
THE NAVIGATOR
EXCELLENT STUDENT WRITING ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES

Volume 6


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The Navigator's Cover Art Contest Winner: Grace Rogers.

About the Artwork
This drawing is titled *"Cybill"* by Interior Design student Grace Rogers. It is an inked drawing of a female jaguar on a 9 x11 sheet of Bristol board. The drawing utilizes hatching, cross hatching, and stippling techniques to create a variety of values and depth that make her features really stand out. The audience is able to decide for themselves if she is roaring angrily or if she is just yawning before a peaceful nap. The drawing is called *"Cybill"* because when Grace showed her drawing to her mom for the first time, she suggested naming her Cybill. This name is of Greek origin and has connections to nature, wisdom, and intuition and this definition embodies the drawings aesthetics.

From the Artist
"My name is Grace Rogers and I am a Sophomore in the Interior Design program at Park University. I have always had an interest in drawing as a hobby and I love creating and designing new pieces when I can. So far in the program, I have taken a few different art classes that have had me working with a variety of different mediums like painting, drawing, and sculpting. I created this drawing in my 2D design class. I am extremely proud of how it turned out and I am so excited to share it!" – ***Grace Rogers***

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About ParkWrites

ParkWrites is a university-wide Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program aimed at improving writing and writing instruction across the university. Writing Across the Curriculum is an educational approach used by a majority of universities to develop student learning about content (writing to learn) and to develop student learning about writing across all disciplines (learning to write). WAC programs increase student engagement and retention, critical thinking, effective communication across a range of audiences and purposes, and better prepare students for communicating in the workplace. These benefits are even greater for international students and students from underserved populations. ParkWrites consists of multiple initiatives including faculty development and support, a journal of excellent student writing called *The Navigator*, a student writing fellows program which places trained students in classes for extra writing support, and a curricular initiative, the Writing Intensive program. In addition to taking 3 required writing courses at Park, students also take at least 2 writing intensive courses both inside and outside their majors ensuring students get effective instruction in writing throughout their entire degree program.

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The Navigator editorial team would also like to thank the Writing Across the Curriculum committee for serving as the editorial reviewers of the Volume 6 writing submissions, as well as selecting the Best Writing Award. We are grateful for your service to the committee and our talented students!

Winner of *The Navigator*'s Best Writing Award

Biophilic Design In Educational Spaces: Enhancing Well-Being And Socioemotional Development

Jules E. Martinez

Introduction

The physical space of a school has a significant influence on children's behavior and an impact on their cognitive abilities. Since the 1800s, classrooms have been set up with rows of desks that are aimed at the central teaching space in a rectangular room (Stock, 2024). In the modern age, most school programs have the same standardized type of design. While this can be cost-effective, it does not provide a proper enriching learning environment for those using the area. The stark, often uninspiring aesthetics and rigid layouts of many contemporary schools can, in fact, have detrimental effects on students, impeding their natural inclination towards curiosity, exploration, and emotional expression (Kazemi, 2025).

Elementary school architecture can be designed to be inclusive for learning while also having a positive influence on child development. Biophilic design in particular can be an effective way to maximize child development. "Findings reveal that factors such as biophilic design…enhance social interactions, a sense of belonging, creativity, and student vitality" (Kazemi, 2025, p.156). A promising avenue for achieving this transformation lies in the incorporation of biophilic design principles.

Significance

How can biophilic design be used to foster an enriching learning environment that supports student well-being and socio-emotional development? This study aims to identify how biophilic design can effectively increase environmental awareness, encouraging a deeper appreciation for ecological systems and promoting more sustainable behaviors and a greater sense of environmental stewardship. Furthermore, the study seeks to understand the profound impact of biophilic design on cultivating emotional and social intelligence, exploring how connections to nature can promote empathy, improve interpersonal relationships, and enhance self-awareness. The final objective is to examine the most significant ways that biophilic design can be strategically integrated to foster enhancements across child development. Specifically, the research will investigate how the incorporation of natural elements and principles within built environments can serve as a catalyst for boosting creativity and cognitive development, thereby enriching problem-solving abilities and innovative thinking.

Literature Review

The concept of biophilic design was first developed by social psychologist Erich Fromm in 1964, who defined it as a psychological attraction to all that is living and vital. It was popularized by Edward O. Wilson in the 1980s, who then defined it as an innate tendency to focus on life and realistic processes. Biophilic design has become more popular within the last few years in the field of architecture and design because it promotes a higher quality of life and reinforces sustainability (Tedjari, et al., 2024). This literature review focuses on how biophilic design, when used in elementary school architecture, can increase environmental awareness, social intelligence, and enhance creativity.

Environmental Awareness

Biophilic Wellbeing Systems Approach focuses on enhancing student wellbeing in an educational setting by fostering a deep connection with nature. Integrating this approach improves learning outcomes and emphasizes the interdependence of individual and planetary health. The profound connection between human society and nature is vital for both psychological and physiological well-being. Humans have evolutionary instincts that affect our interactions, decision-making, and more. Engaging with nature can fulfill innate needs for wellbeing, exploration, and harmonious coexistence with our environment. Children are greatly impacted by this balanced connection with nature, as it offers abundant sensory experiences that enhance their cognitive growth, fine and gross motor skills, and spatial awareness (Gray & Downie, 2024).

Social Development Through Emotional Intelligence

When designing an environment for children, it is important to consider how space can benefit a child developmentally. Aside from home, children spend a lot of their formative years in school. Thus, the physical environment of schools can play a large role in how they learn and develop socially and emotionally. The first few years in the life of a child are very important, as they create the foundation for how they will learn to navigate life. Learning to interact, empathize, and collaborate with others sets them up for more success in the future.

Biophilic elements such as natural plants, open views to the outdoors, and natural lighting can reduce aggression in children, enhancing independence and self-confidence. These positive behaviors can help boost social intelligence, which can directly impact interpersonal skills and improve overall learning outcomes. A space without biophilic elements can often lead to negative outcomes, such as a higher rate of depression among students and less active participation within classroom discussions (Kazemi, 2025).

Impact of Color and Texture

Studies have shown that color and texture specifications can have a positive impact on a child's development; it can help foster creativity, cognitive skills, and emotional well-being. Understanding the importance of color psychology is necessary to create a nurturing environment for children that is both easy to navigate but also provides a space for them to explore and play. Color choices can help reduce stress, promote well-being, improve productivity, and encourage creative thinking. For example, blue evokes the feeling of peace, lowering the heart rate and promoting focus; green offers a sense of vitality and encourages harmony; purple can signify wisdom and luxury. Pattern recognition and memory can be enhanced by the use of vibrant colors. Texture can act as a complement to design, as it influences the perception of space. In the school environment, earthy tones, such as greens and blues, as well as warm hues, like orange, are best to encourage social interaction, connection to nature, and reduce stress. Colors that reflect the local nature can help boost the connection between the students and their surroundings. There are certain colors that can be overused and cause detrimental effects to the classroom environment; bright colors can often hinder focus levels and create distractions for students. Red, although it can be seen as stimulating, can also lead to anxiety and feelings of anger (Falusi & Omale, 2025). When choosing a color palette for a space, it is important to be mindful of how they can affect the users that inhabit it.

Enhanced Creativity

Exposing children to natural elements, like wood, plants, or water, can assist in activating parts of the brain that generate ideas and daydreaming (Podrekar et. al, 2024). Further, the color green inspires creative thinking, whether that is with the use of plants or in the color palette (Falusi & Omale, 2025). Biophilic environments allow those who use the space to feel more calm and secure. With lower stress levels, creative expression is released. Another way creativity is enhanced through design is by natural forms and shapes. Rather than utilizing rigid shapes, like squares and rectangles, geometric patterns that occur in nature or curved spaces promote movement and collaboration (Tedjari et. al., 2024).

Case Studies in Primary Schools

Lisieux Catholic Primary School, Australia

The Lisieux Catholic Primary School in Australia is a prime example of how biophilic principles help foster an enriching learning environment and promote a deeper understanding of the natural world and the Aboriginal culture (Gray & Downie, 2024). For context, the Aboriginal Australians are the indigenous people that occupied the country around 50,000 years ago, one of the oldest cultures in the world (Berndt & Tonkinson). The design of the

school incorporates local fauna by naming teaching spaces after native species, such as Acacia, Golden Wattle, and Silver Banksia. The school is divided into four houses, which have been named after native birds. Throughout the design process, an Aboriginal artist, Norm Jurrawaa Stanley, designed a mural that represents these birds. The school collaborates with local Aboriginal Elders and artists to introduce a connection of this culture to the kids. A sacred possum skin cloak, created by Aunty Lisa Couzens, is worn by students during ceremonial events. We can also see a deep connection to this culture with the Beach Discovery Program, which offers a hands-on learning experience of local heritage and traditional ecological knowledge (Gray & Downie, 2024). By incorporating all of these thoughtful design elements and collaborations, this educational institute provides a suitable learning habitat for those to have a stronger understanding of the natural world and Aboriginal heritage.

The Green School, Bali

The Green School in Bali uses sustainable materials throughout the architecture of its building. By using bamboo and natural adhesives, they constructed a space that exhibits their deep understanding of nature and promotes environmental integrity. Bamboo is a great resource not only for sustainability purposes, but it also reflects the concepts of flexibility, solidity, and lightness. A structure at this school, known as the Arc, built in 2021, exhibits biophilic forms and patterns; it creates the ceiling structure of a gymnasium and wellness space. Biomimicry is the idea of combining design and the natural forms of biology. The concept of biomimicry is used in the design of The Arc, which resembles a mammal's ribcage that is stabilized by tensile membranes that function like tendons and muscles. The Heart of the school was designed after the nautilus spiral form; "These fluid, organic forms break away from traditional, rectilinear education spaces, to create a physical environment that inspires creativity and dynamic learning experiences" (Gray & Downie, 2024, p.600). The Green School showcases how utilizing biophilic design can enhance the relationship between the built environment and the natural world.

In these case studies, there is a direct connection with nature, as it is integrated into not only the structure, but in the educational programs as well. The Lisieux Catholic Primary School uses local fauna and provides access to the local environment to teach their students about the land around them and how to respect it. By collaborating with the Aboriginal elders and artists, they have been able to integrate cultural symbolism throughout the program, which boosts social awareness and emotional intelligence. The Green School uses sustainable materials and biomimetic architecture to teach the students about nature and how to work with it. They also emphasize

wellness by providing natural lighting. With the environment they created, it allows students to better regulate their emotions and boost their creativity.

Conclusion

Utilizing biophilic design principles can be a great way to transform educational architecture. By prioritizing the holistic development of children in combination with biophilic design, the school environment can provide access for students to feel more environmental awareness, a higher sense of social intelligence, and enhance creativity. This research provides information on how the school environment can better support users in a space; by moving beyond the standardized model of a typical school, architects have the opportunity to provide a space for both students and educators to grow in a multitude of ways.

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Schizophrenia: More than Meets the Eye

Mallory R. Sole

Abstract

This paper will explore various aspects of schizophrenia, including a description of the disorder, the cultural and ethical implications of a diagnosis, and the models of etiology that describe the causes, the treatments, and, finally, the prognosis. Exploring these various domains will provide a comprehensive view of the disorder and the literature available. Furthermore, each section discussed will work together to give an overall view of what being diagnosed with this disorder looks like, exploring why those with schizophrenia are so often misunderstood.

Description

Imagine that you are sitting in a work meeting. You are trying to pretend that everything is fine, but you keep hearing voices. Voices that no one else seems to be hearing. It is like an incessant whispering that will not stop, no matter what you do, and it is terrifying. What are you supposed to do? You feel like there is something wrong with you, and you are so afraid to tell anyone, but you do not think you can keep pretending much longer. You are not crazy, but, at the moment, it feels like there is no other explanation. This is just one example of what it is like to live with schizophrenia, a mental disorder characterized by "delusions, hallucinations, and disorganized speech" (Coulibaly et al., 2021, p. 2) as well as "ideas of persecution and voicehearing" (Moritz et al., 2024, p. 22). As a matter of fact, this disorder is more common than one might think, affecting approximately 5 out of every 1,000 people worldwide (Coulibaly et al., 2021).

Characteristics of this disorder are further broken down into two categories: positive and negative. Delusions, hallucinations, and disorganized speech are all considered positive symptoms, since they are "additions" to the cognition and behavior of an individual. For instance, an individual who does not have the delusion that they are God until after they develop schizophrenia. Likewise, an individual who does not start hearing voices until after the development of the disorder. The symptoms are added to the individual's personality in conjunction with their diagnosis. On the other hand, negative symptoms, like social withdrawal, are symptoms that appear to be deficits in the individual, or something the individual is no longer expressing. These can also include diminished emotional range, alogia[1], and

[1] Alogia is poverty of speech or the reduction of speech or speech content (Comer & Comer, 2023).

avolition[2] (García-Portilla et al., 2021). Furthermore, schizophrenic diagnoses have often been related to symptoms of neurodegeneration or intellectual deterioration (Moritz et al., 2024).

This view, description, and understanding of schizophrenia have all changed several times throughout its history, specifically in the various versions of the DSM[3]. In fact, one of the interesting aspects of schizophrenia is that there is support for several different factors influencing the development and progression of the disease (Coulibaly et al., 2021). This is partly due to the influence of cultural values and beliefs regarding mental illness, which can directly impact the beliefs behind the causes of the disorder and how those diagnosed with schizophrenia are treated (Coulibaly et al., 2021). In other words, while schizophrenia is relatively common, there is disagreement on specific causes. Consequently, difficulty in treating schizophrenia, a disorder that usually requires lifelong treatment, arises and causes a general sense of ambiguity around the disorder. It is the stigma and judgments that arise out of this ambiguity that we need to resolve and cause so many with the disorder to be misunderstood. We are doing a disservice to those diagnosed by continuing to accept these negative beliefs instead of spreading knowledge. It is for that reason that this paper is being written: to provide a background on the experience of those with schizophrenia, to understand their lives from a cultural perspective, and to comprehend what the most common outcomes are and take steps to improve the prognosis. Only when the negatives are understood can steps be taken to see and change what it is really like for that person society labeled a monster.

Diagnosis

Difficulties with schizophrenia arise since long-term recovery is rare, and the diagnosis usually comes with a 20-year reduction in life expectancy (Donovan, 2024). Generally, the prognosis for this disorder is not overly positive and is often accompanied by many negative side effects, including an inability to function normally and take care of personal needs (Donovan, 2024). This could be anything from being unable to get a job or live on their own, to the loss of interpersonal relationships without the cognitive capability to maintain them. Their lives revolve around their delusions or hallucinations, which have the potential to cause distressing or dangerous situations, characterizing schizophrenia as a very difficult disorder to live with. Nonetheless, for a diagnosis to be made, there must be at least two Criterion A symptoms apparent, with at least one of them being delusions, hallucinations, or disorganized speech (Moritz et al., 2024). Possible Criterion A symptoms that could be paired with delusions, hallucinations, or disorganized speech are

[2] Feeling drained of energy or lack of interest in goals (Comer & Comer, 2023).

[3] DSM is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which describes symptoms and diagnostic criteria of all known mental disorders.

disorganized or catatonic behavior and diminished emotional expression. Consequently, a person will be diagnosed with schizophrenia after showing at least two of the above symptoms for a consistent amount of time.

Implications

Even though the diagnostic criteria for schizophrenia are easy to understand, it is important to note the often unseen ethical and cultural influences related to diagnosing this disorder. Notably, the reactions and attitudes of family, care professionals, social support, and caregivers, which include judgments, stigma, and the general negative idea a culture has of schizophrenia, directly influence the schizophrenic individual's dignity and mental health (Amiri et al., 2025a). When looking at this from a diagnostician's point of view, a positive attitude and demeanor can significantly enhance the patient's handling of the diagnosis. As a result, it is up to the mental health professional to take ethical steps to reduce immediate judgment, as well as prepare the patient for the judgment they will face from society. This is true for all mental disorders and diagnoses, especially severe disorders like schizophrenia, where symptoms and the associated stereotypes seem to be more pronounced.

Furthermore, Amiri et al. (2025a) identify that there are different cultural implications and reactions to this diagnosis. For instance, psychiatric patients in low-income countries have limited access to healthcare and community-based programs (Amiri et al., 2025a), meaning individuals diagnosed in these cultures are faced with difficulties in addition to those that come from the immediate diagnosis. Moreover, many cultures have completely different views on the diagnosis of this disorder. For instance, Africans believe schizophrenia is the result of psychosocial and supernatural causes, so schizophrenics are seen as possessed and judged accordingly (Coulibaly et al., 2021). These cultural biases can also appear in day-to-day conversation. For example, "patients described instances where they felt disrespected in the workplace or were regarded as 'strange'" (Amiri et al., 2025a, p. 564). In addition, attitudes toward those diagnosed with schizophrenia commonly involve society labeling them as crazy or disabled and calling them psychotic (Amiri et al., 2025a), often causing distress for those diagnosed.

Overall, cultures' views on the disorder vary widely because of various prominent cultural beliefs, as well as the experience of schizophrenic individuals in that country. In cultures where schizophrenia occurrences are more severe, usually due to environmental factors like a lack of mental health services, the disorder is more highly scrutinized. Additionally, there is usually a lack of knowledge on the symptoms and aspects of the disorder (Ruiz et al., 2012). Lack of knowledge, perhaps one of the most detrimental

environmental factors, can lead to harsh, close-minded understandings of the disorder, influencing its intensity and occurrences. Essentially, cultures that have more knowledge of mental illness are more likely to be accepting of those with schizophrenia and provide more sympathy and support (Gilmore & Hughes, 2021).

Models of Etiology

This can be described by the sociocultural model of etiology, which explains that understandings of schizophrenia vary across cultures and social contexts and explores the idea that schizophrenia can develop because of certain societal factors. For instance, understanding of schizophrenia varies widely, with one culture concluding that schizophrenia is caused by emotional or head trauma, genetic factors, emotional problems, mistreatment, or divine will (Audiffred-Jaramillo & Alba-García, 2024). Furthermore, a European sample believed that childhood trauma triggered schizophrenia, while a sample from Spain thought this disorder was triggered by drugs and alcohol (Audiffred-Jaramillo & Alba-García, 2024). Samples from Italy found that many people believed schizophrenia was caused by stress or breakups, while Guadalajara residents had mixed ideas, saying that some possible causes were drugs, nervousness, head trauma, or witchcraft (Audiffred-Jaramillo & Alba-García, 2024). Interestingly, witchcraft was also a popular explanation in Bali and Africa (Audiffred-Jaramillo & Alba-García, 2024).

Likewise, societal factors, like a lack of structured and working activities, can lead to a loss of social support, personality, and independence (Coulibaly et al., 2021). Naturally, these factors exacerbate and accelerate the natural course of the disorder and explain why many diagnosed individuals are unemployed. Equally important, schizophrenic individuals are more likely to be single than married and, therefore, four times more likely to develop the disorder (Coulibaly et al., 2021). These various environmental factors, like problematic family interactions or immigration and being a part of an ethnic minority, can lead to an increased risk of developing schizophrenia (Audiffred-Jaramillo & Alba-García, 2024; Jablensky, 2000). Another way to look at this is through the diathesis-stress model. The more stress or life struggles individuals face as a result of their culture or society, the more likely they are to develop schizophrenia or experience exacerbated symptoms. The world around us has an immeasurable impact on lives, and it is important to acknowledge that.

However, the biological model of etiology is also very important to explore since it focuses on more definitive neurobiological underpinnings, specifically about polygenic inheritance, neurotransmitter dysregulation, and brain abnormalities (Tiwari et al., 2025). Audiffred-Jaramillo and Alba-García (2024) even admit that the biological "causes of schizophrenia are highly developed on science fields" (p. 435). Specific biological factors like

psychiatric family history and perinatal factors were found to be particularly influential, since there is a "significant association between severity of symptoms and a positive familial history" (Budisteanu et al., 2020, p. 3), with 52% of study participants having a history of psychiatric symptoms and 35% having a family history of schizophrenia. Furthermore, there is evidence that sex can affect gene expression and, as a result, the symptomology of schizophrenia (Carceller et al., 2024). In other words, evidence from the sociocultural, diathesis-stress model, and the biological model shows that "the etiology of schizophrenia is currently understood as multifactorial" (Audiffred-Jaramillo & Alba-García, 2024, p. 435).

Treatments

Schizophrenia is further complicated by the various treatment options available, especially when research shows that treatment is more effective when it comes from multiple sources. For example, two of the most common treatment options are cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)[4] and antipsychotics. CBT has been shown to significantly reduce negative symptoms, improve overall functioning, social skills, and social functioning of those living with schizophrenia (Hong et al., 2025). In fact, general improvements were found across a range of psychopathology domains, even social activation and symptom severity (Pos et al., 2019). Despite this, exceptions indicated by Pos et al. (2019) and Hong et al. (2025) imply that CBT might not be as effective when used on its own.

Instead, a treatment like antipsychotics can be used in conjunction with CBT to address the biological effects of schizophrenia. In fact, antipsychotics are particularly effective against the positive symptoms of the disorder, causing symptom reduction in 62% of study participants and enhancing cognitive functions (Inayah et al., 2025; Wilanowska et al., 2024). The negative symptoms tend to persist after antipsychotics, but, as mentioned above, CBT is efficient at reducing those effects. Nevertheless, professionals have supported the effectiveness of antipsychotics by saying "individuals who meet diagnostic criteria for schizophrenia and experience recurrences of several psychotic episodes should continue antipsychotic treatment for many years to indefinitely" (Davidson & Carpenter, 2024, pp. 14-15). Unfortunately, antipsychotics do have the potential to cause adverse side effects (Wilanowska et al., 2024) and seem to be most effective against positive symptoms (Inayah et al., 2025), while negative symptoms can be addressed through psychotherapies like CBT (Hong et al., 2025; Pos et al., 2019). With that said,

[4] A "goal-oriented psychotherapy that aims to improve individuals' emotional and psychological states by changing their negative thought patterns and behaviors" (Hong et al., 2025, p. 1).

the most effective treatment for a disorder with a multifactorial model of etiology, like schizophrenia, would probably be a multifactorial approach (Audiffred-Jaramillo & Alba-García, 2024).

4 Ds—Distress, Deviance, Dysfunction, and Danger

While examining the diagnosing process and influences, as well as the subsequent treatment options, provides a visual of the path this disorder takes, it does not exemplify the patients' experiences. This can be done through the description of four abnormal behavior factors, which are often used in psychology to understand mental disorders. The first is distress, or the degree to which the individual experiences emotional or physical distress as a result of their behavior or diagnosis. Second, deviance is the degree to which the individual's behaviors stray from what is normal and expected of them. Similarly, dysfunction is measured by the degree the diagnosed individual's behaviors influence their ability to live a normal life. Lastly, danger simply explores the physical danger the individual is in as a result of their diagnosis or their potential to put others in danger. Experiencing and living with any mental disorder can cause varying levels of these four factors. However, with severe mental disorders, like schizophrenia, these levels have a greater chance of being more intense. Exploring how these four factors can be represented by schizophrenia highlights just some of the ways diagnosed individuals are disregarded as out of control or products of their own making.

Distress, for instance, can exhibit itself in many social interactions, specifically the breakdown of individuals' social lives, as mentioned above. Due to the manifestation of this disorder, individuals often have a hard time managing their social interactions, negatively impacting the families and support networks of those diagnosed with schizophrenia (Hong et al., 2025). As social creatures, being essentially forced into isolation by a mental disorder will cause a large amount of distress through emotions like loneliness and depression. In addition to unwillingly losing connections with loved ones, distress can also arise from agitation caused by delusions or hallucinations and treatment in general, specifically side effects (Davidson & Carpenter, 2024; Wilanowska et al., 2024).

Deviance also makes an appearance in schizophrenia since most of the behaviors that are exhibited during schizophrenia will appear as deviant. One of the main instances is in the form of ongoing functional impairment, specifically social and role functioning (Donovan, 2024). In other words, as schizophrenia impairs functioning, individuals have a hard time gauging or comprehending situations and behaving in a way that society deems normal. It was even found that deviant behaviors exhibited before the development of schizophrenia can lead to more schizophrenic deviant behaviors later on. For example, individuals who showed deviant levels of sadness before developing schizophrenia were three times as likely to attempt suicide after the onset of

the disorder (Sobin et al., 2003). Deviant behaviors prior to diagnosis also presented themselves in higher levels of sensory and auditory hallucinations, as well as thought disorder after diagnosis (Sobin et al., 2003).

Moreover, schizophrenic symptoms are classified as either negative or positive, with negative symptoms often seen as deviant. For instance, certain negative symptoms like isolation or inactivity can decrease the quality of life and make individuals living with schizophrenia avoid others (Pos et al., 2019). Our society is a social one, where it is expected that we participate in society and interact with our peers. Therefore, when someone no longer has the capacity to carry on a relationship and they start isolating themselves, as in schizophrenia, it can be seen as deviant and causes judgments and stereotypes to be made. This creates a cycle for the diagnosed individual that is very hard to break as they start expressing their symptoms and withdrawing from society. The initial withdrawal causes distress in the form of relationship loss, but as time goes on, the individual starts to experience more distress from those around them judging their behavior. Instead of this prompting the individual to repair their relationships, it pushes them further away, leaving the individual without any of the support they so desperately need.

Likewise, schizophrenia causes dysfunction and impairment to the person diagnosed and "is among the top 20 causes of disability in the US" (Donovan, 2024, p. 18). Essentially, individuals become unable to go about their daily lives as they used to because of the degenerative aspects of the disorder. In fact, there is currently a large focus on the biological and neuro aspects of this disease because of the neurotransmitter dysregulation, specifically dopamine, glutamate, and serotonin, and the many brain abnormalities in the prefrontal, temporal, and limbic regions (Tiwari et al., 2025). In other words, people with mental disorders suffer a loss in "decision-making capacity, living in independent housing, holding a job, and carrying out the acts of daily life" (Hindenoch et al., 2023, p. 1375), which are greatly amplified by the degenerative aspects of schizophrenia.

Danger is something that many people with schizophrenia experience, especially when it is understood that they often have trouble taking care of themselves. Moreover, there is an increased risk of suicide, especially if the individual has depressed feelings before they develop schizophrenia (Sobin et al., 2003). The increased risk of developing depression, anxiety, and other psychiatric disorders in general is a prevalent danger of schizophrenia (Donovan, 2024). Furthermore, it is implied that since judgment is impaired (Tiwari et al., 2025) and patients might have an unhealthy obsession with their hallucinations or delusions, they could engage in risky/dangerous behavior that they would not have engaged in before the appearance of their hallucinations. On the flip side, many people in

society view those diagnosed with schizophrenia as dangerous to them and "believe that those suffering from such disorders are not completely human, but insane or dangerous" (Amiri et al., 2025a, p. 569). Those with schizophrenic disorders are not seen as someone whose symptoms can be a danger to themselves, but rather as someone who can be a danger to the people around them.

In general, the levels of danger, dysfunction, deviance, and distress can vary from person to person, but they are usually high in severe mental disorders like schizophrenia. As a matter of fact, most individuals are judged by the symptoms they outwardly express. However, it is important to understand that these symptoms arise from biological changes caused by the disorder, and the behaviors exhibited are made in response to those changes. By comprehending the cognitive, psychological, and emotional changes that schizophrenia causes, it is easy to see that the symptoms are not an accurate representation of who the individual is, but rather the reason they are so often misunderstood. These individuals are not trying to be the monsters people make them out to be, they are just trying to cope with the life they were given.

Prognosis

In support of all the factors mentioned above, the prognosis for schizophrenia is not positive. In fact, schizophrenia is "associated with a 20-year decrease in life expectancy and a 4-fold increase in all-cause mortality" (Donovan, 2024, p. 18). Additionally, only about 5% of individuals are in remission after 25 years, while only 13% are in recovery (Donovan, 2024), and a significant number will need long-term support (Baltazar et al., 2022). While schizophrenic individuals might get to a point in their lives when they can lead a somewhat normal life and manage their symptoms, there are still many factors that augment the negative prognosis. For instance, social institutions like social assistance and general support, as well as factors like an increased risk of health complications, disease, and suicide, the possibility of treatment resistant schizophrenia, and increased drug and alcohol abuse, can all affect the prognosis (Baltazar et al., 2022). In other words, while diagnosed individuals might make great strides in progress from the onset of symptoms to their later life, there are still many factors working against them.

Despite this, the prognosis for schizophrenia is more positive when certain steps are taken. It is by no means entirely good, but it can be improved. One way to improve the prognosis is to implement a version of early intervention treatment. Early intervention should be applied soon after the first episode of schizophrenia and is often associated with a lower risk of relapse and hospitalization (Donovan, 2024). Additionally, it has been discovered that first-episode schizophrenia patients are more responsive to medications (Donovan, 2024) because they have not developed a tolerance to

the treatment options (Baltazar et al., 2022). Other options that have been presented include the idea of a symptom-specific treatment, essentially the opposite of a one-size-fits-all treatment, where symptoms are treated as they manifest and include medications to increase cognitive functioning (Davidson & Carpenter, 2024). The goal is to reduce the need to take medications for extended periods and risk developing a tolerance and to stop the reduction in cognitive functioning that comes with schizophrenia. This step, in combination with a greater public understanding of this disorder, can hopefully lead to a more positive prognosis in the future.

Conclusion

Overall, the symptoms of schizophrenia and the consequences of those symptoms are often too severe to support a good prognosis. This is especially noticeable in the number of people who still suffer from schizophrenia even years after diagnosis (Donovan, 2024). In addition, many cultural or family factors can influence the experience and, as a result, prognosis of schizophrenia. One example would be family members rejecting the individual with schizophrenia and neglecting them. The "negligence could yield a severity equivalent to physical mistreatment and potentially engender a deeply influential impact on an individual's well-being and standard of living" (Amiri et al., 2025b, p. 1921). Similar comments are made about community and cultural perceptions of schizophrenia, with the understanding being that community and family ideals can influence the quality of life of someone with schizophrenia (Gilmore & Hughes, 2021). With so many factors influencing the quality of life and symptom severity after diagnosis, especially the differing opinions on etiology and treatment options, the struggles these individuals go through make complete sense. Schizophrenia is much more than it initially seems, and those diagnosed are failing to live the life they are meant for because of it. Therefore, if we take the time to curb our initial judgments on mental health and mental illness, we just might change someone's life.

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Serial Killers and Popular Media: Exploitation and Exploration

Nathan A. Larrabee

In 1888, five women were brutally murdered and mutilated in the Whitechapel district of London. A crime spree of this severity was unprecedented. The killer is considered the first of what we now call serial killers. Their crimes captured the public's collective attention and imagination. This killer was dubbed Jack the Ripper, and their identity is still unknown to this day, and any new information garners international headlines even 137 years later. Serial killers, such as Jack the Ripper, have sparked curiosity among the general public for generations. As a result, popular media has exploited and perpetuated the legends of serial killers, fictional and non-fictional, as both convenient tools to frame a narrative and a means to explore the darker aspects of the human psyche.

From newspapers to novels, television shows to movies, popular media is a commodity that is sold to society at large. To be successful to that end, popular media must provide society with something that it wants. One of these desires is death. Modern society has a morbid curiosity surrounding death and trauma. In his book *Natural Born Celebrities*, Daid Schmid (2005) cites author Mark Seltzer in describing this desire as a "wound culture" that centers around "the convening of the public around scenes of violence-the rushing to the scene of the accident, the milling around the point of impact-has come to make up a wound culture: the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound" (p.5, as cited in Seltzer, 1998). People have a fascination with violence and often the more traumatic it is, the more interest it draws. This appears to be especially true in post Industrial Revolution society. In his treatise *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, famed psychologist Sigmund Freud (1957) addresses this morbid curiosity. He hypothesizes that primeval man was surround by death and the finality of existence on a daily basis and that as society has become civilized, death has moved farther away from the public consciousness (Freud, 1957). As a result, society has moved toward literature and fiction to satisfy the relationship with death and human existence. In serial killers such as Jack the Ripper, popular media found a convenient tool that could both satiate the publics curiosity about violence and death while selling a product that the public was eager to consume.

Dime novels or penny dreadfuls, as they were known in the United Kingdom, were early forms of literature that combined serial killers with stories that people were eager to read. These short books were cheap, simple

in narrative and graphic in detail (Thompson, 2018). Easily available to the working classes, these dime novels were incredibly popular, and newspapers of the time even blamed them for an increase in crime rates, although without evidence (Thompson, 2018). In Jack the Ripper, the authors of dime novels found a perfect figure to sell their stories. The graphic and horrifying murders and the mystery surrounding the killer allowed the media to sell blood and gore while crafting any story they wanted, shroud in loose facts. Of the media sensationalism of the time Erin Thompson (2018) writes, "It became quite clear during this time that murder was lucrative, and almost every newspaper, novelist, and penny dreadful wanted a share of the profit" (p.59). It was the Jack the Ripper case where the marriage between serial killers and media sensationalism was firmly established. Little was known then, and still today the identity and motives of Jack the Ripper are unknown. Everything we think we know about the Ripper is a legend created by popular media. Jack the Ripper movies and Jack the Ripper tours of London are as popular today as they have ever been (Fisher, 2018). The media quickly discovered that serial killers and their exploits were ideal for selling and telling any story they wanted. Beth Fisher (2018) writes of the Jack the Ripper murders in Whitechapel, saying, "Part of the reason newspaper sales rocketed was because the press used the Whitechapel cases to stoke the public's fear of 'outcast London'. Whitechapel had come to symbolize London's criminal underworld, providing a ready backdrop for any sensational newspaper report." The strategy for using serial killers to frame a story that sells may have started with Jack the Ripper, but it continues to this day and doesn't apply only to real serial killers. Dexter Morgan, the protagonist of author Jeff Lindsay's (2006) popular book *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, is a fictional serial killer who does elaborately planned and graphically detailed murders much like Jack the Ripper, only cleaner. Like many authors, writers, reporters and filmmakers before him, Lindsay (2006) found success by tapping into society's morbid curiosity about violence and death by telling a story about a serial killer. Whether the killer is real or fictional isn't relevant in order to exploit their crimes to tell a good story.

However, selling a story isn't the only application the exploits of serial killers is good for. Popular media found that serial killers made it easier to explore the darker sides of human and societal nature while also entertaining the audience. Going back to Jack the Ripper, newspapers at the time, in the absence of fact, found the case to be a convenient tool to discuss immigration and cultural identity. It was asserted that the crimes had to be committed by a foreigner because no Victorian Englishman could be capable of such depravity (Schmid, 2005). The film *From Hell* is one of the many film adaptations of Jack the Ripper's exploits. In the film, inspector Frederick Aberline investigates the Ripper murders and discovers a conspiracy that is

traced to Queen Victoria. Sir William Gull, personal physician to the Queen, is discovered to be Jack the Ripper; a plot to silence witnesses to a secret marriage of Prince Albert is laid bare as it is discovered that the victims were all at the wedding (Hughes & Hughes, 2001). The plot also involves a coverup by the Freemasons organization. None of the plot elements in the film, other than the murders themselves, had any evidentiary basis. The film used the Whitechapel murders as a framework to explore conspiracy theories and societal mistrust of government.

Fictional character, Dexter Morgan, is a blood spatter expert with the Miami Metro Police Department who has a darker side; Dexter is a serial killer. Beyond simply satisfying the audience's innate desire for death and gore, in his book Jeff Lindsay (2006) explores moral relativism and asks the audience to consider if bad things are acceptable if done for good reasons. Most would conclude that murder is wrong. However, central to the moral complexity is Harry's code. The code is a set of rules developed by Dexter's adoptive father, Harry, which is designed to allow Dexter to satisfy his urge to kill while not getting caught and performing a social service. According to Harry, "killing must serve a purpose, otherwise, it's just plain murder" (Lindsay, 2006). The code is an attempt to give Dexter a moral standing by only killing people who are guilty of a crime and slip through the justice system; Dexter must vet the victims to ensure that they meet the standards of Harry's code. Dexter's victims are undeniably bad people, such as the priest in chapter one, Father Donovan. He killed at least seven innocent orphan children, whom Dexter took the time to find in his burying ground and dig up the bodies to ensure that the priest was guilty (Lindsay, 2006). Dexter's killing of Father Donovan seems justifiable in the context of saving more children, even while Dexter is committing murder himself. This is the kind of moral relativism that a fictional serial killer like Dexter Morgan allows audiences to explore. According to Steven Granelli and Jason Zenor (2016), both professors in Communications studies,

> Audiences may love these morally ambiguous characters because they exist in a fantasy world and break the social and legal rules that we ourselves wish we could break in our real worlds. Thus, in some ways, shows with morally ambiguous characters may be cathartic for the audience. (Granelli, S., & Zenor, J., 2016)

Serial killers, both real and fictional, are convenient vessels to allow audiences to explore darker questions about human nature and society. Why do people kill? Is murder ever justifiable? Can governments be trusted? These are questions that only serial killers, with their darker natures, allow us to explore deeply.

While this essay only examined two serial killers, one real and one fictional, the principles applied by popular media in the use of serial killers as tools applies to the scores of serial killers since Jack the Ripper. Society has demonstrated an inherent psychological predilection to death and violence. When media began reporting the details of serial murders, the public couldn't get enough. Popular media sources found that serial killers could be exploited to both provide information to the public and satiate innate fascination with death. While doing so, the media could tell any story as long as it was built around the framework of a serial killer, and it would sell. At the same time, those narratives would build the mythic legend of the subject until fact and fiction were difficult to separate. Fast forward to today, where fictional serial killers, not based upon any factual figure, are quite popular. Killers such as Dexter Morgan. While telling stories that exploit the deeds of fictional and non-fictional killers, popular media has allowed the audience to delve into the darker recesses of the human psyche. Jack the Ripper begs the audience to ask what could make a person commit savage acts upon another that are far more brutal than simple murder. Dexter Morgan asks us to answer the question of right and wrong. Is it acceptable to commit murder if society benefits? In both instances the journey of discovery is more important than arriving at an answer in itself. By exploiting the murders of serial killers, popular media has allowed us to satisfy a primeval craving to feel close to death and open a door to the darker side of human nature where we can explore the motivation behind human depravity.

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Understanding Violence Through Film

Nicholas A. Painter

Everywhere we look today, there are violent films ready for public consumption. Superheroes punching people through walls, menacing slashers hacking through people with chainsaws, and time-traveling robots hell bent on destroying the human race are just a few examples. The 2000s and 2010s were rife with blockbuster depictions of the United States military thwarting terrorist threats, saving would-be victims, and even repelling a space invasion or two in films like *Battle Los Angeles* and Michael Bay's *Transformers.* These violent affairs certainly have spectacle going for them, with huge explosions and protracted gun battles taking the center stage. By examining director Clint Eastwood's film, *American Sniper*, which is a product of its time, it becomes clear that films allow viewers to explore violence and the effects of violence in a way that poses no risk to themselves. To demonstrate this, a closer examination of the film's scenes, contextualized by psychology and anthropology, is necessary.

American Sniper is a semi-biographical film depicting the life and military career of Navy SEAL sniper Chris Kyle. The film spans from Kyle's childhood, where he is instilled with the values of protecting his loved ones and never quitting. As he grows up and chases rodeo belt buckles, Kyle becomes spurred to enlist in the U.S. Navy after the bombing of the U.S. Embassies in Tanzania and Kenya. He goes to a recruiting station, where he tells the recruiter, "I'm not most men, sir. I don't quit" (Eastwood 00:10:15). He graduates from the rigorous Navy Basic Underwater Demolition School and earns his way to Sniper School, where he learns his trade. During this time, he meets his future wife, Taya, who will serve as an anchor and symbol for his life stateside while he is deployed. Overseas, Kyle finds himself providing cover fire for Marines as they clear city blocks, among other missions. It is at this time that he finds himself at odds with the mysterious Mufasa, an enemy sniper who acts as a foil for Kyle throughout the film. Mufasa is depicted as being the killer of Ryan Job, the first SEAL killed in Iraq, and several other service members throughout the film. On a rotation home, Kyle has issues processing the things he encountered overseas, such as losing friends and seeing an enemy fighter known as "The Butcher" take a power drill to a child's leg.

On his final tour to Iraq, Kyle manages to kill Mufasa with a long-range shot that compromises his team's position. This results in a desperate gunfight as the team holds out for their extraction. Kyle barely escapes, only doing so after ditching his rifle to catch up to a moving armored personnel carrier. Back stateside, Kyle realizes the toll that the war has taken on him and

volunteers at the local VA hospital to help veterans recover from their experiences in war. It is because of this that Kyle is murdered by a fellow veteran, whom he was trying to help. The film closes out with real-life footage from Chris Kyle's funeral procession and accompanying police escort.

Understanding *American Sniper* is not necessarily a hard thing to do. The film itself is relatively straightforward with its messaging. However, this makes it a good vessel for understanding why these sorts of stories are so appealing and even important for viewers. Understanding tales of warfare and great warriors is an age-old endeavor for humanity. On the urge to understand warfare, psychologist Sigmund Freud said, "War strips off the later deposits of civilization and allows the primitive man in us to reappear. It forces us again to be heroes who cannot believe in their own death, it stamps all strangers as enemies whose death we ought to cause or wish; it counsels us to rise above the death of those whom we love"(28). For the American people, who had been at war for thirteen years at the time of *American Sniper*'s release, war was an omnipresent part of life. Freud puts forth that living in such a time, faced day to day with the knowledge that your nation is at war, and being forced to accept the mortality of yourself and those you love, makes us much like our ancient ancestors, who lived in a state of perpetual survival without the comforts of civilization (Freud 29). In essence, Freud asserts that being subjected to such difficulties causes members of a society to feel as though their lives have been lost while they are still alive and are forced to accept their inevitable death. This "loss of life" makes us seek out some figure in fiction who can die for us or kill other people for us. Experiencing this figure's story allows us to experience "death" with no risk for ourselves because our minds have identified with the figure whom we outlive (Freud 19). This means that in viewing *American Sniper,* we not only experience war and its costs but also a death of sorts. By virtue of having followed along from the very beginning to the final hour, we understand what the costs of violence are and what is lost in death. We get to "die" in a safe and controlled way, relieving the fear of death, if only temporarily.

The depictions of violence in *American Sniper* are used to reinforce the effects of violence. A deeper analysis of key scenes depicting violence allows for better contextualization of violence's role in this story. The first of these scenes, referred to as the Drill Scene (00:45:00), takes place during a meeting with a Sheikh, a local elder, who is offering information on a person of interest for the SEALs. Kyle ends up pinned by gunfire on a rooftop and forced to listen while the Sheikh's son is murdered with a power drill by The Butcher. This scene, coupled with another scene depicting a meat locker full of dismembered human remains during a raid on an enemy building, lends credence to Schmid's assertion in *Natural Born Celebrities*

concerning the role of terrorists in media post 9/11. Schmid states, "Despite the long-standing iconic status of the serial killer in American culture before 9/11, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks it seemed reasonable to suppose that the serial killer would be quickly replaced by the terrorist as the personification of criminal evil" (246). This is not the case, however, as Schmid states, "[T]he two categories overlapped" (246). The terrorist was instead presented as a serial killer, serving as a means of familiarizing the American people with the danger of the terror threat while keeping fear at manageable levels (Schmid 246). The terrorists in *American Sniper* are indeed equated to serial killers through their actions, relishing in the gruesome acts that they carry out. Contrasted with Kyle's reaction to his first kill overseas, the differences between what the film considers "good" and "bad" violence are rather striking. Kyle is forced to kill a child preparing to suicide bomb a column of American Marines. After the child is killed, his mother takes the grenade, and Kyle is forced to kill her as well before she can make it to the Marines moving down the street. Kyle is visibly shaken by killing a child and a woman. He remains silent until the Marine with him tries to celebrate Kyle's first kill, bumping him on the shoulder, to which Kyle responds, "Get the fuck off me" (Eastwood 00:28:10). Here, the film clearly tells viewers that killing is a miserable business. This example is especially interesting because of how it contrasts with the later Drill Scene. Kyle hates the fact that he had to kill that child as a last resort; he sees his targets as human. Meanwhile, The Butcher relies on violence toward children to influence the behaviors of those around him. Kyle kills the child quickly, while The Butcher prolongs the suffering of his victim. The Butcher sees his killing as a means of leverage and influence and his victims as instruments to be exploited for the power they can give him over others, dehumanizing them. Such dehumanization has been linked to self-feeding cycles of inter-group violence, as depicted in *American Sniper* (Bruneua 14).

When Kyle returns home, he is evidently struggling to cope with the things that he has seen overseas. It is through these struggles that the film explores the effects of violence. One effect of violence that is explored by *American Sniper* is fear. Anthropologist Diane King discussed fear due to violence based on her time spent with Iraqi Kurds from 1995 to 2003. The Kurds were survivors of attempted genocide by the regime of Saddam Hussein, and King details how fear permeated their daily lives in the so-called "Republic of Fear," facilitating an all-encompassing concern for the safety of oneself and those they love. In one instance of such fear, King details fearing for her life as her bus is stopped near an Iraqi military checkpoint; she states, "It seemed possible that I was living some of my last moments and, judging from the commentary of the other passengers, they thought so as well" (King 52). King's anthropological examination of protracted fear's effect on society is

reflected in Kyle's individual experience in the film. This deep, prolonged fear takes its toll on Kyle. At one point, Kyle refuses to leave his rifle to the point of urinating where he lies so that he will not miss a shot that might save a life (Eastwood 00:33:00). Kyle's own brother, Jeff, demonstrates acute fear of his situation, appearing miserable and stating "fuck this place" at a chance meeting on an airfield in Iraq (Eastwood 00:57:00). Fear is only one of the costs of violence. Another, more direct cost, is the death of Kyle's loved ones. Throughout the film, many service members die, but none impact Kyle so much as the death of Navy SEALs Marc Lee and Ryan Job. Kyle is, understandably, deeply affected by both events. Kyle wants to make the enemy pay for what was done to his brothers-in-arms (Eastwood 01:31:00). This desire for revenge, yet again, speaks to the dehumanizing of whole groups that occurs as a result of warfare (Bruneau and Kteily 15). His desire to return to battle and avenge his fallen teammates takes a toll on his relationship with his wife, Taya, further shedding light on the cost of war. "I'm here, your family is here!" she pleads. "Let someone else go!" to which Kyle responds, "I couldn't live with myself" (Eastwood 01:30:00). This speaks to the savior complex (itself rooted in fear for those who do not deserve to die) that Kyle cultivates from childhood. When Kyle finally does return home, he struggles to return to everyday life. After nearly attacking the family dog for making his son scream during horseplay, Kyle seeks help from the local Veterans Administration. Here, he says he is "haunted by the guys he could not save" (Eastwood 01:57:00). Kyle begins speaking to disabled veterans who are missing limbs and struggling with life. Perhaps no other line in the film demonstrates the toll that going to war has taken on Kyle so clearly as his response to one of the veterans calling him "The Legend." Kyle simply states, "That's a title you don't want. Trust me" (Eastwood 01:59:30).

It is possible that deeper analysis of visual techniques depicting violence and comparison of the movie to the novel could yield a more thorough understanding of the events depicted within the story, and the effects of violence depicted therein. However, that is beyond the scope of this paper. *American Sniper* is just one example of the exploration of violence that popular media facilitates. This single film explores complex topics such as the types of violence that can occur in war and the different effects of that violence, including fear for the safety of those we love, regret about those who could not be saved, and death itself. Even with the limited content of a two-hour-long film, *American Sniper* manages to demonstrate how exploring violence can help viewers understand its nature by showing the costs associated with violence, whether that is the cost extracted from society at large or the burdens placed on the individual psyche of those asked to perpetrate it on our behalf.

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"Navigating" Mental Health Rhetoric by Twenty One Pilots

Delaney Lowe

Mental health is an increasingly popular topic as society fights the stigmas and lack of awareness that previously dominated perceptions. Conversations about mental health are common within social media, news outlets, movies, and even music. While these are all popular forms of media, music is becoming a more relevant way for people to express themselves or relate to others. A study completed in 2017 shows that young individuals in the United States listen to music more than five hours a day with people of all ages increasing their music consumption by 36.6% (Kresovich 617). With the rise of music consumption, lyrics about mental health are heard by many people that may struggle with their own mental health. It is important to understand what rhetoric is being presented by artists through their music and how it influences audiences. Twenty One Pilots is a specific band that produces content regarding mental health, such as their 2024 song "Navigating." Although some people are concerned about whether pop music romanticizes mental health, this paper argues that "Navigating" does the opposite. The band members, who have the ethos of personal experience with mental illness, use diction, delivery, and arrangement to create an appeal to pathos that normalizes mental health struggles while encouraging help-seeking behaviors, especially for men.

Background and Context

Twenty One Pilots is a musical duo that consists of lead singer Tyler Joseph and drummer Josh Dun. The band was originally formed in 2009 by Joseph and two other members who were replaced by Dun when they left in 2011 (Gwenevere). Their music is a unique mix of several genres—alternative rock, rap, hip hop, and electropop. Through their catchy tunes, Twenty One Pilots use lyrics and music videos to engage in storytelling about a variety of topics with a prominent theme in mental health. In fact, they have created a story in their music videos across their albums that follows a character called Clancy, played by Joseph. Clancy's story is set in a dystopian world where he continuously attempts to escape the city of Dema and fight against its rulers, Blurryface and his Bishops (Layman). Dun plays a character who is a part of the rebellion, helping Clancy through his journey. The storyline is sometimes interpreted as a metaphor for the continuous cycle of dealing with mental health issues.

"Navigating" is one of the songs from the 2024 *Clancy* album that can be viewed as part of the larger story. For the purposes of this paper, though,

the lyrics and music video of "Navigating" will be analyzed as a standalone text because as blog writer Drew Layman says, "The beauty of *Clancy*… is that you don't need to follow the story to enjoy the music." To provide some context, the music video begins with Joseph and Dun getting out of a small boat, greeted by three men with torches at the edge of a forest. The video then switches between the group of men leading Joseph and Dun through the forest, and the duo performing in a clearing at night with a large bonfire behind them. About halfway through these clips, a new person carrying a mask is introduced, but the face is not revealed until he reaches the clearing at the same time as Joseph and Dun. The mysterious figure is revealed to be Dun, forcing Joseph to realize he was imagining his friend up until this moment. They demonstrate this with flashbacks where Dun disappears from previous clips. Finally, the two meet in the middle of the clearing with Dun handing Joseph the iconic mask he is known for wearing.

Analysis of Lyrics

The music of "Navigating" is playing throughout the course of the video, and the style of the lyrics is the first thing that indicates part of the rhetorical message—normalizing mental health. Style refers to the ornamentation of ideas through words, including diction. The diction of the lyrics contributes to the band's use of pathos to emotionally connect to the audience. In the chorus of the song, Joseph repeatedly sings, "I'm navigating, I'm navigating my head" (Twenty One Pilots); these exact lyrics are repeated after the line, "disassociate" (Twenty One Pilots). The specific word choices reflect how it feels to have a variety of mental health struggles. Kenneth Burke's theory of identification explains how this strategy helps Twenty One Pilots connect with their audience; Burke claims people remain unique individuals but join together as "substantially one" when they identify with each other (1287). Individuals with anxiety, depression, and other diagnoses deeply relate to the idea of navigating troubling thoughts. Therefore, these listeners identify with those struggling with mental illness, including the band members. Despite the line that seems to apologize for having mental illness, "Pardon my delay" (Twenty One Pilots), the band members' expression of their personal struggles helps listeners understand they are not alone in their experiences because mental health is a part of life for many people. This identification encourages the audience to feel connected to the band and be more receptive to their message.

The normalization of discussing mental health also opens the door for Twenty One Pilots to use diction specifically to encourage struggling people to reach out for help. This is accomplished by first demonstrating the impact of mental illness. The opening of the song expresses, "This haze around my face, makes me feel all alone" (Twenty One Pilots). The statement of feeling 'alone' clearly communicates the isolation that is often caused by mental health

struggles. The bridge continues the theme of isolation: “Kind of feels like everybody leaves, feelin' the reality that everybody leaves” (Twenty One Pilots). Without blatantly stating that he feels alone, Joseph uses the phrase “everybody leaves” to evoke emotion in audience members. Those who understand the isolation that comes with mental struggles can relate to the lyrics, and those who have not personally struggled feel sympathy and understanding.

Twenty One Pilots continues to use diction to subtly encourage the rhetoric of seeking help rather than staying stuck in loneliness. This can be seen at the beginning of the song when Joseph says, “But when our fingers touch, I feel my way back home” (Twenty One Pilots). This quickly establishes the song is directed toward a loved one, or at least a trusted individual. By stating that this person’s presence brings him “back home” and gets him out of his head, he is communicating to listeners that they can feel relief in a similar way. However, this line only seems to focus on a person's physical presence. They take their rhetoric a step further in their chorus by saying, “Give me some advice” (Twenty One Pilots). This is a specific request for help directed toward a trusted individual and tells the audience it is acceptable for them to seek help. The delivery of the line also adds to an emotional appeal. Most of the song is upbeat except during the bridge. Despite this line still having a fast beat, Joseph draws this line out more than the others and puts extra emphasis on the word ‘advice.’ Pathos is used here, as the listener can hear the desperation and emotion in Joseph’s voice, allowing them to truly feel what he is feeling. This emotional connection encourages the audience with similar desperation to seek help the same way and at least begin confiding in someone as the rest of the song expresses.

Analysis of Music Video

With a better understanding of the lyrics, the “Navigating” music video builds upon the rhetorical message of seeking help when struggling with mental health. Twenty One Pilots specifically use pathos through their visual storytelling, to emotionally connect to their audience. It is clear how important Dun is to Joseph during their journey—Dun is shown walking directly beside Joseph and constantly holds out his hand to assist him when he is tired. The audience connects to the emotional bond between the two, whether it is because they relate to having such an important relationship or because they desire such support. This makes the audience feel more devastated when they realize, along with Joseph, that Dun was never actually there. Not only do they watch Dun disappear from right next to Joseph at the clearing, but they also see specifically the journey Joseph went through alone. For example, rather than grabbing Dun’s hand for help walking up a steep hill, he is shown using the trunk of a tree. Twenty One Pilots

created these emotional scenes to help the audience realize how much of a difference getting help can make for someone who is struggling. This forces the audience to reflect on how much they desire support in their own lives, pushing them to take that first step to seeking help.

The ending of the music video solidifies the message of reaching out for help. After the audience feels the emotional rollercoaster of connecting to Joseph and Dun's bond to then find out it was all a part of Joseph's imagination, seeing the real versions of them meet in the clearing is a relief. Joseph accepting the mask that Dun holds out for him can be interpreted as Joseph finally accepting help rather than imagining it to cope with his mental health. The feeling of satisfaction and relief for the characters is another thing that forces the audience to reflect on their own choices of avoiding help. The video ends in a more impactful way as it pans out to show a cluster of torches behind the two men. This illustrates that Joseph finally has a community to rely on through his mental health journey. The ending uses pathos to elicit feelings of relief and peace for the characters in the music video, pushing audience members to strive for the same emotions in real life by replacing their isolation with community and accepting help.

The rhetorical arrangement of this video—Joseph's journey with Dun, the flashbacks to Dun as an imagined figure, and finally the acceptance of help—may appeal more specifically to men struggling with mental health. Typically, men have a more difficult time seeking help compared to women. Though this does not apply to all men, it is a noticeable pattern that men refrain from disclosing anything about their mental health struggles because they fear "being ridiculed, marginalized, and of being seen as 'unmanly' by other men" (Krumm et al. 119). Due to this fear, they may pretend they are handling their struggles well when in reality, they are not. Men watching the "Navigating" music video might connect more strongly to Joseph and his coping mechanism of imagining Dun to convince himself he does not actually need help. Joseph does not let his lonely coping mechanisms go until he is confronted with the real Dun and forced to admit he needs help. Peer-reviewed psychiatric research shows that having the permission of other men is a "contributing factor to men's acceptance of help-seeking" (Krumm et al. 119). Watching Joseph accept the mask from Dun, which can symbolize accepting help, provides the audience with a healthy and supportive interaction between two men. This example of a man offering another man help puts forth the idea for male viewers that they do not have to be afraid of being perceived negatively for needing help. Through the video's rhetoric, Joseph and Dun are giving them the 'permission' to seek help that men often seek from other men.

Analysis of Band's Ethos

This song and video present's another layer of convincing men to seek help because Joseph and Dun establish ethos as men who have personally struggled with their mental health. Joseph openly expresses his experience with mental health struggles during an interview:

> "When I first started writing music, I didn't think anyone would hear it and so there was an honesty to…that's just naturally there that is hard to recreate because now I know that if we write a song people are going to hear it. But then, because people resonated with it early on, the honesty, I realized that honesty was really important." (Pilots Content)

This interview reveals how Joseph uses Twenty One Pilots' music to honestly talk about his own struggles with mental health. With the realization that his audience appreciated that honesty, he decided that it was important to keep it throughout their music. Rhetorician Quintilian recognizes that a good man who speaks honestly is a better orator and will be "heard with greater credit than a bad man" (362). This means Joseph and Dun's honesty about their mental health struggles as men in "Navigating" makes the male audience more receptive to what they have to say about dealing with those struggles; people trust them to write about how it feels and how to fight it.

Joseph and Dun's credibility is even more influential to male audience members because they are celebrity males. While the audience should be careful about trusting someone's rhetoric simply because they are a celebrity, research demonstrates that male celebrities who open up about their mental health struggles influence "a wider societal and cultural discourse" (Stahl 13). Joseph and Dun's celebrity status in the music world is fairly big, as "Navigating" has 12,578,524 views—a number that is consistently growing. Not only are Joseph and Dun reaching more men than a typical person, but they are also demonstrating to male listeners that they are not afraid to express themselves to so many people. Understanding that the duo decided to keep their honest experiences in their music knowing millions of people are listening, the audience will start to view expressing their own struggles as brave rather than weak. So, as male celebrities who have experience with mental health problems, their music is incredibly influential to men.

Analysis of Reception

To fully understand the rhetoric of Twenty One Pilots' "Navigating," it is important to look into all parts of the rhetorical situation. This paper has already analyzed the text ("Navigating") and speaker (Twenty One Pilots), so it is beneficial to also address the audience's reception. Music about mental health, such as "Navigating," is impactful to audiences in numerous ways. Alex Kresovich identifies these influences through a study in

which college students completed a survey about their exposure to pop songs that mention mental health. The results show that college students who developed parasocial relationships with the artist and perceived personal connections to the song had reduced stigma, more support for mental health resources, and increased willingness to offer mental health support to those around them. Contrary to Kresovich's hypothesis, the study did not support the idea that music influences listeners' willingness to seek help for their own mental health. This is an interesting finding, as it indicates that the rhetoric in "Navigating" should not be successful in encouraging the audience to seek help for mental health struggles. However, comments from the audience that will be explored in this section seem to prove the rhetoric is successful. Kresovich has a possible explanation for this contradiction, stating that future research needs to "look deeper into what type of solutions – if any – are being advocated for in these popular songs" (625). It may be that the diction and pathos Twenty One Pilots use specifically address help seeking, whereas the songs in the study may have simply discussed the struggles of mental illness.

Although research has proven mental health in songs benefit listeners in a variety of ways, there are still concerns that artists who express their struggles may be encouraging them to "romanticize mental health struggles and view depression as trendy or as a 'fascinating' character trait" (Kresovich 625). Blogger Aaron Cooper believes that Twenty One Pilots glamorizes mental illness, encouraging audience members to "Stay depressed and lonely but stay alive! We'll see you on the tour!" (para. 12). Cooper's idea that Twenty One Pilots are capitalizing on their audience's mental health struggles is a bold statement, but it is simply an opinion without any rhetorical analysis. While he does point to songs such as "Neon Gravestones," Cooper does not provide specific evidence to support his claim. He also does not acknowledge the audience reception, which seems important since they are who he is worried about. While the idea of music romanticizing mental health struggles is a valid concern, a rhetorical analysis of "Navigating" proves the audience reception to be positive—not negative.

The "Navigating" music video is posted by Twenty One Pilots on YouTube, which has comments underneath where the audience discuss their reception of the song. Most of the comments appear to discuss the band, lyrics, or music video in a good light. YouTube users of all genders comment about the video's positive impact on their life while sharing their own experiences. User OliviaRena explains she has Asperger's Syndrome and relates to disassociating and navigating daily interactions with social cues she may miss, saying, "I can't wait to tell my therapist about this song." Another user, angiemoon4859, shares that her grandmother died within the month that the song was released. She thanks Twenty One Pilots for being her support and addresses the fan base, "I love you clique." Heatherdavis345 shares a lot more

detail about her experience with grief. However, she also shares how she reached out to her husband for support and "Navigating" allowed her to take a moment for a much needed cry when she was previously in denial. These are all examples of audience members who have reached out for help due to this song, whether it is to a therapist, significant other, or online friends.

Other users may not explicitly state how they have reached out for help or started to overcome mental struggles. However, they do use the conversation about "Navigating" to start opening up about their own experiences. Twentyoneberndunns8822 shares their struggle with brain fog and dissociation during group conversation. User M0unds_ is simpler about sharing their struggles but does so nonetheless when they say, "This album might be my savior. I am going through a hard time right now." Overall, these users demonstrate how the rhetoric of "Navigating" has encouraged them to reach out for help in their personal life or begun to express their struggles to this small community of fans rather than suffering in isolation. Looking at the audience reception in the rhetorical situation, it is clear that the band's rhetoric helps viewers and encourages them to seek solutions rather than wallow in their mental illness.

Conclusion

It is clear that as music continues to rise in popularity, messages about mental health will reach an increasingly larger number of people. While there are some valid concerns about romanticizing mental health within songs, Twenty One Pilots use their song "Navigating" to present rhetoric that encourages the audience, especially men, to seek help when they are struggling. Not only do the band members have the ethos to speak about mental health due to their own struggles, but they also think deeply about how their songs can help people. From the diction and delivery of the lyrics to the thought-provoking arrangement of the music video, the band uses these strategies to elicit an appeal to pathos about how mental health struggles feel and how it might improve through seeking help from trusted individuals. The audience reception to the song and music video proves to be positive, as comments communicate how helpful Twenty One Pilots has been in their individual journeys with various mental health struggles. Their rhetoric truly does help their fans navigate through their personal experiences with mental health while encouraging help-seeking behaviors.

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Adapting Alcott: An Intertextual Dialog of Feminisms through Jo & Amy in *Little Women*

Haley Wathen

Many readers list *Little Women* (1869) by Louisa May Alcott as a favorite piece of classic literature, often declaring the novel as an early feminist text. This idea mainly exists due to the character Jo March, who famously struggles to thrive within nineteenth-century gender norms. However, the presence of Jo's struggle does not ultimately categorize the beloved novel as the pinnacle of feminist literature. In truth, a feminist-centered, close reading of the novel reveals larger conservative themes at play, such as a reinforcement of female altruism, obedience, and an ending that ultimately favors female domesticity. It is often noted by various scholars that these elements seem to muddle the subversiveness present in the text, walking back any progressive themes that are established. To add to this confusion, the presence of these themes does not align with Alcott's character, who largely led a protofeminist life.

According to the book *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism,* a protofeminist is defined as "writers and activists whose thinking, writing and 'living' challenged the tenets of patriarchal social organization and questioned the prescriptive gender norms" (Plain & Sellers, 7). This definition is fitting for Alcott, as she advocated for women's suffrage, never married, and maintained her family's financial status through her writing, all of which were unorthodox for a woman in her time (Hollinger & Winterhalter). The summation of this conflicting information creates a vast divergence in scholarly opinion over present themes, with perspectives ranging from one end to the other. Author Ann B. Murphy speaks to this, describing the text as a "tarbaby, a sticky, sentimental, entrapping experience or place rather than a knowable object," noting that the complicated existence of the work pushes scholars either to take a stance of regression or progress when discussing *Little Women* (Murphy, 563-4). The overall conflict seems to hinge on the knowledge of Alcott's life and the overall ending of the book. As a result of this, many scholars have worked to understand the juxtaposition between the author and her work.

Regarding the creation of the novel, a collection of her written letters and journals shed some light on her potential motivations for ending the story on a domestic note. The original book was published in two parts, *Little Women* and *Good Wives*, both of which Alcott proceeded with apprehensively. Her father, who was an avid transcendentalist, encouraged her to write a

moral story for young girls. Begrudgingly, she decided to write the first part based on her own childhood. In her personal journal she wrote: "So I plod away, though I don't enjoy this sort of thing. Never liked girls or knew many, except my sisters; but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting, though I doubt it" (Alcott 199). This unenthusiastic entry gives the impression that she wasn't fond of the material that she was writing. In spite of her initial outlook, *Little Women* became a big hit, selling two thousand copies in the first two weeks. Her publisher then commissioned a second book due to the popularity of the first. Alcott wrote in her journal that she felt pressured to end the book "in a very stupid style," as both her publisher and audience demanded that all the sisters be married off in the end. Thus, *Good Wives* was born, completing the novel as we understand it today (Rioux). Her journal entries suggest that she felt pressured by outside sources to include certain elements or even write about young women in general.

With this given context, it can be surmised that Alcott included an overarching moral instruction that pointed towards marriage as a result of the cultural pressures of her time. Evidence of these themes can be specifically viewed in the characterization of Jo and Amy. Jo is often noted to be a projection of Alcott herself, who uses the character as an avatar to voice her own discontent of being born a girl (Rioux). Jo is an ambitious writer who struggles with her anger along with finding a place in the world (Alcott). Similarly, the character Amy, noted as being based on Alcott's younger sister May, is a vain artist who struggles with her selfish impulses (Hollinger & Winterhalter). These two sisters mirror one another, portraying two sides of the same coin. By the end of the novel, both sisters have their passions bridled and new last names, as they learn how to be content in adulthood and fulfill their gender roles (Alcott).

Regardless of the novel's conflicting themes, *Little Women* remains popular today. It has inspired many adaptive works, including plays, films, and television shows. Specifically focusing on film productions, the novel has inspired a total of eight movies to date (Rioux). Each of these adaptations made changes to the plot that mirrored the cultural climate of their time, creating a steady stream of observable material. For example, the 1933 adaptation was made in response to the Great Depression, as audiences yearned for simplistic innocence. Similarly, the 1949 adaptation was released in the aftermath of World War II, where women resonated with the March girls who maintained a home while the father was away (Rioux). This trend continues up until modern times, with the most recent film adaptations being released in the years 1994 and 2019.

Arguably, the 1994 and 2019 film adaptations were created during prominent moments of feminism, with 1994 released at the beginning of the third wave and 2019 towards the end of the fourth. In this way, these

adaptations serve as a cultural litmus test of modern feminism, while also allowing for reflection on the protofeminist elements present in the novel. In order to show how feminist rhetoric has shifted over time, this paper examines the evolving characterization of Jo and Amy in *Little Women*, focusing specifically on their representation in the original 1868 novel and making comparisons to their representations in both the 1994 and 2019 film adaptations. By comparing these portrayals, the analysis reveals how past and present narratives shape feminist discourse, offering deeper insight into historical contexts, contemporary strategies, and future interpretations.

Adaptation Theory

In order to successfully observe and communicate the adaptation works in this paper, it is important to discuss and define the methodologies of adaptation theory being applied. To start, scholar Robert Stam states in the novel *Literature Through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation* that "just as any literary text can generate an infinity of readings, so any novel can generate a number of adaptations. An adaptation is thus less a resuscitation of an originary word than a turn in an ongoing dialogical process" (Stam, 4). This idea that adaptation work serves as an intertextual dialog between works aligns with the "Transformation" paradigm outlined by scholar Karen E. Kline in the journal *Literature Film Quarterly*. In her article, she states that "[c]ritics adopting this approach consider the novel raw material which alters significantly, so that the film becomes an artistic work in its own right" (Kline). Rather than viewing changes made from the source material in film adaptations negatively, they are viewed as an artistic expansion. With this in mind, this paper will be looking at changes made from the original novel in order to better understand the cultural landscape of each adaptation. Changes made from the original novel will not be noted as fidelity, but as meaningful dialog between the proto feminist narrative of the past and the ongoing development of feminism today. By doing so, an understanding of the evolution of the dialogue between feminist values can be observed through the lens of *Little Women*, while also shedding light on how the conversation between works may continue in the future.

1994 Film Adaptation

Before analyzing the 1994 adaptation, it is important to map the cultural climate in which it was produced. An article from the *Chicago Tribune* states that 1994 impacted women's progress greatly, describing it as "a year when there was not only a lot of bad news for women, but when women simply looked bad" (Chicago Tribune). The article, which was published in January of 1995, went on to list several feminist issues and failings from the previous year, such as domestic violence, women's health, pay equity, and politics. They also cited the scrutiny that Hillary Clinton received

during her time serving as first lady as a significant blow to feminism (Chicago Tribune). Barbara Berg, a historian and feminist author, expanded upon this in *The New York Times*, stating that Hillary Clinton "had been vilified because she worked, wanted to keep her maiden name and refused to bake cookies" (Bennett). This critical climate brewed a storm that would produce the third wave of feminism (Alexander).

This new emergence of feminism created interesting waters for launching the 1994 adaptation of *Little Women*. Screenwriter Robin Swicord and director Gillian Armstrong were dealt an interesting hand for telling the story of the March family, because their production company was adamant that this was not a women's film, and pitched the project as a "family film for Christmas" (Rioux). Author Jessica Bennet explains that Sony executives were not excited to review the initial script and that the project was only greenlit due to Winona Ryder's agreement to star in the film. Ryder was at the top of her game, and executives thought that her addition would ensure a bigger audience. Even with this insurance, the culture war of 1994 left the director worried about creating a film that would be perceived as "too feminist" (Bennett).

In spite of this foreground, the 1994 adaptation of *Little Women* was received well by audiences. Even though both Swicord and Armstrong expressed apprehension towards making a feminist film, some subversive lines made their way into the script. However, not every choice resulted in a win for the third wave. For example, some interesting choices were made in regard to the casting, characterization, and the overall evolution of these two March sisters. These choices both hindered and elevated the various feminist rhetoric present within the film, drawing attention to the influence that the cultural climate had on the portrayal of Jo and Amy.

Casting

For example, the audience's reception of Jo and Amy was largely influenced by the casting choices made within the film. Author Suzy Woltmann argues that casting holds an important role in the making of a film in her article "How to Cast a Film (and Why Casting Matters)," which outlines the process of successful casting in a "how to" format. She notes that "[c]asting matters because performance influences perceptions" (Woltmann). This sentiment holds true and remains a crucial element when discussing literature to film adaptations. Regarding the characterization of Jo and Amy, the 1994 cast altered the audience's perception in a way that both obstructs and reflects feminist rhetoric from the 90s.

To start, Winona Ryder was chosen to portray Jo March. It was noted by the film's producer, Denise Di Novi, that "[p]hysically, Jo was supposed to be plain and gangly, but Winona was a *Little Women* fanatic and so understood the character" (Spencer). In truth, Jo is described in the novel as being

awkward and having "the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman and didn't like it" (Alcott). Alcott goes on to paint her as having long limbs that got in her way, a "comical" nose, and large hands and feet with rounded shoulders (Alcott). This description couldn't be further from Ryder, whose enchanting demeanor gives the impression of a beautiful girl who doesn't realize that she is beautiful yet. This aligns with various "rom-com" plotlines, arguably leading the audience towards a less-feminist rhetoric that diverges from the author's original intent. This can be observed in many scenes, such as the borderline flirtatious grins that she gifts Laurie or dodging unwanted suitors at the local Christmas dance (Armstrong).

However, the most notable scene where Ryder's beauty overrides the novel's description of Jo is the scene where Jo announces the sale of her hair in order to help Marmee pay for her travels. In the scene, Ryder announces what she has done and dramatically removes her hat to reveal a chic, French-style bob. Ryder appears like a Victorian pixie, with a tasteful look that many women might take to their hairdresser for inspiration in modern times (Armstrong). This scene strongly differs from the novel, as Alcott describes her new hairstyle as a "brown bush" with "short rough ends" and notes that it should grow out into a "curly crop" at some point (Alcott). With Jo's hair being noted as her "one beauty," it is arguable that the 1994 adaptation did not create the same impact as the book, as Ryder remained beautiful in the aftermath of the haircut.

In an essay titled "A Feminist Romance: Adapting *Little Women* to the Screen," it is pointed out that "when Jo sells her hair in the film, her action does not carry with it any significant sense of loss" (Hollinger and Winterhalter). The essay then goes on to concede that Ryder's "effervescent" smile in the scene signals a sense of female determination that rises above societal norms. In addition, they also note that this post-structural revision eliminates "Alcott's, morally stalwart nineteenth-century woman, who is torn between her desire to serve and her need to express herself, and is replaced with a more contemporary one who sparkles with female independence and pragmaticism" (Hollinger and Winterhalter). This subtle change in portrayal is a reflection of the feminist era that the film was released in.

For example, an article by Vogue discussing the evolution of the "pixie" haircut specifically references Ryder from this very era. In 1994, Ryder sported a pixie cut in her personal life that challenged beauty standards. The article states that her haircut had evolved into a statement of "individuality" and described Ryder as a woman who "chopped off [her] hair as a means of empowerment, free from shackles of the narrow beauty ideals that were dominant at the time" (Bateman). Something as simple as the

portrayal of a haircut can lend to a rhetorical argument and portraying the character of Jo as proud and unscathed defied gender norms in that moment. By surviving the chop with beauty and grace intact, the gendered weight of long locks was released as well. While this move arguably negated Alcott's original portrayal of Jo and her own methods of defying nineteenth-century norms with the character's appearance, Ryder's performance created space for a modern conversation surrounding female determination and empowerment that better reflected the values of feminism in the 90s.

While Ryder's natural beauty brought a new likeness to the character of Jo, the double casting of Amy drew special attention to the character's age and maturity. In the 1994 adaptation, Amy was played by both Kirsten Dunst and Samantha Mathis. Dunst was 11 at the time and played the part of Amy in her adolescence. Mathis was 23, the same age as Ryder, and was chosen to play Amy in her adult years ("*Little Women*"). When asked to explain this choice, the film's producer noted that "[i]t just was weird to have someone be a little girl and then a grown-up. It didn't work" (Spencer). At face value, this seems an understandable thought process until comparing the ages of the March sisters from the novel to the screen. In reality, all of them were little girls who then became grown-ups over the course of the novel.

At the beginning of the novel, Amy is 12, Jo is 15, and Laurie is 16 (Alcott). While an age difference of 3 to 4 years can be considerable in regard to maturity during adolescence, the physical differences aren't as dramatic as what was portrayed on screen. Kirsten Dunst appears substantially younger when acting alongside the 20-something year-olds who are meant to portray a similar age group. Whether it was intentional or not, this created the perception that Amy was much younger than the rest of her sisters and her eventual love interest, which ultimately infantilized her character. Author Anne Boyde Rioux speaks to this in her novel *Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy: The Story of Little Women and Why it Still Matters* and states, "Unfortunately, Mathis's prim Amy contrasts too markedly with Dunst's much more playful one." Ultimately, the justification of double casting feels odd, as Ryder was allowed to portray 15-year-old Jo at the age of 23. If it was too "weird" to cast Amy as one actress, how was it not weird to cast the rest of the sisters the same way? Why not cast a more middle-ground Amy?

Essentially, the choice in casting allowed Jo a steady timeline of maturation, which arguably aligned her more to the audience's favor. Amy was not allotted the same courtesy, causing the audience to become distant from her, much like the distance between the ages of the two actresses who portrayed her. An article published by the Smithsonian Magazine speaks to this, stating that Amy March often serves as a "fly in the ointment," or as the sister that everyone loves to hate (Blakemore). While Amy is notably described as immature, she is also described as being talented and ambitious, much like

her sister Jo. The choice in double casting the role of Amy chooses to focus on her youthful immaturity and skips her coming of age, a notable divergence from the original bildungsroman novel, which heavily impacts the character's reception by audiences.

Portrayal of Character & Setting

In addition to casting, perception is also altered by how the character is portrayed through performance and how the setting is depicted through shots. In regard to the setting, many specific choices were made that altered the audience's perception. Rather than focusing on any intrinsic complexities present in the original novel, the writers chose to focus on ambiance instead. The opening scene sets the tone for this, as the audience is presented with a curated picture of a romanticized past, which is hard to do for a story set during the Civil War. The March cottage sits surrounded by blankets of snow, drawing the viewer into the storybook setting of Concord, Massachusetts. A score of trumpets, flutes and strings flutter between scenes, evoking a sense of sweet longing and harkening for the return of simpler times. The inside of the March home is just as quaint, decorated in muted warm tones and full of textures that reflect the nineteenth century- quilted throws, smoky chimneys, creaky wooden floors (Armstrong).

While the novel also depicts a quaint home, dialog of poverty is also present, giving the impression that the family has been heavily affected by the Civil War. The girls often talk of old gowns, shoes that don't fit, not being able to afford gloves, and the heavy presence of their absent father (Alcott). Even though they strive to remain positive and find joy, the presence of poverty is there. This element is lacking in the 1994 setting, where it is hard to understand the March family as poor and suffering consequences of the Civil War in such a quaint home.

To build upon this, author Anne Boyde Rioux notes that the writer for the film, Robin Swicord, unfortunately opted more for nostalgia and consequently "dulled the power and emotions of the original work" (Rioux). As described previously, the studio pitched the movie as a Christmas film for the whole family. This purposeful move, paired with the sterilization of heavy themes, was a clever marketing tactic. An article published by Fielding Graduate University, titled "Why Christmas Movies Make Us Feel Good," speaks to the psychology involved in creating the sense of nostalgia through Christmas. It explains that Christmas films often orbit themes of romance, family, and friendship, which speaks to the human need for social connection. When these themes are paired with the warm atmosphere of the holidays, a sense of escapism and nostalgia are often invoked in the audience (Rutledge). This proved successful in the film, with many audiences associating the 1994 adaptation with the Christmas holiday in present times (Rioux).

Ultimately, the heavy themes of poverty and politics in the Civil War were successfully sidestepped in the 1994 adaptation. This purposeful choice largely reflects the cultural landscape of the 90s. Both Swicord and Armstrong were hesitant to lend ammunition to the ongoing culture war and decided to lean into the "lightness" spearheaded by the studio's marketing strategies. This choice to evade the depth of the original novel had an impact not only on the setting but also on the portrayals of Jo and Amy March.

Arguably, the 1994 adaptation serves a version of Jo who is vexed but never angry and a version of Amy who is selfish and never ambitious. For example, in the 1994 adaptation, Jo's anger only seems to take center stage during the scene where Amy burns her manuscripts in retaliation for not being invited to the theater. In the scene, Jo savagely pounces on Amy when she discovers what she's done, screaming that she hates her and wishes she was dead. It takes both Marmee and Beth to separate the two. Marmee encourages Jo to let go of her anger and forgive her sister, but she refuses. The next afternoon, Jo ignores her sister while ice-skating with Laurie. Amy attempts to skate on the lake on her own and falls through the ice. After her rescue, the sisters lay in a warm bed surrounded by kittens. A few words of forgiveness and remorse are exchanged, and it appears that all is forgiven (Armstrong).

This scene differs greatly from the novel, as Jo basically blames her own anger for her sister's almost-drowning. Following this, there is a long scene where Jo pleads for Marmee to help her with her anger, explaining that she fears someday she will do something awful that she can't take back. She states, "It seems as if I could do anything when I'm in a passion. I get so savage, I could hurt anyone and enjoy it" (Alcott). This pivotal scene in the novel marks Jo's anger as a temptation that she battles throughout the duration of the story. In response to this, Marmee often reprimands Jo for her anger, encouraging her to stifle it whenever it arouses. This element is missing from the film, as Jo rarely appears angered or troubled by it after this event. Instead, she appears playfully vexed by the constraints of her time, bearing them all with a brave smile or a gentle tear.

Admittedly, the idea of female rage was not culturally embraced in the 90s and certainly was something to be repressed in the nineteenth century. Historically speaking, female anger was often defined as a form of "hysteria" and, if not controlled, like Jo learned to do, would send a young woman to a dark fate (Ng). Therefore, the lack of this aspect in the film is a missed opportunity to add to the feminist discourse Alcott may have been trying to build—an angry Jo is a feminist Jo within a nineteenth-century context. However, it could also be argued that the removal of this scene is evidence of third wave feminism, where a harsh focus on atonement might have been seen as unnecessary.

Similarly, Amy is painted as a one-dimensional, bratty little sister. As mentioned above, the casting choice played a large part. However, the script didn't allow for much growth either. The adult version of Amy, Samantha Mathis, only appears an hour into the movie and receives little screen time. This caused the characterization of Amy to heavily lie upon Dunst's 11-year-old shoulders. In addition to this, the script gives little insight into Amy's ambition for painting. Only a few lines at the beginning of the movie show her wanting new drawing pencils, and a single scene is shown of her painting in France (Armstrong). In contrast to this, the book speaks more to her seriousness for art, describing a young girl getting lost in doodles and later a young woman concentrating on bettering her artistic skills. Alcott writes that "she persevered in spite of all obstacles, failures, and discouragements, firmly believing that in time she would do something worthy to be called 'high art'" (Alcott). This determination is lost in the film, and, instead, there is a greater focus on her role as a child, her ignorance, and later as Laurie's wife.

While these portrayals feel disappointing, it is arguable that they reflect the director and writer's desire to not have the work dubbed as a "feminist film" during the culture war of the 90s (Rioux). Swicord herself expressed regret that they didn't push the envelope further in an interview with *The New York Times*, stating, "I wish that "Little Women" had shaken things up a little more than it had" (Spencer). She went on to reiterate that Hollywood was not ready for female driven films and did not believe that there was a profitable audience to receive them (Spencer). This, paired with the missed opportunities discussed in both setting and character portrayals, reflects the same patriarchal line that Alcott toed when writing the original novel. While the creators broke some gender norms for their respected times, pressures from the cultural landscape curbed potential gains. To build upon this upset, missed opportunities also appear in both of the girl's endings.

Character Resolution

For example, an important element of the "coming of age" theme is the character's resolution. This resolution caps the period of growth and self-discovery being described, allowing readers to witness the arch and development of each character. It is specifically noted in the article "The Bildungsroman: Form and Transformations" that for female characters in the nineteenth-century, the elements of a Bildungsroman often consist of "a young woman [who] undergoes a process of worldly or sentimental education and becomes reconciled to her destiny, sometimes in the form of marriage" (Frowet al.). The article goes on to later state that it is possible for female characters to also achieve success in "writing or artistry" (Frow et al.). With this in mind, it is important to analyze how both Jo and Amy's resolutions

were portrayed in the 1994 adaptation, as their end achievements mark the lessons learned.

To start, the 1994 adaptation decided to follow the story of Jo more closely than the other sisters and ultimately ties the film's ending with her own. Many adaptations have taken this route, as she is arguably the main character and the one to whom most women identify with. In a *New York Times* article from 1996 titled "Amy Had Golden Curls; Jo Had A Rat. Who Would You Rather Be," it is stated that "[w]e are all supposed to have worshiped Jo, identified with her, found in her a role model for our writing lives. Louisa May Alcott clearly adored Jo, her idealized self, and generations of readers have fallen in line behind her" ("Amy had Golden Curls…"). The article goes on to argue that the 1994 version of Jo receives a more traditional storybook ending that mirrors Amy's from the original novel. In truth, Jo receives a very different ending in the film than what Alcott had originally wanted or even wrote for her.

For example, in the film Jo moves to New York to make a name for herself as a writer. While there, she is swept away by Professor Bhaer who connects with her on her work. He gives writing advice, encourages her to write from the heart, and seems to nurture her intellectual curiosity. This is all true to the novel. However, a few additional alterations were made. The 1994 version of Bhear does not only connect with her intellectually but also sweeps her off to the Opera, successfully wooing her and building a romantic connection. In contrast to this, the novel distinctly notes that Bhaer is an unattractive, older man. This new version of Bhaer is notably handsome, and, while he appears older, the age difference feels excusable due to their connection (Armstrong). The *New York Times* notes that "this sentimental courtship is a perversion of the novel…the fairytale romance is the most appealing part of a movie that labors to make Alcott seem more modern than she really is" ("Amy had Golden Curls…"). The article then argues that Jo, being made "pretty" by the performance of Ryder, with the addition of the fairytale romance with the Professor who lives next door, aligns Jo to Amy in a way that hasn't been seen before ("Amy had Golden Curls…"). While many readers and viewers enjoy a happy ending, the distinction made by the *New York Times* rings true. By giving Jo a romantic ending, the 1994 film adaptation ultimately alters her character as a whole.

It is important to note that some scholars disagree with this opinion. Authors Karen Hollinger and Teresa Winterhalter state in their paper, "A Feminist Romance: Adapting Little Women to the Screen," that Jo's romance with Bhaer reconstructs the institution of marriage to something positive and more equal, which is a notable divergence from the original novel. They state that:

> Most significantly, unlike her novelistic counterpart, the film's Jo never subordinates her will to Bhaer's; therefore, when she finally does agree to marry him, she can stand beside him undiminished, as his equal in intellect, artistry, and personal integrity. In the film's final scene, Bhear and Jo join hands- interlocking fingers- signaling that in their life together they will be joined as equals. (Hollinger & Winterhalter)

In contrast to this, the novel's version of Bhear comes off more critical and the novel version of Jo seems to crumble under his harsh opinion over her "sensational" works (Alcott). The 1996 adaptation alters these conversations and, as stated above, portrays a fairer argument between two equals.

In summation of this, both of these clashing opinions can be held true at the same time. The 1996 adaptation worked to change Jo's ending by giving her romance. While the romance portrayed mirrored the equal partnerships women advocated for in the third wave of feminism, it also slightly diminished the power of an independent woman. There is something left to be desired for the feminist who does not wish to see the female heroine married off in the end. Alcott herself did not want Jo to get married in the second half of her novel but ultimately felt forced to by her publishers and audience (Rioux). This historical truth, paired with above opinions, leaves a gap for progress in the resolution for Jo.

Similar to Jo's ending, Amy's resolution was slightly altered. Her storyline remains mostly true to the novel with minor adjustments that work to compare her to Jo. For example, following the plot of the novel, Amy is chosen by Aunt March to accompany her to Europe instead of Jo. There, she catches the eye of Laurie while being courted by another man (Armstrong). However, there are not many scenes that show the development of Amy and Laurie's romance, and it all happens very suddenly. This leads audiences to compare Amy to Jo, as the majority of the movie depicts Laurie's falling for Jo, making it seem as if he settled for Amy instead.

To add to this, the film takes several liberties within the script, which consequently creates a "love triangle" narrative. Specifically, the film diverges from the novel when depicting the scene where Amy criticizes Laurie's lack of ambition. In the film, the conversation takes more of a turn towards comparing Amy to Jo. Amy explains that she does not want to be courted by someone that is still in love with her sister. Laurie argues that he is not in love but that he always wanted to be a part of the March family. In response, Amy states that she does "not wish to be loved for her family" and storms away (Armstrong). These lines are void from the original novel, which centers the focus of the conversation on Laurie's heartbreak over Jo instead. At this time,

there is no mention of a romantic relationship developing between Amy and Laurie, as it is not present yet in the novel's storyline.

This subtle change left a big impact on the perception of Amy, as the script created a love triangle that wasn't heavily focused on within the original novel. In the novel, Jo is unbothered when she learns of Amy and Laurie's engagement through a letter. She doesn't love Laurie in that way and is happy that she didn't accept his proposal in the past. She is given space to process their engagement from afar (Alcott). In the 1994 adaptation, Jo is caught off guard by the news which is delivered by the couple in the flesh. She appears shocked but is ultimately happy for the couple (Armstrong). However, the faux pas of blitz-attacking your sister with sensitive news has not gone unnoticed by past and modern audiences.

Author Erin Blakemore states that due to this portrayal in the film, Amy is often scapegoated, as the scene depicts "a supposed betrayal that has created generations of Amy haters" (Blakemore). Amy does appear to be unjustly blamed for Laurie's shifting affections by many. An article published by Slate, titled "Amy Sucks," tells readers that it is okay to hate the character of Amy March, as it is never okay to marry your sister's best friend. It also argues the narrative that Jo and Laurie were meant to be together and that Amy ultimately ruined that for Jo (Schwedel). Perhaps this negative perception could have been shifted if the script had not included lines pitting the sisters against one another and instead focused on a resolution for Amy that was void of comparisons to Jo.

While the 1994 adaptation didn't invent the idea of a love triangle, they definitely added to the trope of women competing against each other for men. Later in that same decade, movies such as My Best Friend's Wedding (1997), Ten Things I Hate About You (1999), and She's All That (1999) serve several plots that mirror this. This trend continued into the early 2000s, when movies like Mean Girls (2004), She's The Man (2006), and 27 Dresses (2008) really took this idea and ran with it. The summation of these films creates a narrative that women must compete against each other for the approval of men. In support of this idea, Dr. Noam Shpancer argues in an article published by *Psychology Today* that female competition is driven by social mechanisms, stating that women raised in a male-dominant society often adopt the male perspective. They state, "As women come to consider being prized by men as their ultimate source of strength, worth, achievement, and identity, they are compelled to battle other women for the prize" (Shpancer). This idea persisted for quite some time and arguably is still present at the time this paper is being written. However, it wasn't until 2010 that movies began to push a new narrative that was arguably inspired by a new wave of feminism.

2019 Film Adaptation

In order to describe the feminist climate of the 2010's, the debate of whether the third wave of feminism has ended and a fourth has begun must be discussed. An article written in 2013 by scholar Ealasaid Munro, titled "Feminism: A Fourth Wave," explains that the argument mainly hinges on how the internet has transformed activism. She states that the internet provides more space for intersectionality within feminism, which is a hallmark of the third wave that must be carried over into the fourth (Munro). To build on this opinion, the National Women's History Museum asserts that the twenty-first century ushered in new forms of activism, highlighting "hashtag activism" on social media as a specific tactic. For example, the hashtag circulated various feminist topics around the world, such as the "Me Too" Movement, Black Lives Matter, and Time's Up—all of which called for social justice, an end to sexual harassment, and equal pay in the workforce (Alexander). An article by Forbes, titled "The 2010s: The Decade Women Fought Back," further outlines these feminist movements, stating that fourth wave feminism generated new terms, such as "mansplaining," and a new ability for women to challenge men in power. The article specifically references gender equality remaining on the forefront of activism, as women continued to struggle to be taken seriously next to their male counterparts in the workplace (Elting).

This new surge in feminist activism was spurred on by a tumultuous political landscape. A *New York Times* article, titled "The 2010's Were the End of Normal," suggests that the biggest losses of the decade were trust, hope, and unity. The article then goes on to explain how this distrust trickled into technology, as the internet became a tool used for misinformation alongside activism, causing mass confusion and anger. As a result, America began to long for simpler times. The article states that: "In fact, immersion or escape into compelling fictional worlds seemed to be one strategy people were embracing to cope with political outrage fatigue" (Kakutani). This fatigue dominated the 2010s, where the nation cycled between outrage and complacency, finding a short escape in entertainment only to restart when the credits rolled.

With that said, the 2019 adaptation faced a similar premise as the *Little Women* adaptation produced in 1949 after World War II. The country was asking for an escape to a better time and place. This, coupled with the eruption of a new wave of feminism, gave director Greta Gerwig a unique opportunity to expand upon the classic novel. Rather than create a sugar-coated storybook adaptation, Gerwig opted to tap into the grief of nostalgia while shining a light on the historical subjugation of women. To accomplish this, specific choices were made that diverted from both the novel and past

adaptive works, such as storytelling, characterization, and the overall focus of the film.

Story Telling

The most noticeable move that Gerwig made when creating the 2019 adaptation was the choice to tell the story nonlinearly. This was a bold choice that dramatically changed the perception of the film and, notably, had never been done before for *Little Women*. She sets the present day during the adult years of the March girls and cycles through reflective scenes from their childhood in a past-tense format. Scenes depicting the present day are edited in cool-toned hues. The score for these scenes is often marked by an emotional, slow, staccato piano. This is vastly different from scenes depicting the past, which are filtered with a golden light paired with a quickened variation of the previously mentioned piano score (Gerwig). This choice creates a noticeable contrast between past and present for the audience and is a purposeful component of the film.

All of the above adheres to the nonlinear storytelling method. Scholar Linda J. Cowgill explains the strategies behind nonlinear storytelling, stating that each scene is linked by "cause-and effect," which develops the plot through characterizations, often by illustrating consequences of events. This causes the plot to be tied to the character, as the directors work to build a sense of inevitability for the end (Cowgill, 10). Gerwig's choice to implement this mode of storytelling created an opportunity for a new focus on perspectives. Instead of focusing on Jo like previous adaptations, we are able to focus on each March sister and witness their emotional development and growth. This transforms the story from a plot-driven piece into a character-driven film, as the audience is made to appreciate each sister's motivations and choices. Congruently, telling the story of the March sisters in a nonlinear fashion pays homage to the bildungsroman style of the original novel, reflecting on the growth of each character and centering the story around them in a new way.

In addition to refocusing the drive behind the story, Gerwig's production of past and present creates a narrative of somber nostalgia, often pairing scenes of conflict from the present with reflections of simpler times in childhood. For example, a notable scene shows Jo confiding in Beth about her struggles with writing on a grey, dreary beach in present time. Beth's health is failing, and Jo is left feeling worried and uninspired. Beth encourages her to write for others, like how Marmee encouraged them to do things for others in their childhood. The audience is then taken backwards to a warmly lit home, where Marmee is preparing to travel to her wounded husband. Jo offers money for the train, and when they ask how she got it she reveals that she has cut her hair. Unlike the 1994 adaptation, the scene doesn't center around Jo. While the rest of the characters are surprised that she cut her hair, the focus

remains on sending Marmee safely off (Gerwig). The nonlinear structure of pairing these two scenes reframes the focus—dying. Beth works to inspire her sister to write something meaningful for others, and Jo remembers the last time that she did such a thing for her family. This shifts the focus from vanity lost to a moment of selfless sacrifice. Consequently, this also shifts the audience's perception of Jo, as she is seen as reflective and mature in these moments rather than the whimsical tomboy of her youth.

Similar to Jo, Amy's character is also reframed through nonlinear storytelling. A great example is when Amy is sent to live with Aunt March after Beth falls ill with Scarlet Fever. The audience starts in a scene from the past, where exasperated Meg states that she wishes they had money to afford to send Beth to a hospital. Because they can't, young Amy is sent to stay with Aunt March while Beth gets better, as she hasn't had the fever yet. While there, Aunt March decides that Amy is going to be the "new hope" for the March family, explaining to Amy that she is her family's only chance at financial security. She must marry rich. The audience is then taken to present time, where adult Amy has just declined Fred Vaghn's hand in marriage in favor of Laurie. Aunt March informs Amy that Laurie has left for business in London. A somber score plays, and Amy looks frightfully sullen (Gerwig). Linking the March family's financial struggle with the constant pressure from Aunt March allows the audience to understand Amy's motivations. She is not a girl wanting to marry rich for her own comfort but for the sake of her family's well-being.

The nonlinear storytelling method allows the audience to make deeper connections with Jo and Amy. Jo is seen as more than a rebellious, headstrong teen who struggles with being a girl in the nineteenth century. She is also shown as a resilient, young woman who handles loss and heartbreak through the inspiration of her family. Similarly, Amy is reframed as more than a bratty younger sister who wants to marry rich because she is materialistic. She is also a young woman, burdened by the constraints of her times, wanting to take care of the people that she loves in the only way that she knows how. Each of these new perspectives is built upon the original novel, taking liberties when needed and highlighting strengths when the opportunity arises. Essentially, the audience watches each sister reflect upon their childhood as they learn to adapt to their present.

Arguably, this method of storytelling also spoke to the cultural landscape of the 2010s. Greta's ability to describe the unique grief that is felt when looking back on simpler times tapped into the nation's need for nostalgia in an important way. Dr. Krystine Batcho explains in her article, published by the *American Psychology Association,* that there are several forms that nostalgia can manifest in: one being an idealized longing for a

historical past, and another being a reflection on a meaningful period in one's life. She states that historical nostalgia is often triggered by a dissatisfaction with the present, stating that "someone could become enamored [by] a period in history such as Victorian days, not because they've lived through them, obviously, but because they have become romanticized and idealized in a way in literature and in film" (Luna). This seemed to be the angle that past adaptations, including the one in 1994, took with *Little Women*. However, the latter form of nostalgia, which is connected to personal aspects of childhood, prompts a different sort of reflection. Bacho explains that "[i]n a way, Nostalgia is like a measurement. It's a way we keep track of things, we monitor progress through life, not just for ourselves, but even for other people to whom we are very attached" (Luna). This appears to be how Gerwig approached the storytelling of this film, as she moves away from a simple escape to an idealized past and instead prompts a personal reflection from the March sisters and, by extension, the audience.

Characterization

In addition to storytelling, perceptions of the characters were also altered through how each character was portrayed. To do this, Gerwig took several liberties in order to expand upon the novel and better reflect the life of the author who wrote it. Gerwig expressed in several interviews that this adaptation was meant to reflect Alcott just as much as the March girls. She specifically spoke to this in an interview published in an article by *The New York Times*, where she states that she relied on Alcott's personal writings for her construction of Jo. The article explains that "Gerwig's film is less an update than it is an excavation—a kind of literary investigation of the characters, their writer, and what they all really wanted" (Hess). In investigation of the writer, Gerwig leaves several easter eggs in the film, paying homage to the author through the character of Jo. For example, Jo is filmed writing ambidextrously, the same as Alcott. Additionally, the majority of filming took place in Concord, Massachusetts where Alcott actually grew up. However, the most notable is the opening scene in the film, which explains why *Little Women* ends the way that it does in spite of Alcott's proto feminist beliefs—with all of the March sisters married or dead.

The movie starts with a nervous Jo standing outside of a publisher's office. Jo takes a deep breath before entering. The room is filled with only men, smoking cigars and taking no notice of her presence. She approaches the editor's desk, stating that she would like to submit her stories anonymously to *The Daily Volcano*. The editor laughs, not taking her seriously, but agrees to take a look. He takes a pen to several pages, slashing through her work, finally exclaiming that she can be paid less than average for this sort of thing (Gerwig). This scene is present in the book, and the dialogue follows almost

word for word. However, Gerwig added a specific line that changed the context of their conversation.

In the book, the editor advises that she removes "morals" from the story, instructing her to make it "short and spicy" (Alcott). Gerwig changes this up, having the editor add, "and if the main character is a girl, make sure that she is married at the end. Or dead, either way" (Gerwig). This line was placed purposely and is a clear reference to the instructions that Alcott received from her own publisher when writing the second part of *Little Women* (Rioux). Opening the film with this scene set the tone, letting the audience know that this is a representation of Alcott's work and hinting that liberties taken were made in honor of her. This line also references concepts from fourth-wave feminism, as women demanded a social revolution in the workplace during the 2010s. They were more vocal in calling out sexism in the work environment and no longer wanted to be seen as "frivolous" or "lesser than" due to their sex (Elting). By including a scene showing Jo getting paid less for her work, while inserting an additional line that devalues women, Gerwig addresses the sexism of her time showing that not much has changed.

In addition to mirroring Alcott through the character of Jo, Gerwig also focuses on portraying the depth of her character. The always happy, whimsical, effervescent Jo from 1994 is gone, and instead we are served a version with sorrows, regrets, and anger. This is shown in various scenes, specifically in a dramatic dialogue that Jo gives to Marmee shortly after Beth's death. Jo is at a personal crossroads in her life at this point in the story. She is grieving the loss of her sister, while also struggling to see how she can move forward as an unmarried woman in her time. With angry tears, she exclaims: "I just feel like women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as hearts. And they have ambition, and they have talent as well as just beauty. And I'm so sick of people saying that love is all a woman is fit for. I am so sick of it. But, I am so lonely!" (Gerwig). While this monologue is not in the original novel, it carries the essence of Jo and, by extension, Alcott herself.

According to an interview published by USA Today, Gerwig confessed that she stole the line from Alcott's lesser-known novel, *Rose in Bloom.* However, she admits that she tweaked the original line to add "I'm so lonely" and later explained that Ronan's performance of the line encapsulated the feeling and left her weeping. In this same interview, Amy Pascal who was the producer of the project, explains that "[Gerwig] wanted to make it about women and economic independence, and she wanted to intermingle Louisa May Alcott's real experience with writing the book" (Mandell). While Alcott did not write this bit for Jo, and the original lines did not include an additional declaration of loneliness, these elements appear to be a part of a breadcrumb trail that leads us to the heart of the author. Some part of Alcott was

tired of being reduced to her gender, and Greta is connecting that tiredness to how fighting against the patriarchy can feel lonely.

Including this specific monologue in the film also spoke to modern times and the complexities of being a feminist during the fourth wave. While the sentiment of wanting to be seen as more than your gender is often shared, the pressure to "have it all" is surmounting and can leave feminists feeling defeated. Feminist scholar Roxane Gay spoke to this in her novel *Bad Feminist* (2014), offering a voice to those who feel guilty for struggling with feminism in certain aspects of their life. In the opening of her book, she speaks on the pressures to "lean in," be a powerful person at work and at home and having to appear to never grow tired of the fight. She states that "like most people, I am full of contradictions, but I also don't want to be treated like shit for being a woman" (Gay). She concludes the chapter by noting that she would rather be a bad feminist than no feminist at all (Gay). Greta echoes this sentiment in Jo's monologue and specifically does so by adding a line speaking to loneliness. Jo wants to be valued for things outside of her gender and is tired of being reduced to "just" a girl. However, the way things are still causes her to feel lonely, and, as an early feminist, she's angry about it.

While Gerwig uses Jo's characterization to simultaneously reflect Alcott's life and the values of modern feminism, Amy's characterization is also altered to shed light on sexism and gender roles on various levels. Similar to Jo, Amy also receives a feminist-coded monologue that is not wholly present in the novel. In a present-day scene, the audience views Amy in an art studio, cleaning brushes and appearing displeased. In walks Laurie, and they start their clever banter. Amy explains that she wishes to be "great or nothing" in regard to her art, a line plucked directly from the novel (Alcott). However, Gerwig diverges from the original novel with the next few lines, where Laurie challenges this mindset. He asks her what she will do with her life after she quits art and mocks her for her courtship to Fred Vaughn for his money. Amy takes a moment to deliver the following, fiery monologue:

> Well, I'm not a poet. I'm just a woman. And as a woman there is no way for me to make my own money. Not enough to earn a living, or to support my family. And if I had my own money, which I don't, that money would belong to my husband the moment we got married. And if we had children they would be his, not mine. They would be his property. So don't sit there and tell me that marriage is not an economic proposition, because it is. It may not be for you, but it most certainly is for me. (Gerwig)

This addition to the script completely alters the portrayal of Amy. In the novel, Amy expresses that she does not actually love Fred Vaughn but must accept his proposal if he makes one. She states: "One of us must marry well. Meg didn't, Jo won't, and Beth can't yet, so I shall, and make everything okay all

around" (Alcott). This passage from the novel shows that Amy was aware of nineteenth-century constraints on how women can earn money for themselves, which was through marriage alone. However, there are no explicit passages from the novel where those constraints are expanded upon. Gerwig takes the liberty to do so in her adaptation, painting a clearer picture of the caveats of marriage for women during that time. This addition fleshes out an Amy that is motivated for marriage at a self-sacrificial level but also as a woman who is angry that things are the way that they are.

This extra element of anger which expresses being upset with societal constraints reflects the feminist topics of the 2010s. When Amy expresses her limits as a woman, she also highlights the need for agency. The audience would have been familiar with his, as women acted with agency and used their voice to tell powerful men "No" during this decade (Forbes). A great example of this would be the public take-down of Harvey Weinstein by actresses Rose McGowan and Ashley Judd, who came forward with details of their sexual harassment in 2017. Because of their bravery, several women came forward between 2017 and 2019 to share their stories, lending to his eventual conviction in 2020 for rape and sexual assault. This public and vocal fight was an important moment for the decade, as women worked together to stand up against a predator in power ("Harvey Winstein…"). The liberty to do this was not something that was allotted for women in the past. In fact, Amy's monologue highlights the many ways that power has been used to subjugate women throughout history. With this specific monologue, Gerwig is reminding a modern audience why it is important for women to continue to use their voices and fight for agency. A world where women lack independence harbors room for variations of Weinstein to germinate and multiply, leading to unsafe power dynamics for all.

Overall, Gerwig took several liberties in her portrayal of events. This consequently affected the characterization of both Amy and Jo, highlighting their strengths and evoking sympathies for their weaknesses. Both characters were able to be explored in depth, and new nuances were created to reflect fourth wave feminism. Jo was molded to better represent Alcott, while also giving her a feminist voice that Alcott wasn't able to give her herself. Amy was handed a microphone that she used to call out nineteenth-century subjugation of women, creating a new narrative for the character that the audience could relate to. Gerwig arguably also solidified the importance of modern feminism through Amy, as time-traveling to the nineteenth century shows the limitations we have overcome and the importance of modern activism.

Focus of the Film

These changes did not only alter the perception of characters but also updated the overall theme and focus of the film. Gerwig shakes things up by choosing a nonlinear storytelling approach and incorporating an ending that is not a part of the original novel. For example, in the novel Jo marries the much older professor Bhaer based on friendship and intellectualism. Jo becomes a mother to sons and trades in her love for writing to become a teacher, opening a school for boys. Similarly, Amy's fate consists of her marriage to Laurie, becoming a mother, and giving up on painting as a whole (Alcott). Each of these endings hinge on the women finding happiness as wives and ultimately leaving their personal passions behind. Most adaptations follow this framework, with the 1994 adaptation closing on Jo's union with Bhaer. Gerwig pivots from this passed down formula for both women and provides an ambiguous ending for Jo and a new perspective on Amy.

Starting with Amy, Gerwig further solidifies her sisterly bond with Jo, while also allowing her character to continue with her artistic passions. After Aunt March passes, there is a scene where the girls discover that Aunt March has left her estate to Jo. The sisters walk idly through the grounds, where Jo decides that she wants to open a school for boys and girls. Amy prompts Jo about her writing. She encourages her to continue with her passions and explains that writing about trivial matters helps make them important. The sisters are shown to be united, happy, and in full support of one another (Gerwig).

As noted, the relationship between Amy and Jo has often been lost in the drama of the plot. Many readers and watchers alike have never gotten over the Laurie love triangle, pitting the two against each other and picking their personal winner, often championing Jo. This scene specifically pivots from that narrative, showing two siblings who naturally butted heads in their youth and support one another in adulthood. This also reframes the narrative of pitting women against each other, offering an updated version for the feminist viewer.

As for Jo, Gerwig leaves her romance with Bhaer open-ended, letting the audience guess if they end up together or not. After a lovely surprise visit to the March home, Bhear leaves for the West Coast without Jo. The scene is abruptly cut, and the audience is transported to the editor's office at *The Weekly Volcano*, where the editor expresses that he doesn't understand why the heroine did not end up with anyone in the end. He states that "If you decide to end your delightful book with your heroine a spinster, no one will buy it. It won't be worth printing." The editor and Jo go back and forth, and the audience is given a supposed ending that the two agree upon, where Jo chases

after Bhaer and they kiss in the rain at the train station (Gerwig). This change was monumental, leaving it up in the air how Jo's story really ended.

This creative choice is also another subtle nod to Alcott, as she was hesitant to marry Jo and only did so due to her publisher's advice (Rioux). The writings from Alcott's personal journal reflect this, as she wrote: "Publishers won't let authors finish up as they like but insist on having people married off in a wholesale manner which much afflicts me" (Alcott). She also expressed her need to not marry Jo to Laurie, stating "I *won't* marry Jo to Laurie to please any one" (Alcott). These sentiments are displayed creatively in Gerwig's ending, offering a new version that Alcott herself may have approved of. Jo's ending centers on her identity as a writer and not on her relationship with Professor Bhaer.

After this scene, the audience watches Jo advocate for her own copyright, which was something that Alcott actually did in her own career (Rioux). This move is noted in her journal where she writes, "An honest publisher and a lucky author, for the copyright made her fortune, and the "dull book" was the first golden egg of the ugly duckling" (Alcott). It is often noted that this decision is what allowed Alcott to maintain her family's financial security, allowing her to take care of them with her writing (Rioux). By adding this discussion, Jo is further fleshed out as an independent author who advocated for herself in a clever negotiation, a reflection of the real-life woman she was modeled after.

While this scene describes Jo's ending, it is not the actual ending of the movie. A very happy and blissful montage knits together scenes of the sisters working collectively to start a school and of Jo who watches the printing of her book with a proud smile. The scenes of the present are finally shown in a warm light. They flutter back and forth between the binding of Jo's book and the transformation of Aunt March's mansion into a school. Amy is present, and there is no evidence that she has given up painting after her marriage to Laurie. Instead, we are shown a short moment that appears to show Amy teaching children how to paint at the new school. The movie cuts with Jo holding her personal copy of her novel close with the same slow piano rift chiming idly in the background (Gerwig). This change in resolution completely reframes the themes of the film, centering the film on who the March girls were.

Rather than a movie following women on their way to being wives, we witness human growth. We start with Jo, watching her struggle as a writer in adulthood. We end with Jo by watching her publish her first novel on her own terms. Similarly, we start with Amy who is creatively ambitious but is unable to make her own choices due to financial pressures. We end with Amy getting a choice in her partner without sacrificing her

independence or her relationship with her sister. These subtle shifts speak volumes, as they reframe the story from focusing on the sister's roles as wives. Instead, the audience is redirected to focus on their identities as women: their vocations, passions, and growth.

The summation of the liberties taken in Gerwig's adaptation create an entirely new perspective, updating the film for modern audiences and showcasing the many nuances of *Little Women*. Specific choices were made in regard to storytelling, which ultimately echoed the sentiments of nostalgia that can be found in the classic coming of age film. This shift caused the focus of the film to reside on the character's emotional growth, allowing the audience to connect with characters on a deeper level. This provided a new narrative for characters such as Amy, who had been slotted unfairly by past portrayals. In general, the entire narrative of the film was ultimately reframed, as major changes to the ending re-centered the plot around what the March sisters wanted, rather than who they married. While accomplishing this, Gerwig made several references to Alcott herself and arguably created a version of the story that she may have written without societal restrictions.

Conclusion

In general, fans tend to pick their favorite version of *Little Women*. For certain viewers, they find connection in both the 1994 and 2019 adaptations. Many still cling to the original plot from the novel written in 1868. Regardless, there is no denying that Louisa May Alcott touched many lives through her work in *Little Women*. The coming-of-age story connects to readers of all generations, leaving a prominent mark in literature. For some, a feminist reading surfaces contradictions that can be troublesome to resolve. The most notable being the ending, as the March sisters are either ushered off to marriage or tucked into a casket by the end of the novel. A look into Alcott's personal letters and journal suggests that she was also not fond of this ending either and would have written something much different if she could (Rioux).

In regard to adaptations, there was a long status quo adhering to the original novel. The 1994 adaptation followed this recipe, focusing on the escapism that can be found within the original text. This film created an immersive, storybook portrayal that ultimately romanticized the times and shirked any heavy themes that Alcott included. Arguably, this was done to avoid adding to a culture-war conversation at the time. Jo's story remained largely the same but did receive a slight evolution in reflection of the third wave of feminism. On the other hand, Amy was further separated from the March sisters through the portrayal of two actresses, which ultimately infantilized her character (Armstrong).

The 2019 film adaptation took the most liberties thus far in regard to film. Gerwig chose a completely different mode of storytelling by creating a nonlinear narrative. There was also the distinctive choice to expand upon the

similarities between Jo and Alcott by adding specific scenes and details that paid homage to the writer. These additions also reflected fourth wave feminism, speaking to modern issues of agency, equal pay, and overall equality. Amy was also specifically reframed in order to cultivate a unified sisterhood, while also expanding upon her motivations to marry rich and take care of her family's financial needs. This helped shed light on nineteenth century gender norms in new ways through dialog and plot (Gerwig).

Both of these adaptations made specific choices, reflecting the feminism of their time. The third wave of the 90s struggled to be defiant against a firm patriarchy, with sources suggesting that women appeared to look bad in this era (Chicago Tribune). On the other end of the spectrum, the arguable fourth wave seemed to be a moment when feminism flared. Whether due to political outrage or personal experience, women actively spoke up against a system that pushed back (Elting). With this contextual information, we are able to look at the changes that were or were not implemented in each adaptation and make connections to the cultural foreground of their time in regard to feminism.

The summation of these works creates an intertextual dialogue between feminisms. Through the novel, we are able to view the cultural pressures of the nineteenth century. There is ample evidence to see how this impacted early feminists such as Alcott, who snuck in subversive lines in her moral instruction for young girls. The conversation continued into the 90s, and later into the 2010s through adaptation work. The third and fourth waves of feminism, along with current events and pop culture heavily impacted the creation of each film, causing subtle changes to appear. The study of these changes over time is important, as this allows society to reflect on both historical and contemporary strategies for feminism. Adaptation work is the ultimate celebration of prominent authors such as Alcott, who specifically noted the limiting factors she had to work with when publishing her novel. Through the expansion of her work in film, we are able to imagine and create the version she may have written if she were not bound by the constraints of her time.

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The Best of the Best: Academic Validation and Self-Worth in *My Brilliant Friend*

Kaya Barringer

Centered in childhood and adolescence, *My Brilliant Friend* (2012) by Elena Ferrante follows two friends, Elena and Lila, as they navigate the complexities of growing up in a poor, violent, post-World War II neighborhood in Naples, Italy. Lila, the fierce, headstrong, and sometimes mean girl, juxtaposes the quiet, people-pleaser narrator, Elena. Yet the two girls have one thing in common: educational achievement. Both girls battle to be the best in their elementary school class and receive high praise for their scholastic advancements. Yet, as elementary school ends and middle school begins, it is Elena who continues on while Lila drops out to work at her father's shoe shop. Elena continues to have her successes applauded by friends, family, and teachers, but her feelings toward herself become reliant on this praise. Elena's relationship with education ultimately becomes a drug, as she constantly searches for validation based on her academic achievements. Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* examines the duality of one's relationship with academically contingent self-worth, a connection that ultimately sours with age as Elena faces pressures that lead to a cheapened value in herself, her achievements, and academics as a whole.

Validation itself is something that has been closely theorized within the realm of psychology, with articles such as "Revisiting Validation Theory: Theoretical Foundations, Applications, and Extensions" by Laura Rendón Linares and Susana Muñoz applying this theory to college students. Validation theory references:

> intentional, proactive affirmation of students by in- and out-of-class agents (i.e., faculty, student, and academic affairs staff, family members, peers) in order to 1) validate students as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community and 2) foster personal development and social adjustment. (Rendón Linares and Muñoz 12)

While validation theory has specifically been applied to college students, its general definition and principles can also be applied to the experiences within *My Brilliant Friend.* This theory has a fixed focus on non-traditional students, such as adult learners, as well as first-generation scholars and low-income students such as Elena, whose underprivileged position is reflected through instances where she says "[t]here was no money to send me to private lessons during the summer" (Ferrante 104). Validation can take several different routes, whether it be verbal praise from professors, support from

family, or more. Academic validation itself takes the same principles as validation theory and is used to instill confidence within students, growing their desire and ability to learn.

This concept of validation is introduced to Elena early in academia. At the end of elementary school, Elena is urged to continue her education by her teacher, Maestra Oliviero, who "summoned in turn [her] parents" to say "that [they] absolutely had to take not only the test for the elementary school diploma but also the one for admission to middle school" (Ferrante 63). Maestra Oliviero serves as a primary agent for Elena's validation. She goes beyond the classroom to personally visit Elena's home to ensure that Elena's parents know that she must continue her education. She affirms Elena's intellect and demonstrates that Elena can flourish if she continues. Thus, Maestra Oliviero validates Elena, instilling confidence and value in Elena and her capabilities, and ensures that her academic basis is expanded by continuing with school.

Backed by Maestra Oliviero, Elena continues with her education as more and more of her peers drop out, ultimately finding that positive feedback parallels positive feelings of worthiness. After passing her exams with high scores, Elena comments,

> I was the best in school: better than Alfonso, who has an average of eight, and much better than Gino. For days and days I enjoyed that absolute superiority. I was much praised by my father, who began to boast to everyone about his older daughter who had gotten nine in Italian and nine, no less, in Latin. (Ferrante 119)

Elena's academic achievements, and the validation she receives because of them, are inherently linked with her self-worth. She receives validation from her father, who informs everyone that his daughter is acing difficult subjects. Additionally, her knowledge of the scores of other students in class and the subsequent comparison that comes with this serves as additional validation. This validation ultimately contributes to a positive feeling of supremacy within Elena, where Elena rides the high of feeling as though she is the best and the smartest. When she is doing well in school and receiving recognition because of it, validation causes content emotions within Elena. Elena inevitably leans on validation as a crutch. While Lila is talking about making shoes with Rino, Elena talks about how she is going to go to high school, "as if to chase away the feelings of revulsion these thoughts inspired, as if to emphasize my value and my indispensability" (Ferrante 132) and to prove that she is "special" (Ferrante 133). The one commonality that bonded Elena and Lila was education and achievement. Now, though, Lila has entered the workforce and is finding other routes to success with her shoe creations. Elena, in turn, feels the need to pose this impression of success on Lila as well. Elena and Lila used to compete in the classroom, vying for the top spot and

the praise of the teacher. Now, even though Lila is not in school, Elena feels the need to evoke this same feeling of competitiveness between them and hopes that Lila will validate Elena as the best. Mentioning her promotion to high school has a purpose beyond simply seeking validation. Elena is simultaneously ensuring that Lila sees that Elena is exceptional and vital in their friendship based on her achievements in school. By drawing on her successes at school, Elena ultimately links validation and value.

Elena's feelings about herself based on education ultimately become a two-way street, as she experiences negative feelings about herself whenever validation from others is not present. When the initial praise from receiving a ten on her paper fades, Elena questions what her "small reputation for being clever" (Ferrante 188) proves and hopes for more validation to "prove [her] autonomous virtuosity" but receives only an eight on the next essay (Ferrante 189). Samuel Fairlamb introduces a critical clarification to explain this behavior in "We Need to Talk About Self-Esteem: The Effect of Contingent Self-Worth on Student Achievement and Well-Being." Fairlamb explains that a chief component of validation theory emphasizes that validation must be consistent in order to uphold positive feelings, a negative constituent that Elena reflects. Elena initially is thrilled at the positive reception she receives. However, once this fades, Elena seeks new routes to substantiate her worth; namely, new academic validation. While she does get a good score on her next essay, she does not obtain as high of a score as she got previously, leading Elena to question her formerly praised cleverness. Thus, academic validation, a construct that has normally been viewed as a positive route for motivational learning, begins to have the opposite effect on Elena.

Fairlamb discusses potential reasons for this shift, leaning on previous studies to demonstrate that academically contingent self-worth can have negative effects, specifically pertaining issues with personality and mental health "because that individual's motivation is based on introjected (i.e., need to do well) rather than intrinsic (i.e., interest) reasons" (46). When trying to discern one's own worthiness, people stake a certain level of importance in external factors, such as academics, to determine their merit. Attaching self-worth to a specific domain can cause an individual to become more motivated, but the origins of this motivation are often blurred. Introjected motivation as a primary incentive leads to what Fairlamb calls a "fragile motivational boost," given the fact that motivation fades whenever success is threatened or nonexistent (46).

This idea of introjected motivation is reflected through Elena when pressures are placed on her to maintain the opportunity to even go to school. On the first day of elementary school, Elena's father says to her, "Lenuccia, do well with the teacher and we'll let you go to school. But if you're not

good, if you're not the best, Papa needs help and you will go to work" (Ferrante 45). It is this conversation that places the kernel of being the best in Elena's head. If she does not succeed and is not at the very top of the class, she will not be able to go to school anymore. This inevitable ultimatum is characteristic of the working-class neighborhood Elena resides in. Many of her peers end up dropping out to go work, and many of the women in her neighborhood end up being housewives. Elena's primary motivation for succeeding is therefore rooted in fear, and whenever the people who surround her do not validate her as the best, Elena becomes scared of the possibility of work. Thus, a lack of academic validation correlates with working instead of going to school. The threat of work as opposed to education hangs over Elena's head all throughout her educational journey, leading her motives for achievement to be rooted in an ultimatum rather than entertainment.

Elena's obligation to be the best is due to another aspect of fear: fear of becoming her mother. Elena admires Lila's "slender, agile" and "always moving" legs, convincing Elena to think, "if I kept up with her, at her pace, my mother's limp, which had entered my brain and wouldn't come out, would stop threatening me" (Ferrante 46). Elena's mother is immobilized, in a physical and metaphorical sense. Her prominent limp is her most obvious constraint but illiteracy is another. Elena's mother is a housewife, as outlined in the character index, and is not educated, reflecting a pathway many women within the neighborhood take. Her limp and substandard schooling places a severe limit on what she can do and binds her to the neighborhood for the rest of her life. This scares Elena, as she latches herself on to Lila because she looked "to her progress to learn how to escape [her] mother" (Ferrante 322). While some look up to their mothers as role models, Elena is scared of following the example her mother has set. When she looks at Lila, she sees strength, intelligence, and freedom from the neighborhood, the opposite of her mother, with education as the ultimate tie for this all. Elena believes that in order to avoid her mother's limp, escape the neighborhood, and become more than a housewife, Elena must remain competitive, stay in school, and follow Lila's golden path as opposed to her mother's bleak example.

Competition with Lila mixes with introjected motivation to pressure Elena to succeed. When Elena moves on to high school without Lila, she comments, "I imposed on myself a discipline learned in middle school: I studied all afternoon until eleven and then from five in the morning until seven" and duly notes, "I was sacrificing the warm deep sleep of the morning to make a good impression on the daughter of the shoemaker rather than on the teachers in the school for rich people" (Ferrante 156). Another introjected motivation for doing well in school is outlined here: Lila. Academics is what initially pulls Elena and Lila together. They were constantly competing to be the best in the classes, and Elena searched for ways to impress Lila,

predominantly through academic achievement. Elena finds herself pushing through the stresses of school to impress Lila, giving up significant portions of her time outside of class to do schoolwork. However, Lila often is not dazzled by the fruits of Elena's labor. After passing her middle school exams with eights and nines, Lila questions "in her malicious tone, 'You didn't get a ten?'" (Ferrante 119), causing Elena to feel "disappointed" (Ferrante 120). In instances where Elena is vying for Lila's attention by mentioning academics and Lila is not impressed, Elena feels unworthy and as though her time and energy sacrificed for school is not enough.

Fairlamb duly points toward perfectionism as a motive for negative academically contingent self-worth, given the fact that this condition assumes high standards on the student. Perfectionism is "a multidimensional construct whereby one places excessively high standards of performance on oneself" (Fairlamb 50). Perfectionism is linked with self-worth due to the pressures placed on the student to succeed. When viewing this personality trait through an academic scope, students are prone to socially prescribed perfectionism, which is where the student places pressure on themselves to perform well based on the standards they believe others hold them to (Fairlamb). This aspect of the personality causes stress for the student because they view their scholastic aptitude with increased self-criticism. One can only feel good about themselves when they have met or exceeded the increasingly high standards they have placed on themselves and are often hyper-focused on their failures, among other fatalistic parts of their academic experience.

Elena places increasingly high restraints on herself in order to achieve a status of perfection yet often focuses on the reactions to the accomplishments instead of the accomplishments themselves. Elena faces various vocalizations of pressure, such as Maestra Oliviero saying that Elena "will bring us great satisfaction" (Ferrante 126). Elena later references how she "was reabsorbed by the work and, so that the teachers would not find me unprepared, I went back to studying until eleven and setting my alarm for five-thirty" (Ferrante 253). Elena has faced pressure to succeed since elementary school. This pressure has stuck with her throughout the rest of her education, and she now assumes perfection in herself. Elena strives to meet the demands of the teachers and puts in copious amounts of work so that they will not see her fail.

This notion of preparedness is just the tip of the standards Elena tries to uphold. When Elena "was promoted to the third year with all tens" she found that "no one was surprised or celebrated me. I saw that they were satisfied, yes, and I was pleased, but they gave the event no weight" (Ferrante 276). In this instance, Elena does achieve perfection by receiving the highest grades alongside her promotion. However, the shine of this event is slightly dulled as her family engages in quiet satisfaction. There is no

verbal validation. If Elena does not meet specific standards or if she does not receive verbal validation when meeting these standards, she fixates on the dismissive attitudes toward her education and reflects a dissatisfied viewpoint on herself. As more and more of Elena's peers drop out, patriarchal pressures similarly contribute to Elena's negative feelings toward herself and her worth based on academics. Luisa Tasca points toward the collective ideals of femininity in Italy at the time of Elena in "The 'Average Housewife' in Post-World War II Italy," noting "the conceptualization of domestic work as a feminine duty" in order to respond "to the desire for order and social peace, to the need for family tranquility after the lacerations and the disorientation of war" (96). The repercussions of the war intrinsically linked women with the role of housewife. Education is notably absent from this definition. Women were predominately confined to the home in this time period, expected to cook, clean, and care for children. This ideal has reached its way to Ferrante's book, as the men are defined and characterized by their occupations, while the women are simply listed as the wives of a man in the character index or, in the case of Elena's mom, a housewife. Thus, as the girls get older, there is an inherent pressure to become a wife.

This pressure begins to disturb Elena's satisfaction with her life's path during adolescence when others around her begin to equate success with relationships. When Lila begins to talk to Pasquale, Elena comments on how she "was terrified of failing in school" but is suddenly overcome with "a single true thought: to find a boyfriend, immediately" because she feels "more strongly the anguish of not being in time" (Ferrante 157). As more of the girls start dating, Elena wrestles with whether to prioritize love over school. Her motivations for pursuing love are rooted in modeling herself after those around her instead of genuine interest. Elena feels the need to continue following Lila's life path to achieve success by embarking on a new journey to find a boyfriend. While Elena's previous validation within school has been enough for her, this feeling has changed as a greater emphasis has been placed on marriage as opposed to school.

Elena's family eventually views Elena's education as "pointless, a waste of time" because Lila "had acquired a wealthy husband, economic security for her family, a house of her own" (Ferrante 315). While Elena has previously focused on education as a route to success by escaping the poverty of the neighborhood, marriage is now seen as the prime avenue for this. Elena adopts viewpoints of shame and embarrassment linked with staying in school instead of getting married from those around her, like her family. While she is still striving for success in school, education takes a back seat to love due to the changing attitudes toward success.

The question of whether academic validation is truly enough is posed throughout the rest of the novel. As Lila gets ready to be married at sixteen,

Elena comments on "the meaninglessness of school" and how she feels as though she is "a shadow," but she is soon consoled by two committee professors who "praised [her] Italian paper to the skies" (Ferrante 276). Elena assumes a delicate balancing act when placing worth toward school. The very attitudes surrounding what has defined success have changed. Whenever Elena is around Lila, it is no longer enough for Elena to succeed in school – she must succeed outside of it and secure a husband. She is no longer validated for her academic achievements. Lila, instead, receives validation for her subsequent marriage. However, the second Elena receives academic validation again, it makes her feel better and solidifies her path in life, even though it looks significantly different than Lila's.

By the end of the novel, societal demand leads Elena to no longer place value toward her education or worth. In the final scene of the novel, Elena says, "I doubted that I could make it. Studying was useless: I could get the highest possible marks on my work, but that was only school: instead, those who worked at the journal had sniffed my report, my and Lila's report and hadn't printed it" (Ferrante 330). The paper Elena refers to is one Nino said would get published in his journal. Elena learned at the wedding that it would not be getting published anymore, contributing to a de-validation of Elena's accomplishments. For her entire life, she has viewed school as her future source of wealth and validation as a verbal reflection of that. Yet, as more and more of her peers are finding other routes to success and validation through marriage, Elena's educational accomplishments, and lack thereof, seem to have no value anymore. Elena's unhealthy relationship with academic validation festers, as compliments related to academics seem to have no worth in her adolescent life. The pressure to conform to society's ideals and get married grips Elena and squeezes, causing her to believe that academics and validation are no longer enough.

My Brilliant Friend by Elena Ferrante explores how Elena's self-respect is rooted in academic validation, showing how various external motivations and patriarchal pressures contribute to a twist on a normally positive route to stimulation. While validation begins as a way for Elena to build confidence in her intellect and potential, it morphs into her associating these traits with validation itself. Thus, when validation is not present, Elena's worth depreciates and she finds herself constantly searching for validation from her teachers, her friends, and her family. This fixation cripples her, trapping her within a wheel of self-doubt and fear. Reasons for this shift are embedded in Elena's motivations for going to school, inclinations that are based in an ultimatum from her father, fear of turning into her mother, and comparison to Lila as opposed to genuine interest, as well as perfectionism causing Elena to fixate on what she deems as failures. In the end, the

patriarchal pressure to get married becomes a defining route to validation in Elena's life, leading her to devalue school and her accomplishments and place a significant emphasis on marriage. Elena's internal struggles with her own value serves as a critical reminder that it is important to find validation from within instead of relying on the praise of others through one specific validation genre.

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‘To Be or Not to Be’: The Evolution of *Hamlet* and Grief

Dana Gloe

There's just something about *Hamlet* that will never fail to feel real. Centuries later, readers still see themselves in his uncertainty, in his grief, in his search for meaning. The “To be or not to be” soliloquy captures that better than anything else and stands as one of the only moments where Shakespeare lets us see Hamlet’s mind for what it is: in constant conflict with itself. Over time, scholars have shifted their views on this moment, with T.S. Eliot’s “Hamlet and His Problems” (1921) seeing it as excessive, Arthur Kirsch’s “Hamlet’s Grief” (1981) seeing it as deeply human, and Diane Dreher’s “‘To Tell My Story’: Grief and Self-Disclosure in Hamlet” (2015) seeing it as an actual form of therapy. Reading their interpretations together reveals not only how *Hamlet* has evolved in meaning over time, but also how our ideas about emotion and mental health have changed.

Personal Analysis of Hamlet

Hamlet is arguably one of Shakespeare’s most complex and well-known characters. He is the prince of Denmark, a man surrounded by wealth and power, yet he still feels powerless himself. He lives in the castle, alongside his mother, Queen Gertrude, and his uncle Claudius, the newly crowned King. He is still a social man with several friends, the closest being Horatio, a character who seems to stay by Hamlet's side until the end; and of course, there is his main love interest: Ophelia, the daughter of the Lord Chamberlain.

However, the clearest thing in Hamlet's life is that he is riddled with tragedy from the start; his father has died, and his mother quickly remarried Claudius, his father's brother. Even outside of the clear heavy-hitting issues, when you look closer at Hamlet he has more grief to feel. From sheer loss of his own reality to a troubling love life and slowly deteriorating trust with everyone around him, Hamlet has a lot on his plate.

Naturally, this means he has a lot to feel concerned about. He lives in a constant state of anger, grief, and confusion, with his father's death being a catalyst for his newest passion: revenge. When his father's ghost comes back to tell Hamlet that his death was not an accident but rather a murder, with Claudius behind it all, his father demands that Claudius be killed in his honor. This factor alone brings a lot of added pressure to Hamlet's life; not only does he need to work through the new reality of killing his own uncle, but he is also concerned with the reality that everyone around him is no longer safe or stable. His concerns are no longer just surface level, but something that makes Hamlet's experience with grief so complex.

He is now additionally concerned with deeper questions about life and death, morals and truth. He constantly worries about doing the right thing, while feeling as if he is surrounded by people who are constantly doing the wrong thing. Really, this is often how Hamlet fits into the larger story being told. Shakespeare's tragedies often have a tone that revolves around the fragility of the world, and for Hamlet, that takes form in the royal court's clear dismay. His grief and personal pressures are almost contagious, but not in the traditional sense; instead, it is decaying everything around him. His inner self, the confusion and often hatred he carries so closely to his heart, doesn't always stay private in the way he claims. It shapes the lives of the people around him, the people he loves and cares about, and shows how a plate too full will eventually ripple into the world around you.

The grief Hamlet feels is often an underlying, unsaid theme in the story; but there are a few moments when it stands at the forefront of the plot, most notably in the "to be or not to be" soliloquy. In this moment, readers get a clear view into his true inner thoughts; there is no guessing what he is thinking, it is just there. Shakespeare uses a lot of vivid imagery and metaphors to really show what Hamlet's suffering is, through lines like "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" and "the undiscovered country" (Act 3, Scene 1, lines 57;76). The idea of slings and arrows helps illustrate that Hamlet feels like he is in the midst of a violent life. The comment about an undiscovered country is supposed to directly reflect death, as he truly fears what comes after death; yet at the same time, has no idea what life after death really looks like. This use of figurative language takes Hamlet's life and helps readers to understand his fear of life, death, and suffering all in one, while simultaneously showing how these struggles are clearly putting Hamlet in a far less-than-ideal emotional state.

As mentioned, Hamlet is a deeply philosophical thinker, sometimes to a fault. However, in this speech, his philosophical nature is a strong suit. He is taking this moment to look at death, specifically in regard to himself, quite carefully and reflectively instead of rashly. It raises the question of: what is really next and how am I supposed to feel about that? He states, "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all," (Act 3, Scene 1, line 83). Through this he is showing that reflective nature, not as a means of understanding the world but rather as something that may set the mind back, or as he states, "make cowards of us all." In this case, it might possibly be saving him from taking his own life, as if the list of unanswered questions he is presenting are the reason he can't.

The soliloquy stays heavily centered in some of those larger themes of the play, between action and inaction, he unpacks grief and morality. He even touches on corruption, pointing out the abuse of power in his own country and the unjust ways the undeserving are treated: "The insolence of office, and

the spurns / That patient merit of th'unworthy takes" (Act 3, Scene 1, lines 73-74). For readers, this shows that while his soliloquy has a primary focus on his circumstances, it changes to wrongdoings that go beyond his personal experience in this moment. This is only one of the places where the soliloquy also becomes a reference for readers throughout the whole play, only gaining more importance as the tragedy continues to play out and readers see the continued injustice of war and murder, even those committed by Hamlet.

As the soliloquy comes to an end, Hamlet concludes with a final realization that "with this regard their currents turn awry / And lose the name of action" (Act 3, Scene 1, lines 85-87). Here it seems he is admitting that he is trapped in his own mind. His grief has become nothing more than a constant confinement, one which he cannot get out of, as he has officially lost the "name of action." Just a few lines after, Ophelia enters, and he greets her as if nothing ever happened: "Soft you now, the fair Ophelia!" (Act 3, Scene 1, line 88). While we watch him find some better understanding of his circumstances, this quick switch to formality with Ophelia turns into a full verbal fight. For readers, it shows something important about Hamlet's soliloquy: There is no large moment at the end to truly achieve peace or closure. This moment of reflection may have told readers something new and helped Hamlet think about what action really is, but it doesn't fix anything. Hamlet's world still feels broken, something is still rotten in Denmark, and his grief still sits at the forefront of everything he does.

Scholarly Reception of Hamlet

Early Reception

T.S. Eliot wrote the piece, "Hamlet and His Problems," in 1921, when mental health was often incorrectly studied and completely misunderstood. The National Mental Health Act in the United States was not even put into place until over twenty years later in 1946 (Wikipedia contributors). One of Eliot's main and most notorious claims in his essay revolved around the idea of the "objective correlative," which means that writing, plays, art, or really any fictional work is best when emotion is tied to clear external elements within a piece. Eliot thinks that Hamlet lacks this; the external factors in the story, even Hamlet's father's death, do not explain the way Hamlet feels in the soliloquy enough on their own. In simple terms, he believed that Hamlet is jumping to an extreme in the soliloquy. However, when we remember the time frame Eliot was writing in, his ideas are not overly abstract. That lack of focus on mental health was built in a time when institutionalization was more common than lower-stakes treatment, such as mental evaluation and less intense types of medication (Wikipedia contributors).

Mid-Century Reception

By the 1970s and 80s, literary studies really started to push theories like New Criticism out the door. The New Critics' hyper-focused close readings left the new age feeling that something was missing. Instead, scholars started holding tighter to theories like deconstruction, feminist reading, and psychoanalysis (Gallop). Reading began going beyond the text itself and what readers can physically see on the pages, but rather into the deeper meaning, the feelings, and minds behind the figures inside the pages.

Right in the middle of this diverse time, Arthur Kirsch's 1981 essay titled "Hamlet's Grief" was published. Kirsch looks at Hamlet's grief as if it were the driving force for the whole play. Kirsch sees Hamlet's grief not as an irrational outburst, but something relatable, stating that he is "speaking deeply of an experience which everyone who has lost someone close to him must recognize" (19). In multiple places throughout the essay, he notes the circumstances Hamlet is in betrayed by his family and haunted by his father, both literally and figuratively.

Freud's name even makes an appearance, with Kirsch connecting Freud's thoughts that grief is, at its core, a true struggle that takes more than time to overcome. Kirsch ties this to Hamlet by pointing out that while people naturally want to hold on to emotional connections with those they have lost, they must also face the painful reality of their absence, something that Hamlet never accepts (23). He ends the essay by leaning further into post-New-Criticism thinking: Hamlet's authentic connection to the human experience and the reality of grief as an all-consuming feeling.

Contemporary Reception

In the 2010s, mental health started to become one of the biggest discussions, even outside literature or science. A fierce focus on breaking mental health stigmas arose, and honesty in struggle became an encouraged and honored practice (Gattuso). In 2015, Diane Dreher's essay, "'To Tell My Story': Grief and Self-Disclosure in Hamlet," was published. In it Dreher points out that Hamlet is not just a tragedy of revenge, but a tragedy fueled by "self-disclosure," which she defines as a process through which grief is expressed, shared, and then finally healed. Dreher really focuses on Contemporary Grief Theory, using it to explain how "telling the story" of loss helps people integrate pain into their life story. She suggests that Hamlet's soliloquies are a form of therapy: a time when his deep more unspoken emotions finally find themselves in the form of understandable words. She argues that Shakespeare used Hamlet as a way for personal healing through the expression of his own feelings. Dreher ends the piece by pointing out the bridge between "personal self-disclosure" and "public self-disclosure," where the author, in this case Shakespeare, and the audience experience their grief together. Really Hamlet's grief being so fully laid out for readers is a form of

healing for every participant. When we compare these concluding thoughts to the social climate of the time, they match well. Shakespeare may have just been one of the original stigma breakers, and Dreher seems to support that notion.

Agreements and Disagreements Through the Ages

Even without an in-depth comparison of scholars' perceptions of grief and Hamlet, the synthesis alone makes it pretty clear that there are some distinct opinions. In 1921, T.S. Eliot saw Hamlet as nothing more than excessive. Hamlet's inability to restrain emotion was taken as a flaw in Shakespeare's writing. To Eliot, the soliloquy is simply ungrounded with no backing.

However, the more modern critics saw it as vulnerable; it is now a great expression of grief. Arthur Kirsch points directly to the "to be or not to be" soliloquy, arguing that it is not just self-remorse or rambling ideas, but rather a direct view into inner turmoil and the complexities of suicidal thoughts. If we compare the ideas between Eliot and Kirsch directly, it becomes clear that Eliot saw the soliloquy as illogical, and Kirsch, almost sixty years later, instead saw it as more than just logical, but rather the truth itself. Adding contemporary ideas from Dreher to Kirsch's already accepting view of grief, it is easy to note that they each follow the same basis: Hamlet's grief is real and raw. However, Dreher makes the point to include a quote from Park Honan, stating that the soliloquy was meant to "show off his extreme anguish and, importantly, do not transform it, but keep terrible pain and the mind that endures it in view" (qtd. in Dreher pp. 12). This, by far, is the most accepting take on "To be or not to be" within each scholars' essays, simply because Dreher does not try to pull it apart but rather accepts it for what it is: a vulnerable expression of Shakespeare's own grief. When you stack each piece next to the others, their readings show how every generation rewrites and interprets Hamlet's soliloquy based on their own relationship with feeling and mental health.

As a modern reader, it is nearly impossible to approach *Hamlet* without seeing it through a culture that openly discusses mental health and emotional struggle, even more so than Dreher might have seen it in 2015. This also shapes how I handle grief as a personal emotion and influences my interpretation of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy on the depth of Hamlet's pain. Eliot saw his emotion as excessive, while currently, there is a lot of recognition of the value and importance of articulating hurt. We can disagree with some of Hamlet's actions, while still finding ourselves sitting right there with him in grief. For many readers today, Hamlet's feelings are familiar simply because we see them named in real life more openly than ever; it is not a weakness but a human reaction to a large loss. That

understanding inevitably shapes the way I read and write about Hamlet's grief: not as a flaw in Shakespeare's writing, but as one of the most realistic things about it—right alongside Kirsch.

Conclusion

Hamlet's impact far surpasses the days of Shakespeare, with pop culture references to the play popping up left and right. The *Simpsons* episode "Do the Bard, Man," is a clear modern parody of *Hamlet*. In the episode, Bart Simpson takes on the role of Hamlet. Surprisingly, the episode follows a very close plot line to the original play itself. Claudius, Gertrude, and Ophelia even make their own appearance through the shape of different Simpson characters ("Tales from the Public Domain"). Naturally, the tone is comedic to fit the classic *Simpsons* narrative, but it still shows how deeply Hamlet's story has gone into more mainstream media. Even in the form of parody, grief is still there, and that need for revenge takes center stage. For those who are unfamiliar or struggle with *Hamlet*, it makes it both accessible and humorous. However, it speaks to a larger point that even when Hamlet is made in satire, the core of who he is as a character is still there. He is clearly lost and conflicted by his own life. It proves that no matter how many centuries have passed between Shakespeare and the present time, *Hamlet* continues to be adaptable for any audience.

That's also why the way people read it matters. What Eliot saw as far too much emotion, Kirsch simply saw a human reaction, and Dreher saw Shakespeare's own loss. Each one says something about the world they lived in and what they thought emotion should look like. My own reading is shaped by the same thing; the time I live in and the way we talk about grief now are important to my work as I navigate analysis. When I look at Hamlet's words and scholars' perceptions, I do see instability, but not in a way that makes him less real. That's what makes Hamlet timeless. His grief isn't clean or noble, nor is he, but in his soliloquy, it is familiar, human, and it matters.

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Mass Incarceration in the United States: A Theoretical Analysis through Conflict Theory and Symbolic Interactionism

Nikki Q. Jenkins

Abstract

Mass incarceration in the United States is a pressing social issue that disproportionately affects marginalized communities, particularly Black and Latino populations. This paper explores mass incarceration through the lenses of conflict theory and symbolic interactionism, offering a multi-dimensional understanding of its causes and consequences. Conflict theory highlights the systemic nature of incarceration, arguing that it serves to maintain power structures, economic inequality, and racial hierarchies. In contrast, symbolic interactionism focuses on the micro-level impacts, such as the internalization of criminal labels, societal stigma, and the role of media narratives in shaping public perception. By applying both theories, this analysis reveals how structural reforms and cultural shifts are necessary to reduce incarceration rates and promote justice. A dual theoretical approach supports a comprehensive solution that addresses both the institutional and interpersonal dimensions of mass incarceration.

The Social Problem: Mass Incarceration

Mass incarceration in the United States is not simply a byproduct of criminal activity but a reflection of broader social, political, and economic forces. With approximately 2 million people currently incarcerated and millions more under probation or parole, the U.S. criminal justice system disproportionately impacts communities of color, particularly Black and Latino individuals (Alexander, 2020). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Black men are incarcerated at a rate of 938 per 100,000 U.S. residents and Latino men at a rate of 446 per 100,000, compared to 183 per 100,000 for white men (Carson, 2021). Prior to the 1980s, incarceration rates were relatively stable, but the onset of the War on Drugs led to an exponential increase—especially for nonviolent offenses—causing the U.S. prison population to almost quadruple between 1980 and 2000 (Alexander, 2020; Carson, 2021). These disparities stem from historical legacies of discrimination, racial profiling, and institutional bias embedded in policing, sentencing, and parole practices.

The second-class status imposed by mass incarceration on people of color, particularly Black individuals, has led scholars like Michelle Alexander to frame it as "the new Jim Crow"— a system of racialized social control that reinforces segregation and marginalization (Alexander, 2020). Policies such as "three-strikes" laws, mandatory minimums, and stop-and-frisk practices disproportionately target urban communities of color, despite similar rates of

drug use across racial lines. These policies contribute to the decimation of entire communities by removing large numbers of men and women from the workforce and family life.

The social consequences extend far beyond the prison walls. Families are torn apart, communities are destabilized, and intergenerational poverty is perpetuated. Individuals with felony convictions face systemic barriers to employment, housing, and education, further entrenching socioeconomic disadvantages. The practice of felony disenfranchisement strips millions of Americans—disproportionately people of color—of their voting rights, effectively silencing entire segments of the population and undermining democratic participation (Schram, 2010). The cumulative effect is a cyclical trap that marginalizes entire communities and perpetuates inequality across generations.

Conflict Theory Perspective

From a conflict theory perspective, mass incarceration functions as a means of maintaining the status quo by preserving the interests of the elite. Rooted in the works of Karl Marx, this theoretical framework views society as a battlefield for power and resources, where dominant groups use laws, institutions, and social norms to control marginalized populations. The criminal justice system, in this view, is not neutral but deliberately constructed to benefit the ruling class (Eason et al., 2024). This is evident in how laws are crafted and enforced. Mandatory minimum sentencing laws, for instance, impose harsh penalties for nonviolent drug offenses, crimes more frequently policed in lower-income, minority neighborhoods. In contrast, white-collar crimes committed by affluent individuals often result in lenient penalties or are under-policed altogether. The prison-industrial complex—a term describing the intertwining of government and private industry in the expansion of incarceration—further illustrates this dynamic. For-profit prison companies such as CoreCivic and GEO Group generated over $3.5 million in combined revenue since 2018 (McCleskey & Rose, 2020). These companies lobby heavily at the state and federal levels, often advocating for policies that increase incarceration, such as anti-immigration laws or tougher sentencing guidelines. This profit-driven motive reinforces a system in which incarceration is not just a consequence of crime but a source of economic gain.

There is a reciprocal relationship between those who create and enforce laws and those who build, support, and profit from prisons. Lawmakers—often influenced by campaign contributions and lobbying efforts—draft legislation that aligns with the financial interests of private prison operators and contractors. This connection reveals how the power to legislate becomes a mechanism for sustaining the profitability of incarceration.

Laws are shaped not only by public interest but also by economic incentives aligned with maintaining and expanding carceral systems.

Furthermore, conflict theorists argue that incarceration serves to manage surplus labor in a capitalist economy. In times of economic downturn or technological displacement, prisons absorb unemployed and underemployed individuals, particularly from communities that have been historically excluded from wealth accumulation. Solutions informed by this perspective include the dismantling of privatized prison systems, investment in community development, the abolition of punitive drug policies, and broader structural reforms aimed at redistributing resources and power (Alexander, 2020).

Symbolic Interactionism Perspective

In contrast, symbolic interactionism offers a bottom-up approach that focuses on individual and small-group interactions and the social meanings created in those contexts. This theory is particularly useful for understanding how mass incarceration affects personal identity and social relationships. Central to this perspective is labeling theory, which posits that once a person is labeled a "criminal," that label can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, influencing not only how others perceive them but how they perceive themselves (Erikson, 1964). This process begins early, often during police encounters, court appearances, and incarceration, where individuals internalize the societal message that they are deviant. For example, a teenager arrested for a nonviolent offense may be labeled a troublemaker in school, leading to exclusion from academic support or extracurricular opportunities. Over time, these compounded exclusions can lead to disengagement, alienation, and recidivism.

Media plays a powerful role in reinforcing criminal labels and shaping public perception. Numerous studies have found that Black and Latino individuals are more likely to be portrayed as violent criminals in the media, whereas white individuals involved in similar crimes are often depicted as troubled or mentally ill (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000). During the height of the War on Drugs, racialized language such as "super-predator" was disproportionately applied to young Black men, fueling public fear and support for harsh sentencing laws. These racially coded narratives shape public opinion, which, in turn, influences policy decisions and community responses.

The stigmatization does not end upon release. Formerly incarcerated individuals frequently face rejection in the job market, social alienation, and internalized shame. Solutions from a symbolic interactionist approach focus on rehabilitative practices that empower individuals to reconstruct their identities. This includes restorative justice programs, mentorship initiatives, trauma-informed counseling, and community-based reintegration strategies.

Public education campaigns that humanize formerly incarcerated individuals and challenge harmful stereotypes are also crucial in reshaping societal attitudes.

Comparison of Theories

Although conflict theory and symbolic interactionism differ in scope and emphasis, they are complementary in understanding the complex phenomenon of mass incarceration. Conflict theory highlights the structural forces—economic exploitation, racial hierarchy, and systemic oppression—that underpin the justice system. It asks who benefits from the current system and demands transformative change at the institutional level. Conflict theorists would go so far as to advocate for the complete abolition of for-profit prisons as one critical aspect of dismantling the incarceration cycle. They also support eliminating excessive court and legal fees, particularly for minor offenses, which disproportionately affect low-income individuals and perpetuate cycles of debt and imprisonment.

In contrast, symbolic interactionism reveals how these structures are lived and experienced. It explores the day-to-day realities of individuals navigating the consequences of incarceration, emphasizing the importance of identity, perception, and interpersonal relationships. While conflict theory critiques the system as a whole, symbolic interactionism addresses the ways in which individuals are socialized into that system and its narratives. Together, these theories create a fuller picture: mass incarceration is both a tool of societal control and a deeply personal experience shaped by stigma, labels, and human interactions. Addressing it, therefore, requires action on multiple fronts—policy reform to alter the systems of power, and cultural change to shift how society views and treats those who have been incarcerated.

Conclusion

Mass incarceration remains one of the most significant social challenges facing the United States today, deeply rooted in systemic inequalities and sustained through both structural forces and everyday social interactions. Through the lens of conflict theory, it becomes clear that the criminal justice system functions as a mechanism of power, reinforcing economic and racial disparities for the benefit of the ruling class. Symbolic interactionism, on the other hand, reveals how individual lives are shaped by the stigmatizing effects of criminal labeling and media-driven narratives. Together, these theories show that addressing mass incarceration requires both broad structural changes, such as policy reform and economic justice initiatives, and localized efforts to shift public attitudes and support individual identity reconstruction. Acknowledging and addressing the complex layers of this issue is essential to creating a more equitable and humane society.

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Evolution of Rape Law: A Study of Common Law and Michigan Statutory Elements

Tyler J. Norton

Abstract

This paper examines how the legal definition of rape has shifted from its narrow origins in English common law to the broader, consent-focused framework used in Michigan today. Common law defined rape in limited terms that required force, physical resistance, and a female victim, and it included major shortcomings, such as marital exemption and the "utmost resistance" rule. Michigan's modern criminal sexual conduct statutes take a more comprehensive approach by recognizing multiple forms of penetration and contact, removing gender restrictions, addressing incapacitation, and expanding protections for minors and victims in authority-based situations. The paper also explains Michigan's rape shield law, which limits the use of a victim's sexual history in court except in rare cases where excluding the evidence would violate a defendant's constitutional rights. Overall, this paper compares common-law elements to Michigan's statutory structure, discusses the social and legal developments that drove these changes, and identifies possible areas for continued reform as society and technology evolve.

Rape has historically been one of the most serious crimes against people, but its legal definition has changed significantly over time. Early English common law treated rape in narrow and often restrictive terms that reflected the social norms of that time period in history. In today's society, Michigan's statutory framework for criminal sexual conduct reflects a modern understanding of sexual violence, consent, power dynamics, and victim protection. This paper analyzes the elements under historical common law, outlines the elements under Michigan's current statutes, and examines how and why the law has evolved. Finally, it offers recommendations for future reform based upon emerging societal needs and challenges.

Common Law Elements of Rape

Under English common law, rape was defined as the unlawful carnal knowledge of a woman without her consent, accomplished by force or the threat of force (FindLaw, n.d.; LawShelf, n.d.). However, this definition shows a clear flaw within the law, because based upon the word structuring, this means that in no case or scenario a male may be the victim of rape. Hale (1736) and Blackstone (1769) both describe rape as "the carnal knowledge of a woman forcibly and against her will," basically meaning that any amount of penile–vaginal penetration counted. Because of how the law was written, rape was completely gendered. The victim had to be a woman, the

offender had to be a man, and husbands couldn't legally be charged with raping their wives. This marital exemption is another clear flaw in common law because it prevented married women from accusing their husbands of rape if it happened.

Under common law, the burden of proving lack of consent was put almost entirely on the victim. Prosecutors often had to show that the victim "resisted to the utmost" (Blackstone, 1769), which is nearly impossible to prove in court. Force or threat of force was mandatory. Without force, the act was not considered rape under common law. Because of this, courts would assess the victim for signs of resistance, checking for bruises, torn clothing, scratches, defensive wounds, or any signs of an altercation. Without this type of "evidence," under common law, there would essentially be no case for the victim.

Lastly, common law treated minors differently but did not have the nuanced, tiered protections compared to what Michigan includes in its current statutes.

Elements of Rape Under Michigan Statutory Law

Michigan no longer uses the term "rape" in its legal code. Instead, the state classifies such offenses as criminal sexual conduct (CSC) in the first through fourth degrees, found in Michigan Compiled Laws, Act 328 of 1931, sections 750.520b–750.520e. This naturally raises the question of how Michigan defines and structures criminal sexual conduct within its modern statutory framework. Michigan's approach differs significantly from the narrow elements of rape under English common law.

Michigan recognizes both sexual penetration (vaginal, anal, or oral) and sexual contact (touching for sexual purposes) as criminal sexual conduct. This is a broader standard in comparison to common law. There is no gender restriction within Michigan's statute for CSC; victims may be of any gender, and marital status does not limit prosecution. Under Michigan's statutes, the consent-based framework is clearly defined and includes criminal acts involving force or coercion and incapacitation, as well as victims being unable to consent due to age, mental disabilities, or authority dynamics. The codes for these can be found within three different sections:

Force or Coercion:

- (Mich. Comp. Laws § 750.520b(1)(f), 1931) — for the "force or coercion" language in First Degree CSC,

- (Mich. Comp. Laws § 750.520d(1)(b), 1931) — for the "force or coercion is used to accomplish the sexual penetration" language in Third Degree CSC, and

- (Mich. Comp. Laws § 750.520e(1)(b), 1931) — for the "force or coercion is used to accomplish the sexual contact" language in Fourth Degree CSC.

Incapacitation:

- (Mich. Comp. Laws § 750.520b(1)(d), 1931) — victim is mentally incapable, mentally incapacitated, or physically helpless
- (Mich. Comp. Laws § 750.520e(1)(c), 1931) — actor knows victim is mentally incapable, mentally incapacitated, or physically helpless

In Michigan's statutes there is no requirement for victims to physically resist. Special protections exist for minors (under 13, or 13-16 with certain relationships). Lastly, offenders in positions of authority face enhanced penalties. Michigan's statutes reflect a comprehensive and victim centered approach much broader than common law. Compared to the very narrow, force-focused definition used under English common law, Michigan's modern statutes are much broader and substantially more realistic. Michigan removes all gender restrictions, gets rid of the marital exemption, expands what counts as penetration, and even recognizes sexual contact on its own as a criminal offense. The state also clearly defines what force, coercion, and incapacitation look like, which is something common law never did well. Overall, the shift from common law to Michigan's current approach shows how the law moved away from a property-based, resistance-focused view and toward a consent-centered model that actually protects victims and reflects what we know today about trauma and sexual violence.

Rape Shield Laws

Another significant difference between common law and Michigan's modernized approach to sexual assault is the adoption of rape shield laws. These laws place strict limits on what evidence can be presented about a victim's past sexual behaviors. Under English common law, a victim's sexual history was often used within courts to challenge her credibility, implying that women who were not virgins were less trustworthy or would be more likely

to have given consent. This allowed defense attorneys to introduce highly prejudicial and irrelevant information regarding the victim's past life, which often discouraged victims from reporting their assaults.

In contrast, Michigan adopted one of the strongest rape shield laws across the country, codified at MCL 750.520j. Under this statute, evidence of a victim's previous sexual conduct is generally considered inadmissible except in very narrow circumstances. These circumstances may include prior sexual activity with the defendant or when excluding the evidence would violate the defendant's constitutional rights under the Sixth Amendment, the right to present a complete defense. Michigan courts apply a balancing test to determine whether any exception applies, weighing the probative value of the evidence against the prejudicial effect. The purpose of rape shield laws is to protect the victims from character attacks and to prevent trials from shifting focus away from the defendant's actions. By restricting irrelevant and discriminatory evidence, these laws encourage reporting, reduce the possibility of retraumatization, and ensure that sexual assault trials center on the facts of the incident rather than the victim's personal life. This represents a significant departure from common law thinking, in which a victim's chastity was treated to be as relevant as her credibility.

Reasons for Legal Change

Looking between the two and comparing English common law to Michigan's current statutes in regard to CSC, we can see that there was need for legal change, but what brought about this change? Research has shown that victims, rather than fight back and resist, will freeze, which invalidates the utmost resistance requirement (Campbell, 2008). This was realized as we developed more understanding of trauma responses compared to what we believe should "logically" happen.

Gender equality developments also played a major role. Research and updated federal definitions show that rape can occur to *any* gender and within marriage, contradicting the gendered limitations of common law (U.S. Department of Justice, 2012). Common law also overlooked the power differences between offenders and victims. Many assaults occur where an offender holds a position of authority (teachers, caregivers, police officers, or others), which increases coercive power. Modern research helped expose the role of authority in sexual abuse (Finkelhor, 1984), leading Michigan to include authority-based coercion as part of CSC. Common law additionally failed to fully consider the impact of drugs, alcohol, or unconsciousness during sexual assault. Modern research shows that a large portion of sexual assaults occur when victims are incapacitated (Kilpatrick et al., 2007). Michigan now explicitly criminalizes sexual acts involving victims who cannot consent due to intoxication, drugs, sleep, or mental incapacity.

Lastly, widespread social and cultural shifts, including public awareness campaigns, advocacy groups, and movements such as #MeToo, placed pressure on lawmakers to modernize outdated sexual assault laws and reflect contemporary understandings of victimization (Hindes & Fileborn, 2020.

Suggested Reforms for Michigan Law

As society changes, laws will continue to evolve. This raises questions regarding the appropriate limits of statutory reform. Modern society has increasingly become more reliant on digital services such as social media, Wi-Fi, and other online interactions. Michigan could adopt clearer guidelines on coercion over the internet, or "digital coercion." These are crimes in which threats may be made regarding leaking private photos as well as coercing individuals into sending them. Regarding reporting procedures, many victims still wait to report due to fear or trauma. Michigan could improve by expanding anonymous reporting, increasing officer training on handling rape cases to help deal with trauma, and increasing access to sexual assault nurse examiners. Michigan can also strengthen protections for military personnel and college students. Given the high sexual assault rates between these two groups, Michigan could expand jurisdictional cooperation and mandatory prevention programming. College women are at one of the highest risks when they are on campus compared to when they are out in public. By implementing the blue box emergency system on every campus, where all you need to do is press a button and security will walk you to where you need to go, we may lower the rate at which these attacks occur.

Conclusion

The evolution of rape law from English common law to Michigan's modern CSC statutes shows how much society has changed its understanding of sexual violence. Common law created a narrow and outdated framework that focused heavily on force, physical resistance, and gendered assumptions in regard to both perpetrators and victims. Michigan's statutes take a much broader and realistic approach by recognizing different forms of penetration, sexual contact, incapacitation, and power dynamics. These changes reflect our improved knowledge about trauma, consent, and how people react during an assault. While Michigan has made major progress in comparison to common law, there is still room for change in today's evolving world, especially as technology and society advance. Updating digital coercion guidelines, strengthening reporting procedures, and improving protections for vulnerable groups would assist in making the law more effective. Overall, the shift from common law to Michigan's CSC framework represents a needed move toward a system that better protects victims and responds to the realities of modern society.

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The Burden of Commuting in Atlanta

Rori Hornung

Despite its low commuter population relative to other major metropolitan areas, Atlanta Georgia ranks fifth in the nation for longest commute times with an average of 31.23 minutes each way (Ortiz, 2025). This does not likely come as a surprise, as Atlanta is infamous for its horrible traffic. A study published by Texas A&M's Transportation Institute estimates that Atlanta commuters spent 87 hours sitting idle in traffic during 2024, which is more than 30 hours over the national average (Raby, 2025). These additional hours cost commuters roughly $1,043 in gas money, total ing over 3.1 billion for the city (Ponton, 2024). Comments from Atlanta residents echo these statistics, with many describing their daily commute as "awful," "the worst," and even "anxiety - inducing" (R/Georgia [flying trashcan], 2024).

Such evidence makes it clear that Atlanta's commuting problem is more than an inconvenience, but a social and economic issue with wide-reaching consequences. Driven by suburban sprawl and public transit inequities, Atlanta's excessive commute times present significant harmful impacts on its residents. Low-income citizens are disproportionately affected by these psychological, economic, and health consequences, demonstrating the need for an expansion of MARTA, as well as transit and carpool incentives to address this burden.

Causes

One of the largest contributors in Atlanta's traffic congestion is suburban sprawl. "Sprawl" describes the low density, outward expansion of a city into suburban areas. Jobs, housing, and even shopping districts are vastly spread out across the metropolitan area. The decentralization of resources and opportunities leads to increased car dependency and thus longer commute times. For example, Atlantans drive 34 miles each day on average, which is nearly 50% more than Los Angeles residents despite the fact that LA is synonymous with automobile ownership rates (Bullard, 2000). Sprawl can also be measured by the availability of jobs in a city's "urban core," which is defined by the 3km radius surrounding the downtown area. In 1980, the share of jobs within Atlanta's urban core was 19.7%; by 2000, that share had dropped to 7.7%, clearly illustrating the relocation of jobs into suburban areas (Yang, 2005).

A decrease in the utilization of public transportation and carpooling in recent years also plays a large role in the creation of traffic in Atlanta. The United States Census Bureau shows a 10% decrease in public transportation and a 5% decrease in carpooling from 1990 to 2014 (Thompson,

2016). While these percentages may not initially sound impactful, in a city of 500,000 people, even a small uptick in commuters who drive alone is enough to significantly increase congestion.

Citizens are deterred from using Atlanta's public transportation system, Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) for a few different reasons. One resident explains that a 15-20 minute drive by car typically takes around 45 minutes on MARTA because of frequent stops on bus routes. Another resident states they don't utilize MARTA because the trains don't start early enough for their morning commute. Some residents even describe the buses and trains as "dirty" and "dangerous" (Turnbull, 2025). Unfortunately, a decrease in MARTA's demand as well as citizen's opposition to increasing taxes to fund transit expansion just reinforces the current issue: Atlanta suffers from major traffic congestion that stems from car dependency but cannot fund the expansion of its public transportation system to decrease the number of cars on the road.

Atlanta is a major commercial hub, which largely contributes to traffic congestion in the city. It houses the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, otherwise known as the "busiest airport in the world," as well as the home of Delta's headquarters. Additionally, two major interstates run through the city, I-75 and I-85; these roads serve as major chokepoints for commercial trucking, producing 3 of the top 10 bottlenecks in the country (Ponton, 2024).

Consequences

Heavy Atlanta traffic poses several economic challenges for its commuters. As mentioned, Atlantans pay an estimated $1,043 in gas each year, which is roughly $300 more than the national average. To an affluent family, $1,043 might be just a drop in the bucket, but for a low income family that price can be devastating. Although MARTA has a relatively low fare at $2.50 a trip, this cost can become a burden for an economically struggling family. In addition to the upfront costs, commuting also presents a cost of time. The multiple hours spent driving each day is time that could be spent working and earning money, once again disproportionately affecting low income families or those with lower wage jobs. Traffic congestion makes it much more difficult for people to work and cover the high cost of living in the city.

Each commuter in the Atlanta Metro area experiences negative psychological effects from sitting in traffic for an extended period of time each day. The inevitable isolation, frustration, and stress that stem from traffic puts a large strain on one's social and personal life. Not only does commuting take time, but it "generates out-of-pocket costs, causes stress and intervenes in the relationship between work and family" (Stutzer and Frey, 2008). Sitting in traffic takes away time that could be spent on family, friends, hobbies, or leisure. Furthermore, a study conducted by Stutzer and Frey demonstrates the

linear relationship between time spent commuting and reported satisfaction with life: participants with higher commute times consistently reported lower levels of satisfaction in their lives. These adverse effects of commuting that reach beyond financial concerns prove the need for Atlanta traffic to be reduced in order to improve the quality of life of its residents.

Commercial trucking traffic in the city produces elevated levels of diesel particle matter, which creates many health and environmental concerns. Diesel particle matter (PM) is defined as small carbon particles coated with organic compounds that are released into the air by form of exhaust from vehicles that use diesel fuel. In addition to the fact that diesel PM is a potent contributor to global warming, scientists also found that the product is linked to cardiovascular disease, respiratory illness, onset of allergies, and even contains more than 40 cancer-causing substances (California Air Resources Board, n.d.).

These health issues disproportionately impact low income residents, as demonstrated by Figures 1, 2, and 3 below. Figure 1 shows a map of traffic proximity in Atlanta, Figure 2 shows the concentration of diesel PM, and Figure 3 shows a map of the highest and lowest median household incomes in the city. The lighter areas represent the top 20% of earners, and the darker areas represent the bottom 20%. These maps clearly illustrate an overlap in the highest concentration of diesel PM and lowest income residents. Not only does this overlap mean low income households are at higher risk of health issues, but they are also responsible for paying for those issues, creating a large economic burden for those families.

Figure 1: Traffic Proximity in Atlanta
(Source: Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool, Version 2.3)

Figure 2: Concentration of Diesel PM
(Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool, Version 2.3)

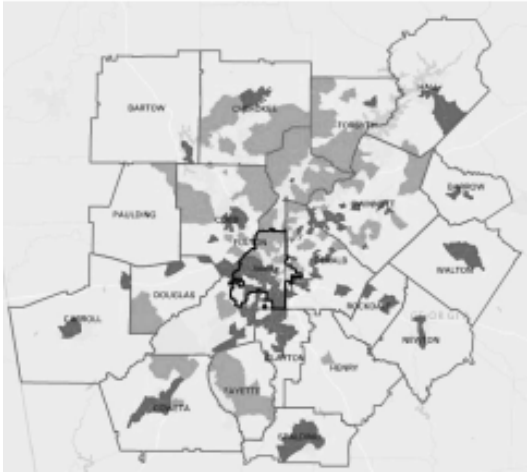

Figure 3: Highest & Lowest Median Household Incomes
(Kelly, 2016)

Policy Recommendations

One of the largest avenues to improve Atlanta's traffic congestion is to expand MARTA. Further developing the public transit system's routes will promote more widespread use throughout the city, reducing the number of vehicles on the road. Figures 4 and 5 clearly indicate areas with the greatest opportunities and impacts for expansion. Figure 4 shows a map of Atlanta's median commute times on a spectrum. Darker coloring indicates the metro's longest commute times, while lighter coloring indicates the shortest. Figure 5 shows a map of the metro's highest and lowest household incomes, with lighter areas representing the top 20% of earners and darker areas

representing the bottom 20%. Each map is overlaid with the current MARTA routes; the black route is a rail route, while all other colors are bus routes.

Figure 4: Atlanta's Median Commute Times (Spectrum)
(Source: Simple Maps, Commute Time and MARTA)

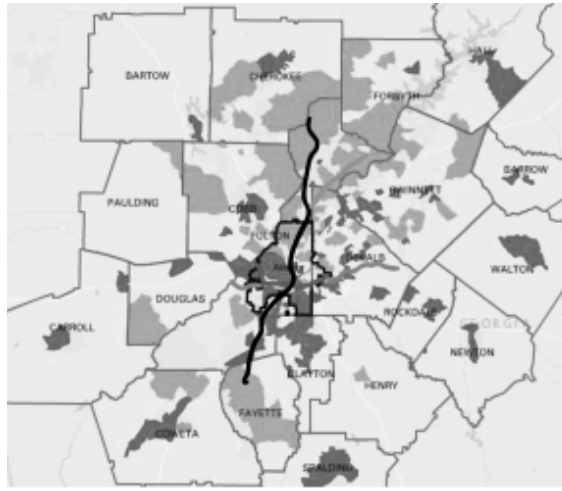

Figure 5: Metro's Highest & Lowest Household Incomes
(Source: Kelly, 2016 and MARTA)

Each figure displays the disparities between MARTA routes, commute times, and income levels in Atlanta. Citizens located along the MARTA rail routes generally have shorter commute times, such as the northern side of the city. Coincidentally, a large portion of the highest income earners live in those areas, demonstrating the need for the expansion of MARTA rail routes into lower income areas within the metro. Although low-income families rely on public transit the most, MARTA's rail routes primarily serve higher income neighborhoods. Therefore, an expansion of rail routes further South and in East-West directions would benefit those who need it the most.

This extension can be achieved through the implementation of a few different funding techniques. First, vehicle property taxes in the Atlanta metropolitan area can be increased. Policymakers can also increase existing tolls on highways such as I-85, Northwest Corridor, or Georgia 400. These techniques disincentivize driving a car while simultaneously producing funds for the expansion of public transportation. The city can apply for an infrastructure grant from the Federal Transit Administration to construct this project.

Another method to improve Atlanta's traffic is to implement employer-provided transit incentives. The ideal policy would require employers to provide free MARTA passes to their employees, thus increasing the incentive to utilize public transit. Data from the 2011 Atlanta Regional Household Travel Survey showed that employees were 156% more likely to commute on public transit when provided free or subsidized transit passes from their employer (Ghimire and Lancelin, 2019). Employers would be able to utilize their pre-tax money for this expense, offering them a tax benefit for this incentive as well.

Lastly, implementing carpool incentives would also reduce the number of cars on the road. Atlanta has already constructed HOV and express lanes that offer faster travel for vehicles with 2 or more passengers. To take this incentive further, policymakers can give a stipend to companies in the metro area to create and monitor carpool preferred parking spots located in front of their businesses. These spots would be given to vehicles with 2 or more passengers only and be enforced with a fine, similarly to the way ADA parking is enforced. Ideally, businesses in high traffic areas would be targeted for this policy such as Downtown, Midtown, and Buckhead.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that commuting times in Atlanta are more than just a small disruption, but a crisis that negatively impacts all of the city's residents. The isolation, stress, and frustration connected to excessive commute times takes a toll on the personal and social lives of commuters. Traffic congestion disproportionately affects Atlanta's low-income population, creating health concerns that quickly become large financial burdens. The

city's current public transit system routes, specifically the faster rail routes, cater to primarily high-income neighborhoods, which further reinforces this disparity.

With the implementation of a few policies to expand MARTA, incentivize the use of public transit, and incentivize carpooling, the entire city of Atlanta would experience an improvement in commute times. Each of these recommended policies aim to reduce the number of cars on the road, consequently reducing traffic congestion. This reduction will improve the city's economy and overall well-being by taking the economic and social strains off of residents. The city-wide positive impact of decreasing Atlanta's traffic congestion proves that it is imperative for policymakers to take action in addressing this issue.

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Author Biographies

Kaya Barringer

Kaya Barringer is a senior pursuing a degree in English and Professional Writing. Upon her graduation in May, she is interested in obtaining her Masters in Library Science to work as a public librarian. She wrote her paper for EN356: Women's Literature with Dr. Kikendall. After reading *My Brilliant Friend* during class, Kaya was interested in how Elena's self-image hinged on academic validation, a normally positive route to stimulation that had the opposite effect for Elena. Kaya would like to thank Dr. Kikendall for her help developing this paper, as well as the rest of the English faculty for their support and encouragement.

Dana Gloe

Dana Gloe is a senior at Park University studying English with a minor in Organizational Communication. After graduation, she hopes to pursue further education in the English field after gaining experience in the workforce. She wrote this paper for EN340: Shakespeare Then and Now, where she focuses on the reception and representation of grief in *Hamlet* throughout the ages, with a particular focus on the "To be or not to be" soliloquy. She would like to thank Dr. Kikendall for aiding her in the creation of this piece and for helping grow her passion within literary studies as a whole. She also thanks her mother, Jude, for her support and encouragement to continue expressing herself through writing.

Rori Hornung

Rori Hornung is currently a senior pursuing a B.F.A. in Interior Design. She is also a member of the Park University softball team and Honors Academy. She wrote this paper for HN305: Topical Honors Seminar: City as Conflict, taught by Dr. Monica Brannon. She would like to thank Dr. Brannon for her help in writing this paper and encouraging her to submit. As a Georgia native, this issue hits close to home for Rori and inspired this topic for discussion.

Nikki Q. Jenkins

Nikki Q. Jenkins holds a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and an Associate of Science in Social Psychology, along with a Certificate in Diversity & Social Justice, all from Park University. Her academic interests center on social inequality, power structures, and the ways institutions shape individual and collective experiences. She authored "*Mass Incarceration in the United States: A Theoretical Analysis through Conflict Theory and Symbolic Interactionism*," a scholarly piece developed for SO403: Social Theory. The work critically examines mass incarceration as a major social issue, applying Conflict Theory to explore systemic power imbalances and Symbolic Interactionism to analyze the social meanings attached to crime and punishment. Through this analysis, she highlights how structural forces and everyday interactions contribute to the persistence of incarceration in the United States.

Nathan A. Larrabee

Nathan A. Larrabee is pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration: Management. In addition to his academic endeavors, he works full-time for Southwest Airlines and hopes to utilize his degree to advance his career. He wrote "*Serial Killers and Popular Media: Exploitation and Exploration*" for the LE300 course taught by Professor Brie Jontry examining the role serial killers play in shaping pop culture. Nathan credits Professor Jontry's unprecedented engagement with her students, providing critical feedback in such a way that encourages and inspires students in their writing endeavors. He found her English classes to be some of the most enjoyable of his academic career. In addition to being a non-traditional student and full-time employee, Nathan is a husband to his wonderful wife, Rose, and father to three amazing daughters.

Delaney Lowe

Delaney Lowe is pursuing a B.A. in English with a minor in Organizational Communication. She wrote her paper for EN300: History and Practice of Rhetoric. She appreciates the opportunity to explore the rhetoric of Twenty One Pilots music, specifically their song "Navigating." The band members, Tyler Joseph and Josh Dunn, have had a beautiful impact on her family in various ways. It is with great excitement that she gets to share this band and their message with others. She would like to thank her family for their support and inspiring some of the most meaningful pieces she will ever write. She would also like to thank all her professors in the English department. Without them, she would not have developed the skill or confidence to submit her writing.

Jules E. Martinez

Jules E. Martinez is a senior pursuing a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Interior Design. Prior to transferring to Park University in Fall of 2025, she completed an A.A. in General Business from Hutchinson Community College and an A.S. in Interior Design from WSU Tech. After graduation, she plans to study abroad and get a masters in Commercial and Retail Design. This paper was written in part of her senior capstone project, in which she chose to design a Montessori school using biophilic design principles to create a space that enhances learning. Jules would like to thank her professor, Kelly Gilhaus, for encouraging her to submit her paper. She would also like to thank her father for transferring his Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to help her pursue her degree. Outside of academics, Jules is a proud daughter, sister, and friend.

Tyler J. Norton

Tyler J. Norton is pursuing a combined B.A. in Political Science and Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree at Park University, with a concentration in public policy and a minor in Military Science. He aspires to work as a legal analyst and pursue a career in government service. His research interests include criminal law, legal reform, and public policy, with a particular focus on the evolution of sexual offense legislation. This paper was originally written for CJ105: Criminal Law and reflects his commitment to examining how legal frameworks surrounding sex crimes have developed and where further reform may be needed. Tyler would like to thank Dr. Hageman for his encouragement in submitting this work for publication. He plans to continue publishing research and is currently awaiting a decision on another submission.

Nicholas A. Painter

Nicholas Painter is pursuing his Bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies at Park University as a full-time member of the Air Force Reserve.

Mallory R. Sole

Mallory R. Sole is a senior pursuing a B.A. in Psychology with minors in Sociology and Fine Arts. After graduation, she will be attending the University of Indianapolis in pursuit of a Doctor of Psychology (PsyD) degree. Her biggest dream is to become a clinical therapist and work with children. Mallory wrote her paper in PS401: Abnormal Psychology to explore current research on a specific disorder. She would like to thank all her psychology professors, Dr. Alivia Zubrod and Dr. Andrew Johnson, in particular, for fostering her interests in psychology and mentoring her through her time at Park. In addition, Mallory would like to thank Dr. Mugg for pushing her to present and publish her research and the guidance he has offered as director of the Honors Academy. Finally, she wants to thank her family for all the support and love they have given her.

Haley Wathen

Haley Wathen graduated with her BA in English and Professional Writing in the Fall of 2025. After completing this program, Haley continued her education at William Jewell College where she is pursuing a Master of Arts in Teaching. Passionate about literature and writing, she hopes to instill that same love in her future students.

About The Navigator

The Navigator is a scholarly journal intended to highlight the best and brightest work from Park University undergraduate students. Work is accepted across the disciplines from any undergraduate course. Students are encouraged to submit research projects, essays, and other scholarly work. Faculty may also nominate student work. An email will be sent to the student notifying them of the nomination and requesting their consent.

Submission Requirements:

- We accept submissions from currently enrolled Park University undergraduate students.
- Submissions must have been completed during the student's undergraduate career at Park University.
- Submissions must be publishable in both print and online formats.
- Images, tables, and graphs are accepted and encouraged as long as they can be reproduced in print and online.
- Submissions should be in compliance with Park's academic honor code.
- While creative spins on academic writing are accepted, pure creative writing (poems, short stories, etc.) is more suitable for Park's literary journal the *Scribe*.

How to Submit:

- You may submit your work as a Word document on the website thenav.org.
- Be prepared to include the following:
    - Your full name
    - Park Student ID number
    - Title of your piece
    - The semester/term, course, and instructor
    - Short description of the assignment the piece was written for

Submission Deadline:

All submissions must be received by December 31, 2026 to be considered for *The Navigator's* seventh volume. However, we do accept submissions on a rolling basis. All submissions received after December 31, 2026, will be considered for the following volume.

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