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The Modern Anti-Hero

by

Shawn Merritt

Under the Direction of Randy Malamud, PhD

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2023

## ABSTRACT

Modern heroes, or anti-heroes, are fascinating figures who dominate much of modernist literature, particularly those texts produced around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in England and America. They differ in a large degree from nearly all the heroes before them, especially those found within early myths. Rather than achieving victory through the use of violence (the sword) like mythical heroes, modern heroes most often reach heroic stature through some type of spiritual enlightenment or sheer perseverance under trial. In the modernist stories where we find them, anti-heroes begin as complex and problematic figures. They are usually disillusioned, self-doubting, hopeless characters who seem destined for failure. However, in each case, these protagonists become modern heroes by the end of their stories. This dissertation explores the modern heroes found within eight American and British modernist novels: *The Great Gatsby*, *Heart of Darkness*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *Nightwood*, *Henderson the Rain King*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Ulysses*.

INDEX WORDS: Modern heroes, Anti-heroes, Mythical heroes, Modernism, Modernist literature, Heroic qualities, Heroism

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2023

The Modern Anti-Hero

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August 2023

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to my late father, Dr. Walter Merritt, my mother, Nancy Merritt, and my two sons, Charlie Merritt and Michael Merritt. They have all been a tremendous help and a massive source of inspiration during this process.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ancient mythology is the primary vessel for the concept of the hero. The myth has flourished in all times over all continents with all people. Paradoxically, no matter what the myth, the story is very comparable. Over the ages, ancient people from all over the world have told similar tales of monsters and monster slayers. Though they shape-shift in small ways, the stories told are surprisingly constant and consistent. In the same way, mythological heroes through time remain reliable as well. Heroes, traditionally speaking, are literary figures, who in the face of monumental challenges, brazenly face adversity through cleverness, courage, and strength, often sacrificing their own desires for the good of others. They are otherwise normal people, but they possess an attribute or feature that separates them. They sometimes possess a great skill, but more often possesses a particular quality of character. According to Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2008), “The composite hero[es] of the monomyth [are] personage[s] of exceptional gifts. Frequently [they] [are] honored by [their] societ[ies], frequently unrecognized or disdained. [They] and/or the world in which [they] find [themselves] suffer from a symbolical deficiency” (Campbell 29-30). [Heroes] seek to remedy this deficiency. [They] typically achieve a “world-historical, macrocosmic triumph” and “bring back from [their] adventure the means for the regeneration of [their] society as a whole” (Campbell 30). Heroes must always be able to overcome their fears and face challenges bravely. Heroes must also possess the perseverance and fortitude needed to overcome difficulties, the virtuosity and honesty needed to make noble choices, the dedication and conviction needed to maintain focus, the compassion needed to empathize with those in distress, and the wisdom to know what actions will best help them to achieve their goals. Others define mythic, or classical heroes, more specifically: “Classical hero[es] [are] considered to be ‘warrior[s] who live and die in the

pursuit of honor' and assert their greatness by 'the brilliancy and efficiency with which they kill.'" This definition of classical heroes specifically references a type of warrior ideology found within most ancient myths. This ideology is the driving force behind the story being told and the traits that many mythic heroes ultimately possess.

In the following centuries, mythological heroes transformed along with the societies that produced them. Consequently, non-mythological heroes followed, but these heroes often achieved their conquest using violence (the sword) in the same way as the mythological heroes. Therefore, they retained many of the same heroic qualities. Those during the same time period who did not become heroes using violence (the sword) were representative of the ages that followed where more normal, traditional heroes evolved. These were heroes who also changed through time, taking on new characteristics and casting off old ones. However, the main idea or purpose behind these traditional heroes remained the same. They ultimately may have shed their tendency to solve every problem with violence (the sword), but they kept the personal character traits which raised them to heroic proportions.

Now, there have been exceptions to this rule in almost every age and genre of literature where characters more akin to anti-heroes emerge. *Don Quixote* is an excellent example of this where the author presents the hero of the story as a foolish, pathetic character who stumbles through the book in a clownish manner, yet still finishes the quest. There are many other examples of anti-heroes like this, but the use of them within stories did not become widespread practice until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and continuing into the 21<sup>st</sup> century). These anti-heroes are a radical departure from the heroes of previous ages. The new anti-heroes who dominate the majority of modernist literature are more complex and problematic figures. Victor Brombert addresses this in his book, *In Praise of Antiheroes: Figures and Themes in Modern*

*European Literature 1830-1980* (1999): “Nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature is moreover crowded with weak, ineffectual, pale, humiliated, self-doubting, inept, occasionally abject characters – often afflicted with self-conscious and paralyzing irony...Such characters do not conform to traditional models of heroic figures; they even stand in opposition to them” (Brombert 2). However, as Brombert goes on to explain, the anti-heroes may still possess many conventionally heroic qualities. They are “capable of unexpected resilience and fortitude,” characters who can present “great strength” in their “opposition” (Brombert 2). This paradox becomes a central concern in many modernist texts, most notably American and British modernist novels:

Large areas of Western literature have been increasingly invaded by protagonists who fail, by a deliberate strategy of their authors, to live up to expectations still linked to memories of traditional literary or mythical heroes. Yet such protagonists are not necessarily “failures,” nor are they devoid of heroic possibilities. They may embody different kinds of courage, perhaps better in tune with our age and our needs. Such characters can captivate our imagination, and even come to seem admirable.

(Brombert 5)

Brombert is not the only scholar to address this paradox. In *The Comic Hero* (1978), Robert M. Torrance writes, “[They] prove [themselves] [heroes] by courageous perseverance, resourceful intelligence, and a more or less conscious acceptance of the inevitable risks that [they] choose to run in [their] willfully comic challenge to the deadly seriousness of his world” (Torrance viii). Stephen Kern, in *The Modernist Novel: A Critical Introduction* (2011), adds:

In assessing modernist protagonists, critics use the term *anti-hero[es]* for [those] who lack classical virtues of strength, beauty, courage, wisdom, and pride. As Lionel Trilling

wrote: “Nothing is more characteristic of the literature of our time than the replacement of [heroes] by what has come to be called anti-hero[es], in whose indifference to or hatred of ethical nobility there is presumed to lay a special authority.” But protagonists are never just anti. Modernist protagonists are rather neo-heroic, that is, admirable in new ways even when they are physically unattractive, sexually unconventional, impotent, cowardly, immoral, or even dead. (Kern 34)

David Lynn is the final author to address this paradox. In *The Hero's Tale: Narrators in the Early Modern Novel* (1989), he writes, “With romantic hero[es] destroyed by [their] own naïve egoism in conflict with the barren social environment, the narrator[s]...assume the role of heroes and transform it. The new moral dualism of skepticism and faith structures the tale [they] tell. That tale, in turn, is [their] heroic act, [their] attempt to translate [their] experience into language” (Lynn 4). The awkward yet admirable anti-heroes are actually heroes for the modern age, or modern heroes. They are “neo-heroic” as Kern claims in the sense that they find a new way to be heroic.<sup>1</sup>

There are many other scholars who see modern heroes in quite a different way, less paradoxically and more straightforward. They argue that they lack all of the virtues of traditional heroes. Most importantly, though, they do not see their suffering and resiliency as conquering qualities. When they view modern heroes, they do not see courageous and virtuous characters striving to achieve some goal. They see only pathetic, hopeless, unimpressive protagonists totally disenchanted with the barren society around them. In their eyes, they are anti-heroes in the strictest sense of the term, disillusioned, unredeemable characters. In *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction* (1992), Randall Stevenson claims that many of the topics characteristically

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<sup>1</sup> The term modern heroes and the term anti-heroes are interchangeable from this point on and mean essentially the same thing.

examined in modernist fiction follow the “lives of isolated, alienated protagonists; outsiders in a confusing world; individuals lonely and anonymous” (Stevenson 151-152). Irving Howe, in *Literary Modernism* (1967), also addresses this idea:

A modernist culture is committed to the view that the human lot is inescapably problematic. Problems, to be sure, have been noticed at all times, but in a modernist culture the problematic as a style of existence and inquiry becomes imperious: men learn to find comfort in their wounds...The problematic is adhered to because it comes to be considered good, proper, and even beautiful that men should live in discomfort. (Howe 18-19)

The anti-heroes that Stevenson and Howe address in these passages are disillusioned figures with little to no hope. They do not meet the standards of traditional heroes, nor are they new types of heroes. They are neither redeemable nor admirable, even in their suffering: “M[en] [are] mired – you can take your choice – in the mass, in the machine, in the city, in [their] own loss of faith, in the hopelessness of a life without anterior intention or terminal value” (Howe 15). The modern heroes’ disillusionment is inescapable. Later in his introduction, Howe describes modern heroes further, giving a description in such detail and complexity, it is like no other. He claims that modern heroes are men “who believe in the necessity of action;” they wish to “put a scar on the map” (Howe 35). However, “the moral impulses that lead [them] to believe in action also render [them] unfit for action” (Howe 35). They become “dubious about the value of inflicting scars and [are] not sure [they] can even locate the map” (Howe 35). Anti-heroes know that they can act with full power only if they command “an implicit belief in the meaningfulness of the human scheme” (Howe 35). But “the more [they] commit [themselves] to the gestures of heroism, the more [they] [are] persuaded of the absurdity of existence” (Howe 35). Classical heroes “moved

in a world charged with a sense of purpose” (Howe 35-36). Spanning from about the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the “belief in purpose gave way to a belief in progress” (Howe 36). This transition modern heroes managed to survive, but at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the introduction of the modern era, heroes realize that they are in a very difficult position: they must now “live in a world that has moved beyond the idea of progress; and that is hard” (Howe 36). Nevertheless, anti-heroes “often continue to believe in the quest, and sometimes in the grail too; only [they] [are] no longer persuaded that a quest is necessarily undertaken through public action and [are] unsure as to where the grail can be found” (Howe 36). Modern heroes “move from the heroic deed to the heroism of consciousness, a heroism often available only in defeat” (Howe 36). They realize that “[men] resemble [their] suffering” (Howe 36). Anti-heroes discover early on that “[they] cannot be heroes” (Howe 36). They lack the virtue and courage of traditional heroes and fail to achieve redemption, even in their suffering. They are not paradoxical figures. Because they lack the virtues of traditional mythological heroes, they have no conquering qualities. In their hopelessness and disenchantment, anti-heroes conquer nothing in their shame.

According to *Modernism: A Cultural History* (2005) by Tim Armstrong, modern heroes most often found within British and American modernist novels are lost figures in “a state of permanent crisis” characterized by “alienation, standardization, and loss of individual autonomy,” in short “the disenchantment of the world” (Armstrong 4). In their desperation, anti-heroes turn to nihilism: “If, nevertheless, there is in literary modernism a dominant preoccupation...by which [they] will surely be destroyed, it is the specter of nihilism” (Howe 37). Modern heroes come to believe in the doctrine of an “all-embracing rebellion against traditional authority” (Howe 37). They consciously uphold and accept a “loss of belief in transcendent imperatives and secular values as guides to moral conduct” (Howe 37). Anti-heroes

come to feel that “there is no meaning resident” in “human existence” (Howe 37). They lose the “impulsions toward an active and striving existence,” impulsions that they hardly recognize until they become “aware of their decline” (Howe 37). Modern heroes recognize a “loss of connection with the sources of life” (Howe 38). As a result, their experiences become consumed by “the blight of boredom,” – monotony, dullness, and world-weariness (Howe 38). In the modern landscape, they find a “resulting disvaluation of values and the sense of bleakness which follows” (Howe 38). Throughout much of modernist literature, in particular American and British modernist novels, the anti-heroes’ nihilistic urges come to represent the modern consciousness. Their belief in the meaninglessness of life and the loss of all religious and moral principles pit them against themselves and against their societies.

In the closing chapter of his book, Campbell briefly provides a unique perspective of the driving power behind the formation of modern heroes. Heroes today, Campbell claims, “[are] far indeed from the contemporary view; for the democratic ideal of self-determining individuals, the invention of the power-driven machine, and the development of the scientific method of research have so transformed human life that the long-inherited, timeless universe of symbols has collapsed” (Campbell 333). People have emerged from a state of “ancient ignorance” and society is no longer a “carrier of religious content,” for society has become an “economic-political organization” (Campbell 334). Its ideals are of the “secular state in hard and unremitting competition for material supremacy and resources” (Campbell 334). This becomes challenging:

The problem of humankind today, therefore, is precisely the opposite to that of men in the comparatively stable periods of those great coordinating mythologies which now are known as lies. Then all meaning was in the group, in the great anonymous forms, none in

the self-expressive individual; today no meaning is in the group – none in the world: all is in the individual. But there the meaning is absolutely unconscious. One does not know toward what one moves. One does not know by what one is propelled. (Campbell 334)

In a society as such, heroes who heed the call cannot turn away from “what has been accomplished by the modern revolution” and they cannot “wait for [their] community to cast off its slough of pride, fear, rationalized avarice, and sanctified misunderstanding” (Campbell 335, 337). If they are to save their society, they must do nothing less than render the “modern world spiritually significant” (Campbell 334). They must make it “possible for men and women to come to full human maturity through the conditions of contemporary life” (Campbell 334). Heroes are unconsciously driven to save their societies from the emptiness and insignificance of modern life. They find themselves in a problematic situation. Though oblivious to what drives them and where they are driven, they still must present to their societies a way to render the world significant.

In the following chapters, I will examine the paradox of modern heroes and their mission to render life meaningful within these American and British modernist novels: *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald; *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad; *To the Lighthouse* (1927) by Virginia Woolf; *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) by Ernest Hemingway; *Nightwood* (1936) by Djuna Barnes; *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) by Saul Bellow; *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) by William Faulkner; and *Ulysses* (1922) by James Joyce.

In some of these novels, two anti-heroes can be found. Only after the first hero is destroyed can the predominant hero emerge. The predominant hero is, in most cases, merely an ordinary character and often the narrator of the story until the transformation occurs. In one novel, there are three modern heroes. In most of the novels, however, there is only one anti-hero.



This hero is usually a hopeless character somewhat disenchanted with the world, a disillusioned, unredeemable character. However, as the stories progress, it becomes clear that the protagonists in each novel are actually admirable types of modern heroes who, despite their failures, possess courageous perseverance and show great character. In most cases, the heroes are men, but there are a few novels where the heroes are women. In these novels, the women become heroes as the novels progress by overcoming the massive and often overpowering patriarchy and heterosexual norms.

## 1 CHAPTER 1

### **The Tragic Fall of Jay Gatsby and the Unexpected Rise of Nick Carraway as He Assumes the Role of Modern Hero**

Finding a modern hero in *The Great Gatsby* is quite an easy task, for there are really two of them. Nick Carraway, the narrator, and Jay Gatsby, the eccentric millionaire, can both be considered anti-heroes. However, this is really a novel heavily focused on perception, and it is Nick's perception of class and people that dominates the novel. Consequently, it is Nick's perception of Gatsby that makes him an anti-hero. Therefore, for the purpose of this discussion, we will highlight Gatsby's heroic qualities, but will ultimately focus on Carraway as the predominant modern hero. In "The Narrator as Hero," Jerome Thale writes, "But in another kind of novel the development comes not to the prince, the man of action, but to someone else, an onlooker, who does not have adventures but observes those of the main figure closely and learns from them" (Thale 69). *The Great Gatsby* is one such novel and Carraway is one such narrator that performs the task of story-telling flawlessly. After learning about the man of action, Gatsby in this case, Carraway sets out on the difficult task of narrating a tale concerning a "bizarre figure" that presents "a difficult paradox" to upper-class society as a whole (Thale 69). The tale, in turn, takes on the quality of great importance.

Before addressing Gatsby, it is first useful to explore Carraway's view of society as he comes to understand it throughout the novel. In particular, the novel focuses on East Egg and West Egg, both of which are upper-class societies just outside of New York City: "There was music from my neighbor's house through the summer nights. In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars" (Fitzgerald 39). Throughout the summer, the time of Nick's stay, Gatsby's house is filled nightly with

extravagant parties. The upper-class society of New York flocks to his residence, often uninvited. Fitzgerald describes the party-goers this way: “Instead of rambling this party had preserved a dignified homogeneity, and assumed to itself the function of representing the staid nobility of the countryside – East Egg condescending to West Egg, and carefully on guard against its spectroscopic gayety” (Fitzgerald 44). The East Eggers and West Eggers garner their wealth in different ways from different means, but they are a relatively homogeneous group that represents modern nobility in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Yet they are surprisingly unsophisticated. When the night begins and the party is still young, there is “dancing” on the “canvas in the garden” (Fitzgerald 46). Fitzgerald describes the scene in the following way: “old men pushing young girls backward in eternal graceless circles, superior couples holding each other tortuously, fashionably, and keeping in the corners – and a great number of single girls dancing individualistically” (Fitzgerald 46). The partygoers, consisting of every group imaginable from young girls to old men, dance gracefully across the floor and behave in an upright, fashionable manner. They all seem to exhibit a great degree of class. However, only a few hours later, Carraway is witness to a very sad young woman from a famous chorus who is completely and wholly intoxicated. As she sings along with music from the piano, she weeps so intensely that the empty pauses are filled with “gasping, broken sobs” (Fitzgerald 51). After a humorous suggestion is made that she “sing the notes on her face,” she throws up her hands, sinks into a chair, and falls into a “deep vinous sleep” (Fitzgerald 51). Simultaneously, Nick notices conflicts arising all around him: “Most of the remaining women were now having fights with men said to be their husbands. Even Jordan’s party, the quartet from East Egg, was rent asunder by dissension” (Fitzgerald 51). The upper-class West and East Eggers are no more sophisticated than a normal middle-class worker from the city who has had too much to drink.

With their large sums of money, they can buy enormous boats, elegant houses, and sleek sports cars. However, as Fitzgerald indicates, they cannot buy sophistication or professionalism. They are an elementary people, which leaves us to believe that modern, 20<sup>th</sup> century nobility deserves none of society's praise.

Nick's perception of Tom and Daisy Buchanan is even more impactful on his view of upper-class society. Tom is an immensely wealthy man who has left Chicago and come East in what Fitzgerald calls a rather breathtaking fashion. It is said that Tom is "one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterward savors of anticlimax" (Fitzgerald 6). The idea of Tom as an acutely excellent man seems to be a generalized or even stated opinion of him in the eyes of his wealthy peers, but this is not how Nick sees him: "But I felt that Tom would drift on forever seeking, a little wistfully, for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game" (Fitzgerald 6). The idea that Tom is drifting and seeking something irrecoverable presents a picture of instability, a picture of unhappiness. He is not the man that other upper-class members of society view him to be. He is, rather, a very wealthy man who is chasing an empty dream. Furthermore, Tom is a man with an irritatingly large ego: "'Now, don't think my opinion on these matters is final,' he seemed to say, 'just because I'm stronger and more of a man than you are'" (Fitzgerald 7). To overcome personality deficiencies like the ones described above, Tom uses his enormous wealth as a shallow tool. His wealth does perhaps sway many of his upper-class allies, but it does not sway Nick. In fact, it dislocates him even further, for Fitzgerald calls him "remotely rich," a man with whom Nick cannot even begin to relate (Fitzgerald 20). Clearly, Tom is a man who can easily relate to his fellow members of high society. However, he finds it difficult to relate to the other members of society, those who are not so wealthy. Nick sees this as a strategy for isolation.

Tom has essentially secluded himself with the use of his great wealth. Consequently, Nick views him as a man detached from both reality and other members of his society (in particular, those on the lower end of the socioeconomic scale).

Fitzgerald presents a far more generous view of Daisy, calling her a bright, exciting, and lovely figure: “Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth, but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget...a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour” (Fitzgerald 9). She seems, at another point, to possess romantic qualities: “For a moment the last sunshine fell with romantic affection upon her glowing face...then the glow faded, each light deserting her with lingering regret, like children leaving a pleasant street at dusk” (Fitzgerald 14). She is such a beautiful character that we almost instinctively love and admire her from the start. The “stirring warmth” that flows from her generous heart is thrilling and promises a life of excitement” (Fitzgerald 14). We see from the beginning that Daisy is a character who draws Nick in with her warmth and beauty. However, only a few pages later, Nick’s perception of Daisy is drastically altered: ““Well, I’ve had a very bad time, Nick, and I’m pretty cynical about everything”” (Fitzgerald 16). It is only when Daisy speaks that we see the contrast between her lovely description and her abject cynicism. Her outward view of society and subjective view of herself does not match her appearance at all. In fact, the cynicism that she exhibits creates a portrayal that is the opposite of her outward appearance. We see this aspect of her personality even more when Fitzgerald continues, ““You see I think everything’s terrible anyhow...Everybody thinks so – the most advanced people. And I *know*. I’ve been everywhere and seen everything and done everything.’ Her eyes flashed around her in a defiant way, rather like Tom’s, and she laughed with thrilling

scorn. ‘Sophisticated – God, I’m sophisticated!’” (Fitzgerald 17). Daisy, like Tom, also appears to be drifting in time, searching desperately for a happiness that eludes her. The sophistication that she possesses is something that is impossible to enjoy. On the contrary, it is a trait that makes her miserable. In this way, she is exactly like her husband. They are both unhappy, unstable figures, and they both seem doomed from the start. However, Daisy and Tom also see themselves as members of “a rather distinguished secret society” (Fitzgerald 17). The secret society that Fitzgerald depicts here is synonymous with the upper-class East and West Eggers that we discussed a moment ago. On the outside, it is a society that everyone wants to join. On the inside, however, it is a society that enjoys very little joy and stability in life. Once the shine of upper-class money fades, this level of society appears to be crude and elementary underneath it all. They are figures essentially isolated from middle and lower-class society. Thus, Daisy is portrayed as an isolated and remote figure just like her husband Tom.

It is Nick’s perception of Jay Gatsby and the contrast it provides with the East and West Egg upper-class that the novel hinges upon. When Carraway first sees Gatsby, he appears as a simple man “standing with his hands in his pockets regarding the silver pepper of the stars” (Fitzgerald 20). Nick originally assumes that Gatsby has “come out to determine what share was his of our local heavens,” but he quickly realizes that he is focused on something more concrete (Fitzgerald 20). He sees Gatsby stretch out his arms “toward the dark water in a curious way” (Fitzgerald 20). When Gatsby begins to tremble, Carraway glances across the sea and can distinguish “nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been at the end of a dock” (Fitzgerald 21). Though seemingly insignificant at the time, Gatsby’s pursuit of the green light becomes one of the most important metaphors in the novel. This will be discussed at greater length in a moment.

The first time that Nick meets Gatsby in a social setting is when he attends one of the parties that fills Gatsby's house with lights throughout the summer. At the party, he first hears about Gatsby through the whisperings of the attendees: "It was testimony to the romantic speculation he inspired that there were whispers about him from those who had found little that it was necessary to whisper about in this world" (Fitzgerald 44). From the start, Nick sees Gatsby as a romantic figure full of mystery. His parties are filled with guests who know nothing about him, who have usually never met him, and who are chockfull with wild conjecture and speculation concerning the enigmatic man. When Nick finally meets Gatsby, he is taken aback:

He smiled understandingly – much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced – or seemed to face – the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on *you* with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just so far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. (Fitzgerald 48)

Gatsby delivers a splendid first impression. Nick is jarred by his sincerity and his ability to put his listener at ease and in a state of instantaneous comfort. There is no doubt that Fitzgerald intends for us to have a romantic and mysterious view of Gatsby from the start. He stands far apart from his guests at the party: "My eyes fell on Gatsby, standing alone on the marble steps and looking from one group to another with approving eyes...I wondered if the fact that he was not drinking helped to set him off from his guests, for it seemed to me that he grew more correct as the fraternal hilarity increased" (Fitzgerald 50). The fact that Gatsby is set apart from his guests is very significant considering how we analyzed those guests a few paragraphs ago.

Fitzgerald puts him in contrast to the East and West Egg upper-class society that attends his parties. Gatsby is better than them. He is more civilized, more self-controlled, and better behaved without question.

When Carraway and Gatsby take a car ride into New York City, Nick is finally able to replace the unknown with the known as Gatsby lays the mysterious character bare. He learns that Gatsby is “the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West” who was “brought up in America but educated at Oxford” (Fitzgerald 65). Gatsby came into a “good deal of money” with the passing of his family members (Fitzgerald 65). Nick learns that Gatsby lived “like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe” before joining the army to fight in World War I where he “tried very hard to die” but seemed to “bear an enchanted life” (Fitzgerald 65-66). He “took two machine-gun detachments” so far deep in the field that “the infantry couldn’t advance,” and was consequently “promoted to be a major” and decorated by “every Allied government” (Fitzgerald 66). At this point, Nick becomes fascinated with Jay Gatsby and promotes him to an even higher place in his mind, a place of romantic idealization. In Nick’s eyes, Gatsby is a wealthy, highly educated man who ultimately leaves the pleasure of money to serve as a war hero. Here, Nick is adding to the concept of Gatsby, even applying his own imagination to enhance his wondrous past. However, Nick simultaneously notices that there is something tragic about Gatsby. The enchanted life that Fitzgerald depicts is the consequence of the very sad thing that happened to him years ago: ““You see, I usually find myself among strangers because I drift here and there trying to forget the sad thing that happened to me”” (Fitzgerald 67). Ultimately, the men’s drive into the city is the perfect opportunity for Nick to perceive Gatsby as both a romantic and tragic figure. It seems like a difficult task to reconcile these two positions, yet Nick finds it very easy to do so. The resulting irony makes the scene incredibly significant and



transforms Gatsby into a spectacular figure: ““Anything can happen now that we’ve slid over this bridge...anything at all. Even Gatsby could happen without any particular wonder” (Fitzgerald 69).

When Nick meets up with Jordan Baker to discuss her mysterious conversation with Gatsby at his party just weeks before, he learns from her that Gatsby had a brief romantic tryst with Daisy years ago just before the war. He begins to think that perhaps this is the sad thing that happened to Gatsby. Perhaps he lost a great love due to his involvement in a war that destroyed so many other lives. Carraway subsequently learns that the location of Gatsby’s house is no coincidence: ““It was a strange coincidence,’ I said. ‘But it wasn’t a coincidence at all.’ ‘Why not?’ ‘Gatsby bought that house so that Daisy would be just across the bay’ (Fitzgerald 78). The mystery of Jay Gatsby begins to unveil itself at this point in the story and Nick experiences his first great revelation in the novel: “Then it had not been merely the stars to which he had aspired on that June night. He came alive to me, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor” (Fitzgerald 78). Nick’s realization here reinforces the romantic notion that he developed during the men’s drive into the city. Now he sees Gatsby’s purpose as well as his spectacular image: “His first image of Gatsby is redeemed, for he has discovered that Gatsby was gazing not at the sea and the stars but at the green light near Daisy’s house: and the light is the symbol of his fidelity, his transcendent dream” (Thale 70). Gatsby is revealed to be an idealist. By reaching out for the green light and hoping to reunite with Daisy when she wanders into a party of his, Gatsby can restore or recapture his past and reverse the very sad thing that happened to him. With this revelation, Gatsby transcends his status as both a romantic and tragic figure, and becomes the first rather surprising modern hero found within the novel. As a modern hero, or anti-hero, he does not fit the usual criteria of a traditional hero as laid out by Joseph

Campbell and others in the introductory chapter, but he is still a hero all the same mainly due to his perseverance and romantic idealism: “One group sees Gatsby’s glamour, another his vulgarity – he is glamorous and vulgar, but he is also something neither group sees, that only Nick sees, he is heroic” (Thale 70). Gatsby’s heroism in this moment is of critical importance because Nick must witness a hero in order to become one later in the novel. Nick is the only character who must promote Gatsby to heroic proportions. In fact, without the tragically romantic hero that we find in Gatsby, Nick would just be another narrator who remains aloof and untouched by the other characters in the story. Therefore, the concept of Gatsby as a hero is essential to the growth of Nick in the novel. This will be discussed further in a moment as we explore more of Gatsby’s tragically heroic character.

When Nick invites Gatsby and Daisy to meet once again around the formal invitation of having tea at his small house in West Egg, the encounter is awkward from the start and Gatsby declares it to be a “terrible, terrible mistake” (Fitzgerald 87). However, after Nick slips out of the house for half an hour, he reappears to find the situation totally changed: “They were sitting at either end of the couch, looking at each other as if some question had been asked, or was in the air, and every vestige of embarrassment was gone...But there was a change in Gatsby that was simply confounding. He literally glowed; without a word or a gesture of exultation a new well-being radiated from him and filled the little room” (Fitzgerald 89). As Gatsby’s dream comes to life and his hope is resurrected, we begin to see more of his heroic qualities. His charisma radiates throughout the room. Gatsby is a man with the power to change those around him. He can affect them both emotionally and physically. In addition, Gatsby can change himself. In fact, he changes before Nick’s very eyes in an instant. The very sad event that happened to

Gatsby long ago seems to have disappeared along with his long-held anxiety over his and Daisy's fate.

When Gatsby takes Daisy and Nick on a tour of his house, he finds himself reevaluating "everything in his house according to the measure of response" it draws "from her well-loved eyes" (Fitzgerald 91). Gatsby is well beyond fascinated with Daisy. The dream he has nourished for five long years is meeting with reality: "He had passed visibly through two states and was entering upon a third. After his embarrassment and his unreasoning joy, he was consumed with wonder at her presence. He had been full of the idea so long, dreamed it right through to the end, waited with his teeth set, so to speak, at an inconceivable pitch of intensity" (Fitzgerald 91-92). At this point, Gatsby's dream is of greater importance than the reality he is consuming. Every year the dream has grown stronger, more vivid, and more perfect. Unfortunately, it is this perfection that can never be matched by even the best reality imaginable. Therefore, we see a contrast presented between the reality and the dream:

Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams – not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart. (Fitzgerald 95-96)

It is the dream that sets Gatsby apart in this section of the novel. Over many years, he has created a vast illusion in which he reunites with Daisy. This illusion is described by Fitzgerald as something that goes beyond Daisy, beyond everything that exists in Gatsby's life. He is so obsessed with this illusion that he organizes his life around it. However, Fitzgerald presents this

as a positive. The illusion is what makes Gatsby a dreamer and an idealist. It also makes him the first modern hero in the novel. The reality that meets the dream is far less important.

When Daisy and Tom attend one of Gatsby's parties, Daisy is sickened by what she sees from the West Egg crowd:

But the rest offended her...She was appalled by West Egg, this unprecedented "place" that Broadway had begotten upon a Long Island fishing village – appalled by its raw vigor that chafed under the old euphemisms and by the too obtrusive fate that herded its inhabitants along a short-cut from nothing to nothing. She saw something awful in the very simplicity she failed to understand. (Fitzgerald 107)

Daisy fails to realize that, apart from minor differences, she fits in perfectly with the crowd from West Egg. She is from the same upper-class as them and behaves in much the same way. She simply fails to understand this concept, and therefore, considers the crowd to be awful. More important, though, is Gatsby's reaction to Daisy at the party. The meeting between West Egg with the usual crowd and East Egg with Tom and Daisy is massively insignificant to him. He concentrates on his dream rather than the reality of Daisy's connection to these awful upper-class socialites. While everyone else thinks about the partygoers, Gatsby thinks only of Daisy.

In a discussion after the party, Gatsby tells Nick that he wants "nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say I never loved you" (Fitzgerald 109). Gatsby feels that only after Daisy takes this huge stand can he truly repair the damage that has been done: "After she had obliterated four years with that sentence they could decide upon the more practical measures to be taken. One of them was that, after she was free, they were to go back to Louisville and be married from her house – just as if it were five years ago" (Fitzgerald 109). Gatsby the idealist, the dreamer, wants to return to the past. He wants to erase the last four years, move to Kentucky,

get married, and pretend he had never left for the war. This is what makes him a romantic figure, a modern hero. When reality does not match his vast illusion, Gatsby decides that reality must be erased and replaced with his dream. He feels that he can restore the rightful past and transition into his dream if he and Daisy can just start over and do things differently this time around:

‘I wouldn’t ask too much of her,’ I ventured. ‘You can’t repeat the past.’ ‘Can’t repeat the past?’ he cried incredulously. ‘Why of course you can!’ He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand. ‘I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before,’ he said, nodding determinedly. ‘She’ll see.’ He talked a lot about the past, and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was.

(Fitzgerald 110)

Nick is of the mindset that the past cannot be relived or repeated. When he expresses this idea, Gatsby nearly goes into a rage. He cannot let go of his vast illusion, his dream of he and Daisy reuniting. It is something that Gatsby has held onto for too long and cannot release. As he continues reveling in the past, Nick suddenly realizes that Gatsby’s illusion is much more than a simple dream. Recapturing the past seems to be the only way that Gatsby can recover that which he lost a long time ago. And without that recovery, Gatsby and Nick both know that Gatsby, the dreamer, will fail tragically.

Later we see Gatsby’s most assertive behavior by far as well as the introduction to Nick as the second modern hero. At lunch in Daisy’s house, Gatsby directly confronts Tom about his

wife's affair: "'Your wife doesn't love you,' said Gatsby. 'She's never loved you. She loves me...' She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me. It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved anyone except me'" (Fitzgerald 130). Gatsby so desperately wants his dream to be laid bare and affirmed by everyone as the new reality.

When these two things clash with one another, however, a huge scandal ensues. In the middle of this scandal, Fitzgerald does something very interesting and of utmost significance – he shifts the focus entirely onto Nick. Now, standing apart, almost indifferent to the environment around him, Nick sadly remembers that today is his birthday. He is thirty years old: "Before me stretched the portentous, menacing road of a new decade... Thirty – the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief-case of enthusiasm, thinning hair" (Fitzgerald 135). This is the first glimpse of Nick as another modern hero. To this point, he obviously has not achieved some massive conquest or heroic victory and Gatsby's heroism has yet to transfer to him. He sees the menacing road of a new decade and imagines an apathetic life of thinning hair and lonely nights. However, Nick's lonely and indifferent attitude is the starting point for his heroic achievement later in the novel.

When Gatsby's car strikes and kills Mrs. Wilson, Gatsby declares that he is the driver rather than Daisy. He essentially seals his fate at this point, and Tom and Daisy immediately begin conspiring against him: "They weren't happy, and neither of them had touched the chicken or the ale – and yet they weren't unhappy either. There was an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture, and anybody would have said that they were conspiring together" (Fitzgerald 145). As we saw earlier, Tom and Daisy are members of a rather secret society, the super wealthy. Above all else, they protect one another from outside threats. Therefore, when

Mrs. Wilson is killed, Tom and Daisy immediately retreat into their giant house and leave the chaos behind for Gatsby and Nick to remedy.

When Nick rushes to Gatsby's house to warn him about the possibility of a disastrous end to the whole affair, he finds Gatsby still clinging to the hope of recapturing the past: "He couldn't possibly leave Daisy until he knew what she was going to do. He was clutching at some last hope and I couldn't bear to shake him free...He had intended, probably, to take what he could and go – but now he found that he had committed himself to the following of a grail" (Fitzgerald 148-149). The romantic and heroic nature of Jay Gatsby has doomed him. He is more unable than ever before to give up the green light at the end of the dock. He could save himself by leaving, but he cannot bring himself to leave Daisy behind. In "The Great Gatsby," John A. Pidgeon writes, "When the dream clashes with reality, he follows it anyway, because to face reality is to face the fact that all his years of dreaming and striving were for nothing" (Pidgeon 181). It is easier and less painful for Gatsby to carry out the charade until the end. He must continue to believe in the illusion that he and Daisy will reunite. His existence is contingent upon it. He must also continue to search for that part of him that is missing. Unfortunately, Gatsby does not realize that the dream is dead. Daisy has already left him. She has "vanished into her rich house, into her rich, full life, leaving Gatsby – nothing" (Fitzgerald 149). Again, Daisy has escaped into her great riches where there will be no repercussions for her actions. Nick is the only one left on which Gatsby can lean: "We shook hands and I started away. Just before I reached the hedge I remembered something and turned around. 'They're a rotten crowd,' I shouted across the lawn. 'You're worth the whole damn bunch put together'" (Fitzgerald 154). Again, Pidgeon writes, "It is in this passage that Fitzgerald sums up the entire tragedy of Gatsby. He really is the American boy pursuing the American Dream, never knowing

that the dream which his idealism has created is not worthy of him. He never realizes that what Nick says is true, Gatsby was ‘better than the whole rotten bunch’” (Pidgeon 182). Gatsby never realizes that he is better than Tom and Daisy, or for that matter, any one of the thousands of upper-class people who frequent his house in the summer. He is better than the whole rotten crowd, but never realizes this profound truth. In fact, as Pidgeon suggests, Gatsby’s dream of reuniting with Daisy is not even worthy of him. He is a truly eccentric and romantic character. He has believed in the dream and brought it to fruition. However, now that the dream has failed, we come to see the tragedy in Gatsby’s life, the inability to retire his vast illusion. The tragic, but also romantic traits that Gatsby possesses make him an extraordinary character and a modern hero.

When Gatsby dies at Wilson’s hand by the pool, he is described as having “lost the old warm world” (Fitzgerald 161). He has also “paid a high price for living too long with a single dream” (Fitzgerald 161). Pidgeon describes the significance of this moment: “Gatsby never succeeds in seeing through the sham of this world. It is the essence of his romantic American vision that it lacks the seasoned powers of discrimination and he dies faithful to the end” (Pidgeon 180). For this reason, as Nick states, there is something gorgeous about Gatsby. He is faithful to the dream until the end and never abandons the illusion he has constructed. He is a romantic and heroic figure, maintaining his innocence until his death. Pidgeon writes again, “Gatsby does not seek to master or understand society. He does not pass from innocence through experience to sophistication, but retains innocence throughout his life” (Pidgeon 180). Tragically, Gatsby can never move forward like the society around him. He is stuck in the past and obsessed with a dream. Ironically, the characteristics that make him a modern hero are the same characteristics that cause his death. Gatsby, the innocent modern hero is alone in the end,



save Nick: “I found myself on Gatsby’s side, and alone...At first I was surprised and confused; then, as he lay in his house and didn’t move or breathe or speak, hour upon hour, it grew upon me that I was responsible, because no one else was interested” (Fitzgerald 164). Nick tries very hard to contact Gatsby’s friends and family. In the end, he finds no one except Gatsby’s father. Other than he and Nick, the funeral is empty. The man who entertained thousands of West and East Eggers every week at his luxurious mansion has no one to mourn his passing: “The minister glanced several times at his watch, so I took him aside and asked him to wait for half an hour. But it wasn’t any use. Nobody came” (Fitzgerald 174). Daisy, the most important person in Gatsby’s life, is completely absent. She is nowhere to be found. She and Tom have left abruptly with luggage for a long trip, presumably to Europe. She sends no regards: “I could only remember, without resentment, that Daisy hadn’t sent a message or a flower” (Fitzgerald 174). The tragedy described here of an empty funeral coincides perfectly with Gatsby’s romantic, yet tragic, fall. Again, we can recall Nick saying that Gatsby is better than the whole rotten bunch put together. In other words, the empty funeral fits perfectly in with Gatsby’s role as a modern hero.

With Gatsby destroyed, the story shifts at this juncture to Nick. In *Hero’s Tale*, David H. Lynn writes, “Something in Gatsby’s failure and the collapse of his dream have awakened Nick to the corruption of Eastern society, to the enduring value of human decency, and to his own sympathetic bond with Gatsby’s romantic imagination. As he leaves, Carraway distances himself from the standards of the ‘rotten crowd’ and allies himself finally with Gatsby” (Lynn 79). Nick now sees how indifferent upper-class society is to the morals and ethics that typically hold the rest of society together. His faith in a “sovereign code of conduct” has been destroyed (Lynn 89). Consequently, Nick must wrestle with the fact that “any such code is arbitrary,

artificial, and, to a certain degree, an illusion” (Lynn 89). At this point, Nick emerges as the second modern hero of this tale. His struggle against the rotten crowd and upper-class society is a heroic struggle. Nick must complete what Gatsby could not. With the romantic hero destroyed by his own naïve egoism in conflict with the adversarial social environment, Nick as narrator assumes the role of hero and constructs the story being told. The story is certainly about Gatsby, but after his death as the story continues it becomes more concerned with the development of Nick’s character: “Nick is the hero of the novel, and Gatsby is a fact, the fact in his development. For development is what the book is concerned with: a hero, still ingenuous at thirty, who leaves the dull midwestern plains for the excitement of New York, and there makes a series of discoveries about Jay Gatsby, but more fundamentally, and inseparably, about himself” (Thale 71). Gatsby is a mere modern hero in passing. He is not meant to carry on with the dream. In fact, Gatsby must tragically fail for Nick to become the main modern hero in the novel. Once Gatsby is gone, Nick can focus on his own situation and administer what he has learned from Gatsby in the appropriate ways.

Nick decides to return West to more comfortable and familiar surroundings: “After Gatsby’s death the East was haunted for me like that, distorted beyond my eyes’ power of correction. So when the blue smoke of brittle leaves was in the air and the wind blew the wet laundry still on the line I decided to come back home” (Fitzgerald 176). Nick is, in essence, fleeing the rotten crowd of upper-class East and West Eggers and everything they represent. He is fleeing the East as a whole. The destruction of Gatsby has changed him forever and changed his views of polite society. At the same time, Nick, as the second modern hero of this tale, is pursuing a dream much like Gatsby’s that can only be accomplished by returning West:

Having reconsecrated those human values passed on to him by his father, Nick seeks to

return to a traditional society in which they remain the unconscious sinews of community. He pursues a quest similar to Gatsby's after all – a journey back towards an innocence and security now lost, towards something of himself that has vanished. His West is a memory of childhood. [Nick] Carraway, again like Gatsby, wishes that all that has happened, not just this past summer but since the War, can be redeemed with an act of will and spirit. At the same time, however, he is well aware that such a wish is folly. The heroic urge for transcendent significance remains potent. (Lynn 91)

A transformation has occurred in Nick. With his romanticism destroyed (as well as the romanticism he invests in Gatsby), Nick has generated a new social character for himself that seeks a return to traditional society. He must undertake a quest much like Gatsby's in search for the innocence that he lost long ago.

At the conclusion of the novel, it becomes evident that Nick's new "moral sensibility" arises from the "clash of his private values with the brutally indifferent waste land that destroys Gatsby" (Lynn 76). It is not the "failure of passion for a woman, therefore, but the defeat of a romantic figure" that transforms Nick (Lynn 76). Gatsby's failure to realize his vast illusion translates into success for Nick because it massively changes Nick's outlook on polite, upper-class society. His change in outlook causes him to pursue a new dream back West where the innocence of his childhood was lost. The change in Nick's outlook and the transformation that occurs within makes him the predominant modern hero in this novel: "That Nick Carraway supersedes his own creation, Jay Gatsby, as hero of *The Great Gatsby* is no startling revelation. Yet despite their imaginative bond, they are very different sorts of heroes. For Nick's achievement is subtle and complex, accomplishing what Gatsby cannot – sustaining a dream – while both recognizing the limitations of that dream and judging the social world that has

destroyed it” (Lynn 72). Though both Gatsby and Nick are modern heroes, there is a difference between the two of them. Gatsby is a charismatic dreamer who holds on to a vast illusion. His romanticism throughout the novel is beautiful, but it is also terribly destructive. On the contrary, Nick is a very ordinary character who contains none of Gatsby’s charisma. The romanticism that he possesses is reserved for Gatsby as he propels him to heroic proportions. Nick, as the narrator, makes the novel move and work while Gatsby enjoys the benefit of his labor. However, Nick also possesses a dream of lost innocence, a dream that does not ultimately destroy him. Therefore, Nick supersedes Gatsby as the predominant modern hero in the end because he possesses the wisdom to know the limitations of his dream. He accomplishes what Gatsby cannot. He sustains a dream without it destroying him. Though the triumph is subtle, it is, nevertheless, a triumph which propels Nick to heroic proportions.

## 2 CHAPTER 2

### **The Destruction of Kurtz Paves the Way for the Ascension of Marlow as the Predominant Modern Hero**

Like the previous novel we discussed, *Heart of Darkness* also has two modern heroes. Marlow, the narrator, and Kurtz, the eccentric ivory speculator, can both be considered anti-heroes. Also like the previous novel, Marlow as the narrator raises Kurtz to heroic proportions before converting himself into a similar but more successful hero. Therefore, for the purposes of this discussion, we will focus on Kurtz's heroism, but will ultimately designate Marlow as the predominant modern hero. According to Thale, *Heart of Darkness* is a special and pure case of a character learning about himself by understanding another; the "formula is the coming to knowledge of the self through seeing the self in another" (Thale 72). Thale also records that the "growth in awareness" of the main hero is not the result "of his own action or at least his own character;" the "growth in awareness" comes from judging another character's development, a bizarre character central to the story (Thale 69). This bizarre, heroic character and the story that concerns him ultimately present us with a "difficult paradox" involving Western society and the ivory trade in Africa (Thale 69).

Before addressing Kurtz, we must first address the Trading Company and the Managers under which he is operating. Marlow relates that the Company is located on a river like a snake in "a place of darkness" located somewhere in Africa (Conrad 8). It is a "Continental concern," a "Trading society" that involves much of Europe, especially England (Conrad 8). Marlow desperately wants a piece of the trading action and is determined to captain a steamer down this river into the center of Africa, what later becomes known as the heart of darkness. Inside the waiting room of the Company's offices, Marlow gets his first impression of the ivory trade going

on in Africa: “I began to feel slightly uneasy. You know I am not used to such ceremonies, and there was something ominous in the atmosphere. It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy – I don’t know – something not quite right...An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness” (Conrad 11). Marlow’s first impression of the Company is a very ominous one. The secretaries feverishly knitting black wool are presented as guards to the African darkness. This, of course, makes Marlow feel uneasy. He begins to sense that he is joining some grand conspiracy that is legal but is not necessarily moral. Because of these factors, he first sees the Company itself as a gloomy operation that is perhaps involved in nefarious behavior.

When Marlow visits with the Company doctor, he must, oddly, have his cranium measured. In the conversation which ensues, Marlow learns that men rarely come back from the African darkness; if they return at all, they return as changed men: ““And when they come back, too?” I asked. ‘Oh, I never see them,’ he remarked; ‘and moreover, the changes take place inside, you know’” (Conrad 12). Marlow receives all the warnings needed, but the warnings never take hold. He is determined to serve as “a piece of good fortune for the Company,” but with it comes a catch (Conrad 13). Conrad writes, ““It appeared, however, I was also one of the Workers, with a capital – you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle’” (Conrad 13). Marlow is deemed to be an exceptional and gifted man. He is presented this way to the Company and, is therefore, expected to serve as a champion of Western values to the millions living in savagery. Marlow is supposed to be an apostle or a spiritual emissary of light. We will discover later that Kurtz was just such a man when he enlisted and was expected to do even more.

When Marlow arrives at his Company's station, he is presented with a troubling scene – he encounters “three wooden barrack-like structures on the rocky slope” surrounded by “inhabited devastation” (Conrad 17). There is an “undersized railway-truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air” (Conrad 17). There are numerous “pieces of decaying machinery” and a “stack of rusty rails” (Conrad 17). There are “a lot of imported drainage-pipes for the settlement” thrown about; they are all broken which leads Marlow to conclude that the site is a “wanton smash-up” (Conrad 19). He even goes so far as to call the location a “gloomy circle of some Inferno” (Conrad 19). Marlow is not impressed with his first view of the Company's station. He sees the decay, the destruction, and the chaos all around him. He even compares it to a raging inferno or a circle of hell. Yet this is the place where the precious and quite lucrative ivory trade begins: “a stream of manufactured goods, rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass-wire sent into the depths of darkness, and in return came a precious trickly of ivory” (Conrad 21).

When Marlow meets the Manager who is “running that show,” he calls him a “flabby devil” and expresses even more disdain for the operation (Conrad 25). His disappointment with the station is compounded by this view of the Manager:

‘He was obeyed, yet he inspired neither love nor fear, nor even respect. He inspired uneasiness...Not a definite mistrust – just uneasiness – nothing more...He had no genius for organizing, for initiative, or for order even. That was evident in such things as the deplorable state of the station. He had no learning, and no intelligence. His position had come to him – why? Perhaps because he was never ill...He had served three terms of three years out there...He originated nothing, he could keep the routine going – that's all...Perhaps there was nothing within him.’ (Conrad 26)

The Manager possesses none of the qualities that Marlow is said to possess. He is neither an exceptional nor gifted man. Though he is obeyed, he does not inspire fear or love from his workers. There is even a sense of uneasiness within the workers' ranks about his ability to lead the men. Yet the Manager can keep the routine going, which is really the only thing required of him. He is not expected to be an apostle or emissary of light like Marlow or Kurtz because he lacks the heroic qualities needed. He is merely expected to keep the station afloat. However, due to his incredible lack of learning and intelligence, the Manager cannot even do that. He has basically run the station into an almost complete state of destruction. Marlow goes on to call him a "chattering idiot" (Conrad 28). Then, Marlow makes a fascinating remark about the station in general:

'I went to work the next day, turning, so to speak, my back on that station. In that way only it seemed to me I could keep my hold on the redeeming facts of life. Still, one must look about sometimes; and then I saw this station, these men strolling aimlessly about in the sunshine of the yard. I asked myself sometimes what it all meant. They wandered here and there with their absurd long staves in their hands, like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence. The word ivory rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse.' (Conrad 28)

With the station in mind and in view, Marlow is unable to see what he has always seen – a distinct meaning for human existence. He must turn his back and reconsider the Western values he has been taught throughout life. As he watches the workers wandering aimlessly around, he tries to make sense of it all, but cannot. The only thing that seems to be important to both the Manager and the workers is ivory. They whisper about it. They sigh about it. They are



obsessed with it. This obsession, the aimless wandering, and the inherent greed that the station represents is appalling to Marlow. Conrad goes on to describe the workers this way:

‘However, they were all waiting...for something...They beguiled the time by back-biting and intriguing against each other in a foolish kind of way. There was an air of plotting about that station, but nothing came of it, of course. It was as unreal as everything else – as the philanthropic pretense of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work. The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages. They intrigued and slandered and hated each other only on that account.’ (Conrad 30)

The Manager and the workers plot against one another in a hope to reach the pinnacle of the ivory trade – a post where the actual ivory is collected and where percentages can be earned. However, their back-biting and intriguing leads them nowhere. All they find is disease and the uninhabitable wilderness that surrounds them. Most importantly, the philanthropic pretense to educate and civilize the savages is as unreal as everything else. This seemingly benevolent scam includes a parallel operation run by the Manager’s uncle:

‘This devoted band called itself the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, and I believe they were sworn to secrecy. Their talk, however, was the talk of sordid buccaneers: it was reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage; there was not an atom of foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them, and they did not seem aware these things are wanted for the work of the world. To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe.’ (Conrad 38)

Conrad distinctly indicates here that there is no moral purpose involved in either the Eldorado Exploring Expedition or the station where Marlow has been placed. These men – both the Managers and the workers – are not emissaries of light like the Company has projected them to be. They are more like pirates or burglars vandalizing the African wilderness: “The initial stage of Marlow’s education... follows his discovery that many of European society’s values are corrupt; all the lip-service paid to colonial enlightenment conceals a limitless, savage appetite for profit” (Lynn 12). The men’s desire for ivory trumps everything else it seems. However, the scavenging of ivory is not the only supposed purpose to the Company’s business in Africa. As the Company’s emissaries of light, the men are to go forth and do nothing less than civilize the African continent. However, they do the opposite. They become so obsessed with plundering the earth that they lose their focus on the philanthropic mission. Marlow quickly realizes that he must escape from this station and the parallel operations going on around him and must secure a new identity separate from the Western values he has come to know throughout his life.

Kurtz is presented early in the novel as a contrast to the Managers and the workers previously discussed. The Company’s chief accountant tells Marlow early on that Kurtz is a “first-class agent” and a “remarkable person” (Conrad 22). He is at the time “in charge of a trading-post” in the “true ivory-country” (Conrad 22). But he is destined for greater things: ““Oh, he will go far, very far...He will be somebody in the Administration before long. They, above – the Council in Europe, you know – mean him to be”” (Conrad 23). The Manager issues similar sentiments, calling Kurtz the “best agent he had, an exceptional man, of the greatest importance to the Company” (Conrad 27). The brickmaker perhaps gives the most detailed description:

‘He is a prodigy...He is an emissary of pity and science and progress, and devil knows

what else. We want...for the guidance of the cause entrusted to us by Europe, so to speak, higher intelligence, wide sympathies, a singleness of purpose...and so *he* comes here, a special being, as you ought to know...Yes. Today he is chief of the best station, next year he will be assistant-manager, two years more and...but I dare-say you know what he will be in two years' time. You are of the new gang – the gang of virtue. The same people who sent him specially also recommended you.' (Conrad 31)

Obviously, the Company has big plans for Kurtz, and he is in the best position possible to advance his career. He is destined to become one of the highest overseers to the ivory trade in Africa. However, his career is of less importance than the philanthropic mission they have entrusted to him. He is an emissary of the most advanced European and Western concepts of science and progress, and is destined to bring light to the savages in the heart of darkness. He is, without a doubt, a special being.

Marlow is also grouped in with Kurtz as belonging to the new gang of virtue. He has been specially recommended by the same people as Kurtz years before, but he is no Kurtz; at least not yet. Kurtz is a “universal genius,” an extremely intelligent man who is constantly becoming of greater and greater interest to Marlow (Conrad 34). Conrad writes, “I had plenty of time for meditation, and now and then I would give some thought to Kurtz...I was curious to see whether this man, who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, would climb to the top after all and how he would set about his work when there” (Conrad 38). The workers have placed Kurtz on a pedestal and raised him to heroic proportions. This has piqued Marlow's curiosity, but he is not sold on the idea of Kurtz as a moral leader in the wilderness – not yet. He is merely curious to see this great man and what he will one day become.

As Marlow travels down the long river into the heart of darkness, he grows ever closer to Kurtz, who becomes more and more mysterious along the way: ““As to me, I seemed to see Kurtz for the first time. It was a distinct glimpse: the dugout, four paddling savages, and the lone white man turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home – perhaps setting his face towards the depths of the wilderness, towards his empty and desolate station. I did not know the motive”” (Conrad 40). This quote is in reference to a moment months before when Kurtz was expected to return to the main station and perhaps to Europe permanently. Yet Kurtz, in the middle of the journey, chose to go back to his own desolate station. In essence, he turned his back on Western values, religion, morality, and civilization itself. It is a mysterious choice that we do not quite understand until much later in the novel. In another instance, Conrad writes:

‘I flung one shoe overboard, and became aware that that was exactly what I had been looking forward to – a talk with Kurtz. I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing...The man presented himself as a voice...The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words – the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness.’ (Conrad 61)

Surprisingly, Kurtz is not presented here as a man skilled in collecting ivory or as a man gifted in running a very lucrative station in the wilderness. Rather, he is presented as a voice. His gift is his ability to illumine or enlighten others, whether that be words that are exalted or words that are contemptible. He can communicate the truth and present his audience with light or he can

communicate lies and present his audience with an impenetrable darkness. The dichotomy presented here reveals that Kurtz is a very gifted, yet complicated man. He has a unique ability to lead others regardless of where he is taking them. Through lies, he can lead them to destruction, and through light, he can lead them to success. Because of his unique voice in the darkness, Marlow begins to promote Kurtz to heroic proportions as the workers and the Manager have done previously: “A hero is needed for the task, and Marlow turns initially to Kurtz; indeed, he creates Kurtz as a romantic hero who will challenge both settlement and jungle” (Lynn 15). With the help of the Manager and the workers, Marlow essentially creates this idea of Kurtz that is quite delusional. Kurtz, according to Marlow’s dream, is the hero needed for the task of challenging Western values and confronting the absence of those same values in the heart of darkness.

Down the river, as the hero finally comes into view, Conrad presents him: ““They say the hair goes on growing sometimes, but this – ah – specimen, was impressively bald. The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball – an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and – lo! – he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation”” (Conrad 62-63). This is the first indication that Kurtz has been corrupted by the darkness around him. Marlow describes that the wilderness has touched Kurtz and changed him. It has loved him, embraced him, consumed him. Kurtz has been infected with the savagery of the wilderness. This corruption becomes clearer and clearer as Conrad continues: ““The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own...He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land”” (Conrad 63). Here, we see the contrast between Kurtz as the emissary of light and Kurtz as the powerful, yet corrupt

voice in the darkness. The contrast is so stark that even Marlow wonders if Kurtz has been corrupted by the most powerful, evil spiritual forces.

When we consider Kurtz's superior mental and spiritual abilities, it comes as no surprise that he is the leader of the tribe located in the area around his station. As Conrad tells us, he presides at "certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites" (Conrad 64). He also commands the tribe of savages to put the heads of their enemies on stakes surrounding the station. Furthermore, he orders an attack on Marlow's steamboat that kills a man and nearly ends their mission. Yet Kurtz is a man educated in England. According to Conrad, all of Europe has "contributed to the making of Kurtz" (Conrad 64). He has been asked by the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs to prepare a report for the Company's future guidance. He is supposed to be the ultimate emissary of light:

While surrounded by the defining context of late nineteenth-century European culture, Kurtz was able to feed the enormous demands of his ego within socially recognized limits...As long as European culture provided structure and restraint, Kurtz could be, superficially, the most civilized of creatures. However, when he arrives in the wilderness to prove that the ideals of humanitarianism and colonialism can be wed – by such a hero as himself, binding contraries by the force of his romantic will – social restraint disappears and his character disintegrates...In the wilderness Kurtz's integrity collapses; only the extremes of appetite and intellect, of savagery and idealism survive.

(Lynn 21-22)

According to Lynn, Kurtz is perceived to be a romantic hero who can easily tame the wilderness. After all, he has been raised in nineteenth-century Europe and has a solid handle on Western culture. However, we find that the opposite happens. The wilderness consumes Kurtz and he

loses all sense of the moral values that were so important to him. All his ideals and intentions fall apart amid the darkness within the heart of Africa. He has proven himself to be hollow and corrupt to the core:

‘They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him – some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence...But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude – and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core.’ (Conrad 77-78)

In this passage, Conrad presents us with another powerful voice, a voice that comes not from the men in the novel, but rather from the wilderness itself. It is a voice that Kurtz finds irresistible, for it is more powerful than any voice he has ever heard or known, including his own. In addition, Conrad tells us that Kurtz is hollow at the core. Consequently, he is unable to fight off the solemn, powerful voice. It finds him lacking and easily draws him in to a unique evil only found in the heart of darkness. In *Modernism*, Peter Childs discusses this further:

All that the colonialists can produce to shield them from this atavism or reversion is their ‘civilization,’ which Marlow and the man he travels to meet, Kurtz, take with them in the form of culture and oratory to envelop the darkness, proclaiming the coming of ‘civilization’ to Africa...However, the novella itself is a disrobing of Kurtz’s ‘magnificent eloquence’ which leaves him naked in the African ‘darkness,’ bereft of a rhetoric which has nothing underneath, a ‘hollow’ man.” (Childs 157-158)

Kurtz enters the heart of darkness with the intent of bringing civilization to Africa. However, as we have seen before, the opposite happens. Without the moral and ethical guiderails provided by European civilization, Kurtz reverts to a more primitive version of himself, a naked, hollow version. The sophisticated culture that Europe provides is not enough to save him from the wilderness in which he anchors himself.

After seeing the spectacle that Kurtz has become, the Manager begins to comment on his mental state and the situation at his station: “‘Upon the whole, the trade will suffer. I don’t deny there is a remarkable quantity of ivory – mostly fossil. We must save it, at all events – but look how precarious the position is – and why? Because the method is unsound...I anticipated this. Shows a complete want of judgment. It is my duty to point it out in the proper quarter’” (Conrad 83). The Manager is content with the collection of ivory at the station, which is the main point of the station in the first place. However, he is not happy with Kurtz’s ability to perform the philanthropic mission of the Company. The system that Kurtz has implemented is deeply flawed and he is revealed to be a fallen man who lacks the judgment with which he arrived. It is the Manager’s job to report both Kurtz and the system to the proper authorities. As he contemplates the report he will draw up, Marlow interrupts his thoughts to elevate rather than reprimand Kurtz:

It seemed to me I had never breathed an atmosphere so vile, and I turned to Kurtz for relief – positively for relief. ‘Nevertheless I think Mr. Kurtz is a remarkable man,’ I said with emphasis. He started, dropped on me a heavy glance, said very quietly, ‘he *was*,’ and turned his back on me. My hour of favor was over; I found myself lumped along with Kurtz as a partisan of methods for which the time was not ripe: I was unsound! Ah! but it was something to have at least a choice of nightmares.” (Conrad 83)



This is a turning point in the novel. Marlow sees Kurtz as a fallen hero, but he is a hero all the same. He is more real than any of the Manager's platitudes or moral indictments. Therefore, Marlow sides with Kurtz over the Company's false mission to enlighten the savages in the wilderness: "Once again Marlow must choose, but now between the reality of Kurtz's failure and the Manager's 'moral judgment' in the name of society: no longer a choice between virtue and vice, but between 'nightmares.' He is disabused of innocence, aware of corruption everywhere, yet he chooses Kurtz once more. For Kurtz is as honest in his way as the wilderness" (Lynn 22). Marlow finds that the choice is not between virtue and vice, but rather between nightmares. In other words, this difficult dichotomy presents no clear choice for Marlow to make. He can identify with either Kurtz or the Company. He chooses Kurtz because Kurtz's vision (despite its dark and evil nature) is more genuine than the Company's philanthropic mission. As soon as Marlow casts his lot with Kurtz, he is doomed in the eyes of the Manager. However, he also begins to take on heroic qualities just like Kurtz.

Marlow and his crew hope to rescue Kurtz from his madness and return him to European civilization. However, Kurtz is dying: "Kurtz's life was running swiftly, too, ebbing, ebbing out of his heart into the sea of inexorable time" (Conrad 91). Consequently, Marlow sees that he will soon "be left alone of the party of unsound method" (Conrad 91). As he surveys the landscape, Marlow notices that the Manager and the pilgrims are looking at he and Kurtz with "disfavor" and as men "numbered with the dead" (Conrad 91). Marlow looks down at Kurtz: "His was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines" (Conrad 93). The voice in the wilderness and the evil in the heart of darkness has affected Kurtz in such a way that his own heart has turned away from the light of civilization and toward the darkness of the African continent. In

other words, the heart of darkness now lives within Kurtz just as strongly as it does in the wilderness. In fact, Kurtz's heart is a primitive, violent, animalistic heart. It is a heart that has lost touch with its civilized, social constraints.

Despite the darkness within Kurtz's heart and his acceptance of evil rather than truth, he is still able to achieve a state of supreme enlightenment:

'Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope to never see again. Oh, I wasn't touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror – of an intense and hopeless despair...He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath:

The horror! The horror!' (Conrad 93)

In a show of pride, power, and terror, Kurtz lays everything bare and screams out in desperation. The enlightenment he achieves in this most crucial moment occurs because he is honest with himself and the others on the boat. Kurtz has no choice; he must reveal the massive evil that flows from his heart of darkness. In so doing, he not only achieves enlightenment, but also solidifies himself as a tragic, fallen figure. In addition, this passage shows us Marlow's reaction to Kurtz's tragic ending. He reacts differently than every other man on the boat. He is neither terrified nor shocked, but rather fascinated with the transformation that occurs before him. Simultaneously, Marlow sees it as both Kurtz's fall and his escape:

For a single instant he escapes, *as Marlow interprets it*, beyond blind egoism to the distance from which to judge and sum up...Kurtz's words are addressed perhaps to himself, perhaps to the void. They are a statement of reckoning, not a message...The spoken word thus becomes a gesture towards meaning. It translates Kurtz's ultimate

self-knowledge, which is the most 'you can hope' from life into a physical cry...And so Marlow transforms Kurtz once again and finally into a hero, and ratifies his act, indeed participates in it by interpreting this apparent impulse of judgment. (Lynn 23-24)

In this moment of revelation, Marlow transforms Kurtz from a fallen, tragic figure into a modern hero. In his eyes, Kurtz has reached the pinnacle of self-knowledge. The wisdom he achieves is more real than the philanthropic mission for which he was sent into the wilderness. This is a moment of great importance within the novel, but also of great importance is the fact that Marlow participates in this final struggle by interpreting the event for us. Marlow leaves the scene with a purpose to keep Kurtz's secrets, but also to carry on his fight against the darkness. In this way, Marlow also becomes a modern hero: "But unlike Kurtz he clings to his duty to return and to defeat this dark side of his own soul...Marlow binds himself to Kurtz so that he can then define himself as separate. He triumphs where Kurtz failed, by giving himself up to the darkness, but not losing himself in it. Once more his own true stuff – the personal code he has discovered within himself – saves him" (Lynn 23). Marlow succeeds where Kurtz fails because he does not perish in the heart of darkness. He surrenders to the wilderness just as Kurtz does, but Marlow escapes due to a new personal code that he has discovered within himself. This is a code that does not come from Kurtz or the Company. It is a code that falls somewhere in the middle of the two competing ideologies. This saves him in the end, as Lynn suggests.

Marlow must return to European civilization as a drastically changed man: "I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other...to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretense because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew...I had

no particular desire to enlighten them” (Conrad 95-96). To Marlow, the people whom he once admired or at least co-existed with are an irritating presence. The “burden of knowledge about himself” and about “all men” makes him “uneasy” and “contemptuous of those who do not know what it means to exist” (Thale 71). In truth, he is contemptuous of European values. He sees them as incredibly corrupt and useless. In *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*, Michael Levenson writes, “He need not struggle any longer to apply transcendent ethical concepts to refractory experience; now he can locate moral value *within* individual experience...in the right circumstances the psychic life can lead naturally, almost imperceptibly into ethical life” (Levenson 54). Marlow realizes that he does not need European culture and European civilization to be a morally upright man. Instead, he discovers a very subjective way of creating a new personal code that is not dependent upon any ethics he has learned up to this point in life. Marlow essentially adopts a code that pulls from both European culture and the lawlessness in the wilderness. He can reject the ideas that clash with his newfound view on reality and accept the ideas that promote his new ideology. This unique ability to stand on his own rule of law makes Marlow a modern hero.

In his final act, Marlow narrates the story of his experience in the wilderness to a group of sailors on his boat. This is his last and most heroic act:

That a story, despite all shortcomings, paleness, and failures of expression, can accomplish something of a moral education for those able to understand, underscores the potency of Marlow’s heroism. Having survived the romantic hero’s momentum towards self-destruction, Marlow has assumed Kurtz’s role. He has discovered, however, that the romantic hero has no place in a society that can no longer provide absolute structures of meaning and restraint to define itself against...Marlow, then, does not simply assume

Kurtz's role as hero; he transforms it. (Lynn 25-26)

The telling of his story is Marlow's final heroic act as he transfers his new subjective moral values onto the others in the boat. In learning from Marlow, the sailors perhaps do not have to travel into their own hearts of darkness. They can learn the flimsiness and uselessness of European values through the narration.

### 3 CHAPTER 3

#### **Lily Briscoe Eclipses Mrs. Ramsay, the Victorian Hero, and Assumes the Role of Modern Feminine Hero**

*To the Lighthouse*, by Virginia Woolf, separates itself from the previous two novels we have discussed by inserting women as the heroes instead of men. In fact, two women within the novel become feminine heroes. However, both are not modern heroes. They are heroes from different generations reflecting different values altogether. In “Woolf’s Feminine Spaces and the New Woman in *To the Lighthouse*,” Thais Rutledge describes Mrs. Ramsay as “the Victorian housewife” while referring to Lily Briscoe as the “New Woman” (Rutledge 73). For our purposes of discussion, the Victorian housewife and the New Woman are synonymous with the Victorian hero and the modern feminine hero respectively. In this chapter, we will first focus on Mrs. Ramsay as a hero from a previous generation. Our focus will turn later to Lily Briscoe, the more modern hero of the two.

When the novel opens, Woolf immediately begins her narration with an examination of Mrs. Ramsay: “she could not bear incivility to her guests, to young men in particular...Indeed, she had the whole of the other sex under her protection; for reasons she could not explain, for their chivalry and valor, for the fact that they negotiated treaties, ruled India, controlled finance; finally for an attitude towards herself which no woman could fail to feel...something trustful, childlike, reverential” (Woolf 6). We see early on that Mrs. Ramsay feels reverence for the male sex. She considers it her Victorian duty to fulfill this role by protecting and serving the male sex in the household while the men go about ruling and governing the world. She essentially sees herself as a member of the lesser or lower sex, a common Victorian age refrain. In the next passage, however, she questions this role: “There might be some simpler way, some less

laborious way, she sighed. When she looked in the glass and saw her hair gray, her cheeks sunk, at fifty, she thought, possibly she might have managed things better – her husband; money; his books. But for her own part she would never for a single second regret her decision, evade difficulties, or slur over duties” (Woolf 6). Here, Woolf places major importance on the inner thoughts of Mrs. Ramsay. This provides us with the typical mindset of a Victorian woman in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In a show of obedience, Mrs. Ramsay puts her own desires last in order to focus on managing and serving the family better. However, Mrs. Ramsay also questions the role that she plays from day to day. She briefly thinks of another way to live and behave that does not fit the Victorian model. But only a moment later Mrs. Ramsay assures herself that she has no regrets. Rutledge writes:

Clearly, Mrs. Ramsay performs the idealized codes for women...Mrs. Ramsay, though briefly, indicates a certain knowledge of a possible life of her own – a life where she chooses what to do and when to do it, a life that does not involve the idealized norms of her society, a life where the need of others and wifely duties would cease to be *her* responsibility. However, the moment quickly fades as Mrs. Ramsay convinces herself not to ‘regret her decision, evade difficulties, or slur over duties.’ (Rutledge 84)

Mrs. Ramsay avoids her innermost thoughts in order to sustain her station in life. Hers are the thoughts of a modern woman, very close to those of a modern feminine hero. Yet she decides in the end to silence her inner thoughts and immerse herself in the role of Victorian housewife. She performs all of the idealized codes and conforms to the idealized norms of society instead of listening to her own voice: “However, while she can notice that the choices she has made have placed her in the position of a housewife, she refuses to act upon these possible regrets and question her prescribed role...Mrs. Ramsay embraces her roles, but it is also clear that she at

least imagines what it would be like to escape these roles” (Rutledge 84-85). This is the type of thinking that almost makes Mrs. Ramsay a modern feminine hero. She can question her prescribed role in life and all the societal rules that constrict her without acting upon any of her inclinations to rebel. Instead, Mrs. Ramsay embraces her role as Victorian housewife.

In another instance, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are arguing over the possibility of visiting the lighthouse in the morning. Mr. Ramsay states that the weather will not allow it, but Mrs. Ramsay questions that idea. Mr. Ramsay becomes very angry and Mrs. Ramsay simply wonders why: “‘Damn you,’ he said. But what had she said? Simply that it might be fine tomorrow. So it might” (Woolf 32). Mrs. Ramsay cannot quite understand why her husband gets so angry over a debatable issue: “The extraordinary irrationality of her remark, the folly of women’s minds enraged him...and now, she flew in the face of facts, made his children hope, what was utterly out of the question, in effect, told lies” (Woolf 31). In fact, Mr. Ramsay does not see it as a debatable argument. The weather being bad the following day is a predetermined fact that cannot be challenged. For Mrs. Ramsay to challenge him, she is in effect telling lies to the children, getting their hopes up. In Mr. Ramsay’s view, this is typical of the folly of women’s minds. Of course, Mrs. Ramsay is not pleased with her husband’s remarks: “To pursue truth with such astonishing lack of consideration for other people’s feelings...so brutally, was to her so horrible an outrage of human decency...There was nothing to be said” (Woolf 32). Mrs. Ramsay has the children’s feelings in mind while Mr. Ramsay is concerned only with facts. To Mrs. Ramsay, this is monstrous; to sadden his own children is an awful thing to do. She is, consequently, appalled by her husband’s behavior. However, in the following paragraph she reverses course entirely: “There was nobody whom she revered as she revered him. She was quite ready to take his word for it she said...There was nobody she revered more. She



was not good enough to tie his shoe strings, she felt” (Woolf 32). In her thoughts, Mrs. Ramsay questions her husband, but when it is time to take outward action, she tells him that she will take his word for it, the weather being too bad to sail. She backs down from the thoughts of a modern woman again and accepts her role as the Victorian housewife, her role as a member of the lesser sex who is not worthy to tie her husband’s shoes: “They came to her, naturally, since she was a woman, all day long with this and that; one wanting this, another that; the children were growing up; she often felt she was nothing but a sponge sopped full of human emotions” (Woolf 32). Mrs. Ramsay’s role is not to question her husband or make decisions governing the family. Her role is to serve others, tend to the children, and emotionally support those around her. She is not expected to serve or support herself and she surely is not expected to abide by the innermost thoughts which question her role as the Victorian housewife.

In another instance, Mr. Ramsay approaches his wife in what seems to be a depressed state of mind. He is looking for sympathy and reassurance that he is an important man in the field of philosophy: “Nothing would make Mr. Ramsay move on. There he stood, demanding sympathy...He wanted sympathy. He was a failure, he said...But he must have more than that. It was sympathy he wanted, to be assured of his genius, first of all, and then to be taken within the circle of life...He must have sympathy. He must be assured that he too lived in the heart of life” (Woolf 37). Mr. Ramsay heavily depends upon the idea that Mrs. Ramsay will play her part and fulfill her role. Part of this role, as he sees it, is administering sympathy and ensuring him of his genius. Mrs. Ramsay responds by essentially bringing Mr. Ramsay into the circle of life: “Well, look then, feel then...she assured him, beyond a shadow of a doubt, by her laugh, her poise, her competence...that it was real; the house was full; the garden blowing. If he put implicit faith in her, nothing should hurt him; however deep he buried himself or climbed high,

not for a second should he find himself without her” (Woolf 38). It is not Mr. Ramsay, but rather Mrs. Ramsay who has brought life into his house and into his life. She has borne the children, taken care of the garden, and kept up the house. It is she who must invite him in to enjoy the fruits of her labor. This is the perfect picture of a Victorian housewife. Yet, at this very point, Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts begin to wander into a territory that falls outside of her duties: “So boasting of her capacity to surround and protect, there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by; all was so lavished and spent...Immediately, Mrs. Ramsay seemed to fold herself together, one petal closed in another, and the whole fabric fell in exhaustion upon itself” (Woolf 38). The act of reviving and rebuilding her husband’s spirits has left Mrs. Ramsay exhausted. There is no energy or will left for her to know herself. She knows only her duties. And yet she goes on to question those duties again and again: “She did not like, even for a second, to feel finer than her husband...but it was their relation, and his coming to her like that, openly, so that anyone could see, that discomposed her; for then people said he depended on her, when they must know that of the two he was infinitely the more important, and what she gave the world, in comparison with what he gave, negligible” (Woolf 39). Mrs. Ramsay does in fact feel finer than her husband, if only for a moment. It discomposes her to see him in such a weak and infantile state, needing her sympathy and her support. It almost seems to embarrass her, fearing the way that others might interpret his behavior. Yet it also discomposes her to feel this way. As a protectionary measure, she must again reassure herself that her husband is superior to her. She relegates herself to a position of unimportance and her husband to a position of great significance. He is infinitely the more important in her mind. Mrs. Ramsay cannot escape the mold of the Victorian housewife to become something akin to a modern feminine hero because

she will not let herself escape. At every turn in which it seems she may break past the mold, she relegates herself back into a position of unimportance, a position occupied by the lesser sex.

After putting the children to bed, Mrs. Ramsay experiences a moment of independence and freedom from her role as the Victorian housewife: “For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of – to think; well, not even to think. To be silent; to be alone...one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself...something invisible to others” (Woolf 62). In this passage, Mrs. Ramsay has a “moment of being,” a moment where she evaluates her own “reality” (Rutledge 85). She finds that she need not think about anybody but herself. She is free from her children, her husband, and her normal household duties: “This moment of being is significant as she displays relief at the thought of not having to fulfill duties or ‘think about anybody;’ she realizes the ‘need’ to be alone. Mrs. Ramsay, at this moment, has a greater sense of her true identity, the identity that is not tainted by her spaces, an identity that is only visible to her” (Rutledge 86). Mrs. Ramsay is incapable of thoughts like these when she is performing her role as the Victorian housewife. When she is alone, however, she can let go and think freely. In her innermost thoughts, she is not only freed, but also triumphs over her traditional role as the Victorian housewife. The boundaries she experiences through codes and norms disappear. Essentially, Mrs. Ramsay only achieves true individual freedom when she is alone. That is what makes those solitary moments of great significance to her: “On the one hand, she lives a life led by Victorian values, for which she has words. On the other, she understands that there are other possibilities outside the house, something...largely undefined and unarticulated” (Rutledge 86). The life of the Victorian housewife is depicted here as something simple, something easy to define. Mrs. Ramsay finds this comforting. The codes and societal rules are straightforward and easy to follow. The life

that she leads within her mind (particularly when she is alone) is drastically different. She cannot quite articulate this whole other world that is totally independent from her husband and children. Therefore, these revelatory moments remain unarticulated, and Mrs. Ramsay is not likely to act upon them or change her day-to-day role in any way. Her triumphant thoughts of freedom remain random and mysterious.

In the famous dinner scene, Mrs. Ramsay organizes a banquet for her family and the guests at the beach house: “But what have I done with my life? thought Mrs. Ramsay, taking her place at the head of the table, and looking at all the plates making white circles on it...She had a sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything” (Woolf 82-83). Again, Mrs. Ramsay is distancing herself from her role as the Victorian housewife. She knows it is her duty to not only arrange a dinner, but to orchestrate her guests into the proper places so that they enjoy the feast: “They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her...for if she did not do it nobody would do it” (Woolf 83). The questioning of her life’s work and purpose reveals that Mrs. Ramsay is, to some extent, unhappy with her plot. She feels isolated from her family and friends and seems to be aggravated with reality. As she wonders what she has done with her life, she finds that her mind has briefly moved on from the duties of being a Victorian housewife, which in this case means orchestrating an elaborate dinner:

During the famous dinner scene, we see Mrs. Ramsay performing the role of the perfect hostess, but here again, she experiences another ‘moment of being.’ At dinner, she ensures that her guests, like her family, have everything they need. When sitting down to eat, Mrs. Ramsay places herself among her guests, assigns their seats, and serves them. But here again, a first-person narration hints at Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts leading her

astray from that role, yet without achieving the kind of awareness that would be full-blown inner monologue. (Rutledge 86-87)

In another moment of being, Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts stray once again from her role as the Victorian housewife. Yet she does not achieve the kind of awareness that might lead to concrete action. She allows herself to think such thoughts, but never dreams of acting on them: "This is another moment where Mrs. Ramsay...questions her own happiness and role in life, but the questions lead nowhere...Indeed, she could never remove herself from her current, suffocating identity" (Rutledge 87). These are the thoughts of a modern feminine hero. By questioning her happiness and role in life, Mrs. Ramsay steps outside of her bounds as the Victorian housewife. However, she does this only momentarily before quickly returning to her duties at hand. In the constant back and forth, Mrs. Ramsay always ultimately sides with her societal rules and codes of conduct. She is faithful to the Victorian norms no matter what freedom it costs her. With the amazing ability to always submit to her prescribed role (after experiencing the thoughts of a modern woman), Mrs. Ramsay reconsecrates herself as a Victorian hero:

Just now she had reached security; she hovered like a hawk suspended; like a flag floated in an element of joy which filled every nerve of her body fully and sweetly, not noisily, solemnly rather, for it arose, she thought, looking at them all eating there, from husband and children and friends; all of which rising in this profound stillness...so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures. (Woolf 104-105)

We notice here the joy, the stillness, and the peace that Mrs. Ramsay experiences as she performs her duties as the Victorian housewife. Though her thoughts stray at the beginning of the scene, Mrs. Ramsay, by the end, is not reluctantly carrying out her duties. She is fulfilling

her role with purpose, determination, and delight. Though tempted to break away from the societal norms that bind her, Mrs. Ramsay ultimately denies her modern feminine heroic voice and embraces her role as the Victorian hero.

Lily Briscoe stands in direct contrast to Mrs. Ramsay throughout the novel. She is a New Woman, as Rutledge explains it, who no longer thinks of herself as belonging to the lesser sex, but rather a sex that is equal to the long-thought-of superior sex: “Still, Lily represents the new generation of women who do not envision themselves as wives or mothers in this sense. Lily’s identity is meant to be different from Mrs. Ramsay’s in many ways...Not only is she young in age, but she aspires to have a career of her own...Some critics agree that Lily Briscoe embodies the characteristics of a New Woman, compared to Mrs. Ramsay” (Rutledge 82-83). Lily is not a product of her society like Mrs. Ramsay. In fact, Lily rebels against the patriarchal norms that attempt to entrap her. She represents a new generation of women who seek to be independent of husbands and families. She strives to be a New Woman, who “in her demands for education and the right to pursue a career rather than marriage, her rejection of the patriarchal family and life of domesticity,” actively questions the “biological determinism and gender assumptions of the Victorian era” (Rutledge 83). Lily fits the description of the New Woman perfectly. She has rejected Mrs. Ramsay’s idea that all women must marry and Mr. Tansley’s idea that women cannot pursue a career in writing or painting. Lily is cynically revolting against society itself and finds herself in a position where she begins to question everything. This begins with her thoughts on Mrs. Ramsay:

Gathering a desperate courage she would urge her own exemption from the universal law; plead for it; she liked to be alone; she liked to be herself; she was not made for that...Then, she remembered, she had laid her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s lap and laughed

and laughed and laughed, laughed almost hysterically at the thought of Mrs. Ramsay presiding with immutable calm over destinies which she completely failed to understand.

(Woolf 50)

Lily feels exempt from the patriarchal culture thrust upon women during both the Victorian and modern age. It is this feeling that motivates her to both paint and avoid marriage. Thus, Lily enjoys a freedom that Mrs. Ramsay does not. She is allowed to do essentially whatever she wants with no thought toward what a husband or child might need. Lily simply refuses to live the type of life that Mrs. Ramsay leads. Indeed, she scoffs at such a life: “The passage clearly shows the clash between the Victorian values which Mrs. Ramsay’s identity reflects and the modern values that begin to shape Lily’s identity...Lily, in a way, rebukes Mrs. Ramsay for not ‘exempting herself from the universal law’...In addition, Lily refuses to comprehend the implications of Mrs. Ramsay’s life choices and her role in the standard Victorian household” (Rutledge 90). Lily is quite aware of the role she is supposed to play in Victorian society, yet she refuses to do so. Her thoughts drift to a more modern idea of how a woman is supposed to behave. This makes her a New Woman as Rutledge defines it and a modern feminine hero as we have come to understand heroes in the modern age.

In the elaborate dinner scene, Lily Briscoe again exhibits the qualities of a modern feminine hero:

But, she thought, screwing up her Chinese eyes, and remembering how he sneered at women, ‘can’t paint, can’t write,’ why should I help him relieve himself? There is a code of behavior, she knew, whose seventh article...says that on occasions of this sort it behooves the woman, whatever her own occupation may be, to go to the help of the

young man opposite so that he may expose and relieve the thigh bones, the ribs, of his vanity, of his urgent desire to assert himself. (Woolf 91)

In this passage, Woolf exposes the idea that Lily knows her prescribed role in Victorian society. She is supposed to come to Mr. Tansley's aid, yet she refuses to participate according to her duties. Instead, she does nothing; rather, she sits there "smiling" (Woolf 91). She does not come to the aid of Mr. Tansley who has vehemently criticized her ability (and women's ability in general) to write or paint: "While she eats, however, Lily again displays resistance to Victorian values...For example, Lily contemplates talking with Charles Tansley...Lily chooses not to engage in conversation with Tansley, but at the same time, she thinks of her duty to entertain a guest, attesting to the fact that...she clearly knows how she should be behaving" (Rutledge 91). Again, we see that Lily clearly knows her prescribed role as a woman. Yet she rebels nevertheless. Obviously, Lily's thoughts, like Mrs. Ramsay's at times, are the thoughts of a modern feminine hero. However, they differ in the fact that Lily acts upon those thoughts where Mrs. Ramsay does not: "Lily, on the other hand, openly identifies Tansley's desire to impress himself, and she, purposely, ignores him. Lily's thoughts thus indicate her full knowledge about a 'code of behavior' that a woman should follow during dinner, but also her unwillingness to follow that code when it disturbs her own identity beyond the Victorian scripts" (Rutledge 92). The concept that Rutledge presents here is interesting: Lily would have to violate her own identity in order to follow her society's Victorian ideals. Thus, it is not simply that Lily wants more free time or to have a simple independence from those constricting ideals – it is part of her identity. Lily is not constructed in the same way as Mrs. Ramsay. She feels totally incapable of fulfilling the duties of a Victorian housewife. Instead, she decides to remain alone and paint.



At the dinner, Lily finds herself in an uncomfortable situation and suddenly falls back on her plan to paint in the morning, obviously countering Charles Tansley's statement that women cannot write or paint: "Then her eye caught the salt cellar, which she had placed there to remind her, and she remembered that next morning she would move the tree further towards the middle, and her spirits rose so high at the thought of painting tomorrow" (Woolf 92-93). With a determination that she will paint in the morning, Lily is able to dismiss Mr. Tansley's opinion about the role women should play in society. Just the thought of painting lifts her spirits and banishes any doubts she might have concerning her independence. Lily does this again when she is confronted with the idea of Paul and Minta marrying: "For at any rate, she said to herself, catching sight of the salt cellar on the pattern, she need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution. She would move the tree rather more to the middle" (Woolf 102). The idea of coming to Mr. Tansley's rescue or undergoing the degrading act of marrying a member of the supposed greater sex is too much for Lily to confront. She safely reverts to her backup plan. In other words, whenever Lily is faced with the notion that she must behave according to certain values and play her role as a Victorian woman, she falls back on her painting, her career as a new woman and as a modern feminine hero.

After Mrs. Ramsay dies, the Victorian hero is gone. Lily must come into her "maturity as a New Woman" and a modern feminine hero (Rutledge 92). She is presumably beyond child-bearing years and in no position to marry. This is the first evidence of her modern feminine heroism. She has not, over the last ten years, given in to the Victorian ideals imposed on her. The second evidence of her modern feminine heroism comes when Mr. Ramsay approaches her before he leaves for the expedition with his kids to the lighthouse:

Suddenly Mr. Ramsay raised his head as he passed and looked straight at her...she pretended to drink out of her empty coffee cup so as to escape him – to escape his demands on her...But with Mr. Ramsay bearing down on her, she could do nothing. Every time he approached...ruin approached, chaos approached. She could not paint...But all she did was to ward him off a moment. He made it impossible for her to do anything. For if she gave him the least chance, if he saw her disengaged a moment...he would be on her...demanding – something she felt she could not give him...She, on the other hand, would be forced to give. Mrs. Ramsay had given...his need was so great, to give him what he wanted: sympathy...No; she could not do it...the pressure on her was tremendous. But she remained stuck...In complete silence she stood there, grasping her paint brush. (Woolf 146-153)

In two different moments, Mr. Ramsay approaches Lily demanding sympathy as he once did with his wife. Contrary to Mrs. Ramsay's response ten years ago, Lily refuses to oblige. Her "reaction indicates she will not cater to his needs as Mrs. Ramsay often did" (Rutledge 93). Instead, she retreats into her painting: "Lily's simple action frames her identity as the New Woman, who no longer has to remain in the house to serve anyone" (Rutledge 94). Lily does not simply retreat to paint in order to avoid Mr. Ramsay, but also uses the canvas to block his view of her and her view of him. As she concentrates on moving lines and shapes to the center, Mr. Ramsay cannot penetrate her obstruction. She succeeds in brushing him away. She never gives him the sympathy that he demands, not just from Lily, but from all women. She, once again, exhibits her role as a modern feminine hero as she refuses to adhere to the Victorian ideals imposed on her.

As Lily paints at the end of the novel, she refers in her memory to Mrs. Ramsay. In “Lily Briscoe’s Painting of Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* and Julia Stephen in *Painting and Photography*,” Joy Pepe writes, “The artist Lily Briscoe...spends her creative energies working on a painting that correlates to her love and grief for Mrs. Ramsay” (Pepe 45). Lily, through her painting, shows her love for Mrs. Ramsay and the sadness she expresses for her loss. However, there is another side to Lily’s painting: “At the same time that Lily’s picture is an homage to Mrs. Ramsay, it is also a means for Lily to assert her own freedom from Mrs. Ramsay’s expectations” (Pepe 47). Lily’s painting has a dual-purpose. On the one hand, she recollects on her fondness for Mrs. Ramsay. On the other hand, Lily is also quite critical of Mrs. Ramsay’s Victorian ideals and behavior: “Mrs. Ramsay has faded and gone, she thought. We can over-ride her wishes, improve away her limited, old-fashioned ideas. She recedes further and further from us. Mockingly she seemed to see her there at the end of the corridor of years saying, of all incongruous things, ‘Marry, marry!’” (Woolf 174). Here, Lily specifically cites Mrs. Ramsay’s idea that all women must marry. Of course, as we have seen throughout the novel, Lily is very much opposed to the idea of marrying. She sees it, as the quote reveals, as an old-fashioned idea receding further and further away from the ideals of the modern woman: “And one would have to say to her, it has all gone against your wishes. They’re happy like that; I’m happy like this. Life has changed completely. At that all her being, even her beauty, became for a moment, dusty and out of date. For a moment Lily...triumphed over Mrs. Ramsay” (Woolf 175). Here, Lily is referring to the marriage of Paul and Minta, a marriage that Mrs. Ramsay had helped to establish. Apparently, Paul has a mistress and the marriage between he and Minta has fallen apart. Mrs. Ramsay was wrong, as Lily sees it regarding Paul and Minta; but she was wrong as well regarding the marriage of Lily and Mr. Bankes, which she actively encouraged.

Everyone is happy with the way things turned out, Lily thinks, contrary to Mrs. Ramsay's wishes. Lily has triumphed over Mrs. Ramsay by remaining unmarried and following her desire to paint, a profession not usually suited for women as Mr. Tinsley expressed earlier. Lily has become a modern feminine hero rather than a Victorian hero despite Mrs. Ramsay's ardent wishes.

As Lily approaches her goal of finishing the painting, she thinks to herself how insignificant the picture will be, but at the same time realizes that the effort will last forever as a tribute to her memories of the beach house and Mrs. Ramsay: "Yet it would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be rolled up and flung under a sofa; yet even so, even of a picture like that, it was true. One might say, even of this scrawl, not of the actual picture perhaps, but of what it attempted, that it 'remained forever'" (Woolf 179). Lily knows that her painting is insignificant in the eyes of Victorian society. It will be hung in the attic and never seen again. However, she also feels like the painting will remain forever. In essence, she is right on both accounts. While the painting is insignificant, it will live on due to the memories of Mrs. Ramsay and the beach house embedded within it. Michael Levenson addresses the importance of this moment in *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*: "The distribution of shapes, colors, and lines in pictorial space becomes a vivid sign for the novel's sense of how passing time might yield up significant moments" (Levenson 209). The pictorial space Lily is creating from memories of Mrs. Ramsay and her time at the beach house yields up an important moment. Lily realizes that Mrs. Ramsay, as the Victorian hero, has passed and left Lily space to become a modern feminine hero. She is a new woman, as described earlier by Rutledge. Yet she must complete her painting to reveal the significance of the moment: "She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second,

she drew a line there, in the center. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision” (Woolf 208-209). The vision of Mrs. Ramsay and the experience at the beach house is complete. Lily finishes her painting. However, as Pepe describes, Lily accomplishes much more in this moment than simply adding the last stroke to her canvas: “Lily embraces her own identity as an independent creative being, balancing her life as this ultimate stroke of paint balances and unifies the painting. She becomes a modern artist, freed from conventions” (Pepe 47). Lily frees herself once again, but this time her freedom is expressed in more than just her thoughts. She presents a physical object – the painting – to express this freedom from Victorian norms. Levenson adds: “The artist is the self-described old maid; and *To the Lighthouse* builds to a double perception of wholeness in a painting and partiality in a life. The insufficiencies assigned to the unmarried woman appear side by side with the self-sufficiency of the female artist, her private marriage of male and female within the artifact she builds in solitude” (Levenson 191-192). It is interesting how Levenson once again brings up the idea of marriage. This is important because, as we have seen, Lily has escaped this Victorian era requirement for women. Her vision and her painting complete her in ways that marriage could not. She is self-sufficient as an artist, marrying male and female parts within the androgynous painting. This allows her to triumph over Mrs. Ramsay’s old-fashioned Victorian ideals and maintain her status as the sole modern feminine hero in the novel.

#### 4 CHAPTER 4

##### **Jake Barnes' Search for Love and Enlightenment Results in His Ultimate Ascension to the Role of Modern Hero**

Unlike the previous three novels discussed, *The Sun Also Rises*, by Ernest Hemingway, contains only one modern hero. Jake Barnes, the main character, is a World War I veteran and an American expatriate who has been greatly injured – psychologically, physically, and emotionally – on the battlefield. Because of these wounds and the general, overall, disillusionment of society around him, Jake takes on the traits of a very submissive and compliant character throughout the novel: “Jake Barnes is lame and passive. Yet his disillusionment with traditional social values is not a discovery made during the tale: it is the ground for that tale, shared with a generation wounded by the war and alienated from the past” (Lynn 92). Jake’s disillusioned lifestyle and attitude runs powerfully through the novel, influencing his every thought and decision. Facing this disillusionment head on is Jake’s heroic act and a process by which he comes to be a modern hero.

The novel opens in Paris where Jake spends most of his time going from one bar to the next drinking with his friends. He does work occasionally, but mostly wastes his days and nights getting drunk in order to forget the past: ““You’re an expatriate. You’ve lost touch with the soil...Fake European standards have ruined you. You drink yourself to death...You spend all your time talking, not working. You are an expatriate, see?”” (Hemingway 92). Jake is described here as an expatriate who has lost touch with his most important morals and values. Rather than confronting this truth early on, Jake instead drinks himself into a state of consciousness where he can easily avoid his disillusionment with modern life. It is in Paris where we also meet Lady Brett Ashley and learn about Jake’s injury during the war. She and

Barnes discuss their unique relationship as they sit in a cab: “‘It’s a shame you’re sick. We get on well. What’s the matter with you, anyway?’ ‘I got hurt in the war’” (Hemingway 14). We learn in this passage that Jake’s injury is of a sexual nature. It is not entirely clear, but most likely he has had his private parts either damaged or blown off in the war by a mortar shell. Consequently, any possible relationship with Brett is assured to end badly. The two are in love, nevertheless:

‘Couldn’t we live together, Brett? Couldn’t we just live together?’ ‘I don’t think so... You couldn’t stand it.’ ‘I stand it now.’ ‘That would be different. It’s my fault, Jake. It’s the way I’m made.’ ‘Couldn’t we go off in the country for a while?’ ‘It wouldn’t be any good. I’ll go off if you like. But I couldn’t live quietly in the country. Not with my own true love.’ ‘I know.’ ‘Isn’t it rotten? There isn’t any use my telling you I love you.’ ‘You know I love you.’ (Hemingway 45)

Jake and Brett are in love, but are unfortunately unable to consummate their relationship due to Jake’s injury. Therefore, the relationship is destined to fail and the two never embark on a mission to solidify their love for one another.

In another section, Hemingway writes, “‘What’s the matter? You sick?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Everybody’s sick. I’m sick, too’” (Hemingway 13). The comment that everyone is sick tells us a lot about American and European society following World War I. According to Hemingway, the war has sickened not only Jake, but Brett as well, along with most of the modern world. The ideas of virtue and progress have been laid waste. Jake becomes a product of this world. In “The Anti-Hero in Modernist Fiction: From Irony to Cultural Renewal,” Shadi Neimneh writes, “Jake is a product of the wasteland of modernity: irrational violence, alienation, capitalistic indifference, and spiritual crisis” (Neimneh 85). Lynn adds: “Jake Barnes in Paris, taking that

first cab with Brett Ashley, is already thoroughly disillusioned...Jake, however, has long since lost touch with any such faith. Nor can he retreat towards the past. Paris is home, his daily round of patterned series of empty rituals for keeping isolation, loneliness, and meaninglessness at bay” (Lynn 95). Jake is a product of the modern wasteland, a place in spiritual crisis filled with the violence of a massive world war. The disillusionment that results is devastating for Jake’s character. He is isolated and lonely, lacking any religious inclination that he has previously held. Because of this loss of faith and total disillusionment, Jake turns to the empty ritual of drinking alcohol on a daily and nightly basis. His plan, at this point, is to remain isolated and lonely, and mask his disillusionment with the effects of binge drinking.

The fishing trip that Jake and his friend Bill embark on represents an escape from Jake’s empty lifestyle in Paris. He and Bill drink wine on the trip when they break from fishing, but the drinking is nothing like the all-out binging that they participate in while in Paris. During the five days at Burguete, Jake and Bill fish and nap under the shade of the trees. It is a return to nature for Jake and figures significantly in his progress as a character: “During the fishing trip to Burguete, a dramatic interlude, Jake demonstrates what was not readily apparent earlier – a sensitivity to the natural world and, more important, to the virtues of man’s proper orientation towards it. Jake and Bill Gorton purify themselves for what is to come and are renewed by the rituals of fishing and the simple clarity of male community” (Lynn 102). The fishing trip is a dramatic interlude, a massively important event. We see its importance in the way that it affects the two men. Both are purified by the simple ritual of fishing and the significance of male bonding. The fishing trip also foreshadows Jake’s emergence as a modern hero later in the novel: “As hero and narrator, Jake will later translate the values he practices in Burguete into a code with which to confront the bleak formlessness of life in Paris” (Lynn 102).



While waiting for the festival to start in Pamplona, Jake and Brett enter a Catholic cathedral: “I went to church a couple of times, once with Brett. She said she wanted to hear me go to confession, but I told her that not only was it impossible but it was not as interesting as it sounded” (Hemingway 121). This incident takes the reader back to Jake’s earlier trip to a cathedral in a small town on the way to Pamplona:

I knelt and started to pray and prayed for everybody I thought of, Brett and Mike and Bill and Robert Cohn and myself, and all the bull-fighters...then I prayed for myself again...I was a little ashamed, and regretted that I was such a rotten Catholic, but realized there was nothing I could do about it, at least for a while, and maybe never, but that anyway it was a grand religion, and I only wished I felt religious and maybe I would the next time.  
(Hemingway 78)

The trips to the two cathedrals show Jake’s sensitivity to the Catholic faith and his desire for life to represent more than his current disillusionment. He wants to be a more religious man and a better Catholic, but does not quite know how. As the modern world has become disenchanted with religion, so has Jake. His loss of faith runs parallel to the loss of faith in modernist society. Yet the cathedral scenes again foreshadow Jake’s emergence as a modern anti-hero:

The Church retains some distantly remembered significance for him. He reveals towards it the same sensitivity that he has for fishing...He goes to church; he confesses; he prays. And though the prayers often lead nowhere, he maintains a faint but essential hopefulness that in the future he will be a ‘better’ Catholic. This spiritual openness – and yearning – which we first see in Burguete defines his character as profoundly as does his wound, and makes credible his later moral transformation. (Lynn 104)

Jake reveals a sensitivity to the Catholic Church that is like his fondness for fishing. He goes through the religious ritual of prayer and confession just as he performs the spiritual ritual of casting a line and pulling in a fish. He also reveals his desire and openness to revisit his Catholic faith. All of this indicates that Jake, at some point, must confront his isolation and loneliness in order to transform himself into a modern hero.

In Pamplona, Jake unfortunately regresses. He turns back to the familiar lifestyle that he exhibits in Paris. During the festival, he and his friends go from café to café drinking and dancing. For an entire week, he engages in the same empty rituals to fend off the isolation and meaninglessness of his modern existence. The only thing that separates him from his friends is his love of bull-fighting: “He always smiled as though bull-fighting were a very special secret between the two of us; a rather shocking but really very deep secret that we knew about. He always smiled as though there were something lewd about the secret to outsiders, but that it was something that we understood. It would not do to expose it to people who would not understand” (Hemingway 105). Jake is an aficionado, one who is “passionate about the bull-fights” (Hemingway 105). Apparently, there are very few aficionados. Montoya and Jake consider this quality to be so unique that outsiders cannot comprehend it. Only the aficionados truly appreciate bull-fighting. Neimneh considers Jake’s love for bull-fighting to be just like his love for fishing. Both activities, s(he) concludes, give Jake a relief from his disillusionment with the modern world. This points back to our previous discussion about important rituals. Jake’s love for bull-fighting can now be included with his love for the Catholic faith and his love for fishing. Apparently, all three activities contain a spiritual component that is massively important to Jake. Unfortunately, the bull-fights end for him at the conclusion of the seven-day festival and he slinks back into drinking daily and nightly to forget about the past and to avoid the looming

darkness and meaninglessness of modern life. Though Jake has made significant discoveries concerning his pursuit of a happier and more peaceful life, he is not yet ready to be propelled to the likes of a modern hero.

After learning of Brett's obsession with Romero, the top bull-fighter, Jake introduces the couple in a café over drinks. He leaves them alone shortly after arriving so that Romero can fulfill the relationship that Jake cannot: "'Sit down,' I said. 'I must go and find our friends and bring them here.' He looked at me. It was a final look to ask if it were understood. It was understood all right...When I came back and looked in the café, twenty minutes later, Brett and Pedro Romero were gone" (Hemingway 149). Jake cannot resist giving Brett everything she asks for; his love for her has distorted his ability to make rational decisions. He essentially acts as a shameless pimp. This moment greatly conflicts with those we explored earlier. Jake is no longer acting in the best interest of his spiritual growth: "Arranging the affair between Brett and Romero, Jake betrays himself and the only positive values left him" (Lynn 109). Jake has nothing except the disillusionment with which he began. He eliminates all the spiritual progress that he has attained up to this point. Therefore, he finds himself in a position where he must confront his iniquities and "climb towards a new moral identity" if he is ever to reach heroic status (Lynn 109).

Jake's trip to the beach at San Sebastian represents an attempt to finally confront his disillusionment with modern life. He makes a conscious effort to escape the type of life he has been leading in both Paris and Pamplona: "I wished I had gone up to Paris with Bill, except that Paris would have meant more fiesta-ing. I was through with fiestas for a while. It would be quiet in San Sebastian. I could get a good hotel room and read and swim. There was a fine beach there" (Hemingway 187). Jake is finally determined to lead a tranquil, fulfilling life. He

is finished with the fiestas for a while and seeks a more peaceful place to go. This leads him to the beach at San Sebastian. Not surprisingly, the scenery provides the perfect backdrop for Jake's new life of peace and fulfillment: "Even on a hot day San Sebastian has a certain early-morning quality. The trees seem as though their leaves were never quite dry. The streets feel as though they had just been sprinkled. It is always cool and shady on certain streets on the hottest day" (Hemingway 188). The picture that Hemingway presents here is the opposite of that which he presents in Paris and Pamplona. Here, Jake can confer with nature rather than the chaos he finds in the bars and cafés. The scene is very much like the section of the novel where Barnes fishes with Bill, where we see a hint of Jake becoming the novel's only modern hero. At San Sebastian, Jake is at perfect peace with himself. His disillusionment with modern society is temporarily put on hold. His chaotic relationship with Brett is a complete afterthought. His life traveling from one bar to the next and drinking himself into a stupor is something he has placed in the past:

To satisfy his desire for cleansing, Jake travels after the fiesta to the sea at San Sebastian. That decision, moreover, represents a courageous choice not to retreat into the hollow safety of what his life had been before the crisis. It marks Jake's intention to follow the path begun in Pamplona towards new self-awareness, acceptance of what he has done and, ultimately, to the role of narrator and hero...A return to San Sebastian offers a clear moral choice, a rejection of what has been his life in Paris...His brief stay in San Sebastian is an interlude similar to the fishing trip to Burguete. The tone and detail of his swims recall his description of the earlier fishing. Here again is ritual: the cleansing release of past life, the baptism of new. (Lynn 112- 114)

Jake makes a courageous choice when he decides to visit San Sebastian rather than Paris. It is certainly a more difficult choice; it would be much easier and simpler for him to retreat into his old life of irresponsible drinking. Yet Jake makes the courageous choice in order to propel him to new heights of self-awareness. This new self-awareness is necessary for Jake to reach heroic proportions. He begins by swimming in the ocean and sitting outside alone at a café. These are two rituals like those performed while fishing and watching the bullfights. Jake essentially finds cleansing in this ritual as he did with the others. His sins, especially that of acting as a pimp for Brett at the fiesta, have been cleansed. Now he can return to society as the sole modern hero in the novel and face his disillusionment with modern life.

While at San Sebastian, Jake receives a message from Brett which cuts his trip short: “COULD YOU COME HOTEL MONTANA MADRID AM RATHER IN TROUBLE BRETT...Well, that meant San Sebastian all shot to hell, I suppose, vaguely, I had expected something of the sort” (Hemingway 192). It is evident that Jake has been expecting something like this to happen. It is as if he knows all along that the peace found within himself cannot last in its current situation. He must face the modern world again rather than hide out at San Sebastian forever. Jake is very aware of the fact that he has created his own misery: “That seemed to handle it. That was it. Send a girl off with one man. Introduce her to another to go off with him. Now go and bring her back. And sign the wire with love. That was it all right” (Hemingway 192). This disastrous situation, created by both Jake and Brett, forces him to immediately leave San Sebastian so that he can rescue Brett from her own destruction. He finds that she has essentially been abandoned by Romero in Madrid and she is now alone with nowhere to go and with no money to survive: “Jake’s war injury terminated the possibility of a fruitful relationship with Brett...However, Jake patiently endures. He has the moral honesty to

triumph over his suffering. He is there to help Brett when she is deserted by Romero in Madrid” (Neimneh 85). By returning to Madrid and rescuing Brett, Jake hopes to overcome his isolation and loneliness. According to Neimney, he develops a new moral honesty to face the disillusionment that has essentially tortured him throughout the novel. His new moral honesty is also a source from which he derives the ability to be a modern hero:

He travels farther into Spain to rescue Brett. The trip to San Sebastian purged him clean; as he assumes responsibility for Brett Ashley, Jake’s new moral identity at last reveals itself...The bitterness is part of the exorcism of past self-delusion: the judgment an explicit acknowledgement that Cohn’s charge of pimping was accurate. Jake accepts the truth so that he can accept, in turn, responsibility for it by bringing Brett back. (Lynn 114-115)

Jake admits to himself the crime that he has committed – pimping Brett out to Romero. Now, by rescuing her, he takes responsibility for his actions and, in turn, presents to us his new moral identity. Jake emerges here as a modern hero because he takes moral responsibility and displays moral honesty.

In the final scene, Brett and Jake find themselves talking in a cab again. This takes us back to the cab ride in Paris where Jake reveals his injury to Brett. However, Jake’s perception of the cab ride this time is not so pessimistic. Jake seems to find optimism in the conversation that ensues: “The driver started up the street. I settled back. Brett moved close to me. We sat close against each other...‘Oh, Jake,’ Brett said, ‘we could have had such a damned good time together’...‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Isn’t it pretty to think so?’” (Hemingway 198). Jake essentially agrees with Brett that the two of them could have had a great relationship, but he is honest with himself that the relationship cannot be fruitful anymore. It is pretty to think so, he states. Unlike the

Jake in Paris, the Jake in Madrid is a modern hero who can courageously face the fact that his and Brett's relationship will never change. He is neither disappointed nor disillusioned with that reality: "The concluding scene of the novel dramatizes the same point: Brett clinging to Jake in the Madrid taxi for solace and protection, trying to resurrect the old phantom of what-might-have-been, the foundation of their relationship...But Jake refuses the comfortable illusion. He may well still love Brett...But he at last acknowledges that the what-might-have-been is a meaningless, enslaving fiction" (Lynn 115). By clinging to the past and what might have happened with Brett had he not been injured, Jake has, throughout the novel, enslaved himself to a fantasy. He has been unable to emerge as any type of hero due to this refusal to face reality, both in this situation and in others. As we have seen in San Sebastian, Jake overcomes many of his illusions concerning life in the modern world. Now, sitting in the cab in Madrid, Jake lets go of the final illusion that has been holding him back. He emerges as a "true hero" who is "appropriate to a modern world of lapsed values and fragmented rituals" (Lynn 93). Jake is essentially the perfect type of modern hero who can emerge in such a modern wasteland as this. Now he must return to Paris with Brett and share these heroic qualities with others. He must, in Lynn's words, share "some of that light to a Paris shrouded in sickness, self-deception, and relations" (Lynn 116).

## 5 CHAPTER 5

### **Robin Vote, Nora Flood, and Jenny Petherbridge Battle Against Victorian Society in Their Quest to Become Modern Lesbian Feminine Heroes**

Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* is different from every other novel in this discussion because it contains three modern feminine heroes. Robin Vote, Nora Flood, and Jenny Petherbridge are all characters who ultimately possess heroic qualities. Involved in somewhat of a love triangle, Nora and Jenny aimlessly and hopelessly chase after Robin throughout the novel. And because all three women are lesbians, they are, to a great extent, cast out of Victorian-inspired society. In "I've Always Suffered from Sirens: The Cinema Vamp and Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*," Nancy Levine refers to the three women as "degenerate" (Levine 279). However, as other critics argue, it is the state of outcast and their response that makes them modern feminine heroes. Carissa Foo writes, "To see the world aslant and in darkness, as the queer women in *Nightwood* do, is disorienting. The experience...is an effect of path-breaking, of following a direction that fails to 'return' to heteronormative destinations" (Foo 325). The women are disoriented because they do not comply with Victorian society's view of sexuality. As a result, they are opposed to the patriarchal system in place within their society. This has negative consequences: "What is at risk are 'the conventional forms of the good life' such as having a good marriage (heteronormativity) and stable families (community) that promise happiness, security, and success" (Foo 325). Victorian society's view of a successful woman involves marriage and children; in essence, building a stable family is the goal. As we shall see, it is these women's opposition to this patriarchal, heteronormative ideal that makes them modern feminine heroes in the end.

Robin Vote is the first character that we meet. Barnes initially describes her in the following way: "Felix...felt that he was looking upon a figurehead in a museum, which...seemed



yet to be going against the wind; as if this girl were the converging halves of a broken fate” (Barnes 41). Robin is a static figure like a display in a museum who is going against the wind. This excellently foreshadows Robin’s tendency throughout the novel to go against the heteronormative society that surrounds her. She is also described as the converging halves of a broken fate. This refers to Robin’s emotional state throughout the novel. She is a disillusioned and tragic figure, much like many of the heroes we have discussed so far. Robin marries Felix Volkbein a few chapters into the novel. He immediately senses something wrong with Robin: “In the following months he put his faith in the fact that Robin had Christian proclivities, and his hope in the discovery that she was an enigma. He said to himself that possibly she had greatness hidden in the non-committal” (Barnes 48). Felix’s only hope is that Robin’s Christian background and beliefs will cause her to commit fully to him and his plans for building a family. He deceives himself by assuming Robin has some greater hidden treasure inside that will ultimately come out as she fulfills her duty as a Victorian housewife. Despite the arguments he presents to Robin and his hard work at making the relationship work, everything soon spirals downward: “wrecking himself and his peace of mind in an effort to acquaint her with the destiny for which he had chosen her – that she might bear sons who would recognize and honor the past” (Barnes 49). Robin has no desire to adhere to Felix’s plan or the destiny that he has chosen for her. This ruins his peace of mind. Yet it is destroyed even further when Robin begins “wandering the countryside; to train travel, to other cities, alone and engrossed” (Barnes 49). She leaves for hours or even days at a time wandering the cities and countryside. Robin is, in fact, an enigma, but not in the way that Felix desires. She vehemently opposes any type of Victorian oppression that will trap her in a marriage.

Ultimately, Felix convinces her to adhere, however briefly, to heteronormative society. He convinces her to have a child and, thus, produce a family. He hopes that the birth of their first child will bring Robin to accept the conventional forms of a good life. However, this is not the case as Robin and Felix soon find out:

Amid loud and frantic cries of affirmation and despair Robin was delivered. Shuddering in the double pains of birth and fury, cursing like a sailor, she rose up on her elbow in her bloody gown, looking about her in the bed as if she had lost something. ‘Oh, for Christ’s sake, for Christ’s sake!’ she kept crying like a child who has walked into the commencement of a horror. A week out of bed she was lost, as if she had done something irreparable” (Barnes 52)

As Robin delivers their first child, she feels a sense of loss rather than gain. It is not that she has gained a child, but rather that she has lost her independence. There is no joy or happiness in her response to becoming a mother. Rather, Robin feels as if she is in a horror show. She has done something that can never be reversed and must oppose the Victorian society bearing down on her. She soon begins to wander the city and the countryside again: “Robin took to wandering again, to intermittent travel from which she came back hours, days later, disinterested...Robin was almost never home” (Barnes 52-53). Robin is the exact opposite of a typical Victorian housewife. Rather than caring for her child and husband at home, she is lost in her travels and wanderings. She does not wish to be a mother or a housewife: “As he came toward her she said in a fury, ‘I didn’t want him!’” (Barnes 53). Robin never wanted a child. Felix had hoped for a long time to change her views of heteronormativity, but he fails. She becomes even more defiant about maintaining her independence at the cost of losing her family. She will not accept the ideal of the Victorian housewife, and because Victorian ideals are all she knows, she leaves as a

disillusioned, tragic figure: “She grinned, but it was not a smile. ‘I’ll get out,’ she said...For three or four months the people of the quarter asked for her in vain. Where she had gone no one knew” (Barnes 53-54).

The description that Barnes gives of Nora Flood is really two-fold: she is both impressive and unimpressive simultaneously. According to Barnes, she runs the “strangest salon in America” often frequented by various paupers like “poets, radicals, beggars, artists, and people in love” (Barnes 55). Of all the people in her salon, Nora stands out because of the “savage and refined equilibrium of her nature” (Barnes 55). Interestingly, she is both savage and refined. She is also young and has the skin of a child, but there is already in her appearance the “design that was to be the weather-beaten grain of her face” (Barnes 56). In appearance, she is both young and old. In addition, Nora is described as a being continually in descent: “There is a gap in ‘world pain’ through which the singular falls continually and forever, a body falling in observable space...Such a singular was Nora” (Barnes 56-57). Barnes compares Nora here to a body in continual descent, but also as a remarkable person. In addition, Nora possesses a “derangement in her equilibrium” that keeps her “immune from her own descent” (Barnes 57). This is an interesting paradox. Nora is a remarkable character in decline who is immune from her own descent. This immunity from descent is one of her heroic qualities. It sustains her throughout the novel as she faces great adversity. Barnes also gives her the positive characteristic of being selfless: “Nora robbed herself for everyone; incapable of giving herself warning, she was continually turning about to find herself diminished” (Barnes 57). Being selfless seems to be a great thing for others, but not so much for Nora. As people use her and as she loves “without criticism,” she finds herself “betrayed” and essentially diminished (Barnes 57). Furthermore, we see that Nora is a trustworthy woman: “To ‘confess’ to her was an act

even more secret than the communication provided by a priest. There was no ignominy in her; she recorded without reproach or accusation... This drew people to her... they could neither insult nor hold anything against her" (Barnes 58). Nora is as trustworthy as a priest. She receives confessions and keeps dark secrets without judgment. Naturally, people are drawn to her because of this trait and she emerges as a great candidate for a modern feminine hero.

Everything changes for Nora when she meets Robin. She falls in love with her and finds herself "haunted" to the point where "separation" is "impossible" (Barnes 60). Within her mind, Robin's image walks with "appalling apprehension" (Barnes 62). Robin becomes a polarizing figure within Nora's every waking moment. Nora often wakes from her sleep in a panic over Robin. She begins to see that Robin possesses two lives, the life with her and another life that Nora has no part in. In essence, while keeping Robin, she sees herself losing Robin simultaneously. After a few years, Robin begins to roam the city streets and the countryside again as she did when married to Felix. At first, Nora goes with her, but in time Nora sees no point in following Robin like a chaperone. She remains at home in a state of agonizing defeat: "Nora stayed at home, lying awake or sleeping. Robin's absence, as the night drew on, became a physical removal, insupportable and irreparable" (Barnes 64). It becomes obvious that Nora's stable personality is beginning to fray. The toxic relationship between her and Robin drags on her in such an ominous way that she can neither leave nor stay. Her mind is constantly rife with tension and anxiety. Because of Robin, Nora's heroism diminishes and she essentially becomes a disillusioned, tragic character just like Robin herself.

This culminates in the dream scene. In her grandmother's room, Nora envisions Robin lying with a company on the floor: "The louder she cried out the farther away went the floor below, as if Robin and she, in their extremity, were a pair of opera glasses turned to the wrong

end, diminishing in their painful love, a speed that ran away with the two ends of the building, stretching her apart” (Barnes 68). Nora cries out as the floor recedes and the walls speed away. This signifies that Robin is slipping away despite Nora’s tremendous effort to keep her. In addition, the two of them are described as opera glasses turned to the wrong end, or backwards. They are figuratively looking at their relationship through the wrong lens. This ruins any chance for a relationship that revolves around compromise, logic, or reason. Consequently, it diminishes their love. When Nora wakes, she looks out into the garden only to see Robin with another woman:

“Waking...and looking out into the garden...she saw a double shadow falling from the statue...and thinking perhaps this was Robin, she called and was not answered. Standing motionless, straining her eyes, she saw emerge from the darkness the light of Robin’s eyes, the fear in them developing their luminosity until, by the intensity of their double regard, Robin’s eyes and hers met. So they gazed at each other. As if that light had power to bring what was dreaded into the zone of their catastrophe, Nora saw the body of another woman swim up into the statue’s obscurity, with head hung down, that the added eyes might not augment the illumination; her arms about Robin’s neck, her body pressed to Robin’s, her legs slackened in the hang of the embrace. (Barnes 69-70)

Nora finds the scene repulsive, but she cannot look away. She experiences “a sensation of evil, complete and dismembering” and falls to her knees (Barnes 70). The tragedy is complete and Nora is left to clean up the broken pieces of her life. Robin’s influence has brought nothing but misfortune and has left Nora as a disillusioned, tragic figure. She and Robin now share this unfortunate characteristic as if they are bound together for eternity.

Jenny Petherbridge is a middle-aged widow who has been married four times. Each one of her four husbands has tragically died. Jenny is described as having a “beaked head” with a “small, feeble, and ferocious” body (Barnes 71). She looks “old, yet expectant of age” and seems to be “steaming in the vapors of someone else about to die” (Barnes 71). She writhes “under the necessity of being unable to wear anything” and, consequently, becomes “one of those panicky little women who, no matter what they put on, look like a child under penance” (Barnes 72). Jenny is given the appearance of an old maid even though she is only middle-aged. She has a very unattractive body and face, and dresses like a child under penance no matter what she wears. In essence, she is the opposite of what we might consider the lovely, graceful Victorian housewife. She is an unattractive figure with a beaked head and a ferocious, almost masculine body. Jenny also has “no sense of humor or peace or rest” (Barnes 72). She appears to be a miserable character and perhaps one who is miserable to be around. In addition, she is “avid and disorderly in her heart,” “nervous about the future,” “indelicate,” and “one of the most unimportantly wicked women of her time” (Barnes 74). Jenny is passionate, but in a disordered way. This causes her to be nervous and indelicate. She is also wicked, but so unimportant that she has no evil influence over others. Again, she is the opposite of what we might consider the stereotypical woman of the Victorian age. She is neither beautiful nor graceful nor kind and loving in any way.

Jenny is also a “squatter by instinct” (Barnes 75). When she hears Robin talk of her love for Nora, Jenny feels like she must have what those two possess. Thus, as a squatter, she steals Robin from Nora and tries to copy their relationship: “Jenny knew about Nora immediately; to know Robin ten minutes was to know about Nora. Robin spoke of her in long, rambling, impassioned sentences. It had caught Jenny by the ear – she listened, and both loves seemed to

be one and her own. From that moment the catastrophe was inevitable” (Barnes 75). It is quite interesting to find that this new love triangle between Robin, Nora, and Jenny is presented as a catastrophe. They all possess relationships with one another that are unsustainable and unhealthy. For instance, as soon as Jenny steals Robin from Nora, she finds herself in a situation where she is about to lose her: “Jenny saw that Robin was moving toward the second carriage in which the English girl had already seated herself. ‘Ah, no, no!’ Jenny cried, and began beating the upholstery, sending up a cloud of dust. ‘Come here,’ she said in an anguished voice, as if it were the end of her life” (Barnes 79). When Jenny follows Robin into the carriage, she makes an awful scene: “Then Jenny struck Robin, scratching and tearing in hysteria, striking, clutching, and crying. Slowly the blood began to run down Robin’s cheeks, and as Jenny struck repeatedly Robin began to go forward as if brought to the movement by the very blows themselves, as if she had no will, sinking down in the small carriage, her knees on the floor, her head forward as her arm moved upward in a gesture of defense” (Barnes 83). Envious of another woman and angry at Robin’s reaction, Jenny unleashes a torrent of violence onto Robin. While the blood flows down her face, Robin sinks into the bottom of the carriage and raises her arms defensively. Strangely, this violent incident does not end the relationship. It appears to be doomed for failure, but it endures through this trial. Consequently, Jenny adopts the impression that their relationship is fine. So, when the women set sail for America, Jenny cannot anticipate the danger ahead. Ultimately, though, the danger is real. And as she struggles to face reality, she becomes a disillusioned, tragic figure like both Robin and Nora.

We have seen how miserable Nora is while she is with Robin. Now we will discuss how miserable she is without Robin. In a long conversation with Dr. Matthew O’Connor, Nora unleashes the burden that Robin has left upon her: “‘Then,’ Nora said, ‘it means – I’ll never

understand her'... 'I can't stand it. I don't know how... What is it in her that is doing this?'" (Barnes 92). Nora strives to understand Robin and why she has run off with another woman to America, but like before, Nora cannot understand her. And, unfortunately, Nora's love for Robin continues to be a contaminate in her life. She seems to be equally miserable whether Robin is there or not. Yet Nora's love for Robin persists and she finds herself attempting to save her. In reality, she is also looking to save herself, but her efforts are fruitless:

'I saw her always like a tall child who had grown up the length of an infant's gown, walking and needing help and safety; because she was in her own nightmare. I tried to come between and save her, but I was like a shadow in her dream that could never reach her in time, as the cry of the sleeper has no echo, myself echo struggling to answer; she was like a new shadow walking perilously close to the outer curtain, and I was going mad because I was awake and, seeing it, unable to reach it, unable to strike people down from it; and it moving, almost unwalking, with the face saintly and idiotic. And then that day I'll remember all my life, when I said: It is over now.' (Barnes 154)

Early on, Nora realizes that Robin is a child, and therefore, a danger to herself. She tries her best to save her from the nightmare in which she is living. She cries out like an echo in a dream, but fails to reach the sleeper who is wandering perilously close to the edge. In the end, Nora is haunted by the realization that Robin cannot be rescued. It "rots" her from the inside out (Barnes 161).

Nora searches for Robin across Europe: "I sought Robin in Marseilles, in Tangier, in Naples, to understand her, to do away with my terror'... 'I left Paris. I went through the streets of Marseilles, the waterfront of Tangier, the *basso porto* of Naples'" (Barnes 166). Nora is unable to find Robin anywhere, but in the end, Robin finds her. In her wanderings, she circles "closer



and closer” to Nora’s “part of the country” until, eventually, she comes home (Barnes 177). Barnes gives us no indication whether Robin’s stay is permanent or just temporary, but we do know from the previous text what this means for Nora. The return of Robin may bring her momentary joy, but it will make her equally miserable over time. In other words, Nora will remain a disillusioned, tragic figure long after the novel ends.

Ultimately, Nora, Jenny, and Robin are locked in a love triangle that destroys all three characters. This is what makes them all tragic figures: “in the end you’ll all be locked together, like the poor beasts that get their antlers mixed and are found dead that way, their heads fattened with a knowledge of each other they never wanted, having had to contemplate each other, head-on and eye to eye, until death; well, that will be you and Jenny and Robin” (Barnes 107). Dr. O’Conner gives us a vivid metaphor here comparing the three ladies to beasts of the field with their horns locked together until death. It is interesting how he addresses the women’s contemplation of one another. Throughout the novel, each character is filled with knowledge of the other two characters. This is what makes them miserable – the knowledge of one another. On her own, each woman would be in a better position to find happiness and contentment, but together they are all doomed.

We have shown that Nora, Jenny, and Robin are all tragic characters linked together throughout the novel. In the end, they are all “finally destroyed,” but it is not due to their accumulated sins. In other words, the novel is not the “celebration of a punitive morality” (Levine 279). Rather, the novel is a celebration of their triumph through destruction:

Defiance is a part of *negative perception*, which is defined here as a counterintuitive way of seeing that challenges naturalized, analytical perception. To defy is to be unfaithful and suspicious of totalizing norms and master narratives that organize and explain

experience...Defiance, then, is more than willful disobedience or reactionary. It is necessary recourse, to articulate ideological confrontations and to find one's bearing amidst changes. (Foo 328)

Foo is addressing an alternate view, a view of negative perception, here. The women, as homosexuals, are defying the heteronormative society around them. Yet their defiance is more than reactionary; it is necessary. In other words, the women must fight against the patriarchal Victorian society in order to exist: "By deviating from positive patterns of seeing and normative practices, the novel illuminates and documents the experiences of a group of people whose sexual inclinations and behavior are different from the presumed norm. Barnes's characters are queers whose bodies are ridden with shame and sorrow symptomatic of 'the historical impossibility of same-sex desire'" (Foo 330). Nora, Jenny, and Robin are all characters who battle against the norms of society by expressing their true sexual natures. Each one of them reveals heroic qualities throughout the novel while doing this. Unfortunately, their acts of defiance require sacrifice. They rise to heroic proportions, but are miserable throughout the novel. Ultimately, the three women, filled with shame and sorrow, become tragic characters simply because they are practicing same-sex desire in a society that only promotes heterosexual desire. Yet they must persist: "To navigate is to find one's way or the right way, to follow along society's straight path and do the honorable thing. To be bent or to bend is to move away from the straight and normative course. Therein is the defiance, a rebellious impulse to actively bend against the grain of the straight" (Foo 333).

Throughout the novel, the three women navigate by bending away from the normal course. This is their defiance against heterosexual norms, and this, in essence, is what makes them modern feminine heroes in the end. They remain tragic characters, but by persisting and

defying the natural order, they reach the high point of heroism: “Robin (the sleepwalker), Jenny (the purloiner), and Nora (the searcher) may seem aimless and unproductive but the very force of the alliance is their endurance and ability to remain in absurd stances, alone and persevering” (Foo 338). The three women appear to have little purpose and even less direction in life. Their time is mostly spent torturing one another rather than producing anything of value. In short, they are disillusioned, tragic figures. Yet they have the endurance and ability to continue challenging the society that disapproves of them. This, of course, makes them modern feminine heroes. Ultimately, we see that Barnes addresses the power struggle rather than the victory. This is a lot like the other novels we have covered so far. Jenny, Nora, and Robin are modern feminine heroes because they persist in failure. They do not resemble traditional heroes because there is no victory in their stories, only pain and perseverance.

## 6 CHAPTER 6

### **Eugene Henderson's Search for the Meaning of Life, an Answer to the Voice that Plagues Him, and His Eventual Ascension to the Likes of a Modern Hero**

In *Henderson the Rain King*, by Saul Bellow, there is only one modern hero. Eugene Henderson, the protagonist in this novel, is an erratic, untethered, middle-aged millionaire who raises pigs for a living. He is the type of pathetic and depressing character typically found within modernist fiction. According to Fei Luo in "Spiritual Journey of Protagonists in Saul Bellow's Fictions: Search-Escape-Regeneration," Henderson is "a victim of the mechanizing forces of society in a spiritually exhausted world" (Luo 1315). In "Henderson the Rain King: Resolving Existential Despair with Theist Existential Philosophy," Bulent Cercis calls him a new type of hero who is "as displaced – as uprooted and puzzled – as his prototype in the French existential novel" (Cercis 2). Henderson is a victim to some extent of the barren social landscape around him, but a lot of his problems are self-inflicted as well. Because of these difficulties, Henderson goes on a quest to Africa to find peace, tranquility, and the meaning of life. He seeks to answer the voice within him that constantly plagues his mind. According to Luo, the "depressed" and "lonely" Henderson takes "the task of quest" as he seeks the "realization of dignity and morality" (Luo 1314). Ultimately, Henderson re-instates his dignity and discovers a new morality. At the end of the novel, he is propelled to the likes of a modern anti-hero.

Early on we get an indication that Eugene Henderson is a protagonist who constantly fails in his search for happiness. He is a miserable character:

Things got worse and worse and worse and pretty soon they were too complicated. When I think of my condition at the age of fifty-five when I bought the ticket, all is grief. The facts begin to crowd me and soon I get a pressure in the chest. A disorderly rush begins –

my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my farm, my animals, my habits, my money, my music lessons, my drunkenness, my prejudices, my brutality, my teeth, my face, my soul! I have to cry, 'No, no, get back, curse you, let me alone!' But how can they let me alone? They belong to me. They are mine. And they pile into me from all sides. It turns into chaos. (Bellow 1)

In this passage, Henderson begins to relate why he is making a trip to Africa, but quickly gets bogged down in his own troubles. He is worried about his wives, his children, his money, his drunkenness, and his animals. As we see here and throughout the novel, he is obsessed with his troubles. However, as Henderson states, his troubles belong to him. He cannot leave them behind or ignore them. In another instance, Henderson addresses the voice that plagues him: "and a ceaseless voice in my heart that said, *I want, I want, I want, oh, I want...* But at this time my heart was consumed with the demand I have mentioned – *I want, I want...* but this terrible repetition within – *I want, I want!* – was not stopped by any face I saw" (Bellow 10-12). The difficulty for Henderson lies in the fact that the voice is ceaseless, yet never confesses what it wants. Henderson has some idea why the voice exists, but cannot put it into words or concrete action. Consequently, the voice both plagues and consumes him. It is of such importance that it becomes another recurring theme throughout the novel: "Henderson's dissatisfaction with his life persistently appears by a voice-an inner voice that always asks for a want... This inner voice is a signal that Henderson needs to change" (Cercis 4). The voice that says *I want* conveys a message that Henderson has strayed from his true purpose in life. Unfortunately, he does not know what this purpose might be. He also has no idea how to change if and when the purpose is found. Additionally, the inner voice is a signal that Henderson is lacking something vital, something essential. It is something that goes all the way to his soul. His spirit is crying out *I*

*want*, but Henderson lacks the fundamental spiritual awareness to understand this. Consequently, he is incapable of any changes that might present a solution.

When Henderson returns home from the war, he has aspirations of becoming a pig farmer. As Bellow indicates, this decision “illustrates what” he thinks of “life in general” (Bellow 18). This is another recurring theme throughout the novel, the idea of Henderson farming pigs, the reasons why, and what this discloses about his character. Bellow reveals here that Henderson doesn’t think very highly of his own life or the meaning of life in general. And this is one of the problems Henderson has – he subjects his life and compares his life to the lowliest form of animal: “Anyway, I was a pig man. And as the prophet Daniel warned King Nebuchadnezzar, ‘They shall drive thee from among men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field’” (Bellow 19). This is one of the most revealing instances of Henderson’s self-loathing. He compares himself to King Nebuchadnezzar, a man cursed by God. Henderson sees his own life in a similar way, as a man cursed to live not only with but like the lowliest form of animal, the beasts of the field.

Before his trip to Africa, Henderson tries to cure his self-loathing and lowly attitude about life through various different means. In one instance, he turns to work:

A student of mine once explained to me that if you inflict your anger on inanimate things, you not only spare the living, as a civilized man ought to do, but you get rid of the bad stuff in you. This seemed to make good sense, and I tried it out. I tried with all my heart, chopping wood, lifting, plowing, laying cement blocks, pouring concrete, and cooking mash for the pigs. On my own place, stripped to the waist like a convict, I broke stones with a sledgehammer. It helped, but not enough. Rude begets rude, and blows, blows; at least in my case, it not only begot but it increased. Wrath increased with wrath.

(Bellow 21)

This is an admirable attempt by Henderson, but it falls way short. Not only does he fail to rid himself of the “bad stuff,” he actually makes the problem worse. As he states, his rudeness and wrath increase through the violent blows he inflicts on inanimate things. Another action that Henderson employs to rid himself of self-loathing is learning to play the violin: “But anyway I didn’t hope to perfect myself as an artist. My main purpose was to reach my father by playing on his violin” (Bellow 28). Henderson feels that if he can reach his deceased father (who disapproves of him until the end and who wishes that he had died in place of his brother), he can find some consolation and happiness in life. Yet he fails again. The playing of the violin merely keeps “time with the voice within” (Bellow 28). Rather than revealing what it wants or how to rid himself of it, playing his father’s violin purely keeps him in rhythm with the voice that says *I want*.

We also learn that Henderson has inherited millions of dollars from his father, and yet he decides to raise pigs for a living. He has dreams of becoming a doctor, but fails to put the dreams into motion. Instead, he busies himself with being a nuisance to society as a whole: “I had fights, I had trouble with the troopers, I made suicide threats” (Bellow 29). As one critic suggests, perhaps Henderson’s habit of being a nuisance is due to his alienation from humanity. In “Anxiety and Perplexity of Choice: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Henderson the Rain King,” Juan Gao writes, “Henderson has a dominant position in American society, but he never feels happy; on the contrary, he is deeply alienated from the extremely boring American life after the war, and the wealth and status he possesses not only fails to help him, but accelerates the process of alienation; ironically, what his great financial freedom makes him feel is incompetence and depression” (Gao 1119). Despite Henderson’s great wealth and excellent

socioeconomic status, he is the most miserable character in the novel. This is partly due to the large amount of money that Henderson possesses. Rather than being a launching point for accomplishing great things (as wealth can be), Henderson's riches actually cause him to be more alienated and miserable. This is due to the fact that though Henderson possesses great financial means, he lacks spiritual means: "compared with his abundant material life, his spiritual world is like a barren land, full of inner restlessness and chaos all the time" (Gao 1117). The voice that says "I want" is obviously a spiritual voice with which Henderson finds an inability to communicate. This is because he lacks spiritual means. He has all the material possessions that he wants, but he lacks the ability to think or communicate in a spiritual fashion. As Gao suggests, this is what causes Henderson's misery. His inner spiritual world is chaotic and restless.

When Henderson's disillusionment with life reaches a boiling point, he decides to go to Africa with his friend Charlie. He must find meaning somewhere: "Henderson often mentions his spiritual emptiness and the lack of meaning in his life. As a reader we come to understand that nothing makes a contribution to his life; so, there is and must be something else to his family and to the money that he possesses...this is what he is looking for at the beginning of the novel" (Cercis 3). In the beginning of Henderson's narrative, he often loses his train of thought and reverts back to his failures in life and his inner spiritual restlessness. The preoccupation with his empty spiritual life is astounding and massive. It affects him so greatly that he is miserable in every circumstance, but he feels that he must address it. This is what he plans to do in Africa. Luo adds:

In Henderson's inner world he feels quite lonely and falls into a deep spiritual desperation, although Henderson is lucky to have received millions of dollars and has



lived a prosperous life...he longs to search the meaningful world to get rid of the strong pressure which makes him feel that life is empty and painful...At the same time, due to his conflict with himself, his wife, his father, his son, his sister, even his neighbors, the sound of the inner voice "I want, I want" is always ringing in his ear and surrounding him continuously. Henderson tries every means to get rid of it, but this cry has been following him forever, and no matter how much effort he makes, it lingers around him...He is overwhelmed and there is a serious crisis in his spiritual life...Therefore, with all these phenomena occurring, he has no choice but to escape that world and adventure to the remote tribes in Africa so as to search the real meaning of life.

(Luo 1314-1315)

Henderson's decision to leave for Africa is a courageous and valiant one. He must leave his family, his friends, and his riches behind. It cannot be an easy decision, but this is precisely what Henderson wants to do. By travelling halfway around the world, Henderson hopes to rid himself of the problems at home as well as the voice that says *I want*. He must address his spiritual emptiness somewhere. He feels that Africa is the best place to do this.

Henderson's first impression of the African land is one of awe and wonder. He feels a sense of peacefulness and tranquility around him: "I didn't feel the pressure in the chest, nor hear any voice within. At that time it was silent" (Bellow 40). In the short time that he has spent traveling the plains and deserts within Africa, Henderson finds that the voice and his discontent have disappeared. He credits the remote land, the barren landscape without a past: "for that matter there was not much of anything here; it was all simplified and splendid, and I felt I was entering the past – the real past, no history or junk like that. The prehuman past" (Bellow 43). This is a place – in the prehuman past – where Henderson feels that he can rid himself of the

voice that says *I want* and find the meaning of life. However, he soon finds that the voice and his disillusioned outlook on life has traveled with him: “my discontent returned and one afternoon I heard the familiar old voice within. It began to say, *I want, I want, I want*” (Bellow 40). The peacefulness of the African landscape is not powerful enough to cure Henderson’s inner spiritual restlessness or the voice that says *I want*. He quickly realizes that it might take some time and work to answer his spirit’s call, or to “burst the spirit’s sleep.” Still, Henderson is motivated and determined to find peace on his quest.

When Henderson first encounters the Arnewi tribe, he meets a woman who is weeping hysterically:

But the young woman being a stranger, it’s less easy to explain why her weeping loosed such a terrible emotion in me. What I thought immediately was ‘What have I done? Shall I run back into the desert,’ I thought, ‘and stay there until the devil has passed out of me and I am fit to meet human kind again without driving it to despair at the first look? I haven’t had enough desert yet. Let me throw away my gun and my helmet and the lighter and all this stuff and maybe I can get rid of my fierceness too and live out there on worms. On locusts. Until all the bad is burned out of me. Oh, the bad! Oh, the wrong, the wrong! What can I do about it? What can I do about all the damage? My character! God help me, I’ve made a mess of everything, and there’s no getting away from the results. One look at me must tell the whole story.’ You see, I had begun to convince myself that those few days of lightheartedness, tramping over the Hinchagara plateau with Romilayu, had already made a great change in me. But it seemed that I was still not ready for society. Society is what beats me. Alone I can be pretty good, but let me go among people and there’s the devil to pay. (Bellow 45-46)

Henderson's reaction to the woman weeping is once again indicative of his self-hatred and self-loathing. His mind, disillusioned with reality, immediately jumps to the conclusion that he is to blame for the woman's crying. He sees himself as unfit for society, a rude and fierce brute with no social skills. But the woman is crying for an entirely different reason: "With enormous relief it dawned on me that the crying was not due to any fault of mine... 'Dem cry for dead cow,' he said" (Bellow 47). The woman (as well as the rest of the tribe as Henderson now sees) is crying for a cow that has recently died. The tribe thinks of the cows "like brothers and sisters, like children" (Bellow 53). Consequently, they mourn their passing. Henderson soon learns that "the cows are dying of thirst" because the water in the cistern is "polluted" with "frogs" (Bellow 54-55). He realizes that this is his chance to not only save the Arnewi, but himself as well. He must get rid of the frogs.

While speaking with Prince Itelo, Henderson once again gives us an insight into his mindset: "And I told him, 'Your Highness, I am really kind of on a quest'...he must have known what sad sacks were, and as of this moment, to judge by his looks, I belonged in that category. Of course it was true I had been very downcast, what with the voice that said *I want* and all the rest of it" (Bellow 61). Whenever he encounters a new person, Henderson assumes the best about that person, but the worst about himself. In other words, as he attempts to peak into the mind of the other person, he assumes that the other's mind is thinking the worst about him – in essence, what he thinks about himself. He does something very similar when he meets Queen Willatale:

Who – who was I? A millionaire wanderer and wayfarer. A brutal and violent man driven into the world. A man who fled his own country, settled by his forefathers. A fellow whose heart said, *I want, I want*. Who played the violin in despair, seeking the

voice of angels. Who had to burst the spirit's sleep, or else. So what could I tell this old queen in a lion skin and raincoat (for she had buttoned herself up in it)? That I had ruined the original piece of good issued to me and was traveling to find a remedy?

(Bellow 71-72)

Henderson's first instinct is to tell the queen everything that is wrong with his life. It is the self-loathing in him that prompts this. However, he does hint at the solution – to burst the spirit's sleep. In essence, Henderson must find a way to awaken his spirit and find the meaning of life.

He looks to the queen for this: “‘Say, you want to live. Grun-tu-molani. Man want to live.’

‘Yes, yes, yes! Molani. Me molani. She sees that? God will reward her, tell her, for saying it to me’...‘I could not bear how sad things have become in the world and so I set out because of this molani. Grun-tu-molani, old lady – old queen. Grun-tu-molani, everybody!’” (Bellow 79-80).

Henderson explains to the queen that he is looking for the desire to live – this is what the Arnewi call grun-tu-molani. But he has had difficulty finding it in his home country. Therefore, he tells the queen that he has set out on a quest in the African heartland. It is wisdom from the queen that Henderson now desires, and as he remains with the tribe and speaks with the queen, he obtains more and more of it:

Henderson felt the innocence, naturalness, gentleness, and primitive beauty in the Arnewi tribe, and felt harmony, identity, and peace in their queen. As soon as Henderson enters the Arnewi tribe, he feels that he has returned to ancient times before the birth of mankind...The queen is a symbol of stability, tranquility, and balance and represents harmony and unity, which Henderson lacks. Some of the truths the queen tells Henderson makes him more aware of himself. However, the wisdom he obtains is not sufficient to promote his complete transformation. (Luo 1315)

The Arnewi tribe and the queen in particular represent what Henderson is missing – harmony, tranquility, and meaning. A lot of the wisdom he receives from the queen indicates how he might achieve these three qualities. However, as Luo suggests, the life lessons Henderson receives from the tribe in general and the queen in particular are not enough to save him.

Henderson looks to the frogs in the cistern for resolution. He decides that he must save the Arnewi in order to save himself. He concocts a plan to blow them out of the water with a make-shift explosive: “Thus having decided in the hut to take the shells and use them in my bomb, I lay grinning at the surprise those frogs had coming, and also somewhat at myself, because I was anticipating the gratitude of Willatale and Mtalba and Itelo and all the people; and I went so far as to imagine that the queen would elevate me to a position equal to her own” (Bellow 89). Henderson is not necessarily looking for praise from the Arnewi people. As he states, he has not left home in order to “achieve power or glory” (Bellow 89). He is looking to save them out of the kindness of his heart. Yet, he is also looking to save himself. He feels that by ridding the tribe of the frogs and therefore saving their cattle, Henderson may continue to live with the Arnewi and receive the rest of Queen Willatale’s wisdom about happiness and the meaning of life. As Henderson relates, there is destiny involved: “I thought, ‘This is going to be one of my greatest days.’ For not only was the high feeling of the night still with me...but I became convinced...that things, the object-world itself, gave me a kind of go-ahead sign” (Bellow 94). Henderson feels that the objective, outside world itself is giving him signals to move forward with the plan he concocted the night before. Quite simply, he must save the Arnewi because it is his destiny to do so. Henderson perceives that the plan is fail-proof. Additionally, there is self-revelation involved: “So now when I turned my thoughts to the relief of the Arnewi, I was a different person, or thought I was. I had passed through something, a vital

experience” (Bellow 96). Henderson has been a miserable failure his whole life, but now he sees his chance to turn everything around. He has a new knowledge of himself because he has passed through a vital moment. This vital moment is one of self-revelation and destiny. He now sees the task at hand, believes that he can carry it out, and thus, hopes to save himself in the process.

Henderson also feels like he is on the verge of making a giant leap toward finding the meaning of life. If the make-shift bomb works the way he hopes, he will be a hero to the Arnewi and be allowed to stay with them indefinitely or until the full amount of wisdom is imparted to him. Unfortunately, Henderson’s plan turns out disastrously: “I had gotten more of a result than I could have known in the first instants, and instead of an answering cry I heard shrieks from the natives, and looking to see what was the matter I found that the dead frogs were pouring out of the cistern together with the water. The explosion had blasted out the retaining wall at the front end. The big stone blocks had fallen and the yellow reservoir was emptying fast” (Bellow 102). The bomb is too powerful and blows the entire cistern up. As the water floods out and the natives shriek in horror, Henderson’s hope of saving the Arnewi and himself has been blown to pieces: “This was nothing but God’s own truth, as with the cistern I had blown up everything else, it seemed” (Bellow 103). As we recall the earlier sections, we realize that Henderson has done this his entire life. He has blown up every opportunity to find peace, tranquility, and wisdom. He is a tragic figure, miserable and disillusioned: “It’s the same old story with me; as soon as I come amongst people, I screw something up – I goof. They were right to cry when I showed up. They must have smelled trouble and knew that I would cause a disaster...I demanded, ‘Why for once, just once, couldn’t I get my heart’s desire? I have to be doomed always to bungle.’ And I thought my life-pattern stood revealed” (Bellow 105). Henderson is very aware that this disaster fits perfectly with the rest of his life. Every problem seems daunting and every action doomed to

fail. His frustrations are visible as he demands to know why he cannot succeed at any task. He nearly cries out in agony. Now he has no chance to find the grun-tu-molani, or the meaning of life: "I hoped to learn the wisdom of life from her but I guess I am just too rash. I am not fit for such companionship... This was how I left in disgrace and humiliation, having demolished both their water and my hopes. For now I'd never learn more about the grun-tu-molani" (Bellow 106). Henderson is not fit for the Arnewi's companionship. He is too rash and unwise. Consequently, he must leave in shame and humiliation. Along with Mtalba (the queen's sister), the entire tribe yells for him to leave forever. Henderson is devastated. He realizes that now he must abandon his hopes of learning the wisdom that brings tranquility and happiness.

When Henderson first encounters the Wariri tribe, he is confronted with a man known as the Examiner. Henderson's reaction to the man is similar to his reaction to the crying Arnewi woman: "What was I going to tell this character? That existence had become odious to me? It was just not the kind of reply to offer under these circumstances. Could I say that the world, the world as a whole, the entire world, had set itself against life and was opposed to it...but that I was alive nevertheless" (Bellow 126). Henderson's first instinct is again to share the story of his failures and self-loathing, but the idea that the entire world is actively functioning against him is too much for the moment. He stops short seeing that the Examiner is the type of man who couldn't care less about Henderson's predicament. When Henderson meets the king of the Wariri tribe, King Dahfu, his first instinct is, once again, to tell him his life story, his story of failure and misery. He stops short this time because he badly wants to impress the king. He begins thinking about Walt Whitman, the state of being, and the state of becoming:

I might have added, as it entered my mind to do, that some people found satisfaction in *being* (Walt Whitman: 'Enough to merely be! Enough to breathe! Joy! Joy! All over

joy!'). *Being*. Others were taken up with *becoming*. Being people have all the breaks. Becoming people are very unlucky, always in a tizzy. The Becoming people are always having to make explanations or offer justifications to the Being people. While the Being people provoke these explanations. I sincerely feel that this is something everyone should understand about me. Now Willatale, the queen of the Arnewi, and principal woman of Bittahness, was a Be-er if there ever was one. And at present King Dahfu. And if I had really been capable of the alert consciousness which it required, I would have confessed that Becoming was beginning to come out of my ears. Enough! Enough! Time to have Become. Time to Be! Burst the spirit's sleep. (Bellow 153)

Henderson does not speak about being and becoming out loud to the king. He keeps these thoughts to himself knowing how revealing they are. Obviously, as we have seen so far, Henderson is Becoming, not Being. He sees King Dahfu and Queen Willatale as the opposite. Henderson explains that Becomers are unlucky, always in a tizzy, and having to make explanations for their failures. It is not feasible for Henderson to remain in this state. He realizes that he must transition to a state of Being. He must "burst the spirit's sleep." In other words, he must awaken his spirit to the meaning of life. He sees King Dahfu as the one who can help him do this. King Dahfu also realizes his role in the matter: "I easily gather, Mr. Traveler, that you have set forth to accomplish a very important matter" (Bellow 160). King Dahfu sees Henderson's spiritual needs. He realizes that Henderson is on a quest to awaken his spirit.

Henderson's transition to the Rain King occurs during one of the Wariri's rain festivals. There is no man in the tribe that can lift and transport the rain god Mummah. In Henderson's eyes, it falls on him to do so:



I simply knew that I could lift up Mummah, and I flowed, I burned to go out there and do it...And in the process of proving it, should my heart be ruptured, should the old sack split, okay, then let me die. I didn't care anymore. I had longed to do some good to the Arnewi when I arrived and saw their distress. Instead of accomplishing which, I had rashly brought down the full weight of my blind will and ambition upon those frogs. I arrived clothed in light, or thinking so, and I departed draped in shadow and darkness...So inflamed was my wish to *do* something [to life Mummah]. For I saw something I could do...I still couldn't pass up this opportunity to *do*, and to distinguish myself. To work the right stitch into the design of my destiny before it was too late.

(Bellow 178-179)

As he imagines himself lifting Mummah, he thinks about how he failed the Arnewi, how he arrived as a savior and departed as a cursed man. Henderson reflects upon the Arnewi because he sees lifting Mummah as his second chance at “bursting the spirit’s sleep.” This is his chance at redemption and he doesn’t care if he dies trying. As with the experiment to obliterate the frogs, Henderson sees this opportunity as his destiny: ““You are strong but it so happens I am stronger. It’s not a personal matter at all. It’s only the fates – they willed it”” (Bellow 179). Henderson sees himself as an instrument of fate. Lifting Mummah is not even a choice. He has been chosen to dominate the wooden god. All he must do is wrap his arms around it and lift. The fates will determine the result. Buoyed by this knowledge, Henderson does, in fact, lift Mummah and carry her to the proper destination. The Wariri tribe cheers from the stands:

I lifted her from the ground and carried her twenty feet to her new place among the other gods. The Wariri jumped up and down in the white stone of their stands, screaming, singing, raving, hugging themselves and one another and praising me. I stood still.

There beside Mummah in her new situation I myself was filled with happiness. I was so gladdened by what I had done that my whole body was filled with soft heat, with soft and sacred light. (Bellow 185)

What Henderson failed to do for the Arnewi, he has achieved for the Wariri. He has lifted and carried Mummah, the rain god, to her proper destination with the other gods. It cannot be understated how significant this moment is for Henderson. It contradicts his entire life story of failure and misery. He entire body radiates from the happiness in his soul: “And so my fever was transformed into jubilation. My spirit was awake and it welcomed life anew. Damn the whole thing! Life anew! I was still alive and kicking and I had the old grun-tu-molani” (Bellow 185-186). Henderson seems to have finally “burst the spirit’s sleep” and achieved the grun-tu-molani. Yet his explanation is very vague. The new feelings of enlightenment and purpose have no substance. He mentions his soul awakening and his life renewed, but this is a mere feeling. He has no evidence that a change has actually taken place, and really, he doesn’t need any as long as he can rely on his feelings in the moment. Henderson has not found a solid foundation on which to build. It is a broad feeling of enlightenment and therefore it is short-lived.

When the storm begins and the rain starts, Henderson becomes the Sungo, or Rain King. In Henderson’s eyes, he has saved both the Wariri and himself. He feels like one on the verge of becoming a modern anti-hero. However, as we have previously discussed, there is nothing of substance for Henderson to base his feelings upon. Consequently, his thoughts revert back to his failures: “Yes, here he is, the mover of Mummah, the champion, the Sungo. Here comes Henderson of the U.S.A. – Captain Henderson, Purple Heart, veteran of North Africa, Sicily, Monte Cassino, etc., a giant shadow, a man of flesh and blood, a restless seeker, pitiful and rude, a stubborn old lush with broken bridgework, threatening death and suicide” (Bellow 192).

Henderson is still obsessed with the dark shadow clouding his life. He cannot allow himself to rejoice in his triumph very long. He thought he had “burst the spirit’s sleep” and achieved the *grun-tu-molani*, but again, this was only a nice feeling in the moment. It was temporary. The meaning of life still eludes Henderson. He even regrets transporting Mummah the following day: “‘Whut fo’ you did it, sah?’ ‘Oh, Romilayu,’ I said, ‘if I could explain that I wouldn’t be where I am today...I don’t know why it is I have such extreme intensity. The whole thing is so peculiar the explanation will have to be peculiar too. Figuring will get me nowhere, it’s only illumination that I have to wait for.’ And thinking of how black things were and how absent any illumination was I sighed and moaned again” (Bellow 197). Henderson is once again focused on his failures rather than a path to illumination. He simply has no clue where to go or what to do to “burst the spirit’s sleep” permanently. Consequently, Henderson decides that thinking about and planning for the future will never give him the enlightenment he desires. He seems to think that the necessary enlightenment will magically appear one day, but this is not the case with any of the truly wise people that Henderson meets. Queen Willatale and King Dafhu, the two wisest characters in the novel, have taken a different path than Henderson. They have lived and worked in pursuit of the *grun-tu-mulani*. It never magically fell on their spirits; nor did it occur in one spectacular moment. Henderson must learn to walk a similar path.

When Henderson discovers that the king has a lion trapped under the palace, he immediately jumps to the conclusion that the king must be crazy, but then retreats as he considers his own shortcomings:

‘And now with the lions. Lions! And the man almost a graduate physician. The whole thing is crazy.’ Thus I reflected. But then I also had to take into account the fact that I have a voice within me repeating, *I want*, raving and demanding, making a chaos,

desiring, desiring, and disappointing continually, which drove me forth as beaters drive game. So I had no business to make terms with life, but had to accept such conditions as it would let me have. (Bellow 203)

In this case, the conditions Henderson must accept involve the lion beneath King Dahfu's palace. He does not yet know what role the lion will play in his development, but he is willing to go along with the king because, in Henderson's eyes, the king is the only one who can instruct him on how to get rid of the voice that says "I want." This passage also reveals that Henderson is not a modern hero at this point in the novel. Though he has lifted Mummah and become the Rain King, the voice that says "I want" remains and the meaning of life eludes him. King Dahfu is his only hope. He soon realizes the problem: "'So tell me, what do I illustrate most?' 'Why,' he said, 'everything about you, Henderson-Sungo, cries out, Salvation, salvation! What shall I do? What must I do? At once! What will become of me? And so on. That is bad'" (Bellow 210). The main thing that stands out to King Dahfu about Henderson's life story is his need for salvation. He sees Henderson as a rash and reckless man drifting through life with no obvious idea where he should go. Yet he respects Henderson all the same and becomes determined to help him find the meaning of life and rid himself of the voice that says "I want."

At King Dahfu's direction, Henderson must enter the lion's cage beneath the palace. As King Dahfu states, confronting the lion is Henderson's only option: "'First she is unavoidable. Test it, and you will find she is unavoidable. And this is what you need, as you are an avoider. Oh, you have accomplished momentous avoidances. But she will change that. She will make consciousness to shine. She will burnish you. She will force the present moment upon you'" (Bellow 251). The lion, according to King Dahfu, holds the key to Henderson's transformation because it is unavoidable. The king sees that Henderson's broken spirit is also unavoidable.

Therefore, Henderson must confront the lion and his own failures simultaneously in order to receive illumination. Evidently, King Dahfu believes in Henderson:

‘Excellent. Precisely. Change. You fled what you were. You did not believe you had to perish. Once more, and a last time, you tried the world. With a hope of alteration... You have told me much. You are frank. This makes you irresistible, as not many are. You have rudiments of high character. You could be noble. Some parts may be so long-buried as to be classed dead. Is there any resurrection in them? This is where the change comes in.’ (Bellow 251)

King Dahfu understands Henderson’s life story perfectly well, but he believes that the misery and self-loathing can be conquered. He sees nobility and rudiments of high character, but these traits are buried beneath Henderson’s failures. Consequently, he believes that Henderson must resurrect those positive traits hiding beneath the surface. Only by doing this can Henderson find the illumination he so desires.

King Dahfu explains that Henderson must imitate the lion while standing before her in the cage: “‘What do you want me to do?’ ‘As I have done. As Gmilo, Suffo, all the forefathers did. They all acted the lion. Each absorbed the lion into himself. If you do as I wish, you too will act the lion’” (Bellow 255). King Dahfu explains to him that he and his forefathers have absorbed the lion’s spirit. They have then acted out the part of the lion in order to become mighty men. Henderson attempts to do the same:

And so I was the beast. I gave myself to it, and all my sorrow came out in the roaring. My lungs supplied the air but the note came from my soul... This was where my heart had sent me, with its clamor. This is where I ended up. Oh, Nebuchadnezzar! How well I understand that prophecy of Daniel. For I had claws, and hair, and some teeth, and I was

bursting with hot noise, but when all this had come forth, there was still a remainder.

That last thing of all was my human longing. (Bellow 258)

As he roars, Henderson totally submits himself to the process that King Dahfu has described. He feels like the lion's spirit is within him as the notes flow from his soul. Unlike Nebuchadnezzar, he now feels like he can co-exist with the mighty as well as the lowly beasts of the field.

However, when he finishes, his human longing and self-loathing returns: "A bungled lump of humanity! Oh, ho, ho, ho, ho! Would death please wash me away and dissolve this giant collection of errors. 'It's the pigs,' I suddenly realized, 'the pigs! Lions for him, pigs for me. I wish I was dead'" (Bellow 259). Henderson realizes that his life is a giant collection of failures. He has bungled his way through it hopelessly searching for the meaning of life, but has found failure rather than illumination. This intimately connects him with the pigs on his farm:

That was when I warned her, 'You'd better not hurt them. Those animals have become a part of me.' Well, had those creatures become a part of me? I hesitated to come clean with Dahfu and to ask him right out bluntly whether he could see their influence.

Secretly investigating myself, I felt my cheekbones...Under my helmet, my fingers crept toward my eyelashes...And now I felt my jowls, my snout; I did not dare to look down at what had happened to me. Hams. Tripes, a whole caldron full of them. Trunk, a fat cylinder. It seemed to me that I couldn't even breathe without grunting. (Bellow 260-261)

As Henderson begins to question his relationship to the pigs in his yard, he wonders if their lowly stature is representative of his pathetic life. Mostly, he wonders if he has chosen pigs for a particular reason. He reflects upon Daniel's prophecy concerning King Nebuchadnezzar and

realizes that he has chosen pigs to farm because he is like the pigs. He must imitate the lion in order to become a modern hero, but he is more closely aligned with the pigs.

Through his roaring, Henderson cries out to God for help and mercy. In his anguish, he asks for aid. However, the process that King Dahfu has prescribed for Henderson is unsuccessful at first. He believes the cause of this lies deep within Henderson's soul. The "old self is resisting," King Dahfu explains (Bellow 266). Henderson soon agrees with the king's diagnosis: "'Oh yes, I feel that old self more than ever,' I said. 'I feel it all the time. It's got a terrific grip on me'" (Bellow 266). His relationship to the pigs, the voice that says "I want," and his failure to find the grun-tu-molani are all indications that Henderson's self-loathing has a tremendous grip on him. He feels the old self all the time because he is unable to shake his past failures and present inadequacies. As a result, Henderson's mind is on a loop where he constantly and consistently comes back to his failures rather than successes in life.

At the completion of his training with the lion, Henderson seems to have found some level of success: "For his sake I accepted the discipline of being like a lion. Yes, I thought, I believed I could change; I was willing to overcome my old self; yes, to do that a man had to adopt some new standard; he must even force himself into a part...I would never make a lion, I knew that; but I might pick up a small gain here and there in the attempt" (Bellow 288). Henderson realizes that he may never become the lion as King Dahfu and his forefathers have done. He is willing to change and overcome his failures, but he is not willing or able to adopt the new lifestyle necessary for enlightenment. Consequently, he is limited to small gains which change nothing. This realization causes Henderson to once again revel in his own suffering and self-loathing: "He observed that I was peculiar about trouble and suffering...I *was* monstrously proud of my suffering. I thought there was nobody in the world that could suffer quite like me"

(Bellow 294). Henderson's suffering defines him. He is uniquely able to find failure in every task he undertakes. And though change is possible, everything in Henderson's being seems to resist that change. He is monstrously proud of his self-loathing and cannot let it go no matter how well he roars before the lion. Consequently, Henderson has not reached the status of a modern hero.

When King Dahfu dies trying to capture the lion in the form of his father Gmilo, Henderson learns that he, as the Sungo, is to take his place. His reaction is interesting as he speaks to the king: "Sungo also is my successor," he said, touching my hand. "I take your place?" ... Then I said, "Your Majesty, move over and I'll die beside you. Or else be me and live; I never knew what to do with life anyway, and I'll die instead." I began to rub and beat my face with my knuckles, crouching in the dust between the dead lion and the dying king... "I waited too long, and I ruined myself with pigs. I'm a broken man." (Bellow 302-303). In this critical moment, Henderson begins to think that he has waited too long to find enlightenment. His lifetime of failures coupled with the realization that he has no clue what he wants to do in life causes Henderson to seek death rather than a kingship. In essence, he would rather die in the wise king's place than become a wise man himself. In Henderson's mind, he deserves to die at this moment mainly because of his constant failures, but also because he has identified and ruined himself with the lowly beasts of the field. He is a broken man who cannot possibly take the place of King Dahfu.

Henderson only reaches a point of transformation in the very last few pages. He is on his way home to his wife Lily and their children: "I'm eager to know how it will be now that the sleep is burst. And the children, too. I love them very much" (Bellow 325). Henderson suddenly realizes that in the process of roaring before the lion and watching the king die, he has



“burst the spirit’s sleep.” It is a delayed reaction, but a welcomed reaction all the same.

Henderson seems to have finally found the *grun-tu-molani*, (or meaning of life) and discovered an answer to the voice that says “I want.” He also plans to rid himself of the pigs. He has fundamentally become a modern hero. Henderson goes on to demonstrate this transformation aboard the plane back to the United States. He befriends a young orphan boy who has lost his parents. This touches Henderson in a positive way: “This kid went to my heart. You know how it is when your heart drops” (Bellow 325). Henderson lets the orphan boy play with his lion cub, shows him pictures in a magazine, gives him dinner, and lets him fall asleep in his lap. When the plane lands in Newfoundland to refuel, Henderson takes the boy on a walk in the frigid cold. He wraps the boy in a blanket and holds him close to his chest:

‘I’m going to take a walk. Will you come with me?’ I said to the kid. He answered me in Persian. ‘Well, it’s okay,’ I said. I held out the blanket, and he stood on the seat and entered it. Wrapping him, I took him in my arms...So we were let out, this kid and I, and I carried him down from the ship over the frozen ground of almost eternal winter, drawing breaths so deep they shook me, pure happiness...I held him close to my chest...While to me he was like medicine applied, and the air, too; it also was a remedy. Plus the happiness that I expected at Idlewild from meeting Lily. And the lion? He was in it, too. (Bellow 330)

Henderson’s trek with the young orphan boy upon the frozen tundra delivers pure happiness. In essence, he is now pleased with his life despite the failures that have plagued him. He is even optimistic about some of the very things that have troubled him. Henderson now believes that he can find happiness in all things: “We can immediately see the outcome of Henderson’s changed state as a new person. Henderson acts and behaves differently than he used to. The first sign is

the way he treats people around him...Henderson shows affection to a young Indian boy whose parents have died and he takes care of him...We can also see that Henderson is happy to see his wife Lily which would normally not be expected of him” (Cercis 8-9). Henderson, once a menace to his friends and neighbors, now seems excited to enter and participate in the normal society that he is accustomed to back home. He starts by taking care of the young boy and anxiously anticipating his reunion with Lily and the kids. Now that the transformation has occurred, Henderson can share the new perspective with his family and friends.

In the end, the trip to Africa has awakened Henderson’s spirit: “In Bellow’s conceptions and imagination, during the African journey away from modern civilization, Henderson’s soul is baptized by the original and he eventually finds his spiritual belonging” (Gao 1117). The revival of his soul transforms Henderson into a modern hero. He now has something to offer society, and as he reflects upon his return to civilization, he finds excitement as well as contentment within. Ultimately, Henderson can face reality, and in a sense, create a new reality for himself. This is what allows the transformation to take place: “At the end of all his efforts, Henderson ultimately finds a new reality in Africa which helps him to transform his former unsatisfied life and personality” (Cercis 9). Henderson’s new reality is a vision in which he re-enters society and becomes productive and content. He no longer needs to raise pigs, smash rocks, play the violin, or obsess over his failures because he is suddenly satisfied with life. A great transformation has occurred within Henderson’s spirit. It is also a new reality where Henderson loves and cares deeply for his family. He does not loathe the trip home or the fact that he must return to his family. Again, we see that a great transformation has occurred. We also witness the arduous journey that Henderson must take for that change to be possible. He faces adversity like no other character in the novel and he triumphs in the end. Ultimately, the suffering that

Henderson must endure coupled with the massive transformation which takes place makes him a modern hero.

## 7 CHAPTER 7

### **Quentin Compson as the Most Depressed and Disillusioned Anti-Hero Found Within Modernist Literature**

*The Sound and the Fury*, by William Faulkner, only contains one modern hero. Quentin Compson, a young Harvard student, is probably the most disillusioned and damaged hero we have covered so far. He is arguably the most depressing character in modernist literature due to his obsessions with the past and with time. He cannot recover from the memory of his sister losing her virginity and he cannot stop obsessing over the watch in his pocket. According to James Stannard, Quentin has a dangerous “obsession with the past,” displays extensive “trauma,” and “suffers debilitating psychological damage” (Stannard 208). *The Sound and the Fury* contains four sections each narrated by a different character. For the purposes of this discussion, we will focus on Quentin’s section. In Quentin’s narrative, Faulkner uses a technique called stream-of-consciousness to unveil Quentin’s mind to the reader. Consequently, the narrative does not contain much action. It will be on the thoughts of Quentin Compson that this discussion will focus.

There are two major recurring themes within Quentin’s narrative. The first involves his shadow. In “The Words of *The Sound and the Fury*,” Robert Martin writes, “Just as the image of fire dominates Benjy’s section, so does the image of the ‘shadow’ dominate Quentin’s section. Quentin is constantly noticing his ‘shadow’ and is usually bent on trying to elude it...Quentin also seems to personify the ‘shadow,’ allowing it the ability to try to outsmart him” (Martin 50). Quentin’s narrative begins with a focus on his shadow and its significance in his life. As Martin suggests, the shadow is both an inside and outside feature of Quentin’s mind. In other words, Quentin embodies his shadow while also outwardly obsessing over it. In the first example,

Faulkner writes, "I stepped into sunlight, finding my shadow again. I walked down the steps just ahead of it" (Faulkner 82). This is the moment Quentin begins his long walk through the narrative. He is walking ahead of his shadow in this scene. This is the only time he seems to outrun or outpace it. For the remainder of the narrative, Quentin seems frustrated by his shadow: "and I leaned on the railing, watching my shadow, how I had tricked it" (Faulkner 92). This is one of those instances Martin describes in his article. Here, Quentin personifies his shadow while also claiming to elude it. His frustration with the actual physical shadow is evident, but he does not realize that the very shadow he is trying to elude already resides in his troubled mind. There is no escape for Quentin Compson, an observation that becomes more and more evident as the narrative continues: "Trampling my shadow's bones into the concrete with hard heels...The chimes began as I stepped on my shadow...I walked upon the belly of my shadow" (Faulkner 96). This is the most common reference that Quentin makes concerning his shadow throughout the narrative. He is usually trying to walk upon it and grind it into the ground. There are at least a dozen other references like it and there is great significance in Quentin's frustration: "Quentin seems always to be in movement trying to distance himself from his shadow, that part of himself that possesses all the humanity and non-order that he cannot escape" (Martin 50). Quentin's shadow represents the chaos and disorder in his life. Again, the shadow is much more than just a physical darkness. The shadow is Quentin's very mindset. The fact that he cannot shake, elude, or destroy it indicates that Quentin's problems are not only here to stay, they are here to dominate his life. This comes into sharper focus as the narrative continues: "my shadow lying flat upon the water, so easily had I tricked it that would not quit me. At least fifty feet it was, and if I only had something to blot it into the water, holding it until it was drowned" (Faulkner 90). This passage displays Quentin's strongest desire yet to rid himself of his shadow, yet he

still sees it in only a physical light as he drowns it in the water. There is no profound realization that the darkness is something that exists both within and without. In other words, Quentin lacks the ability at this point in the novel to recognize the darkness within his own psychologically damaged mind. He simply thinks of it as something physical that can be drowned in the river. Ironically, this passage also foreshadows the manner of Quentin's death. He does, in fact, drown himself later in the novel. We may conclude that, through suicide, Quentin does ultimately free himself of his shadow and his psychological trauma. This will be further discussed in a moment.

The second recurring theme in Quentin's narrative involves the relationship between time and depression:

When the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtains it was between seven and eight o'clock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch. It was Grandfather's and when Father gave it to me he said I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it's rather excruciatingly apt that you will use it to gain the reducto absurdum of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father's. I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it. Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools. (Faulkner 76)

According to this passage, time reveals to man his own folly and despair. He may use it to pursue positive gains, but in the end will merely realize the absurdity of existence. It is only through escaping time that man can achieve any form of happiness. Unfortunately, Quentin is "in time." His debilitating psychological damage is due to this fact. He simply cannot escape time. In other words, clinical depression is linked to time within Quentin's narrative. In "The

Physical and Psychological Grotesque in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Sanctuary*," James Stannard writes, "Quentin Compson...cannot follow his father's advice to 'forget time'" (Stannard 210). For Quentin, being "in time" means that he cannot look outside of time, and therefore, cannot escape the way it consumes and ravages his life.

Consequently, he fails to carry out his father's advice to "forget time." As the story continues, we see that Quentin is not only "in time," he is quite obsessed with it: "I got up and went to the dresser and slid my hand along it and touched the watch and turned it face-down and went back to bed...And so as soon as I knew I couldn't see it, I began to wonder what time it was"

(Faulkner 77). This is Quentin's first attempt to escape time, but just as with his shadow, he is unsuccessful. By placing the watch face-down, time does not disappear as Quentin hopes it will. Instead, time appears in an even more important light by piquing his curiosity. Consequently, he reverts to other means of forgetting time. He tries smashing the watch: "I went to the dresser and took up the watch, with the face still down. I tapped the crystal on the corner of the dresser and caught the fragments of glass in my hand and put them into the ashtray and twisted the hands off and put them in the tray. The watch ticked on. I turned the face up, the blank dial with little wheels clicking and clicking behind it, not knowing any better" (Faulkner 80). Quentin's attempt to escape time is again unsuccessful. He smashes the watch, shatters the glass, and rips the hands off. Unfortunately, the wheels keep turning and the watch keeps ticking. Even with the watch destroyed, time does not stop. As we have seen, this is indicative of Quentin's ability to escape time. However, this is also indicative of Quentin's inability to escape the psychological trauma that tortures him. As we shall discuss in a moment, time and psychological trauma converge in Quentin's narrative.

Quentin begins his journey across town, but as he walks, he finds that time pursues him: “and then I could hear my watch ticking away in my pocket and after a while I had all the other sounds shut away, leaving only the watch in my pocket” (Faulkner 83). In another attempt to escape time, Quentin is again unsuccessful. This is mainly because he blots out all the other sounds around him and focuses instead on the broken watch ticking in his pocket. Ironically, his attempt to escape time is also an attempt to obsess over it. This again indicates that Quentin cannot escape his troubled mind. In fact, he obsesses over his problems rather than ignoring or solving them. We see another example of this when Quentin walks into the watch repair shop to both inquire about repairing his watch and to obsess over the watches and clocks inside:

The place was full of ticking, like crickets in September grass, and I could hear a big clock on the wall above his head... ‘Would you mind telling me if any of those watches in the window are right’ ... ‘It’s twen –’ ‘Don’t tell me,’ I said. ‘please sir. Just tell me if any of them are right’ ... ‘Are any of them right?’ ‘No. But they haven’t been regulated and set yet. If you’re thinking of buying one of them –’ ‘No, sir. I don’t need a watch. We have a clock in our sitting room. I’ll have this one fixed when I do.’ I reached my hand. ‘Better leave it now.’ ‘I’ll bring it back later.’ (Faulkner 83-84)

Strangely, Quentin asks about having his watch fixed, but then declines the repair man’s offer to fix it. He hopes that he can still escape time if the watch remains broken. This translates also into a hope to escape the psychological trauma that plagues him. This is the first sign that Quentin has a chance to forget the past and attain happiness ultimately in the end. This will also be discussed at greater length in a moment.

When Quentin awkwardly asks the repair man if the watches in the window tell the correct time, he reveals that he has no intention of buying one. Oddly, Quentin is obsessed with



the ticking watches even if the time on all of them is different and incorrect: "I went out, shutting the door upon the ticking. I looked back into the window... There were about a dozen watches in the window, a dozen different hours and each with the same assertive and contradictory assurance that mine had, without any hands at all. Contradicting one another, I could hear mine, ticking away inside my pocket, even though nobody could see it, even though it could tell nothing if anyone could" (Faulkner 85). Again, Quentin is obsessed with the time displayed by each watch and he understands the paradox that each watch, being incorrect, still asserts itself the same. Each watch proclaims a different time with the same certainty. As Quentin leaves, the watch in his pocket overwhelms the other sounds around him just as it has before. This once again indicates that Quentin cannot escape time or his debilitating psychological damage. Time, to Quentin, is a prison: "Father said a man is the sum of his misfortunes. One day you'd think misfortune would get tired, but then time is your misfortune Father said... You carry the symbol of your frustration into eternity. Then the wings are bigger Father said only who can play a harp" (Faulkner 104). This quote perfectly links time with depression. Now we can see the connection that Quentin has been trying to make this entire time. In his attempt to escape time while also obsessing over it, Quentin remembers the downcast words of his father. As he applies these words to himself, Quentin realizes that he is merely the sum of everything that has gone wrong in his life. He also notes that when his misfortunes grow tired, then time becomes the driver for his problems to match their full potential. In other words, time and debilitating psychological trauma are related in Quentin's narrative. For Quentin, to be in time and obsessed with time is the equivalent of being clinically depressed and mentally unstable.

In another example, Faulkner writes, "Father was teaching us that all men are just accumulations dolls stuffed with sawdust swept up from the trash heaps where all previous dolls

had been thrown away...The three quarters began. The first note sounded, measured and tranquil, serenely peremptory, emptying the unhurried silence for the next one” (Faulkner 175-176). Again, the pessimistic and dejected words of Quentin’s father relate to time because they appear alongside the chimes in the distance. As the sounds ring out, Quentin pictures humanity as the accumulation of broken dolls among the trash heaps. The dead humans are dissolving into sawdust while the new humans are being created with that very same sawdust. In other words, the trash heap of humanity just continues forever. Quentin’s view of life is a tragic one, but it is one that he is unable to challenge: “Quentin is a fine example of Faulkner’s idea of the ‘human heart in conflict with itself’...Quentin is trying to cope with the order of the world, trying to tolerate some degree of disorder, but he cannot do it” (Martin 50). The disorder within Quentin’s mind is too great. His obsession with time and the depressing advice of his father has ruined him. He is arguably the most disillusioned character in all of modernist literature. And yet even he finds a way to gain redemption, though in a very unconventional way. Faulkner hints at this late in the narrative:

The honeysuckle got all mixed up in it the whole thing came to symbolize night and unrest I seemed to be lying neither asleep nor awake looking down a long corridor of gray halflight where all stable things had become shadowy paradoxical all I had done shadows all I had felt suffered taking visible form antic and perverse mocking without relevance inherent themselves with the denial of the significance they should have affirmed thinking I was I was not (Faulkner 170)

The most interesting part of this passage lies in the last line – “I was I was not.” Essentially, Quinton is experimenting with the idea of non-existence, an idea that Faulkner emphasizes by writing in the past tense. This indicates that Quinton is quickly moving toward the past or is

already in the past – he was in existence and then he was not. The idea of non-existence is key within the novel because Quentin must cease to exist in order to escape time. In “A Bakhtinian Reading of William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*,” Sahar Al-Keshwan writes, “However, Quentin finds that time has been a problem for him all his life, so he decides to stop the clock by committing suicide” (Al-Keshwan 115). Through death, Quentin is able to escape time. In fact, as Faulkner suggests above, it appears to be the only way for him to escape time. In doing so, he leaves his obsessions, instabilities, traumas, and depression behind. Through his unconventional escape, he becomes a modern hero.

## 8 CHAPTER 8

### **Leopold Bloom Assumes the Role of a Modern, Unconquered Hero and Propels Himself to the Heroic Levels of Odysseus and Elijah**

James Joyce's *Ulysses* presents us with probably the most well-known and celebrated modern hero found within all of modernist literature. The protagonist, Leopold Bloom, is a middle-aged newspaper advertiser who wanders around Dublin for the entirety of the novel. He suffers like no other, whether it be the loss of his son, his lack of common culture with the citizens around him, or his intimate knowledge of the affair that his wife is currently having. Consequently, he is a pathetic, disillusioned character. However, Leopold Bloom also shows great heroic qualities throughout the novel. We will explore this paradox methodically as we investigate the most telling parts of the story – Episodes 6 (Hades), 8 (Lestrygonians), 11 (Sirens), 12 (Cyclops), and 18 (Penelope). We will then examine how Joyce's ingenious parallelism between *Ulysses* and *The Odyssey* makes Leopold Bloom a modern anti-hero in another fashion.

In Episode 6, Bloom attends the funeral of his dear friend Paddy Dignam. Throughout the chapter, Joyce uses stream-of-consciousness (as he does for most of the novel) to place us inside the head of Bloom. Consequently, we see both meaningful and quite insignificant thoughts roaming through Bloom's mind. When the conversation turns to Simon Dedalus's son, Stephen, Bloom immediately thinks of his own son who passed away years before: "If little Rudy had lived. See him grow up. Hear his voice in the house. Walking beside Molly in an Eton suit. My son. Me in his eyes. Strange feeling it would be. From me...I could have helped him on in life. I could. Make him independent" (Joyce 79). Obviously, Bloom is terribly saddened by the thought of his dead son, Rudy. He goes into intricate detail about how it would

feel for Rudy to still be around and how he could help Rudy triumph in life. In another instance where a child's casket is being transported through the cemetery, Bloom again thinks of Rudy: "A dwarf's face mauve and wrinkled like little Rudy's was" (Joyce 85). Once more, Bloom's thoughts turn to the saddest subject of which he can think. In a third instance, Mr. Power makes a comment about the cowardice of one who commits suicide: "But the worst of all, Mr. Power said, is the man who takes his own life" (Joyce 86). This immediately makes Bloom think of his own father who committed suicide:

He looked away from me. He knows. That afternoon of the inquest. The redlabelled bottle on the table. The room in the hotel with hunting pictures. Stuffy it was. Sunlight through the slats of the Venetian blinds. The coroner's ears, big and hairy. Boots giving evidence. Thought he was asleep first. Then saw like yellow streaks on his face. Had slipped down to the foot of the bed. Verdict: overdose. Death by misadventure. The letter. For my son Leopold. (Joyce 86)

Just like his thoughts concerning Rudy, Bloom's thoughts concerning his father contain a lot of detail. He remembers the afternoon well, the labelled bottle on the table, the Venetian blinds, the coroner's ears, the yellow streaks on his father's face, the ultimate verdict – death by poisoning, death by suicide, and the letter which was left for him by his father. With the remembrance of Rudy and his father, it is easy to see from the very beginning that Bloom is not meant to be a conquering hero as in the tales of old. He is a sad figure who has no quest and nothing to conquer. For instance, there is no mission that might save Bloom's father or son. Therefore, the hero cannot resolve the problem at hand. He must live with the memory of their deaths forever. Thus, he is meant to be a different type of hero altogether. He cannot resolve the issues that

plague him, but he can show emotion toward others suffering like himself. We see this mostly in his compassion for Paddy Dignam as well as the wife and children he has left behind:

Bloom is distinguished (and isolated), however, not only by independence of thought but by tolerant concern for the thoughts and feelings of others...He is above all...‘a good man,’ and his goodness stems from his boundless capacity for sympathetic identification...Among his own species his compassion extends not only to the dead, from poor Dignam to his own heartbroken father, but to the bereft and helpless, like Dignam’s orphaned sons, and to all who suffer derision or pain. (Torrance 246)

Bloom’s experience with suffering is actually a positive aspect of his life. It allows him to identify and sympathize with those who suffer like him. And this display of sympathy, in turn, makes him a modern hero. We do not usually see this type of sympathy from traditional, classical heroes because they identify with the conqueror in any and all situations rather than those who have been conquered, those who need the sympathy. Consequently, we once again see Bloom as a different type of hero altogether.

In Episode 8, Bloom is wandering the streets of Dublin thinking philosophically about the meaning of life, metempsychosis, and the suffering one must endure on a day-to-day basis before his thoughts suddenly turn to his wife: “Never put a dress on her back like it. Fitted her like a glove, shoulder and hips. Just beginning to plump it out well...People looking after her. Happy. Happier then” (Joyce 138). This is the first indication that Bloom is no longer happy in his marriage. Though the marriage is intact and surviving, and Bloom has no intention of ending it, he is not as happy as he once was: “Could see her in the bedroom from the hearth unclamping the busk of her stays. White. Swish and soft flop her stays made on the bed. Always warm from her. Always liked to let herself out. Sitting there after till near two, taking out her hairpins.

Milly tucked up in beddyhouse. Happy. Happy. That was the night” (Joyce 138). Bloom seems to hint here that the night he is describing is the night when his wife, Molly, became pregnant with Rudy. Obviously, this is one of Bloom’s happiest memories, and again, he juxtaposes this memory with the new reality that his marriage is an unhappy one. Once more, Joyce writes, “I was happier then...Twentyeight I was. She twentythree when we left Lombard street west something changed. Could never like it again after Rudy. Can’t bring back time. Like holding water in your hand” (Joyce 149). Obviously, when Bloom thinks of his wife, he can sadly only think of better times. Here, we see that the death of Rudy has brought a twofold devastation upon Bloom’s life – the loss of a child and the partial loss of his marriage. In addition, he no longer has sex with his wife. Bloom indicates that she could never like it again after that. The death of Rudy has placed a huge chasm between he and Molly. Unfortunately for Bloom, things only get worse: ““Isn’t Blazes Boylan mixed up in it?” A warm shock of air heat of mustard haunched on Mr. Bloom’s heart...His midriff yearned then upward, sank within him, yearned more longly, longingly” (Joyce 154). We see throughout the novel that Blazes Boylan is having an affair with Bloom’s wife. Unfortunately, Bloom is quite aware of the affair. In this passage, the mere mention of his name causes a warm shock of air to hit Bloom’s heart. His stomach drops upon the realization that Boylan is scheduled to have sex with his wife in just a few hours. Bloom is a cuckolded husband, embarrassed and ashamed. He, in no way, resembles a classical hero. Again, he is a completely different type of hero. We see this as well in the way Bloom worries about and sympathizes with poor Paddy Dignam and Mina Purefoy, a woman in the hospital who is suffering due to difficulties with the birth of a child. Once again, Bloom’s compassion and empathy prove to be his heroic qualities.

In Episode 11, Bloom's thoughts mostly concern his loneliness and his wife's affair with Blazes Boylan: "I feel so sad...So lonely blooming...Last rose. Castille of summer left bloom I feel so sad alone...I feel so sad today...So lonely...went Bloom, soft Bloom, I feel so lonely Bloom" (Joyce 230, 231, 252, 258). In the previous episodes, we have seen Bloom's sorrow as it relates to Rudy and Molly. In these passages, Bloom indicates no outside circumstances affecting his mood or mental state. He is simply lonely. We might conclude here that Bloom suffers from some type of clinical depression, but there simply is not enough evidence for this claim. Therefore, it is upon Bloom's real worries and actual problems that we must focus: "Blazes Boylan's smart tan shoes creaked on the barfloor where he strode. Yes, gold from anear by bronze from afar. Lenehan heard and knew and hailed him" (Joyce 238). Bloom is silent as Boylan enters the bar even while his friend greets him. Bloom even worries that Boylan may see him: "See me he might" (Joyce 238). In this circumstance, a traditional hero would confront his enemy, the man having sex with his wife, but Bloom does not. He is passive in the face of the battle that arguably needs to take place. And this passivity threatens his mental state, his marriage, and his happiness. He merely hopes Boylan has "forgotten" that his sexual appointment is "at four" (Joyce 239). Bloom looks again like a rather pathetic character. However, Joyce does something very interesting here. As the passage above continues, Joyce writes, "See the conquering hero comes. Between the car and window, warily walking, went Bloom, unconquered hero" (Joyce 238). The "conquering hero" refers to Boylan for obvious reasons, mainly because he has conquered Bloom's wife. However, Bloom is also referred to as a hero, an "unconquered hero." So far, we have seen that Bloom's ability to empathize with others produces heroic qualities in him. However, as the novel progresses, we see many more reasons why Bloom is ultimately the modern hero of the novel. This reference is foreshadowing



in a way and shows Joyce's intention in creating Bloom in the first place: "He...emerges as an exceptional but still ordinary person. When he sees the 'conquering hero' Boylan leave a bar to have sex with Molly, he remains an 'unconquered hero,' a description suggesting resiliency, specifically the equanimity that eventually displaces his gnawing jealousy...such a historical break in conventions about the traditional hero was Joyce's intention" (Kern 40). Joyce breaks with the convention followed by writers for thousands of years concerning heroes within Western literature. It is obviously his intention to present Bloom in a very different lighting because he wants his hero to display completely different qualities, and yet still retain some of the same. Thus, Joyce breaks with convention as he attempts to portray Bloom as an anti-hero rather than a classical one.

In Episode 12, Bloom enters a pub where his friends are visiting with the citizen. He is known as the citizen because of his passionate love of Ireland. He is also considered a hero within the novel: "The figure...was that of a broadshouldered deepchested stronglimbed frankeyeyed redhaired freely freckled shaggybearded widemouthed largenosed longheaded deepvoiced barekneed brawnyhanded hairylegged ruddyfaced, sinewyarmed hero" (Joyce 266). The citizen is a hero in the same way that Boylan is a hero – they are both strong, loud, conquering forces. Also, like Boylan, the citizen is prefigured to be a hostile force against Bloom. And again, Bloom is set up to be an unconquered hero: "bedight in sable armour? O'Bloom, the son of Rory: it is he. Impervious to fear is Rory's son: he of the prudent soul" (Joyce 268). Joyce depicts Bloom here as an anti-hero clad in armor and impervious to fear. He is a new type of hero, but still possesses some of the classical heroic qualities like strength and bravery. Bloom also emerges as a wise soul. Again, this is a classical heroic quality. Wisdom is not usually expected of a lonely, disillusioned character who is filled with sorrow. In addition,

Joyce presents Bloom as a man persecuted by his fellow citizens: “Swindling the peasants, says the citizen, and the poor of Ireland. We want no more strangers in our house” (Joyce 292). Here, the citizen is referring to Bloom as a stranger in his country’s house because Bloom is Jewish and technically not of Irish descent. However, the citizen is wrong. Bloom is no less Irish than him. He was born in Ireland like the citizen and considers himself to be just as Irish as the man persecuting him. The persecution continues:

‘Persecution, says he, all the history of the world is full of it. Perpetuating national hatred among nations.’ ‘But do you know what a nation means?’ says John Wyse. ‘Yes,’ says Bloom. ‘What is it?’ says John Wyse. ‘A nation?’ says Bloom. A nation is the same people living in the same place’...‘What is your nation if I may ask,’ says the citizen. ‘Ireland,’ says Bloom. ‘I was born here. Ireland.’ The citizen said nothing only cleared the spit out of his gullet and, gob, he spat a Red bank oyster out of him right in the corner. (Joyce 299)

In this passage, we clearly see that the citizen is not the only one questioning Bloom’s citizenship. The number of men persecuting him widens. John Wyse questions Bloom’s idea of a nation while the citizen merely spits into the corner in disgust. The inevitable questioning of Bloom’s race soon arises: “‘And I belong to a race too,’ says Bloom, ‘that is hated and persecuted. Also now. This very moment. This very instant’...‘Force, hatred, history, all that. That’s not life for men and women, insult and hatred. And everybody knows that it’s the very opposite of that that is really life’...‘Love,’ says Bloom. ‘I mean the opposite of hatred’...‘A new apostle to the gentiles,’ says the citizen. ‘Universal love’” (Joyce 300-301). Bloom recognizes the reasons behind his persecution right away. He knows that being a Jewish man in Ireland makes him an outcast. However, he has a solution – universal love, which creates a

space where all people can be accepted no matter their race or nationality. Of course, this does not register positively with the group, especially the citizen. He laughs at Bloom for the very thing that makes Bloom special, his ability to love despite being persecuted or outcast. Soon the men accuse Bloom of robbing Ireland:

John Wyse saying it was Bloom gave the idea for Sinn Fein to Griffith to put in his paper all kinds of jerrymandering, packed juries and swindling the taxes off of the Government and appointing consuls all over the world to walk about selling Irish industries...God save Ireland from the likes of that bloody mouseabout...old Methusalem Bloom, the robbing bagman...‘Where is he?’ says Lenehan. ‘Defrauding widows and orphans’...‘We don’t want him,’ says Crofter the Orangeman...It’d be an act of God to take a hold of a fellow the like of that and throw him in the bloody sea. Justifiable homicide, so it would...‘A wolf in sheep’s clothing,’ says the citizen. ‘That’s what he is.’ (Joyce 303-306)

Of course, the political accusations against Bloom like jerrymandering, packing juries, appointing consuls, and swindling taxes off the government are totally fabricated. The personal accusations like robbing orphans and widows are a complete fantasy as well. In this situation, Bloom must stand his ground. He reminds the men that Christ was a Jew: “‘And the Saviour was a Jew and his father was a Jew. Your God’...‘Whose God?’ says the citizen...‘Your God was a Jew. Christ was a Jew like me.’ Gob, the citizen made a plunge back into the shop. ‘By Jesus,’ says he, ‘I’ll brain that bloody Jewman for using the holy name. By Jesus, I’ll crucify him so I will’” (Joyce 309). Being Irish citizens, there is no doubt that the group of men persecuting Bloom follow Christianity (most likely Catholicism). Thus, they believe that Jesus is their resurrected savior. Their entire religion is based upon this fact, so when Bloom correctly

asserts that Jesus was a Jew, the men become infuriated. The citizen begins to chase Bloom out of the pub. As he punches into the air, the citizen misses because the sun is in his eyes. Bloom barely escapes into a car whose driver is frantically speeding away. Joyce describes Bloom's escape in the most interesting fashion:

And last we saw was the bloody car rounding the corner...When lo, there came about them all a great brightness and they beheld the chariot wherein He stood ascend to heaven. And they beheld Him in the chariot, clothed in the glory of the brightness, having raiment as of the sun, fair as the moon and terrible that for awe they durst not look upon Him. And there came a voice out of heaven calling: *Elijah! Elijah!* And he answered with a main cry: *Abba! Adonai!* And they beheld Him even Him, ben Bloom Elijah, amid clouds of angels ascend to the glory of the brightness at an angle of fortyfive degrees over Donohoe's in Little Green Street like a shot off a shovel. (Joyce 312)

In this passage, Joyce is alluding to the Biblical story of Elijah. Because of his righteousness, Elijah was taken up into heaven in a whirlwind by a chariot of fire. Here, we see that Bloom is no normal protagonist, but is rather an anti-hero who is being equated with arguably one of the greatest Biblical figures. The equation that takes place reveals Bloom's heroic qualities. Thus, the exiled Bloom is the driving force in the novel and the hero of the tale. Levenson shares his thoughts:

Bloom...is exiled from a community of fellows and followers who might sustain him until he reaches home...in Dublin Bloom has no common culture whose destiny he projects. Put simply, he has no crew. And yet, the novel does not rest with the isolation of its besieged protagonist; it continues to aspire to a form of epic community. It does so,

however, not by locating these comrades in the space around Bloom but by discovering them in time. (Levenson 192)

As we have seen throughout this episode, Bloom is exiled from his community because of his Jewish ancestry. However, the story does not end with Bloom's isolation. He can find a new community, not located in Dublin, but rather in time. In this situation, Elijah becomes Bloom's epic comrade. We know from Biblical history that Elijah is a hero of ages past. Therefore, when Joyce equates the two men, he is also equating their heroism. Consequently, Bloom, though exiled and isolated throughout the chapter, still possesses the mantle of modern hero at the end.

Episode 18 consists of a stream-of-consciousness monologue by Molly Bloom. In it, she explores dozens of topics which are often repeated throughout. The most repetitious and important topic concerns her husband, Leopold Bloom. We will focus on this sole topic. At the start of her monologue, Joyce writes, "Yes because he never did a thing like that before as ask to get his breakfast in bed with a couple of eggs" (Joyce 640). The "yes" at the beginning of the sentence refers to her answer years ago when Bloom proposed to her. Obviously, she said yes. Here, she remembers that and accompanies the response to serving him breakfast in bed. Despite her affair with Boylan, Molly's rambling thoughts begin with her husband. She apparently still thinks fondly of Bloom and remembers vowing to marry him. At the end of the monologue, we see something similar:

they might as well try to stop the sun from rising tomorrow the sun shines for you he said  
 the day we were lying among the rhododendrons on Howth head in the gray tweed suit  
 and his straw hat the day I got him to propose to me yes first I gave him the bit of  
 seedcake out of my mouth and it was leapyear like now yes 16 years ago my God after  
 that long kiss I near lost my breath yes he said I was a flower of the mountain yes so we

are flowers all a womans body yes that was one true thing he said in his life and the sun shines for you today yes that was why I liked him because I saw he understood or felt what a woman is and I knew I could always get round him and I gave him all the pleasure I could leading him on till he asked me to say yes and I wouldn't answer first...yes...yes...Gibraltar as a girl where I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like made and yes I said yes I will Yes. (Joyce 681-682)

This passage contains Molly's memory of Bloom proposing to her. In vivid detail, she recounts everything from the garden where they lay to Bloom's romantic words. In the end, we see her saying yes to his proposal. In fact, Molly says yes nineteen times within this one passage. Each time she is reaffirming her commitment to Bloom and the idea that she would marry him all over again. This memory changes the entire novel. Bloom is redeemed through his wife's recollections. His importance in the novel as well as his ultimate redemption places him far above Blazes Boylan. He no longer appears as a pathetic character, but rather a character who deserves the title of modern hero. All along, we have seen Bloom, the pacifist, command "the determination and skill to defy an implacably hostile world" in "defense of his paramount values" (Torrance 251). Now, in the final episode, we see the culmination of this as Bloom, the unconquered hero, defeats Boylan, his greatest adversary. In this moment, Bloom solidifies himself as the ultimate modern hero.

We have seen Bloom triumph albeit in unexpected ways throughout the novel. This, of course, makes him a modern hero as we have seen. However, he is an anti-hero in another respect too. Joyce constructed *Ulysses* in a way that would run parallel with *The Odyssey*.

Therefore, when we look at Leopold Bloom, we automatically compare him with Odysseus:

Joyce crafted Leopold Bloom to be a modern version of the handsome, athletic, virile, cunning, and courageous Odysseus from Homer's *The Odyssey*...Joyce's soft, overweight advertising salesman Bloom is a pacifist landlubber who carries a rolled-up newspaper in place of wielding the Odyssean sword, brandishes his cigar in place of the Odyssean spear, and flosses his teeth in place of stringing the Odyssean bow. Odysseus was the loyal son of Laertes, the protective father of Telemachus, and the devoted husband of Penelope; Bloom is in some ways a failure as a son, a father, and a husband, because his father committed suicide, his son is dead, and he has not had sexual intercourse with his wife in over ten years. (Kern 39)

The difference between Bloom and Odysseus spells out clearly the difference between a modern hero and a classical hero. Odysseus, branding a sword, defeats his enemies both abroad and at home. When he returns to his abode, his faithful wife is waiting for him. Bloom, on the other hand, brandishes no such sword. For nearly the entire novel, he is a rather pathetic advertising salesman who wanders around Dublin before returning home to his wife who has just had an affair earlier that day. In addition, we see Odysseus contemplating victory in battle while Bloom contemplates his dead son and father as well as his unfaithful wife. And yet Bloom is still very much like Odysseus. In *Theorists of the Modern Novel*, Deborah Parsons writes:

Leopold Bloom, an advertising salesman whose wife is cheating on him, who buys a kidney for his breakfast, picks his toe-nails, and masturbates in public, may seem an

unlikely parallel for the wily Greek. Bloom's life, presented in full prosaic detail, seems outstandingly ordinary. But at the same time it is this ordinariness that the reader is asked to be interested in, and to recognize as the extraordinary reality of life...we are to recognize in his character and circumstances the all-round man that Bloom is, revealing during the events of his day in Dublin his essential honesty and kindness, his prudence and wit, his physical and emotional needs and desires, and also his sense of exile and isolation, in the same way that Ulysses [Odysseus] did in the adventures that took him on his long journey home to Ithaca. (Parsons 62)

As Parsons suggests, Bloom is an ordinary man. However, his ordinariness comes to resemble something extraordinary when we look at his morality, compassion, and sense of exile and isolation. As we have discussed previously, these are the qualities that make Bloom a modern hero. However, these qualities also connect him with Odysseus, one of the most well-known classical heroes. It is this connection that bolsters Bloom's heroism to an even greater extent: "The meek and ostensibly unexceptional Bloom gradually emerges, when seen in the multiplicity of his inner life and latent affinities, as a hero no less versatile and resilient...than the resourceful Odysseus of Homeric legend" (Torrance 242). In the end, we see Bloom as an ordinary man emerging in extraordinary ways. As Torrance suggests, we see his resiliency and versatility as well as his morality throughout the novel. All these heroic qualities equate him with Odysseus, the mighty hero of legend. The deeds are what separate the two men. Thus, Bloom cannot be a classical hero. He must be a modern hero. In this way, he remains, as Joyce suggests early in the novel, the unconquered hero of *Ulysses*.



## 9 CONCLUSION

When we examine the rich literature left to us, from religious and mythic texts all the way up to the modern period, it becomes obvious that modernist fiction (particularly the modernist novel) is vastly different from everything that precedes it. This becomes especially obvious when we scrutinize the notion of the hero. As we have seen, heroes from time periods before the modern era (with a few exceptions) most often achieve heroic stature through the conquest of grandiose opponents. In addition, these heroes often triumph using violence (the sword). They conquer opponents and overcome obstacles through feats of strength. However, modernist heroes do almost the opposite. They most often achieve heroic stature through sheer perseverance. Rather than conquering some vast and mighty foe, they simply endure the pain that modern society projects onto them. This makes them unique in all of literature. We have seen this throughout our discussion. However, if we compare these texts to one another, we find that they are unique in another way. They all contain rather lame and passive protagonists, but these protagonists achieve heroic stature in very different ways according to which novel we examine.

We previously examined three novels which contain two heroes – *The Great Gatsby*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *To the Lighthouse*. These novels contain protagonists that start out in a less impressive state than the heroes who precede them. Nick is a struggling bond salesman whose sole purpose is to observe and record the romantic life of the rich and fabulous Gatsby. Nick is not heroic in any way. Marlow is described as an impressive man, but he lacks the ivory experience and philanthropic stature of someone like Kurtz. Like Nick, his sole purpose is to narrate the story of the hero who precedes him. Lily is a rather awkward woman who does not fit into the Victorian era societal rules that Mrs. Ramsay follows perfectly. She also does not

appear heroic in any way when the novel begins. However, in all these stories, when the initial heroes fail, the less impressive characters emerge triumphantly, often through sheer perseverance, to become the main modern heroes within the texts. This makes them different from nearly all the literature we see up until the modern time period.

However, each one of these three novels is also unique from one another in the way that the first heroes fail and the second heroes succeed. Gatsby's dream of reuniting with Daisy drives him throughout the novel and instills in him a romanticism focused on recapturing the past. However, his inability to release the dream once it has become impossible to achieve ruins him in the end. He dies tragically at the hands of Wilson, the mechanic. At this point, Nick, completely disillusioned with society in East and West Egg, decides to travel back West to his childhood home where he can regain his innocence and pursue a dream much like Gatsby's. With the tragically romantic character destroyed, Nick emerges as the main modern hero in the text. Kurtz also dies tragically, but he is far from a tragically romantic character. At the beginning of the novel, he appears as impressive and fabulous as the great Gatsby, but we learn later that he is corrupt to the core. His philanthropic mission has turned into a nightmare. His death is a horrific one, and though tragic, it is not romantic. Marlow emerges from Kurtz's death disillusioned, much like Nick. However, his disillusionment is with Western society as a whole and the rules by which this type of society lives. He also travels back home (to England), but his solution (as a modern hero) is to live by a whole new standard of rules, partly influenced by Western values and partly influenced by the recklessness and lack of restraint he witnesses from Kurtz in the wilderness. As the initial hero, Mrs. Ramsay is a tremendously impressive character. She contains aspects of both a Victorian and modern feminine hero, but when she fails to act on the thoughts of a modern woman, she becomes a mere product of her age. Only

insofar as she holds to the duties of her Victorian era is she recognized as a hero. In other words, she may show signs of being a modern, independent woman, but fails to become one in the novel. She dies quite tragically like the others. Upon her death, Lily emerges as the sole modern feminine hero in the novel. She is disillusioned with Victorian era values, but also realizes that the modern age is upon her and the values associated with a woman's role in society are rapidly changing. In other words, her values begin to match the more modern, feminine values created during her lifetime. In all three novels, the modern heroes learn from their mentors – the initial heroes – in order to propel themselves to heroic stature. However, as we have seen, each novel is different in the way that this task is accomplished. They are all unique in their own way.

*Nightwood*, in typical modernist fashion, contains lame and passive characters who ultimately achieve heroic stature through perseverance. Robin is, from the start, a highly unsatisfied character. She rejects the rigid structure of a typical Victorian family in order to pursue her own independence. However, in doing so, she essentially becomes a homeless woman who aimlessly wanders the streets at night. Though she finds temporary habitation throughout the novel, she never permanently has a home or a family. Nora runs a successful salon frequented by artists and appears, at first glance, to be a remarkable character. She is both savage and refined, trustworthy and selfless. However, she is also described as being a character of a singular nature in descent. We find later that her descent and unhappiness are mainly due to her attachment to Robin. Jenny is described as a squatter, someone who is unsatisfied with her own lot in life and wishes to steal aspects or people from the lives of others. She is obviously unhappy with herself and disillusioned with her own life. For this reason, she also chases after Robin unsuccessfully throughout the novel. Like Lily in *To the Lighthouse*, the three women in *Nightwood* all rebel against Victorian society and the rigid rules it places upon them. However,

the three women in *Nightwood* take this rebellion a step further by engaging in homosexual behavior. Their involvement in a disastrous lesbian love triangle makes them miserable, pathetic characters, and therefore, they fit the mold of most modernist fiction. However, their lesbian tendencies also make them modern feminine heroes because they persevere against the Victorian era society pushing them to get married and form a family. This again separates the novel from much of the literature written up until the modern period, but it also separates it from the other novels in this discussion. Barnes presents us with a unique story by using three modern, lesbian, feminine heroes. Like the other novels, her characters are ultimately lost and disillusioned with society. However, they are also redeemed in a sense by the way they persevere and keep their modern feminine identities.

We previously examined four novels which contain only one modern hero – *The Sun Also Rises*, *Henderson the Rain King*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Ulysses*. In each novel, the protagonists start out as lame and passive characters highly disillusioned with either modern society or their lot in life. They are not heroic in any fashion, which is something we have come to expect from modernist fiction. Early on, we learn that Jake is impotent. He has been terribly wounded (physically, psychologically, and emotionally) during World War I, and consequently, cannot fulfill the duties of a physical relationship with Brett Ashley, the woman he loves. Jake is also described as an American expatriate, highly disillusioned with the modern society that welcomes him after the war. He has relocated to Europe where he drinks on most nights to pass the time and forget about the past. Henderson is first presented to us as a man who is highly unsuccessful in nearly everything he attempts. In fact, he sees himself as a total failure. Henderson spends most of his time worrying about his teeth, playing the violin, breaking rocks, raising pigs, drinking, and causing chaos all over town. However, he also focuses a lot of time

and effort on something quite significant – bursting the spirit’s sleep and ridding himself of the voice that says *I want*. Essentially, Henderson feels like he is on a significant quest, but spends all his time doing insignificant things that do not aid the quest. He is, consequently, in a state of spiritual crisis when the novel begins. Quentin is perhaps the most disillusioned character in all modernist literature. From the start, he obviously suffers from clinical depression. Quentin’s constant focus on having sex with his sister in order to save her reputation and the depressing words of his father reveals that he has no hope for spiritual redemption. Instead, his mind is preoccupied with the meaninglessness of life. Bloom is perhaps the most famous of all the lame and passive characters found within modernist literature. He is a successful ad canvasser, yet he does not focus on his success at all. Instead, Bloom’s focus falls on his wife who is having an affair, his father who committed suicide, and his son who died tragically at an early age. In other words, we find early on that Bloom constantly and reflectively contemplates only the negative things in his life. He does not see life as meaningless, but he does view it as troublesome. In these four novels, the authors choose as their protagonists four rather pathetic characters who are not heroic in any way when the stories begin. The use of such lame and passive characters differentiates each of these novels from nearly every story written up until the modern period.

As expected, in all four novels, the protagonists become modern heroes at the end of their stories. Yet each novel differs in the way that this feat is accomplished. Jake is a hero who grows spiritually as the story unfolds. He takes a fishing trip to Burguete early in the novel to escape the chaotic and troubled life he has been leading in Paris. There, Jake finds a release and a peace in the ritual of fishing that can sustain him. However, after the trip ends, he immediately returns to a life like the one he had been leading in Paris. As an aficionado of bullfights, Jake feels that he must attend the festival in Pamplona. There, he drinks too much throughout the

siesta and ultimately pimps Brett out to one of the bullfighters. It is not until he goes to San Sebastian that he finds the needed renewal for his spirit. The ritual of tanning in the sun and swimming in the ocean is like the ritual of fishing. Consequently, something changes in Jake while at San Sebastian. It is a more permanent change than what takes place on the fishing trip. He returns to Pamplona and saves Brett (his true love) from the disastrous situation in which he placed her. However, he also realizes that he cannot maintain a relationship with her. Because of this realization, Jake finds peace in the fact that he can be alone (without Brett) and still be happy. It also occurs to him that he does not need to constantly drink in order to be satisfied. His disillusionment with modern society mainly due to his injuries sustained in the war as well as a deep dissatisfaction with his own life evaporates. In fact, he is determined to return to Paris where he can share what he has learned with other expatriates and Parisians. Jake's spiritual growth throughout the novel and his ultimate arrival at some form of enlightenment makes him a modern hero in the end.

Henderson is also a hero who grows spiritually throughout the novel. When he first arrives in Africa, he senses that he has come to the right place. He quickly meets a tribe called the Arnewi and begins his search for the grun-tu-molani, or the meaning of life. He appears to be on the right pathway to enlightenment until he attempts to save the tribe from the drought that is killing their livestock. When Henderson detonates the explosive in the Arnewi's cistern in order to kill the frogs, he destroys the cistern walls and releases all the tribe's drinking water. This event parallels what we see in the introduction. Henderson has failed once again. Because he must leave the tribe having never found the grun-tu-molani, Henderson immediately resorts to his old habit of self-loathing. He imagines that the meaning of life will elude him forever until he encounters another tribe called the Warriri. While with them, Henderson becomes the Rain

King by moving the rain god Mummah across the field and placing her in her rightful place. He is finally triumphant and succeeds at a major task, but surprisingly Henderson does not burst the spirit's sleep at this point or answer the voice that says *I want*. His spiritual growth is not complete even though he has saved the Warriri from the terrible drought and he resorts to the familiar habit of self-loathing. King Dafhu, upon noticing this, convinces Henderson to face his lion, Atti. Henderson spends the following weeks roaring before the lion, trying to release the burdens that a life of failure has brought upon him. However, the roaring does not burst the spirit's sleep either; nor does it rid him of the voice that says *I want*. It is not until the king dies tragically that Henderson learns the meaning of life. Between his escape from Africa and his arrival at the airport, Henderson's transformation occurs. Suddenly, everything changes. Henderson gains a tremendous desire to see his family. Rather than avoiding life back home like he has done in Africa, he wants to return and find success where he has known only failure. He finally bursts the spirit's sleep, answers the voice that says *I want*, and discovers the meaning of life. Like Jake, Henderson sheds his disillusionment, but not so much with modern society. His disillusionment has always revolved around his own failures, not with the society or values around him. He becomes a modern hero, but a slightly different type of hero than Jake. He does not wish to spread any type of enlightenment with his community. He merely wants to quietly enjoy his family for the rest of his days.

Quentin is presented as the most disillusioned character of all. He wanders aimlessly through his narration both mentally and physically, constantly preoccupied with negative thoughts. He obsesses over having sex with his sister in order to save her reputation. Quentin also obsesses over the depressing words of his father, the idea that life is meaningless, and the notion that time is the enemy. He is consumed by his shadow and contemplates its death along

with his own throughout the story. Quentin is disillusioned to such an extent that there is no spiritual growth available for him to achieve. He can only find peace in death, in suicide. And yet he too becomes a modern hero because he finally escapes his sad and meaningless life. Quentin does not find spiritual redemption like Jake and Henderson, but he does find relief and peace in death.

Bloom is probably the most well-known disillusioned character within modernist literature. Because the novel is written in stream of consciousness, we have access to Bloom's every thought. Consequently, we see him obsessing over his problems continually. He reflects upon his father's suicide early in the story and upon Rudy's death throughout the entire narrative. Mostly, though, he reflects upon and obsesses over his wife's affair. He even meets her fellow adulterer, Boylan, during the story. Yet Bloom never confronts Boylan and is, in many ways, conquered by him. In fact, Boylan is described in the story as a conquering hero. We might, at first, assume that he has conquered Bloom. However, only a few lines later, Bloom is described as an unconquered hero. This is the first indication that Bloom is a modern hero who is vastly different from the heroes of old. He endures the humiliation of being a cuckold and perseveres through the pain of seeing his wife's partner in the bar. The perseverance under extremely difficult circumstances creates the heroic qualities that we admire in Bloom. Later in the story, Bloom is confronted by the Citizen and some of his friends in a bar. He is accused of being a traitor to his country and told that, because he is Jewish, he does not belong in Ireland. He is ultimately chased out of the bar by the Citizen and his dog under threats of violence. Again, Bloom assumes the role of unconquered hero as Joyce equates him with Elijah, a biblical hero of old. He simply perseveres under extremely difficult circumstances in order to gain heroic stature. Yet it is only at the end of the novel when Bloom is solidified as a modern hero. During



Molly's soliloquy, she fondly remembers when Bloom proposed to her and she chooses him all over again. In fact, she says yes to marrying him again in her mind nineteen times. Though Bloom appears to be conquered by various people and situations throughout the novel, he remains, nonetheless, an unconquered hero at the end because he is redeemed by his wife. He is a modern hero in every sense because he emerges triumphantly solely due to his perseverance and his ability to remain unaffected by the troubles that plague him. Unlike Jake and Henderson, Bloom does not experience any type of enlightenment; nor does he find the meaning of life. And he differs from Quentin in the fact that he survives and finds peace in life rather than death. Bloom simply endures where it seems impossible and wins in the end. In addition, *Ulysses* is unique because of the parallels that Joyce draws with *The Odyssey*. In the mythological story, Odysseus is a mighty hero who faces mystical beasts and the wrath of the gods before returning home triumphantly to a faithful wife. Bloom is quite the opposite and yet Joyce draws the comparisons anyway. This is due solely to Bloom's character, not his deeds. He does not battle the gods or any great beasts and he returns home to an unfaithful wife. However, in all of this, Bloom perseveres through extreme circumstances without losing his morality, compassion, and kindness, the qualities that both make him a modern hero and equate him with Odysseus. In all four novels, the protagonists begin as rather pathetic characters who are disillusioned with either modern society or life or both. But all four of these protagonists embark on a journey which transforms them into modern heroes, very different from the mighty heroes of old. They are heroes who overcome adversity through perseverance and will rather than by using violence (the sword). Where the journey takes place and how the protagonist is transformed differs in each novel. Therefore, they are all unique in their own way.

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