

# PENTANGLE

*Established 1992*

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# Pentangle's History

*Pentangle* is NKU's student-run journal featuring essays pertaining to all areas of literary studies, including film and other media."

*Pentangle's* name alludes to the famous image in the Middle English poem, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, where it is a symbol of truth and perfection. The journal seeks to highlight excellence in academic writing and scholarship.



## Submission Guidelines

*Pentangle* solicits submissions of critical essays pertaining to all areas of literary studies, including essays on film and other media. Book reviews should be for books written in the last two years. All submissions must be in MLA format (8th ed.) and typed in Microsoft Word. Submissions should be at least 500 words and no more than 8000 words. Please email all submissions to [pentangle@nku.edu](mailto:pentangle@nku.edu). When submitting manuscripts, please include a brief biography and contact information.

## Editorial Policy

The editors reserve the right to edit submissions for grammar and punctuation. Editing may also include revisions to thesis statements and transitional sentences as well as other changes that clarify the work. The editors will work diligently to ensure that the integrity and intent of the author's work is maintained.

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## Editor's Note

Dear Readers,

It is our honor to present you with the eighth edition of *Pentangle* magazine. *Pentangle* is NKU's student-led literary journal whose intent is to elevate excellent writing. This year, we feel that we have composed an especially unique issue of the journal. At *Pentangle*, we believe in the importance of literature and its accessibility to everyone. We also believe that the study of literature is engaging and fun, and it is our wish to share that passion with each of our readers.

We received a collection of outstanding essay submissions, and were thrilled to see so many critical analyses of pop culture media in addition to classic literature. During the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic allowed many of us to return to the joys of our favorite books and movies. This year posed difficult challenges for us all, but allowed us a temporary slow from the constant rush of our lives. Upon returning to a state of new-normalcy, we are pleased to see the popular canon translated into literary terms. In sharing this collection of unprecedented essays, it is our hope to encourage others to make new waves in the longstanding convention of literary analysis.

We hope you enjoy this edition of *Pentangle*.

Sincerely,

The Editors

Abileen Beiting, Kaitlyn Craig, Shelby Doyle, Danielle Heiert, and  
Lisa Kuhn

## Homosexual Desire and Identity in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Kayla Belser

Oscar Wilde's nineteenth-century novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, has been widely reviewed in the world of literary academia. The presence of homosexuality is a common topic in discussing both the novel and Wilde's personal life. The focus on homosexuality surrounding the narrative has helped establish the novel as a staple in the gay literary canon. While homosexuality is never directly addressed within the novel's 210 pages, its presence is heavily implied. From the focus placed on the beauty of Dorian's character by his male friends, to the discreet nightly acts that the reader is left to wonder about, the gayness is obvious, especially to those who may share in the identity of both Wilde and his protagonists. Exploring and understanding the presence of homosexual desire is essential to comprehending Wilde's message of self-destruction and public image.

The opinions of the late-Victorian general public clearly denounced homosexuality. By the end of the nineteenth-century, in an attempt to control the ideas and behaviors accepted by society, there was a massive increase in discourse about homosexuality. Those who disapproved clung to science, which at the time condemned homosexuality from a physical and psychological standpoint. Homosexuals were inhumanely spectated. This was exemplified by the outpour of public attention in various trials condemning homosexuality, particularly the Wilde trials of 1895. Wilde was tried and convicted of "committing acts of gross indecency with certain male persons."

In "Silent Homosexuality in Oscar Wilde's *Teleny* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*," Antonio Sanna highlights this attention on sexual acts and its reflection in the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act and the Vagrancy Act of 1898. These amendments were homophobia disguised as justice. The late-Victorian laws severely punished the practice of "gross indecency" between men, in public or private. In the argument of *Dorian Gray* being gay, it is appropriate that Wilde wrote him as being deathly concerned with the judgement or condemnation of contemporary society, as was the case for most homosexuals at the time. Sanna affirms that "although Dorian is never disgraced by the rumors, his terror of them pervades his life" (Sanna,

28). This is connected to his own concept of identity and sense of self. In relation to being gay/queer, this idea of a secret only you know controlling multiple variables in your life is eerily common in those who feel unsafe or ashamed of their identity. A wide belief is that Wilde explored this concept based on his own personal experience.

Wilde's inclusion of secrecy attests to the veil of lies that came with sexual awakening if it deviated from heterosexuality in the late-Victorian era. He attributes this realistic component to Dorian. Understanding that Dorian's identity troubles stem from his suppressed sexuality adds the slightest clarity to what his character values. Dorian resorts to convincing himself he isn't gay, that he would be perfectly happy marrying Sibyl Vane before he learned of her suicide. This is a common coping mechanism for individuals who fear the reality of their sexuality. Toward the end of chapter eight in the original text this becomes clear to readers. Wilde unpacks Dorian's thoughts, saying "For every sin that he committed, a stain would fleck and wreck [the portrait's] fairness. But he would not sin. The picture, changed or unchanged, would be to him the visible emblem of conscience. He would resist temptation. He would not see Lord Henry anymore—would not, at any rate, listen to those subtle poisonous theories that in Basil Hallward's garden had first stirred within him the passion for impossible things" (88-89). The reference of "impossible things" was his romantic desires toward men, Lord Henry specifically. Dorian was not ready to accept himself; the physical portrait represents his suppression and fear. Dorian quite literally "hides" himself throughout the novel in veiling the portrait from anyone who enters his home. He also continually conducts his "sins" in secrecy. Sanna goes on to say that "Silence and homosexuality could be seen as strictly interrelated in this text by Wilde." As we can tell from historic law, hiding your sexual identity as a gay man was a necessity to remain a free member of society when this novel was written. In the matter of silence and homosexuality going hand-in-hand, Sanna continues that "This is particularly true if we consider that Dorian is not the only character in the text that could be interpreted as homosexual. In fact, the fascination he inspires in other males is repeatedly stressed throughout the narrative and thus possibly assumes a homoerotic characterization. Many of Dorian's male friends are disgraced by his company, their lives being ruined by the rumors and scandals that occurred after they had been filled with "a madness for pleasure" by Dorian himself" (Sanna, 31). Dorian holds a common gay character trope of hiding, which we see was, and is, a very real response to societal judgement and rules. Wilde's decision to characterize Dorian as tortured by himself in secrecy was a large element of homosexual desire. Dorian is tortured by internalized homophobia caused by his surroundings. He is free in the bars and dens of shadowed

alleys, and haunted by daylight that forced him to obsess over what others might think of him if they ever uncovered his truth.

The idea that Dorian wasn't the only gay character in the novel is supported by scholar and professor of English at Princeton University, Jeffrey Nunokawa. In his article, "Homosexual Desire and the Effacement of Self in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," Nunokawa begins his critical discussion of homosexuality within the novel by stating Basil Hallward's character is blatantly head-over-heels in love with Dorian from the beginning, and that Dorian's "extraordinary beauty" inspires Lord Henry's interest in the main character as well. Basil Hallward's actions leave very little room to question the presence of homosexuality. His jealousy is thick when he learns of Dorian's proposal to Sibyl, and toward Dorian's blossoming friendship with Lord Henry. Nunokawa approaches Basil's homosexuality through a modern lens, writing "if we have no trouble diagnosing Basil Hallward's perturbations as the birth pangs of homosexual identity, we may have trouble diagnosing them as anything else. His attraction to Dorian Gray appears as nothing other than the first act of the now well-developed drama of self-realization we call coming out" (Nunokawa, 312). In recalling Basil's reaction and hesitation to the feelings Dorian's sheer presence brought upon him, Nunokawa accurately characterizes Basil's journey throughout the novel. Even if Basil only ever came out to himself, he is one of the few characters that is honest. His attractions are so strong that he prepares himself for the absorption of his soul. A toxic outlook by most standards, but also a sentiment that led to the connection of sexuality and identity. Dorian hangs onto every word of Lord Henry. The dynamic between the two was homoeroticism taking form in the exercise of influence. It is valid to credit Lord Henry for the initial depersonalization journey that Dorian encounters, which is rooted in their mutual sexual attraction. Nunokawa relates the twisted friendship to that of a teacher and a student set in the scandals and controversy that surrounded Oxford and Cambridge during the latter half of the nineteenth century. In connection to this, he writes, "the enduring suspicion that homosexual desire is conducted through the schools may reflect the homoerotic ambitions exemplified by Lord Henry, and the current of depersonalization...the dispersal of charisma" (Nunokawa, 316). This point summarizes the common critical theory surrounding the novel that there are vastly different effects in heterosexual desires versus homosexual ones. There is no sense of detachment from self in heterosexual desires in the novel because of the familiarity and acceptance within society surrounding male and female relationships. To understand this effect is to unravel the shells our characters are placed in by Wilde in nearly everything they do,

think, and speak. Essentially, Dorian's, Basil's, and even Lord Henry's moments of displacement and confusion are a product of being secretly infatuated with men.

Scholars Dustin Friedman and E.L. McCallum both offer literary criticisms on Wilde himself and what his homosexual presence left for history and the LGBTQIA+ community. In the piece, "Negative Eroticism: Lyric Performativity and the Sexual Subject in Oscar Wilde's 'The Portrait of Mr. W.H.,'" Friedman begins with, "In discussions about the methods and aims of sexuality studies in literary criticism, perhaps no other writer has been more central, or more controversial, than Oscar Wilde... Wilde's writings have occasioned a "creative dialectal rupture" between critical enterprises of "Gay Studies" and "Queer Theory." Gay studies authors have drawn Wilde as an uncomplicatedly self-aware homosexual male, while queer theorists label him as a "historical figure and cultural commodity" (Friedman, 597). McCallum argues that today "there exist two opposing critical accounts of Wilde: the one, an emotionally powerful but historically naïve narrative constructed by gay studies scholars that can be considered humanist, and the other, a rigorously historicized, anti-essentialist queer account of Wilde's subversive eroticism that can be construed as anti-humanist" (McCallum, 603). The critical views of Oscar Wilde vary from tragic victim to cultural product. Whether you agree with the former or latter, recognizing's Wilde's homosexual ubiety is essential to the critical analyzation of his work. There is no proper perception of Dorian Gray, without acknowledging the importance of his homosexual identity.

The conversation of literary influence, homosexual presence, and identity are still changing and expanding in relation to Oscar Wilde and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The continuing conversation has led to scholars in literature, gay studies, and beyond still crediting Wilde for writing the first Victorian homosexual characters. The study of homosexuality and identity in literature is incredibly important. With this novel, realization of homosexual presence is necessary in understanding the actions and dynamic of the male protagonists, their identity qualms, and Wilde's intention for the narrative. Unpacking the nuances and queer identity issues in this singular novel and forming new literary critiques could go on for centuries to come.

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## The Ancient Qualities of Dracula as Modern Societal Fears

Alexi Kreutzjans

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is a plethora of dark and mysterious themes that prove the novel to be a product of its time, and this is inherent by the presence of bloodsucking nocturnal beings that prey on innocents in the dead of night. However, what seems to truly provoke the fear that is typically present within the gothic, 19th-century atmosphere is not so much what is seen, rather, what cannot be seen: the unknown. Throughout the entirety of the novel there is virtually no sign of the evil, ambitious vampire, barring only the immediate beginning as well as the immediate end, as he literally flies across England in a hurry to "colonize" and create his new nation of predators. Aside from the ancient castle encased by memories of days long gone, there is little to no trace of the kind of environment from which Dracula may originate. Moreover, there is even less to support his whereabouts at any given point. The only thing that can be known for certain is that much like the ordinary gothic novel, there are monsters and other creatures of the night lurking around the churchyards or outside the windows of unsuspecting innocents. There will be blood and fangs and a loss of innocence as once harmless victims become bloodthirsty, crazed, and uncontrollable demons condemned to roam the darkest streets and corners for eternity. This much is evident upon Van Helsing's encounter with Lucy after her transition and is supported continuously throughout Stoker's novel following this event. However, what cannot truly be certain, and what must

be relied on through blind faith for the readers just as much as Van Helsing's group, is what occurs in the shadows. What takes place in the dark castle and various homes that The Count will visit in addition to what takes place and is undocumented between each character's experience is the genuine source of fright in this story, and there is much to be considered in between Dracula's first and final appearances.

Although the bleak and mysterious qualities of the gothic era play their part in invoking fear in their audience, scholars agree that Stoker seems to suggest many things in allowing the vampire's absence, and that this is the source of true fear. This seems appropriate to argue, as well as the fact that whether it be the vampire himself or the representation of modernity that he embodies through Stoker's inclusion of technology and colonization, much of the fear that is present in the novel, which is mirrored by Victorian society, is a result of the fallout from these two things. In other words, the modern conflict that has been produced by ancient ideas or, more specifically, the desire to surpass them.

Not only is the presence of monsters and creatures of the night a threat and constant source of horror throughout the novel, but another threat equally as terrifying is what this presence suggests. Modernity serves as the first of many components in the novel that cannot be seen and therefore known, and yet are clearly present in other ways. As a product of its time, this story can easily be contextualized within the setting of 19th-century European society regardless of the shapeshifting bloodsuckers. Although they are not part of real-life society, what is part of it is the constant fear of that which is foreign and therefore not understood. The Victorian era is widely considered not only the turn of the century (or the *fin-de-siècle*), but the turn of society from the primitive, bleak environment of pre-modernity into the revolutionized, technological world. At the same time in which *Dracula* was written, the Victorians were beginning to notice their environment change as they were slowly thrust into what would become the contemporary world.

In Stephen Arata's article, "The Occidental Tourist," he brings attention to The Count as he relates to 19th-century society, stating, "Dracula is a 'representation of fears that are more universal than a specific focus on the Victorian background would allow.'... Dracula in particular, continuously calls our attention to the cultural context surrounding and informing the text." (622). In other words, there is what he calls an "up-to-dateness" throughout the novel in the sense that it accurately and genuinely conveys the concerns and controversies surrounding the emergence of new technology and ideas that make the once unquestionable beliefs and frameworks of the current world suddenly out of date. The ever-changing

and continuously evolving world that inherently comes with technology and changing ideals from what was always normal and expected has created a foreign environment, almost unrecognizable from what society has always known. With alien-like, unexpected appearances comes fear from what can no longer be known or understood, much like vampires it seems. Stoker's consistent emphasis and portrayal of vampires as vessels of unfamiliarity and aspects of the new world to which no one has ever been exposed suggests that this is no coincidence. Rather, this may be a counterpart of 19th-century Victorian society that Stoker wanted to bring attention to, as the inevitable change and therefore loss of understanding of the way the world functions, and more importantly how it would function going forward, was a clear and undeniable source of concern and unease that marked the end of an era.

Yet another aspect of this story that lends itself to modernity is Dracula's ever-persistent wish to "colonize" the English, which is symbolic of the British Empire and its ambitions of conquering nation after nation without end, which soon begins to change near the end of the century. Arata makes another clear connection, this time between Dracula and his eagerness to dominate the population with the British Empire and its imperialistic qualities, stating, "In the case of Dracula... the decline of Britain as a world power at the close of the nineteenth century... the decay of British global influence, the loss of overseas markets for British goods... the increasing unrest... the growing domestic uneasiness over the morality of imperialism." (622). This is especially clear when considering the vampire's response to being overtaken by Van Helsing and his new group of hunters. Following the eradication of nearly every creature The Count has managed to turn, he reluctantly and angrily crawls into his corner, so to speak. He runs away from the men, never looking back, and hides in his earth-filled box until he no longer has any grip left on the innocent men and women of London. He even lashes out immediately before his disappearance, declaring, "You think to baffle me, you with your pale faces all in a row, like sheep in a butcher's... You think you have left me without a place to rest, but I have more... I spread it over centuries, and time is on my side... you and others shall yet be mine, my creatures, to do my bidding and be my jackals..." (192). This almost makes it seem as though Stoker is bringing attention to, and even trying to condemn the imperialist perspective, calling society to action in recognizing that the sun has finally begun to set on the British Empire.

This idea is also explored by author Jamil Khader in his article titled, "Un/speakability and Radical Otherness: the Ethics of Trauma in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*." Khader looks at Stoker's focus on colonization from a slightly different perspective, which only reaffirms Arata's argument on imperialism when he writes, "Despite the apparent containment of the

threat of the foreign monster... there is no simple return to normality, no celebration of triumph of good over evil, and no closure for the victims.” (75). He goes so far as to point out that, though he has been defeated, Dracula’s blood still runs through the veins of Johnathan and Mina’s child, which leaves the entire family, along with their friends, still “contaminated” and impure. This speaks volumes to what Stoker seems to emphasize throughout the story, which is that the world is moving on from its ancient methods of overtaking and enslaving other nations for their control, but that there are still lasting consequences of these actions, ones that were not so prominent in the past. It is true to say, based on Arata and Khader’s arguments, that with the modern world comes not only modern creations, but modern conflicts. It is not only the things we make that create chaos, but the things that we have done, long ago or otherwise.

Another vessel of modernity that seems to go hand-in-hand with colonization is the portrayal of Dracula as a non-binary entity, meaning that he represents both a mother and a father throughout the book. In his attempts to turn innocent people into blood hungry monsters, he is using his blood and feeding it to his victims so to speak, which is seemingly a metaphor for impregnating them, especially with his very obvious focus on women as his prey. Furthermore, upon entering the Harker home to prey on Mina, he is seen forcing her to his breast and encouraging her to feed on it, much like a mother would to her infant. Helena Gurfinkel makes a similar argument in her piece titled, “Portents of Modernity in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Fiction.” She notes, “If the absence of a productive heterosexual unit is a failure, Stoker’s Dracula avoids it. Johnathan and Mina manage to create a family unit, pending the destruction of the primary father, Dracula,” describing Stoker’s creation of a seemingly polygamous relationship between Mina, her husband, and the rest of the men who gave their blood to her as a “discussion of fin-de-siècle homosociality.”

While Dracula gives his blood to Mina in order to turn her, every man in the room takes a turn in doing the same for the purpose of saving her. It can be inferred that this was a topic of thought for not only the author of the novel, but the characters in it as well. In the early chapters of the book, Lucy is beginning her transition when Van Helsing suggests a blood transfusion, insisting that only Arthur take part as he is the one she loves. Only when dire circumstances arise, leaving Lucy on the cusp of death, do Van Helsing and the other vampire hunters step in.

This suggests that the idea of supposed “insemination” through the transferring of blood is universally acknowledged, inside and outside of the novel, creating multi-faceted and polygamous relations between characters. Furthermore, Gurfinkel’s argument can be connected to that of Arata and Khader’s in the sense that this view on colonialism as a form of

reproduction and impregnation of woman allows Dracula to be portrayed as a sort of “All-Father” as the head of his new population of vampires while also maintaining his motherly approach by giving life to new beings.

In addition to these already numerous consequences of colonization as a facet of the Victorian period’s newfound horror in modernity is the idea that foreign objects and creations are often the subjects of scrutiny because one of the inherent qualities of something so alien to society is danger. Understandably, every author seems to agree that that which cannot be known will always pose a threat to others because that which can never be fully understood will always have its secrets. The same argument is true for Laura Sagolla Croley. She notes the kinds of environments The Count is typically found in or around, the places where he hides and creates his diabolical plans along with the dirt-filled boxes that line the “low-lodging” house, “fluffy and heavy with dust, and in the corners were massive spiders’ webs whereon the dust had gathered till they looked like old tattered rages as the weight had torn them partially down.” (Stoker 250). She uses this part of the book’s passage to make the argument that the vampire, much like foreign objects and people, is represented as scum, low and dirty and sickly. She continues to say, “...this language... applied to the poor in general, it became heightened in discussions of nomads’ like Dracula, for if physical and moral disease could be somewhat contained in the slums, it became mobile and invasive with the moving body.” (88). This seems like a welldeveloped argument to make, as the idea of disease and “palpable” physical effects such as pallor, loss of blood, and long, sharp fangs correlate with the image created in 19th-century society of foreigners and immigration, which is quite ironic considering Britain’s almost uncontainable desire to invade other nations, making them the foreigner. She includes another author’s description of the “slums” and “lairs” and “dens” that immigration and poor living was accused of overpopulating cities with, turning them into “dirt-boxes” (much like Dracula’s sleeping place) and living like “dangerous animals,” which is exactly how one might describe the bloodthirsty predator. This is a vivid reminder of works like “Heart of Darkness,” by Joseph Conrad, which seem to validate imperialism and the portrayal of natives, who are made and treated as foreigners by the very people who invaded their land, as primitive and vulnerable while also being dangerous and overwhelming. Works like these are also a product of their time, only they paint a much different picture of the horrors of colonization.

In continuation of the 19th-century portrayal of foreigners and immigration, Khader makes yet another well-developed point, discussing how Dracula as an individual can be interpreted as a source of violence and



strife for a country in his wish to irradiate the human population, especially with a focus on women.

He states, “The apocalyptic potentialities of Dracula’s “reverse colonization” (Arata 1997), and his threat to subjugate Britons and transform them into his minions by feeding off and corrupting their women, amount to a projective displacement of the history of ethnic cleansing and racial extermination... therefore, the vampire in Stoker’s *Dracula* serves as a metaphor for extreme forms of violence that humanity witnessed in the past.” (77).

He even draws terminology from Arata, who later continues in his own article to describe Dracula as a representation of the “colonized world” being overtaken by “primitive forces,” which is another angle from which one might view not only modernity, but the issues that arise in the modern world as a result of ancient or outdated practices, such as colonization.

Once more the argument is extended by writer Christopher Bundrick, who suggests that though vampires have always been seen as creations of the distant past, products of fantasy, the fact that they are now real beings in the context of the story forces each character to contend with the knowledge that ancient, historical fears have come to disturb the future. He observes, “We know that ghosts and monsters – both representative of the gothic past – should be bound in history... dangerous ideologies from the past might reconstitute themselves and, in the process, destabilize the present.” (21-22). All three of these authors seem to work together to construct the idea that, past or present, outdated or contemporary, some things such as evil are never gone. They can never be truly replaced or destroyed because although Dracula and his offspring were destroyed, it is still the ancient beings that remain in control and the ancient rules which must be followed, such as those that Van Helsing observes in order to defeat the count: the use of stakes, garlic, and especially crucifixes. And regardless of whether these ancient creatures and rules are currently in control, dead or alive, the one thing that is certain is their eventual return into the world, the “looming sense that monsters might emerge from the past” (22), whether it be the characters themselves or the writers that breathe life into them.

Throughout the course of the novel, it becomes clear that not only are the stereotypically dark, haunted, and gothic images of the Victorian period a genuine source of fear for an audience, but more so the unknown than anything else. The unknown of technological advances, to reiterate, may sometimes create order in a society. It seems fitting to remember that the evolution of once primitive or even nonexistent equipment, such as the camera, was in fact useful in developing awareness of one’s self-image as well as their environment, such as the use of photography in apprehending criminals or wrongdoers. Regardless of whether or not they escape, having

their faces captured means they are in society’s eternal grip. However, this same technology, ie. phonographs and telegraphs, and especially forms of technology that were considered scientific, such as blood transfusions, proved to be either the cause of chaos or the inability to stop it. Phonographs, for example, were used throughout the story to document and connect evidence, but as Van Helsing noted towards the end of the novel, this would only create panic and confusion if discovered on a wide scale. He declares, “We want no proofs! We ask none to believe us!” (236). This was after he had previously stated that even if they wanted to share their discoveries, they would sound mad to the rest of the world. In regard to scientific technology, it becomes clear after several blood transfusions for both Mina and Lucy that this is not an effective solution. Though it was expected that such a modern solution was sure to have outdone The Count, an ancient being, it did not take long to realize that it is the ancient ones, along with their ancient rules, that must be abided by.

An ancient problem cannot be settled with a modern solution, thus lies the fear within 19th-century society. This is emphasized by Dracula’s ambitions to overtake and repopulate England, as well as the book’s portrayal of him as a low-lying, dirty creature – much like how foreigners and immigration in general were viewed in this time – despite his higher status as a Count. As a result of his attempt at colonization, which was by then becoming an outdated practice, old conflicts became future conflicts. When the Count lost his grip on London, he also lost his grip on the transformation of the human race under his wing, and so lost his place as both the mother and father of his future race. Dracula’s ability to play both parts as a non-binary entity is yet another progressive ideal that would have been foreign to Victorian society, and having lost his “motherhood” so to speak, how could he have succeeded in carrying out his efforts? Just as motherhood is significant in Dracula, the same can be said for 19th-century society, as it is a symbol of domestication and stability. When this component begins to break down, the rest is sure to follow. It is no coincidence that so many of these modern-day fears are present in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, and much has been gained from The Count’s ambitions and practices regardless of his presence throughout the story, or a lack thereof. It comes as no surprise that so many scholars agree in stating it is not only the idea of the vampire itself in all of its mysterious, gothic qualities which sets fear in the hearts of an audience, specifically in the Victorian period;

rather, it is the ideas and questions that the vampire’s presence forces its audience to confront.

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## Fear and Control in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

Lisa Kuhn

Although there are many important topics in Nella Larsen's novel, *Passing*, the main themes are fear and control. This analysis will explore the different fears held by the characters, and the actions they take to subdue those fears and maintain control over their lives. The three main topics discussed are race, sexual taboos, and economic/social status, using textual examples and referencing choice articles included in the Norton Critical Edition. This paper will explore how each topic produces fear and is controlled by the characters, as well as how these relate to the social climate of the United States at that time in history, the 1920s.

The most pertinent topic in the novel is race, especially racial identity. We know the plot—Clare Kendry is a light-skinned African American woman passing as a white woman. Irene Redfield, also a light-skinned African American, is her friend who has ambivalent feelings towards her. After her father dies, Clare is raised by her white aunts in another city. It is reasonable to assume that Clare fears being trapped by the limited choices an African American person has at this time. She sees this as a chance to start over as a white person in order to improve her station. Since it is still only the 1920s, the best she can practically hope for is to marry well. After all, women had just recently won the right to vote. She does just that when she marries the wealthy Jack Bellew, a white supremacist. Clare is strong-willed, so she accepts the challenge of hiding her heritage from her

husband. She endures it for a long time, and even bears him a daughter, but eventually, she misses the black community of her youth. Clare experiences a loss of racial identity. In order to both control this fear and maintain her current life, she impulsively renews her friendship with Irene. If Clare can be in Irene's world separately from her white world, perhaps she can satisfy both of her identities. She tells Irene, "You don't know, you can't realize how much I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh" (Larsen 51). It is this rekindled friendship with Irene in which Clare believes she will find acceptance.

Meanwhile, Irene disapproves of Clare's "passing." Irene has the opposite personality of Clare; she does not indulge in spontaneity and has rigid ideas about how life should be. This includes her views on race, or so she claims. Even though Irene "passes" from time to time when the convenience arises, she mostly finds it to be a betrayal. She comments, "It's funny about 'passing.' We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt, and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it" (Larsen 39). While Irene ignores her own hypocrisy, she is happy to police the practices of others. When she learns that Clare is deeply embedded in her false identity, it makes Irene very nervous. Irene fears for Clare's safety if she were to be outed, especially after Clare introduces her to Bellew without preparing her. The encounter shakes her to the core, angering her about "Clare's innate lack of consideration for the feelings of others" (Larsen 34). America at this time was wrought with racial tension. Lynching was common, despite the fact that the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance were simultaneously taking place. White people with racist ideals were terrified of the practice of "passing." Because of this, Irene's husband, Brian, motions to move to Brazil, a racially tolerant country, to escape the rising tension. He believes it to be foolish to remain in such a dangerous social climate.

Another common theme addressed in the novel is sexual taboos. America has come a very long way since the 1920s. It is becoming much more acceptable to have diverse gender and sexual identities at this point in time. Few people bat an eye if you tell them that you are gay. This was not the case in the Roaring Twenties. The language used to describe how Irene sees Clare is charged with sexual attraction. She is continuously describing Clare's beauty. On page 21, she describes Clare as having "a tempting mouth." A few sentences later, the narrative goes on: "Into those eyes there came a smile and over Irene the sense of being petted and caressed" (Larsen 21). The word "seductive" is repeated throughout the novel. Irene is so terrified of this desire that she vehemently suppresses it. Her fear leads her to control her desire the best she can by avoiding Clare and projecting her feelings onto her. She neglects to invite her to an important party in order

to keep her away. Unfortunately, Clare shows up at the party anyway. The evidence that the romantic spark between the Redfields is dying serves to put into motion what Irene believes happens next. She assumes that Brian and Clare are having an affair simply because she finds them in the same room together. According to Judith Butler in her article, "*Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge*," Irene is projecting her own craving for Clare onto Brian so that she can be absolved of blame (430). In other words, Irene inwardly fabricates a story between Brian and Clare in order to distract herself from the sexual tension she feels between herself and her friend.

Deborah McDowell sheds some light on the tormented history of sexual abuse towards black women in her article, "Black Female Sexuality," (366-379). The ridiculous myth that black women were erotically insatiable was spread by white slave owners to justify their actions of rape and assault. That myth lasted a long time, and the result was a protective desire to remain chaste. When African American female writers wrote about sexuality, it was heavily veiled. Innuendoes and double entendres were used instead of direct language. The very novel being discussed was considered quite controversial, including the sexual content. By today's standards it seems pretty demure, but it was groundbreaking at the time of publication. This background information serves to explain some of Irene's trepidations. Irene is a married woman, with two young sons, living in a middle-class world. To have extramarital attractions is crude enough, but to feel this way toward a woman is downright scandalous. Her whole world would crumble if she acted on her yearning, and she is determined to maintain her upright image. In her mind, Clare is the threat to her marital stability, rather than her own suppressed sexual needs. The reader witnesses very little physical affection between Irene and Brian. Upon thinking of him after leaving Clare's home, Irene ponders how Brian's "...old, queer, unhappy restlessness had begun again within him; that that craving for some place strange and different, which at the beginning of her marriage she had had to make such strenuous efforts to repress..." (Larsen 35). Irene realizes that the lack of complacency that Brian feels is starting to get to him, causing him to feel depressed.

To complicate matters, there seems to be evidence that Clare reciprocates Irene's craving. In Clare's letters to Irene, she says she "cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before...I wouldn't now, perhaps, have this terrible, this wild desire if I hadn't seen you that time in Chicago..." (Larsen 7). Phrases like this, combined with her insistence upon seeing Irene even when Irene rejects her, are damning evidence of mutual feelings. Clare tells her, "Damn being safe!" (Larsen 47). The impulsiveness exhibited makes Irene very nervous. Butler says, "Clare embodies a certain kind of sexual daring that Irene defends herself against"

(419). The difference is that Clare is not as repressed as Irene.

The third most commonly discussed theme in the novel is economic/social status. In the words of Gayle Wald in “*Passing and Domestic Tragedy*,” “Larsen’s novella explores the volatile relationship between two female protagonists, both of whom pass for white and both of whom see class privilege as a key to their survival in a patriarchal society” (487). As mentioned before, Irene is comfortably complacent as a married, middle-class socialite with a good reputation. She maintains a strict household and participates in many respectable social activities, such as afternoon tea parties and working with the Negro Welfare League. This position of status is a big deal for a black woman in the 1920s. It affords Irene and her family some measure of protection from race-related violence and hate crimes. She will do nothing to jeopardize that, including letting Brian have a say in family matters. She refuses to consider Brian’s repeated suggestions that they move to Brazil. Why uproot themselves for the unknown when they already have a good situation? The grip she has on her family takes a toll on her marriage. Her desperation to keep her social standing is evident at the end of the novel when we see her (possibly fatal) motivation to prevent Bellew from casting Clare aside at the discovery of her deception. Irene has a measure of hard-won privilege that she fears losing because of Clare’s perceived meddling.

Clare is in a similar economic situation, but she does not hold onto it as tightly as Irene. At first, it seems that she is satisfied with her lifestyle. She tells Irene, “Money’s awfully nice to have. In fact, all things considered, I think, ‘Rene, that it’s even worth the price’” (Larsen 20). After spending time with Irene, her feelings begin to change. Clare’s impulsive nature makes it hard for her to care about her lifestyle when she finds herself missing the black community. In a letter to Irene, she writes “It may be, ‘Rene dear, it may just be, that, after all, your way may be the wiser and infinitely happier one.’” (Larsen 34). She realizes that safety and financial comfort cannot bring the same happiness provided by belonging to a community.

The story of Larsen’s invention contains a tangle of topical intersection: racial issues, gender and sexuality, and social status. None of these can be efficiently separated because the boundaries are far too blurred. Humans are messy creatures. Our lives contain a myriad of things that weave together to make one big tapestry of our existence. For this reason, Larsen focused on what we fear and what we do about the fear. As the novel illustrates, we often do things that cause our worst fears to come true in our efforts to thwart them.

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## Mental Illness as Presented in *A Court of Thorns and Roses*

Kelsey Lee

Depression and anxiety are illnesses which, while displayed in books and media, are not typically analyzed within literature any further than a basic level. Mental illness has been displayed in a number of works of literature and films throughout the years; by doing so, authors and film makers create the sense that those struggling are not alone. In writing strong figures battling with mundane illnesses, these creators show others that they can find the strength to overcome any struggle. Much like the relatability of a character, fandoms create a sense of belonging within a fictional world someone has grown to love. Sarah J. Maas's writing stands out because it seriously examines how mental illness can affect someone, even if that someone is a strong, female protagonist.

The portrayal of characters who deal with mental illnesses like anxiety and depression can range in technique. Many authors of Young Adult (YA) literature use different approaches when it comes to how their characters are portrayed, but one thing stands true among them all: they bring awareness of mental illnesses to young people. Through an examination of Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Alison Monaghan discusses the importance of bringing awareness to young people about mental illnesses. Monaghan writes that there are certain markers an author must achieve in order to have an effective portrayal of mental illness.

She writes that they are:

1. The protagonist/narrator accurately reflects the knowledge of someone his age under the circumstances in which he finds himself.
2. The protagonist's/narrator's illness experiences allow the reader to draw parallels between her life and experiences and those represented in the narrative.
3. The protagonist's/narrator's story rings true: if Point A is connected to Point B, it does so according to the logic of the narrative.
4. Somewhere in the narrative, the illness or condition is explicitly articulated (Monaghan 39).

This list of criteria that Monaghan has created outlines a number of things that, in her opinion, must happen in order for an author to have been successful in their portrayal of a mental illness. To Monaghan's standards, *A Court of Thorns and Roses* does not make the cut; Maas does not specifically state that Feyre is struggling with anxiety or depression, she simply uses Feyre's characterization throughout the novels to imply so. However, because of the fantasy world that the novel takes place in, it can be argued that Monaghan's standards would be different. Maas uses the fantasy aspects of her novel combined with realistic character design to make the main character relatable regardless of the world she lives in. Feyre faces problems that would never happen in the real world, such as fighting a giant worm-like monster in a maze. But Maas's ability to parallel the real world to her fantasy world helps to show the success in her portrayal of Feyre's depression and anxiety. Despite Feyre's unlikely situation, she is weak and vulnerable after facing trauma like any real person would be.

With the portrayal of real-life illnesses within YA literature, the accuracy of the illnesses through the author's writing comes into question. While anxiety and depression have specific medical definitions, the illnesses themselves are unique to each person who faces them. In an article from Healthline, anxiety is defined as the "body's natural response to stress. It's a feeling of fear or apprehension about what's to come (Healthline)." The same site defines depression as "a mood disorder. It may be described as feelings of sadness, loss, or anger that interfere with a person's everyday activities (Healthline)." The main thing that Maas focuses on in writing Feyre's character is the struggles that she faces on the inside and how those

struggles are portrayed to those around her. Feyre lost her old life and is thrown into an impossible situation that put both herself and many others at risk of death. Maas's writing is extremely effective in that it focuses more on the descriptions of Feyre's inner thoughts and feelings instead of using technical terms or definitions to portray her illnesses. When diagnosed with depression or anxiety, a doctor is going to use technical jargon to explain the illness. What Maas and many other authors do through their writing is describe these illnesses in a relatable way. If someone young were to be reading a YA novel that included characters with anxiety or depression, not only could they have a better understanding about what those characters are facing, but they would find someone they love who was able to face and overcome their struggles. Through Maas's portrayal of her characters, she is able to define anxiety and depression in a clearer way, which in turn makes her characters that much more real.

However, the clinical psychologist and professor Otto F. Wahl argues that the attitudes of others towards mental illness are created by portrayals in mass media. He states, "Many of the current assertions about the mass media's portrayal of mental illness and its role in maintaining stigma are based on impressions and anecdotal observations, with only occasional reference to specific research findings (Wahl 343)." Wahl's opinion holds true when it comes to certain works of literature or even movies. Many are led to believe that what is produced in the mass media is the truth. In believing these portrayals, people are at risk of having distorted images of what mental illnesses are. Writers focusing on the internal feelings of their characters removes outside perspective; doing so allows for an unfiltered description of what struggling with one's mental health can be like. Maas's writing in *A Court of Thorns and Roses* helps to show that mental illness can be distorted by outside opinions, but in the end, it is up to the person to decide how that illness defines them.

The book series *A Court of Thorns and Roses* follows the main character, Feyre, through the incredible struggles she faces. In the first novel, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, Feyre is ripped from her home and taken to the faerie lands where she is to live out a life sentence in the home of Tamlin, ruler of the Spring Court. Feyre eventually grows to love Tamlin and she must face the evil Amarantha in a series of deadly games to win Tamlin and his court's freedom back. Because Feyre is mortal and weak, Feyre is expected to be killed quickly, but she perseveres despite her weaknesses. Due to of the nature of the tasks she must complete and the dungeon she is locked in while awaiting said tasks, a large toll is taken on both her mental and physical health. Maas writes, "Still, fear like nothing I had ever known swallowed me whole when my cell door opened and the red-skinned guards told me that the full moon had arisen (Maas 315)." During the time that

Feyre was imprisoned, she not only had to deal with the daunting nature of her tasks, but also the depths of her mind when placed in the dungeon. The countless hours Feyre spent in a dark, dank dungeon took a huge toll on her mental well-being; she feared for her life as well as what it would mean if she failed. This trauma and deep-rooted fear follow Feyre throughout the rest of the novel and into the next book of the series becoming the main source of her failing mental health.

The second novel, *A Court of Mist and Fury*, dives even deeper into the depression and anxiety that Feyre faces after the outcomes of the games. Feyre is taken back to the Spring Court where she is expected to live like nothing ever happened, but her behavior says otherwise. Feyre loved to paint because it brought her incredible joy, but in the very beginning of the novel Maas writes, "And all those paintings, all the supplies, all that blank canvas waiting for me to pour out stories and feelings and dreams...I'd hated it (Maas 13)." Feyre's lack of enthusiasm for something she once loved so dearly is a clear sign of depression. She no longer has the motivation to do things that brought her so much joy. There are even some signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) when Feyre asks to not have red flowers at her wedding because they remind her of blood. When walking down the aisle at her wedding, Maas writes, "A cluster of red petals loomed ahead—just like that Fae youth's blood had pooled at my feet" and then further down the page, "And between my skin and bones, something thrummed and pounded, rising and pushing, lashing through my blood—So many eyes, too many eyes, pressed on me witnesses to every crime I'd committed, every humiliation— (Maas 41)." Both of these quotes show the panic attack that is induced as Feyre is walking down the aisle, all triggered by seeing the red rose petals. In this instance, Maas writes of the crushing weight Feyre feels from the events she went through in the past. Maas's writing highlights the feelings one has in their core as well as the thoughts running through the head when having an anxiety attack. This is just one example of the detail in which Maas writes of the mental toll that Feyre is facing daily.

In the first novel, Feyre makes a deal with Rhysand ("Rhys" for short) to visit him every month; on Feyre's wedding day, when she is crying out in her mind for help, Rhys comes to save her. As their relationship grows, it is clear that Rhys worries about Feyre's well-being and points out things she has never recognized, including her weight loss, which is a common sign of both depression and anxiety. Because Rhys is a powerful High Lord, he has powers that allow him to see into Feyre's mind. When Feyre arrives to his home, he says, "When I can't tell if your nightmares are real threats or imagined. When you're about to be married and you silently beg anyone to help you (Maas 56)." This interaction infuriates Feyre because she did not realize anyone could see her thoughts to know how much she was struggling.

Rhys is willing to do whatever it takes to help Feyre and she begins to come out of her dark state of mind. This can be seen clearly when she starts to resent Tamlin and the life she had before Rhys saved her. An example of this can be seen when Tamlin uses his control to forbid Feyre from leaving the house, which leads to Feyre having another anxiety attack. Maas writes, “I wrapped that raging force around myself as if it could keep the walls from crushing me entirely, and maybe, maybe buy me the tiniest sip of air—I couldn’t get out; I couldn’t get out; I couldn’t get out— (Maas 124).” Maas’s development of Feyre’s character shows the unpredictability of anxiety and depression. Feyre’s situation also does not help; the high stress and scrutiny that she is placed under hinders her healing. By including this in Feyre’s narrative, Maas helps to show that in order to heal, one must be in a safe, calm environment. Maas uses more extreme examples of situations in which anxiety attacks can be triggered, which places emphasis on the power of the mental disease. Feyre must face extreme circumstances, and her ability to overcome all of this and to eventually lead a happy life in the end is a token of her perseverance.

The creation of lovable and relatable characters, like the ones Maas has created, leads to the creation of fandoms. A fandom is, simply put, a group of people who are fans of a common thing. While most of the aspects of fandoms are positive, there are some negative effects of these groups. *A Court of Thorns and Roses* has many good features; however, there are some aspects of the novels that portray some negative qualities, which have been discussed by those in the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* fandom. A blog post by Ruth Scott goes into detail about the characterization specifically of Maas’ male characters. She discusses how the relationships portrayed in the novels are not healthy, causing negative ideas to be created for those that read the novels. Scott writes, “There is something quite dangerous about writing what is essentially an entirely human character apart from the traits that suit you. It is very damaging to display a volatile controlling personality as romantic because he’s part-fairy and it’s just his animalistic instincts taking over because he is in love (Scott).” Because of the fantasy nature of Maas’s novels, there are some aspects that portray relationships that would not be healthy for real-life standards. These portrayals have the potential to be reflected in real relationships; if someone who is a fan of the series understands the abusive nature of the relationships in Maas’s novels, they could view a real relationship that is abusive to be acceptable. It is important to note that the abusive relationship portrayed within Maas’s novels is one of the main causes of Feyre’s mental illness. She feels trapped in that relationship, seeing no way out, leading to the development of her anxiety attacks and depression. So much like in these novels, abusive relationships in the real world can lead to mental illness. However, one could also argue that

in seeing the abusive relationships play out, someone would now know the warning signs they themselves as well as those close to them should look for when it comes to abusive relationships.

When thinking about the portrayal of mental illness, we must also consider the strategies that educators use when teaching about them. In her book *Teaching the Taboo: Reading Mental Health and Mental Illness in American Literature*, Susanna H. Davis discusses the importance of teaching controversial works of literature. She writes, “Moving from the once-taboo topic of mental illness to readings on the once-taboo topic of women’s unhappiness allows the class to discuss, in addition to everything else, the transition between what is accepted and acceptable and what is not (Davis 12).” Teaching texts that tackle such topics allow for a deeper analysis of one’s life. Davis’s argument helps to capitalize on the importance of examining stigmatized texts about mental health. When a student can analyze a writer’s techniques in displaying mental illness, they then have the opportunity to apply that to their real life. Using more modern portrayals of mental illness, such as in *A Court of Thorns and Roses* or *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, helps students to become more aware of issues they or someone close to them could potentially face. Using these more relatable texts in a classroom setting also allows for a more attentive class; if students can relate to what they are reading, they will be more interested.

Sarah J. Maas’s *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series successfully portrays the struggles one can face when diagnosed with mental illnesses such as anxiety or depression. Maas’s novels help to create a sense of community and belongingness within a fandom. *A Court of Thorns and Roses* is just one example of how an author’s writing can heal.

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## “You know I ain’t queer”: *Brokeback Mountain* on Sex and Manhood

Andrew Evans

When it was released in 2005, *Brokeback Mountain* was almost unique in cinema history. Long before *Love, Simon*, *Moonlight*, and *Milk* broke into the popular and critical limelight, *Brokeback Mountain* was one of the first films with queer characters to appeal to mainstream audiences. An adaptation of a short story by the same name, the film quickly rose in box office prominence and reaped dozens of awards, including a nomination for Best Picture at the Oscars. The film explores the relationship between cowboys Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger), who begin a secret love affair which lasts two decades, from 1963 to 1983. The film’s exploration of erotic love between men was largely unprecedented in such a well received film prior to 2005, and *Brokeback Mountain* is still viewed as a classic of queer cinema. Throughout the film, sexual content is an essential part of the message being communicated, not just in terms of eroticism between men, but in terms of sex and manhood in general.

From the outset, sex is implicit in the film. The opening shot is of Ennis driving up to the building where he will meet Jack before they leave for their assigned job on the titular mountain. The two men wait to be called into the building, conspicuously avoiding eye contact. They stand outside without speaking until just after the four-minute mark of the film, when the first line



is spoken not by either man but by their boss, Aguirre. During the lengthy silent stretch, Jack pulls out a razor and starts shaving his face. It is an almost defiant gesture. No, I will not look at you. Do you like what you see of me? This silence is viscerally charged with immediate sexual tension, a tension which only builds throughout their time on *Brokeback* until the actual moment of sex. There are plaintive looks between Jack’s tent and Ennis’s camp. There is playful physical contact between the two men as Ennis shoots an elk. There is a gun which appears several times, and which, like the razor in the opening scene, can easily be interpreted as phallic by even the most oblivious viewer.

This buildup of sexual tension is significant for two reasons. First off, it is necessary for an audience unaccustomed to queer sexuality in movies. The rising sexual tension takes up much of the early part of the film. There is little dialogue; apart from a few revealing exchanges about family and religion, the two men - more so with Ennis - refrain from too much talk. There is also little to suggest a plot; panoramic shots of a mountain covered in sheep are interspersed mostly with scenes of everyday life for the two shepherds. In a film about an opposite-sex couple, these shots and scenes could be considered boring, borderline pretentious. And yet for a same-sex couple it is necessary. There can be no accusations that the first sexual scene came out of nowhere, or that it was inadequately built up. In a film industry where simply being attractive opposite-sex protagonists is enough to imply a nonexistent love story, *Brokeback Mountain* actually shows a growing physical and emotional attraction because it must. There is no easy directorial shorthand for what is growing between Ennis and Jack as they cook their beans and carry their lambs.

Even if there were such a shorthand, though, it would be inadequate, not merely because of viewers’ standards but also because of the psychology of the characters themselves. The attraction between Jack and Ennis is one of aversion and reluctance. Ennis is the more afraid of the two. He is not the defiant Jack, shaving in the parking lot and playfully hitting his companion. Rather, he avoids contact or overt signs of attraction where possible. When he is wounded falling from a horse, Jack tries to wipe away the blood with a cloth, and Ennis rebuffs him. It later becomes apparent that Ennis has every reason to fear his sexual feelings for Jack; in a flashback, a young Ennis’s father makes a point of showing his son the mutilated corpse of a man killed for his same-sex partnership. Ennis’s internalized guilt over his sexuality persists even after the first sexual experience; the first thing he finds after striking out the morning after is a mauled and mutilated sheep, both a sign that he has abandoned his duty (both as a shepherd and as a “normal” heterosexual) and (in retrospect for the viewer) a reminder of that mutilated body from his childhood.

Jack, the more exuberant and devil-may-care of the pair, is not entirely immune to this aversion either. While he initiates contact at several points, he also avoids looking at Ennis when they first meet. In a later scene, he makes a point of not looking at Ennis as Ennis bathes naked. The shot is composed such that Jack is in the foreground, looking forward into the distance. Ennis is shown from behind, completely exposed, but out of focus. The camera, like Jack, avoids looking at Ennis head-on.

And then there is the thing itself. The sex. There are two contrasting sex scenes during the men’s initial time on the mountain. The first happens when Jack asks a frigid Ennis to join him in the tent. Jack initiates the sexual act, and Ennis, after some shock and reluctance, dives in with gusto. As the partner whose internalized homophobia and self-hatred are much stronger, Ennis is the one who penetrates, taking the stereotypically more masculine role of the top. The sex is rough and raw, with spit for a lubricant. Both men are clothed, with just a sliver of Jack’s backside actually visible before the camera cuts to his face. While it initially seems as though Jack is trying to kiss Ennis, no actual kissing takes place, and once Jack gets on his knees to receive Ennis the two men have no means of making eye contact. This is the sex of two stircrazy men, not two lovers, because Ennis cannot be a lover, not yet at least. He maintains afterwards that their sleeping together was a “one shot thing” and that he “ain’t queer.” Jack echoes this statement, saying “me neither,” though he does offer a potential alternative to this denial by suggesting that their actions on the mountain - queer or otherwise - aren’t “nobody’s business” (Lee).

The sex is not, however, a “one shot thing.” Soon thereafter, Jack and Ennis have another love scene. This time, Ennis begins still fully clothed, but Jack is completely naked. Jack is still the more vulnerable and open of the two, while Ennis still has difficulty exposing himself. This time, there is no hurried tearing down of pants; the only removal of clothing is when Jack pushes aside the hat Ennis is clutching to his chest. The men do not have sex on screen, but simply exchange passionate kisses. Their faces are oriented towards each other, and the tent is well-lit, not dark like the previous night. This is not a sex scene; it is a love scene. The film implies that the blasting through of the initial barrier - the sexual one - is necessary for the more deliberate disassembly of the second barrier - the emotional. This is paralleled by the removal of clothing. On the first night, Ennis pulls down Jack’s pants in a utilitarian gesture, ripping them away for easy access to the anus. When, on the second night, Jack tenderly removes Ennis’s hat for easier access to his face, the contrast is obvious; this night is something else entirely from the previous one. What was having sex has blossomed into the making of love.

And then, there are the women. Each man has one sex scene with his respective wife after the initial scenes between the two men on *Brokeback Mountain*. Here, too, there is a marked contrast. Ennis marries a woman named Alma (Michelle Williams) shortly after his return from the mountain. They are shown having sex after several years have passed, and they have already had two children. The scene most closely resembles the first of the two between Ennis and Jack; it is harsh, breathy, and though the lights are initially on, Ennis quickly turns them off. Ennis, without any warning, flips Alma over below him and enters her from behind. The camera cuts away from his face, focusing on Alma, who is visibly distressed, possibly in pain. Despite having fathered two children by Alma, it seems that Ennis cannot shake the desire for anal sex. This is not a form of birth control, as it is later mentioned that Alma takes the pill. It is also not a spur of the moment decision. Alma’s expression is resigned, as if she has been through this many times before. It seems, then, that Ennis cannot shake his memories of Jack. When having anal sex, he can remember his first time with Jack. Perhaps after he flips Alma over and is unable to see her face, he can even imagine that it is Jack whom he is sleeping with. And yet this is not like *Brokeback Mountain*. The scene makes an obvious callback to the earliest sex scene, in which Ennis takes the role of the top and does not kiss or make eye contact. He is trying to “be a man” with Alma, to impose himself upon her for pleasure’s sake. The barrier of internalized homophobia, disassembled when he is on the mountain with Jack, comes back in full force even when he is with a woman.

Jack, on the other hand, seems to have no such qualms when he has sex with Laureen (Anne Hathaway), whom he meets at a rodeo. Where Alma and Ennis are only shown having sex in their house several years after their textbook chapel-and-minister wedding, Jack and Laureen, by contrast, are anything but this idealized vision of the opposite-sex American couple. They meet in the afternoon, and by the same night, they are having passionate sex in the back of Laureen’s car. Laureen asks Jack if she is going too fast, but he gives her the go-ahead and the two strip down, barely hours after meeting each other. There is no face-averting or visible dread here. The two look into each other’s faces with apparent enjoyment as they do the deed. Jack certainly enjoyed sex with Ennis, but he can also enjoy it with a woman.

There may be practical reasons for this; the film does not state either man’s sexuality, and it is perfectly plausible that Jack is bisexual or pansexual while Ennis is a repressed homosexual merely affecting attraction to Alma. And yet on a thematic level, there is another reason, and this is the core of meaning in the sexual scenes in the film: the two men have radically different brands of masculinity. Jack is more self-assured. From the first scene, in which he pulls out his razor and begins to shave, he is often

flippant, sometimes ridiculous, and always talking. He feels no need to prove himself to anyone. The first time the men have sex, he is comfortable taking the often-stigmatized bottom role, which has been seen as unsuitable for men in many less-tolerant cultures throughout history. And he is the one who breaks down Ennis’s barriers, the first to acknowledge the homoerotic tension between them. Throughout the movie, he is implied to have sex with several other men. On the whole, Jack is far from the stoic, closed-off, heterosexual cowboy idealized by the traditional western. Ennis, on the other hand, makes an effort to fit this stereotype in every possible way. He barely speaks for the first couple of days with Jack. When he does open up, Jack remarks that this is the most he’s spoken in days, and Ennis replies that it’s the most he’s spoken in years. When he has sex with Jack, he takes the dominant role. And it is Ennis who fulfills the traditional “American Dream,” with his wedding in a small chapel to a woman he may or may not love, his small house, his two children, all by the book. When in distress, he often feels the need to lash out at others to prove his manhood, shouting at Alma, Jack, and several random passersby at various points throughout the movie to cover up his own emotional vulnerabilities. Ennis’s childhood trauma and internalized homophobia cause him to affect rather than live his masculinity. He is a performer, living at the beck and call of those around him, even when he appears to be the assertive, aggressive man.

Perhaps the sequence which best epitomizes this relationship is one which is not overtly sexual at all, though it does have some downright Freudian connotations. The scene in question is a two-part parallel, in which both Jack and Ennis have dinner with their families fairly late in the film. Jack’s scene begins with his father-in-law asserting that he, as opposed to Jack, should cut the turkey Laureen has prepared. There is a scuffle over whether or not the television should be on. Laureen wants her son to eat his food without the football game playing in the background, but her father insists that “boys should watch football” (Lee) and turns the set back on. Jack asserts himself at this point, turning the television off and seizing the knife so that he can cut the turkey himself. The camera then cuts to Ennis, whose turkey is being cut by the new husband of Ennis’s now ex-wife Alma. The knife is mechanized, as opposed to the old-fashioned one Jack’s family uses. Ennis tells a story about his time in a rodeo, and then gets into a fight with Alma in the kitchen after she implies that she knew about his affair with Jack all along. Ennis is then kicked out of the house.

These two scenes, while having very little impact on the plot overall, carry a deep thematic contrast. Jack displays his own brand of masculinity by asserting that his father-in-law’s premise (that “boys should watch football”) is not definitive. He rejects this standard, cookie cutter view of what defines a man. In the same instant, a Freudian would not fail to

notice, he takes the decidedly phallic turkey knife back from his father-in-law, asserting that he is a man regardless of whether he agrees with the beliefs of those around him or not. Ennis, on the other hand, tries to assert his traditional masculinity by society’s standards. He tells a story about the rodeo, a traditionally masculine pursuit, at the behest of his daughters. He then shouts at Alma when she tries to bring up his affair with Jack in private, and he even comes close to physically assaulting her before being kicked out. This aggressive, domineering behavior is ironic in that it is traditionally masculine, but Ennis employs it to prevent Alma talking about his homosexuality, which he believes would destroy his masculinity in the eyes of society if it came to light. Ennis’s performative conception of what it means to be a man is not ultimately triumphant, and he has to leave. Again, on a more Freudian note, it is not insignificant that Ennis never even touches the phallic turkey knife. It has been taken from him by a new man. And yet the plastic, electronic knife was always an artificial thing even when he had control over it, unlike with Jack and his metal knife. These two scenes, back to back, work on more than one level to show the difference between how Jack and Ennis each strive to behave as men.

This all comes to a head in the final scene shared by the two men, after which they part ways and never meet again, thanks to Jack’s untimely death. The two are in the spot on *Brokeback* where they have been meeting for years, and Ennis reveals that he will be unable to return for some time, sparking a fight. This is when Jack delivers the iconic line: “I wish I knew how to quit you” (Lee). Jack is under no obligation to stay, but he wants to be with Ennis. He frames Ennis as an addiction, a person with his own toxic quagmire of issues to whom Jack is continually drawn. Jack could be happy without him, find another man to love, if only he knew how to. He is complete in and of himself, with nothing to prove. Ennis replies with: “It’s because of you, Jack, that I’m like this.” In Ennis’s eyes, his is not an issue of addiction to another person; it is an issue of who he, Ennis, is. His sexuality as a whole is the problem, and somebody needs to take the blame for making him the way he is. However irrationally, he places the blame on Jack, as though Jack chose to make him queer. This toxic way of looking at things epitomizes Ennis’s central issue: he cannot love himself, cannot accept who he is. His sexuality, his masculinity, everything that he is, is a source of shame to him, but this has nothing to do with Jack, whatever Ennis may say to the contrary.

*Brokeback Mountain* is a sterling example of queer cinema, but it is also a stunningly complex portrayal of sex in mainstream film. It contains several sex scenes, many of which defy social taboos. Ennis and Alma’s anal sex and Jack and Laureen’s sex on the first date are hardly without their controversies in film, even today. But the portrayal of sex between men

blew these lesser offenses out of the water. The “gay cowboy movie” did what very few films had been brave enough to do before, and it did so for a wide, mainstream viewership. The most incredible thing, perhaps, is how each sex scene is essential to understanding the themes of the movie. The viewer cannot understand the shift from physical attraction to emotional love between Jack and Ennis without seeing the differences between their first and second sex scenes. It is difficult to grasp Ennis’s internalized homophobia and his longing for Jack without having noted the parallels between his first night with Jack and his sex scene with Alma. And without Jack and Laureen to contrast with Ennis and Alma, it would be much less apparent how Jack’s vision of manhood contrasts with that of Ennis. The sexual content of the film is not merely groundbreaking or provocative for the sake of being so; it is what it must be for the film to progress, providing an integral spine to the story which would have been difficult to incorporate in any other way. Perhaps this, just as much as the novel queer storyline, is why the viewers of both queer and mainstream cinema must tip their hats to *Brokeback Mountain*, the original “gay cowboy movie.”

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## ***Cruel Intentions, Sexual Immorality, and the Irredeemable Woman***

Hallie Fogarty

The 1999 cult classic film *Cruel Intentions*, starring icons such as Sarah Michelle Gellar, Reese Witherspoon, and Selma Blair, offers a great opportunity to dive deeper into the discussion of sexual morality and obscenity within film. This movie boasts an R rating and follows incestuous, manipulative stepsiblings Kathryn and Sebastian who wager to take the virginity of a fellow classmate. Despite the shocking topics, the movie's lewdness is quite tame when compared to today's standards. The majority of the sexuality is contained to explicit, salacious dialogue and the occasional implicit sex scene. The most nudity found in the film is the backside of the main male character, Sebastian, while all other scenes are clothed or only show backs. The dialogue however, when used, is quite indecent and untamed. When Kathryn and Sebastian are negotiating the terms of their bet, Kathryn describes what Sebastian will gain by saying, "In English, I'll fuck your brains out" (Kumble). Later, when Kathryn attempts to take Sebastian's prized Jaguar out for a ride, Sebastian shuts her down with, "Kathryn, the only thing you'll be riding is me" (Kumble). The film's use of explicit dialogue, along with the characters' sexual decisions, clearly showcase the extreme double standards that surround female sexuality. These double standards are most prominent in the difference in treatment that Sebastian and Kathryn receive but are also highlighted through the characterization

of the other female characters and their sex lives. While other female characters have and enjoy sex, Kathryn's sexuality is the most harshly judged because of how strongly she accepts and owns her sexual decisions.

A large portion of the vulgarity of the film is rooted in the nature of the sexuality shown. Most of the sexuality within the movie is deceitful, offensive, and nihilistic. While the sex scenes were not overtly scandalous, the sexual themes of the movie are likely what incited the R rating. All the depictions of sex show blatant disregard for community standards and common societal beliefs of how sex should fit into our lives. The incestuous relationship of the main two characters, Kathryn and Sebastian, would be shocking to even some of the most uninhibited of viewers. While the stepsiblings never explicitly have sex, they do specifically discuss the intention to. There are also multiple scenes where they are clearly seducing each other, with a shocking moment that includes Kathryn sitting on Sebastian's lap as he sensually massages her torso while her hand reaches down to presumably give him a hand job. Other moments of sexuality that would be considered risqué to the community standards of the time include the clear showing of same-sex behavior. Again, while there are no explicit same-sex scenes, the relations of two gay men are clearly recounted, with one of them being described as having the mouth of a "hoover." There is also the iconic make-out scene between Sarah Michelle Gellar and Selma Blair, fit with their juxtaposed outfits and finished with the famous string of spit. Further, there is the usage of derogatory words such as "fag" and "queer," though those were considered more socially acceptable to use at the time, as same-sex relationships were more vilified in film during the nineties than they are now. Additionally, much of the sexuality shown is indecent, and at many times, criminal. The movie opens with what would now be deemed revenge porn, with Sebastian uploading naked photos of one of his "conquests" online. Later, he manipulates Cecile into letting him go down on her by threatening to call her overprotective mother. No act of sexuality goes untainted in this film—Sebastian even takes photos of two men having sex so he can blackmail one of them into helping him.

Many of the sex scenes, despite being indirect, make interesting implications about the gender relations and power dynamics between the characters in the movie. In all of the sexual scenes between Kathryn and Sebastian, she is shown as being the aggressor and is usually doing the seducing. In Sebastian's scenes with other women, he is shown as being more assertive, and at times, violent. In scenes with Cecile and Annette, he is able to reject their advances, while in most scenes with

Kathryn, he is seen as helpless against her seduction. He is also seen as being incredibly flippant towards Cecile, even throwing her off his bed in one scene. This authoritativeness in him is absent in his scenes with Kathryn, showing that in that particular relationship, she is the one with the power. This power imbalance is further enhanced in a later monologue when Kathryn boasts of her manipulation of him: “You gave up on the first person you ever loved because I threatened your reputation. Don’t you get it? You’re just a toy, Sebastian. A little toy I like to play with. And now you’ve completely blown it with her. I think it’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard” (Kumble). Throughout the film, Kathryn blatantly uses this power and her sexuality against him, since she knows he is haunted by the fact that she is the one girl he can’t have.

The inclusion of pornography in this film is not incredibly apparent, but it is perceptible. In the beginning of the movie, Sebastian is shown as to have uploaded a young woman’s nudes onto the internet, emblazoning them with the words “how to raise a slut!” (Kumble). Later, he tries to persuade Cecile to let him take nude photos of her, saying: “you know what would be super-duper sexy? If you lost all the clothes” (Kumble). This absence of prevalent pornography is an effective tactic to show that the sexuality in the film is simply human nature, not influenced by outside factors. Sex is shown as an everyday thing in the film; it is not shied away from, except by the characters that are considered to be naïve and inexperienced. The lack of porn doesn’t mean the film lacks the visual iconography of sex, as there are many scenes depicting naked bodies, deep cleavage, and obvious sexual acts which all showcase the reality of these teenagers’ sex lives.

Ultimately, this movie is about terrible, spoiled rich kids, which is why it works so well for a study of the depiction of sexuality and morality. It’s a nihilistic film in nature—these kids are bored of their privileged, empty lives, and use the most powerful tool they have, their sexuality, to manipulate the people around them. Sebastian himself says that he is “sick of sleeping with these insipid Manhattan debutantes. Nothing shocks them anymore” (Kumble). These characters have everything but are fatigued by the meaninglessness of their everything. Sebastian is a misogynistic player and keeps a diary of all of his sexual conquests, detailing out his exploits and the women that fill them. He uploads a girl’s nudes onto the internet, and he coerces an inexperienced virgin into sleeping with him for his own entertainment. Kathryn herself is also irredeemable and corrupt in her own ways. When her ex-boyfriend breaks up with her after she cheats on him, she decides to get revenge by aiming her anger at his new girlfriend: the unassuming, simple Cecile. Kathryn is further vilified for her blatant love of sex. She does not hide

her sexuality; she embraces it. Together, Sebastian and Kathryn make a bet over taking a young girl’s virginity. Fundamentally, this movie is about morally corrupt teenagers and how they manipulate people and situations by using their sexuality. Even the more likable characters, like Cecile, are shown in a bad light: she is dumbed down to such a point that as viewers, it is assumed that she deserves what happens to her. She is also shown to be a typical boy-crazy, bratty teen, placed on a level beneath the cultured, high-class stepsiblings. Annette is arguably a good person, but she is practically a figment of the film—a foil of everything Kathryn and Sebastian are, but filled with a bland, innocuous personality. Her arrival into the narrative starts with a manifesto she writes about saving herself for marriage, but within days, even with knowledge of Sebastian’s “sinful” and indecent reputation, she ends up falling in love with him and sleeping with him anyway.

The end of the film is written in such a way that viewers are arguably supposed to feel that everyone gets what they deserve. Sebastian dies by sacrificing himself when Annette is about to get hit by a car – presumably to show that he truly has changed. Cecile and Annette distribute his journal to the student body to showcase how truly corrupt Kathryn is. However, even with Sebastian’s death, Kathryn ultimately gets the brunt of the punishment, which is heavily influenced by the fact that people are terrified of sexually liberated women. Yes, Kathryn was vindictive. She manipulated people; she screwed people over and tried to ruin their lives. But Sebastian did the same. He got his redemptive ending, while Kathryn was defeated. She was no more evil or corrupt than he was; she simply had the disadvantage of being a sexual woman. Towards the beginning of the movie, Kathryn even defends her behavior, saying, “Eat me, Sebastian. It’s okay for guys like you and Court to fuck everyone, but when I do it, I get dumped for innocent little twits like Cecile. God forbid I exude confidence and enjoy sex. Do you think I relish the fact that I have to act like Mary Sunshine twenty-four-seven so I can be considered a lady? I’m the Marcia fucking Brady of the Upper East Side, and sometimes I want to kill myself” (Kumble). Kathryn is not a good person – no one would argue that – but Sebastian’s ending should be rejected as a proper redemption. The little remorse he showed for placing the bet – and nothing else he had done – does not offset all of the harm he caused throughout the movie. Both Sebastian and Kathryn were irredeemable, unscrupulous people who deserved punishment. However, due to Kathryn’s acceptance of her shameless female sexuality, she is viewed as the irredeemable villain, while Sebastian was able to redeem himself and be shown as the hero.

The vilification of Kathryn and her sexuality in this film is a perhaps exaggerated but true example of the real-world double standards that women face in regard to their sex lives. The events within *Cruel Intentions* are all displaying the true realities and repercussions that confidently sexual women face in our society. Media portrayals like this serve to reinforce common beliefs that women who reclaim their sexuality are to be punished, but men who reclaim their sexuality are only doing what's natural. While this film may be fictional and dramatic, it is still sharing and upholding universal truths about what it's like to be a confident, sexual woman in our society.

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## The Donut Hole with a Hole in the Center: Examining Block Elements in *Knives Out*

Danielle Heiert

The mystery genre is one that has been adored by audiences of all kinds for thousands of years. Whodunnits specifically have become well-known for their surprise twist endings, and none are more popular in the eyes of today's audiences than the notorious "donut hole" case of Harlan Thrombey. In this essay, I will analyze how Rian Johnson's 2019 film, *Knives Out*, functions as a whodunnit mystery by examining his use of block elements in the plot. In order to effectively analyze the events of the film, we must first understand what block elements are.

### What are Block Elements?

As Eliot Singer explains in his article, "The Whodunit as Riddle: Block Elements in Agatha Christie," block elements are riddling strategies that are used to distract the audience from the solution to a mystery or crime. These blocks are often revealed in a plot twist, ensuring that the audience does not solve the mystery before the author intends them to. Singer also notes that block elements can be split up into the following four groups:

- 1) Too little information: This type of block occurs when the author purposely leaves out crucial details in a situation, thus making the mystery unsolvable until the missing detail is

revealed. For example, this could be a hidden familial relationship between characters that provides a motive for the crime.

- 2) Too much information: This block can take the form of red herrings or other details that lead the audience down the wrong path. An author could include details about the mysterious behaviors of a character to induce the audience into believing they are the culprit when in reality they were in no way involved with the crime.
- 3) Contradiction: Contradiction is a staple element in mysteries of all kinds. This occurs when the mystery is supplemented by an impossibility – a locked door with no other possible entries or exits; a photograph showing a character at a certain location at the time the crime was committed; a character’s assumed lack of intelligence.
- 4) False gestalt: Singer notes that false gestalt is not really its own category, but rather “a result of too much information or of a contradiction that leads the reader into forming a false picture of the whole circumstances of the murder, not just of its details” (Singer 164). A false gestalt could happen when a dead body is wrongly identified; the audience will assume the dead body is who it is supposed to be and will not consider the “victim” to be the criminal.

Singer states that “it is absolutely essential to the whodunnit that there be an apparent crime, that someone seek to solve that crime, and that the reader not learn of the solution until the final epiphany” (Singer 166). This fact is true of every mystery novel or film that has ever existed, but the way it is laid out in Rian Johnson’s *Knives Out* is especially intriguing.

#### The Plot: Seeing the Donut

*Knives Out* follows the events surrounding the mysterious death of Harlan Thrombey, an extremely wealthy and famous crime novelist. While the police interrogate Harlan’s family – his children, Linda and Walt; their spouses, Richard and Donna; his daughter-in-law, Joni; the grandchildren, Hugh “Ransom,” Meg, and Jacob; Harlan’s mother, “Great Nana” Thrombey; his housekeeper, Fran; and his personal nurse, Marta – the audience is introduced to Mr. Benoit Blanc, a famous private investigator

who has taken on the case. During each character’s interrogation, we learn that the Thrombey family has many potential motives for wanting Harlan dead: Harlan was threatening to tell Linda that Richard is cheating on her, Walt has just been fired from the family’s publishing company, Joni has been financially cut off from Harlan after he discovered she had been stealing from him, and Ransom stormed out from the party after a mysterious altercation with Harlan.

When Blanc moves on to questioning Marta, we are taken into a flashback of the night before, depicting Marta accidentally mixing up Harlan’s medications and giving him a large overdose of morphine. When Marta is unable to locate the life-saving antidote, Harlan hurriedly formulates a novel-worthy plan to allow Marta to get away with his murder to save herself and her mother, who is an undocumented immigrant. Harlan instructs Marta to leave immediately and to point out the time to someone, then secretly return to his room by climbing up the terrace to dress in his robe and hat, which would allow “Harlan” to be seen, alive, after Marta had left for the night. When Marta questions this plan and suggests they try to call an ambulance to save Harlan, he slits his own throat, forcing Marta to go through with the plan.

Blanc asks Marta to be his investigative assistant, and Marta purposely destroys any evidence that proves she was involved in Harlan’s death. She is drawn back into the spotlight when Harlan’s will reveals that he has cut off his entire family and has instead left everything he owned to Marta. Ransom helps her escape the family and demands to know everything that happened, then devises his own plan to help Marta avoid suspicion in exchange for a portion of the money. In the end, Blanc realizes the truth of the case: Ransom, angered that Harlan cut him out of the will, switched Harlan’s medications so that Marta would give him the wrong doses and cause his death. As Marta accidentally mixed up the bottles, she actually gave Harlan the correct doses, meaning Harlan’s death was, in actuality, a suicide.

#### Block Elements in *Knives Out*: The Many Holes in the Donut

In his article about nostalgia in detective fiction, Eric Sandberg makes the connection between *Knives Out* and great mysteries of the past. He points out that Detective Elliot makes the explicit connection of the Thrombey house to a Clue board, and that Marta’s mother is watching a Spanish translation of an episode of *Murder, She Wrote*. However, more than anything he claims that “Johnson’s film is a contemporary homage to the Christie whodunnits he read as a child,” (Sandberg). Many elements of Christie’s famous novels are seen in the most subtle details of the film, and Sandberg even theorizes that Harlan himself is based on her. There is a reason that *Knives Out* feels so similar to an Agatha Christie novel: many of her most famous block elements are utilized in the film. Christie is known

for her airtight plots and mind-bending twists. Similarly, Johnson achieves multiple jaw-dropping moments through the careful use of blocks.

Johnson uses the characters' own assumptions to block them from seeing the truth. This is a staple of mysteries and is a block element the audience expects. One of the first blocks noted in the film is one of contradiction. Blanc initially assumes Marta's innocence due to the timing of events: Marta left the house shortly after midnight, and Harlan was seen alive later that night by Walt. Clearly, Marta could not have been involved with Harlan's death if she had not been in the house when it happened, yet she is made the prime suspect after being the sole benefactor of Harlan's will. It is not until Blanc looks past this element of contradiction that he can begin to piece together the night's true events.

However, the true genius of *Knives Out* comes in Johnson's ability to block the audience while giving the impression that they are aware of the truth from the very beginning of the film. By using the audience's assumptions based on their preexisting knowledge of mysteries against them, Johnson is able to show viewers exactly what is going on, yet still leave them blindsided by the end reveal. The first assumption Johnson relies on is that there will be only one culprit. This assumption is formed before the film even starts; being marketed as a classic whodunnit murder mystery, the audience draws upon their knowledge of other whodunnits and assumes only one of the stellar cast members will turn out to be the bad guy. This assumption is shattered almost right out of the box: in the first half-hour, the audience is informed not only of the murderer's identity, but of the fact that Harlan was an accomplice in his own murder, resulting in double culprits. In revealing Marta's accidental murder so early in the film, Johnson also creates a block of too much information. With the knowledge of exactly how the murder occurred laid out in front of them, the audience is no longer focused on the search for clues. The new assumption formed is that the film will now follow Marta as she evades her murder charge, rather than a continued search for the true culprit.

The next audience assumption Johnson relies on is that the murder will be committed by the murderer. In traditional murder mysteries, the culprit who is caught at the end of the movie is the one who actually committed the crime; however, *Knives Out* is by no means traditional. Marta, who, through her flashbacks, tells the audience step-by-step how she committed the crime, is not the one responsible for Harlan's death. In fact, not even Ransom, the convicted culprit, is Harlan's murderer. Johnson flips this assumption on its head by creating a situation in which the murder is committed by its own victim. This reveal essentially occurs twice: the audience is informed at the beginning of the film that Harlan really is the one who slit his own throat, but it takes on new meaning when the realization hits that the medicines

were indeed correct and there was nothing actually wrong with Harlan. "In fact, if Harlan had listened to you and called the ambulance, he would be alive today," (Johnson).

Perhaps the most surprising block element comes from the audience's assumption that Marta is a reliable narrator. The audience is shown exactly what happened on the night Harlan died. We see each family member's order of events played out how they saw it, and then seen again from Marta's point of view. With this corrected version of the night's events, the audience assumes that Marta's version displays the ultimate truth. This is further aided by the fact that Marta is physically unable to lie without vomiting. Marta does not realize that Ransom has switched the medications, creating a false gestalt block of too little information. Marta believes she is telling the truth when confessing her guilt, so the audience believes right along with her. This fact results in Marta unintentionally becoming an unreliable narrator. By holding the assumption that Marta is aware of the true nature of the crime, the audience is blocked from seeing that there is still a missing element in Harlan's death.

"I spoke in the car about the hole at the center of this donut. And yes, what you and Harlan did that fateful night seems at first glance to fill that hole perfectly. A donut hole in the donut's hole. But we must look a little closer. And when we do, we see that the donut hole has a hole in its center – it is not a donut hole at all, but a smaller donut with its own hole, and our donut is not whole at all!" (Johnson).

The culmination of block elements on each of these key assumptions results in a film that disregards everything the audience thought they knew about murder mysteries. Johnson's vast knowledge of the mystery genre allows for an artfully nostalgic take on what has become a modern classic worthy of its predecessors. This fun and innovative take on beloved mysteries of the old brings a love of the classic genre to a new audience and puts a new spin on whodunnit mysteries that will have lasting impacts on the genre for years to come.



## Works Cited

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## Contributors

### **Kayla Belser**

Kayla Belser is in her senior year at NKU and is graduating this May. Her major is English with a focus in creative writing and a minor in social justice. After graduation, Kayla is looking forward to travelling and pursuing her MFA in creative writing. Her dream is to become a published author and to teach creative writing at the collegiate level or work in the publishing industry. Kayla was inspired to write her piece, "Homosexual Desire and Identity in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," after noticing the parallels between the novel and our current society regarding self-image, secrecy, and shame surrounding homosexuality. Dorian's journey was heartbreaking to Kayla in so many ways, as she focuses a lot on queer voices in her writing and felt compelled to address how that voice has always been present, why it had to be muted back then and is still muted in some cases today.

### **Alexi Kreutzjans**

Alexi Kreutzjans is a junior at NKU and expects to graduate in Spring 2022. She is majoring in English with a focus in literature and minoring in Spanish. After graduation, Alexi is looking forward to becoming an English professor, which she wants more than anything. Alexi's piece, "The Ancient Qualities of Dracula as Modern Societal Fears," was inspired by Count Dracula's ability to be incorporated into the supernatural as well as the gothic and mysterious aspects of 19th-century Victorian society.

### **Lisa Kuhn**

Lisa Kuhn is in her senior year at NKU and is graduating this May. Her major is English with a focus in literary and cultural studies and her area of concentration is in psychology. After graduation, Lisa will be pursuing her master's degree to start her teaching career in higher education. She was inspired to write her piece, "Fear and Control in Nella Larsen's *Passing*," when reading the novel in Dr. Yohe's Introduction to English Studies course. She was very intrigued by Larsen's discussion on race relations during the Harlem Renaissance.

### **Kelsey Lee**

Kelsey Lee is in her fourth year of college and her second year at NKU. She expects to graduate in Spring 2022 with her degree in English and a minor in Women's and Gender Studies. Kelsey's dream job would be travel writing or working for Disney Publishing Worldwide. Kelsey's piece, "Mental Illness as Presented in *A Court of Thorns and Roses*," was inspired by her love of the *ACOTAR* series for Maas's discussion of important topics such as mental health, which is so often misrepresented and poorly construed in today's media.

### **Andrew Evans**

Andrew Evans is a senior at NKU, and plans to graduate in Spring 2022 with his degree in Secondary English Education and two minors in Theatre and Honors. After graduation, Andrew hopes to get his MA and PhD in English Literature and teach at the collegiate level. His piece, titled "You know I ain't queer": *Brokeback Mountain* on Sex and Manhood", was originally written for an Honors course on obscenity and media censorship, and was inspired by his fascination with LGBTQIA+-centered media.

### **Hallie Fogarty**

Hallie Fogarty is in her junior year at NKU and is set to graduate in Spring 2022 with her Integrative Studies degree in studio arts, English, and psychology and with an Honors minor. After graduation, Hallie is looking forward to getting her MFA in creative writing. Her piece, titled "Cruel Intentions, Sexual Immorality, and the Irredeemable Woman," was inspired by sexual double standards against women in film.

### **Danielle Heiert**

Danielle Heiert is in her senior year at NKU and is graduating this May with her degree in English with a focus in writing studies and a minor in marketing. After graduation, Danielle is excited to work in the writing field in editing or in social and digital media. She was inspired to write her piece, "The Donut Hole with a Hole in the Center: Examining Block Elements in *Knives Out*," after reading an essay on block elements used in Agatha Christie's works during Dr. Soliday's Literature and Film course.