

DARK LONERISM:
SELF-SABOTAGE, APATHY, AND UNCANNY WHITENESS

by

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(Under the Direction of John Wharton Lowe)

ABSTRACT

Commenting on the literary trope of loneliness that can spark action or epiphany, Robert A. Ferguson accounts for the many “fables” in America about the “solitary adventurer and its social variant, the self-made man,” by suggesting individualism can be the “answer as well as the problem to feeling alone.” This dissertation explores a similar paradox: how can an intense self-interest, aloof to the struggles of others, become the answer as well as the problem to feeling disempowered? In a certain strain of American literature from the Great Depression through the early post-war period, depictions of the aloof and brooding male protagonist ironicize as much as they romanticize the angst of ensuring one’s integrity within a chaotic world. The irony exposed in such texts inevitably becomes layered and multivalent because the presence of a loner-protagonist creates a schism between external reality and his troubled, obsessive mindset. As this study argues, the loner-protagonist may stubbornly fantasize about opting out of society and seeking confirmation of his exceptional status, yet he can only test this sense of the world by deconstructing his preferred state of apartness, surveillance, and hypervigilance. Despite being tormented by his concessions to normativity as he enters the crucible of social life, the loner-protagonist capitalizes on the promise of control inherent in white privilege, or what this project

conceptualizes as the masked persona of uncanny whiteness. By exposing the performative undercurrents to an otherwise austere and seemingly unknowable archetype, *Dark Lonerism* encompasses both a healthy skepticism of the loner-protagonist's self-isolating pose and a sympathetic interrogation of the pathological psychology underlying his many acts of self-sabotage.

INDEX WORDS: The Loner, The Loner-protagonist, Loneliness, Isolation, Asceticism, Solipsism, Paranoia, Self-destruction

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my loving parents, Cynthia and Rich, whose support during my years of writing and research tethered me to reality. Their example gives me perspective on the difference between solitude as a necessity—the isolation endured in pursuit of knowledge—and the type of loneliness that feels more significant the more it harms and separates. Far from the delusion propagated by the latter, I embrace the inconvenience of the former with full knowledge that there are bonds worth returning to and reinforcing. Thank you, mom and dad.

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*False values and delusive words:
these are the worst monsters for mortals—
long does catastrophe sleep and wait within them.*

— From “On the Priests,” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1891), by Friedrich Nietzsche

*Know when you see him,
nothing can free him.
Step aside, open wide:
it’s the loner.*

— Chorus to “The Loner,” debut single from *Neil Young* (1969), by Neil Young

Introduction

For a country so easily caricatured as fixated on the indulgences afforded by wealth and the excesses withstood by youth, America has surprisingly also made room within the cultural landscape for lionizing the austerity performed by a certain class of men: the aloof and brooding, the astute and withdrawn, the capable and mistrustful. These lone operators define a particular strain of labor within our capitalist system, relying on native intellect and occupying themselves through solitary pursuits. Such pretenses toward self-reliance make for awkward or tense situations when these avatars of lone-wolf masculinity intersect with society. While they may appear conceited in their indifference to the trivialities of socialization, their antisocial behavior can just as easily be understood to be something akin to ascetic disavowal. To pursue a full expression of pure being, one must be unencumbered by obligations arising outside of the self, or so the thinking would go.

Lone operators tend to run cool while applying reason, plying their trade, yet turn hot-headed when responding to a power vacuum. From rugged cowboys to hardboiled detectives, oily hucksters to hard-luck drifters, prickly vigilantes to fringe-dwelling outcasts, all know how to rely on a mix of distancing behavior and general duplicity for their gain. Whether or not they are truly immoral, they act unscrupulously: shielding intentions as they withhold emotional honesty or mislead with false information; suppressing desires as they renounce social attachments or ignore attempts at intimacy; swallowing doubts as they scapegoat others or run amok in self-destructive ways. Though seemingly aloof to the world, these figures actually invest

great care in their personas, as they draw power from the ritualistic calculations by which they determine when, why, and how to let their guards down. Deigning to engage with the world can have consequences, though, and this project explores the nature of this fallout through the lens of those false values and delusive words that inevitably usher the lone operator to defeat.

Once we distribute the above qualities across a range of ascetic archetypes, we can see how such men determine a cosmology of reactionary isolation. Some examples aspire to pure detachment, as occurs with the invisible man or man without qualities, but can also rely on tangible (rather than metaphysical) barriers, as occurs with the hermit or the recluse. Some value privacy as the means of ennobling their peccadillos and deflecting suspicion, as occurs with the underground man or the voyeur. Some can even expose the chasm between self and other, mediating this difference through an exaggerated persona, as occurs with the holy fool or the hunger artist. No matter the status inherent in their social positioning, these figures trade on unknowability, as if their volatile mystery—of not just *who* they are, but *why* they insist on remaining abject—grants them a form of privilege beyond the freedoms they vigilantly defend.

Isolated men who find themselves in conflict with the wider world have often been upheld, for better or worse, as avatars of American masculinity. Within the mythos of the self-reliant man, the effort to sustain emotional distance has been deemed necessary to uphold individualism and to exert agency. At once ascetic in his reluctance to conform and decadent in his willful abjection, the archetype arising from these conditions might rightfully be termed the loner. This category, by virtue of its slippery usage and array of connotations, could encompass all iterations of those isolated male figures in American literature who broadcast their apartness, feeling themselves disempowered yet still yearning to order some portion of their existences. Given the loner's self-isolating pose, he is not so much convinced of his convictions as

determined to shore up confidence in those abilities and instincts that set him apart. He betrays his entitled position, then, in testing whether his individualism passes muster as exceptionalism.

As we flesh out this concept, we should refrain from imposing connotations about the loner as necessarily a lonely figure who, as a matter of course, avoids social interaction. Unwilling to live as just one subjectivity among many, the loner skews closer to an archetypal configuration, a totem of masculine longing concealed beneath stoic resolve. Many heroes are made of this same tension, of course, but the loner willfully stands alone, redoubling his taciturn self-containment when others might seek connections and yield to help. His isolation fails to provide the comfort, renewal, or perspective of solitude, then, because introversion and its attendant self-knowledge would threaten to usher the loner toward reintegration with society; this fate must be avoided, as it would obliterate the very premise of his identity. Thrust deeper into the baseless ‘rectitude’ of his apathy, the loner is alone but not lonely; his fate is to be misunderstood and possibly even persecuted, as he is more willing to play the part of the victim or scapegoat than he is to adapt or admit wrongdoing. From this perspective, the loner has the uncanny ability to at once operate beyond the realm of moral conduct yet feel justified doing so because he believes himself owed that privilege.

Among other things, this project investigates the sexual violence that can be propagated by isolated yet empowered loner-protagonists. I argue that texts in this vein ultimately deconstruct white male privilege by pinpointing the uncanny deferral of identity behind which toxic masculinity and corrosive whiteness can thrive. Beyond that, I hope to account for the loner’s tendency toward violence as a microcosm of the self-destructive impulse. This is a desire for the crucible of violent upheaval, the test needed to affirm self-determination. Even if what he creates is, paradoxically, the *destruction* of the self, the loner still succeeds in fusing ascetic

values with decadent behavior. The discomfiting legacy of this self-sabotage is his enduring allure.

Given this intersection of the loner-protagonist under duress and his fatalistic drive towards self-destruction, we should elaborate on the nature of comeuppance and how it functions as a trope. In his exploration of the positive role solitude can have for characters working through and responding to distress, Robert A. Ferguson explores the range of reflective modes—from “reasoned solitude” to “working solitude”—that is available for conducting the difficult emotional work of reckoning with trauma and eventually rejoining the world (115, 156). His study, *Alone in America*, builds off the claim that “solitude is an obsession in American literature,” and he suggests we can account for this prevalent theme by recognizing how readers receive edification through the tension and eventual resolution of “inward claims of identity” that must be “pitted against the pressures of a surrounding community” (2). The intrinsic value for the reader, Ferguson suggests, is that such narratives “indicate how we might talk to ourselves when the pressures come our way” (2). As a means of structuring his analysis, Ferguson delineates such modes of crisis as “failure, betrayal, change, defeat, breakdown, fear, difference, age, and loss” (4). These constitute the “felt quality of existence,” and they are a good synopsis of the types of pressures that arise from the narratological imperative for tension and conflict (4).

Whether focused on the hard-won honor of standing apart or the tenuous survival of being adrift, any portrayal of what Ferguson calls “the displaced self” should evoke a reader’s ambivalence (9). What makes the archetypal loner off-putting yet alluring is how he evinces competing whims. As Ferguson makes plain, an unintended consequence of our Americanized form of individualism, which “glor[ies] in solitude as [the individual’s] natural state against the trifling norms and conventions of society,” is the potential of rogue citizens to feel entitled to

inverting the social contract of democracy (5). The drive toward individualism, then, has prompted “fables about the solitary adventurer and its social variant, the self-made man,” that stake out much of American literature as the proving ground for the efficacy of the individual as lone operator (5). While individualism may very well be “the answer as well as the problem to feeling alone,” as Ferguson argues, the paradox this project explores is how an intense self-interest, aloof to the struggles of others, has become the answer as well as the problem to feeling disempowered (5).

While the loner’s quest to exert agency makes him a shadow version of the archetypal hero, he should stand apart from the conventional and more vaguely defined ‘antihero.’ Rather than being suspicious of ideals or agnostic in general about morality, the loner adheres to a code of conduct that maximizes his distance from his object of disgust, be it organized religion, others’ neediness, or even his own sexuality. For that reason, the presence of a loner-protagonist suggests a fundamentally psychological orientation to a text, as his seeming indifference necessitates ways of peeking behind his implacable mask. In his exploits, he typically weathers narrative tensions that force him, at first, to rise to the challenge of societal interference. The loner-protagonist answers the call to action gravely, though, for his entire persona is designed to resist the perils of indoctrination and acculturation. Once entrenched in conflict, the loner and his façade rarely prove strong enough to withstand what the archetypal hero tends to endure: descent back into corruptible, fallible human nature. Accordingly, the loner-protagonist will almost inevitably fall to the temptation of exploiting fear and uncertainty, power and privilege, as he grasps for control over himself and others.

The loner, as codified within this project, should be seen as uniquely a product and term of the 20th century, even if his lineage has roots in movements such as Romanticism and

transcendentalism. As depicted in literature, film, and television, the loner is typically more everyman than hero, the type of person who seems talented enough to have earned being upwardly mobile yet withdrawn enough to generally avoid exposing himself to harm or risk of any stripe. However, in times of conflict (whether or not of his making), he almost inevitably claims recourse to his white male privilege, an act of hubris epitomizing the inequity against which identity politics contend. In this reading, the loner exposes himself as part of the silent majority, benefiting from norms he would be loath to defend. As he resists this prospect, though, the loner's hypervigilance can place him among the delusional and the messianic. If these traits prove less pathological and more egotistical, he could even be counted as the Great Man striver. No matter how the loner internalizes the power of his guise, its outward manifestation—silence—enables him to surveil the wider world. However, in his solipsism he becomes susceptible to paranoia. Indeed, the paranoid sense of his agency being threatened is the source of his determination to shore up power in whatever context he can control.

The loner's distrust of the world can manifest in different ways. From Humphrey Bogart's steely and unflappable presence as Rick Blaine in *Casablanca* or Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*, each of whom sorts out the messes of others, to Holden Caulfield's more excitable voicing of grievances in *The Catcher in the Rye* or even the unhinged emotionalism and vengeance of Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*, to the many iterations of Bruce Wayne who have donned the cowl of Batman, the many detached glances over a glass of Canadian Club from *Mad Men*'s Don Draper, and the many cynical one-liners from *Parks and Recreation*'s resident libertarian, Ron Swanson, manifestations of the loner are leery or prejudiced in some manner or another. They have also functioned as commentary on the masculine ideals of their eras. Although designed to reflect our more cynical modern times, these figures often uphold some

version of heroic masculinity, if only in their drive to get things done. While they all project the overriding sense that they operate by their own codes and have cut away obligations in order to ensure survival on their own terms, these characters of literature, film, and television share other qualities that are more unequivocally problematic: they are all white males who position themselves not just apart from society, but *beyond*; they are at times self-assured to the point of being closed off; they are often cynical and even exploitative of others' emotions and desires.

While the loner may valorize his ability to remain true to himself amid competing imperatives, he also projects a public persona that suggests his identity is malleable, if only in the eyes of different beholders. This brings his self-integrity into question. For example, Travis Bickle converts to vigilantism by literally confronting his reflection, and then he changes his physical appearance as a rite of passage away from his eponymous role—as voyeuristic taxi driver—and into his new guise as agent of retribution. Bruce Wayne lives a double life as Batman, and his playboy image works against our understanding of the superhero as crusader for justice. Don Draper assumes a dead man's identity during the Korean War, and protecting this secret becomes an imperative at different points over the course of his serialized narrative.

These identity crises occur in part because the loner is a hero of his own devising. The loner-protagonist dedicates himself to a journey away from the Other—or, more accurately, *against* the Other, in all its varied senses—and toward a deeper sense of the self. Occupying an ambiguous and liminal ontological formation, the loner enters the phases through the hero's journey not to locate and harness the transformative potential of a boon to society, but rather to achieve a manner of self-knowledge that obfuscates the nature of selfhood. His goal is to erase the very premises of both biological and social determinism, to erase that which gives rise to identity and allows us to categorize it. As the man *beyond*, the archetypal loner goes through a

crucible of his own making to remove any trace of legibility on the façade of his monolithic tabula rasa.

By prioritizing self-determination to a destructive degree, the loner reveals the schism of our nation's foundational paradox. American individualism, as an ideal, has long privileged an empowered and rational agency as the essential condition for fostering democracy. However, participation in the collective is tacitly optional for those individuals with the resources to opt out. By stubbornly foregrounding the escape route of self-segregation, available only to a privileged few as recourse against the needy masses, the loner-driven text subverts the godlike drive toward autonomy. The loner-protagonist may stubbornly fantasize about opting out of society and seeking confirmation of his exceptional status, yet he can only test this sense of the world by deconstructing his preferred ontological state. Paradoxically, the pursuit of pure being requires becoming entrenched in a world of compromise.

As he lays claim to these mutually exclusive conditions—a self-contained ethos functioning within an adaptive environment—the loner seeks to validate the belief that his perceptions are the only measure of the world he will need. To engage the world as a loner, then, presupposes there is some reality that would accommodate him. What he ignores, though, are the surreal distortions he must make in order to believe his toxic influence is welcomed. For these reasons, this project proposes that we might better capture the fatalism and unnerving qualities of loner-driven texts by revising the privileged, decadent solipsism identified by the term 'Dark Romanticism.'¹ By reducing the earlier term's melodramatic connotations, this new notion of

¹ See G. R. Thompson's introduction to *The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism* for an exploration of the "demonic-quest romance," which Thompson aligns with Diabolist (or Dark) Romanticism: "What the essays persistently suggest is that the kind of high Gothic represented by *Melmoth*, or *Moby-Dick*, or *Heart of Darkness* is the embodiment of demonic-quest romance, in which a lonely, self-divided hero embarks on insane pursuit of the Absolute. This self-destructive quest is metaphysical, mythic, and religious, defining the hero's dark or equivocal relationship to the universe" (2). The underlying decadence of this genre, I argue, derives from what Mario Praz, in his foreword to *The Romantic Agony*, describes as the "progressive cooling of the passionate quality with which the

‘Dark Lonerism’ would necessarily comprise both an introverted epistemological framework, hypervigilant in identifying threats, and an attendant ontological state of apartness. In other words, Dark Lonerism would describe the loner’s fraught sense of self, in which a sensitive (but outwardly aloof) individual seeks agency (but also reassurance) by hiding behind the unquestioned privileges of whiteness. As we will see, the power that results is so debilitating and, thus, *dehumanizing* that it becomes uncanny.

As a key example in his seminal effort to theorize the nature of the uncanny, Sigmund Freud identifies repetition as one possible source of this feeling. In his conception of this unsettling aesthetic experience that is at once strange and familiar, Freud likens uncanny repetition to a situation when one falls into a pattern of “the unintentional return,” reverting back to the place where one had just exited (144). Similarly, he speaks earlier in his analysis of the dread we experience due to the “constant recurrence of the same thing,” in which “the same characters, the same destinies, the same misdeeds” become as banal and numbing as they are unwelcome (142). Although the conditions of Dark Lonerism could certainly consign a loner-protagonist to a similar cycle of “helplessness” in the face of “the fateful and the inescapable,” this project makes greater use of uncanny doubling as a framing device for conceiving the loner’s troubled mindset (Freud 144). On this topic, Freud extrapolates from E. T. A. Hoffmann’s usage of the *Doppelgänger* trope to better describe the cognitive dissonance that results from the “appearance of persons who have to be regarded as identical because they look alike” (141). However, he does not limit himself to a strict interpretation of doubling as solely the emergence of a *Doppelgänger*. As we will see, it is through these metaphysical extensions of

first of the Romantics had invested even morbid themes” (xv). According to Praz, this process resulted in the “crystallization of the whole of the movement into set fashion and lifeless decoration,” whereby an antihero’s brooding sensibility is not so much challenged by the text as it is permitted to fester (xv).

doubling and doubleness—rather than physically encountering an uncanny replica of himself—that the loner becomes trapped in his cycle of recursive thoughts and desperate actions.

Beyond the external manifestation of a *Doppelgänger*, uncanny doubling also occurs if a person were to “identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self,” or if he were to “substitute the other’s self for his own” (Freud 142). At these dissociative extremes within the trope of doubling, the self would “thus be duplicated, divided and interchanged,” or so Freud argues (142). The disturbing allure of these experiences draw from what Freud, building on the theory of Otto Rank, proposes was the original purpose fulfilled by cognitive doubling: “The double was originally an insurance against the extinction of the self or, as Rank puts it, ‘an energetic denial of the power of death’, and it seems likely that the ‘immortal’ soul was the first double of the body” (142). He concludes this passage with the pithy reminder that, “having once been an assurance of immortality, [the double] becomes the uncanny harbinger of death” (142). From these assertions, we can sense how an archetypal formulation like the loner, first inhabited as a persona by a man desperate to control his fate, could convey the promise of transcending mortality even though it exacts its cost through the ironic death (figurative if not literal) brought about by the loner’s own misdeeds.

Because of its tendency to wallow in tragic absurdity, Dark Lonerism should never be celebrated as a viable means to combat nihilism. Its vision of life as a purely Darwinian contest to beat back society’s intrusions inevitably yields to its own deconstructive potential: the loner-protagonist, agonized by competing impulses, sabotages any good intentions he may have ever hoped to act on. Given the nature of narrative—with its ability to codify norms or subvert them, with its inevitable thrust toward either definitive resolution or absorbing ellipsis—stories of strife and uncertainty resonate most when they motivate action, cultivate empathy, or simply dislodge

harmful ways of thinking. However, one must first revise and reformat the narrative of struggle (against society, nature, or just the complacent self) before it can lapse into the collective unconscious. As evidenced by Henry David Thoreau's folkloric and self-mythologizing distortions of his time at Walden Pond, the power of metafictional reflection resides in its intimacy, in its excavation of the resiliency needed to take stock of our failings and confront them. Dark Lonerism invites a similar feeling of intimacy, I argue, but it does so by indulging in what Ralph Waldo Emerson calls the "distemper" of egotism (70).

In his essay, "Culture," from *The Conduct of Life*, Emerson reflects on how the "craving for sympathy" affects the status of the individual within society (70). He can admit that this is a "tendency in all minds," yet he also sees the "metaphysical variety of this malady" as extending beyond, say, the mere expression of discomfort to elicit a comforting word (70). Rather than broadly critiquing the need for sympathy, Emerson comments on "[o]ne of its annoying forms," in which "sufferers parade their miseries, tear the lint from their bruises, reveal their indictable crimes, that you may pity them" (70). This constitutes a "limbo of irritability," or the type of solipsistic angst that proves Emerson's truism, "Your man of genius pays dear for his distinction" (73). With little alteration, we could paraphrase this aphorism to reflect on the plight of the loner, as well.

The outcome of this distemper, as Emerson imagines it, occurs as the sufferer is "speedily punished," but only in the sense that "this habit invites men to humor it" by "treating the patient tenderly" (71). In this attempt to "extort some show of interest from the bystanders" to one's egotism, tragic irony inevitably overwhelms the sufferer because the response of others is "to shut him up in a narrower selfism, and exclude him from the great world of God's cheerful fallible men and women" (70, 71). If the loner-protagonist distinguishes himself from Emerson's

sense of the existential egotist, it is in his uncanny ability to place the shackles upon himself. Shockingly, he derives masochistic pride from this narrow—ultimately *terminal*—sense of self.

When Emerson makes a strong rebuke against solipsism, he dismisses a central tenet of Dark Lonerism. However, his thesis in “Culture” suggests that there are myriad perspectives folded within a single subjectivity, and so these must inevitably compete. Before any prospect for harmony can emerge, we must recede into the type of introspection that remains tethered to norms:

Culture is the suggestion from certain best thoughts, that a man has a range of affinities, through which he can modulate the violence of any mastertones that have a droning preponderance in his scale, and succor him against himself. Culture redresses his balance, puts him among his equals and superiors, revives the delicious sense of sympathy, and warns of the dangers of solitude and repulsion. (72).

The loner, however, detects no such recourse within culture. He may dread the ‘mastertones of violence’ that threaten to blot out his humanity, but he also understands the allure of succoring his idealized self against his socialized self. From this perspective, the loner not only embraces the ‘dangers of solitude,’ but he also becomes locked in the type of repulsion that redoubles itself within his dueling sensibilities. This is the absurd duality of the loner-protagonist: trapped in the hall-of-mirrors of his solipsism, he “continues to spin slowly on one spot” but never resigns himself to seeking solace in anything outside his narrow world (Emerson 70).

Perseverance may build character, but it can only be harnessed for identity-making by those at a remove from quotidian deprivations. Only once framed as a fable of man proving his mettle and receiving his bountiful reward—to be reborn in his own idealized self-image—can the performance of austerity be made meaningful as a desirable or replicable life path. Short of such

a dedicated performance, there is hardly much empowerment to be gleaned through self-reliance for those who must struggle to survive. For one's austere lifestyle to pass into the lore of hardworking Americans, the individual in question would need to have achieved a level of stability that would inherently reduce the stakes of his supposed self-sacrifice. Returning to the model provided by Thoreau proves this point, as his account of his time at Walden Pond succeeds in evading distemper and solipsism but only at the cost of his credibility. Rather than burnishing his legacy as a prophet of self-reliance, Thoreau ultimately argues—through praxis if not through rhetoric—in favor of introspection as a mediator between self and society.

Given how crucially context can inform narratives of struggle, Thoreau must admit to his current state of writerly repose on his opening page of *Walden*. Although he speaks of the writing process in the past tense as well, he mainly casts the warm afterglow of beneficence onto his lived experience, and so he stages the first of these initial three sentences as a series of distancing gestures that deepen the mystique of his former seclusion: “When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only” (1). It is only once we encounter the coldly factual context of the next two sentences—“I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again”—that we can take stock of the deliberate, delicate respite that the first sentence had instantiated (1). Thoreau's reflective process, then, can either move us toward the heart of calm that seems to have necessitated his mythological binding of Walden Pond within the pages of *Walden*, or it can move us closer to a shared meta-awareness—the author and reader's entwining of sensibility—that suffers from the

intellectual distancing necessary for yearning. In the latter instance, readers' twinned perspective (of Thoreau's introspection encroaching upon their own) paradoxically inhibits empathy.

Thoreau in no way seems uncertain about the efficacy of returning to this cherished mental state of calm. However, his opening gesture makes it clear that the mutual edification of this exercise could easily devolve if it were to take on the cast of nostalgia for him or voyeurism for us. Despite the flaws within this model of celebratory introspection, it at least encloses Thoreau's rhetoric of self-reliance in scare quotes, given how his writerly repose is a privilege enjoyed only once he abandons his sojourn at Walden Pond and reenters the presumably longer-term 'sojourn' of his 'civilized' life. Within the loner's model of brooding introspection, though, the pitfall we witness in Thoreau—his nostalgia—curdles into either resentment or paranoia. Similarly, Thoreau's tacit, unpleasant invitation to encroach upon his interiority (presumably for the sake of motivating our own rebirth through self-fashioning) inverts within the loner, whose reactionary desire to shield his interiority manifests as his implacable mask.

To his credit, Thoreau proves sensitive to the distortions that might result from his twin impulses. Even as he attempts to inhabit with sincerity those bygone days of solitude, he alludes wryly to the lot of "the laboring man" (of which Thoreau might be one) who "has not leisure for a true integrity day by day" (3). This demonstrates the irony of trying to reclaim the glory of what once was: even our prophet-philosopher must at times turn his gaze backward and intone the paradoxical question, "How can he remember well his ignorance—which his growth requires—who has so often to use his knowledge?" (3). Sadly, the sense of discovery Thoreau hopes to regain has already become subject to intellectual labor, or what R. W. B. Lewis calls the "infinite capacities of the unaided human spirit," thereby shifting the priority of Thoreau as author away from communing with his earlier self and toward reconstructing the *context* which

gave rise to that earlier self (22). In other words, to yearn for the bliss of innocence is to have knowledge of it, and to acknowledge one's distance from a desired state is to corrupt that memory. Given the yearning that would inspire such reflections, no effort at communing directly with a prelapsarian self could ever retrieve that sublime, limitless sense of integration and wholeness. This does not stop Thoreau from trying, of course, but it does motivate the loner to move in the other direction: to accelerate toward the bottomless sense of dissolution, to death.

The other side of the above quandary is how to reconstruct the prelapsarian context without tainting that memory. As Lewis informs us, the judicious application of irony—which is our means of highlighting “the doubleness of things”—can permit a sensitive soul such as Thoreau to dramatize his (and our) search for the “spiritual analogues” that complete the “doubleness of nature” (24). To approach full awareness of these gnostic truths, we must adopt what Lewis (sans reference to W. E. B. Du Bois) terms a “double consciousness” (24). Despite this curious omission, which we will rectify shortly, Lewis proposes a helpful correlative to the concept of double consciousness; he suggests that it must find expression in a “double criticism,” one which presumably understands the tyranny of self-knowledge as much as it celebrates the deliverance provided by it (24).² In light of these arguments, Thoreau could potentially be sincere in asking how he might remember his preferred state of ignorance, even though he frames his quest ironically due to those mercurial opening lines, which have already revealed his success in performing this necessary rite of passage into artfully arranged memory, or what Lewis calls the “imaginatively ordered prose of Henry Thoreau” (21). Without this double-edged yearning—to reconnect with an untainted experience but also to connect readers with “[t]he old double, the ideal and the actual”—Thoreau's distortions might impede his transmission of (and

² As Emerson warns, “Beware of the man who says, ‘I am on the eve of a revelation’” (70-1). The tyranny of self-knowledge, then, manifests when individuals fail to put “their act or word aloof from them[selves]” (70).

our journey toward) the mystical knowledge gained through rebirth (Lewis 24). For his part in this discussion, the loner favors such distortions to better obscure his intent, and so he yearns for unknowability whereas Thoreau simply performs a version of literary disclosure predicated on poetic license.

By dramatizing introspection, *Walden* achieves more than just allowing us to explore the efficacy (and limits) of self-reliance. Once we expand this thematic concern to encompass Thoreau's metafictional emphasis on his own self-mythologizing, we can better unpack the irony of the experiential Thoreau reporting to have written the text in solitude in the woods even though the authorial Thoreau admits to reflecting upon the text's contents once he is again a 'sojourner in civilized life.' These gestures do not simply allow us to define certain hermeneutics for self-actualization, though Thoreau's vision of spiritual rebirth is compelling for that reason, too. Rather, the metafictional play of *Walden* implores us to interrogate that which encourages us to will an idealized version of ourselves into being. Accordingly, Thoreau compels upon us the double consciousness defined by Lewis—in which we ascertain both 'the ideal and the actual'—so that we may question in our own lives the extent to which our ideals could ever alter or overtake our reality. This is a check against delusion, one which the loner desperately lacks.

Given that these assertions derive from Thoreau's example, we should turn again to *Walden* for the model that informs Lewis. In a passage from his chapter entitled "Solitude," Thoreau suggests that "conscious effort of the mind" allows us to "stand aloof from actions and their consequences," with "all things, good and bad, go[ing] by us like a torrent" (90).³ As evidence for Lewis's reading of the way well-chosen symbolism can evoke the "shape of the life that was genuinely lived," we should consider an example from *Walden* that speaks to the positive connotations of double consciousness (21). Specifically, Thoreau details the feeling of

³ Note the similarity of this quote to the lines from Emerson cited in Footnote 2.

being “beside [oneself] in a sane sense” through his insistence that we can approach the world from different perspectives (90):

I may be either the driftwood in the stream, or Indra in the sky looking down on it. I *may* be affected by a theatrical exhibition; on the other hand, I *may not* be affected by an actual event which appears to concern me much more. I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. (90-1)

The prospect that we can stand apart, dispassionately observing our own ‘thoughts and affections,’ is a balm in one sense: there is value in ignoring ‘an actual event which appears to concern’ us, especially when there might be some therapeutic recourse in reflecting upon this hypothetical ‘theatrical exhibition’ instead. However, Thoreau also acknowledges that the internal “spectator” responsible for doubling our consciousness can manifest not only as a “presence” within our minds, but also as “criticism” emerging from “a part of [us], which, as it were, is not a part of [us]” (91). As he admits, “[t]his doubleness may easily make us poor neighbors and friends sometimes” (91). In a similar vein, this study contends that one’s doubled or twinned perspective, which expands thought exponentially by refracting cognition through itself, does not always make us better spectators or critics of ourselves. As we will see, conceptualizing this uncanny inversion of Thoreau’s reflective bliss can reveal to us some semblance of the loner’s brooding, exponentially refracted consciousness.

Indeed, the very nature of this uncanny process—complicating and maybe even undermining the already ‘infinite capacities of the unaided human spirit’ that Lewis describes—means it could seal off the narrow channel for “advanc[ing] confidently in the direction of [our] dreams” (Thoreau 214). As he discusses in his “Conclusion,” Thoreau believes that “meet[ing]

with a success unexpected in common hours” would require uncommon attention to decluttering the mind: “In proportion as [the individual] simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness” (214). But double consciousness has a way of never letting us forget. When the spectral spectator inhabits our minds, it becomes habituated to “sharing no experience, but taking note of it” (Thoreau 91). For that reason, the role it performs is akin to a mask’s: “When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned” (91). What Thoreau ignores, however, is how easily masked perception can distort and fall out of its proper proportion. Indeed, this light touch in waving away the significance of double sight seems frivolous in the wake of W. E. B. Du Bois and his landmark study, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

Despite the later gravity (of Du Bois and others) in theorizing and applying the term, Thoreau approaches double consciousness as something almost ascetic, as a means of paring away attachments. It carries vestiges of privilege, then, in assuming that rational subjectivity will always be the arbiter between self and external reality. Clearly, these qualities make Thoreau’s usage more transcendent than and not nearly as disorienting as Du Bois’s usage, which points to the sense of internalized othering that can inflict people of color. As we work through this reading of Du Bois, we will eventually arrive at the persecution complex that can hijack both conceptions of double consciousness. Once a persecuted mindset lodges itself behind the loner’s solipsistic conduct, the scapegoat becomes the only spiritual analogue that could resonate with his neurotic sense of self.

For Du Bois, the black experience in America amounts to being “born with a veil” and “gifted with second sight,” which provides the “peculiar sensation” of a “double-consciousness”

that enforces a feeling of lack (5). The involuntary aspect of this mental comparison—in which the subject is always found lacking—demonstrates how Du Bois’s coinage flips the efficacy of introspection on its head. Indeed, the perspective on offer only leads to “measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (5). What results are wasteful “double aims,” which compel the veiled individual into “seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals” (7). Du Bois laments this tension in particular, as he sees it as responsible for self-disgust:

[Double-consciousness] has wrought sad havoc with the courage and faith and deeds of ten thousand thousand people,—has sent them often wooing false gods and invoking false means of salvation, and at times has even seemed about to make them ashamed of themselves. (7)

More lamentable than this shame, though, is base confusion. In this reading, the soul-deep idealized self is further distorted due to the vantage from which this veiled individual comes to recognize the grotesque, socially-conditioned version of himself. Lacking contact with untainted gnostic truth, the figure of Du Boisian blackness—the person consigned to a veiled life—takes on shades of the loner. However, the key difference articulated within the notion of Dark Lonerism is the loner’s recourse to privilege.

As Du Bois insists, the veil of double consciousness draws the individual’s attention to a “world which yields [the viewer] no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (5). In this light, the only true self would appear to be the stereotyped Other, which the veiled individual perceives as competing for primacy within himself. This is because the revealed world (of normative whiteness) has projected this distortion onto him, mercilessly and ceaselessly. When this occurs, any effort at introspection devolves into Emersonian distemper, and the spiritual resonances of an uncanny vision would fail to set these

twinned perspectives back into their proper order. As stated earlier, though, the loner betrays no such compunction about his masked persona or his distorted worldview, even if other anxieties overwhelm him in the end.

Now that we have explored the bleak prospect of introspection descending into a negative feedback loop, we can return to Lewis and his study, *The American Adam*. Lewis discusses the impulse within our culture to depict a society “poised at the start of a new history,” and he recognizes the mania with which an image of “the authentic American as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities” was created (1). From this perspective, he admits that the “Adamic hero is the equivalent, in American fiction, of the prince or king in the long tradition of classical drama” (128). However, within the model Lewis proposes, the “American hero as Adam takes his start outside the world, remote or on the verges; its power, its fashions, and its history are precisely the forces he must learn, must master or be mastered by” (128). By making heroism equivalent to mastery and spatializing the hero’s journey as movement inward, Lewis suggests that introspection and self-knowledge will assist the hero in “leaving his mark upon the world” (128).

This distinction might encourage us to place the loner-protagonist as a version of the Adamic hero. However, Lewis would be quick to refute this claim because loners are just another iteration in the lineage of “the dispossessed, the superfluous, the alienated, [and] the exiled,” all of which Lewis dismisses as “tormented extensions and distortions of their Adamic prototypes” (128, 129). Ironically, the existential state of torment—which would certainly result from the Du Boisian experience of ‘seeing oneself through the revelation of the other world’—might be a more honest appraisal of the American character than Lewis’s preference for the naïve and innocent. Indeed, Jonathan Mitchell makes nearly the same claim in his study,

Revisions of the American Adam, when he insists that “the American Adam is a paradigm of promise that masks the means of ideological control” (4). In other words, the Adamic paradigm provides the individual with the mask of uncanny whiteness, and the loner-protagonist simply capitalizes on its promise of control, despite being tormented by his concession to normativity.

As Mitchell works through the paradoxes of his thesis, he foregrounds the political nature of Lewis’s arguments. Of greatest concern for our purposes is Mitchell’s unpacking of certain Derridean traces, which intersect with hegemonic power in complicated ways. Ultimately, this reading subverts any claim that the Adamic archetype can embody ‘innocence’ despite also harnessing ‘vast potentialities.’ As Mitchell argues, this archetype “has to remain beyond the forces of socialization, but equally centrally embedded in controlling it, for the failure to define society is to become defined by society, which means the loss of the self defined as man” (6). From these points, we can paint the loner as an aspirational Adam, rather than an actualized and totemic Adam. Thus, the loner-protagonist aspires to remain outside the law despite benefiting from it, and he remains beholden to normativity even as he lashes out against it.

The privilege to act in this way derives, of course, from the mask of uncanny whiteness: exceptional in its blankness, unknowable in its aloofness, unsettling in its vast potential for violence. As Toni Morrison argues, literary whiteness has been formulated in response to a pervasive Africanist presence. Her point makes any claim about the ‘integrity’ or ‘purity’ of the Adamic hero not just ironic but absurd. At the heart of her contention, Morrison exposes the paradox that “the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of [African Americans as an] unsettled and unsettling population” (6). Whiteness cannot help but interject uncanniness, then, into any text staking out the boundaries of normative identity. To paraphrase Mitchell’s argument about the yearning to “escape from the

strictures of a society perceived to be corrupted,” the loner’s choice to opt out is not transgressive but “regressively formative,” in that it is a “(re)commitment to a basic mythic identity of being American” (5). Scorning his implicit knowledge of this inescapable and recursive return to the fold, the loner opts instead for decadence: the indulgent gesture of removing himself from the scene of his impending rebirth as Adam. In other words, the loner accelerates the cycle of defeated ambition and pointless lashing out toward his inevitable moment of ironic dissolution.

When depicted in narrative form, the loner’s journey materializes through genres that permit unflinching portrayals of hubris sitting alongside self-doubt. In instances of satire, his mutual self-creation and self-negation amplify to messianic levels of martyrdom. In instances of naturalism, his single-minded desire to embrace the unknown subsumes him in a darkly comic misadventure. In instances of tragedy, the destruction of the family is the apotheosis of the loner’s desire to stand alone. As we will see, each manifestation flirts with and eventually succumbs (in one way or another) to the death drive.

Within the confines of this project, I limit my focus to American literature from the Great Depression through the early post-war period. Starting with Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts* from 1933, we experience the ups and downs of the title character, a depressed newspaperman whose desire for enlightenment is thwarted by his reliance on vices as an escape. In Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead* from 1943, we witness the slow reveal of Howard Roark, a stoic architectural genius whose self-reliant ethos amounts to zealotry. In Richard Wright’s *Savage Holiday* from 1954, we enter the mindset of Erskine Fowler, an isolated man whose Christian values not only fail to see him through distress, but actively facilitate his sublimation of sexual desire. By

locating the uncanny in these texts, we can expose the respective hero's plights as haunted by privilege.

To varying degrees, these protagonists (all middle class and white) are determined to actualize themselves through a heroic narrative of their own making. However, their efforts deconstruct and betray ulterior motives once they ignore or distort social functions attendant to heroism, like serving the greater good or upholding communal ideals. Instead of adhering to their belief systems, these three men ultimately choose self-interest over self-sacrifice. While such a choice should hardly be judged as an outright betrayal of social or communal obligations, it allows privilege to remain latent and to go uncontested in these particular instances because these men satisfy *exploitative* aspirations: Lonelyhearts achieves a parasitic form of self-actualization by ruining the lives of others; Roark achieves the freedom to create at the cost of others' opportunities to do so; Fowler achieves ultimate control over another person's life through manipulation and murder.

As this project attests, we can see the shaping and undermining of delusion with different examples of white male privilege suffering the ravages of distress. The challenges faced by these solitary protagonists bring to light different strains of masculinity: the title character in *Miss Lonelyhearts* feels himself a failure, and this shades his perception until he is haunted by the difference between reality and what he desires of his life; Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead* is seemingly unperturbed and never disillusioned by defeats and betrayals, yet the chip on his shoulder motivates him to denounce the world of glad-handing and subterfuge; Erskine Fowler in *Savage Holiday* is the type to blame others for the things he wishes to ignore, like generational change and female sexuality, and so he suppresses misgivings about himself as a force for good

while projecting his self-doubt onto others. All are united by professional lives that breed cynicism (if not outright paranoia) as much as they empower.

Each novel, though, refracts and makes unique the experiences of the individual beset by attacks on his (supposed) self-integrity. They do so by positioning their narratives within disparate genres: *Lonelyhearts* stumbles through a darkly satirical version of Manhattan and brings about his murder, a moment which might suggest he has triumphed (if only ironically) at pushing the limits of self-creation; *Roark* carves out opportunities to pursue his vision on his own terms, but so many men around him are having misadventures in heroism that Roark himself is sucked into the naturalistic swirl of destructive and degrading forces; Fowler unravels in an Oedipal tragedy of his own making, with the death of the family precluding real growth.

In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Nathanael West skewers the mindset that would desire religious certainty simply as a means to combat the perception of a disordered world. West directly parodies *The Waste Land* in exposition early in the novella, and his central figure is much like “the young man carbuncular:” Miss Lonelyhearts “makes a welcome of indifference,” too, though not just in his cynical treatment of women (WL 231, 242). Lonelyhearts conducts himself as if he would prefer to be received with indifference. His disengaged reactions and yearning for transcendence suggest he would rather have true anonymity as the unknowable force of spiritual whiteness than have the scarlet letter of his easily mocked penname. Instead, he is assaulted by the cynicism of those around him and becomes distraught. His delusion is that he can change himself by changing others, and his status as a loner comes to light through his moments of apathy, ambivalence, and distrust. The satirical mode of the novella means that Lonelyhearts’ efforts will be for naught, though there is still pathos in how he comes close to finding happiness out in the country with his on-again-off-again love interest, Betty. However, the mock

martyrdom demanded of the character retroactively makes it clear that a return to Eden was never in the cards. At least, certainly not in a world where base desires have access to multiple vices, where white male privilege grants Lonelyhearts carte blanche for violently transgressing taboos against infidelity and physical abuse.

Lonelyhearts is a failure as a lover, as an advice columnist, and as a Christ figure, and the difference he exhibits (from what he hopes to be and from the model of cynical, combative masculinity embodied by his boss, Shrike) sets him up for a precipitous emotional collapse. He rebounds from this collapse through a shadow-play version of religious reverie. If Lonelyhearts' delirious vision toward novella's end is reverie, though, it is not true enlightenment but rather a phase in which he becomes as disinterested and unassailable as a rock. Still, West's big joke is that this character is a hypocrite: being disinterested is the same as being a cynic and being unassailable does not make him a prophet. Given the satirical text, it is surprising that we are almost made to feel pity because Lonelyhearts cannot walk through the fire of self-disavowal to achieve transcendence. Despite that, Lonelyhearts resists committing the real work of self-creation and instead brings about his own death by cuckolding a fundamentally decent man, who then sets out for revenge. In this instance, the delusions of the loner cause the implosion of a self-styled savior.

In *The Fountainhead*, Ayn Rand frames a version of heroic masculinity from the outside but rarely penetrates into the monolithic façade of her creation, Howard Roark. Although Rand's narrative style relies on dialogue that externalizes hidden agendas, the novel nonetheless gives glimpses of characters' mindsets: from a seemingly noble individualist drive to an exploitative communal paradigm, which the novel vilifies. Roark is a man with the courage of unwavering conviction in his abilities, an apparent match against the corrupt world that surrounds him. The

novel's biggest conflict, then, is that Roark's certainty about the path he can create for himself must be tested within a world capable of being remade by others. To trump up the argument against compromising one's vision, Rand devises characters as nodes along the continuum of masculine effort toward Great Man status. As a beacon of hope for other men in the novel, Roark forms partnerships supposedly predicated on unsentimental male bonding. However, the silent admiration at the heart of these partnerships is actually the culmination of a desire for a great white hope who might beat back the darkness of Modernist decay by championing Modernist progress. Roark cannot be the architect of America's salvation, though, because he is hardly the architect of himself.

For as much as this is a novel that luxuriates in the possibility that visionaries can break free of systemic constraints, *The Fountainhead* also makes it clear that the price Roark must pay for being unimpeded is to become unheeding. His pursuit of a pure expression of his architectural vision causes him to take few precautions, as if he has no a priori default to hedging his bets or protecting his interests. In the outsized mythology Rand creates, Roark has the preternatural gift to be an unceasing laborer and the privilege to be unfettered: from family, from social life, and from human decency (in an infamous scene, he rapes his love interest, Dominique Francon, though the text suggests Dominique tacitly approves of what would amount to sexual role-playing). Still, Roark does not have ultimate control over himself, as the naturalistic forces that bring down other characters in the novel—like Peter Keating and Gail Wynand—lead Roark to reverse his earlier dedication to being a force of construction and, instead, become a force of destruction. Sucked in by the heightened rhetoric about culture as the contested site of humanity's fate, Roark cannot abide the alteration of his design for the Cortlandt housing project, so he dynamites the site near the date of its completion. This cynical act reveals Roark to be yet

another misguided loner, lashing out at a world that has already granted him so much privilege. In this instance, the delusions of the loner cause chaos masquerading as righteous rebellion.

In *Savage Holiday*, Richard Wright pits religious certainty against a corrupt world and emphasizes Fowler's paranoia through bleak existentialism. As a former insurance agent forced into early retirement and prone to view humanity as stained by guilt, Fowler forms doubt easily. More problematic is that he only finds respite from his continuous questioning about his role in causing the death of a young boy by thinking, rather naively, that he could exploit his political connections and call in favors if he finds himself in need of exoneration. His loner qualities are apparent in his sublimated sexual desires, which make him suspicious of a neighbor whom he believes to be promiscuous and inattentive as a mother; this repulsion desexualizes him and indicates that his personal life is as devoid of activity as his abruptly truncated professional life. With his steadily mounting fears and uncertainties, Fowler cannot control his intensifying guilt, rage, and lust. His sublimation gives way to a violent form of projection with his eventual murder of Mabel Blake, the unfit mother of the boy, Tony, whose death Fowler causes.

Even though cast out from the business world, Fowler adheres to a competitive mindset. However, the onslaught he hopes to resist is as big and irreversible as a new social order. His struggle, then, is to comprehend how greater permissiveness of women expressing their sexuality could deny him the control and ownership he desires of a woman. Confronting a repressed facet of his being, Fowler imports the skepticism of his insurance work and becomes a detective within a social structure unaccustomed to scrutiny or the presumption of guilt. Despite his efforts to control the knowledge Mabel might gain about his own involvement in Tony's death, Fowler ultimately fails. His actions—and his gaze—undermine his prudish mentality, and the novel shows us that Fowler's poorly sublimated sexual desire could never extend its repressive power

over the beguiling Mabel. In this instance, the delusions of the loner cause the death of the family.

Despite what their demeanor might suggest about their preferred state of undisturbed reflection, problem solving, and creation, loner-protagonists cannot remain solitary. Still, their solitude is often at stake because, to the loner's mindset, from solitude comes many things: peace, pleasure, and possibly even greatness. Such delusions of grandeur can only take shape against the background of an audience, though, and many loner-protagonists bristle at the prospect of compromise or having to demean themselves by even considering the opinions of others. Narratives privileging the loner with agency take advantage of this tension, for they cannot avoid revealing when the delusional performance of apartness becomes disrupted. When this happens, the unsettling of the loner's self-mythology of integrity and ingenuity causes distress once he is confronted with a problem that reason alone cannot solve. What readers gain, though, is a new perspective on the pitfalls of blazing one's own path.

Martyrdom and Self-Creation in *Miss Lonelyhearts*:

The Jaded Loner who “Fought Himself Quiet”

In his 1933 novella, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Nathanael West treats the theme of loneliness by magnifying the pathos in otherwise sardonic vignettes. Presented in a serialized format through fifteen short chapters, these individually titled episodes trade in tragicomic fumbling and antagonism. The further we enter into the text, though, the more these harrowing experiences begin to register as emotionally heightened impressions. Inundated by a parade of the blasé, the feeble, the brokenhearted, and the naïve, we are thrust into a similar position as the title character: we experience the steady distortion of reality, which eventually recedes entirely as the text collapses into a fever dream of spiritual transcendence. While the tone of these vignettes could be read as unrelentingly bleak or even cynical, there remains a mercurial tenderness to the narrative voice whenever it brings to light the earnest longing and solipsistic angst of our title character. West uses these borderline sympathetic moments to push against the unsettling viciousness and otherworldly blight that elsewhere shrouds the text in darkness.

As a respite, though, this pathos is meager and unsatisfying, a halfhearted distraction from the text’s caustic world-view. West seems determined to explore the source and limits of hope, yet he commits so fully to satirizing the alienated and aloof Modernist outlook that his protagonist’s attempt to sustain hope becomes a childish whim. This is a text, after all, that takes seriously the Prufrockian quandary, “Do I dare / Disturb the universe?” (“Prufrock” 45-6). Indeed, West’s satirical eye never fully alights upon this existential dilemma, leaving it instead to

fester at the novella's margins. Although unspoken, this dilemma becomes the guiding conflict within our would-be hero; we could paraphrase it as: 'How shall I dare disturb my bleak surroundings?' At the same time, the text revels in the absurdist moral confusion (verging on apathy) that marks Prufrockian navel-gazing, and West simply takes the solipsism to its terminal point. What makes Eliot's speaker comically indecisive—as immortalized when he ponders, "Do I dare to eat a peach?"—also makes West's loner-protagonist dangerously persuasive (122). Just as brooding can take many forms, from innocuous to destructive, so too can daring take a wrong turn into self-sabotage.

In his treatment of these themes, West simply dramatizes the truism that misery loves company. Given these tensions, the line must be thin between his suspicion and admiration of those, like our title character, who set out to—who *dare* to—improve the lot of others. Indeed, West allows nihilism to encroach upon the text, and so only a bastardized, insular form of redemption can vindicate our protagonist in his search for meaning. As happens often in depictions of the loner-protagonist under duress, the reader is lured into feeling a certain measure of sympathy, only to be thrown into contact with justifiable repulsion and, ultimately, existential dread.

Against the background of a darkly satirical version of Prohibition-era Manhattan, our title character works as a newspaper advice columnist under his pen-name, a pseudonym employed by other characters in the novella and by the text itself. Although a joke to some, Miss Lonelyhearts strives to be Christ-like by doing justice to his public platform, from which he may offer solace and possibly even solutions to his readers. However, Lonelyhearts exaggerates the responsibility of this position in his mind and grows self-important, even as he becomes distraught that he cannot confer real salvation. He may yearn to engage his readership in tangible

ways, but his goal is simply to affirm his power as a conduit for grace, enlightenment, and even transcendence.

From the opening of the novella, we see how rundown and blithely submissive Lonelyhearts has become. He is numb due to the harrowing letters he receives, which have fed his masochism for too long. It seems he has forced himself to swallow others' grief and his own guilt without ever truly reckoning with either. As a result, instead of wallowing passively, Lonelyhearts implicates himself in tangible violence over time, unleashing destructive tendencies at different turns in his seemingly bizarre, but ultimately drab, existence. These instances of violence externalize the spiritual dispossession he experiences at his job, where he has been laughing at "the same joke [...] thirty times a day for months on end" (West 1). This is a bitter joke about the inevitability of human suffering and the absurdity of asserting agency, and Lonelyhearts recognizes only now that his narrow life is indistinguishable from the punchline.

This is also a joke that savors bitter irony, such as different individuals somehow managing to be so inarticulate as to stamp their laments from "the dough of suffering" with the same "heart-shaped cookie knife" (1). In response to his readers' homogenized pain, Lonelyhearts has either "fought himself quiet" or reached for platitudes about life being "worth while" because it is "full of dreams and peace, gentleness and ecstasy" (3, 1). Still, he knows this is inadequate. Because these intellectual responses take part in the distancing he so desperately wants to collapse, they are just defense mechanisms that pale in comparison to actual touch.

Ineffectual and increasingly perturbed about it, Lonelyhearts turns to "searching for some clue to a sincere answer" to his readers' loneliness and suffering, but for unspecified reasons (1). Even so, we can infer that Lonelyhearts challenges himself in this way because his conscience has made it such that the letters are "no longer funny" to him (1). He callously dismisses their

letters as all alike yet nonetheless wants to offer them hope. He is skeptical of hope and haunted by his own privileged position in the world, which makes him distanced from his readers, a distance he reinforces by mocking their misfortune. As we can already tell, Lonelyhearts will prove quite unwilling to give up this entitled mindset, even as he craves some means, any means, of tending to his flock.

Signaling his interest in parsing the power imbalances caused by delusions of grandeur, West suggests that Lonelyhearts' good intentions merely reify his impulse toward othering. Although he sees himself as bestowing merciful comfort to his readers, Lonelyhearts is also sickened by them. His manner of pity is therefore closely aligned with misanthropy. He may share in his readers' yearning to fight feeling powerless, numb, and unknown, but their appeals to his exceptional status—a figure designed to convey bleeding-heart empathy—expose the gulf between his deficit of fellow feeling and their excessive need for it.

In his unflinching way, West works through the ironic implications of Lonelyhearts' self-righteousness and hypocrisy at nearly every turn of his brutishly concise narrative. We come to learn Lonelyhearts has the sincere desire to help his readers but not the sincere conviction that he can transcend his own grubby existence fueled by alcohol and misogyny. Nevertheless, he envisions a form of self-actualization for himself that would establish inner peace through embodying Christ. This manner of apotheosis will not come to pass, though. Because he lacks true conviction, Lonelyhearts ends up imploding his world from within, but not before finding a way for at least one person to affirm his authority as a Christ figure. This cowering, placating man, Peter Doyle, will prove crucial in both the unmaking of Lonelyhearts the man and the (ironic) making of Lonelyhearts the martyr. However, at this point in our consideration of the text, we should simply note that Lonelyhearts judges himself too ill-prepared and insincere to

preach, proselytize, or espouse the rhetoric of salvation, and so he instead turns his attention to developing his talents as a faith healer. Of course, the power of touch is double-edged, a truism to which Lonelyhearts proves oblivious until it is too late to alter his life's course.

Prior to Lonelyhearts' conversion into an ersatz faith healer, his conflicted attitudes about the efficacy of religion make him continually test the limits of his faith. He recalls in a crucial scene how he could never give himself over to the supplication and self-disavowal of prayer, admitting that this vulnerable pose of placing himself subject to God's authority has always felt like a form of hysteria (8-9). Although "capable of dreaming the Christ dream," Lonelyhearts falters trying to actualize it because he cannot ignore the absurdity of believing "the whole world would learn to love" due to his entreaties and proselytizing (39, 8). In contrast, he takes seriously the task of locating the source of this personal failing, for the hysteria of his self-abasement manifests through lacerating symbolism that proliferates in key scenes. The intensity of these projections underscores Lonelyhearts' fatalistic introspection, which seemingly cannot be silenced. As ballast, though, his psyche can also call forth visions of a destiny which, up to that point, has remained just out of reach.

In a situation mirroring this inner conflict between selflessness and self-aggrandizement, Lonelyhearts must also contend with deterioration and entropy, or what he perceives to be the physical world's "tropism for disorder" (31). Just as it unsettles him to witness "no signs of spring" amid the "decay that cover[s] the surface of the mottled ground," moral decay unsettles Lonelyhearts because he recognizes in others his own tendency toward self-sabotage (4). Once he begins to view the world as disordered and impervious to his good intentions, Lonelyhearts moves from being standoffish to being abusive. Either paralyzed or lashing out, he proves unable

to understand himself fully. As a result, the text itself develops into a pathos-driven dark comedy the more he flounders.

With this emotional underpinning, we are not just saddened by Lonelyhearts' marginalization as a sensitive soul, but we also pity his status as a hopeless loser who becomes more and more willing to ingratiate himself into society. These qualities allow West to buoy a feeling close to hope in his readers, as we recognize that Lonelyhearts tries to challenge in himself the callousness that others—especially his fellow newspapermen—wield against the suffering. The fatalism of the text, though, makes it impossible to sustain any optimism about Lonelyhearts' efforts. Still, he is unique among his damaged, cynical colleagues who “revenge themselves” through “childishness” (14). Their manner of buffoonery relishes crass talk and savage apathy, as they have a cooler disposition than Lonelyhearts, who lashes out from a place of weakness or uncertainty, helplessness or defiance. As blasé as Lonelyhearts is earnestly concerned, these colleagues are “machines for making jokes” who heap further indignity on those who already suffer (15). Their indifference extends to those who are generally othered and dehumanized by society, as well as those actively being abused through verbal or even physical violence.

Seeing himself as different somehow, Lonelyhearts resists projecting an air of snide self-regard, but is too manic in his introspection to be stoic, either. With an “almost insane sensitiveness to order,” he pains himself to uphold his sense of integrity and, thus, deflects self-critique (10). As a result, Lonelyhearts can ‘revenge’ himself callously and with precision, but only in a defensive manner. When his need to lash out overwhelms his conscious effort at moral superiority, he proves capable of becoming “so full of hatred that he himself [is] surprised” and so vicious that his gestures grow heated and “too appropriate, like those of an old-fashioned

actor” (12). In these instances, Lonelyhearts rationalizes his behavior and contorts his reality in the process.

Even when he makes his fiancée, Betty, fear for her safety, Lonelyhearts dehumanizes her rather than casting blame on himself. She is “like a kitten whose soft helplessness makes one ache to hurt it,” or so the mercurial narrative voice tells us (13). As we learn later in the novella, Lonelyhearts has acted on this rationale of putting an animal out of its misery in the past, so we should register his thought here as an instance of free indirect discourse, no matter how depraved. Elsewhere, though, the narration reports on Lonelyhearts’ desperate mindset by winking at the reader. For example, we become privy to an odd manner of reflection—which manifests through another simile—as Lonelyhearts leaves Betty’s apartment after ‘aching to hurt’ her.

During this moment, an “excited” and “afraid” Lonelyhearts feels “as though his heart were a bomb, a complicated bomb that would result in a simple explosion, wrecking the world without rocking it” (13). This image suggests what a violent outburst from Lonelyhearts might look like: he could somehow make wreckage without first giving forewarning of his startling deed. This image also inverts what a reader might presume to occur, which would amount to Lonelyhearts lashing out in a way that could shock and rattle those involved without fundamentally ruining their lives. On the contrary, Lonelyhearts’ self-interested and pathetic measures, which cause ruin without warning, have an outsized impact on whatever situation he tries to control. Epitomizing the absurdity of the text, these instances bring about irreparable damage disproportionate to Lonelyhearts’ floundering.

Despite the damage he causes, Lonelyhearts proves too self-defeating to conceive of any reaction more constructive than impulsive violence. When he tries to fight back at disorder and

“obtain control,” he uses “too much violence” and is “decisively defeated” by the chaotic world, anyway (11). Attuned to life’s terminal path, Lonelyhearts eventually concludes that exerting agency by shoring up his cultural capital is more meaningful than actually ameliorating the suffering of others; he would rather be known than be accomplished. Paradoxically, bolstering his status in this way will require that he devote himself to a shadow-play version of religious reverie. In concrete terms, this means Lonelyhearts discovers enough moral strength and conviction within himself to expunge his debilitating habits of the mind (or so he believes), and then he puts his newfound inner peace to the test by performing a mock self-sacrifice, which carries fatal consequences nonetheless.

When assessed with the benefit of hindsight, Lonelyhearts could be said to quest sincerely for the means to intercede in the suffering of others. However, his botched quest can only yield a self-serving delusion: in order to assume the mantle of messiah, he must first convince himself that fake miracles (the only kind he can provide) would confer more good than embodying hard-won virtues like self-love, acceptance of others, and benevolence. Once he is no longer invested in actualizing the recuperative power of his words, Lonelyhearts becomes cynical and starts performing a more invasive role in the lives of the suffering. In this reading, I view Lonelyhearts unequivocally as a faith healer stymied only by his lack of a receptive audience. Although the text takes seriously his compulsion to escape isolation and exert control over the seemingly disordered threads of his life, Lonelyhearts at bottom nurtures an intense self-interest and thus cannot escape his habit of fostering shallow, hollow, and ultimately corrosive relationships.

This effort to confront his disgust with the world by finally engaging with it reveals Lonelyhearts’ desire for a revelatory conversion experience. As it turns out, this conversion does

come to him, but the twofold process (enacted across the novella's climax) only leads to his death. After first journeying within himself to discover the eternal calm of a "reclining statue holding a stopped clock," Lonelyhearts arrives a few days later at his feverish reverie, which represents some sort of "promise [...] fulfilled" (51, 56). At the oncoming of his "identification with God," Lonelyhearts understands there to be grace and delight filling his room "like a gentle wind" (57). However, this identification—this approval from God and the resulting euphoria it brings Lonelyhearts—in no way corresponds to the man who long ago foolishly accepted the mantle of 'Miss Lonelyhearts.' Rather, Lonelyhearts affirms in this moment his affinity with Christ, which is to say that he finally recognizes and lets go of his morbid fascination with humanity, thereby ignoring his inner nature as a fallible and corrupted man.

Accepting that there is at least one spark of "life and light" amid the "black world of things," Lonelyhearts now sees Christ as the "bright bait" to which all life should aspire (57). Although this image simply reinforces Lonelyhearts' earlier fatalism, it somehow inspires him to "immediately beg[*in*] to plan a new life and his future conduct as Miss Lonelyhearts" (57). Now oblivious to irony, Lonelyhearts casts himself into this image of Christ as a "bright fly, spinning with quick grace," and the dead world "as a fish," rising with "a splash of music" (56-7). In this allegory of self-sacrifice, there is the strong possibility of being scapegoated for no greater purpose than bringing about ephemeral beauty, be it in the 'splash of music' marking the occasion or in the glimpse of humanity's vulnerability, its "shining silver belly" (57). Nevertheless, Lonelyhearts envisions baiting humanity in precisely this way, except that his death drive ends up foreclosing the chance of even fleeting relief. Soon after professing, "I accept, I accept," Lonelyhearts rushes headlong into his self-sacrifice, martyring himself for no greater cause than achieving closure (57).

The absurdity of this resolution, I argue, should shape our understanding of the entire novella. Once we concentrate on the catalyzing tensions and conflicts resolved by this mock martyrdom, we can better see how self-doubt motivates Lonelyhearts. Having failed to minister adequately to his flock, he becomes unsure of himself and grieves for the lost chance to access the exceptional power to which he feels entitled. As Arthur Cohen renders this inner conflict, it is Lonelyhearts' Christ complex that destroys him: "[it] destroys him, for it deludes him. He misrepresents the world and is martyr to his misrepresentation" (48). His chief transgression, then, is imposing onto others his misguided will to help and to heal.

As we have seen, Lonelyhearts is failed by a host of misrepresentations. During the climax of the novella, he misjudges his ability to work miracles and even his desire to live a 'new life as Miss Lonelyhearts.' In fact, it seems part of him knows his 'future conduct' could never deviate from his previous destructive behavior, given how his last act of cognition is a dangerous distortion of reality. Immediately before being shot, Lonelyhearts misidentifies a desperate shout of warning as "a cry for help from Desperate, Harold S. Catholic-mother, Broken-hearted, Broad-shoulders, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband" (West 57-8). As we will soon explore, the merging of these identities (pseudonyms for his letter-writers) obscures the real threat underlying the delusion. In this moment, the fallible and corrupted man lurking beneath the guise of 'Miss Lonelyhearts' asserts himself one last time.

Failing to comfort his readers may challenge Lonelyhearts' belief in the significance of his voice and public platform, yet he still commits fully to the falseness of his self-image as a messiah. As he becomes tortured by the inadequacy of his words, his Christ complex manifests through what amounts to faith healing. These deeds nudge him out of his solipsistic isolation and bring him in closer contact with the embodiment of despair, represented in the text by Peter

Doyle, a crippled and cuckolded foil to Lonelyhearts. Thrust into the wider world of human struggle, Lonelyhearts becomes conscious of performing a role, which grows more grandiose in his mind once he meets Doyle. Physically touching this crippled man in spite of his revulsion becomes Lonelyhearts' unsettling way to transcend his earlier practice of imposing unbridgeable distances with his halfhearted words. As we have seen, this performative conversion ritual is self-serving and wholly ironic, a testament to the dark measures of the self-lacerating ego when grappling to achieve a sense of integrity and worth.

Tracking regression rather than growth, then, the novella's satirical mode replaces one set of tropes with another. Instead of what we would expect from the *künstlerroman*—to experience the artist's struggles while developing a unique perspective and his eventual triumph upon refining a set of skills—we get uncomfortably familiar with what Daniel Aaron describes as Lonelyhearts' "self-loathing, extreme exasperation, self-mistrust, [and] self-despair" (65). These are qualities West derives, according to Aaron, from William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. This set of tropes pertains to the "conversion experience," a revelatory process through which "the unregenerate man can attain saintliness" by enduring the manner of crucible defined by James (Aaron 64). Specifically, it is only through "brooding, depression, morbid introspection, and sense of sin" that one can touch bottom and thus fully sound the depths of man's depravity (James 195). However, by yoking to Lonelyhearts these signifiers of the "ordinary storm and stress and moulting-time of adolescence," West paints his protagonist as having never fully come of age (James 196). Locked in arrested development, Lonelyhearts exhibits the solipsism of one who has failed to pass "from the child's small universe to the wider intellectual and spiritual life of maturity" (James 196).

While Aaron makes a sympathetic reading of Lonelyhearts consumed with the same “melancholia of Tolstoy overwhelmed by a heightened awareness of objective evil,” I read alongside this condition a palpable measure of masochism in Lonelyhearts (65). He is the type, I argue, to savor as meaningful the way he “writhes in the presence of his own corruption and his inability to control it” (Aaron 65). Receiving pleasure from pain in this way enables Lonelyhearts to endure in solitude his all-consuming melancholy. However, once he finds he can no longer suppress his displeasure with others’ needs encroaching on him, he must inevitably turn outward and cast aside his solipsistic disregard of others. As a result, Lonelyhearts fetishizes the influence and power of his status, which enables him to pursue the unmaking of his weakest, most desperate adherents.

Even when willing to give of himself, Lonelyhearts never makes his needs subordinate to the needs of others, for his ostensible sacrifice still proves self-serving. His delusion, then, is that he can change himself by changing others, and his status as a loner comes to light through his moments of ambivalence, distrust, and even apathy. The satirical mode of the novella suggests that his efforts will be for naught, though there are still glimpses of pathos in those instances when Lonelyhearts seems earnestly conflicted. Prone to brooding publicly, dreaming vividly, and investing life with symbolic fantasies and memories, Lonelyhearts eventually latches onto Doyle as his means to escape what James terms ‘morbid introspection’.

Already empowered over those who have turned to him as they suffer in their loneliness and self-doubt, Lonelyhearts forces upon Doyle the visceral and ultimately destructive thrill of the deed: supposedly curing and absolving—but actually objectifying—through touch. While Doyle seems embarrassed yet heartened sitting “silently hand in hand” with Lonelyhearts, our messianic protagonist must force himself “to clasp the cripple’s [hand]” in order to prove himself

“triumphant” in his humility (West 47). This self-serving agenda, to which Doyle is oblivious, means that the novella’s hallmark tragic irony must rear its ugly head soon afterward. Indeed, Lonelyhearts betrays both his revulsion for Doyle and the destructiveness of his touch when he later beats Doyle’s wife, Fay, with whom he has been having an affair (50). Although initially a means of fending off Fay’s advances, this beating quickly edges past mere self-defense and instead becomes an outlet for exerting control, albeit through the ironic measure of temporarily losing control himself.

In the vein of the *künstlerroman*’s purported self-discovery and self-creation, Lonelyhearts’ shift toward the direct engagement of faith healing results from his earlier ennui when having to confront the notion of suffering in the abstract. Whereas he used to have to “[fight] himself quiet” to ignore the pleas of his letters or masochistically “hurt the pain” by revisiting letters that continued to make him feel powerless, Lonelyhearts eventually claims agency by forcing himself into (decisively anticlimactic) action (3, 39). Fending off the uncertainty and inadequacy that have haunted him up to this point, he compels a change. As he is confronted by Doyle after assaulting Fay, Lonelyhearts thinks that “God had sent [Doyle] so that Miss Lonelyhearts could perform a miracle and be certain of his conversion. It was a sign. He would embrace the cripple and the cripple would be made whole again, even as he, a spiritual cripple, had been made whole” (57). This embrace, however, turns deadly.

While there could be great benefit in privileging the recuperative power of actions over words, Lonelyhearts pursues this path not to recuperate the broken spirits of the suffering but to redeem his own sense of personal triumph and empowerment. This dynamic is especially evident after Lonelyhearts endures a psychological breakdown, via his twofold ‘conversion’ process, in the novella’s climax. Newly convinced after a dark night of the soul that “God approve[s] his

every thought,” Lonelyhearts finds himself “running to succor [those who suffer] with love” (57, 58). However, what the reader finds is a darker reality: we experience the absurdity of Lonelyhearts’ final moments, rushing to embrace Doyle, who kills Lonelyhearts seemingly in panic or even as an accident, despite coming prepared with a concealed gun (58). Only capable of inducing trauma rather than recuperation, Lonelyhearts martyrs himself unknowingly, yet becomes the sole beneficiary of his death. In contrast, Doyle is hardly ‘made whole again,’ despite succeeding in exacting revenge against Lonelyhearts.

Stumbling as always through his life of awkward encounters, Lonelyhearts brings about his murder in this concluding anticlimactic moment. In a caustically funny grace note, the text affirms that Lonelyhearts, even as he dies, cannot prevent himself from literally bringing others down with him. The final two sentences of the novella leave the reader with the pathetic image of Lonelyhearts “dragging [Doyle] with him” as they roll “part of the way down the stairs” together (58). This moment confirms that Lonelyhearts’ actions are as ineffectual as his words. More importantly, it blurs the distinction between Doyle, a conflicted and broken man giving up on transcendence and now hoping for revenge, and Lonelyhearts, a delusional man collapsing back into the degeneracy he thought he had escaped. These brooding, defensive characters are two sides of the same coin, it seems.

Describing West’s method of “crystallizing” character, Victor Comerchero observes that Lonelyhearts’ manner of reflection does not pronounce itself through “psychologically perceptive dialogue” or exposition of “introspective delicacy” (3). While certain passages in *Miss Lonelyhearts* will help us later qualify this assertion, the point remains that West relies on “Freudian images” to function as symbolism or as “objective correlatives of a psychological state” (3). Comerchero locates these Freudian resonances in the many dreams and visions that

West depicts, and he argues that, with this imagery, Lonelyhearts' "entire emotional-intellectual complex falls into place" (96). Despite this helpful description of how the novella uses expressionistic signifiers to convey inner states, the nature of Lonelyhearts' complex must be debated. Comerchero speculates that "Miss Lonelyhearts has a homosexual Oedipal complex," whereas I would rather interrogate his mindset at the manifest register, exploring the tension between Lonelyhearts' ambitions and failings through the lens of the loner-protagonist's archetypal cynicism and self-defeat (96). With that in mind, I intend to expand our understanding of West's symbolism by considering the text's many allusions, moods, and motifs, all of which will better contextualize our protagonist's ostensible martyrdom at novella's end.

Before we get to that point, though, we need to consider how T. S. Eliot, in offering the most widely discussed and interpreted definition of the objective correlative, positions the disquieted mind as incapable of fully objectifying the source of its angst. In his essay, "Hamlet and His Problems," Eliot argues that there exists a "formula of [any] *particular* emotion," as if works of art need only rely on the appropriate "set of objects" or "chain of events" in order to "terminate in sensory experience" for the viewer or reader (100). As both an element and criterion of style, the objective correlative can be a measure of an author's success, for his or her goal would seem to be to guide readers toward particular sensory experiences *objectively*.

In the converse scenario, Eliot details how the absence of such 'appropriate' symbolism poses problems within a text. However, he frames this problem chiefly through the perspective of a literary character—Hamlet, as per his essay's title—rather than addressing this flaw as a failing on Shakespeare's part or a source of confusion and displeasure for the reader. As Eliot writes, "Hamlet is up against the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother, but that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her" (101). In

my reading of *Lonelyhearts* as a disturbed individual, he is likewise guilty of the type of disgust that envelops and exceeds its object: the seemingly disordered world. Complicating the matter, though, is his underlying self-disgust, which precludes the personal reckoning needed for emotional growth.

While describing inadequate or misleading correlatives, Eliot explores what troubles Hamlet about his external world failing to match his inner frustration. He frames Hamlet's madness as, in a way, a symptom of Shakespeare's inability to provide an adequate foil for his protagonist's roiling emotions. Even though this reading ultimately critiques the artist himself rather than the work of art, it offers a good example of the basic need (shared alike by artist, reader, and even fictional character) to have external validation for thoughts and feelings in the form of an object around which to reify emotions. That Eliot makes his argument to indict Shakespeare for failing to fully realize his intention is beside the point, because I am more interested in thinking about the ways in which the notion of the objective correlative deconstructs itself.

Speaking of "Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings," Eliot insists that the work of art should convey "the external facts" of its imagined reality in such a way as to establish the "imagined sensory impressions" (101, 100). Short of this external validation, the literary character can only invest his or her reality with *subjective* impressions, which would certainly complicate and override conventional notions of 'equivalents' and 'correlatives'. Nonetheless, these subjectively formulated projections can impart traces of latent content: even when anxiety runs deep, it can still ripple perceptibly beneath the surface of calm waters. Given how West foregrounds this manner of expressionistic and subtly intense fodder for

character analysis, I argue that he succeeds in tethering his idiosyncratic symbolism to recognizable archetypes.

In my reading of *Miss Lonelyhearts* as satire, I understand West's intention to be fundamentally existential in nature. As he contorts the familiar through what I'll term 'subjective correlatives,' West amplifies the absurdity of his uncanny characters, whose flatness as stock archetypes he casts in unusual light through rich and disturbing symbolism. To wit, all of his characters (aside from "Betty the Buddha") are variously needy, bitter, and/or nihilistic, yet these flaws still resonate as all-too-human (West 12). Given the presence of characters like the manipulative trickster, Shrike (Lonelyhearts' editor and boss), Shrike's sycophantic and transgressive followers (Lonelyhearts' colleagues), and our aloof, brooding protagonist himself, West's imagined world may feel like an echo chamber of like-minded cynicism and despair. However, he still manages to both articulate *how* and critique *why* the virtues of hope, empathy, and love have become bitterly ironic in Modernist poetics. As one example, West's critique demonstrates that these virtues, when harnessed by the privileged yet alienated, are too easily weaponized against those who truly suffer. In this reading, those who would most benefit from finding a way to sustain the will to live are exploited by those who harness the will to power.

With its iconoclastic bent, *Miss Lonelyhearts* participates in a particular strain of satire, a tradition which burlesques themes of alienation and loneliness among the privileged. To again paraphrase Eliot, when Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude of Denmark, reveals herself to be woefully unsuitable for correlating to and symbolizing his needed adversary, she exacerbates his madness: Hamlet's anxiety over both his political power and his self-imposed isolation becomes more diffuse without fully evaporating (101). Gertrude falls well below the metaphysical significance needed for the task of reifying Hamlet's mix of righteous indignation and base self-

disgust. What carries the weight of signification, then, is the obvious torment of Hamlet being haunted by a “feeling which he cannot understand” (101). Lonelyhearts may grow progressively more numbed and, thus, more oblivious to this confusion than Hamlet does, but he still shares in this uncanny experience of seeing in his world nothing that corresponds to how he feels. In fact, I argue that Lonelyhearts’ ineffectual brooding exemplifies better than Hamlet’s the absurdism addressed by Eliot: when we encounter a loner-protagonist relying on dark “levity” as meager “emotional relief,” we should be reminded of Lonelyhearts, rather than Hamlet, as the most daring example of a literary character whose plight at once dramatizes and satirizes solipsistic angst (102).

Through his “buffoonery” of “emotion[s] which can find no outlet in action,” Lonelyhearts reveals traces of “ecstatic or terrible” feelings that he tries to sublimate (“Hamlet” 102). In my reading, Lonelyhearts’ lust for violence, sex, and alcohol find outlet easily enough; these actionable desires correspond to the type of ‘terrible’ emotions that give rise to escapism. In contrast, the ‘ecstatic’ nature of Lonelyhearts’ simultaneous desire for and fear of religious hysteria cannot be resolved; even considering the prospect of giving up control proves too overwhelming. Although his job could have provided an outlet for his earnest longing to spread the empathy of Christ’s love, he quickly turns from believing “Christ was the most natural of excitements” to finding “the Christ business” a joke (West 9, 3). In other words, he makes a mockery of the selfless disposition that would be more difficult for him to enact and uphold than simply indulging in his abusive urges; this is transparently a defense mechanism.

While occasionally successful at sublimating his self-destructive desires in sacrilegious, morbid, or vicious humor, Lonelyhearts cannot as easily quiet his suspicion that “hysteria [might] really [be] too steep a price to pay for bringing [the deadened world] to life” (9). Indeed,

when his sardonic outburst against Betty threatens to reveal his hysterical devotion to self-abasement, he frames it as a joke. In this particular scene, Lonelyhearts at first calls Betty a “kind bitch” and aligns himself with “[w]ife-torturers, rapers of small children” (12). He then insists, “I’m not sick. I don’t need any of your damned aspirin. I’ve got a Christ complex. Humanity . . . I’m a humanity lover. All the broken bastards . . .” (13). However, he soon reinstates his cynical guise of being aloof to Betty’s—and, by extension, humanity’s—suffering, for he “pat[s] her shoulder threateningly” and asks, “Didn’t you like the performance?” (13). To recover from having possibly exposed Betty to both the extent of his depravity and the masochistic pleasure he takes in feeling broken, Lonelyhearts must instead sublimate these destructive tendencies.

Claiming that his outburst had merely been a ‘performance’ does not excuse his verbal harassment and physical intimidation, nor does it even restore order to his heated discussion with Betty. Rather, it takes Betty’s “undramatic” declaration of love to give Lonelyhearts the chance to mount one last attack, as he volleys back that he loves not just Betty but also her “damned smiling through tears” (13). To process this scene of Betty turning the other cheek while Lonelyhearts brandishes his ironic detachment as a weapon, we must remember that this vile and malicious buffoonery is merely a symptom of Lonelyhearts’ desire to reify his feelings of powerlessness and angst. For her part in this episode, Betty refuses to be ensnared and, quite simply, does not take the bait.

As discussed earlier, Lonelyhearts at one point leaves Betty’s apartment feeling as though his heart were a ‘complicated bomb.’ We can now read this image as a subjective correlative expressing Lonelyhearts’ desire to keep his emotions contained while preparing to one day unleash them. Unlike “the ordinary person” who, according to Eliot, has “trim[med] down his [ecstatic or terrible] feeling[s] to fit the business world,” Lonelyhearts eschews the pressure to

conform and seek belonging (“Hamlet” 102). Instead, he nurses grudges and his delirious need for power. If anything, he is closer to “the artist [who] keeps [these feelings] alive by his ability to intensify the world to his emotions” (“Hamlet” 102). However, Lonelyhearts cannot possibly intensify the world enough through his distorted perception of it, as his inner world would ultimately prove the more disordered, anyway. In order to transcend this solipsistic thinking, it takes Lonelyhearts’ bizarre bastardization of performance art—what I’ve conceptualized as his ‘faith healing’—to actually intensify the reactions of others. The problem, of course, is that trying to ‘save’ others ends up converting them to Lonelyhearts’ morbid perspective on life, a process which dissolves any prospect for empathy and ultimately leads to our protagonist’s downfall.

West’s great accomplishment, then, is in eliciting sympathy—no matter how fitful it may be—for Lonelyhearts. By offering his text as what Robert A. Ferguson calls “a proving ground for the uses and even the dangers” of “internal conversation,” West demonstrates that self-reflectiveness can either motivate us to weather our loneliness or, in fact, *exacerbate* it (2). Given how Lonelyhearts’ outlook conflates the messiah complex and its grandiose sense of purpose with the victim complex and its nihilistic sense of defeat, his internal conversations warrant scrutiny. While Lonelyhearts certainly offers a prime example of a character who we can “learn to care about” due to his apparent “struggle to overcome the world rising against [him],” his status as someone “forced away from others or undone by them” grows thornier and more problematic as the narrative builds (Ferguson 3). Once we begin to note how the ambivalent narrative voice undercuts Lonelyhearts’ perspective on his heroic “comeuppance endured,” we must recognize the corollary that Lonelyhearts earns this comeuppance by victimizing others, especially Betty (3). As an agent of chaos, he inflicts the type of pain that “cut[s] across

everything [his victims might] want to do or become” (3). In achieving his own rebirth in the mold of a self-styled faith healer, Lonelyhearts deprives others of becoming anything other than pawns in his own psychodrama.

To amplify the above irony, West uses his exposition to subtly cue readers’ reflection on the nature and cause of Lonelyhearts’ dismay. For example, he suggests that Lonelyhearts feels burdened living in a world where “[n]o repeated group of words would fit [the] rhythm [of raw shouting] and no scale could give them meaning” (West 11). With this allusion to the schematization of language and musical notation, we get a glimpse of how Lonelyhearts processes the bitter realization that he cannot impose order on (nor extract hope from) the seeming chaos. More importantly, we sense his reluctance to confront the reality that he is powerless, that he cannot force his world to correspond to the self-empowering utopia he desires.

Elsewhere, West gives us symbolism depicting Lonelyhearts’ performative need to fixate on and wallow in the cognitive dissonance he experiences. Even the sanctuary of his home represents an indifferent and uncooperative world:

Miss Lonelyhearts [...] lived by himself in a room that was as full of shadows as an old steel engraving. It held a bed, a table and two chairs. The walls were bare except for an ivory Christ that hung opposite the foot of the bed. He had removed the figure from the cross to which it had been fastened and had nailed it to the wall with large spikes. But the desired effect had not been obtained. Instead of writhing, the Christ remained calmly decorative. (8)

The spartan furnishings and elaborate effort at sacrilege fail to ignite a deeper metaphysical crisis. Lonelyhearts cannot will himself into radical empathy with Christ’s suffering, cannot project onto the crucified figure anything other than his neurotic desire for a sign. Still, as a

Derridean reading informs us, the very act of invoking this image within the text elicits the reader's tracing back toward the signified action: the Christ made of ivory proves capable of writhing in our collective imagination, even if it fails to do so in Lonelyhearts' reality.

Paradoxically, this trace of a desired sign—the writhing in pain that Lonelyhearts cannot himself emulate—imposes *ironic* significance onto this failure to signify. To want to see the figure in pain exemplifies Lonelyhearts' self-abasement, and the crucifix's failure to signify suggests that Lonelyhearts' crisis of faith will not be so easily resolved. Indeed, Lonelyhearts' deadpan disappointment upon realizing 'the desired effect had not been obtained' cannot be unique to this situation, as his job and his interactions with Betty must evoke the same feeling. As that feeling becomes too strong to ignore, Lonelyhearts experiences what must be a muted (and ultimately delusional) call to action, or so we can infer.

Like the other loner-protagonists in this study, Lonelyhearts believes he is poised for heroism through his occupation, as if some manner of destiny or simply an archetypal calling has made it clear he must prove himself worthy of greatness. Due to the pervasive cynicism among his colleagues, though, he is compelled to offer only empty gestures in the form of his general buffoonery of emotion. He cannot respond with enough compassion to match his readers' vulnerability, so Lonelyhearts instead privileges mere escapism, no matter how easily thwarted: in his mind, "[m]en have always fought their misery with dreams. Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio and newspapers" (39). This defeated attitude represents an occupational and existential impasse that distresses Lonelyhearts. More importantly, it also exposes a conundrum about his tainted wisdom and advice, a dilemma which Robert Edenbaum articulates succinctly: "Miss Lonelyhearts may be a holy fool, but he is considerably less innocent than his correspondents" (64). Resigned to selling his readers on the

dream that life can be “full of [...] peace, gentleness and ecstasy,” Lonelyhearts knows he has compromised his integrity (West 1). Faith healing, on the other hand, eventually emerges as a new calling for Lonelyhearts, one which would require him to put aside dreaming in favor of action.

Another critic of the novella, Arthur Cohen, also invokes this concept of the holy fool when critiquing Lonelyhearts, but his analysis explores whether the sacrifices made by the holy fool should be considered profound or absurd. Cohen at first defines this concept as complicating simplistic notions of “the perfect sinner” in opposition to “the perfect saint” (46). In his reading, the holy fool recognizes the world’s degradation and, thus, practices a heedless, potentially self-indulgent form of asceticism as a way to externalize how “the spirit of man records more quickly and sensitively what emerges but gradually in the social order” (Cohen 47). Once the saintly renunciation of worldly pleasure has been taken to its most extreme manifestation, though, the holy fool’s hysterical and foolhardy behavior becomes exposed. Read generously, the holy fool can be said to act in this way to acknowledge that, “long in advance of his destruction,” he knows “he is being destroyed” by an unfeeling and unresponsive world (Cohen 47). However, when we return to Edenbaum’s analysis, we can infer the damning point that Lonelyhearts’ solipsism precludes his manner of self-destruction from taking on this same righteous cast. As Edenbaum explains, “If Miss Lonelyhearts submerges the world in his own ego, the letter-writers, nevertheless, are a constant which constitutes a very real world” (64). Accordingly, Lonelyhearts serves only himself when he enacts, after his fever dream, the absurd yet very real self-sacrifice at novella’s end.

Well in advance of these concluding events, Lonelyhearts yearns to transcend his commodified labor, just as he yearns to transcend the barriers that keep him from reaching those

who suffer, just as he yearns to transcend hopelessness: these are the imperatives that motivate his sense of duty. However, the final of these is what sets him on his journey to recreate himself as a messiah, as a beacon for and even source of hope. As evidence of this yearning to transcend hopelessness, Lonelyhearts, in a rare moment of self-critique, first implicates “his own self-doubt” as the reason he cannot embody or convey Christ love (West 39). He ultimately determines, though, that it is “his lack of humility” holding him back (39). Despite having a visionary’s sense of mass media as an untapped medium for proselytizing, Lonelyhearts recognizes that he will remain unfit for the task of disseminating gospel unless he has a change of heart and can bear himself prostrate before God’s grace. Lonelyhearts comes to be defined by this union of deep self-doubt with the failure to repress his will to power. As a result, he becomes ever more attuned to the suffering of those who share in the same manner of angst as his own: despairing over the state of the world but hating himself—and, eventually, others—for not knowing how to fix it.

As we have seen, Lonelyhearts tacitly understands his inadequacies as a lover, as an advice columnist, and as a Christ figure. He even falls short of fully emulating and inhabiting the model of cynical, combative masculinity embodied by his editor and boss, Shrike. Tempted into testing the limits of self-determination, Lonelyhearts sets himself up for a precipitous emotional collapse; once he feels himself a failure or, worse, a sham, he becomes haunted by the difference between reality and what he desires of his life. Accordingly, Lonelyhearts’ sense of charity proves equally false, as it arises from disgust at the identity-effacing effects of emotional isolation and despair.

Due to Lonelyhearts’ underlying disgust with the world and with himself, neither love nor a desire for fellowship enter into his self-abasing manner of compassion. Rather,

Lonelyhearts is like Eliot's unnamed speaker traversing the "Unreal City" in *The Waste Land*, who laments that he "had not thought death had undone so many" (60, 63).⁴ In West's construction, though, Lonelyhearts understands this malaise, for he has been a part of the anonymous "crowds of people, walking round in a ring" (WL 56). However, he also views himself at a remove, somehow apart from and above the inarticulate masses whose "[s]ighs, short and infrequent, [are] exhaled" as "each man fixe[s] his eyes before his feet" (WL 64, 65). Undone by loneliness, these hopeless people now represent the prospective audience from which Lonelyhearts must draw his readership. Their naked pleas of confusion and self-disgust threaten to undo Lonelyhearts' defenses, though. As he cultivates a sense of purpose through a blinkered dedication to creating himself anew, Lonelyhearts neglects to invest himself in his platform for succoring the suffering. Given his advice columns consisting merely of boilerplate, Lonelyhearts could easily be exposed as a fraud. To wit, Lonelyhearts can only offer paeans to humanity and faith in which, it seems, he cannot invest true conviction.

The dissonance between Lonelyhearts' messiah complex and the phoniness of his presentation to the world marks his search for meaning as absurd. Locating both comedy and tragedy in Lonelyhearts' multiple instances of comeuppance, West depicts the ways an earnest drive or desire can be failed by insincere application. By turns mocking and despairing, West's treatment of the alienated subject places him in the company of other great authors of the Modernist vanguard. Moreover, West ensures this comparison by developing archetypes and themes commonly affiliated with Eliot; he even parodies Eliot's most well-known work. As we will soon explore, the text offers shades of "Prufrock" through Lonelyhearts' confusion and indecision, and we get a note-for-note parody of *The Waste Land* through elegiac exposition.

⁴ As this chapter makes plain, the resonances between *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Waste Land* are myriad, and they are emblematic of Jonathan Greenberg's point that West makes it difficult to parse out whether these are parodic references or sincere allusions.

Although likewise consumed with “an overwhelming question” that rattles within him “like a tedious argument,” Lonelyhearts is not so dumbstruck as Prufrock (“Prufrock” 10, 8). Whereas Prufrock must ponder if he would even “dare” to “[d]isturb the universe,” Lonelyhearts has already resolved that particular dilemma (45-6). Still, both share in the knowledge that there will always be “time to murder and create,” just as this rash decisiveness can be overturned in the time that yet remains: to the self-defeating mindset, there will always be “time yet for a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred visions and revisions” (“Prufrock” 28, 32-3). Lonelyhearts, though, comes closer to breaking free of this mindset than does Prufrock. For example, he is not so self-effacing as to proclaim, “I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be” (“Prufrock” 111). Lonelyhearts may act demure in positioning himself, too, as just “an attendant lord” and “an easy tool,” but his fealty is to God rather than to a monarch (112, 114). Thus, if Lonelyhearts understands himself to be “[a]t times, indeed, almost ridiculous,” it is only because his messianic ambition manifests as buffoonery in the eyes of the cynical (“Prufrock” 118). Unlike Prufrock’s cautious admission that he at times represents “the Fool” to Hamlet’s wily and canny Prince, Lonelyhearts’ introspection is murkier (119). His thinking seems to be subsumed in the uncanny sense that *his* suffering will be meaningful even though the suffering of his readers strikes him as pitiful and absurd.

Unlike the Prufrockian fool, Lonelyhearts can envision the means—his self-sacrifice—to quiet indecision, and so he takes action. Unlike the holy fool, Lonelyhearts would only sacrifice himself in order to be jolted out of his apathy. Nonetheless, his delusions alone prove him a fool, though more like the type of hapless, corruptible fool embodied by Eliot’s “young man carbuncular” from *The Waste Land*: Lonelyhearts “makes a welcome of indifference,” too, although not just in his cynical treatment of women (WL 231, 242). In his social life,

Lonelyhearts conducts himself as if he would prefer to be received with indifference; he withers when subject to Shrike's attention, for example. Between his disengaged reactions and his yearning for transcendence, Lonelyhearts already cloaks himself in anonymity. Over the course of the novella, he comes closer to believing he can attain this desired state, and readers should ultimately recognize that Lonelyhearts seeks to become the unknowable force of spiritual renewal—as a messiah—simply to obscure and erase the scarlet letter of his easily mocked pen-name.

Beyond their shared interrogation of aloof and entitled masculinity, *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Waste Land* also broadcast this moral decay outward upon the wider world. The visions offered by West and Eliot, respectively, suggest that a deteriorated landscape, natural though it is, can become sinister once cast as a subjective correlative. Enveloped by morbid and tainting perceptions, the land is inevitably exceeded by the disturbed viewer's need for a bleak omen corresponding to his inner disorder or even depravity. Instead of Eliot's speaker lamenting that April is "the cruellest month" for the way it breeds lilacs "out of the dead land," we get Lonelyhearts remembering how, the previous year, "May had failed to quicken these soiled fields" (WL 1-2; West 4-5). Only "the brutality of July" proved able "to torture a few green spikes through the exhausted dirt," we are told (West 5). At this early point in the text, Lonelyhearts has just entered "the heavy shade" of a park, walking "into the shadow of a lamp-post that lay on the path like a spear. It pierced him like a spear" (4). Conflating Lonelyhearts' foreshadowed death with the brutality needed to awaken dead land, this scene undermines his messiah complex by simply revealing that Lonelyhearts would rather encourage "his correspondents to come here and water the soil with their tears" than water the soil with his own sweat and blood (5).

Tellingly, this allusion to *The Waste Land* occurs in the vignette titled “Miss Lonelyhearts and the Dead Pan,” which multiplies the meaning in ‘deadpan’—the English idiom for affectless humor—by punning on the mystical death of Pan, Greek god of the wild and the rustic. The image of Pan’s death functions as a synecdoche for the figurative and literal death of nature explored in *The Waste Land*, except West here inverts Eliot’s laments. This subversion of Eliot’s themes allows West to signify one man’s dissolution, rather than humanity’s complicity in forsaking the land. To imagine Lonelyhearts amid a dead landscape, wryly conceding that brutality might be his only means of getting favorable outcomes to emerge, is to see how a broken man might justify his torturous misdeeds.

Beyond directly parodying Eliot, the novella is also parodic of genres like the *künstlerroman*, the spiritual confessional, and the epistolary novel. Given Lonelyhearts’ quest to discover the means to leave his mark on those who suffer, tropes relating to artistic or expressive development inevitably creep into the text. In my reading, Lonelyhearts’ ineffectual yearning and fumbling constitute an inversion of a *künstlerroman*, which would present him not as a visionary but rather as a wayward scam artist in need of an audience. Inverting the trope common to the *künstlerroman* of the artist discovering ways to reinforce his confidence and prioritize his will to create, *Miss Lonelyhearts* instead depicts its protagonist as he makes a performative art out of breaking others’ will to live. Interpreting the text through this lens, we can note early on that the artistic expression cultivated by Lonelyhearts is, in fact, a means of delivering platitudes and obscuring his own delusions of grandeur. Once he devises faith healing as his best means to engage directly with the suffering, Lonelyhearts simply affirms that bolstering his greatness at any cost is his sole motivation.

Given the abjection of Lonelyhearts' situation and his desire for redemption, the novella eventually participates in certain tropes of the confessional and its mix of repentant yet laudatory tone. Rather than deliberate parody, I take the novella to be suggestive of the confessional style, in that its tragicomic vignettes suggest a growth narrative, but one which never fully coalesces. By narrativizing Lonelyhearts' conversion experience with deadpan attention to the delusions experienced therein, West skewers the mindset that would desire religious certainty simply as a means to combat the perception of a disordered world. When Lonelyhearts fails to repent and, in fact, basks in the glory of achieving apotheosis, the novella reveals the significance of distorting these confessional elements: instead of arriving at the point when Lonelyhearts can piously disavow his sinful urges, his narrative arc simply peters out. Despite this upheaval of genre expectations, we still experience the confessional's disclosure of misdeeds and yearning for salvation. However, West deploys these qualities to convey how honest self-assessment loses its purpose for Lonelyhearts once his delusions begin to feed his solipsism.

Given the letters submitted to Lonelyhearts' column, three of which open the novella while crowding out Lonelyhearts' voice, a subtext emerges that parodies the epistolary novel. For example, West chooses unsettling details to disrupt the naked sentiment of Sick-of-it-all, who is "*so sick and scared because [she] cant have an abortion*" and who cries "*all the time [that] it hurts so much*" (2). In this same letter, West slyly plants an off-note in the form of Sick-of-it-all's wry sentiment about being ill-prepared for marriage, as she was never told "*about man and wife*" (2). By injecting an element of understatement, West undermines the gravity of this woman's pain from failing kidneys and panic in the face of an unfeeling husband. As particularly scathing evidence of this technique, Sick-of-it-all writes, "*My grandmother never told me and she was the only mother I had but made a big mistake by not telling me as it dont pay to be*

inocent and is only a big disapointment” (2). The bizarre way in which she diminishes the severity of her problem—claiming it was merely a mistake or foolish omission to be kept naïve about sexuality—actually highlights a deeper problem: Sick-of-it-all does not understand that the reason her strictly Catholic husband won’t authorize an abortion is the same reason her grandmother could not access the will or the wherewithal to articulate what sex entails. She has been wronged by those who are “*so religious*” as to become dogmatic, and yet here she appeals to Lonelyhearts, champion of religious rhetoric as balm for the suffering masses (2).

Silenced as he sorts through the pile of letters “he had received [that] morning,” Lonelyhearts chain-smokes as a way to suppress his anxieties and ignore his guilt (1). In a damning bit of accidental cringe comedy, Lonelyhearts even reveals how he relies on vicious humor as his outlet for sublimating his entrenched fear of hysteria. To wit, after Lonelyhearts fails to process the content of a letter from a teenage girl who signs her letter ‘Desperate,’ he perpetuates the very same othering (imposed on the so-called ‘imperfect’) that Desperate herself experiences and decries. As is his wont, Lonelyhearts remains oblivious to the ironic resonance between his behavior, as he stares “furiously” at his “imperfect” cigarette that “refuse[s] to draw,” and the indignity faced by Desperate as she is forced to swallow the shame of her father degrading her for being “*born without a nose*” (2-3). We know nothing of how Lonelyhearts might answer Desperate’s concluding question—“*Ought I commit suicide?*”—because he has already “fought himself quiet” and “lit another [cigarette]” by the time he switches to the third letter (3). Despite its epistolary format, this opening vignette, titled “Miss Lonelyhearts, Help me, Help me,” disrupts any occasion for our protagonist to assert or pronounce himself; no help is forthcoming.

The text as a whole constantly defers Lonelyhearts' responses to these letters and ultimately makes a joke of his indecision. Struck deaf and dumb, Lonelyhearts unwittingly suggests that the apotheosis of his talents occurs not in writing or proselytizing, but in deliberate silence. This null response serves him well, actually, and his silence in the opening vignette foreshadows the moment when he can finally affirm his integrity by attesting that his spiritual conversion has left him reborn as a rock. While readers should be able to grasp the irony that is lost on him, this conversion nonetheless has real significance for Lonelyhearts. He becomes what Stanley Edgar Hyman describes as "the rock on which the new church will be founded, but it is the church of catatonic withdrawal" (23). As we will later explore, what occasions this opportunity to reify his desired state of benumbed detachment is rather simple: in order to become truly impassive, Lonelyhearts must shore up his sense of ideological certainty. Once he believes himself deserving of power and privilege, he can embrace this unassailable subjectivity, anchored as an unmovable and unknowable force against which disorder cannot win.

For greater context about West's idiosyncratic sense of genre, W. H. Auden describes how West manages to affect a deeply felt, nearly Romantic admiration for Lonelyhearts, a borderline Nietzschean figure capable only of self-destruction. His points concern West's sleight of hand as an earnest absurdist and cynical surrealist, an author with a satirical eye yet a plaintive tongue. Auden refutes the common reception of West's work, stating that "West is not a satirist" but rather a bemused deconstructionist of appearances who spins "Cautionary Tales" (43). Auden's explanation highlights West's surrealist impulses: "Satire presupposes conscience and reason as the judges between the true and the false, the moral and the immoral, to which it appeals, but for West these faculties are themselves the creators of unreality" (43). In light of this reading, we could easily paraphrase Auden in order to frame one of Lonelyhearts' most sincere

beliefs—that “[m]an has a tropism for order”—as an ironic gesture on West’s part: the innate allure to order our world is, in fact, a temptation to create unreality, just as the wishful aphorism, “All order is doomed, yet the battle is worth while,” instantiates that unreality (West 30, 31). Auden shows that West, in writing “parables about a Kingdom of Hell,” exposes the world as led astray by “the Father of Wishes” who, rather than lying outright, tempts the disaffected by teasing out the sublimity of aspiration (43). This temptation, in Auden’s reading, occurs through the mindless cultivation of wishes that acknowledge and know “what is the case”—or, rather, what is real—without bothering “to accept it” (43). In other words, such wishes indicate powerfully one message: “I refuse to be what I am” (Auden 43). Lonelyhearts, of course, refuses to accept himself as a joke or hack newspaperman, nor can he fathom being found out as a fraud faith healer. Still, he cannot fashion a viable alternative.

Despite his indebtedness to archetypes of the privileged yet alienated, Lonelyhearts stands apart as a unique creation. He also stands apart within the world West imagines for him, as Lonelyhearts conducts himself through phases of activity and seclusion, agitation and convalescence, that emphasize both his ironic and uncanny heroics. As an ironic hero in the mold of Don Quixote, he is eager to prove himself noble, yet his efforts are repudiated by a world indifferent, even hostile, to his desire for spiritual conquest. As an uncanny hero in the mold of Bartleby, the scrivener, he yearns for control and self-determination, yet these stubborn desires relegate him to the shadow life of liminal spaces. In both instances, Lonelyhearts is more inept than inert, fumbling but still surprisingly effective at realizing his death wish.

While we know very little about Lonelyhearts’ youth, his home life is tellingly elided in favor of a glimpse of him as “a boy in his father’s church” (West 8). Even though there was once a time when “something [would stir] in him when he shouted the name of Christ,” it seems he

knows he has failed as an adult to uphold his father's legacy (8). As Ferguson notes of a thematic motif across American literature of the high Modernist period, "twentieth-century fiction glorifies the lonely figures who return home only to reflect on no home found there" (13).⁵ Ferguson highlights *Miss Lonelyhearts* as somewhat of an outlier in this context, an exception which nonetheless participates in inescapable tropes: "Rejecting such solemnity but hitting the same theme with dark humor, Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) parodies loneliness while sustaining it on every page" (13). For Lonelyhearts, there is no home to be found in piety and humility; he is spiritually adrift, unsettled in a way that makes what was once familiar—the rituals of church life—seem strange and inaccessible. However, there is an alternate path already available to him, for Lonelyhearts knows that "only violence could make him supple" (West 11). With this subtle call to action, violence is what he courts.

As indicated earlier, Lonelyhearts rebounds from the implosion of his self-determination through a shadow-play version of religious reverie and his dubious martyrdom. With this dismantling and deconstruction of the heroic impulse, the novella reveals that it is satirizing the supposedly noble self-sacrifice demanded by the hero's quest. Similarly, Thomas H. Jackson, in his critique of the novella, suggests that the targets of West's satire are notions of heroism and the hero's capacity to rally support for a cause bigger than himself. Jackson renders the novella as "a deflation of the heroic novel" in which "Miss Lonelyhearts' appeals to Christianity are solely on behalf of order; again and again in the novel he refers to it as 'the answer' to the misery and moral disorder he sees around him, and hardly at all a devotional consideration" (4, 2-3).

⁵ Hyman also situates *Miss Lonelyhearts* among canonized works of the early 20th century. Despite the way it assaults the reader with overt "violence and shock," the text also participates in the same "pervasive melancholy atmosphere of failure and defeat" that Hyman identifies in *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sun Also Rises* (27). Each features "a lost and victimized hero" and offers "a bitter sense of our civilization's falsity," qualities which the novella shares, even if it is not quite as despairing as it is damning of Modernist ennui. Indeed, this somberness is misleading, as mourning the loss of the man known as Miss Lonelyhearts would be beside the point.

With this reading, we can see why even the interpretation of Lonelyhearts as a holy fool ultimately deconstructs: his foolish devotion is not to Christian ideals but rather to fighting entropy and his own alienation.

If the conclusion of the novella shows Lonelyhearts succeeding on his own terms, it also provides a troubling instance of an alienated man whose rite of passage into individuation is promptly followed by his death. In his uncanny approximation of a life, Lonelyhearts at first estranges himself from society due to his job and the way he dismissively treats the suffering as a joke. He then loses himself in the job of trying to correct his mindset and fix his misdeeds. Measuring himself against an impossible standard, Lonelyhearts finds himself wanting. As Hyman argues, Lonelyhearts is “clearly the prophet in the reluctance stage, when he denies the call and tells God that he stammers” (19). However, this reading should only apply to Lonelyhearts’ ineffectual effort to use his advice column as a comforting respite for, yet also a buffer against, his correspondents. His stammering and silence recede once Lonelyhearts contrives to embrace death as more meaningful than life.

Increasingly indifferent to physical intimacy, Lonelyhearts must reflect in a crucial moment upon his reluctance to see sex as a balm for his morbid focus on decay. He admits “[n]o similar change ever took place in his own body” despite seeing and feeling the anticipatory euphoria of his female companion (West 19). At these times, he feels like a “dead man,” in that “only friction could make him warm or violence make him mobile” (19). Given the context, this apparent intent to violate women acknowledges the degeneracy of the world of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, a quality which James F. Light understands to be perversely life-sustaining. In his reading, Light contextualizes the savagery of the text as indicating a disturbing impulse: “Man’s desire for life leads to his seemingly instinctive preoccupation with sexual violence, the type

most intimately associated with life” (21). As Light’s pithy construction tells us, violence is “the salt by which [modern man] savors an existence without the Saviour” (20). My reading, however, prioritizes Lonelyhearts’ inner life rather than the socialized tawdriness and chauvinism of his fellow males. He is unique among his compatriots, I argue, because he internalizes this need for sexual violence and uses its latent threat to weaponize his impotence, which becomes yet another frustrated desire that he sublimates as part of the ‘complicated bomb’ hidden in his chest.

As context for the above admission from Lonelyhearts, this episode occurs when he happens upon a little park containing an obelisk. Just as he had observed the shadow of a lamp-post piercing him like a spear, Lonelyhearts stares at the obelisk’s “long, rigid shadow [cast] on the walk in front of him” rather than the monument itself (West 19). He dreads looking upon the monument, which seems “red and swollen in the dying sun, as though it were about to spout a load of granite seed,” because observing the phallic symbol on the cusp of (yet denied) ejaculation makes Lonelyhearts fear that his inner bomb might fail in one of two ways: it could explode prematurely, or—more likely—it could fail to explode at all (19). Within the span of a page, Lonelyhearts again experiences dread and sexual anxiety. However, this second instance is more explicitly a reflection of Lonelyhearts’ impotent rage and frustrated masculinity than is the phallic and alien obelisk, frozen in a sadistic denial of release.

Specifically, Lonelyhearts confronts his impotence when looking upon an advertisement featuring “a naked girl made modest by the mist that rose from the spring at her feet” (19). Despite the exaggerated sexuality presented in the advertisement’s “great deal of care” to depict “nipples [that] stuck out like tiny red hats,” Lonelyhearts is left cold and needing “to excite himself into eagerness,” if only to test his virility (19). Once the text confirms that, inevitably,

“the excitement refused to come,” it also reveals that Lonelyhearts nonetheless “persist[s]” in compelling himself into lust “out of desperation” (20). In these two instances of misplaced or frustrated sexuality, Lonelyhearts either tacitly laments his feeling of emasculation or actively tries to fight it off. Either way, it is the abstract notion of wasting his procreative potential that instills fear in Lonelyhearts; even though he might not actually care about the world receiving a chance at rebirth, he still yearns to become an unknowable force of spiritual renewal. Indifferent to sex on a physiological level but craving the phallogocentric power to structure the lives of others, Lonelyhearts proves numb to reality but oversensitive to ideas.

As evidence of this stasis and need for order, we should recall that West forces us to enter the novella on Lonelyhearts, distressed yet protective of his solitude, as he sits at his desk and stares, unable to write (1). He is scrutinizing his already tenuous belief in Christianity, it would seem, as he questions its ability to address the suffering in the world. Any sense that the novella will focus on whether Lonelyhearts can rediscover his faith is a red herring, though, as its real concern is whether he can accept the inadequacy of his all-too-human efforts. Painfully aware that he is a lone agent of fallible judgments and compromised morals, Lonelyhearts exhibits paradoxical qualities that Comerchero identifies across West’s “two great novels,” *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*: with “an indignation [...] grounded in compassion,” West and his darkly comic creation, Miss Lonelyhearts, both “disguise [their] moral earnestness and [their] anguish” (2). In Comerchero’s estimation, West betrays himself as an “embarrassed moralist” by investing righteously indignant comedy into works that otherwise “dramatize the slow, lingering death of a civilization” (2). Applying this reading to a character who is deprived of the agency wielded by his author, I see Lonelyhearts as an embarrassed moralist himself,

although one consumed with dread rather than wry humor as he faces “a world existing in a moral vacuum” (Comerchero 2).

This moral vacuum foreshadows the terminal path fated for Lonelyhearts’ quest, a path which he navigates haphazardly through limited engagement with the external world. In a sense, he feels trapped in his toxic social life. Even in the best of circumstances, Lonelyhearts conducts himself as “an anarchist sitting in the movies with a bomb in his pocket,” with only “an innocent, amused smile” concealing his desperation (West 14). However, Lonelyhearts lives in Manhattan and dabbles in bourgeois sensibilities; he is free to traverse many social spheres and is privileged to access speakeasies. In that light, his refusal to take advantage of the resources available to him makes Lonelyhearts an emblem of the individual sabotaging himself through self-destruction.

Lonelyhearts only pursues his call to action once his pity for others, which leaves him unmoved, becomes overmatched by his self-pity, which he cannot abide. Only from self-pity does his rage begin to manifest. Just as his “pity had turned to rage” once the suffering of a dying frog “had become real to his senses,” Lonelyhearts’ self-pity turns to rage once his impotence becomes so pronounced that it cannot be ignored (17).⁶ As a result, Lonelyhearts finds power in suppressing his own feelings of hopelessness, for his readers crave a source of optimism to motivate the will to live, just as much as Lonelyhearts himself craves a way to indulge his will to power. He may feel all is lost, that human achievement has crumbled under its own weight, but he still nurses ambitions that require the reciprocal manipulation of and validation from others.

While Lonelyhearts could have shown empathy for his readers by honestly reckoning with how even hope can fail us, he instead combats his own loneliness by sadistically imposing

⁶ This moment results in one of many instances of animal cruelty in the novella, as Lonelyhearts kills the frog. However, the entire scene unfolds as a memory of how quickly the misery of others causes Lonelyhearts to mirror—and resent—their pain: “Miss Lonelyhearts felt as he had felt years before, when he had accidentally stepped on a small frog. Its spilled guts had filled him with pity, but when its suffering had become real to his senses, his pity had turned to rage and he had beaten it frantically until it was dead” (17).

pain and suffering on the undeserving. Even if the letters sent into Lonelyhearts' advice column suggest there is a tainted social order in the text's background, it is one that fails women more than men. For example, we get to read (alongside Lonelyhearts) letters mostly from women, all of whom seem haunted by hardline doctrine that forces guilt onto the innocent. In order to compel these women to feel that they share in the wrongdoing of others, the men in their lives degrade and humiliate them. Similarly, Lonelyhearts' skewed perception, founded upon the myopia of white male privilege, is possibly at greater fault for painting his world in a bleak light than is all the undue suffering presented in these letters. With that in mind, it should be clear that Lonelyhearts' detachment from reality does not speak to some pathology deep within society as a whole. Rather, the pathology tainting society is man's hunger for power, plain and simple.

Although achieving martyrdom may suggest Lonelyhearts has triumphed at pushing the limits of self-creation, it is very much an attenuated and ironic triumph. Indeed, Lonelyhearts creates a terminal narrative because he has found himself lacking: his need to express genuine sympathy for others' pain (or even to articulate his own suffering) proves irreconcilable with his rejection of the 'hysteria' of teleological thinking, whereas his base desires prove to be easily fed yet stubbornly insatiable. Having access to multiple vices in the dark playground of Manhattan, Lonelyhearts indulges in the worst type of white male privilege, which grants him *carte blanche* for violently transgressing taboos against animal cruelty, infidelity, and physical abuse. This blinkered and entitled mindset helps explain how Lonelyhearts can have both a deep reservoir of self-pity and yet also a deep well of resilience as he strives to achieve the status he feels he is owed.

Lonelyhearts' death would appear from the outside to be a moment of utter defeat preceded by breakdown. However, we must accept that West elicits moral confusion here in

order to suggest what Hyman describes as the novella's scathing, heartbreaking message. Specifically, Hyman insists "the book's bitter paradox" is that, in the distorted mindset of Lonelyhearts, "sadism is the perversion of love" (25). This means Lonelyhearts aims for love but turns vicious because a perversion of love is the only thing he can grasp, is all he is capable of, in this perversion of reality. Seeking intimacy, he accrues sadistic power over others and preys on their misplaced vulnerability with him, which allows him to insinuate himself into the lives of the Doyles and to commit acts of physical, psychological, and sexual violence against animals, an old man, and his various love interests, respectively. Power of this sort, which demands insatiable consumption, represents the perversion of yearning: it divorces hope and desire from their necessary constraints of patience and vulnerability. Lonelyhearts' power, then, strengthens over the course of the novella as his intent to snatch pleasure by whatever means overwhelms his intent to honor the Christian doctrine of charity and humility.

Given the two prospects—death or disappointment—presented in the novella's concluding scene, West's satirical aims become clear. In the novella's world of insular and cynical acts of self-exertion or even just self-preservation, an individual's efforts go awry easily. Although it appears we are meant to find Lonelyhearts' motives dubious and Doyle's motives pitiful, West diminishes in this anticlimactic scene the distinctions between the two men. While Lonelyhearts is finally exposed as an aloof yet ambitious striver, Doyle represents the impotent, inarticulate yearning that elicits Lonelyhearts' pity and rage; we learn that Doyle could never be more than a giver, alienated yet desperately hopeful. Indeed, Hyman reads Doyle as "a sinister puppy," a recklessly oblivious man-child who only wants to please others (21). Hyman invokes this imagery due to the scene in which Fay hits Doyle "in the mouth with a rolled-up newspaper" and Doyle responds by "growl[ing] like a dog and catch[ing] the paper with his teeth" (21).

Doyle seems willing to abase himself openly, having long ago abandoned any notion that others will afford him even small measures of dignity. Conversely, Lonelyhearts only makes concessions that permit him control of a situation, be it when he forgoes petty disgust in order to hold Doyle's hand or when he forgoes sexual pleasure in order to resist Fay's advances.

In both cases, though, the agency of these men (or, rather, the effort to exert agency) clouds their judgment. Both fail to acknowledge how their behaviors might impose disarray or suffering on others. However, with Lonelyhearts' death resulting directly from his belief that God had used Doyle to test him, we can only measure his self-actualization a success by the terms laid out within his death wish, his pursuit of martyrdom. Doyle's goals are not nearly so solipsistic, though, which suggests his revenge in this moment will hardly provide him a sense of vindication. Thus, the broken and corrupting world does not become any more ordered by Lonelyhearts' sacrifice, and yet his sense of messianic purpose achieves closure and fulfillment. This concluding instance of irony may well be the text's most biting, one which feels designed to leave a bitter taste in readers' mouths.

With its abrupt end at the moment Doyle fumbles with his gun and Lonelyhearts stumbles into him, the novella confirms that it has been Lonelyhearts' false perceptions all along that have distorted his reality. What Hyman describes as the text's "desperate and savage" tone, "rapid and hysterical" pace, and "garish, ugly, and compelling" imagery all originate through the narrative voice's tight focus on Lonelyhearts' point of view (24, 27, 26). This heightened tenor manifests through either narcotized or agitated passages of free indirect discourse and through deadpan reportage of even Lonelyhearts' most heinous deeds. The only vulnerability and raw emotions we experience are those of Lonelyhearts' readers (or, potentially, our very own); in contrast, Lonelyhearts himself lives in a post-traumatic daze. Surprisingly, even the text's conclusion

sustains this perspective. We learn that Lonelyhearts, deep in delusion, cannot properly “understand [Doyle’s] shout” and instead hears it “as a cry for help from Desperate, Harold S. Catholic-mother, Broken-hearted, Broad-shoulders, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband” (West 57-8). In this moment, Lonelyhearts may have transcended his self-critical ennui, but his newfound conceitedness leaves Doyle obscured and purely an instrument for validating our self-styled messiah. For his part, Doyle is reduced to a proxy for those Lonelyhearts has previously failed.

To complicate our sense of Lonelyhearts’ mundane evil and Doyle’s hopeless anger, West embeds in this scene an alternative perspective. A third character, Betty, enters the action to find that Lonelyhearts has “caught” and is struggling with Doyle (58). Betty functions as an audience surrogate here by virtue of being a helpless observer. However, she also affects the fatal outcome of their struggle by “call[ing] to them to stop and start[ing] up the stairs;” with her well-intentioned desire to intercede in the conflict, she inadvertently cuts off Doyle’s escape, which prompts his attempt to “get rid of the package” concealing his gun (58). This violent series of whims and mishaps is a microcosm of the text as a whole, except the bleak irony is somehow darker given that it is now Betty, rather than Lonelyhearts, who must confront how easily we can become complicit in the suffering of others.

As established earlier, the emotional crux of this text arises from how we are forced to pity Lonelyhearts even as his behavior becomes more objectionable. This cognitive dissonance builds until we reach the existential dread of seeing Lonelyhearts achieve deliverance in the face of his own incompetence and abusiveness. Given this inversion of how we are conditioned to interpret self-sacrifice, the text concludes by revoking any chance at catharsis for readers and, in fact, rebukes us for desiring catharsis in the first place. There is no easy answer as to whether we

should pity Lonelyhearts or fear him for his delusions, nor can we say whether Doyle's act of revenge should mitigate our pity for him. Likewise, there is no easy justification for feeling the text properly resolved, as Betty is left confused and horrified, her hope for a new life with Lonelyhearts dashed.

As evidence of these dashed hopes, Betty earlier reveals to Lonelyhearts that she is pregnant and is going to have an abortion in the vignette titled "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Party Dress" (55-6). In fact, West places this scene immediately preceding the novella's conclusion to amplify its importance. In their discussion, Lonelyhearts proposes marriage on the spot and convinces Betty that "they would rehabilitate the farm in Connecticut," presumably to act as their new home (56). This fantasy will not come to pass, of course; as Hyman notes, "it is Betty's patient innocence—she is as soft and helpless as a kitten—that makes the book so heartbreaking. She is an innocent Eve to his fallen Adam, and he alone is driven out of Eden" (20). While I appreciate Hyman's point about Betty as a locus of pathos in the text, I would argue that she will become irreversibly corrupted from witnessing Lonelyhearts' death. To my mind, Betty is overdetermined as heartbreaking and, thus, absurd.

Despite my cynical reading, the text certainly paints Betty as a saint: the long-suffering woman as an anchoring, calming, centering presence. In an ironic touch, it is Betty, rather than Lonelyhearts, who truly embodies the virtues of being the rock. Still, West subjects Betty to having her resolve and conviction tested, at least tacitly, once Lonelyhearts fails to prove himself a worker of miracles. As Light notes, "Witnessing the murder of her unborn child's father, [Betty] will need an even greater blindness than she has shown before if she is to disregard the existence of violence" (30). Light frames this concluding moment as marking when Lonelyhearts' "pilgrimage is over" yet "Betty's has just begun," which suggests she will have to

“reconcile pain and violence with a godly universe” if she wants to survive with a sense of compassion intact (30). Pregnant with the child of the man she has just watched be slain, Betty deserves least of all the characters to have her compassion tested or to be left hopeless. Thus, no clarity emerges about who is to blame for this tragic ending, nor is there even a clear sense that West would discourage us from reading the conclusion as merely a farce of desperate measures intersecting with desperate delusions.

By invoking the powerful emotions of catharsis within his characters, eliciting the same in his readers, and yet subverting the expectation to purge us of our foreboding, West encourages us to question the source and limits of the intense feelings—love, hate, fear, pity—that often motivate action. Jonathan Greenberg recognizes this tendency across all of West’s works, arguing that he “explicitly thematizes the problem of feeling throughout his writing” (590). In this reading, Greenberg does not argue that only certain feelings are problematic; rather, he suggests that any feeling can become “itself the source of conflict” if said emotional response emerges as an impediment, either holding back a character’s ambitions or prompting unnecessary, counter-productive measures (590). His argument highlights what makes *Lonelyhearts* a paradoxical symbol: designed to lambaste the destructive facets of self-creation, *Lonelyhearts* nonetheless capitalizes on its generative facets. In Greenberg’s formulation, “the artistic quests of virtually all West’s protagonists” are “efforts to resolve the tension between the claims of satire and sentiment” (590). As applies to *Miss Lonelyhearts*, this tension between satire and sentiment affirms *Lonelyhearts*’ uncertainty, for he would seem to be torn between disrupting the way his readers haphazardly direct their faith toward any potential salvation and exploiting that faith under the auspices of his own spiritual leadership.

This inquiry into the novella's abortive catharsis reveals how deeply West interrogates the existentialist's conundrum. By foregrounding the absurdity of a loner-protagonist trying to remain authentic to himself while also trying to live out his ambitions, West concedes that pessimism and despair are all too common byproducts of aspiration. Still, West also takes seriously Lonelyhearts' need to discover some pragmatic means to sustain optimism. Greenberg acknowledges this tension, concluding his line of thought with the suggestion that "West's fiction at once manifests and resists a satiric impulse, and the push and pull of this ambivalence constitutes the central dynamic of his fiction" (590). We can best recognize this ambivalence, I argue, in the irony of Lonelyhearts trying to will himself into being seen as an emotionally astute visionary, which is a goal he cultivates solely because he desires to transcend the stultifying effects of pain. He is both dismissive of and motivated by pain, responsive to and yet resistant toward the suffering. Attempting to parse these distinctions, our role as readers becomes simplistic in our generalized grief yet disastrously complex when confronting notions of blame or guilt.

A certain level of ambivalence should be expected on the part of readers, then, as our confusion of emotional responses from pity to disgust to *schadenfreude* clouds the judgment of Lonelyhearts, as well. We are implicated in Lonelyhearts' world-view, sensing that there is more than mere delusion to his claim that he is now "a spiritual cripple [...] made whole" (West 57). The text's conclusion offers Lonelyhearts the chance to finally quiet his nagging self-reproach, just as it affords us some measure of relief: we rejoice that Lonelyhearts can no longer cause any harm even as we must begrudgingly accept that he is dying at peace with himself. This should not silence our existential dread, though. Indeed, the banality of evil at first haunts and then corrupts Lonelyhearts, and West's singular accomplishment is to inflict upon his readers a

haunted state of unease as we experience the swirl of Lonelyhearts' corrupting influences, from blasé and cynical colleagues to his own unchecked pity and rage. We might be satisfied to see Lonelyhearts receive comeuppance, yet we should also be chastened to realize that—despite his desire to convey compassion—Lonelyhearts wanted to be an instrument of comeuppance himself, to be a vengeful god rather than the merciful messiah that he claimed was his model of divinity.

In the loner-protagonist's mind, his violence makes him not an agent of chaos but rather an agent of order. It seems inevitable, then, that we receive this sense of order through the simultaneous closure of Lonelyhearts' quest and *Lonelyhearts'* narrative. Paradoxically, his self-destruction affirms his project of self-creation, but the integrity he protects comes at the cost of ironically undermining his desire for Christian fellowship. While Lonelyhearts receives a hero's death, in which persistent striving finally pays off after the ultimate self-sacrifice, those he exploits can only unite around their shock and horror. In this moment, both Doyle and Betty must confront their false perceptions of Lonelyhearts, yet they will likely fail to gain any insights into how much of his performance was pure artifice and how much was sincere.

Despite his flair for cynicism, West differentiates his text by lobbing the accusation of falsity with equal parts scorn and lament. Almost all participants in the narrative prove themselves worthy of the reader's contempt, yet the narrative voice cautiously sidesteps outright vitriol in favor of a more nuanced condemnation of how power and privilege entrance and tempt the earnest seeker. From this perspective, there is certainly sympathy within the text for the pawns so hampered as to have no recourse to intentionality or agency. Readers cannot rightfully view the text as merely "a dupe ministering to the duped," a reading which Aaron formulates in order to wave off as too pat (65). Likewise, there should be measured recognition on the part of

readers that Lonelyhearts could have pursued alternate routes: he could have given himself over to so-called hysteria, or an authentic experience of losing control of the self in order to find the self. Instead, Lonelyhearts only loses control of his self-restraint in order to indulge his penchant for violence.

In light of the many excuses for Lonelyhearts' misdeeds entertained thus far in this chapter, we should wonder: what, ultimately, is Lonelyhearts' greatest sin? The answer, it would seem, is that his self-image makes him susceptible to suggestion. Befitting the name others use to mock our ostensible hero, Lonelyhearts is a lonely man isolated at a spiritual and emotional remove from those whose corrosive beliefs and behaviors he cannot help but emulate. The fatalism of the character demonstrates that external forces of his environment (particularly his boss at the newspaper, Shrike) and internal forces like his lack of commitment both impede the search for enlightenment. However, Lonelyhearts exacerbates these constraints by taking to heart the notion that his condition is fixed and unchangeable. As Cohen articulates bluntly, Lonelyhearts is "rhapsodized by that mental liquor of the ascetic deceiver, the egotism of suffering" (48). Wallowing in suffering holds more appeal for Lonelyhearts than giving of himself through his work, and he resigns himself to inertia simply because he cannot steal together enough conviction in his better nature. Debasement is his natural state, and he deludes himself into thinking that he must remain authentic to his ingrained self-image as a loser. Indeed, once he thinks of himself as a messiah, it is only in the sense that losing—as in, losing his life—could potentially have meaning. This convinces him that his sense of loss could finally serve a greater purpose.

Still, the text clearly sets out to indict more than a mere character flaw. In a more evenhanded analysis than Cohen's excoriation above, Kevin Bell argues:

Lonelyhearts blinds himself to the paradox of identity that envelops him, failing to acknowledge that the only possible source of his would-be benediction is the same mass-mediated community that so nauseates him and that the recognition he so desires is located only within the province of the chaotically commercialized sociality he so desperately loathes. (135)

If pursuing recognition and benediction would make Lonelyhearts susceptible to consumerist impulses, then his ineffectual ‘writhing,’ as Aaron puts it, makes sense (65). Unable to overcome these temptations or to even control his corruption, Lonelyhearts becomes both cynical enough to critique Americans’ “orgy of stone breaking” and astute enough to comment that this work has been done “hysterically, desperately, almost as if they knew that the stones would some day break them” (West 27). Despite these insights, he takes his job as an advice columnist only because he is “tired of being a leg man,” and he then “considers the job a joke” until the point when he realizes he is “the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator” (32). After that point, he works hysterically, desperately to perpetrate a fraud, in the form of faith healing, simply because he knows that victimhood will soon break him. He must control his circumstances and impose order on his life, even though he knows that “[e]very order has within it the germ of destruction” (31). However, there is one solution that would not subject Lonelyhearts to a perversion of solace. Lonelyhearts could gain control of his identity if, paradoxically, he were to accept that yielding control over his life to determinism is the only release from suffering.

The irony here, of course, is that Lonelyhearts has arrived at his distressed state by internalizing the perspectives of others. His drive to be Christ-like was fostered long ago, determined by his childhood experience, just as his cynicism about faith—his own and that of others—is determined by the snide nay-saying of iconoclasts like Shrike. Similarly, his

ambivalence about life and blasé attitude about finding stability or comfort are determined by his jaundiced perspective on the natural world, which itself has been determined, at least in part, by the urban landscape creating the illusion that nature is being swallowed up by man-made refuse. Even pursuing his likeliest means of escape, personified by Betty, would compromise his individuality simply by virtue of soothing away his innate pessimism. While emulating Betty would make available to him such basic ways to suppress nihilism as self-control, determination, and compassion, the very thought of making his will subordinate to her identity would contradict his desire for integrity.

For as much as there is dramatic irony in Lonelyhearts failing to live up to his professed ideals, there is tragic irony in him accepting his warped perceptions. By the end of the novella, certain he has proven himself worthy of God's trust yet unable to properly welcome others into the fold, Lonelyhearts achieves some manner of apotheosis in his mind. In this reading, he ascends to saintliness, or even godliness, despite Doyle's frightened and fatal reaction to him. Accordingly, Lonelyhearts' so-called growth occurs through an ethical regression, for he must silence his yearning to make a difference before he can differentiate himself as self-contained and serenely detached from earthly struggles.

In short, his apotheosis occurs by finding within himself the arrogance to be genuinely aloof. Instead of just performing the role of a blasé and reserved cynic, he can now be truly unconcerned about life and unmoved by others because his sense of entitlement has proven indestructible. Tellingly, the uncanny fever-dream quality of the novella takes full hold of the text only after Lonelyhearts beats Fay Doyle and discovers that his acts of violence never bring corrective consequences. To rework Harold Bloom's reading of the novella, dramatic irony abounds as Lonelyhearts, who at first appears driven to be "the Whitmanian American Christ,"

exposes himself as a “nihilistic” and “mutilated image of God” (8). This perversion of godliness manifests as a god of retribution, one who sets his sights on the lowliest of creatures. The way Lonelyhearts exploits weakness—in his manipulation of Doyle and especially Betty—shows that he is only a god of his own making: a lesser, petty, venal god, at that.

Lonelyhearts’ character progression concludes with him no longer having any use for hope and no longer requiring outside validation. Tellingly, he sets on this journey alone in his spare apartment contemplating his “different sort” of vocation (West 9). Through this morbid introspection, he reaffirms his belief that yearning in an unreserved, open manner amounts to hysteria. This is a bedrock principle that dictates not just Lonelyhearts’ distant and aloof manner of socializing, but also his belief that he must resist any hysterical loss of control in order to remain open to God’s grace. In his perception of spiritual reverie, yearning to tap into “something secret and enormously powerful” is dangerous, which is why he has “never allowed” this overwhelming power “to come alive” within him (8). As something that arises from inside the self rather than through God’s grace, this hollow version of reverie can “uncoil in [Lonelyhearts’] brain” like “a snake whose scales are tiny mirrors in which the dead world takes on a semblance of life” (9).

Such a mirage-like deception could be alluring, but Lonelyhearts is staunch in acknowledging his own version of reality, which he reinstates by remarking to himself, “And how dead the world is . . . a world of doorknobs” (9). This image evokes one of Freud’s examples of the uncanny, in which the “unintentional return” is confusing and unnerving (144). In the unintentional return, the subject steadily finds himself unsettled by the surreal experience of walking through a series of doorways, only to find after each one that he has arrived back in the room from which he has just exited. For Lonelyhearts to invoke this imagery means he has

reconciled himself to finding only cold comfort in his deadened, dead-end prospects for actualization, which remains perpetually deferred in a ‘world of doorknobs’. His ennui arises from his familiarity with the endless parade of doors that only ever open onto a new set of constraints, never revealing a vista full of promise.

Resisting the outward appearance of hysteria in this way does not preclude Lonelyhearts from losing control of himself, though. Inept in his self-discipline, Lonelyhearts almost immediately exposes a central irony of the text by undermining his avowed desire to remain unflappable. West affirms this irony through juxtaposition: in an abrupt shift that takes us behind Lonelyhearts’ veneer of calm, the narration moves from one of his hallmark modes to another. In this crucial scene, Lonelyhearts’ reflection on how he came to conceive of hysteria as a mirrored snake gives way to an uncanny dream—the first of his many visions—that paints him as distressed and desperate. In this dream, he is “a magician who [does] tricks with doorknobs. At his command, they bled, flowered, spoke” (West 9). His imagined role is to convert these barriers to connection into avatars of humanity, which symbolically dehumanizes Lonelyhearts’ readers as doorknobs themselves. More than simply a play on the colloquialism of ‘dead as a doornail,’ these dead doorknobs function as a stand-in for the faceless and interchangeable masses to which Lonelyhearts panders. This dream reveals his anxieties, then, by equating this feat of investing inanimate objects with a facsimile of life to the emotional manipulation and glad-handing needed to connect with his readers. Either guise, the magician or the advice columnist, requires Lonelyhearts to rely on sleight of hand to create the illusion that he can open the door onto a better, more hopeful future.

Moving forward in this dream, Lonelyhearts considers his responsibility to his imagined congregation. Potentially unfulfilled by merely entertaining his flock, he instead “trie[s] to lead

his audience in prayer. But no matter how hard he struggle[s], his prayer [is] one Shrike had taught him and his voice [is] that of a conductor calling stations” (9). True authority eludes him, as the fear of being exposed as a fraud consumes him and makes a mockery of his habit of simply being a mouthpiece for Shrike’s cynicism. After all, “Christ was Shrike’s particular joke,” yet Lonelyhearts is the one compelled to fully parody Him (3). Similarly, Lonelyhearts’ fear that he could only ever proselytize as if calling out the name of a train’s next stop suggests that he knows he is only capable of providing an arbitrary guidepost moving toward an unknown destination, rather than providing real guidance.

In a moment of layered irony, one of his fellow newspapermen manages to get at the cause of Lonelyhearts’ malaise. Even though this unnamed figure, as the text informs us, simply imitates Shrike as one of many “machines for making jokes” in the orbit of Shrike’s ur-trickster, he still articulates a deeper truth (15). Although pontificating ironically, this man recognizes the solipsism that haunts Lonelyhearts: “The trouble with him, the trouble with all of us, is that we have no outer life, only an inner one, and that by necessity” (15). As evidenced by his habit at the speakeasy of drinking “steadily” in pursuit of his preferred “alcoholic gloom,” Lonelyhearts cannot help but give himself over to insular experiences (14, 5). He privileges his inner life, then, because he believes “his confusion [to be] significant,” something worth nursing like the petty do grudges (11).

Conversely, Lonelyhearts has not done much to construct an outer life for himself, as his closest approximation to a network of compatriots or like-minded acquaintances is also a prime source of frustration. These newspapermen, the default presence in Lonelyhearts’ life, make craven imitations of Shrike and taunt our protagonist en masse. In an interpretation that echoes the ‘young man carbuncular’ vignette of *The Waste Land*, Jackson suggests this scene at the

speakeasy foregrounds social alienation. He states, “As male and female are cut off from each other, the person is cut off from society: Miss Lonelyhearts’ colleagues jest truthfully in their speakeasy conversation that the individual’s experience cannot be socially meaningful” (3). The absence of social meaning is, of course, what eventually prompts Lonelyhearts to put aside writing in favor of action. However, only having an inner life—or, as another colleague puts it, only “cultivat[ing] his interior garden”—is what sustains Lonelyhearts (West 15).

In this solipsistic bubble, Lonelyhearts would seem to prefer the type of “genuine religious experience” that a third colleague clearly thinks would be too obscure, absurd, or surreal: the type of religious experience that, because it is “personal,” would register to others as “so meaningless, except to a psychologist” (15). Despite being dismissive of these jokes, Lonelyhearts knows that his vigilance against their spite and pettiness cannot endure, as he must ask himself, “Was their nonsense the only barrier? [...] Had he been thwarted by such a low hurdle?” (15). Soon afterward, Lonelyhearts gets his answer when he receives a punch to the mouth in a moment of comeuppance that, ironically, he might not really deserve. After the accidental collision and ensuing blow to the face, Lonelyhearts must admit, “The hurdle was higher than he had thought” (16). Transcending the confines of an alienating world (especially a world of privilege) poses many challenges, it appears.

Even in the realm of romantic intimacy rather than friendship, Lonelyhearts explicitly denies culpability and sublimates guilt instead of finding some way to improve his emotional connection with others. When he admits early in the novella that he has been avoiding Betty, he also reveals that he finds some measure of relief in ignoring her. In fact, he “did not feel guilty” at all for falling silent so soon after having “asked her to marry him;” instead, he has merely been “annoyed at having been fooled into thinking that such a solution was possible” (12).

Responding with apathy, Lonelyhearts can only chastise himself—and likely blame Betty—for trying to structure his life through marriage. That manner of solution must strike him as another form of emasculation, in fact, given how he must reinstate his power in the relationship by absenting himself. As we will soon see, this use of ironic detachment as a weapon foreshadows Lonelyhearts' most egregious manipulation of Betty, which he pursues as a necessary evasion in the run-up to his desired reverie and conversion.

This tenuous relationship to the outside world, coupled with a cynical outlook, sets up the eventual irony when Lonelyhearts switches to a more extreme method of testing how alone he really is. No longer willing to sling platitudes that poorly conceal his hollow efforts at combating the dead world, Lonelyhearts wants tangible affirmation of his impact. Having tried to minister to the suffering with words, he eventually realizes that words simply reinforce solipsism. As a corrective, he continues “dreaming the Christ dream” but finds he must address his “lack of humility” by purging himself of antipathy and misanthropy (39). Indeed, Lonelyhearts prides himself (ironically) on “the triumphant thing that his humility had become” after his first instance holding Doyle’s hand, when he had to “[drive] his hand back and [force] it to clasp the cripple’s” (47). Having to confront this disfigured man whose limited facility with language mirrors his own—Doyle speaks in “a jumble of the retorts he had meant to make when insulted and the private curses against fate that experience had taught him to swallow”—Lonelyhearts comes to understand that bold, sacrificial gestures are more legible than muttered grievances or halfhearted condolences (46). His ultimate sacrifice, though, somehow manages to withhold the necessary component of actually giving himself over to something greater than himself.

Convinced the world is broken but unwilling to see himself as a product of that world, Lonelyhearts goes through a crucible of his own making in order to bring about two delirious

visions toward novella's end. He first courts apotheosis by isolating himself in his spare apartment for three days, from which he emerges as disinterested and unassailable as "an ancient rock, smooth with experience" (51). Any notion that this transformation makes Lonelyhearts closer to being a savior proves delusional, though, once West reveals the extent of his satire: the irony of Lonelyhearts-as-rock having achieved "solidification of his feeling, his conscience, his sense of reality, [and] his self-knowledge" is that he finally has become serene and assured, "calm and solid," but only by closing himself off from others (56, 52). As the rock, Lonelyhearts can protect his self-interest yet project earnest concern, as he does when convincing Betty not to get an abortion and, in fact, to marry him.

For the first time in the novella, Lonelyhearts is capable of "complete poise" in the company of the woman who has previously unmanned him by standing her ground (56). He negotiates the difficult conversation by "saying all the things [Betty] expected to hear" and being "just what [she] wanted him to be: simple and sweet, whimsical and poetic, a trifle collegiate yet very masculine" (56). As "neither laughter nor tears could affect the rock," this seemingly happy resolution with Betty instead acts only as confirmation that "[t]he rock had been thoroughly tested and had been found perfect" (55, 56). Deploying a shameful ruse to comfort a woman in distress, Lonelyhearts illustrates that his manner of disinterest as the rock is the same cynicism (personified by Shrike) against which he had fought earlier in the novella. Likewise, being unassailable does not make him a man of vision, one who dares to maintain the courage of his convictions; rather, his appeasing façade and impenetrable self-regard betray the hardhearted opportunism at his core.

The opportunity in question, of course, is for Lonelyhearts-as-rock to transcend mortal fallibility through apotheosis, which he seeks in order to fulfill the archetypal call to action he

earlier rejects. Before Lonelyhearts ever meets the Doyles, he visits a grubby city park and glumly compares himself to the “exhausted dirt” there (5). He decides during this contemplation that he needs to excise “the stone that had formed in his gut”: his conscience (5). Tellingly, he imagines he should throw this stone at a worthwhile target, so he becomes disappointed when the sky before him reveals “no angels, flaming crosses, olive-bearing doves, wheels within wheels,” nor any other manner of Biblical symbolism for the divine presence (5). In this moment, he preemptively refuses God, just like when he resists the ‘hysteria’ of faith.

Now with transcendence in reach, Lonelyhearts-as-rock elevates to the messianic mindset by accepting spiritual reverie and its cryptic promise of “mentally unmotivated violence” (56). As his second and more destructive delirious vision takes hold, Lonelyhearts intuits that “[t]he promise [would] soon [be] fulfilled; the rock [becomes] a furnace” in a nearly literal crucible (in reality, he is suffering through a fever) that burns away the remnants of his investment in “this black world of things” (56, 57). As noted earlier, when Lonelyhearts’ vision from God eventually does materialize, it does not appeal to what remains of his conscience, bearing a message of peace, justice, or love, but rather assures Lonelyhearts that “God approve[s] his every thought” (57). This manner of transcendence, tacitly endorsing Lonelyhearts as an agent of ‘mentally unmotivated violence’ and thus *chaos*, is simply his means to transcend human decency. In this light, the ‘God’ that emerges in Lonelyhearts’ warped mind can only intimate violence and sanction our hero’s ultimate self-destruction.

As this discussion should make plain, Lonelyhearts’ turning point occurs once he is finally inspired rather than haunted by a vision. After a dark night of the soul, he emerges as the rock and proves able to withstand abuse. More importantly, he is invulnerable to emotional turmoil, which he negotiates skillfully by manipulating Betty. From there, he enters a fever

dream, a welcomed fugue state that brings on psychological breakdown. This enables a complete break from human decency, which we witness in the novella's final chapter, "Miss Lonelyhearts Has a Religious Experience." The tragic irony of Lonelyhearts, Doyle, and Betty simultaneously bottoming out takes its cues from the ironic chapter title, which should make us skeptical about this awful experience just happening unprovoked, as there is no question that Lonelyhearts *creates* this experience.

Likewise, West creates an uncanny experience for his readers. His art is in revealing the strange and unsettling within the familiar by setting up his text as the uncanny valley across which we recognize some semblance of our own world. As Aaron notes concerning the works of West and his contemporary, Kenneth Fearing:

Their dark vision of society, their twisted wry comedy, their recognition of an ineradicable evil denser and more durable than the capitalist blight, violated the spirit of Socialist Realism. It was all well and good to depict the hells of bourgeois capitalism, imperialism, and fascism, but in the last reel, the glow of the Heavenly City ought to be revealed. (62)

West's go-for-broke satire, then, makes him as much an outsider as Lonelyhearts himself. His satirical eye allows him to take the hero's quest, a genre long ago bled of resonance, and invest it with the grotesque, overlaying this imagery with plaintive language that parodies the novel of masculine internalization.

If Lonelyhearts' delirious vision toward novella's end is reverie, it is not true enlightenment but rather a phase in which he becomes as disinterested and unassailable as a rock. Given these qualities, West's big joke reveals itself: even Lonelyhearts-as-rock is a hypocrite, because being disinterested is the same as being a cynic and being unassailable is antithetical to

being a messiah. With his absurdist style, West interrogates two themes at ideological cross-purposes: his devaluing of ritual and oratory exposes the folly of aspiration and the innate absurdity of human endeavor, yet his deconstruction of nihilism suggests there must be some means of creating meaning beyond mere solipsism. Situated at the nexus of these cross-purposes, *Lonelyhearts* represents the inadequacy of what Comerchero describes as “peculiarly modern neurotic responses to the twentieth-century spiritual malaise” (3). As the mind giving life to *Lonelyhearts*’ dead world of doorknobs, West himself exhibits the neurotic tendency to be struck dumbfounded and immobile, or so Comerchero infers from West’s writing style. If true, then West can “only watch in fascinated horror at a wasteland before him that fill[s] him with pity and rage” (Comerchero 3). Given this particular text, though, it is surprising that we are almost made to feel pity for *Lonelyhearts* and the way he refuses to walk through the fire of self-disavowal to achieve transcendence. In my interpretation, rage must win out, because *Lonelyhearts* resists committing the real work of self-creation and instead brings about his own death by cuckolding Doyle, a fundamentally decent man, who then sets out for revenge.

In the end, this is a text devoted to testing the sympathy, maybe even the patience, of readers. As an instance of the literature of endurance, *Miss Lonelyhearts* refuses to blink as it casts a potentially noble person into the void, only to perversely suggest that his dark measures work where others’ cautious efforts fail. Whether or not there is hope to be mined from such caustic themes would depend on how a reader chooses to interpret the aphoristic quote, “All order is doomed, yet the battle is worth while” (West 31). Any sensible reader should recognize this as hokey pablum, seemingly just the narrative voice venturing, quite dubiously, into a stoical tone that *Lonelyhearts* himself has yet to earn. The remainder of the text, of course, allows us to

pity and fear Lonelyhearts due to how sincerely, hysterically, and desperately he battles to affirm the self.

His efforts provide mixed results, but we know that his only sincere desire is to see himself divorced from the typical standards for socialization. In that light, there was never any hope for Lonelyhearts because his battle for order is meaningless. He could only ever salvage the bitterest harvest of regret, given that his outlook disparages the pragmatism of Betty's, which foregrounds "sureness" by privileging her "power to limit experience arbitrarily" (11). She controls what she can and is honest with herself about the vast expanse of life and variety of lives beyond her purview. The surefooted manner of agency this provides cannot measure up to Lonelyhearts' desired expansiveness as a visionary, though.

In the final analysis, Lonelyhearts' struggle would always be doomed from the beginning unless he were to first invest in communication and connection. Even if he were to feel disingenuous having to ignore the suffering in the world simply so that he could have a superficial connection with another, this minor sacrifice would prioritize the needs of the person before him over his need to address loneliness en masse. As it stands, this urge to fix others is, of course, paradoxical and unsustainable, yet Lonelyhearts' idea of 'order' is one that pushes the limits of what is possible. The order he seeks, that he has always sought, is to order the needs of others subordinate to his own.

Iconoclasm and Austerity in *The Fountainhead*:

The Selfish Loner who Wanted “What Nobody Can Give a Man, Except Himself”

In her 1943 novel, *The Fountainhead*, Ayn Rand frames a vision of heroic masculinity from the outside but rarely penetrates the monolithic façade of her creation, Howard Roark. An architectural genius with the courage of unwavering conviction in his abilities, Roark is as comfortable sustaining introspective silence as he is putting others ill at ease with his “damnable eyes,” which make people “feel as if they [do] not exist” (Rand 5). Along with this alienating gaze, Roark’s weaponized aloofness manifests through his stoicism, as he is seemingly never distressed nor disillusioned by the many defeats and betrayals that besiege him on his visionary quest. In the outsized mythology Rand creates, Roark appears to be the right man to stand against bureaucratic meddling and the mediocrity that inevitably results from design by committee. He embodies, then, not just the competence and perseverance suggested by the novel’s title, but also its corollary: Roark is the steady force that can unsettle others and undermine institutions.

Across the novel’s four-part structure, each section named for a different male character, we witness the slow reveal of Roark. Because he always seems at odds with society, he is judged arrogant by some characters. However, his inflexible sense of pride derives less from vanity and more from a self-reliant ethos that has ossified into zealotry. This doctrinaire attitude hardly makes Roark a false idol, though, because the differences between these men—Peter Keating, Ellsworth Toohey, Gail Wynand, and Roark himself—can be mapped as an eschatology of aspiration and accomplishment, pitting godlike creators against parasitic ‘second-handers.’

Accordingly, the novel aligns the radical self-interest of Roark with paradigm shift, his selfish brilliance functioning as the fountainhead from which a new social order might emerge. This quality, though speculative and never fully realized within the text, elevates our solitary, seemingly misunderstood protagonist to a Prometheus among men.

In its realist orientation, the novel explores the nature of professional integrity and emphasizes the righteousness of protecting one's work. In its metaphysical orientation, though, it argues that the individual in friction with society is the source of genius (and, thus, progress). With this need for conflict as its central premise, the text must at times foreground the role of those lacking the intellect or courage to carve out their niche; these are the parasitic, chasing prestige in obsequious ways. These second-handers, as Roark terms them, claim to "live for others and [to] place others above self," and their conception of "dependence as a virtue" tacitly defends the need for altruism and its "distribution" of "gifts" (712).⁷ However, when rendered as tenets of good governance, the second-hander's philosophy would insist that equal access to resources, such as food and housing, is each citizen's right, just as equal consideration while pursuing opportunity, be it in education or in one's career, is each applicant's right.

We might expect Roark to respect the variety of ways, including service or stewardship, one could discover a sense of purpose (and, thus, freedom). Instead, he suggests that "the man who enslaves himself voluntarily in the name of love is the basest of creatures" (712). From this core belief, egalitarianism emerges as the novel's main bugaboo. Compounding this is Rand's heavy hand, her sensationalism. As we will see, she assigns rhetoric to her mouthpiece, Roark,

⁷ Earlier in the novel, Roark defines the "deadliness of second-handers," claiming they represent "[o]pinion without a rational process" (634). Against his own rationale for selfishness, Roark renders the thinking of second-handers as a series of qualifications and compromises: "Not to judge, but to repeat. Not to do, but to give the impression of doing. Not creation, but show. Not ability, but friendship. Not merit, but pull" (634). His critique conflates the power of intellect with the value of labor. As he remarks, "You don't think through another's brain and you don't work through another's hands" (634). However, this admonition ignores how often our labor is powered by the wisdom of those who came before us, just as it ignores how often intellect values the (more efficient, more thorough) work of others and, thus, prefers it over our own.

that contorts an ideology as valid as any other—the privileging of equality over freedom—into a sinister scheme meant to hinder genius.

The fate of humanity is at stake, then, in how the four main figures define and apply the criteria of their visions. This is a story, after all, of Roark the visionary architect dragging society forward purely by happenstance, his only calling in life being his craft (or so we are told). Likewise, he pursues innovation as a goal in itself, rather than as a means to achieving high-minded notions of progress. The only conviction he needs is that which extends from his grasp, from experiential knowledge and creative vitality. Blind faith serves no purpose for him when his reach rarely exceeds his grasp.

Despite his success negotiating Manhattan’s crucible of striving, social climbing, and subterfuge, Roark fails to remake the world in his image. His professional renown may be well-earned, but his interpersonal style amounts to a form of dominion. He may be clear-eyed in figuring out a plan and confident following through on it, but this entails him forcefully establishing his dominance whenever a decision needs to be made. Roark’s assertiveness can be oddly placid, though, even matter-of-fact. Still, he cannot avoid becoming brusquely direct with business contacts or colleagues within his field, nor does he pull punches with casual acquaintances.⁸ As empathy and sentiment are antithetical to his value system, he lacks both the humility needed to acknowledge errors and the generosity of spirit needed to adapt. Simply put, Roark believes he is always right.

With his genius emanating from an architectural firm of one, Roark operates solely through his own code of conduct and, thus, answers to no one. Although he eventually succeeds

⁸ This brusque (yet somehow genial) nature is on display in a brief exchange with a former employer, John Erik Snyte. After a number of curt responses, Roark gains the upper hand: “I’ll listen if you want me to, Mr. Snyte. But I think I should tell you now that nothing you can say will make any difference. If you don’t mind that, I don’t mind listening” (125).

enough in his profession to warrant staffing an office, Roark's managerial style leaves employees disconcerted and feeling as if their boss is "cold, unapproachable, [and] inhuman" (316). Still, the omniscient narrative voice corrects this interpretation for us, as we are told Roark's staff somehow knows that "he [is] none of these things," even if they cannot put this feeling into words (317). Conveniently enough, the narration then details the source of this confusion, claiming Roark "respond[s] only to the essence of a man: to his creative capacity" (317). This generous reading expands to his employees' emotional responses, as well, for they apparently experience "an immense feeling of self-respect" due to his "benevolence" (317). Crucially, Rand differentiates Roark's seemingly godlike "gift" from God's grace; rather than unearned mercy, the favored employee is granted a feeling of accomplishment to which "a debt" is attached (317). Despite the accounting terminology, the indebtedness to which the exposition refers does not impose any obligation to repay, nor does it manifest as devotion or undying fealty.

Through some unexplained bestowal of dignity, Roark enriches the lives of his employees by effecting "loyalty [not] to him, but to the best within themselves" (317). Emblematic of Rand's heavy hand, the transcendence promised by this allegory guides the narrative. Over time, self-reliance and faith in oneself ascend to tools for what Lawrence Buell describes as "mental emancipation at the individual level," which can be difficult to quantify when the complicating factor of influence is taken into account (67). Nonetheless, this Roarkian model of pledging loyalty to the idealized self evolves into an imperative by the conclusion of *The Fountainhead*, and Buell's dissection of Emersonian self-reliance will help us elucidate the solipsism of Roark's mindset.

With the benefit of Buell's insights, we can locate tension within the novel by framing the promise of mankind's "self-transformative capacity" (of which Roark is emblematic) as a

version of the “Puritan doctrine of a predestined elect” (62). In this framework, pursuing the best in ourselves “prescribes not insular withdrawal but more robust coexistence,” because we attain “moral reorientation” and “impersonal individuality” through what Buell likens to the “apotheosis of the superego” (78, 66). Given her desire to instead bring about the apotheosis of the ego, Rand likely does not share in Emerson’s “democratized vision of the inherent equality and value of persons,” and so her monolithic creation, Howard Roark, projects an antithetical vision, in which the forces of his will and exceptional vitality manifest as “confidence and energy, but not necessarily comfort and joy” (Buell 62-3, 71). In this reading, Rand might depict Roark’s facility for interacting with characters across the social spectrum in order to humanize him, but his conduct undermines this assessment and betrays his indifference. Similarly, his comfort as he negotiates tense situations exists because Rand imbues him with excessive dignity, as if he alone determines the upper limit of value to human life.

If Roark prioritizes ‘creative capacity’ over ‘inherent equality’ as the essence of man, then he does so at the expense of self-critical awareness about the subjectivity of value judgments. Because the corollary to Roark-as-fountainhead, inspiring others toward a more expansive sense of individual freedom, is Roark-as-iconoclast, undermining convention and unsettling conformists, his pride in the former could easily tip over into spite due to the fickle fate of the latter. Though unacknowledged, Roark’s robust creativity can still be toppled. In other words, he resists admitting a key feature of Emersonian thought: “what justifies paying attention to ‘great men’ is their value as disposable models” (Buell 63). The tyranny of greatness, it seems, is its skepticism about the virtue of equality.

For his part in this debate, Emerson makes clear his belief that greatness does not correspond to antagonism in his essay, “Culture,” from *The Conduct of Life*. Remarking on those

who have a “high conceit of [their] weight in the system,” he states bluntly, “The pest of society is egotists. [...] ’Tis a disease that, like influenza, falls on all constitutions” (70). Although he concedes it is a “strong necessity in nature,” Emerson speaks of egotism as a “goitre [sic]” frequently observable within “notable persons” (71). Even though we might expect a different stance from him, Emerson aligns the selfish pursuit of one’s own ends with narcissism and solipsism. In such situations, he sees the egotist as a capable but ungrateful person, the type who “runs round a ring formed by his own talent, falls into an admiration of it, and loses relation to the world” (70). He also argues, though, that the individual guilty of “private interest,” “self-love,” and “vanity” can certainly develop “style and determination” and, thus, become “a master of his own specialty” (71). However, such an individual would lack “catholicity,” or the “power to see with a free and disengaged look every object” (71). True talent thus derives from a passion for analysis, for assessing the possibilities inherent in the world, and not from a passion for their potential uses.

At first, this failing would seem insignificant to society. After all, vision tainted by “affection or self-reference” simply narrows the individual’s comprehension of and engagement with the world (Emerson 71). The problem, then, arises from what Emerson diagnoses as the tendency toward “coldness” or “incuriosity,” which he equates to the “immensely overload[ed]” instinct for self-preservation that ensures humanity’s survival at a great cost: if “egotism has its root in the cardinal necessity by which each individual persists to be what he is,” then it also increases “the risk of perpetual crime and disorder” (71). Ultimately, Emerson laments that selfish drives might in fact be “the basis of [culture],” rather than “inconsistent with [it]” (71). His bigger point overrides any prospect for fatalism, though, because he envisions each person as having a “motherwit” that can only be cultivated *within*—not outside of—culture (71). This

means we can never be conquered by the forces of indoctrination as long as we objectively weigh the merits of “all books, arts, facilities, and elegances of intercourse” against our own needs (71).

In light of the danger that Roark might lose all ‘relation to the world,’ it could be to his benefit that his uncompromising work ethic takes on a combative edge. At times, he can become puckish in the face of a client’s whims, yet these instances of metaphorical nose-tweaking often strike the right tone of incredulity. Demanding individuals deserve to be shamed or exposed if they prove oblivious to reason, after all.⁹ However, most instances of Roark digging in his heels and, for example, stubbornly refusing to accommodate a client occur in the face of aesthetic concerns. Even when opposing a request contractually assured to be honored, he contorts the matter into an ethical stance against the tyranny of conformity rather than simply a difference of opinion.

Curiously, the most thematically rich example of this dynamic never amounts to a direct confrontation between the befuddled client, Hopton Stoddard, and the perpetually self-righteous (yet stoically reserved) Roark. The resulting work, conceptualized as the “Temple of the Human Spirit” but dubbed the Stoddard Temple, proves to be Roark’s masterpiece (Rand 327). The problem, in fact, is this very mastery, or Roark’s unnerving success at conveying the “great aspiration of the human spirit toward the highest, the noblest, the best” (327). To Stoddard’s chagrin, Roark somehow *exceeds* these instructions from his patron: “We want to capture—in stone, as others capture in music—not some narrow creed, but the essence of all religion” (327).

⁹ The figure of Mrs. Sanborn provides Rand a deserving target for Roark’s ire, even if he only voices his frustration obliquely when he complains to her husband of “senseless changes [she] has forced [him] to make” (168). An obstinate woman who desires a “French chateau” design for her family’s country home, Sanborn invites Roark’s disgust by demanding that the home look “stately and ancient, as if it had always belonged to the family; of course, she admit[s], people would know that it hadn’t, but it would *appear* as if it had” (165). As we will see elsewhere, Roark cannot prevent himself from becoming unintentionally snarky in moments of confrontation.

Upon his initial visit to the Temple, Stoddard cannot put words to his dismay, though the exposition helps us to understand his confusion over the structure's failure to "resemble anything [he] had seen anywhere in the world; nor anything he had expected" (350). The experience he expected, we are led to believe, is something akin to "the universal spectacle of religion," in which adherents confront "the promise of hell" and are properly chastened (350). In a rebuke to the insincere humility brought about by scaremongering, Roark only values the "heroic in man," and so he devotes his craft to expressing this aspirational quality, which is "[u]plifted in its quest" for fulfillment even as it is "uplifting by its own essence" (341). Nevertheless, our loner-protagonist becomes the defendant in a civil suit for "breach of contract and malpractice" that he eventually loses, as he is found liable for damages and instructed to pay Stoddard "a sum sufficient to have [his work] altered by another architect" (350). Despite this defeat, Roark rarely concedes to the forces of consensus-making because his 'heroic' purview relegates compromise to an unsavory, self-abnegating posture that is beneath him. Instead, he disavows much of what polite society and the business world would consider decorum because his only desire is to affirm his creative freedom.

Outside of his surprising and somewhat warped sense of loyalty (to the *essence* rather than the *substance* of a person), Roark engages in what amounts to ideological conquest. In his soliloquy-cum-manifesto during the novel's climactic courtroom scene (in which he is again the defendant), Roark employs this same terminology but appears oblivious to the intention behind his rhetoric. Free of irony, he argues, "The creator's concern is the conquest of nature. The parasite's concern is the conquest of men" (712). This mentality suggests that, when viewed in the abstract, the natural world is an endlessly replenishing reservoir of raw materials, whereas mankind is fickle, easily debased, and irreparably shortsighted. Harboring deep pessimism about

the body politic as craven, Roark ignores the fact that, in conquering the natural world to shore up the manmade, one inevitably alters the social nature of humanity: to conquer nature is to exploit it, and to sanction exploitative practices is to encourage moral solipsism.

With this prospect of getting lost in the hinterlands of his imagined domain, Roark achieves a certain balance to his self-perception by mustering an almost pragmatic outlook. Although hardly acknowledged, he takes deliberate steps to sustain the courage—or, really, the caginess—to ignore the conundrum that is the existence of others, even as he operates in an industry reliant on patronage. Nevertheless, fear exists somewhere beneath Roark's implacable façade, and so he fights to rend autonomy from the forces of tradition, complacency, and indoctrination. This fear marks Roark as a loner-protagonist; his uncanny sense of entitlement makes him capable only of brinkmanship when under duress.

If Roark strikes us as an inversion of the typical loner-protagonist, it is only because we lack any ironic distancing in this instance. Here, we are supposed to admire our loner-protagonist's ideals, to find them noble. As we will discover in our next chapter about Richard Wright's *Savage Holiday*, though, fear becomes our inevitable response as we witness the level of Erskine Fowler's religious conviction, which gets undermined (but also amplified, oddly) by his paranoid sense that he is destined for a fall from grace. In a way, this means he is torn between two sets of convictions: one predicated on a belief in the spiritual uplift afforded by Christian zealotry, the other predicated on a bone-deep dread that no such uplift can reverse his ingrained degradation. Suspicious of either extreme in this dichotomy, Wright uses dramatic irony to amplify tension and to mock Fowler's severity.

This dynamic is more pronounced, though, in Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Amid all the novella's nastiness and grotesquerie, we are supposed to weep for the victims of our

loner-protagonist's surreal messiah complex. At the same time, we can easily laugh at the absurdism of his apotheosis, when Lonelyhearts fancies himself an indomitable rock. Writing from within (yet ultimately against) blasé cynicism, West uses situational irony to interweave the vignettes, thereby permitting the recursion of events, emotions, and epiphanies to undermine Lonelyhearts' threadbare conviction. The distance established through this technique means we can see his martyrdom for what it is: meaningless self-sabotage.

The cartoonish delusions exhibited in these other instances of Dark Lonerism do not manifest with Roark, though. As a man driven by obsession yet seemingly incapable of compulsiveness, he achieves his goals without tipping into madness. Because Rand hides the seams between Roark's architectural brilliance and social indifference, they appear of a piece with his air of integrity and self-control. What remains concealed is his libidinal darkness, a misanthropic quality he shares with both Fowler and Lonelyhearts. With Roark's abusive tendencies latent but largely hidden within his interactions starting from the earliest scenes of the novel, readers might find themselves lulled into rooting for his genius to be recognized, which is certainly excusable; his composure takes on an edge as he must defend not only his work but himself, and we become complicit in tolerating his insolence. However, we also must contend with a browbeating narrative voice that encourages us to take sides, as if Roark's dedication to perfection deserves to triumph in every possible context, from his negotiations with clients to his rare intimacy with women to his endurance of personal hostilities and professional grievances. As a result, we can only sense how his confidence deconstructs itself in two key moments: when he rapes his love interest, Dominique Francon, early in the novel and when he demolishes his ostensible (engineering if not aesthetic) masterpiece, the Cortlandt housing project, during the novel's climax.

Roark's preternatural confidence ultimately pays dividends, though, even in these two examples of aggressive self-exertion. As we will explore later, Roark wins the favor of Dominique by claiming her as an object worthy of his dominion, and he wins the criminal case brought against him after his act of domestic terrorism by claiming dominion over his intellectual property. This is because his aesthetic authority—preaching austerity as a virtue—verges on the spiritual. In that light, Roark, as the ever-replenishing fountainhead of genius, must be more than a mortal being. As Rand envisions her creation, Roark is above reproach, despite conduct that would be seen as megalomaniacal in others.

To assess Rand's treatment of those characters who *are* guilty of abusing power, we must turn our attention away from our loner-protagonist. Despite his status as a solitary adherent within the cult of hard work, Roark is of course not alone: among the novel's pantheon of archetypal strivers and sycophants, tastemakers and muckrakers, he simply proves the least susceptible to greed or flattery. Similarly, any hint of Roark's apotheosis is merely a trick of misdirection and forced perspective, despite his transformative brilliance. When Rand juxtaposes him against highly caricatured rivals, she depicts the visionary quest as a melodrama of epic stakes, and this exaggerates the serene clear-headedness of Roark. In truth, his saving grace is simply that his interpersonal style proves more evenhanded than, and not nearly as cutthroat as, that of other characters. If anything, he carries himself with such indifference to the trivial matter of others' inner lives that he never deigns to consider their humanity. He is blithely unresponsive, for the most part, to anything unrelated to his work. Accordingly, this cannot be classed as the story of a visionary dragging society forward, because Roark has no interest in seeing the lives of others improve.

Rather than allowing his work to take on a life of its own once he has submitted his design, Roark insists on having his say in the construction process. He shows little trust that others can execute or realize his vision. From that perspective, Roark's goal is to leave his mark on a world he professes to love yet believes to be at risk of stagnating or even collapsing. The novel's biggest conflict, then, arises as Roark's certainty about the path he can create for himself—the bedrock principle sustaining his unshakable self-belief—must be pitted against rivals, who each represent a node along the continuum of masculine effort toward Great Man status. As one would expect, the novel endorses Roark, the enigmatic loner, as the only match against the corrupt world that surrounds him.

He and his rivals, such as Peter Keating the architectural wunderkind and Gail Wynand the newspaper baron, compete within a world of not just plastic materials, but also plastic culture and ideology. This is a public-facing domain just as capable of being remade by others as it is by Roark. While he of course has the competence and perseverance to succeed, his efforts—to “stand at the end of no tradition,” possibly even to “stand at the beginning of one”—alienate too many people (13). Still, Roark has every right to be crowned victorious in this conflict because he alone occupies the architectural vanguard. Whenever any new project bearing his “sharp, angular signature” reaches completion, he should be proud that his love for the work itself has translated to tangible success (10). We must consider, though, that a more important secondary consequence, prized yet unacknowledged, enables Roark to stand apart: the implicit trust of others that he will continue to operate in good faith. As the court cases against him demonstrate, Roark violates this trust once he begins privileging his sense of dominion and placing it above the patronage of his clients. In short, his tragic flaw is putting self-love over love of craft.

At best, this ambitious man would seem to embody principles of an individual-focused, hierarchy-enforcing meritocracy. In this reading, Roark could only find himself in the position of greatness, recognized for praiseworthy talent and mind-reeling audacity, by vanquishing his competition. The merit of his previous work, then, would not only bestow him an air of competence, but would also grant him *carte blanche* to exploit this goodwill and admiration; paradoxically, the role of ‘recognition’ within this type of meritocracy would be as a privileged gatekeeper, the sole criterion for installing so-called genius in a position of power or respect, but not as an enforcer. Short of a continual vetting process, the admiration of others simply weakens the conventions whereby a meritocracy claims to update or revise our sense of ‘merit.’

These points mean that, rather than subscribing to a more conventional (if deeply flawed) notion of a democratic and group-oriented meritocracy, Roark adheres to the antiquated notion pitting ‘top performers’ against ‘weak links.’ As a prolific architect and protean laborer himself, Roark may recognize and value the skilled labor of others. However, this occurs only when he can cultivate a person’s talents within his own self-reliant ethos and channel them toward an expression of man’s dominion over his fallible, base nature. Those who empathize with (or even just pity) weakness are worthy of scorn in Roark’s eyes, as the emotional labor needed to elevate the meek would only detract from the skillful application of intellect and might demanded by one’s handiwork. Thus, to labor is to conquer, and to conquer is to demonstrate the breadth and depth of one’s prowess.

For context about this ideology that measures the worth of one’s creative output in terms of vitality rather than pragmatic results or aesthetics, we turn to Nietzsche and his obsession with distinguishing the mighty from the rabble, the totemic from the profligate. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche speaks of the need in philosophy to pursue “a new, untraveled path to human

greatness” (106). Although he sees this as a “harsh, unwanted, undeniable task,” he argues that the true philosopher will embrace iconoclasm and even the prospect of ostracism because “his enemy has always been the ideal of today” (106). With utmost conviction in his critique that “the will is weakened and diluted by the tastes and virtues of the times,” he proposes a more voracious, multifaceted sensibility than what contemporary norms would allow (106). Nietzsche then begins articulating his conception of ‘greatness,’ which should revel in “the very scope and variety of humanity, in its unity in multiplicity” (106). After relegating “the ideal of a stupid, self-abnegating, humble, selfless humanity” to a different era (the 16th century, to be exact), he lists those qualities that should constitute greatness in our modern context: “being noble, wanting to be for yourself, the ability to be different, standing alone and needing to live by your own fists” (107). For as much as Roark embodies these principles, he also shows us that becoming the sole guarantor of achievement—his ‘wanting to be for himself’—cannot be reduced simply to mastering physical labor or perfecting his intellectual output. Beyond this desire to will himself into context-free greatness, Roark spurns certain strains of humanity in an act of not just disavowal but attrition—his ‘living by his own fists’—because he hopes to ensure his continued dominance. He looks down upon second-handers, then, to foment the friction needed to spark his defiance.

Prior to listing the qualities noted above, Nietzsche suggests that the “capacity for long-term resolutions must belong to the concept of ‘greatness’” (*BGE* 107). Even more than Rand’s rebuke of a society that would fault the Great Man for his apartness, it is this tension of championing single-minded resolve even as she promotes catholic taste that informs her characterization of Roark. In particular, Rand frames him as an artist-philosopher, an uneasy marriage of ascetic lifestyle and decadent self-confidence. Surprisingly, we see this tension

mirrored in Nietzsche's enigmatic use of quotation to conclude section 212 of *Beyond Good and Evil* (from which earlier quotes have been drawn).

To interpret this passage, we must pay attention to the way Nietzsche amends his list of heroic qualities capable of undermining the status quo of his times, wherein "only the herd animal gets and gives honor in Europe" (*BGE* 107). Tellingly, he elides direct address, which would feel didactic, by using a ventriloquized voice:

And the philosopher will be revealing something of his own ideal when he proposes:

"Greatest of all is the one who can be the most solitary, the most hidden, the most different, the person beyond good and evil, the master of his virtues, the one with an abundance of will. Only this should be called *greatness*: the ability to be just as multiple as whole, just as wide as full." (107)

Given the peculiar nature of Nietzsche's attribution, which alludes to possibly unconscious motives behind the ensuing 'proposal,' this contention about the idealized self feels oddly performative. It reads almost like an instance of dissociation, as if the figure of the archetypal philosopher accidentally indulges in a fantasy or divulges his misanthropy by emitting the ventriloquized voice of Nietzsche, who uses the occasion to impart a paradoxical aphorism.

The performance (and meta-critique) embedded in this moment suggests that our author has disappeared, hidden behind the mask of this archetypal philosopher who is more wishful thinker than soothsayer. At the same time, Nietzsche's trick of throwing his voice allows him to reemerge in a new guise, as he embodies—even while disembodied—the mercurial greatness of the man *beyond*. Indeed, his dramatic reentrance into the text gives him the opportunity not only to invoke the book's title and to state its thesis, but also to prove that his idealized self exists *within* the book (and is, thus, real in a sense beyond mere proposals or wishes). As applies to our

reading of *The Fountainhead*, the slippage of this moment evokes Rand's intrusive narrative voice, which undermines the stoic, silent demeanor of Roark whenever it hijacks the text to elucidate the paradox that is his unsettling integrity. However, the differences here should be obvious: Nietzsche amplifies his mystique even as he suggests that it is all an illusion, whereas Rand disrupts the power of her creation with her attempts to clarify.

From one perspective, this technique allows Nietzsche to no longer play coy, to state his claims earnestly. From another, it affords him the wry distance of the mask, or what he describes later in his treatise as one of "all kinds of disguises" harnessed by "free, impudent spirits who would like to hide and deny that they are shattered, proud, incurable hearts" (*BGE* 166, 167). In this reading, the value of the mask is similar to that of spiritual pain: "Profound suffering makes you noble; *it separates*" (166; emphasis added). Indeed, Nietzsche invites misinterpretation and slippage, for "being understood" has a way of insulting or even harming the "profound thinker" whose sympathetic heart "always says: 'Oh, why do you want things to be as hard for *you* as they are for me?'" (173). From these remarks, we can note a profound difference between these two thinkers. Rand may welcome controversy, as evidenced by her blunt habit of dramatizing the shock and outrage that greets every one of Roark's virtuosic efforts (both professional and personal), but she would never want her polemical work to be misunderstood.

Despite Nietzsche's effort to complicate authorial voice and obscure intent, he seems to conceive of greatness (as 'multiple' and 'wide') in the same way that Rand conceives of Roark's noble leadership. When Roark proves willing to recognize the creative capacity of anyone, regardless of gender or class, he upholds the virtues of "courage, insight, sympathy" (*BGE* 171). Thus, both Rand and Nietzsche argue that a generosity of spirit must exist within Great Men, even when appearances indicate otherwise. However, Rand and Nietzsche diverge in that she

wholeheartedly adheres to the commonplace of integrity and resolve equating to greatness, whereas he tries to salvage the qualities of being ‘whole’ and ‘full’ (of conviction, one assumes) by making room for an unexpected virtue: solitude.¹⁰ As he argues, “solitude is a virtue for us, since it is a sublime inclination and impulse to cleanliness which shows that contact between people (‘society’) inevitably makes things unclean” (171). While this mania for metaphysical purity emerges in the Roarkian ethos, as well, it extends along the channel of his outward gaze and becomes an externalized form of self-control: his dominion proliferates through a ‘clean’ and ‘honest’ design sense—an aesthetic of austerity—as a complement to his internal drive for wholeness and fullness. This means that Roark could never take solitude to be a virtue, as his determination to conquer the architectural field makes him an iconoclast in search of the likeminded rather than a lone genius reluctant to integrate back into the wider world. Once his determination and defiance turn violent, though, these qualities simply make him a loner-protagonist, forsaking not only the virtues he claims to cherish but also the goodwill he could never deign to acknowledge.

Theoretical as it is, Roark’s status as a Great Man must be challenged at points. This occurs mainly through the pernicious influence of the shrewd media mogul, Gail Wynand, who drags society downward with an almost misanthropic glee for appealing to the lowest common denominator. His sense of ethics corrupted long ago, Wynand has found success with his newspaper empire by giving the crass and the jaded in society what they want, rather than the hard truths they need.¹¹ We might expect an unspoken antagonism to arise between Wynand and

¹⁰ See “*The Fountainhead* from Notebook to Novel,” by Shoshana Milgram, for greater context about (the limits of) Nietzsche’s influence on Randian thought. As pertains to this topic of solitude as a virtue, Milgram is explicit in arguing that Roark is “progressively described as less Nietzsche-like regarding isolation. Whereas Nietzsche believed that the noble soul did not seek others of his kind, Roark is described as actively seeking his kind of face, his kind of person” (28).

¹¹ With his characteristic demeanor of taking an interlocuter into his confidence by telling it like it is, Wynand has no reservations about admitting his mercenary investment in both conning the masses and forcing elites to grovel for

Roark, but the text refrains from fully depicting this William Randolph Hearst proxy until it has sufficiently sketched the intra-office dynamics at Wynand's flagship publication, the New York *Banner*.¹² Once Rand begins placing Roark in closer contact with Wynand, a friendly détente results even as they share romantic interest in one of the novel's few female characters, Dominique Francon. Nevertheless, this surprising development—in which Roark lowers his defenses to share an intellectual bond with the occasionally charming, perpetually irascible Wynand—cannot last.

Conveniently enough, we have reason to anticipate this bond will be tested and eventually broken. At a crucial moment toward the end of the novel's first section, Roark's mentor, Henry Cameron, articulates what he views as a metaphysical conflict between Wynand, the boorish enabler of chicanery, and Roark, the upstanding antidote to corruption. While speaking to his protégé from his deathbed, Cameron makes pronouncements of grave import, yet Roark hardly seems to take them to heart. During this rare scene of tenderness and pathos, Cameron at first encourages Roark by saying, "You'll have to show...the damn fools...what wealth the human brain has made for them...what possibilities" (Rand 176). He then makes a prophecy: "I don't...hate anybody any more...only Gail Wynand... No, I've never laid eyes on him... But he represents...everything that's wrong with the world...the triumph...of overbearing vulgarity.... It's Gail Wynand that you'll have to fight, Howard..." (176).¹³ Oddly, Roark's

favorable coverage. As he boasts, "The *Banner* is a contemptible paper, isn't it? Well, I have paid with my honor for the privilege of holding a position where I can amuse myself by observing how honor operates in other men" (458).

¹² The splashy portrayal of a Hearst surrogate, which gives us glimpses of both his forays as a playboy and his frequent, spontaneous globetrotting, bears resemblance to Orson Welles's performance as Charles Foster Kane in *Citizen Kane*, from 1941. Rand simply reduces the satire in this instance and extends the *roman à clef* to Roark as an analogue to (and deification of) Frank Lloyd Wright. See "Howard Roark and Frank Lloyd Wright," by Michael S. Berliner, for a full accounting of these resonances.

¹³ In typical fashion, Rand earlier gives Cameron a nearly identical speech. At first, the cantankerous architect takes on a ruminative tone as he hopes aloud to "hold on" until he has "started [Roark] on [his] own" (67). Then, he shifts into a mix of praise for his protégé's talent and doom-saying about the "strange mission" ahead of Roark: "I'll tell you: I've taught you a great deal and nothing. No one can teach you anything, not at the core, at the source of it. [...]"

triumph by novel's end carries little weight as a repudiation of society's degraded morals.

Instead, the conflict Roark resolves simply relates to the vapid assumption that all altruism leads to the greater good. His actions in the Cortlandt affair argue that not every charitable impulse deserves to be realized and, thus, some moral compromises should be received as unjust.

As we will see, Wynand exits the narrative as a fallen comrade to and defender of Roark, even if the tragedy of his undoing comes about due to dramatic irony. Part of the novel's climactic action, which takes place over its final hundred pages or so, involves Wynand's doomed effort to reframe the narrative about Roark's unsanctioned demolition of the Cortlandt housing project. However, the *Banner* had often levied unwarranted attacks against Roark in its pages, and so the legacy of this yellow journalism sinks Wynand's efforts. He is hoist on his own petard, and he understands the irony of this all too well.

The public, sold on the popular image of our loner-protagonist as an unrepentant vigilante, rejects Wynand's blitz campaign of op-ed pieces in support of Roark. It quickly becomes a losing battle to legitimize his decision to protect intellectual property through such an extreme measure, which amounts to an act of lone-wolf terrorism. Predictably, this belated sacrifice ruins the reputation of the *Banner* but does not ruin Wynand, whose empire is "sound and doing as well as ever throughout the country, with the exception of New York City" (724). Ironically, Roark becomes the beneficiary of Wynand's sacrifice, as the humbled businessman contracts the triumphant architect—only recently exonerated in the criminal case for demolishing Cortlandt—to design what Wynand ominously predicts will be "the last skyscraper ever built in New York" (724).¹⁴ Although Rand would likely insist otherwise, Wynand's drive to recuperate

I'm leaving you to face them. You'll answer them. All of them, the Wynand papers and what makes the Wynand papers possible and what lies beyond that" (68).

¹⁴ In an act of penance, Wynand provides Roark the opportunity to construct a skyscraper, the Wynand Building, that he hopes "will remain long after the newsreels and tabloids are gone" (724). The largesse of this offer is evident

Roark's public image is a charitable gesture, and his offer of work is an olive branch. Thus, he forsakes his bully pulpit and even some of his wealth because of the epiphany that "those who lack the courage of their own greatness" do not deserve to be forgiven; due to the readership he has cultivated, Wynand judges himself guilty of just that sin (694). The only honorable act left, then, is to cede his power and privilege to a man who can wield them with courage and conviction. For his part on the receiving end of this windfall, Roark somehow avoids being castigated as a second-handier because redemption, abetted by hypocrisy, goes to the victors.

On the periphery of this muted battle of wills are the novel's true agents of discord. Alongside Ellsworth Toohey, the architectural critic and Machiavellian intellectual, is his patsy, Peter Keating. Theirs is an almost codependent relationship between critic and artist, although Toohey participates wryly, with ulterior motives, while Keating participates unwittingly. To ply his graft, Toohey elevates Keating the imposter to a wunderkind within his field. The conflict, of course, is that Keating's field is architecture, and so these two siphon glory and exaltation from the likes of Roark.

To her credit, Rand gets a lot of mileage out of her cartoon villains. There is dark comedy to be found in Toohey's outward spurning of prestige even as he consolidates his power and influence, and a good deal of pathos arises from Keating's earnest belief in all the praise for his 'talent.' Still, Rand relies too heavily on caricature in depicting Toohey as, at once, obsessed with Roark yet coy about his campaign of subterfuge against the man. For example, Toohey dedicates a number of op-ed pieces in "One Small Voice," his column for the *Banner*, to

in the complete freedom that Wynand is prepared to grant Roark: "I intend to liquidate a great part of [my newspaper empire]. You will, therefore, have no reason to limit yourself by any consideration of costs in your design of the building. You are free to make it cost whatever you find necessary" (724). Still, the faith Wynand has in Roark's abilities (and honesty) does not carry over into optimism about mankind: "The age of the skyscraper is gone. This is the age of the housing project. Which is always a prelude to the age of the cave. But you are not afraid of a gesture against the whole world" (724).

disparaging Roark's personality and ideology (if not his talent). However, his withering criticism never compares to his greater calling in life, which is convincing others to remain complacent. Early in the novel, Toohey insists that achieving greatness requires the creator "subordinate himself to the mandatory canons which generations of craftsmen behind him have proved inviolate" (41). When expressed in this blunt manner, the ideal of remaining beholden to tradition sounds both romantic and antiquated. As we learn from the earliest moments in the novel, Roark rejects this pressure out of hand. Nevertheless, Rand needs a campy villain like Toohey to make Roark's quest appear nobler than if he were simply to vanquish a convention-bound rival like Keating.¹⁵ Given his oily self-regard, Toohey not only flaunts his success in the marketplace of ideas but also demonstrates the need for the self-interested Randian hero. He raises the stakes for Roark through his embrace of corruption and complacency, which prove their advantage over vision at many turns in the novel.

In Rand's eschatology, Toohey represents the stasis and eventual apathy caused by indoctrination. He becomes an especially insidious force because his mastery of egalitarian rhetoric conceals the way he tempts and exploits others. Keating plays a less complicated role in this eschatology, one which Roark himself makes evident when he complains of the failings he has witnessed in Keating ever since they attended the same architectural program in college. As he remarks, "What was [Keating's] aim in life? Greatness—in other people's eyes. Fame,

¹⁵ Matthew Harle makes a similar reading of the Toohey character, but his commentary pertains to the performance (scripted by Rand herself, directed by King Vidor) in the 1949 film adaptation: "Toohey is a tastemaker and enemy of the individual—the foil to Roark's career—played by [Robert] Douglas in high camp style" (11). Harle revisits this critique at the conclusion of his short, snarky essay, and he uses it to drive home his deeper point that Howard Roark and Donald Trump "flourish in the right-wing underdog narrative" because they are both "egomaniac world-builders" (14). In this reading, Harle suggests that *The Fountainhead* exists somewhere between high camp and tyranny, both unintentionally hilarious and utterly sinister" (14). Uniting these disparate registers is Rand's "vision of dystopic individualism," which Harle fails to define even though he earlier offers a glimpse of his meaning (14). Specifically, he comments on the bizarre tendency of characters in the film to "assemble in groups and hector each other with amusingly sinister monologues on human nature, like villainous sociologists who have managed to get lost on their way to a faculty meeting" (14, 12).

admiration, envy—all that which comes from others. Others dictated his convictions, which he did not hold, but he was satisfied that others believed he held them” (633). Thus, Keating personifies the fantasy (and inevitable reality) of all second-handers: to be afforded status, to be handed success, yet to be found lacking, to be exposed as a fraud. This waking nightmare haunts Keating for much of the novel, resulting in a downfall similar to Wynand’s. As we will see, the only difference between these two pretenders to the mantle of greatness is the extent to which Roark facilitates their respective defeats.

To combat the blight of hypocrisy, passivity, and groupthink, Rand tests the transformative abilities of her central quartet of male characters. Each can be evaluated in terms of the scope of their ambitions, the methodology of their influence, and the extent to which they reject the social death of prescribed behavior. These criteria necessarily inform our discussion of their successes and failures, even if one final criterion—their treatment of women—inevitably unites them all and undermines any of their noble qualities. In a coincidence that is actually rather unsurprising given the dearth of major female characters, the recipient of this mistreatment is often the same woman: Dominique, who becomes romantically involved with Keating, Roark, and Wynand at different points in the novel. Elsewhere, we see Keating’s mistreatment of Catherine Halsey, a minor character who happens to be Toohey’s niece. With every character save Roark, Rand’s subversion of their supposed strengths or virtues is most certainly intended. Accordingly, our focus should remain on interrogating the notion of Roark as defender of libertarian ideals, as his sexual violence toward Dominique and wanton destruction of the Cortlandt housing project disrupt the iconography of his bedrock integrity.

Given Roark’s reticence to engage in altruism or even just sympathy, the merits of his skilled labor do not lie within its ability to alter society as a whole. Similarly, Roark makes it

clear that, in his eyes, one's labor does not gain significance simply by improving his or her socioeconomic station. Rather, skilled labor has merit only insofar as it manifests from a personal drive toward greater and greater autonomy. Thus, mankind's potential for greatness can only be actualized by first adopting the Roarkian ethos that no man "can hurt another, not in any important way. Neither hurt him nor help him" (601). Genius means never having to express forgiveness or gratitude, or so Rand's paradoxical moral economy would dictate. As Wynand phrases these arguments, the "true hater of mankind" is he who "expects nothing of men, so [that] no form of depravity can outrage him" (461). Likewise, to expect nothing of ourselves would be to "make some sort of feeble stew out of sympathy, compassion, contempt and general indifference" (462). On the other hand, sincere love for humanity would manifest only through "clean, steady, unfrightened eyes" turned upwards, seeking out the means to express "the total passion for the total height" (461, 462). To paraphrase Wynand's conception of the ideals only Howard Roark can attain: anything short of the pinnacle is wasted effort, and all wasted effort is depraved.

These ideals suggest that struggle and setback are markers of progress for Roark, even if his drive inevitably sets him careening ever upward yet no nearer to an enduring form of greatness. The paradox of his limitless resolve is that he can never come any closer to attaining his unspoken goal: to embody a contradiction, unimpeachable prowess wielding absolute authority. This marriage of dialectical opposites makes him as compelling as he is infuriating. Given the ideology embodied by Roark—that mastery across many disciplines grants him the power of creative malleability and the veneer of strength—we must anticipate a countervailing notion, an ideology that would keep his generative abilities in check. This antithesis would insist

that, despite freethinking mastery being a desirable prerequisite for leadership, only rigid exertion of principles can confer Roark the authority to foster a sea change within architecture.

Any theoretical synthesis of his iconoclasm with his ideal of dogmatic authority would seem a far-off possibility, as they work against one another. To privilege his right of creative freedom above that of others, Roark rejects passively ascribing authority to those in power. His air of self-regard, dignified to some and smug to others, subverts the tacit assumption that deference is owed those who have achieved status or seniority. Roark voices this attitude explicitly when defending his radical self-interest: “I’ve chosen the work I want to do. [...] I set my own standards. I inherit nothing” (13). At the same time, his art is exacting rather than exploratory, ego-baring rather than soul-searching; in other words, his art is monumental, a testament to his own intellect and a celebration of same. Although he places himself at the vanguard of an epoch open to flouting tradition, Roark still becomes the godlike power at the world’s center, building monuments to his genius rather than fostering mankind’s potential. He may not believe himself a moral or even aesthetic authority, but he still embodies the dogma of self-mythology: to justify the risk-taking and lack of tact inherent in accruing power, one must become the arbiter dictating the terms by which these efforts are judged. Simply put, Roark believes no one can understand the magnitude of his abilities and refuses to believe there are limits to what he can accomplish.

To better understand this tendency toward the masturbatory and solipsistic, we should frame Roark’s insensitive, occasionally combative nature as a symptom of his single-mindedness. At bottom, he sees challenging himself in all facets of life as his purpose. Any obstacle, any problem worth being solved, must be approached as a test to prove he is “the kind of man who can get things done” (604). Not only that, but he must find something to cherish in

the activity; his philosophy dictates that, “to get things done, you must love the doing, not the secondary consequences” (604). Although unspoken, an important aspect of Roark’s love of ‘the doing’ is his need for control. Describing the urge for professional autonomy, he explains: “If I find no joy in [my work], then I’m only condemning myself to sixty years of torture. And I can find the joy only if I do my work in the best way possible to me” (13). Across a variety of actions and accomplishments, though, the reality of how Roark operates in the world proves more complicated than his simplistic credo.

Even during the novel’s catalyzing moment, when Roark acts upon his disdain for normative society and breaks with convention, we witness his tendency toward self-aggrandizement. In the spring of 1922, a young and insolent Roark is expelled the very morning of his commencement ceremony. Twenty-two years old and ready to overturn staid tradition, he is summoned to the office of the Dean of the Architectural School at Stanton, his post-secondary institution, on the day of what should be his graduation. However, when told the Dean is willing to have a meeting, to arbitrate the decision of the Board of Regents, Roark responds with a curt, “I don’t give a damn” (6). This attitude recurs when he must insist to the Dean, “I don’t give a damn what any or all of [humanity] think[s] about architecture—or about anything else, for that matter” (11). In the pantheon of Modernist antiheroes, Roark evokes Rhett Butler’s roguish defiance and repudiation of love in *Gone with the Wind*, but his misanthropy plays like a rehash of Rick Blaine’s world-weary indifference in *Casablanca*.¹⁶ No matter the cultural resonances of these remarks, our loner-protagonist vocalizes his apathy with a purpose, staking his claim on an ethos of vigilant, virulent disregard. As we will see, this interaction represents the archetypal

¹⁶ The film version of Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 novel premiered four years prior to the release of this novel, in 1939; the Humphrey Bogart film was released at the end of 1942, the year prior to this novel’s publication.

refusal of help, which precedes the call to action from Henry Cameron, an unlikely and misunderstood source of inspiration.

Across this tense opening scene, Roark stands his ground as the sole force of agency in his life. While this serves as the introduction to an ambitious Roark eager to realize his vision, he is no novice. Barely finished with his formal education, he has already adopted an air of being well removed from the point in his development when he laid claim to innate talents. Roark's insouciance suggests he never had to experience the struggles that define the *künstlerroman*, as if he spent little time cultivating skills from within and, instead, focused on defending them from without. Fully inhabiting the narrative of a persecuted genius, Roark and his demeanor as a firebrand make it clear that his ignominious departure from the Stanton Institute of Technology will become a source of pride for him.

Despite his flippancy, Roark attends the meeting with the Dean, yet his preemptive snootiness proves excessive because no real dressing down occurs. Indeed, he is subjected to the least scathing critique one could imagine when the Dean acknowledges that Roark has been "excellent in all the engineering sciences" (9). From there, the Dean cautiously explores the problem of Roark's design sense:

Of course, no one denies the importance of structural engineering to a future architect, but why go to extremes? Why neglect what may be termed the artistic and inspirational side of your profession and concentrate on all those dry, technical, mathematical subjects? You intended to become an architect, not a civil engineer. (9)

In the most revealing moment of their conversation, the Dean sets out to alleviate the tension in the room with the commiserating remark, "Naturally, you would feel bitterness toward us at this moment, but..." (10). Roark cuts him off, of course, interrupting an authority figure who has

insulted him less by acting officiously and more by making overtures transparently designed to placate. With his interjection, Roark makes a more honest statement of his life philosophy than in a later instance (which we will soon discuss), when he claims to love the earth yet desires to change the shape of things. The full extent of Roark's response to the Dean demonstrates his petty desire to erase any sense that he ever respected his professors or placed trust in them. Refuting the intimation that he might resent this seeming mistreatment, Roark claims, "I feel nothing of the kind [...] I owe you an apology. *I don't usually let things happen to me.* I made a mistake this time. I shouldn't have waited for you to throw me out. I should have left long ago" (10; emphasis added). This smug and presumptuous disavowal of civility (and of his own role in desiring an education) shows that Roark only knows one response: to burn bridges.

As this exchange makes clear, Roark has a chip on his shoulder. The Dean senses this, of course, and grows more agitated as a result. The most extreme example of this dynamic occurs when the Dean asks with barely veiled contempt, "Do you mean to tell me that you're thinking seriously of building *that way*, when and *if* you are an architect?" (11). After Roark responds in the affirmative, the Dean counters with an impish, "My dear fellow, who will let you?" (11). Challenged about the patronage he must seek from potential clients, Roark retorts as the reader already knows to expect, by doubling down on insubordination: "That's not the point. The point is, who will stop me?" (11). Changing the subject with a pithy bit of anadiplosis, Roark reiterates confidence in his efforts; his efforts could only ever be jeopardized, he claims, if some force were to rise up and challenge him. In Roark's mind, permission and patronage are insignificant. The consent of the masses—just like Dominique's consent—is trivial.

Undermining his defiant attitude, though, is Roark's peculiar need to spout Functionalist dogma in the face of purely academic classicism. To refute the claim that there are a finite

number of “proper forms of expression,” Roark insists that “[n]othing can be reasonable or beautiful unless it’s made by one central idea, and the idea sets every detail” (12). He also dissects the flawed aesthetics of the Parthenon, mocking along the way its emphasis on the ornate and the simulated:

The famous flutings on the famous columns—what are they there for? To hide the joints in wood—when columns were made of wood, only these aren’t, they’re marble. The triglyphs, what are they? *Wood*. Wooden beams, the way they had to be laid when people began to build wooden shacks. Your Greeks took marble and they made copies of their wooden structures out of it, because others had done it that way. Then your masters of the Renaissance came along and made copies in plaster of copies in marble of copies in wood. Now here we are, making copies in steel and concrete of copies in plaster of copies in marble of copies in wood. Why? (12)

With these remarks, Roark rejects thoughtless adherence to orthodoxy. Such a stance makes sense in context of the young Roark, early into an epic narrative that will span almost two decades, staking his claim as an innovator. However, Rand does not limit Roark’s visionary quality to the realm of self-mythologizing. Along with characters even more prone to pontification, like Wynand the snake oil salesman or Toohey the blowhard, Roark proves to have a way with aphorisms. In fact, Rand affords him a somewhat more hardboiled terseness than other characters, which passes for eloquence.

Rather than how his ideological opposite, Toohey, glorifies in manipulation as a balm against a cruel world, Roark simply states the facts as he sees them. For example, he attests to the nobility of labor and the dubious status of critics with this credo: “Never ask people. Not about your work” (22). This terseness also makes his ideological statements seem more earnest

than Toohey's smarmy (and ultimately farcical) pandering. While Toohey preaches the virtues of pity, restraint, and anonymity, he practices ostentatious puffery. This delineates his in-group of loyal followers from his hit list of targets, who often are subject to vicious-yet-droll critiques within the pages of his widely read newspaper column. Toohey's self-aggrandizement, then, is more nakedly a plea to foment not just conformity but groveling. Although hardly indicative of upstanding character, Roark's self-expression and pointed silences do not seem to be covering up for nearly as much insecurity as Toohey's behavior. Nonetheless, these pithy statements, from across the ideological spectrum of Rand's heroes and villains, betray a deep persecution complex once they are endlessly piled atop one another.

This sense of persecution forms a thread throughout the novel. Roark at first believes that "[e]very man creates his meaning and form and goal," which should strike us as judicious and open-ended, encouraging of all potentialities (12). However, his philosophy devolves from this statement into a type of doom-saying as he turns away from social bonds. This is clearly an instance of denunciation, predicated on a feeling that Roark has been savagely harassed and brought down to the level of his fellow men: "Civilization is the progress toward a society of privacy. The savage's whole existence is public, ruled by the laws of his tribe. Civilization is the process of setting man free from men" (715). With these remarks, Roark shows no self-awareness in how the monuments he builds to his own genius must be measured against enduring instances of structural brilliance and aesthetic daring. In a novel that often deals with the difficulty of quantifying influence, there is also the more slippery problem of articulating the qualities that deserve to be cast as 'inspirational' and, thus, to be propagated through culture as positive influence. Roark's shift to pessimism means we get a clearer picture of only the parasitic influence that he finds hindering, and so we cannot envision the alternative way that legacy can

spread. Once locked in his mindset as a persecuted iconoclast, Roark can denounce and destroy but not create.

With the fervor of a zealot, our loner-protagonist foregrounds the infinitely variable capabilities granted by his creative process. If the integrity of a building can be measured by whether it follows “its own truth,” conveys “its one single theme,” and serves “its own single purpose,” then Roark’s supremacy as a maker can be measured by whether he “gives [a building] *the soul* and every wall, window and stairway to express it” (12; emphasis added). Conjuring soul is a mystical process, of course, and Roark is reticent about revealing his secret. Ironically, the closest we get to seeing his genius in action is when Keating periodically reenters Roark’s life, appealing for design help. In these moments, Roark adopts the lightly chiding tone of the schoolmarm, yet his insights amount to the truism that less is more. Thus, he hardly even revises Keating’s work, for he simply eliminates the most egregious examples of Keating’s sweaty need to clutter otherwise functional blueprints. The substance of these scenes, then, is not Roark’s actions but his words. In light of his ideology that “[e]very form has its own meaning,” it is telling that Rand offers no depiction of Roark’s struggles and setbacks in attempting to perfect his aesthetic (12). She makes his form appear as indomitable as the rocks with which she associates him, yet the content of that form—Roark’s soul—speaks out in contradictory ways.

Given these difficulties, the genesis of Roark’s genius occurs as a paradox. He enacts ascetic purity, both in his lived experience and in his artistic productions, without recoiling from the bounty of earthly pleasures. These can be harnessed as the inspiration for new creations, after all, just as the bounty of earthly marvels can be harnessed as the materials of production. However, in Rand’s construction, genius can be so off-putting—antithetical to notions of humility, resistant to claims of collective need or guilt—that it warrants being personified

through a series of allusions to transgressive figures: at its most totemic, the text presents us Roark the Promethean, compellingly adroit and a Titan conferring his creative vitality to the unworthy; at its most humane, the text presents us Roark the Mosaic, seemingly orphaned and the reification of his own prophecies; at its most honest, the text presents us Roark the *Maschinenmensch*, unnervingly machinelike and a pseudo-android of angular proportions. From this lineage also emerges the most obvious association, Roark the *Übermensch*, which we will scrutinize later.

As ballast against these allusive intrusions, Rand provides us with a rare instance of Roark's development in a crucial scene. He is prompted, while appealing to a potential mentor figure for work, to articulate the *modus operandi* underlying his industriousness. This interlocutor is Henry Cameron, a disgraced architect who formerly enjoyed great renown despite his gruff, combative relationship with both clients and colleagues. Roark's response indicates that he has "never believed in God" because he has instead put his faith in the malleability of humanity's drive and capacity to create (39). As Roark sees it, he "love[s] this earth," and "[t]hat's all [he] love[s]" (39). Accordingly, he contributes to this earthbound ebb and flow of culture because he knows that man, not God, dictates the content of the built world. However, there remains a mysterious, potentially metaphysical quandary when engaging in the iconoclasm that sets Roark apart from his architectural peers: if one's self-imposed task is to shatter earlier forms, transcend norms, and upend tradition, then should he seek out the floor or the ceiling? In other words, if Roark does not "like the shape of things on this earth" and "want[s] to change them," then should he build structures that favor utilitarian design and man's love of convenience, or should he conceive of structures that favor bold innovation and man's quest for greatness (39)?

Ideologically, Roark harbors grandiose notions about what man can achieve, and he thus reaches for the heavens by blazing his own path through his chosen field. However, his minimalist and unadorned architectural style suggests a humble, process-oriented approach that shears away aesthetic clutter in pursuit of metaphysical purity. With Roark's remarks arising in context of his disavowal of a higher power, though, his love of purity inescapably takes on the cast of dogma or even cant. In his dedication to changing his beloved object, the manmade world, Roark harnesses his love as a tool, and this can easily be seen as foolhardy. Because refining or 'purifying' the forms in which we live and conduct business does not necessarily elevate or exalt the tasks performed therein, Roark's efforts are dubious. Indeed, the more reasonable explanation for his love of purity is that he simply needed justification for paring away attachments.

Beyond this need to justify his aloofness, Roark also seeks out Cameron for guidance in the art of heroic self-presentation. The legend surrounding Cameron has made him out to be washed up, which appears accurate; the older man reviews Roark's potential with a great deal of awe and describes it from a cynical perspective. Still, his words represent a call to action from the wise old man, and so they carry weight. Surveying the possibilities of what could be, Cameron and his prophecy position Roark as the answer to the world of glad-handing: "I know only that there is an answer and that you're holding it, that you're the answer, Howard, and some day you'll find the words for it" (68). In other words, our loner-protagonist has the ability, but to truly lead he will need the *voice*. This acknowledges that Roark's stoicism is a liability, that his silence and aloofness is seen as combative and alienating. As we will soon explore, the move from private renunciation to public denunciation solves this problem.

Even though Roark can, in the opening pages, look upon himself as the unmoved mover, he has yet to clarify or harness his voice. Ironically, the early Roark mindset reads a little too biblically: “These rocks, he th[inks], are here for me; waiting for the drill, the dynamite and my voice; waiting to be split, ripped, pounded, reborn; waiting for the shape my hands will give them” (4). The association between dynamite and voice is not accidental, as evidenced by the Cortlandt affair and Roark’s longwinded self-defense during the climactic courtroom scene. Prior to that moment of triumph, though, Roark can hardly voice himself without grandstanding. It seems he must learn to put his vision of the world in a context more palatable than his allusions to himself as a replacement for God.

As we conceive of the archetypal resonances Rand employs to make Roark recognizable yet sublimely unknowable, we must acknowledge that his preternatural abilities have been directed toward the undoing of the self as social animal. From one perspective, this is noble, as Roark seems to assume humanity can adhere to higher ideals by living and operating within steely, antiseptic environments that promote work over play. In this reading, Roark harnesses an aesthetic of austerity as an extension of ideological purity and utopian thinking. From another perspective, though, Roark’s rejection of a socialized self puts his influence in doubt, because it jeopardizes his ability to guide others or to deliver the boon that is his work ethic (rather than the work itself). Whereas Toohey can preach the virtues of self-abnegation as a “sacrifice that includes the destruction of one’s soul,” Roark embodies the virtue of selfish insularity, which amplifies the primacy of his conquering spirit (308). An important distinction here occurs with Toohey’s explicit cautioning that “one doesn’t abnegate by keeping one’s self pure and proud of its purity” (308). Delineating the difference between the hero and the antihero, Toohey speaks of a skewed process of becoming, in which the antihero keeps himself ‘pure’ rather than heroically

purifying the self. This presumption of innate purity folds the quest for transcendence back onto itself, with the ontology of self-as-master-of-self superseding the need for growth.

Toohey understands that purity is a social construct and, thus, a relative (if not illusory) state. It cannot be an inborn quality. Therefore, Toohey is the trickster element of the text who recognizes our loner-protagonist's archetypal journey for what it is: the quest into the self to 'discover,' rather than challenge, the will to power. From this perspective, Roark sees himself as laying claim to a rational framework of identity as he refines his abilities, even though he applies the epistemology of mastery towards the greater goal of imposing his will with impunity. His claim is dubious, of course, as we never see Roark actively learning from experience. It would seem the idle time of knowledge formation would disrupt his preferred state of being, self-as-master-of-self. Pristine and intimidating, proudly monolithic, Roark asserts himself into the marketplace of ideas with an air of mastery that undermines his avowed love of logic. To already *be* perfect precludes him from *becoming* perfect, and this inherent lack of attentiveness to process obfuscates the very knowledge claims—with their attendant errors and failures—that predicate mastery. There can be no inner life to the individual qua individual, and so Roark's self-assertion in conquering the socialized self can only be reactionary.

The irony of this reading, we must acknowledge, is that Toohey is disingenuous and manipulative. As Dominique says of the man, "Everyone else is so unfinished, broken up into so many different pieces that don't fit together. But not Toohey. He's a monolith" (114). Despite the coy sense of judgment typical of the barbed interactions between these two colleagues at the *Banner*, Dominique harbors begrudging respect for Toohey. He embodies a legitimate threat to the sanctity of her desired state and Roark's seemingly inherent state: fascistic self-control. By taking Dominique's commentary on face value, then, we can pinpoint the strategic advantage

Toohey enjoys in the battle between ironic monolith (himself, the public intellectual given over to sophistry) and earnest monolith (Roark, the reluctant face of a solipsistic ideology).

Specifically, Toohey recognizes the fraudulent sense of self that animates Roark's claims of mastery because he is seamlessly fraudulent himself, simply the shell of a man. As happens often in depictions of the loner-protagonist under duress, this type of trickster presence can exhibit self-awareness in contexts where the locus of the narrative can muster none. Simply put, Roark takes life too seriously.

In his blinkered logic of life as a zero-sum game, Roark competes not just with fellow architects, but also journalists, cultural critics, sculptors, philanthropists, newspaper barons, and even his sexual partners. As his foil and long-term frenemy, Peter Keating, attests during a heated exchange, Roark tacitly sets forth an imperative, an ultimatum, when interacting with anyone. At this point in the novel, Keating knows that Roark is looking for work now that Cameron has retired. Roark's apprenticeship had evolved into a pseudo-partnership over the three years since his expulsion from Stanton, but his time with Cameron failed to broker any lasting contacts within the field or with prospective clients. Sensing the desperation that has brought Roark to seek his counsel, Keating becomes uncharacteristically frank when he describes feeling compelled to make a choice between Roark and "the rest of the world" (81). Despite the situational irony of Keating finding himself, for once, in a position to critique his more skilled colleague, the content of his appraisal should not be disregarded.

Keating and his conformist ways certainly overcorrect in the other direction from Roark's solipsistic self-reliance. However, this tragic flaw does not invalidate his point when imploring Roark to see that the world is not "all fighting and renunciation" (81). In Keating's placating mindset, cronyism replaces the need to cultivate and defend one's own merits, and so he is

constitutionally unprincipled. As the avatar of glad-handing and sycophancy in the novel, he would be expected to recoil from Roark's forceful self-containment, and he does just that when insisting, "I don't want to be an outsider. I want to belong" (81). Still, his critique of Roark is not, from my perspective, nearly as toothless as Rand would seem to imagine.

Of greatest importance in this short-lived reckoning between sophist and ideologue, Keating confronts Roark about being humorless and conceited. As stated above, Keating's upper hand in this scene is illusory, as Rand habitually telegraphs the irony of his false bravado; this is a performance, intense self-doubt masquerading as pragmatism. Nonetheless, Keating relies on rhetorical questions meant to be cutting: "Can't you ever be comfortable—and unimportant? [...] Don't you get tired of the heroic?" (81). He makes it clear that the unnerving quality when in Roark's presence is his cocky manner of *sprezzatura*, or the paradoxical marriage of Roark's intense drive with his effortless competence. At one point, Roark plays the fool by asking, "What's heroic about me?" (81). In response, Keating sputters, "Nothing. Everything. I don't know. It's not what you do. *It's what you make people feel around you*" (81; emphasis added). From this assessment, we can infer that Keating balks at Roark's default mode of strain and imperial overreach.

Even the way Keating orders his two descriptors of Roark's conduct—fighting and renunciation—inverts what we might expect of the austere genius who can rise to the challenge when needing to defend his work. Roark can be misconstrued as ascetic in his seeming isolation, but he could never be mistaken for retiring. Indeed, he is often willing to make the first strike. Keating would know better than most that Roark looks for fights only to later renounce those

former ties with understated drama.¹⁷ As we will soon explore in context of Roark's iconoclastic bent, it is only toward the end of the novel that his incendiary self-righteousness manifests as explicit *denunciation*. Still, the impetuosity of Roark is a through line of the text, and tense conversations are the result. That these are intellectual fights about architecture makes no difference; that these are fights stoked almost involuntarily because of Roark's blasé demeanor makes no difference; that these are ties in which Roark has invested no emotion makes no difference: he gets into ideological scrapes simply so that he can better delineate his loyal inner circle.

Although he would be loath to admit it, Roark relies on the endorsements of his benefactors, who proselytize on his behalf. Beyond that, he seeks the encouragement of those likeminded few who orbit in related fields. We come to understand there are a handful of people figuratively—even literally—by his side: Mike Donnigan, the tireless and gruff construction worker (a minor character); Steven Mallory, the fervently unsentimental sculptor (a minor character, but significant to a subplot involving Toohey); and Dominique Francon, the lifestyle columnist whose social commentary in her column for the *Banner*, "Your House," is equal parts withering and urgent. These characters would never seek out a support network and, thus, represent a cosmology of self-sufficiency, yet they weather in tandem the demands to adulterate their self-expression or bastardize their work.

This loose affiliation of libertarians posits that one's loyalty should be afforded only to those with little need for accommodation. In such instances, the bond between supposed equals hardly constitutes friendship; rather, they enforce an implicit contract insisting that the handout culture of second-handers will never infiltrate their meeting of pitiless, enterprising individuals.

¹⁷ The most pertinent example occurs during Roark's renunciation—to the Dean's face—of his desire to earn an architectural degree. This scene unsparingly illustrates the antagonism our loner-protagonist can foster even when he is being held to account.

However, there is a necessary, if unexpected, corollary to the way this novel luxuriates in the possibility that visionaries can break free of systemic constraints. For as much as *The Fountainhead* envisions an idealized state of freedom accessible to all (if only they are willing to suffer the slings and arrows en route to freedom), it also demonstrates that the price Roark must pay for being unimpeded is to become unheeding.

The pursuit of his architectural vision never fully devolves into a reckless or decadent vice. Even so, this pursuit causes Roark to take few precautions, as if he has no a priori default to hedging his bets or protecting his interests. The upside is that he earns the privilege to be unfettered: from family, from social life, and even from human decency. The downside, of course, is the very premise for my argument, as Roark's modus operandi is to untether himself from social obligation even as he positions himself as the fountainhead from which a new aesthetic tradition might emerge. The unstable and deconstructive potential of this subject position may correspond to Roark's vitality, but it also makes a hypocrite of him. For example, we cannot mitigate the horror of the infamous scene in which Roark rapes his love interest, Dominique, even if the text suggests she tacitly approves of what would amount to sexual role-playing. Although more remains to be said about Roark's sexual violence, my point here is that his transgressions matter and that he does not have ultimate control over himself.

With Roark and his contradictions acting merely as a microcosm of privilege run amok, the naturalistic forces that bring down lesser men in the novel inevitably compel him to reverse his earlier dedication to being an agent of construction. As an example of this context, we witness Keating experience a moral awakening about his status as a second-hander late in the novel, yet this epiphany is exposed as only a faux-miracle once he ends up demoralized, as

ineffectual as ever. Seeking solace, Keating admits to exploiting relationships with others, mainly Roark, throughout his life:

Howard, I'm a parasite. [...] You designed my best projects at Stanton. You designed the first house I ever built. [...] I have fed on you and on all the men like you who lived before we were born. [...] In the whole of my life, I haven't added a new doorknob to what men have done before me. (601)

Roark takes pity on Keating in this moment, which maybe amounts to growth for our loner-protagonist. However, the opportunity for redemption that Roark provides his old acquaintance only serves to reiterate how pitiable and desperate for validation Keating has always been. For his part, Roark simply sees his chance to circumvent the informal blacklisting that prevents him from submitting plans for Cortlandt Homes, the housing project central to the plotline that builds to the novel's climactic courtroom scene. Even after being tasked with acting as Roark's surrogate and fighting for the sanctity of his design, Keating fails to defend Roark's vision for Cortlandt Homes during its construction. Tellingly, he disappears from the text once he fails in his belated effort to redeem himself, to prove his worth after achieving hollow renown as an architectural wunderkind. In his defeat, Keating is felled by yet another misguided whim, as he lacks the conviction to mount a righteous defense of Roark's brilliance (or so the text would have us believe).

Likewise, we witness Wynand late in the novel going through a similar epiphany. Although he fails in his misguided effort to redeem himself as well, it is only because he seeks to make amends in grander fashion than Keating's method of declaring himself a fraud before Roark, his chief benefactor. As we discussed earlier, Wynand hopes to right the wrongs of the yellow journalism that had once been his stock-in-trade. In contrast to Keating, Wynand is given

a noble sendoff, as he continues to run his newspaper even as it is waylaid by strikers and protesters. Fighting the lost cause of publicly defending Roark, he “fill[s] in as city editor, managing editor, wire man, rewrite man, copy boy. He [does] not leave the building. He sle[eps] on a couch in his office—as he had done in the first years of the *Banner*’s existence” (677). Chastising himself for creating an empire unworthy of the heights of human accomplishment, Wynand waxes poetic about what he has wrought: “Such is the nature of sums and of quests for the lowest common denominator. What, then, is the residue of many human minds put together, unaired, unspaced, undifferentiated? The *Banner*, he th[inks] and walk[s] on” (690). While Wynand’s ruination seems designed to strike us as tragic, Keating’s exposes a central absurdity of the text: Roark might represent the salvation for mankind, but Keating discovers that individual salvation is impossible to manufacture (unless you are Roark). Despite these ironic reversals and tragic shortcomings, Roark manages to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat during the climactic criminal case against him, even as he becomes a vengeful agent of destruction. In this guise, he rescinds his earlier gifts proffered from on high, and Rand’s didacticism allows this petulance to stand.

During the novel’s climax, Roark performs an act of literal iconoclasm when he destroys a governmental construction project. He cannot abide the alteration of his design for Cortlandt Homes, a “gigantic experiment in low-rent housing,” and so he dynamites the site near the date of its completion (591). Sucked in by the heightened rhetoric about culture as the contested site of humanity’s fate, Roark takes action that exceeds conventional morality. Indeed, towards the end of his extensive remarks during the trial against him for destroying government property, Roark attests, “We are approaching a world in which I cannot permit myself to live. [...] I designed Cortlandt. I gave it to you. [...] I destroyed it because I did not choose to let it exist. It

was a double monster. In form and in implication. I had to blast both” (716). With this as the premise for his self-righteous act, Roark then drives the dagger home: “The form was mutilated by two second-handers who assumed the right to improve upon that which they had not made and could not equal” (716). The monstrous implications, of course, are that “the altruistic purpose of the building superseded all rights” and that Roark would have “no claim to stand against it” (716). Hence, he had to force his claim upon the world.

Through this climactic misdeed, Roark plays the role of a stern deity in the hope that he might affirm not just his own freedom but also the sanctity of his vision. Thus, he feels justified demolishing work that is no longer solely his own—a project transcribed imperfectly from his original design into building materials and the labor of many—because he believes “the integrity of a man’s creative work is of greater importance than any charitable endeavor” (717). The political expediency represented by Cortlandt, which manifests simply due to the willpower of those who compromised to bring it into being, means nothing to Roark; the logistical problem-solving represented by Cortlandt, which goes beyond an architect’s contributions and extends to ensuring labor union support, discovering ways to exploit tax incentives, and marshalling federal grants, means nothing to Roark; the socioeconomic panacea represented by Cortlandt, which is purely theoretical and yet worth being given real-world application, means nothing to Roark: he only takes pride in the engineering solutions unique to his design.¹⁸

In exerting his will through this act of destruction, Roark spurns any good that might be achieved by allowing Cortlandt to stand (despite the compromises that have diminished his role). Beyond that, he rejects the collectivist ethos demanded by such a largescale endeavor. His opposition goes beyond simple retaliation for a professional slight; Roark sees himself as

¹⁸ Roark is clear on this point: “I agreed to design Cortlandt for the purpose of seeing it erected as I designed it and for no other reason. That was the price I set for my work. I was not paid” (716).

correcting a wrong and doing what he judges to be right. His actions are political, then. Although we might assume he objects to everything government housing represents, his grievance is with the circumstances of his defeat within the marketplace of ideas. In the abstract, the notion of affordable housing does not rankle Roark, especially when presented to him as a problem solvable mainly through his ingenuity converting a handful of materials into spare structures.¹⁹ Even contracting as government-subsidized labor fails to raise his hackles. Rather, he takes issue with the ideology of ego-effacement, or the pressure to sacrifice his creative control with charitable bonhomie.

As Roark's attitudes come into full view toward the end of the novel, he finds the privileging of cooperative action needless and backwards.²⁰ Similarly, he sees something wrongheaded in the valorization of social capital symbolized by government housing. As evidence of his belief system, Roark insists late in the novel that, "after centuries of being pounded with the doctrine that altruism is the ultimate ideal," mankind has been reduced to "seeking self-esteem through others" (635). Beyond that, he critiques how most high-achieving people have diverted their energy by struggling to attain prestige, or what he terms "the second-hander's delusion" (635). Unmoved by the need for others' approval, Roark inherently disregards extrinsic criteria of his labor's worth.²¹ Never in his work does he consider populist notions of a comfortably livable space, elitist notions of architecture's essential traditions, or

¹⁹ The challenge of this project must be tantalizing for Roark. As Toohey describes it to Keating, "Cortlandt is to be a model project. An example for the whole world. It must be the most brilliant, the most efficient exhibit of planning ingenuity and structural economy ever achieved anywhere. That's what the big boys demand" (598).

²⁰ Mocking the illusory sense of accountability within groupthink, Roark paraphrases the truism that people rush to take credit but eagerly deflect criticism, thus creating a merry-go-round of blame: "Who permitted them to do it [to alter the design for Cortlandt]? No particular man among the dozens in authority. No one cared to permit it or to stop it. No one was responsible. No one can be held to account. Such is the nature of all collective action" (716).

²¹ Roark belittles those who value status, saying that when such a man seeks to burnish his reputation, he seeks a "stamp of approval, not his own" (635). Similarly, he mocks those who desire excessive wealth: "Personal luxury is a limited endeavor. What they want is ostentation: to show, to stun, to entertain, to impress others" (634). For Roark, the reward for his work is seeing it manifest in the real world, unadulterated and unscathed.

even just the exchange-value of his designs. However, he unreservedly believes himself capable of achieving the manner of greatness that will endure beyond his own lifetime. The hypocrisy of this stance is palpable.

While on trial for the destruction of government property, Roark gives himself over to stubborn, full-throated denunciation of conformity. In fact, his testimony elides factual accounts of the contract negotiated for his design of Cortlandt (as there was none), the role performed by Keating (as the surrogate for Roark, representing the work as his own), or the planning required to dynamite the site safely and stealthily (as he hopes to protect Dominique, his co-conspirator). Instead, Roark takes a philosophical perspective on the ethics of creation. In this soliloquy-cum-manifesto, he proselytizes about the duty to force oneself into action, preemptively and habitually.

Because he sees only virtue in exerting agency, Roark ignores the checks normally available to us through cognition. His refusal to debate with himself, to second-guess himself, means the criterion of expediency is foreign to him. As we learn, his sense of humanity's greatest failing derives from the supposedly selfless way that certain people abdicate power over themselves: "Men have been taught that the ego is the synonym of evil, and selflessness the ideal of virtue. But the creator is the egotist in the absolute sense, and *the selfless man is the one who does not think, feel, judge or act*. These are functions of the self" (713; emphasis added). Not only selfish but unfeeling, Roark undoes the work of others when he destroys Cortlandt. Although this act deprives the world material evidence of Roark's genius, which he should be permitted to withhold, it also wastes taxpayer money and judges the needs of future occupants as insignificant. The jury, of course, finds Roark not guilty.

The cynical act of destroying Cortlandt reveals Roark to be a misguided loner, lashing out at a world that has already granted him so much privilege. His delusions fuel his petulance: feeling unappreciated, maybe even persecuted, he revokes the fruits of his considerable intellect and labor. By reducing the collectivist vision of Cortlandt—this figurative Tower of Babel—to rubble, Roark insists that pure (rather than mongrel) expressions of might are the only way to incapsulate gnostic truths about the divine within us all. As is common among loner-protagonists, he seems to hold the secret to exercising his faculties with unnerving conviction, with purity of vision, but he also seems to harbor the shadow of this conviction, a tendency to burn any bridge between self and normative culture. The secret he shields, then, is that his self-possession intensifies in the face of outrage.

To protect itself, the fountainhead must somehow impart its gifts yet withhold its essence. This is why Roark acts reserved in ways that are at odds with his combative nature and why he seems suspicious of others' intentions (despite protesting otherwise).²² Although these behaviors are somewhat defensible, Roark's protectiveness extends to his "act of scorn" in raping Dominique, for his conduct as "a master taking shameful, contemptuous possession of her" withholds tenderness for the sake of conveying his ultimate passion: to convert all he touches into a "symbol of humiliation and conquest" (220). It is not enough to overpower Dominique, nor is it enough to bring the cognoscenti to heel; Roark must also bolster the cult of competency

²² In the only moment of direct confrontation between Roark and Toohey, the latter believes himself at an advantage. With pompous magnanimity, Toohey extends an offer: "Mr. Roark, we're alone here. Why don't you tell me what you think of me? In any words you wish. No one will hear us" (401). The retort that follows should strike us as unintentionally snide, which might be the quality that made Rand believe it was "one of the most effective lines in *The Fountainhead*" (viii). Roark's simple reply—"But I don't think of you"—cannot stand without commentary, of course, and so Rand provides exposition of Toohey's reaction; the "attentiveness" of his face apparently suggests that he is "listening quietly to something as simple as fate" (401). With these remarks, what we must consider is that, for fate to have designs on Toohey, Roark must consciously understand himself as the instrument of fate, as the mechanism by which Toohey's undoing will be assured. Although he hardly seems paranoid about the insidiousness of Toohey's designs, Roark has undoubtedly thought about (or, at least, intuited) the reasons to keep his self-appointed nemesis at arm's length.

that fuels his mystique. Thus, he rends the veil, humiliating others by dispelling their delusions.²³ This debases in a counterintuitive way, revealing normative culture's ingrained state of degradation, which of course derives not from original sin but from unexamined and unexcised artifacts of social conditioning.

To replenish itself, the fountainhead must somehow nurture its talents, indulge its passions, even as it withstands criticism. This is why Roark, in the preamble to raping Dominique like “a soldier violating an enemy woman,” conducts himself as if reifying his labor, as if bringing his art into life (220). He becomes “austere in cruelty” and “ascetic in passion,” and so he terrorizes Dominique with “the shock of feeling his skin against hers, [with] the thing she had thought about, had expected, had never known to be like this, could not have known, because *this was not part of living*, but a thing one could not bear longer than a second” (219; emphasis added). Whatever pleasure, masochistic or otherwise, that Dominique receives from the shock of the new, Roark receives none. His creative talents, his vitality, draw from a source that obliterates life. His passion dwells in recesses untouched by pleasure, and his gnostic truth—that his will to conquer supersedes others' will to power—remains undying only because it could never flourish among the living.

By surrendering to base urges, Roark exposes a central paradox of the text. He may inhabit the persona of Renaissance man exceedingly well, but he cannot defend his right to the free accrual of skills and intellect when he fails to wield them responsibly. Roark's narcissism means he overestimates how much his influence is welcomed, and so the only way he bothers to

²³ As we will see, Roark bristles at Dominique's investment in the mirage of power-conferring prestige. Even though she embraces this ideology as a cynical response to her wavering sense of integrity, she cannot be convinced to renounce this worldview by reason alone (or so Roark's behavior would suggest). In a similar dynamic that is blessedly devoid of psychosexual complications, Roark bristles at Toohey and other social justice advocates simply because they preach altruism but practice elitism. These are the boogeymen whom he recognizes as not only delusional but hypocritical; accordingly, he has no problem denouncing their love of power, even as he rapes Dominique in an attempt to stoke her love of power.

share his genius is to impose it. Unwilling to foster the mutual trust needed for intimacy, he only knows how to turn people into implements. He meets the very existence of others as a challenge. From Roark's perspective, though, he lacks the resources to solve the problem of socialization only because he "never learned the process of thinking about other people" (15).²⁴ This admission suggests that Roark, sterling avatar of imagination, spatial reasoning, and dutiful effort, has never taken the initiative to reason out how compassion works or why it can be relied upon as a tool of discourse (to say nothing of love). For others, little prompting is needed to intuit the joy or even just utility of being compassionate, but Roark would need to learn a new way of conceiving the world before he could expand beyond his unilateral drive and vision.

Tellingly, the language of the above quote deconstructs itself. There is no difference between the 'process of thinking about' experiences rooted in emotion—connection, belonging, vulnerability—and the process by which Roark calculates, say, the load carried by a structural beam or a wall. In both instances, the process originates with intention, with deliberation, and proceeds through pattern-recognition. Although the different contexts requiring emotional intelligence are more various and complex than the engineering challenges Roark creates for himself, some manner of cause-effect dynamic still exists. For example, the romantic partnering in the novel often prompts a naked assessment of costs and benefits, mainly because these pairings emerge from overlapping love triangles: Keating in pursuit of Dominique, with Roark as the roguish complicating factor; then Roark partnered with Dominique, but Keating supplanted by Wynand as a worthier romantic rival. In this insular world of power and privilege, the

²⁴ In typical fashion, Rand later evokes a nearly identical sentiment, although this time she allows Roark to speak for himself instead of justifying his aloofness through exposition. In response to a sympathetic client's advice to "learn how to handle people," Roark argues that he is incapable of that because he was "born without some one particular sense" (157). He goes on to suggest that sensitivity to the needs of others would only inhibit him: "I don't know whether it's something I lack, or something extra I have that stops me. Besides, I don't like people who have to be handled" (157).

libidinal economy is shaped by competition and pettiness. Status must be considered, whether in terms of the intrinsic nobility of a person's carriage, the extrinsic honor afforded by a person's accomplishments, or simply the ineffable qualities of a person's general attractiveness or fitness as a mate. Despite his aloof nature, Roark is not immune to making such judgments.

Rand justifies the murky sexual politics of the novel's rape scene by having Roark recognize a pernicious quality within Dominique that requires violent excision. In this logic, her haughtiness is the cause necessitating his solution of breaking her will. To flip this brutal and fascistic rationale, though, we need only point out that objectification and assault are effects experienced by Dominique alone, whereas Roark derives power and sexual gratification. If she is guilty of attacking his sense of dignity, then he is guilty of violating hers.

At the point when Rand finally permits these two characters to meet, Roark has exiled himself in Connecticut. Unable to find meaningful architectural work in Manhattan, he is fulfilled nonetheless, as he enjoys the physical labor of breaking rocks and fabricating granite in his new job as a quarryman. In another of her melodramatic coincidences, Rand situates Dominique nearby, forcing these two into proximity as Roark strengthens his resolve (despite being at a low point in his professional development) and Dominique seeks seclusion at her father's country estate. Her goal, we are told, is to conduct an "experiment of actual solitude," and the results are both "an enchantment" and "a betrayal into a weakness she had never allowed herself: the weakness of enjoying it" (206). Surprised at the recuperative value of leisure, Dominique still cannot escape her masochistic ways. In an instance of blunt foreshadowing, Rand bestows upon Dominique the intuition that she will soon experience "the sensation of a defiling pleasure" (206). The novel obliges, as we already know.

With this change in setting, Rand finds occasion to again align Roark with nature, as she does to open the novel. By interjecting Dominique, though, she shifts our attention from the static Roark—"a body of long straight lines and angles, each curve broken into planes"—and toward the active Roark, rendered as "only a few clots of tension: his knees, his wrists, his shoulders and the drill he held—to feel the drill trembling in a long convulsive shudder" (3, 203). Structurally marking the transition into Part 2 of the novel, this recurrence of Roark amid the rocks also signifies the difference between his former potential and impending greatness. The measure of this amplified vitality is, of course, his virility, and so the role Dominique must play is merely as temptation and test for Roark. As the spoiled daughter of Guy Francon, a respected Manhattan architect, Dominique has done little to earn the arrogance of presuming her status is above that of Roark. She tacitly understands this, though, and desires to be broken of "her own cold, luxurious fragility" (209). Seeming to play out a rape fantasy, Dominique thinks of Roark's "strained body, of his clothes drenched in dust and sweat, of his hands. She stresse[s] the contrast, because it degrade[s] her" (209). While these attitudes and desires could warrant any number of consequences or outcomes, none of them should require Roark to act as the agent of moral indignation.

As they venture deeper into their flirtations, Roark challenges Dominique's dismissiveness in a way that imposes violent comeuppance. This is a response disproportionate to her earlier slight of him, when she refuses to tolerate his lack of deference. Even in these sexually charged moments prior to the rape, Roark brazenly projects his entitlement:

He sustained the insolence of looking straight at her, he would not move, he would not grant the concession of turning away—of acknowledging that he had no right to look at

her in such manner. He had not merely taken that right, he was saying silently that she had given it to him. (208)

In light of this, the specter of hierarchical thinking, which animates their sadistic power struggle, dispels the myth of Roark's integrity. Just as he had to *unlearn* the supposed virtue of currying favor (or the tact of not staring), he had to *learn* the utility of rape—not just to conquer, but to humiliate—before deciding on that course of action with Dominique. Roark has been socialized within the habitus of hegemonic masculinity, and he is therefore habituated to power and displays of virility.

For historical context about this scene, Susan Love Brown details Rand's contemporary moment by suggesting "cultural understandings of rape were exacerbated by Hollywood mores and the fiction of her day that glamorized male dominance and rape as a sign of masculinity" (4). Beyond this passive reflection of the times, though, Brown sees Rand as willfully participating in a model of gender dynamics that takes heteronormative femininity to be "marked by the desire of a woman to be conquered by a man" (6). With this as her premise, Brown then explores and distills the debate about Dominique's willingness to be debased. Along the way, she invokes the language of consent and gives an honest appraisal of Dominique's thoughts, which are "ambiguous and hard to read" throughout these scenes (7). Most importantly, Brown resists the ideological reading of Dominique's rape as merely her submission before an ideal mate; as she notes of Dominique's (not yet fully informed) perspective at the time, she has been "raped by a lowly quarry worker, not by her highest value" (7). Instead of "being captured or overpowered" by a worthy adversary, Dominique simply indulges in a fling (at best) with a man she does not know at all (7). For good measure, Brown repeats this reading later, when she notes that Dominique's 'rapture' could not be a "response to values, because Roark is a stranger" (9). In

short, Rand's characterization of the mindset that would welcome sexual degradation is regressive and pathological, rather than transgressive and liberating.

Even in context of the harrowing, emotionally charged act of rape, Roark remains convinced his dominion is unsentimental, agnostic, and ultimately constructive. Because he stands for the principle that every individual has the right to impose his will upon the world, he performs all tasks as if they were his duty. Thus, Roark believes the tendency to foster conflict, seemingly inescapable throughout his life, has emerged from outside his narrowly defined purview. Seeking his rightful dominion over the manmade world is not, in his mind, an aggressive act. Rather, Roark simply fulfills the Romantic drive, the yearning to commune with an inner sublime, conveyed by one of his greatest works, the Stoddard Temple: he, too, is a testament to "[t]he human spirit as the creator and the conqueror of the ideal" (Rand 327).

From this perspective, Roark shares in the Temple's "great, silent acceptance" of duty and disciples (343). However, the stoic guise adopted by Roark—the façade of rectitude mirrored by the Temple—masks his selfish determination to "feel sinless and strong" no matter the context (343). Through the masturbatory act of exalting himself within this structure, Roark hopes to experience continually what a visitor to the Temple could only feel in passing, which is "to find the peace of spirit never granted save by one's own glory" (343). Elsewhere, we see the Temple as Roark's reification of self through his similar ethos and carriage. Specifically, Roark serves as a reminder, too, that the figure of a proud man, with "arms outstretched at shoulder-height" in order to "lift the earth," is "the only absolute, the gauge of perfection by which all dimensions [are] to be judged" (343). From this pride as the 'gauge of perfection' derives Roark's peculiar 'process of thinking about other people,' in which any struggle against him is only a prelude to submission.

When met with Dominique's cynicism and haughtiness, for example, Roark interprets it as inadequacy, the veiled angst of a woman who can envision herself as a critic but not as a creator. To move her spirit, to lift her gaze, Roark assumes the role of conqueror, ensuring for himself the 'peace of spirit' granted only when a man achieves glory on his own terms. For her part, Dominique acknowledges to herself that she "had found joy in her revulsion, in her terror and in his strength" (222). This masochism bruises her pride, as she has always been keenly aware of "that awed reverence [of others] before her person" (223). Any confusion evaporates, however, once she confronts the unsettling truth that she received "*the degradation she had wanted,*" even if this epiphany means "she hate[s] [Roark] for it" (222; emphasis added). Finding herself in the presence of 'the only absolute' worth pursuing, Dominique can finally see that her life of privilege, which has always felt hollow, need not be the inescapable purgatory she has made it. If her only conception of glory in the manmade world has been her father's wealth and prestige, then her new perspective would necessarily have to place herself and all her delusions among the meritless affronts to Roark's godlike perfection.

The paradox of this episode—of what Roark terms their "unrepeatable exaltation" and what this project regards as Dominique's Romantic awakening—is that it occurs through a rape fantasy, sex bled of any romance (221). There can be no glory, then, in vulnerability or connection. Instead, what inspires Dominique's sublime "rapture" is her vision of gnostic truth: "One gesture of tenderness from [Roark]—and she would have remained cold, untouched by the thing done to her body" (220). Fearful of yet another man submitting her to kneejerk reverence, Dominique locates her moment of glory during Roark's violent possession of her body, because his involuntary "shaking with the agony of a pleasure unbearable even to him" signifies something more powerful than his submission (220). Dominique senses that his willingness to

lose control of himself “came from her, from her body,” and so she attains the self-possession to “bit[e] his lips,” thereby conveying knowledge of “what he had wanted her to know” (220). In other words, he vanquishes her self-doubt, she vanquishes his self-protectiveness, and together they create a heroic union to be tested but ultimately reaffirmed by the novel’s final page.

To actualize the text’s many promises of transcendence, Rand gives us a fairytale ending. This gesture establishes a final moment of respite, which feels designed to retroactively justify the melodrama of Dominique working against her romantic fate and Roark neglecting to ever pursue romance in the first place. Although we only receive a glimpse during the novel’s abbreviated denouement, we know that these two can finally be united. Rising alongside scaffolding in a construction hoist, Dominique eventually “passe[s] the line where the masonry ended behind her,” and she sees the “ocean mount[ing] as the city descend[s]” (727). Well beyond the hierarchy of fallible institutions, Dominique finds herself above the “pinnacles of bank buildings,” the “crowns of courthouses,” and the “spires of churches” (727). The triumphant final vision, which the reader shares with Dominique, is of “only the ocean and the sky and the figure of Howard Roark” (727). No longer a man but a figure, he has achieved apotheosis. Of course, these readings simply take Rand’s libidinal economy at face value, and so we must remember that her cavalier depiction of sexual violence contorts Roark’s brutality into a crucible enabling Dominique to prove herself worthy of him.

With that reminder, we can see that Roark, incapable of godlike repose, evinces cracks in his façade. He is no *sui generis* individual because there is precedent, in the figure of the *enfant terrible*, for his freewheeling beyond expectation and tradition. In fact, *The Fountainhead* adopts features of the *roman à clef* in order to better sell this association between petulance and genius,

to justify Roark's arrogance. As the novel propagates its fantasy of the beautiful and the damned, the powerful and privileged, it portrays Roark as a Frank Lloyd Wright proxy.

This analogy to the famous architect is apt, in the sense that Wright inspired both rhapsodic praise and petty critiques, which we would only expect for Rand's model of genius. As evidence, consider the rhetoric worthy of Rand employed by Peter Blake, who describes Wright as "the last of the true Americans," a man representing the "radical concept" of ingenuity in the face of uncertain odds (265). Invoking impossible ideals, Blake aligns Wright with the trope of the American Adam and situates him within utopia:

[Wright is] a symbol of absolute, untrammelled freedom for every individual, of as little government as possible, the end of classes and castes, of unlimited and equal physical opportunities for the adventurous, of the absence of all prejudice—excepting prejudices in favor of anything new and bold; of the absence of form and of formality, and, finally, a symbol of a society of many individuals living as individuals in individual settlements—not a society of masses living in giant cities. (265-6)

On the topic of Wright's personality, Blake can admit that "[t]o the outside world he often seemed arrogant, strident, full of conceit. Yet, in all likelihood, these characteristics were little more than a 'front'" (267). This willingness to pierce the man's façade leads to assumptions about Wright feeling "intensely conscious of and deeply hurt by what he considered to be the insults regularly hurled at him by the city slickers" due to his "country boy" roots in "the Wisconsin hills" (267). The sympathy of this analysis may have merit when piecing together some semblance of interiority for a historical figure, but it would feel quaint if applied to Roark (whose childhood and adolescence, it should be noted, remain a mystery to readers).

On the topics of influence, apprenticeship, and aspiration, Blake describes the fateful moment in 1887 when Wright took a job with the firm of Adler & Sullivan. He notes that one of the partners, Louis Sullivan, was “then only beginning to make his mark, though architects and draftsmen, especially in Chicago, knew that his approach differed radically from the accepted notions of polite architecture of the period” (273). Sullivan, of course, would later be known as the father of the skyscraper, a claim to which Blake attests when he describes him as the “architect who, almost single-handedly, turned the skyscraper into architecture” (x). By providing Wright access to a visionary mentor, this period amounts to his education in the “vocabulary of Art Nouveau,” which tried to “find a new ‘honesty’ in design” and to discover within the “forms of nature a complete set of principles which, if followed, would inevitably lead to this new honesty in expression” (Blake 273-4). Rand replicates this dynamic by providing Roark with Cameron, a mentor whose influence pertains less to aesthetics and more to prophecy. Leaving Roark to define the vocabulary of his design sense by himself, Cameron does not embody the ‘honesty’ of humbly seeking inspiration in the ‘forms of nature.’ Instead, he encourages Roark’s delusions of grandeur by turning their mutual disavowal of God into inspiration: if the manmade world is the arena in which one must prove his greatness, then the Great Man is the one who makes a god of man.

Concerned less with the metaphysics of architecture than Rand is, Blake characterizes the singular aesthetic theorem of Sullivan and Wright as a reckoning with the plasticity of materials. They believed that “‘honesty’ was a function of [the structure’s] function—that no building could be true to itself, that no building could be a true expression of the aspirations of those who built it, unless its exteriors clearly declared its purpose” (Blake 278). This principle, often quoted as the aphorism of ‘form follows function,’ would become the basis for the Functionalist

movement, even if this manifested as a general push toward simplification and clarity during the early 20th century rather than a defined aesthetic. As for the style emerging from Sullivan's mentorship of Wright, ornamentation would still be permitted in their structures, but only through a keen application of "a genuinely American, 'democratic' expression" (278). Blake pinpoints the emergence of Wright's Organicist aesthetic, for example, when he describes how "symbolic images of nature began, more and more, to represent images of America and of democracy as well" for the young Wright (278). *Roark* exhibits no such reliance, as we will demonstrate below.

Within the 'honest' and 'natural' aesthetic framework espoused by Wright, the fictional works of *Roark* become more legible, as his masterpiece, the Stoddard Temple, is a low-slung structure "scaled to human height" (Rand 343). The peculiar quality that allows it to appear in a natural embrace with its surroundings—such that it does not "cling to the soil" nor "crouch under the sky"—is its horizontal orientation (343). The lines of its form are "not the lines reaching to heaven, but the lines of the earth," and the seeming humility of such a "joyous place" derives from its ineffable summons to visitors "to feel sinless and strong" (343). Blake highlights a similar quality in the work that Sullivan and Wright submitted for the Transportation building at the World's Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893:

The dominant line of classicism (and neoclassicism) is the vertical, the image of man standing up against nature. The dominant line of Sullivan's and Wright's down-to-earth architecture was the horizontal, the image of man in love with nature. [...] The horizontals that characterized the Transportation building were slabs and planes somewhat in conflict with the great Richardsonian arch of the main entrance. [...] the Transportation building, more than any other structure they designed together, was

evidence both of the rich vocabulary Sullivan could supply and the dynamism and verve his young disciple injected into the master's work. (279)

As we discussed earlier, Roark claims to draw from no traditions. His time with Cameron has left him devoid of faith in the 'rich vocabulary' employed by others. Thus, his 'dynamism and verve' equate to a vision that disregards the bliss of achieving harmony within nature. To be sure, Roark values the way a pristine setting can make one feel 'sinless and strong,' but he takes this as a cue to shamelessly sin against basic humanist dictums. The source of his strength, then, is in defying the imperative that we remain stewards of the land. To Roark, the Great Man has ascended beyond any need to ever act as shepherd of man.

Even if he marks a new precedent for the loner-protagonist, tempering his indifferent guise by admitting confusion over social niceties, Roark nonetheless understands his lot in life with a skewed perspective. Although not quite brooding, his manner of self-awareness reflects upon the social dynamics of creation and casts it through a prism that makes singular, gnostic truth incompatible with "the slothful routine of [others'] lives" (Rand 710). During the Cortlandt trial, Roark implicitly compares himself to Prometheus "chained to a rock and torn by vultures," to Adam "condemned to suffer," and to all the "unsubmissive and first" men who "paid for [their] courage" (710). The full scope of his messiah complex, however, reveals itself when he claims of the archetypal creator, "His truth was his only motive" (710). Having thus far refrained from speaking in the first person during his climactic testimony, Roark defends himself obliquely, arguing in the third person that "[t]he creation, not its users" deserves to be "his goal and his life" (710).

Increasingly didactic, Roark romanticizes how only the made object, as an extension of genius, can give "form to his truth" (711). Accordingly, he prioritizes not just the integrity of his

vision but also the sanctity of forms devised through the application of genius. As Roark insists, “[The creator] held his truth above all things and against all men,” although my critique would reformat this justification to transport it away from the realm of abstraction (711). To better indict Roark as just another entitled loner-protagonist, we must pierce his façade and paraphrase his concealed truth: Howard Roark, fountainhead and iconoclast, holds his vision for the world superior to all other manmade things, and he carries himself as if above all men because he holds their dependence, their weakness, against them.

With his iconoclastic bent, Roark obscures the archetypal basis for his mystique. When he mocks the notion of a “collective brain,” he unwittingly draws attention to metanarratives of progress and paradigm shift, a lineage within which he participates (711). His remark that there is “no such thing as a collective thought” ignores (and, thus, undermines) the discourse on archetypes and mythology, yet the very trace of this socio-religious drive to create meaning should alter our reading of Roark (711). By taking his argumentation on face value and placing Roark in the monolithic, third-person-pronoun role of ‘The Creator and His Vision,’ we can reframe him as a folk legend come to life, ungrateful that his accomplishments have been narrativized into a social context bigger—and more important than—his “self-motivated, self-generated” status as “a life force, a Prime Mover” (711). In context of this argument, Roark hardly represents Prometheus bringing man fire, because he instead acts as Zeus felling his father, Cronus, and the rest of the Titans before installing himself as the unmoved mover.

Deluded over time by his desire to project poise and integrity, Roark becomes imperial and meddlesome. The dignity with which he carries himself would seem a guarantee he could never be so petty as to become envious of another’s brilliance. Still, Roark admits “[t]here are so many products of man’s genius around us today” and insists “[t]here are such great possibilities

to exploit” (604; emphasis added). His obsessions span not just the urges to create and to transcend tradition, but also the compulsions to fix the work of others and even to control the circumstances under which others can express their creativity.²⁵ Instead of being completely process-oriented, he is outcome-oriented, although not in a way that seeks prestige or is even beholden to power in the traditional sense. Rather, his goal is to create output so totalizing, so obdurate, that it cannot be seen as a template to build upon. His buildings are already perfect, rather than being a resource to be harnessed or even a space to be passively inhabited.

Although his obsessiveness manifests differently than the brooding indecision or agonizing paranoia of other loner-protagonists, Roark still isolates himself through an opportunistic mindset. He might not be crassly calculating, but he sees threats to his autonomy where others perceive the chastening dilemma that is others’ needs, desires, and rights. Consider this admission from Roark late in the novel:

You see, I’m never concerned with my clients, only with their architectural requirements. I consider these as *part* of my building’s theme and problem, as my building’s material—just as I consider bricks and steel. Bricks and steel are not my motive. Neither are the clients. *Both are only the means of my work.* (604; emphasis added)

Any desires or stipulations from a client become subsumed within Roark’s framework of artistic production as dominion. Just as it is the painter’s prerogative to adulterate or manipulate her materials in idiosyncratic ways, so it is the architect’s prerogative (as Roark sees it) to manage a client’s expectations in manipulative, exploitative ways. After all, Roark’s great theme is not that

²⁵ As discussed earlier, Roark cannot resist imposing his will on Keating’s work. However, the Roarkian mystique creates the impression that he is always in control. For example, Roark is seen by Austen Heller, a client who offers him one of his earliest commissions, as “a man so impervious to compulsion that he became a kind of compulsion himself, an ultimatum against things Heller could not define” (131-2). The absurdity of this paradoxical phrasing should become clear when we apply it to Roark’s inability to turn down Keating’s unethical pleas for help: within the conceit imagined by Heller, Roark’s benevolent gesture in the face of Keating’s desperation must derive less from a compulsion to fix and more from an ultimatum against the hackneyed likes of Keating. If any such ultimatum exists, however, it derives simply from Roark’s compulsion to preemptively burn bridges as a test of loyalty.

form should be divined from intended function or that the utility of a structure should be our sole criterion for beauty. Rather, the theme of his visionary struggle is that the problem of control—the problem of *competing* for control—necessitates vigilance and godlike detachment.

Despite the skepticism of my critique, the text takes seriously the prospect that Roark could inherit the mantle of Nietzschean *Übermensch*, or the earthbound version of a sublimely powerful deity. As David Mikics implies in his exegesis of “the labor and joy of critical power” championed (and even romanticized) by both Emerson and Nietzsche, the *Übermensch* corresponds to notions of “the exemplary” within mankind (1). With its connotations of breaking free of human constraints to become *beyond* or *super*, this construct suggests an element of transcendence needed to activate an individual’s potential; it suggests that “the self can be startled into action [...] by its meeting with an unexplained impulse [...] to be transformed and to be fully created for the first time” (Mikics 1). However, embedded within this notion of the *Übermensch*—the man who strides beyond our common lot of normative values and customs—is a sense of yearning, as well. To characterize this feeling of lack, we must think of what motivates Roark to strive for the freedom of creative expression.

Given his preternatural gift to be an unceasing laborer, Roark would seem unlikely to harbor a deep longing to reclaim agency from an unfeeling world. We must interrogate this prospect, though, because our circumspect loner-protagonist, projecting his weaponized aloofness, deliberately shields his inner life from attention. He cloaks himself in sinister unknowability. He must, then, experience what Mikics claims is the transformative impulse of the *Übermensch*, such that Roark can harness the inscrutability of his affectless narcissism to become known for mystical power.

If Rand invests conviction in the clear hagiography of the novel, then Roark must reify the exemplary. He would need to be both exceptionally reverent, culling from traditions that have given rise to the great works of mankind, and exceedingly innovative, forsaking tradition. In this reading, Roark represents everything to which our innate desire “to be perfected and to be guided by the allure of the exemplary” should be directed (Mikics 1). However, Roark’s paradoxical labor—placing his work in context of manmade culture yet removing himself from cultural constraints—would require continuous and recursive self-scrutiny. Per Mikics, the twin processes of evaluating culture and investing in one’s own ‘critical power’ places the *Übermensch* on the razor’s edge of knowledge. In such a rarified position, he negotiates “the paradoxical connection between necessity, or fate, and freedom;” he is emboldened by “the importance of provocation as a means of instruction;” and he understands “life as an illusion, at once isolating the individual and interweaving him with the cosmos” (Mikics 1). As the novel invests in this provocative illusion, it exceeds the bounds of mere hagiography. The melodrama of conniving and backbiting at first puts Roark’s efforts in stark relief and places him ‘above it all,’ but naturalistic constraints eventually overwhelm the text. Accordingly, the Roarkian ethos of self-reliance (and his violent defense of same) deconstructs itself. He can master the discourse of critical power, but not the measured exertion of it.

These contradictions pose a paradox, of course. The yearning to transcend our fallible nature necessitates (for those of a devotional inclination) the privileging of metaphysical virtues, and yet the premise giving rise to the *Übermensch* is that this category of human potential must resist (and, in fact, *refute*) speculation about supernatural salvation or God’s grace. In other words, we may achieve self-determination by placing the ‘critical power’ of human intellect over fealty to an unseen and unknowable avatar of omnipotence, but doing so could also allow an

adherent to conflate individualism with hegemony. To better delineate this dilemma, we should turn to Nietzsche and his declaration, in *Ecce Homo*, that his “humanity is a constant self-overcoming” (83). The cryptic meaning here begs the question as to which facets of his subjective experience must Nietzsche overcome in order to feel more human. Based on context, he seems to be commenting on the correlation between his ability to sympathize with others and his craving for seclusion: “my humanity does *not* consist in sympathizing with people as they are, but instead in *putting up with* the fact that I sympathize with them [...] I need *solitude*, by which I mean recovery, a return to myself” (83). In privileging solitude as a virtue, the Nietzsche of *Ecce Homo* not only reiterates his points from *Beyond Good and Evil* (which we discussed earlier), but also places his understanding of the ‘impulse to cleanliness’ in context of its two possible outcomes: reluctant sympathy and irreversible disgust.

As we parse Roark’s hegemonic drive for perfection, for purer and purer expressions of his will to conquer, we should take heed of Nietzsche’s admission that the love of purity too often distorts into its shadow, the vindictiveness of disgust. On the topic of how he has achieved “the guardedness of [his] disgust,” Nietzsche first alludes to the conditions favorable for the emergence of the *Übermensch* (EH 83). With reference to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, his treatise dramatizing the travails of the titular prophet who speaks of mankind’s need to precipitate the apotheosis of the ego, Nietzsche confesses: “The whole of my *Zarathustra* is a dithyramb to solitude, or, if you have understood me, to *purity* ... Luckily not to *pure stupidity*. [...] *Disgust* with people, with ‘the dregs’ of humanity, has always been my greatest danger” (83-4). He then drives his point home by commenting on (and quoting an entire passage about) how “Zarathustra discusses *redemption* from disgust” (84). Beyond merely demonstrating that the “sensitivity of [his] instinct for cleanliness is perfectly uncanny,” Nietzsche draws our attention to a self-critical

reflectiveness capable of regulating sympathy and keeping disgust at bay (83). This is something that Howard Roark sorely lacks.

When he invokes the prospect for redemption, Nietzsche portrays the respite that is turning inward—by which we discover our idealized selves—as necessarily temporary. Once we return from solitude and place ourselves again in (reluctant) contact with humanity, we can see things in their proper relation; the uncanny sensitivity at which Nietzsche marvels can now shine an uncomfortable amount of light on the source of our (former) disgust. Through reflection, we see that the impulse to seek out the pure in ourselves does not amount to a directive to discover the impure in others. A lingering sense of disgust is not an excuse for completely undermining the self-sufficiency of another individual.

Returning to our discussion of Roark as a model for the man *beyond*, Mikics suggests that Nietzsche invites the tensions and contradictions of the *Übermensch* as godlike anti-god. Similarly, Rand observes the tenets of compelling narrative and thus embeds tension, too, when characterizing Roark as godlike anti-god. The unforgivable contradiction that she introduces, then, is simply Roark's will to conquer, which turns others' will to power against them. His overflowing vitality cannot be a boon to society when so many are unmanned while basking in his impossible, superhuman standard for achievement.

It should not surprise us that Roark achieves the freedom to create at the expense of others' opportunities to do so. Dismissive of equality and oddly certain that all mediocrity is a conspiracy against him, Roark carves out opportunities to pursue his vision on his own terms. However, so many men around him fall victim to their own solipsistic misadventures—or, rather, their own heroic travails in the arrogant cause of proving their supremacy over others—that Roark himself is sucked into the naturalistic swirl of destructive and degrading forces. As a

result, *The Fountainhead* reads as a distorted hagiography, trumpeting the brilliance of a misunderstood genius. Once Roark becomes more vocal in spouting his principles, the novel shifts into a manifesto of sorts. His soliloquy in the courtroom goes beyond the defiance he has exhibited from the opening scene with the Dean; his rhetoric is now elevated to a call to arms. From one perspective, Roark deserves to triumph after being persecuted the whole novel long. In this reading, his unlikely exoneration in the courtroom is supposed to feel like vindication. From another perspective, though, Roark is guilty of breach of contract (at the very least), and so he has hardly been scapegoated.

In truth, Roark demonstrates at key points that he could almost be Christ-like in turning the other cheek. For example, we consistently see his indifference, maybe even comfort or satisfaction, being scapegoated by the likes of Toohey. While the ‘sins’ of his austere aesthetic certainly make him a target, they also make him worthy of devotion. Even in his messianic guise, however, Roark provokes uncertainty, discomfort, and apocalyptic dread. As evidence, consider this exchange between Dominique and Wynand: “What is [Roark] to you, Gail? In the nature of a shrine?” (Rand 578). In response, Wynand counters the interpretation offered by Dominique, proposing instead that what Roark means to him—what manner of shadow this monolithic visionary casts over the lives of Manhattan’s coterie of elites, tastemakers, and hangers-on—is “[i]n the nature of a hair shirt” (578). This conception gives us unmistakable shades of the holy fool, of the self-destructive archetype designed to humble those whose false piety has accelerated us to the eschatological precipice.

With unnerving conviction in the righteousness of dominion and conquest, Roark commits multiple acts—the rape of Dominique, the adulteration of Keating’s work, the destruction of Cortlandt—that mimic the actions of those who are just as guilty (although

unwittingly) in taking the reins of their own degradation. In this light, Roark's efforts do not fail so much as they undermine his earlier stance as a transformative force. As Roark's genius deconstructs itself, so too does Rand's monolithic vision. It is fitting, then, that the actions of our vain loner-protagonist literally deconstruct the supposed abomination that is a housing project, which was intended to help lift the disadvantaged from degraded circumstances.

Status and Sublimation in *Savage Holiday*:

The Paranoid Loner who “Found Himself Eagerly Clutching at a Scapegoat”

In his 1954 novel, *Savage Holiday*, Richard Wright pits the themes of religious certainty and social change against one another. He interrogates the assumption that Christianity can and should act as a bulwark against emerging cultural shifts, but he centers his critique on decorum rather than dogma, behavior rather than belief. As the text lays out tensions ignited by generational difference and a single mother’s sexual freedom, it eventually explodes into a psychodrama about patriarchal control that arrives, rather cynically, at a form of stasis. Although Wright concludes the novel with stark finality, he resolves few of its psychological tensions. However, he employs enough dark humor to occasionally punctuate his bleak story of repression leading to ruination, even if tragic irony overwhelms the text in the end.

Paradoxically, Wright’s heavy-handed narrative voice makes *Savage Holiday* an appropriate vehicle for experiencing a precisely directed form of catharsis. By keying into obsession to an oppressive degree, Wright establishes Erskine Fowler, our loner-protagonist, as a privileged man somehow capable of lashing out at a defenseless single mother and war widow, Mabel Blake. Although both pious and prudish, Fowler accidentally scares Mabel’s young son, Tony, into falling to his death from the tenth-floor balcony of their shared apartment building. This episode occurs early in the novel when Fowler gets locked out of his apartment while completely nude, yet his resulting trauma proves less significant to Wright’s plot than we might expect. Rather, Fowler worries about the rippling of consequences beyond his control, with his

own culpability quickly overshadowed in his mind by paranoia that someone saw both the accident on the balcony and his fleeing the scene.

Seeking an outlet for purging his guilt and shame, Fowler withholds the truth from Mabel and, in fact, vilifies her as the cause of Tony's suffering. With his survival instinct taking hold, Fowler scrutinizes his every move, yet his underlying intention is to manipulate Mabel; he arrives at this strategy solely due to an obscure sense of resentment, a feeling which has been compounded over time by his paranoia, zealotry, and sexual longing. By the end of the novel, Fowler is a broken man, and his efforts at controlling Mabel make him no closer to redeeming the catastrophe he has caused. With this focus on the tragic shortcomings of Fowler, Wright safely expunges both our fear and pity of those ineffectual men so desperate for control that they become willing to commit self-sabotage.

As we learn early on, Fowler can veer from internalized speculations, which seem calmly rational at first, to heated accusations, which explode only after fits of passive-aggressive baiting. The point of commonality, though, is Fowler's tendency to brood, and the source of his brooding and paranoia is a fear of himself that overshadows even his fear of others. Something uncertain and unknowable exists within Fowler, it seems. Beneath his pragmatic and dispassionate façade lurks an uncanny presence, a mixture of self-doubt and uneasiness which haunts him once trauma from his past reemerges stronger than ever. As these unresolved anxieties start to complicate an already tense situation, Fowler cannot stop himself from exacerbating the fallout from Tony's accidental death.

Although seemingly a center of calm amid the tension and confusion surrounding the boy's untimely demise, Fowler conceals a guilty conscience and, thus, wallows in cognitive dissonance. Driven by superego, he sees himself as crusading to reinstate order, yet this leaves

Fowler uncertain of what he might do and increasingly convinced (if also troubled) about needing to resort to extreme measures.²⁶ While some of these solutions include admitting his role in Tony's death to Mabel and potentially turning himself in to the police, Fowler becomes more preoccupied with correcting Mabel's lackluster performance upholding a narrow version of femininity and motherhood. In response to this perceived threat against family values, Fowler confronts Mabel about the number of men with whom she socializes and even imagines that he could 'redeem' her through his offer of marriage. Given these dubious efforts, we can see why Laura Dubek would argue this is a novel that "rewrite[s] the dominant postwar family narrative, critiquing the glorification of white marriage and motherhood that marks this period of our nation's social and political history" (595). Indeed, the novel's conclusion implies, quite sardonically, that Fowler will pursue his quest to be united with Mabel—to 'protect' her—by any means; their narratives, if not their hearts and souls, cleave together once Fowler performs his only action of lasting impact: murder.

In a pat and tidy epiphany during the novel's denouement, Wright reveals why Fowler, unsettled by his own desires, obsesses over and eventually kills Mabel, his distressed neighbor. This epiphany exposes a "*shameful daydream of revenge*" that Fowler has repressed since the age of seven, when he first entertained the desire to kill the only parent he had ever known, his inattentive and promiscuous mother (Wright 220). Although "*he had pushed out of his mind*" this tragic desire for many years, Fowler returns to this self-destructive and simplistic solution—revenge—once he becomes resentful of his former employer, Longevity Life Insurance Company (220). As we learn from the novel's opening scene, Fowler cannot wring even the

²⁶ This is a longstanding strategy in his life: "At some point in his childhood he had assumed toward himself the role of a policeman, had accused himself, had hauled himself brutally into the court of his conscience, had arraigned himself before the bar of his fears, and had found himself guilty and had, finally and willingly, dragged himself off to serve a sentence of self-imposed labor for life, had locked himself up in a prison-cage of toil..." (32-3).

barest note of contrition from Longevity Life's upper management despite his years of loyalty. He surmises that "[f]or twenty years he had worshipped these men, and now they were hating him," yet Fowler feels more dejected than indignant over being wronged in this way (27). In lieu of jeopardizing his pension, stock options, and severance pay through some self-righteous outburst, Fowler chooses to enter retirement with his tail between his legs.

Cast out into a world where he feels a "haunting sense of not quite being his own master," a world in which he can hardly contend with his "hated freedom," Fowler can only flounder (32, 31). However, once he begins to obsess over Mabel, his "voluptuously sinful" neighbor, he discovers that the two foremost grievances in his fear-addled mind can now redirect toward his newfound locus of desire (90). With more time on his hands, Fowler turns his attention to the one person who can awaken desire in him, but this is the type of lust that, at its most lascivious, objectifies Mabel as the "pliant, raw stuff of feminine material which he could mold and exalt as he pleased" (184). Fixated, Fowler notes Mabel's uncanny mirroring of both the neglectfulness of his mother and the aloofness of Longevity Life; these resonances exert a powerful influence on him.

In short order, Fowler displaces his urge to retaliate—against his mother, against Longevity Life—onto Mabel. After the climactic moment when he murders her, Fowler can only understand his violent deed as an act of revenge. However, Wright delays the onset of this epiphany until *after* Fowler has killed her, which suggests that our loner-protagonist must justify to himself what would otherwise appear to have been a brutish and irrational impulse. Even though Mabel had never wronged Fowler except through inadvertently arousing his long-repressed sexual drive, he still blames her for reawakening his deep-seated hatred of his mother.

After projecting various sins onto Mabel and ultimately murdering her with a cold sense of duty, Fowler must reckon with the destruction he has wrought. Despite this depiction of Fowler's effort at self-scrutiny, the novel's grace note of an ending feels inconclusive, as it has a way of replicating the sweaty paranoia and shifty-eyed disavowals that have defined Fowler's *modus operandi* up to that point. Once he ruminates long enough to accept that he has just stabbed Mabel to death in his kitchen, he surrenders to a police officer but then insists, "*I can't talk [...] I can't tell you anything*" (222). Fowler then enters a moment of silence with head bowed in arms, but this gesture provides little closure to readers because it evinces no real remorse.

By presenting Fowler's ineffectual reflectiveness as not just absurd but dangerous, Wright undermines the fascistic self-control that Fowler had long used as his coping mechanism. Indeed, what we learn about Fowler's repressed urges simply confirms his deranged need for control, as his desire for Mabel, the woman who "forever hover[ed] agonizingly beyond his reach," only comes into existence alongside his yearning to overpower and punish her in some way (212). As an instance of the return of the repressed, this impulse to conquer Mabel, to demand all her love and attention at the expense of her own agency, is clearly id-driven; it is a symptom of his foundational disorder, reformatted from hate directed at his mother into lust directed at his mother's uncanny double, Mabel. Due to Fowler's successful sublimation for all these years, though, the intensity of his need for revenge has diminished into a nearly subliminal (yet omnidirectional) resentment, even as his need for control has been allowed to go unchecked. Both qualities served him well, after all, detecting insurance fraud for Longevity Life.²⁷

²⁷ Fowler details his resentment towards the litany of false claims and guilty people that consumed his work life. For example, he recalls the "shifty-eyed, timid, sensual, sluttish woman trying, with all of her revolting and nauseating sexiness, to make you believe that she'd been maimed for life in an automobile accident" (28-9). Also, there was once a "small-time, stupid, greasy-faced Italian grocery-store keeper who had amateurishly set his dingy, garlic-

Fowler's sublimation also means any reemergence of unsanctioned desires must coincide with the arrogant assumption that he can once again master these urges. Having found a use for his vengeful nature through his choice of career, Fowler can look upon his lust for Mabel—once properly constrained and redirected—as another vehicle to “quell the riot of those returning memories from the dark bog of his childhood past” (134). Because his offer of marriage would, in his mind, accomplish this goal, Fowler fails to see his possessive lust for what it is: the return of his repressed need for vengeance. Afraid of his own sexuality, he represses these feelings and channels them into church-sanctioned visions of wedded devotion, yet he does so without understanding what truly makes them unhealthy. As we arrive at the conclusion of the novel's harrowing narrative, we learn that libidinal desire is dangerous for Fowler because it reactivates his sadistic need to punish his neglectful, emotionally absent mother. Beyond that, we sense that his hypervigilance against abandonment developed in response not just to his mother's behavior, but also to a general feeling of being rejected. This sense of isolation, compelled upon him by others, has made Fowler so paranoid about others' motives that he acts closed-off when he should be vulnerable, just like he becomes self-destructive when he should be contrite.

Considering how Fowler ultimately surrenders to the police but refuses to confess his motives, some part of him understands that his extreme measure has in no way served justice. As always, he proves reverent of “the rigorous fiats of duty,” yet his gesture of surrendering falls well short of penance because he cannot articulate the full extent of his long-held need for revenge (220). By closing the novel on this ambiguous note, Wright makes available to us only

reeking place ablaze hoping that he'd collect enough insurance money to start all over again under another name and in another state” (29). Tellingly, these figures, taken together, are reminiscent of Cora and Nick Papadakis in James M. Cain's crime noir, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, published in 1934; Wright seems to be tipping his hand about the hardboiled desperation that Fowler at once deplores yet cannot escape. For pop-cultural resonances more contemporary with *Savage Holiday*, two films by Alfred Hitchcock—*Rear Window* (1954) and *Vertigo* (1958)—demonstrate the perverse appeal of voyeurism and the dangers of amateur sleuthing. Beyond that, they share Wright's concern with the delusion-fueled anxiety over uncanny doubling, and they invoke the archetypal fear of falling from great heights in fateful instances.

the slightest of sympathetic readings: we could claim that Fowler resorts to murder because of his sense of duty, as if ridding the world of Mabel would salvage the right of all men to control women's bodies. Such sympathy would be misguided and misogynistic, of course, and so I can only believe that Wright intends for Fowler's self-righteous revenge narrative to be ironic and unsatisfying, rather than heartfelt and tragic.

From one perspective, Wright seems determined to offer only cold comfort to his readers through this ambiguous, almost taunting conclusion. However, he also imbeds enough tragic irony that the novel can condemn Fowler's hypocrisy without devolving into a screed against all forms of conviction or piety. Indeed, Wright makes Fowler's grievances with the world so personal and idiosyncratic that his zealotry cannot be mistaken for any type of commonplace, merely dogmatic Christianity. For greater insight into Fowler's skewed faith, consider the Sunday school lesson he manages to present at his church, Mount Ararat Baptist, mere hours after the accident that sends Tony plummeting to his death.

As he prepares his extemporaneous remarks, Fowler first imagines Mabel "wallow[ing] shamelessly in the fleshpots of nightclubs," then envisions himself as "God's fiery rod of anger" to be wielded against her, and finally speaks to his class about the "fearful battlegrounds [of] our hearts" (87). This last point—the only one he vocalizes—should give us pause for how it acknowledges, only to then *dismiss*, Fowler's own struggles with what he terms "the seductions of a deceptive world" (87). Having previously devoted himself to both a mother and an employer that would eventually abandon him, he now dedicates himself to combatting deception. With Tony's death fresh in our minds, though, we can sense the hypocrisy demonstrated in this moment, as Fowler has already committed to befriending Mabel merely as a pretense. His hypocrisy manifests transparently in this hope to deceive Mabel about his 'pure' motives.

More importantly, Wright foregrounds tragic irony in this moment, as Fowler is clearly guilty of deluding himself. By the conclusion of his impromptu sermon, Fowler no longer frames Mabel as the source of his temptation but rather as the key to his salvation:

Christ likewise enjoins you to clasp hands with your neighbor, even your enemy—those who hate us and whom we hate—and lead them into that family where hate is no more, where enemies are transformed into brothers, neighbors! Christ denied His mother and His brothers, but only to make all women His mother and all men His brothers and neighbors! (88)

Couched in terms of a holy war designed to convert rather than vanquish enemies, Fowler's sanctimonious imperative elevates his life's work from the secular to the spiritual. It also implies that he can prove himself worthy of God's love only by refashioning Mabel, the object of his lust, as the mother he has always hated for having spurned his childlike, unconditional love. With this clear reference to Oedipal desire, Wright foreshadows how Fowler, like other loner-protagonists under duress, will only discover once it is too late that his spurious attempts at integrating into society have imploded. If anything, his extreme measures will warrant a degree of ostracism more confining than his current staid and prudish lifestyle.

Fraught with irony, Fowler's championing of the "sublime spectacle of the family" uncovers for us the source of his desperation to compel a familial bond between himself, Mabel, and her young son, Tony (87). Given that Fowler is all too aware of how "[m]anmade families lurch and wreck themselves on the rocks of circumstance," his fight against the dissolution of his makeshift family must seem doomed from the beginning (88). Nonetheless, he exerts his will onto Mabel out of a misplaced desire to reconcile with his long-dead mother. Before Fowler can convince himself that a makeshift family is within his grasp, though, he must first reawaken

those grievances that will motivate his antagonism of Mabel. Possessed by a latent form of sexual longing too forbidding to explore, Fowler foments deeper and deeper resentment of any carnal desire. More troubling, though, is how this resentment feeds into his paranoia. Fowler not only feels compelled to combat legitimate deception, he also becomes hypervigilant to the point of forming unfounded suspicions about Mabel—and even himself.

For context about the tragic irony of Fowler's obsessive need for a family, Abdul R. JanMohamed suggests that a logic of displacement undergirds our protagonist's Oedipal complex. In this reading, Mabel takes the place of Fowler's mother just as much as all-consuming lust displaces his long-held fear of sexuality. Specifically, JanMohamed contends that, within Wright's conception, "matricide is the result of the impossibility of avoiding oedipal desires and the even greater impossibility of transgressing the injunction against that desire: the subject is doomed to oscillate between the desire and its impossibility" (211). Within the skewed logic of his coping strategies, Fowler's avoidant personality displaces the angst he would otherwise feel constantly.

I argue, however, that we must consider how this oscillation (focused on Mabel rather than his own mother) vexes Fowler only until his unspeakable lust becomes concrete hatred. Discovering Mabel as an object worthy of his disgust and hate breaks the circular logic of his superficial piety, which constantly supplants all desire even as those desires inevitably undermine his piety. With the eruption of Fowler's self-righteous hatred for Mabel, the logic of sublimation finally makes his Oedipal desire actionable: what was once an irreconcilable tension fueled by toxic memories of his own mother can now become the imperative to manipulate and overpower the far-too-trustful Mabel.

More than halfway into Part One of the novel, we learn that the disorder Fowler must confront is of his own making. After unintentionally causing Tony's death, Fowler acts quickly to flee the scene of the accident and to shield himself from suspicion. To that end, he fixes his attention on Mabel, knowing their lives are now inextricably linked. Unmoored by grief, Mabel seems unwilling to question the circumstances surrounding Tony's fall, and this blind spot translates to an aporia within the text: we cannot say for certain when Mabel starts to doubt Fowler's sincerity as he helps her cope, nor do we know exactly when she first suspects his involvement in the accident. From Fowler's perspective, though, this blind spot translates to an advantage: he knows he must protect his secret knowledge, so he sublimates his guilt by fixating on Mabel as a promiscuous (and, therefore, *unfit*) mother. This widens the power differential between them and feeds Fowler's misbegotten belief that Mabel tacitly consents to his control. Filtering his fears and uncertainties through his disgust for any woman "who couldn't give the right kind of attention to children," Fowler redirects his anxieties but cannot control his intensifying rage (Wright 35).

Despite his willingness to blame Mabel for Tony's death, Fowler also tries to gauge the extent to which he, too, is at fault. This process is halfhearted, though, as the text bluntly reveals:

Automatically, [Fowler's] mind sought for someone else upon whom to shunt the blame for what had happened; but, remembering the undeniably accidental nature of the episode, he realized that he didn't need a scapegoat upon which to dump the

responsibility. It had all transpired so quickly, so inevitably, so utterly shorn of any

intention on his part that he could have sworn that it had happened to somebody else. (57)

There is nothing pained or saddened in this dissociative manner of self-scrutiny, yet Fowler soon dismisses it, anyway. In his mind, he can simply claim recourse to privilege through his political

connections and bribe those who might question him about what happened to Tony; he believes, rather naively, that calling in favors to receive exoneration would trump any need to feel remorse.²⁸ With this presumption of both his security and superiority, Fowler has no need to manufacture blame, even if that is his initial impulse, and so his dogged attempts at self-control wane and distort over time.

Adopting a formalist approach to his unconventional tragedy, Wright focuses on a concentrated timeframe and sets the action almost exclusively in the Manhattan apartment building where Fowler and Mabel both reside. Although most of the building's tenants recede from the narrative once the main storyline begins to develop, they still reify some of the novel's major concerns. For one, the invisible presence of this Greek chorus acts as an extension of the "white, smooth, modern" hallways that, panopticon-like, provide "no Gothic recesses, no Victorian curves, no Byzantine incrustations in, or behind which, [one] could hide" (45). This sense of exposure, exacerbated by the informal network of surveillance and gossip among certain of the building's tenants, feeds into the paranoia that drives the novel to its brutal end.²⁹ Before we are thrust into this claustrophobic milieu, though, we must first enter the mindset of our disturbed protagonist. Wright gives us this window by establishing a prologue of sorts, an extended sequence prior to Tony's death that is the longest stretch of the novel to take place away from the Elmira apartment building.

²⁸ Note the tension between Fowler's arrogance and uncertainty: "The honorable, Christian thing to do was to tell the police; he had connections; he had money; he could hire a lawyer. But, no; that was not the way out; not at all. Considerations of personal safety were not constraining him; he could, if worse came to worst, bribe his way out. But, out of *what* would he bribe his way? He wasn't guilty..." (81).

²⁹ The character of Mrs. Westerman provides the best, most insidious example of this judgmental presence. Over the course of an extensive conversation, she both divulges certain speculations that would incriminate Fowler—telling him that Mabel "thinks she saw a naked person on the balcony..."—and allows him to arrive at a false sense of confidence that Mabel has already been blamed for Tony's death and that his secret will easily remain suppressed: "Listen, Mr. Fowler, she's just like all those loose women; they're a dime a dozen...When somebody catches 'em with a man, they start yelling: 'Rape!' it's a wonder she didn't say it was a nigger she saw. You understand?" (107, 109).

To foreground the paranoid oscillations of Fowler's mind, Wright opens the novel by letting us experience the catalyst for our loner-protagonist's extended bout of dejection and self-recrimination. What we glimpse is the fallout as Fowler, forced into retirement at the age of forty-three, is cast off by the only family he has ever cared to know, Longevity Life. This unwanted break with the past initiates Fowler's downfall, yet it is not revenge against his former employer that he seeks.

Wasting no time, the text establishes the first of Fowler's many anxieties over the course of this opening, which we enter *in medias res*. This glimpse into Fowler's waning professional life helps contextualize the rest of Part One, helpfully titled "Anxiety," and even arouses our sympathy for the way Fowler comes by some (but not all) of his grievances honestly. Forced into retirement, he receives a farewell banquet that rings hollow due to the nepotism underlying his ouster. Introduced to us as he nurses a bruised ego, Fowler frets obsessively and clutters his thoughts with ever-intensifying doubts and accusations he is too timid to voice. We come to understand in short order that Fowler is an isolated and paranoid man, the type of loner-protagonist who feels threatened when unsure of others' intentions but downright unmanned when unsure of his own.

Seemingly the paragon of conformity, Fowler can nonetheless admit that he has sought "the approval of his fellowmen" for purposes darker than mere acceptance or camaraderie (32). In conjunction with his urge to validate himself through work, Fowler has long committed to a campaign of psychosexual repression and social estrangement. Resigned but also a little proud, he reflects that, "above all, [work] made him a stranger to a part of himself that he feared and wanted never to know" (32). Similarly, he resorts to a smug, stubborn tone when he recalls that "they'd always regarded him as a little queer in the office because he wouldn't exclaim and wax

slobberingly enthusiastic over every new gadget” (31). This strategy of distracting—and distancing—himself through work can no longer serve Fowler, though, now that his services are no longer needed at his job.

With wounded pride, our protagonist believes that being jobless will situate him at a remove from the pageantry of human endeavor, and he frames this oncoming sense of stasis as if he were always fated to be the victim of a cosmic joke. To wit, Fowler veers into self-pity as soon as he grasps how insignificant his personal trauma is to others; after “dazedly” observing happy couples as they dance during the banquet in his honor, Fowler feels “lost,” “abandoned,” and “alone amidst it all” (20). This reverie then extends to the metaphysical scale, with the narration detailing Fowler’s dread that Longevity Life will “keep marching” while he remains “on the outside of it all, standing on the sidelines, rejected, refused” (20). In light of this reminder that time “flow[s] pitilessly on,” the novel’s main conflict comes into focus: Fowler now feels daunted and resentful as he enters an extended bout of morbid introspection, and he thus becomes lost in its echo chamber of self-recrimination (20).

After finding the bluster to “protest their abandonment of him,” Fowler objects to the “cheap, sickening way” that the company’s president, Albert Warren, has decided to install his son, Robert, in Erskine’s position (24, 25). To his credit, Fowler finally works up the courage to confront Mr. Warren because he has felt “like a criminal” since the Board of Directors “made [him] take a bribe” (22). However, the most piercing critique that Fowler manages to land—by snapping at a snidely placating Warren, “Where’s *your* honor?”—actually implicates himself as much as it indicts Warren’s shady business practices (25). Fowler cannot claim to have done the honorable thing in accepting what he terms a ‘bribe’ but what we understand to be a golden

parachute, the type of compensation designed to mitigate the sting of severance by way of nepotism.

Having no upper hand, Fowler is easily made to kowtow before Warren and his “crusty, acid-tongued vice president,” Ricky (24). All it takes to chasten Fowler are a series of insults from Ricky about being “out of date” and then the final gut punch of Ricky’s taunting question: “Do you want to fight Longevity Life?” (26, 27). Once Fowler breathes out a resigned “no,” readers can sense that his “wilting” demeanor means he could never act on his longing “to send his right fist smashing into Warren’s face” (27). Still, the very appearance of this momentary fantasy suggests that revenge will remain paramount in Fowler’s mind.

According to Gerald Early, Wright’s aim with this novel is to explore in an objective, scientific manner the brutal efficacy of Fowler’s “ethical solipsism and evasion of moral responsibility” (232). While Early’s interpretation adheres nicely to his thesis that Wright set out to compose a novel “so explicitly psychoanalytic that it would resemble a case study,” we should not disregard the unflinching, steely-eyed way that Wright elicits our dread (223). Through his intense focus on the machinations of evil, no matter how mundane or prosaic, Wright reiterates again and again Fowler’s deep hypocrisy and paranoia. He shows us through grim repetition how the façade of “religious rectitude” has helped to distance Fowler from his traumatic childhood, or what he views as “the past that his love and need of religion had been designed to deny” (Wright 189). Between his dogmatic posturing and his eager “clutching at” Mabel as a scapegoat, Fowler sublimates a number of childhood resentments (72). Chief among them are the entwined traumas of his mother’s neglect and his own sexual confusion due to witnessing the ‘primal scene’ of his blasé mother having sex with a stranger (98). Despite the pathos that this revelation engenders, it is so blatantly Freudian as to seem farcical.

The source of the novel's power, then, resides not in its Oedipal configuration or the frequently telegraphed and, thus, inevitable dissolution of the family unit. Rather, its power resides in how it unsettles the norms of its comfortably bourgeois setting. Wright's biggest accomplishment is in exposing Christianity and 'conventional' morality as tools of power rather than conduits for achieving some divine purpose. Because *Savage Holiday* takes little glee in its lurid revelations and is almost absurdist in its halfhearted application of suspense, it fails as a psychological thriller. However, it succeeds as an indictment of hypocrisy and unchecked male privilege.

The character arc for Fowler begins when he is struck dumb upon realizing that, despite investing in his job and company as a source of identity and self-worth, this dynamic has not been reciprocated. The company derives neither identity nor worth from having Fowler as part of its anonymous machine. He amounts to nothing in the hierarchy of his company, as leadership there operates through nepotism rather than valuing and nurturing one's merits. Roles are interchangeable at Longevity Life, so Fowler has now come to realize that he had been drawing self-worth from a position that was never assured to be his own. He could never take ownership of a privileged spot within the ecosystem of his company, but he can at least superimpose that mindset on the world of romantic entanglement, which confuses and unnerves him. The result, of course, is his tactic to embody phallogocentrism and wield parent shaming as a weapon against Mabel. Ignoring one's own fallible nature might be a necessary (if hypocritical) strategy when uncovering insurance scams, but applying chauvinistic double standards that decry female sexuality is hypocritical in dangerous ways when Fowler seems to need Mabel's validation so badly.

Even though now forced to exist outside the business world, Fowler adheres to a competitive mindset. However, his target is no longer novice criminals caught trying to perpetrate insurance fraud; the onslaught he hopes to resist now is as big and irreversible as a new social order. His struggle, then, is to comprehend how greater permissiveness of women expressing their sexuality could deny him the control and ownership he desires of Mabel. Confronting a repressed facet of his being, Fowler imports the skepticism of his insurance work and becomes a detective within a social structure unaccustomed to scrutiny or the presumption of guilt. As a result, Mabel is ill prepared to combat Fowler's insinuations and accusations.

Despite his initial impulse to judge himself harshly, Fowler is also the type to blame others for the things he wishes to ignore, like generational change and societal breakdown. Indeed, the only way in which Fowler achieves ultimate control over his life is through murder, thereby eliminating Mabel as a reminder of his deficiencies and society's changing sexual mores. As early as his retirement party, Fowler understands that he is "a man who could not keep a grip upon himself" (21). With the reception coming to a close, Fowler faces the most humiliating form of defeat: he must stoically resign himself to being cast aside and cannot even have the masochistic pleasure of being conquered or bested. He is simply being replaced, and he cannot come to terms with this new reality.

Ironically, Fowler chastises himself for his obsolescence in a way that merely replicates his initial feeling of disarray. Forced to shift away from his "self-protective nostalgia" for the "familiar atmosphere" of Longevity Life, he instead fixates on the belief that he harbors—and, in reality, has always harbored—"slow and turgid stirrings of buried impulses now trying to come to resurrected life in the deep dark of him" (31, 33). It would seem that Fowler, in a manner

typical of the loner-protagonist under duress, has managed to camouflage himself. He has hidden his neuroses in plain sight, even as part of him has lain in wait to plumb the depths of depravity.

There must be a catalyst, though, to pressure Fowler into venturing away from the comforts of his staid lifestyle. To arrive at the unstable nexus of his self-righteous entitlement in conflict with his self-destructive urges, Fowler needs a push. With tragic efficiency, Wright provides one, as Fowler inadvertently causes a series of escalating mishaps, concluding with Tony's accidental death, the very next morning after his farewell banquet. At first, while preparing to shower, he miscalculates his ability to reach for his Sunday newspaper before his front door slams shut. Next, he must grapple with his "moral conditioning leap[ing] to the fore," as his prudish nature makes him fear that a neighbor might discover him "standing nude, with a foolish expression on his face, before [his] locked door" (44). This failure to commit to decisive action exacerbates his sweaty distress.

Next, Fowler makes a fervent attempt to board the elevator, which exposes him to an even greater risk of being discovered. This foolish gambit makes him want to "scream and bring this spell of unreality to an end," even though he knows he must keep his wits about him and insist to himself, "[T]his unreality [is] real" (48). Once he finds an empty floor onto which he can disembark, Fowler feels as though he were "escaping an enormous throng of encircling, hostile people armed with long, sharp knives, intent upon chopping off his arms, his legs, his genitals, his head" (50). However, the narration undermines Fowler's relief almost immediately, telling the reader, "So long had he waited for this respite that he now, *quite foolishly*, felt that he had almost solved his problem" (51; emphasis added). With this foreshadowing, we know his epiphany—"YES, THERE WAS HIS BATHROOM WINDOW [...] HE COULD MAYBE CLIMB INTO IT FROM THE BALCONY"—can only lead to tragic results (51).

Throughout this tense sequence of events, Wright underscores Fowler's reluctance to be set upon a quest. Just as it is not only irksome but fear-inducing to be cast into retirement, so too is the quest to return safely to the womb of his apartment.³⁰ This uncertainty and fear undermines Fowler's sense of duty, and Wright uses subtle humor to signal the irony of our protagonist discovering he lacks the true courage to stand for his convictions. Instead of embodying noble self-assertion, Fowler withers from his initial impulse to heroically uphold his claim of rightful ownership; to wit, the rationale that he "[b]etter get [his] paper [because] [t]wo weeks ago his Sunday paper had been stolen" evaporates as soon as he is stranded and exposed (42). As we venture further into this ordeal, Wright emphasizes the psychosexual underpinning for why Fowler remains "dismayingly conscious of his nudity": not only does he feel exposed to the point of imagining "a huge x-ray eye [...] glaring into his very soul," but he also feels diminished, shrunken into "something small, shameful" (43). The self-possession necessary to match against his vulnerable position eludes Fowler. Thus, heroic masculinity fails to manifest for him, even in this absurdly low-stakes situation.

The savagery of this predicament, from Fowler's perspective, and our own sense of its savage *irony* become more definite when we consider Fowler's dissociative sense of his body and virility. As Wright takes pains to establish from the earliest moments after Fowler wakes on this fateful Sunday, this is a loner-protagonist so consumed with how the world perceives him that he conceives of himself "loom[ing]" while naked (40). When the narration insists that, "[n]ude, Erskine looked anything but pious or Christian," we must assume the cryptic meaning

³⁰ In the moments immediately prior to the fiasco over the Sunday paper, Wright presents Fowler as comfortably cloistered. As Fowler prepares to shower, he enters the kitchen, still nude, to tend to his coffee pot that has just boiled over; from there, he sets out provisions for an indulgent breakfast: "he opened the refrigerator and hauled out the eggs, the butter, the bacon, a jar of strawberry jam, and a tin of chilled fruit juice. Padding on bare feet, he visualized the plate of succulent food he'd have" (42). Depicting Fowler safely in the womb of his apartment, Wright shows us how self-sufficient our loner-protagonist is, even as he also affords a sly glimpse of the setting in which Fowler will later murder Mabel. Once these domestic comforts are snatched away from him, Fowler resorts to making demands of the only maternal figure available to him.

here—primitivist in associating Fowler’s “hirsute coating” with uncouth humanity, condescending in associating nudity with hedonism—would resonate with Fowler, if only in the sense that he is no stranger to feeling monstrous, unwanted, or lacking in some way (40-1). As further evidence of this reading, consider how the feeling of being diminished recurs for Fowler while locked out of his apartment: “His hairy body, as he glanced down at it, seemed huge and repulsive, like that of a giant; but, when he looked off, his body felt puny, shriveled, like that of a dwarf” (45). Fowler not only fears he might be swallowed whole by this situation, he also fears that he might *already* be withered and used up. The situational irony of this moment should remind us of the incident when Fowler confronts Mr. Warren; just as that earlier attempt to assert himself left Fowler unmanned, this current crisis, exacerbated by his nakedness, should strike us as another such attempt doomed to affirm only his virile body’s premature impotence.

Although Wright subverts heroic masculinity across the entire novel, he plies this technique especially during the buildup to Tony’s death. As we have already catalogued, heavy doses of irony help undermine any sense that Fowler, though proud of his perceptiveness and cautious demeanor, can prevent impending tragedy. However, Wright embellishes his depiction of Fowler as a fish out of water, desperate to maintain his composure, by tweaking other literary formulations: Fowler’s archetypal journey is restricted to the claustrophobic spaces of the Elmira apartment building, and it manifests symbolically as a descent into inescapable paranoia; Fowler’s noble piety is reframed and contested through biblical allusion, especially to Adam and Noah’s shame over nakedness; and Fowler’s ingenuity and pragmatism are called into question once Wright depicts him in a Freudian dream sequence, which evokes both the fear of castration and the myopia of “intricate mental calculations,” or the shrewd judgements and assumptions that will eventually betray Fowler (36). Given our loner-protagonist’s morbid introspection, we

should explore the effects of these techniques in terms of both the reader's response and Fowler's own conflicted sense of self.

For Fowler, the call to (mis)adventure is the newspaper scattered at his apartment door. However, it would be more apt to think of this as an absurd MacGuffin for the way it lures him out of his apartment even though he otherwise seems wholly unconcerned about the outside world; Fowler strains for news of a society that he has already decided wishes to leave him behind, and which he has always approached skeptically. Once barred reentry as his door slams shut and locks behind him, Fowler manhandles the newspaper, wadding and then clutching it to his genitals as an ersatz fig leaf befitting our ponderous and paranoid Adam. Readers should sense the irony underlying this catalyst for action, especially given the bewildering moment when Fowler, after witnessing Tony's fall, decides to swipe Mabel's copy of the Sunday paper and to leave behind his own "damp, crumpled" and, we soon learn, *bloodied* copy (75). Nevertheless, Fowler himself likely values his routine, including his Sunday paper, more for what it signifies to others than what it means in the context of his ongoing existential crisis. Simply put, Fowler is oblivious to the self-sabotage inherent in straining to retain a façade of normalcy.

Even in its broad strokes, Fowler's archetypal journey does not force him to venture far (aside from his time in the elevator, his sermon at Sunday school, and an awkward visit to a bar, later in the novel, with Mabel and her friends). Nonetheless, the narrative action sees him mostly nonplused and paranoid, rather than assured of his path, because he views his objective to be micromanaging Mabel's grief, rather than coping with his own trauma. While confronting the unknowable resolve that seems to belie Mabel's confusion, Fowler grasps consistently at whatever momentary power he might need in order to make her submit to his desires: not just in

accepting his version of what happened to Tony and why, but also in accepting his plan to marry her.³¹ This petty manipulation leaves Fowler little opportunity to vindicate himself (either in our eyes or Mabel's), yet it also exposes the overwhelming tension he must feel while objectifying her.

To see Mabel as the unknown he must conquer, Fowler first has to suppress any trace of empathy, any inkling of his own shared flaws or peccadillos. Wright illustrates this point succinctly with an allusion to King Lear's self-pitying ways. Later in the novel, after learning of how Mabel views the financial and social predicaments caused by working at a nightclub, Fowler responds thusly: "More sinned against than sinning, he told himself with satisfaction, relishing the advantage that his money and social status gave him over her" (123). Through this audacious bit of exposition, Wright underscores the irony of Fowler's snide train of thought by invoking the air of privilege that necessarily permeates such blinkered self-regard. Although the hero of his own pompous narrative of victim-turned-savior, Fowler lacks the true courage to confront his delusions of grandeur. Put simply, he is a fraud.

As a bastardization of the archetypal hero, Fowler is more paranoid than stoic. When circumstances force him to suffer at length, to endure shame over his naked body, Fowler responds with the darkly brooding impulse toward self-preservation, rather than noble-minded perseverance. Indeed, Wright offers an especially telling instance of Fowler's panic, soon after

³¹ In the earliest instance of Fowler engaging in emotional subterfuge with Mabel, he drifts into a state of "ancient jealousy that he'd thought he'd thrust back of him forever" (121). His only recourse against his "uneasiness in the presence of a woman, that deep conviction that no woman could ever be truly his," is to access his missionary zeal and weaponize it (121). This extended scene takes us from Fowler's initial disgust with the thought of sabotaging his good name in order to save Mabel to his eventual epiphany that "*one* vow could enable him to answer God's call, save this woman, and serve Him as he should—*He'd ask her to marry him!*" (134). From first "wondering how it would have been if he'd tried being Tony's father" and lamenting that it "would've meant being married to a *fallen* woman like this," Fowler arrives at what he terms "an executive's decision"—something "moral, clean-cut, efficient, practical"—and relishes how this 'solution' would place him "in the role of a missionary" (121, 134).

causing Tony to fall, when he frames Fowler's mindset as wholly concerned with *his* wellbeing, not Tony's or Mabel's:

Such a story would be the ruin of him. What would the *Daily News* or the *Mirror* think of it? What would his friends and relatives think? They'd think that he was 'queer'... As the word *queer* came to his mind, he felt again a tight cap of something like steel pressing down upon his skull and he all but collapsed. (61)

Despite the dread Wright evokes with this passage, he also makes a joke of Fowler's armchair psychoanalysis. In the concluding portion of the above quote, Wright nudges readers to question their own pat assumptions about 'unconscious complexes' that might explain Fowler's behavior, but also might excuse the toxic feelings that underlie his actions:

Yes; these days everybody was talking about 'complexes' and the 'unconscious'; and a man called Freud (which always reminded him of *fraud!*) was making people believe that the most fantastic things could happen to people's feelings. Why, they'd say that he'd gone *deliberately* onto that balcony like that, nude. (61)

Ironically, Fowler accuses someone else of being a fraud during his blatant and laughable excuse for nonaction. He fears telling the truth to the police would open him up to other suspicions about his moral character, and he fears these implied allegations might be true. He thus remains silent.

If homosexual panic lies at the core of Fowler, then we would need to reassess his lust for Mabel. The notion of his uncontrollable feelings and urges, which could cause 'fantastic things' to occur, certainly might indicate Fowler harbors the latent desire to love men. As it stands, though, we can only say for certain that he wants desperately to avoid being misread. In the above passage, Fowler gives in to paranoia that his nakedness would become the crux of his

testimony, that the odd fact of his being nude at the time would be the detail to warrant his branding as 'queer'. Because of his sensitivity to shame, then, Fowler commits to a lie of omission. Whether he has been omitting the truth about his sexuality from himself is ultimately a moot point.

When Fowler worries about having his good name ruined, his anxiety pertains mostly to fearing his once and future insignificance. From this fear comes the lost cause of his hypervigilance, his crusade against being abandoned. In a similar vein, Fowler sets himself on guard against the all-too-easy blossoming of shame because he not only fears exposure, he knows he has been transparently suspicious and dreads the reckoning that must ensue. From his fear of unraveling come the smokescreen measures to deflect shame. Fowler's dismissiveness regarding Freud and the popular (mis)application of his theories shows us one instance of such a deflection, yet a few earlier examples allow us to see Fowler lashing out (rather than coolly rationalizing) to keep his shame in check. As we noted before, Wright at one point lingers on the absurdity of Fowler's ham-fisted, Adam-like modesty with the crumpled newspaper. In his next biblical allusion, though, Wright tinges the humor with menace.

During a pause in Fowler's naked excursion throughout his apartment building, the narration takes a moment to invoke Noah's excessive response after being seen naked by his son, Ham. With wry humor, the text reports on Fowler's uncharacteristic behavior, "giving vent to a curse for the first time in many long years" by muttering, "Hell" (46). To interpret this as a direct allusion would certainly be a stretch, yet we must remember that Noah curses Ham's son, Canaan, rather than Ham himself. The rash and petulant response of the father overshadows the rash and unabashed curiosity of the son, and Noah's curse, which relegates his son's progeny to base servitude, immediately dissolves the family bond in favor of condoning bondage. The irony

here is that Fowler, having witnessed the primal scene of his mother with strange men, can be seen as a proxy for Ham even while uttering a Noah-like curse.

In Wright's formation, however, we witness Fowler cursing himself as commentary not just on his current situation, but almost as foreshadowing. Within another six pages of the novel, Wright will complete the image of Tony-as-Ham, with "his little white face registering shock" and "staring at" Fowler's nakedness before he falls backwards off the balcony (52). Given the immediate consequences, the hell to which Fowler refers could easily be diegetic, denoting the real-time predicament that he is careful to delineate down to the minute (in an odd touch, Fowler still wears his watch while naked and stranded). Beyond that, though, the metatextual moment of this biblical allusion should make us worry about the hell to which Fowler's makeshift son is now consigned (due to the way Mabel is unfairly assigned blame for her son's death, there can be no justice for Tony).

This curse should also make us worry about the more entrenched psychological hell of shame, which will not wear off once Fowler is finally clothed again. In this reading, Fowler has already been cursed, and Tony's tragic fall simply instantiates our protagonist's vision of hell: to be beholden to, bound inexorably to, a mother from which he remains forever estranged. Considered either as a Ham figure or a Noah figure, Fowler lacks the agency to overcome shame. In cursing to himself, then, he is hardly taking control of the situation; rather, the consequences continue to take shape, thrusting him deeper into the unknown, and all Fowler can do is spurn help while feeling uncomfortable in his own skin.

As he curses the role of chance in his predicament, Fowler obscures the larger situation—his self-imposed path toward ruin—because he focuses too heavily on his current dilemma. Wright alludes to this dynamic at an earlier point in the novel, as well, when he segues from the

conclusion of Fowler's disastrous night out at the banquet into a Freudian castration dream. In this dream of "a strange, deep, dark forest with stalwart trees ranging on all sides of him," Fowler misses the forest for the trees due to his desire to know "how much profit he would make if he ordered all the trees cut down" (36). He enters a mercenary mindset instead of experiencing awe in the face of "these majestic trees looming skyward" (36). The symbolism here is clear, as this dream forest manifests as almost a miracle, appearing at the end of a "narrow path" beset on either side by "tall black weeds" (36). However, once this apparently hallowed reward begins filling Fowler with a "sense of pride," we learn that his effort to traverse the straight and narrow path cannot shield him from sins of the mind (36). Even if the order to cut down these trees would signify Fowler's eagerness to preempt any possible sin of the flesh, his underlying pride would undermine all such precautions.

Wright certainly evokes the fear of castration with this dream sequence, especially once Fowler notices a tall man, described as "hard and brutish and criminal-looking," chopping at one of his trees (37). My reading of the dream still prioritizes the theme of self-sabotage, though, despite the initial paradox of blaming Fowler for destruction committed by this interloper. To shift our perspective away from the prospect that Fowler fears being emasculated by outside forces, we must return to his pride while tabulating the potential profit of felling the entire forest. He is willing to forsake the sacred value of these trees for a quick buck, but then he feels personally attacked when someone else fells a tree. As stated before, Wright allows us to call into question Fowler's ingenuity and pragmatism with this scene, because the myopia of his "intricate mental calculations as to how much profit he would make" is more damning than, say, his nonexistent hysteria over becoming a eunuch (36). Castration would be of little significance, would carry negligible consequences, for our repressed and virginal protagonist.

The outrage and fear Fowler experiences due to this dream, then, correspond more to his subconscious recognition that his shrewd judgements and assumptions have a way of eventually betraying him. Beyond inferring Fowler's emotional experience, readers must also feel their own outrage, directed at Fowler rather than the interloper, because his hypocrisy is clear in how he begrudges another for doing the work he refuses to do himself. Capable only of imagining what it would be like to order others around, Fowler exhibits none of the humility that attends self-sacrifice. Rather, he enters a stream-of-consciousness moment of avarice, figuratively counting his chickens before they hatch, and begins tallying: "he started counting the trees four eight sixteen trees were in a space sixteen yards by thirty-two yards and now he assumed that he had a hundred acres of trees like these how much profit would he realize" (36). In his dream as in life, Fowler's over-eagerness becomes a form of self-sabotage.

At the same time that Wright uses irony to introduce dark humor to the proceedings, he treats the precipitating action of Tony's death so direly that its more absurdist elements get lost beneath Fowler's desperation. The almost slapstick measures Fowler takes while stranded should strike us as painfully absurd, yet he so fears his nudity and so values his social standing that the dark humor of these events can hardly even survive. As we learn later in unsubtle exposition, Fowler has long been convinced that "man [is] a sneaking, guilty animal, always prone to excesses" (72). Nevertheless, he permits himself to adopt similar "outlandish attitudes" under the guise of "prudence" (72). With this in mind, we can characterize Fowler's fear and shame as excessively prudent or, rather, as *ironically* justified. As an example of this irony, Fowler finds himself, while panicked and naked in a hallway of his apartment building, "reverting for a moment to the primitive feelings that children have—reasoning that if he shut his eyes he would not be seen" (45). His goal very well may be reasonable, as avoiding detection would help

preserve his desired anonymity, but his actions are inherently absurd. Wright gives a tantalizing glimpse of a more satirical novel in this moment, but Fowler's self-awareness and all-encompassing dread make the comedy fleeting.

In Wright's hands, even just this hint of dark humor must be blotted out, simply because death is a real force in his work. Although this claim may seem paradoxical, Wright never treats death lightly even when his characters are compelled to mitigate its consequences or repress its trauma. On this topic, JanMohamed theorizes what the nature of subjectivity is like for someone "who grows up under the threat of death, a threat that is constant yet unpredictable" (2). In articulating the variety of Wright's characters who are "death-bound" and thus "produced by the threat of death," JanMohamed notes that the threat of death can be enacted deliberately as a "mode of coercion," a hegemonic force insisting that resistance is futile (2, 3). This specter of coercion would make even seemingly 'natural' death subordinate to this larger dialectic of power, for "the destructive effects of terroristic coercion" can easily be read into Wright's myriad depictions of death due to accident or injury, the vicissitudes of age or illness, or even one's own negligence (3). By applying this lens to the deaths of Tony and Mabel (not to mention Fowler as the death-bound agent of these deaths), we can see how the loner-protagonist experiences the threat of death despite ultimately enacting it on others. As a self-styled aporia himself, Fowler has a unique and seemingly conflicted perspective on how his own neuroses produce both Tony and Mabel as "aporetic subject[s]," at once 'bound' by the "process of 'unbinding'" and yet inscrutable within Fowler's unraveling sense of order (2).

Being inescapably bound on a trajectory toward the 'unbinding' of death makes such characters aporia-like or 'aporetic' in JanMohamed's reading. This term indicates the determinism affecting characters whose lived experience is bound up in coercive forces that will

inevitably put them in contact with death as a dehumanizing, untethering cataclysm. In this reading, to witness a lynching, as an example, would constrain subjectivity to such an extent that the helpless observer can become nothing other than an aporetic, death-bound subject. However, this term can also refer to the aporia manifested by the deconstructive potential of a character like Fowler, uncertain whether to live falsely or to sacrifice himself, who desperately attempts to harness agency. The irresolvable crux of such motivations would make this type of aporetic figure indecipherable, and the archetypal loner-protagonist certainly embodies these qualities.

JanMohamed argues that Wright depicts acts of violence as a means of bringing to light the “political deployment of death” that characterized the coercion inherent in not just master-slave struggles, but also the lynch culture of Jim Crow society (11). His reading of *Savage Holiday* as “an expressionistic death-dream-work” helps place Wright’s work, I argue, in league with West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts* and its multiple dark fantasias that careen toward a foolhardy act of martyrdom (210). JanMohamed argues that “Fowler’s desire for and horror of life keep him confined to the edge between life and death, in a position structurally identical to that of social-death” (215). Similarly, he positions Fowler as an agent of chaos latched to the oblivion that produced him: “[D]eprived of his professional ‘life-work,’ which consisted of a displacement of the conditions of his own production, Fowler is now fully primed to reengage the ‘death-work’ that produced him” (215). This formulation helps clarify what makes the delusions of the loner so destructive, because the ephemeral, uncanny sense of his power—which he directs toward death-bound labor—can only result in an irresolvable crux.

By presenting Fowler as a displaced self, JanMohamed tacitly acknowledges this uncanny quality within the text. As he asserts, “All significant scenes, plot twists, and relationships between characters are determined by the anxiety of the subject’s location on the

border—the border of the family, of work, of sexuality, of desire, and of life and death” (214). At bottom, JanMohamed frames *Savage Holiday* as an “attempt to transgress and renegotiate a variety of borders, all of which are, ultimately, ‘displaced’ structural versions of the primal scene” of parental sex witnessed by the child (214). As we have seen, though, my reading of the novel downplays its Freudian qualities and instead highlights Fowler’s defense of his own privilege.

If anything, I would argue that Fowler attempts to renegotiate the boundaries of his own power, to reassert the reach of his impunity. While JanMohamed argues convincingly that Wright foregrounds both the threat of death and the tyranny of bondage to evoke Fowler’s delirious sense of exposure, I still believe Fowler retains agency. Although displaced from productive sexuality and nurturing love, Fowler has the capacity to be vulnerable in ways that would veer him away from his death-bound fear of life. However, Fowler’s weakness for mastering women fuels his defensiveness and paranoia, which means that his vulnerability *is* his central flaw. Due to his (wholly delusional) imperative of realizing God’s supreme moral order, Fowler would open his heart to Mabel only to suppress her capacity for wide-ranging trust and all-embracing love.

This adherence to an ingrained moral code takes shape in Fowler early in life. Reflecting on his childhood, he acknowledges how repression and sublimation have been essential tools in forming his responses to distress (and thus forming his personality):

Full of sullen, impotent rage, he had let his heated imagination range wild and had choked back his yen to act. He’d developed into a too-quiet child who kept to himself, ignoring a world that offended him and wounded his sense of pride in what he loved most; his mother... He’d sought refuge in dreams of growing up and getting a job and

taking his mother into some far-off land where there'd be no one to remember what had happened. (Wright 39)

It seems Fowler has been a loner from the start, but he also grows to be self-aware and comes to understand how this self-isolation has altered his development and irreversibly shaded his self-image as deviant. In the above moment, Fowler recognizes that his current status, stunted and at times petulant, amounts to an uncanny reflection of what could have been, of the well-adjusted child he never had the chance to become. Trauma forced him to deviate from the healthy path, and now his cloak of anonymity, torn away by circumstance, fails to shield him from either outside scrutiny or his own shame.

The sympathy that arises with this reading of Fowler's childhood requires context, of course. In fact, I must acknowledge here that much of my analysis accepts Fowler as he sees himself, if only because his morbid introspection, although self-pitying, also helps to turn his caustic thoughts upon himself. However, I admit that praising the novel for its critique of toxic masculinity might be a tough pill to swallow for those who see Mabel's brutal murder as Wright cynically insisting that entrenched power will persist, that it will always defend itself mercilessly. Nevertheless, this manner of fatalism—characteristic of Wright, for better or worse—should not invalidate readers' sympathy for the plight of Mabel as a tragic heroine.

An enigmatic presence in the novel, Mabel comes off at first as an object of pity due to her status as a war widow and single mother. Wright complicates this narrow characterization, though, by imbuing her with a placating manner and somewhat confused sensibility. These qualities mitigate any resentment that Mabel, as a victim of circumstance, could possibly still carry with her. In fact, she is introduced to us through her "easy, flashing smile" and her abashed response while "trying to stammer her gratitude" for a kind gesture Fowler extends to Tony (34).

Mabel evinces no bitterness about her fate, then, and even seems helpless at times. Still, she proves resilient in the end, as she is confident enough to stand up for her right to exercise agency. Empowered by her “cold detachment,” she remarks to Fowler, her tormentor, “Listen, I sleep with whom I damn please. I’m a woman; I’m free...What the hell’s the matter with you?” (213).³² Sadly, these turn out to be some of the final words she will speak.

Mabel, of course, is no stranger to death, and Wright allows her to process trauma in odd, occasionally apathetic ways. This seeming incongruity between her warm nature and her ditzzy aloofness generates tension within the text, thus compelling the reader to question Mabel’s integrity. However, Mabel herself not only weathers contradictory drives and impulses, but also withstands accusations of being an unfit, inattentive parent. Between her guileless acceptance of charity and her cagey refusal to defend herself as a mother, Mabel contains multitudes. Nevertheless, her strengths sit uneasily alongside her flaws, and Wright chooses to implicate Mabel as at least partially culpable for the narrative’s deadly conclusion.

From an unsympathetic perspective, Mabel simply represents a minor obstacle within the novel’s cynical framework, which insists that patriarchy will always find new ways to enact its Madonna-whore complex. As evidence for this reading, consider the power of the male gaze directed at Mabel by Fowler, her secretly obtrusive neighbor: “[O]ne summer evening, just before getting into bed, he’d seen her completely nude through the open window of his bedroom. That time, he’d nipped in the bud the possibility of any such image haunting his mind by promptly becoming angry” (35). We soon learn more about Fowler’s voyeuristic presence in the novel, but even at this early point it would suffice to say that Mabel, the “shapely, plump,

³² Earlier in the novel, Fowler insults Mabel by asking, “Who are these men who are calling you on the phone all the time? [...] How many men are you in touch with right *now*?” (158). After protesting Fowler’s cruelty, Mabel arrives at a more staunch defense of her conduct: “‘All right,’ she spat at him. ‘So what? Suppose I sleep with every man in this *block*! What it to you, hunh? What’s it to anybody on this damned earth? It’s *my* body, isn’t it?’” (159).

brunette war-widow,” has little chance to be seen as a complex figure when she is objectified from the very moment she enters the text (34).

Given this stark power differential, it would be difficult to fault Mabel for conceding too much control over her life to others. More importantly, it would simply be cruel to fault her for doing so once she learns, early in the novel, of her son’s accidental death. After this catastrophe, Mabel becomes confused and heartbroken but also numb. Accordingly, she must rely on the kindness of friends and neighbors to either distract her from her pain or shelter her from difficult decisions about funeral arrangements.

These behaviors would suggest a tendency toward passivity, insensitivity, or even escapism, as if Mabel were abandoning the role of mother at the moment when it has become too burdensome. However, she also finds herself, quite understandably, unready and ill-equipped to confront (let alone process) the trauma of what has happened. Because Tony falls to his death while she is sleeping nearby, Mabel cannot fully grieve; any attempt to mourn his loss would necessarily bring about feelings of guilt and shame. Put simply, Mabel reels from shock.

In light of this pain and its crushing assurance that her future will now be bleaker and more uncertain, Mabel deserves the chance to recover some sense of equilibrium. What we learn over the course of the novel, though, demonstrates the bind she is in: the more she wallows in despair and feels detached, the more she must rely on others, yet the more she seeks normalcy, the more she will appear to suppress the memory of Tony.³³ Unnerved by the pressure to perform her grief, Mabel chooses a middle path of distracted, frivolous socializing, which still

³³ Fowler is taken over by a similar tension, as we learn when he decides, with masochistic glee, that he cannot extract himself from this situation. As the narration reports: “[Fowler] looked at her and, despite his hate, his senses drank in the sensual appeal of her buxom, grief-wracked body. The more distraught she seemed, the more he wanted her; the more abandoned she was, the more he yearned for her; and the more dangerous she loomed for him, the more he felt that he had to remain near for his own self-protection. His desire for her merged with his hate and fear of her and he was jealous...” (155-6).

leaves her vulnerable to others' judgements and, ultimately, to Fowler's exploitation. More than anything else, then, Mabel's tragic flaw manifests not through a single act of negligence but rather through her foolish willingness to place trust in the most judgmental of her potential allies, the seemingly decent, well-meaning neighbor, Erskine Fowler.

For a number of reasons, Wright depicts Mabel's mourning process from afar. In fact, we are cut off completely from her interiority and are afforded only a few chances to access her emotional state. Due to the text's tightly limited perspective, conveyed often through free indirect discourse, we are instead caught in the solipsistic swirl of Fowler's harried mind. His questioning of others' motives is a steady feature of the text, and this perspective dictates the novel's tenor of high-strung, feverish paranoia. In fact, if we can judge Mabel flawed for trusting too freely, then we can also judge Fowler dangerous for being unable to trust even himself.

Beyond this instance of Fowler's myopia, his inner tension (and attendant belittling of Mabel) also brings to light how much he feels owed validation. As we have seen, Fowler wants not just compensation but respect from Mr. Warren and Longevity Life. Similarly, he wants not only excitement and sexual submission from Mabel, but also her devotion. In yet another irony, though, Fowler judges Mabel for pursuing a life that balances obligation with pleasure. He cannot abide her carefree demeanor, even if her lifestyle of struggle actually refutes his assumptions about her.

Mabel may indulge in casual relationships with men, but only as an extension of her limited financial means, as if sexual desire factors little into what amounts to momentary distractions from her larger, more pervasive stresses. From Fowler's perspective, though, Mabel's conduct warrants "anger and jealousy for her living so loosely, sloppily, for her giving herself so easily" (127). Her sense of freedom in the face of difficult circumstances hardly

constitutes wanton hedonism, yet it offends Fowler because he has only ever given himself over to ascetic disavowal. As Mabel exercises her limited agency, she makes choices that do not affect Fowler in the least; nonetheless, he still feels Mabel tarnishes the dignity of his own strictly enforced restraint.

On this topic of leisure and the dilemma over self-determination, Early argues that, at its core, *Savage Holiday* interrogates the paradox of free will as a double-edged sword. He frames this crucial thematic as questions posed implicitly by Wright, such as: “What is freedom and what is desire? Why do human beings find it so confounding, even destructive, to seek and use their freedom, to understand the nature of their desire?” (Early 225). Within this discussion, Early settles on few concrete assertions about the problem of leisure within the novel. However, he establishes a reading earlier in his essay that points to how civilization’s strictures—often arbitrary, even if also successful in imposing order—do nothing more than reinscribe fear of the unknown. As Early claims: “The struggle of modern man, as Wright saw it, was to combat the atavistic, irrational impulses that reflected the irrationality of the society and culture in which he lived” (224). From this perspective, Fowler could be justified in fearing the primal urges that lurk in his subconscious, yet he still falls victim to assuming manmade principles, like social decorum and religious conviction, can grant him power over potentially reckless desires. He uncritically invests himself in fallacies about how to achieve self-control.

This misguided approach means Fowler will exercise his free will most fervently when combatting desire. The paradox here is that he allows himself agency only in the form of what is sanctioned under the auspices of his prohibitively self-righteous superego. In this light, Fowler’s newfound leisure time demands vigilance, and he makes sure to tamp down sexual impulses that would likely never become dangerous, but which nonetheless pose an existential threat to him.

The stringent nature of his moral reasoning short-circuits any inborn curiosity that Fowler might possess, and so he never directs energy to exploring his sexuality or to negotiating the libidinal economy between consenting adults. For this reason, Fowler could only ever find Mabel confounding, as her open, unguarded relish for extracting leisure from otherwise dire circumstances completely upends his strategy. He has seized and lashed himself within the manacles of self-discipline for too long—even during the most pleasant, carefree circumstances—to ever feel comfortable in any other position.

Put another way, Mabel confounds Fowler because she can, like Betty in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, limit experience arbitrarily (or, rather, in a way that he believes to be arbitrary). When she divests herself of motherly obligations and indulges in leisure, either through drinking or spending time with men, Mabel feels like a free, unbound woman. However, these instances allow her to recoup the sense that laboring as Tony's sole parent is an authentic priority, making it an obligation, and yet also an ephemeral role, making it a privilege. Mabel's identity certainly takes license with a mother's accepted behavior, but she ultimately embraces the reality that she only has so much energy and attention to give. She refuses to regret taking time for herself because holding on to that shame would amount to surrendering her openhearted (and somewhat naïve) nature.

With Fowler, though, leisure pursuits are antithetical to his manner of masculine ego, which is precise and driven rather than virile and haphazard. Task-oriented, he turns his "headlong predilection for Mabel" into a one-sided competition (Wright 139). This is why he ultimately sees himself as an agent of comeuppance, yet he must arrive at this role by first gauging how much authority Mabel is willing to concede to him. Across some of their earliest interactions after Tony's death, Fowler can entertain the delusion that Mabel would "be a willing

pupil, and [thus] he'd cure her of her moral lapses" (137). As her personality emerges as stronger and more complex than Fowler imagined, Mabel must become an object of pity for him, thereby propping up his chauvinistic narrative of rescuing her; she becomes "redeemed in his feelings" once he can see her as "the abandoned, tragic queen of his heart whom he'd serve loyally, without reserve" (145). The final development occurs when Fowler's bitterness and distrust ossifies, leading him to one of his nastiest judgements: "That was the trouble with this woman; she acted like an irresponsible child and the world was always sparing her some needful experience" (154). Implied here is Fowler's eagerness to humble Mabel, to exact petty revenge in the guise of justice and wisdom.

Although he previously relied on "self-imposed labor" to curtail and distract from his possessive form of sexual desire, Fowler now lacks the "prison-cage of toil" as his barrier against the most unknowable regions of his psyche (33). In need of a new distraction, he greedily latches onto the opportunity to affix his gaze on Mabel. He sharpens his scrutiny until he paradoxically forces Mabel into a subject position nearly as blurry and detached from reality as his own; over time, she becomes entrapped within his readings of her as, variously, a sexualized animal, a confused child, and a recklessly manipulative ditz.³⁴ Through his effort to decipher Mabel, Fowler taps into a deep sense of purpose. He pushes the limits of his agency as he labors to erase any lingering sense of culpability for Tony's death, and Mabel simply represents the object onto which he can impose his desired narrative of the unrepentant whore who, through his offer of marriage, is born anew as the Madonna.

³⁴ During their first interaction after Tony's death, Fowler cannot resist thinking Mabel has an ulterior motive: "A fleeting glimmer of intuition made him suspect her of playing the role of an emotional *agent provocateur* to lure him into disclosing what he knew, but the notion was too far-fetched and he dismissed it from his mind. Blending in one wild wave, shame, anger, and guilt rose in him. His feelings were trying fumblingly to resolve themselves into something definite about the woman; but she hovered before him elusive, now threatening, now appealing..." (120).

To wit, Fowler tests his agency by becoming the arbiter of moral conduct for Mabel. He reacts to her confusion and seeming apathy by feeling smugly assured that his secret is safe and that Mabel, in fact, *deserves* to suffer. In this thinking, she can be no holy mother if her devotion can founder in the face of tragedy, and she instead must be a whore because her suffering is not as pure or sacrosanct as Fowler would like. Again, the text is blunt in revealing Fowler's delusional train of thought:

He must somehow redeem what had happened to Tony! *That was it!* Conviction hardened in him. In redeeming Tony, he'd be redeeming himself. How neatly the double motives fitted! He'd help to purge the world of such darkness... How right he'd been in refusing to accept blame for Tony's death; it hadn't been his fault at all. Only an ignorantly lustful woman could spin such spider webs of evil to snare men and innocent children! As he walked he told himself with the staunchest conviction of his life: "That Mrs. Blake's the guilty one..." (105)

Despite this confidence that scapegoating Mabel will permit him a clear path forward, Fowler must soon confront the violent and chaotic reality of his situation. It quickly dawns on readers, if not Fowler, that blame cannot be weaponized, that the act of condemnation retains a corrosive and omnidirectional power no matter who appoints himself an impartial adjudicator. As these ironic tensions take shape, Wright reveals his ultimate critique of Fowler's arrogance and apathy: by unraveling in an Oedipal tragedy of his own making, Fowler forfeits his makeshift family at novel's end and precludes any emotional growth or spiritual reckoning.

At the same time, Fowler has developed enough self-awareness that he can temper his agitation by applying rational scrutiny and a measured line of inquiry to his swirling thoughts. This veneer of calm and reason amounts to little more than a defense mechanism, though, and it

becomes clear early on that Fowler exploits other such means of structuring his life—like his nebulous, poorly articulated Christian values—simply as barriers between himself and the world. Whatever sense of piety kept hidden within his psyche has failed to make him open or compassionate. In fact, Fowler’s so-called faith proves woefully inadequate at seeing him through distress, and it even exacerbates his anxiety by actively facilitating his sublimation of sexual desire.

Over time, Fowler’s sublimation gives way to a violent form of projection, with his hatred for his own mother fueling his vilification of Mabel. Self-aware about his prejudices and lightly chiding himself with a rhetorical question, Fowler wonders, “[W]asn’t it maybe because Mrs. Blake—alone, sensual, impulsive—was so much as he remembered his own mother that he found himself scolding her and brooding over her in his mind” (38). His actions—and his gaze—undermine his prudish mentality, and the novel shows us that Fowler’s poorly sublimated sexual desire could never extend its repressive power over the beguiling Mabel. This repulsion desexualizes him and indicates that his personal life is as devoid of activity as his abruptly truncated professional life: we are told explicitly that he sleeps in “a bedroom that had never been dishonored by the presence of a stray woman of pleasure” (34). Despite his efforts to control Mabel’s body and to contain the knowledge she might gain about his involvement in Tony’s death, Fowler ultimately fails. In this instance, the delusions of the loner cause the dissolution of the family.

Despite fulfilling the most salacious and retrograde aspects of a Freudian revenge narrative, Wright also locates the potential for existential inquiry within his thin plot. As Early demonstrates, Wright relies on certain tropes of the domestic drama, such as “the censuring of women, the suppression of family, and betrayal by the father,” but applies them to different ends

(232). Rather than working in, say, a realist mode to champion perseverance and self-reliance, Wright works in a naturalist mode to test and potentially undermine the supposed virtues of “puritanism and self-made Americanism” (Early 232). As both a voyeuristic window into the nature of deviancy and yet a treatise on the banality of evil, as both a small-scale tragedy about sexual repression and yet a wider examination of hegemonic social forces, the novel participates in a variety of genres.

Given this mix of qualities, Laura Dubek situates *Savage Holiday* at the nexus of certain stylistic developments. Describing how the later Wright begins to highlight and critique more internalized forms of degradation, Dubek argues that he “moves from naturalism to existentialism, from a sociological perspective to a psychological one” (594). Although productive readings might emerge by applying this “bifurcation” model to Wright’s oeuvre, it would also overshadow important nuance, as Dubek freely admits (594). In particular, we would miss out on the fundamental coherence of his works if we were to distinguish them based on the scope and emphasis of his critiques. As an alternative, Dubek encourages us to recognize “Wright’s life-long commitment to exposing the absurdities of American life and values to a white audience” (594).³⁵ However, we must consider how this particular text differs from other Wright works, as the absurdism here tends to get subsumed in paranoia.

Unable to reckon with the dark substance of his character, Fowler shields himself and keeps others at bay through his deep distrust of man’s fallible nature. He might always have been prone to viewing humanity as stained by guilt, but his job as an insurance adjuster seems to have perverted that instinct into an ethos: “Insurance was life itself; insurance was human nature in the raw trying to hide itself; insurance was instinctively and intuitively knowing that man was

³⁵ Dubek catalogs those features that *Savage Holiday* shares with other Wright works: “a tripartite structure, an urban setting, flashbacks and dream sequences, strategic use of dramatic dialogue, a fatherless male protagonist, homicidal rage, and a female victim of male violence” (596).

essentially a venal, deluded, and greedy animal” (Wright 28). These assertions reveal to us the convictions that have ossified within Fowler over the course of a career spent “detecting the pretenses of others” and “spot[ting] the phonies” among legitimate insurance claims (30, 31). What started out as “uncanny shrewdness” and “knowing intuitions” sharpened over time, growing into a faculty “more mysterious than horse sense” but also distorting into a dogmatic form of cynicism (30). Now embittered from being forced into early retirement, Fowler has become fully habituated to his suspicions, and he latches onto any fears or misgivings preemptively.

To his credit, Fowler can recognize that his “uncommonly profound” intuition manifests an “odd side of him,” one which brings “blessings as well as bane” because it conflates perceptiveness with paranoia (30). On one hand, Fowler sees his detective’s mindset as “shoring him with confidence,” yet, on the other, he knows it has “sap[ped] his sleep at night, exerting its influence over a far wider area of his life than just the insurance business” (30). Despite this admission, Fowler fails to uncover completely the reason why his skepticism has sometimes “created odd situations in which he became incredibly obtuse, stupid almost” (30). Simply put, the reason he can lapse into a state of confusion, uncertainty, or basic misunderstanding is that he has elevated a set of assumptions about man’s debased nature to a dark pseudo-religion.

Limited by Fowler’s skewed perspective on morality, we cannot escape the ethical solipsism of his withered conscience, which must feverishly rationalize his deviant behavior by seeing it as insurmountably determined. He interacts with others infrequently, and is largely indifferent to their lives, but turns his thoughts obsessively to Mabel, whom he both desires and hates. The absurdity here is in how Fowler has identified a certain habit of his mind that can only

lead to ruin, yet he misrepresents his obsessions as arising not within himself but rather from Mabel as an object worthy of scorn. This is his means of rationalizing deplorable behavior.

Early in the novel, when he makes his departure from the farewell banquet, Fowler bristles at the realization that he will soon no longer feel productive. He acknowledges in this moment the “uncanny, haunting sensation” that “his life [has] turned from a settled routine into a nagging problem” (32). The existential savagery brought on by this impending, never-ending ‘holiday’ demands a solution, of course. What Fowler pursues as his solution, though, is continued repression. As the type of person to have “introjected into his heart” all the “acquired notions of right and wrong,” he decides it would be best to “encircle himself, his heart, and his actions with bars, to hold himself in leash” (33, 34). Fowler has been so motivated by fear that he at one time conceded any pretense of agency and embraced the determinism of a life lived in the shadow of the superego.

Any situation that does not adhere neatly to moral dichotomies, such as the Oedipal conflict at the novel’s core, must necessarily make for an incomprehensible morass that Fowler would struggle to resolve. Because he cannot abide moral ambiguity, Fowler must respond definitively to his own tortured ambivalence over Mabel, whose uninhibited, seemingly naïve embodiment of feminine sexuality haunts our protagonist. To frame this tension, Early claims that Fowler imposes clarity on his dilemma by seeing it through the nightmarish logic of uncanny doubling. Imagining Mabel as his own mother, Fowler enacts a form of erasure that casts one sexually active single parent—Mabel—in the role of another.

At the latent register of this waking dream, Fowler kills Mabel but acts as though he were “a haunted, anxiety-ridden son murdering the mother who failed to be both mother and father to him” (Early 231). At the manifest register, Fowler kills Mabel and acts as though he were hoping

that “he could reinvent [Mabel] as a being beyond the sensuality that so threatens him” (Early 231). Both the latent and manifest content of this act are predicated on fallacies, though, because Fowler’s mother will always remain the long-dead villain looming in his subconscious. Likewise, Mabel’s sexuality cannot be corralled or controlled, revised or redirected, once her earthly body is left lifeless and bloody.

In this context, Fowler becomes an agent of order only in the retrograde sense. His actions reify everything he assumes about Mabel as a manipulative slut, and he orders his reality by allowing no ambiguity about who Mabel is or who she might become. In this pigeonholing mindset, Mabel will either prove to be the whore or the Madonna. As we learn late into Fowler’s impromptu scheme, the unveiling of Mabel’s true nature, whore or Madonna, will hinge solely on whether she allows Fowler to redeem her through marriage. However preposterous that ploy might be, it still leads to disastrous consequences.

As many of the above quotes should make plain, Wright allows himself to be characteristically blunt in outlining Fowler’s internal conflict. This observation need not be a critique, though, because Wright establishes early on that *Savage Holiday* will deploy both situational and dramatic irony in idiosyncratic ways. Instead of catering to those readers who savor moral ambiguity or psychological subtlety, Wright undermines these pretenses of Modernist poetics and favors an unflinching narrative voice. As we will soon see, the text’s clear-eyed exposition refuses to be coy about the ironies exposed through Fowler’s many dilemmas and decisions, insights and accusations. Paradoxically, though, the accumulation of all these thoughts yields a hall-of-mirrors effect, as the profusion of Fowler’s perspectives is rendered meaningless because he consistently fails to arrive at the one perspective that could deliver him from his worst fears: humility eludes Fowler, and he suffers as a result.

In an early example of situational irony, Fowler seems to pull off his performance of stoic resolve, as the exposition reports on his “Lincoln-like, quiet, stolid face” during the farewell banquet honoring him for his thirty years working for Longevity Life (Wright 13). The details of his behavior contradict this initial impression, though; among other clues, we are directed to consider the way his hands either run “tensely inside of his coat” or jitter, with fingers “trembl[ing] slightly” (13). Despite the marked sense of Fowler’s uncertainty and displeasure in this ostensible celebration, Wright cannot leave the irony of the moment to stand on its own. Instead, he commits fully to exposing the dissonance between the persona Fowler hopes to inhabit and the persona Fowler unsuccessfully stifles:

His facial features seemed hewn firm and whole from some endurable substance; his eyes were steady; he was the kind of man to whom one intuitively and readily rendered a certain degree of instant deference [...] because one immediately felt that he was superbly alive, real, just *there*, with no hint in his attitude of apology for himself or his existence, confident of his inalienable right to confront you and demand his modest due of respect... (14)

Although Fowler can convey implacable self-containment while stoically sitting in silence, his actions prove disastrously fumbling.

In this moment of exaggerated irony, Wright manages to provide psychological insight about both Fowler’s fantasy of himself and the broader nature of delusion. For as much as Fowler is self-aware, his sense of how others might project meaning onto his taciturn façade does not equate to an authentic, self-reflexive experience of willpower and restraint. Commenting on the way the narrative voice makes psychoanalytic readings explicit, Dubek explains how Wright can attach layered irony to what appears to be unsubtle exposition. She speculates that “such

heavy-handedness might be intentional” and expresses incredulity about other critics’ obtuseness in failing to recognize this feature of the text; she insists that, “in a novel dripping with irony,” Wright’s objective might be to suggest “the *limits* of a strictly psychoanalytic understanding of human behavior” (599). The skepticism here should remind us of our earlier metatextual reading, when we appreciated Fowler’s sardonic observation that Freud’s theories have entered the zeitgeist even as we concluded that he acts dismissively as a means to deflect guilt.

As an example in support of Dubek’s claim, we should consider another passage that resonates a little too strongly with cut-and-dried Freudian psychoanalysis:

Whenever [Fowler] was distraught or filled with anxiety, he invariably made this very same compulsive gesture which he had developed in some obscure and forgotten crisis in his past; his touching those pencils always somehow reassured him, for they seemed to symbolize an inexplicable need to keep contact with some emotional resolution whose meaning and content he did not know.... (Wright 21)

If touching the tips of these writing implements can remind Fowler of some elusive, possibly illusory ‘emotional resolution’ of ambiguous content, then mastery is what he desires. After all, the smug sense of mastery is central to the appeal of phallogocentrism. However, what Dubek would have us remember is that, while this coping mechanism may help Fowler override the anxiety of almost any situation, his Pavlovian response fails to rewrite, say, his fear of abandonment.

In this light, Fowler’s form of self-control simply masters the *language* of coping, with true self-control eluding him. Similarly, Dubek’s argument about the limits of psychoanalysis should make us reluctant to rehearse and reiterate the buzzwords surrounding Oedipal desire. In short, it would be insufficient to account for Fowler’s chauvinism and violence by attributing

them to just one explanation; the seemingly overdetermined sense that an Oedipal reading would fully articulate his tragic flaw is absurd. To make such a claim would be to accept the red herring at face value.

To refute the notion of Fowler suffering shame over latent, transgressive lust directed at his mother, consider his general distaste for the embodied experience of need and desire. Examples abound, but one instance occurs as he frantically tries to evade detection while naked and desperate to reenter his locked apartment. Fowler decides to commandeer the elevator and, in a telling moment, screams a response to a fellow tenant waiting to use it: “‘Wait, will you?’ Erskine screamed, his body shaking with rage, shame, despair, and a sickness which he could not name” (50). This feeling of sickness might strike us as Fowler’s creeping unease over his immediate, perilous circumstances, but we should recognize it as something that runs deeper. Because he has already set defenses against sexual urges, this reemerging sickness must be due to his disgust at discovering there are some needs he cannot fulfill himself; he has long stifled those desires he is unwilling to satisfy, but now he realizes he cannot stifle the need for help or protection, given his vulnerable state. Even though he cannot name what he is vigilant against, Fowler has put in place mental barriers and emotional protections to shield himself. This scene simply shows us the limits of his defenses.

In another telling moment, Fowler can recognize as he retreats from the embarrassment and resentment he feels at the banquet that he is “really trying to flee from himself; that banquet room had been but an objective symbolization of a reality which he, at that moment, had wanted more than anything else on this earth to avoid” (22). To yearn for this extreme, all-encompassing repression of his entire reality is unsustainable. The thing he wants to avoid is so large that “he could only feel it, suffer it; he couldn’t know it, master it . . .” (22). Instead, the thing he feels he

can master is Mabel, a seemingly weak-willed and accommodating woman whom he shames with impunity.

Fowler's mastery is predicated on false knowledge, though, and his willful blindness, his avoidant personality, proves to be his undoing. Even in the moment immediately after watching Tony fall, Fowler cannot reckon with the truth. His frazzled emotional state—his panic—makes his senses “refus[e] to acknowledge what had happened all too clearly before his eyes” (53). Fowler cannot make sense of his emotions, it seems, and Wright insists that this manner of emotional confusion will always tinge the world surreal, will always detach trauma from its source and make it seem like a movie or a bad dream. For example:

The incident had thrust [Fowler] entirely on his own, and nothing he had ever heard of could offer him any guidance now. Clinging to the whole balcony tableau of horror was a hopeless nebulosity, something irresistibly unreal; one moment he felt that he knew exactly what had happened, and yet the next moment he was not so sure. (57)

This self-protective blindness is clearly an example of sublimation, and the outlet for his ugly emotions and accusations will be the image Fowler harbors of Mabel as an uncanny reincarnation of his mother.

As Fowler loses the ability to control his projections, the shifts in his demeanor become more severe and jarring. Eventually, the explosions into vitriol and the bouts dredging up the past happen with less provocation. Before the climax's crescendo of revelations (ironically bled of satisfying resolution because readers know the secret surrounding Tony's death), Fowler debates his options for manipulating Mabel. What he seems to realize is that his paranoia about what she might know and the blame he ascribes her for being an unfit mother have given Mabel

power over him, thereby sapping his half-baked scheming of the necessary element of control. Fowler learns too late that he cannot control that which he does not understand.

These lessons about reflexive versus deliberate action echo a recurring concern within Wright's oeuvre. Indeed, *Savage Holiday* hits on a similar dynamic as his earlier novel, *The Outsider*, published the year prior. A black man who would rather be defined by his intellectualism and independence, Cross Damon—the titular 'outsider'—claims recourse to violence even as murder and deception corrupt him. He explicitly values violence as a tool, but indulging in deception and multiple murders slowly makes violence an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. As his narrative takes shape, Damon becomes subsumed in an uncanny journey through death and godlike power after a train accident, which causes enough of a violent disruption that he forms a plan to impose disjunctions from any number of his life's oppressions: his wife and his pregnant mistress; his debts; even his personal history and identity. Planting identification on the corpse of a fellow black man at the scene of the train accident, Damon travels from his native Chicago to New York City, but his reluctance to be the fool gets the best of him.

In *Savage Holiday*, Wright is able to show how the white loner can fully realize the identity-effacing goals of black nihilism. Damon, in *The Outsider*, represents the isolated black man who hopes to move beyond competing belief systems and ideologies. His double consciousness expands beyond the expected duality of his own self-image as a black man in conflict with whites' fearful or pitying projections. In addition, Damon is doubly aware of dissonance between himself and the world because he understands himself as standing alone, an intellectual whose apartness feels like a punishment due to class- and race-based assumptions about his intellect. His persona broadcasts a sense of uncanny blackness, then.

At once familiar to normative culture and yet unsettlingly strange, Damon's blackness already represents an obstacle and a point of no return. He could never be accepted into political circles of his own accord, yet his rhetorical prowess makes him an asset to those political operatives who would only ever exploit, not befriend, him. Fowler, on the other hand, shows us how the privileged loner (with recourse to his uncanny whiteness) inverts this double consciousness. By simultaneously inhabiting a persona (in the sense of his solipsistic self-containment) yet erasing any typifying features (in the sense of his whiteness marking him as normative and thus invisible), Fowler avoids the fate of Damon.

The white loner-protagonist succumbs to different pitfalls, but at least he wields some manner of agency at first. In contrast, Damon can only bitterly embody the subject position of the 'invisible' black man whose blackness still makes his racial identity legible. At best, he is an anomaly. Nonetheless, the power structure still takes the iconoclastic Damon to simply be an aporia, a troubling enigma to be written over by imposing either victimizing or vilifying readings of blackness.

For greater context on how white loner-protagonists can disrupt family bonds and (even if just inadvertently) undermine opportunities for acceptance or belonging, we can consider Kurt Vonnegut's elegiac coming-of-age novel, *Deadeye Dick*. The novel's protagonist, Rudy Waltz, is a loner for reasons different than Fowler's lifelong campaign of repression. This distinction can be traced to how the trauma that haunts Waltz occurred not in deep childhood, but rather in adolescence. In some ways, Waltz is a Boo Radley figure, in that both signify how an early instance of going wayward or misbehaving can have long-term repercussions. In terms of measurable trauma, though, Waltz is closer to Fowler than Boo. We learn early on that Waltz was guilty of a horrible crime, even if it was an accident; similarly, Fowler commits the sin of

seeing the reality of a situation (his mother's sexuality) and then punishes himself for the rest of his life. When Waltz errantly fires rounds of gunfire into the open air, one bullet reaches a pregnant woman vacuuming the future nursery for her unborn child. This is his original sin.

As consequences pile up, both characters experience masochistic pleasure in the comeuppance that fate directs at them, even as they also bristle at human interventions that might shame or expose them. In this light, Waltz's devotion to his parents is a form of penance, just as Fowler's repression is his ineffectual form of atonement. The difference here is that Waltz is explicit about needing to repay a debt, whereas Fowler never fully acknowledges that he has lingering neuroses. From that perspective, it is easier to sympathize with Waltz. Also, his violence against a woman occurred well in the past, something that he must live down, whereas killing Mabel is the climactic act for Fowler, one for which he shows no remorse.

This violence against women invites Freudian readings. With no other means of exorcising his obsessive thoughts and traumatic memories, Fowler intends to kill his own mother when he attacks Mabel; Waltz commits an act that is an inversion of Oedipal desire, in that he accidentally kills a pregnant woman and then is ostracized to the home space where he must care for his parents. What makes Waltz a more sympathetic character than Fowler is that he seems to still be trying to make sense of the accident. He accepts that there were consequences outside of his control once he ruined the lives of others, and he seems humble in living simply and with little ego. Waltz never quite articulates this as his objective, but he lives like a monk or a eunuch. He self-identifies as asexual, and he sustains an almost Buddhist knowingness as he rejects desire and cultivates an ascetic lifestyle. Again, the important distinction here is that Waltz comes to embrace deprivation as his best means to reject desire and embody devotion, whereas

Fowler does so subconsciously; his sacrifice of libidinal desire amounts merely to the repression of dirty feelings.

Within the context of their mutual self-destructiveness, Damon in *The Outsider* is less of a stereotypically withdrawn loner than Fowler or Waltz, and he causes the most destruction as a result. Of the three, his narrative most explicitly draws out the theme that violence committed by the loner cuts him off further from family. As a whole, *The Outsider* is existential in its insistence that an individual unmoored from society easily loses his humanity. However, Damon proves charming in ways that distinguish him from the paranoid, manipulative Fowler and the awkward, blandly accommodating Waltz. Outside of his toxic objectification of women, Damon is self-assured and capable of human emotion. For example, his shame and hatred is palpable when he has to dupe racist clerical agents as he fishes for information about his new identity. This makes for a scene that is tragic in scope because Damon, working a desperate ruse, knows he must bring the vitriolic mocking and disregard of those white men upon himself.

Despite its existentialist ruminations, *The Outsider* is a text that weeps for humanity. Its conclusion makes it clear that there is a bleeding heart at its core, even if there had been a good deal of cynicism about the identity-effacing hierarchical systems to which we are forced to subscribe. Wright evinces little faith in human institutions, but there is at least a glint of hope that the ‘little gods’ skewered by the text might nullify each other and eventually leave sympathetic onlookers to pick up the pieces. Wright’s agenda shifts once he conceives of *Savage Holiday*, though, as hegemonic forces win out easily when the agent of order, Erskine Fowler, is already himself committed to effacing his identity.

Across these three tragedies, we could aggregate readings that ignore subtle differences and renders the respective loner-protagonists as resorting to violence to affirm their sense of

isolation, to cut off ties and to burn bridges. However, we should instead see our roles as readers to be the hard work of sympathizing. We should lament the ease with which the loner renders violent outcomes on others, because this dynamic affirms how perilously humanity coincides with depravity. The types of narratives that make this claim and highlight this theme are expressly tragic.

These novels each linger on the catalyzing event of an accident that causes a significant death, a death for which the protagonist must pay some price. The accident that forces Fowler to confront his repressed sexual desire and sublimated fear of his mother's sexuality cannot be rationalized to fit into a Freudian reading of a child fearing the nakedness of an adult; the more fundamental rift in Fowler's worldview is that he cannot comprehend how greater permissiveness of women expressing their sexuality could deny him the control and ownership he desires of a woman. The accident that permits Damon to assume a dead man's identity creates a rift between the intellectual life he pursues and the stigma of his blackness that he cannot leave behind; creating meaning in the greater, unknown world proves impossible for him as long as he assumes the guise of white male privilege. The accident that Waltz commits creates a rift between his innate compassion and his burgeoning cynicism about the dehumanizing forces of law, order, and war; memory distorts meaning for Waltz as his past becomes an uncanny presence that cannot be suppressed, even as he remains comfortably sidelined while his world collapses in a destructive spectacle. There is little free will in these texts, it seems, even if they occasionally gesture toward the humanity that can still survive amid uncertainty.

Given these points of commonality, these are moral universes: Fowler is eventually exposed and brought into police custody, with his narrative leaving off at a point where it is ambiguous whether he is ultimately brought to justice; Damon's real identity is exposed, as are

his murders, and he is left to die as he faces the horrors he has committed; Waltz is ostracized and left to wallow in guilt, tentatively reemerging over time to a community that has finally become willing to see him as a devoted caretaker rather than adolescent murderer. Conversely, there are blind spots or aporias in the moral code, either of the loner-protagonist or of the world in which he lives: Fowler can violently scapegoat Mabel, unloading upon her all the sublimated desire, shame, and confusion rooted in his childhood exposure to his mother's nakedness and sexuality; Damon can scapegoat others as more worthy of being executed or erased than he is. The exception is Waltz, who is scapegoated when he is tarred and feathered by the local police, which is an act of public shaming so egregious that it precludes the slain mother-to-be or her family from receiving justice.

The tragedy in these three works is that the positive social forces that bond a community dissolve as a result of an accident. An accident, of course, is not a tragedy, but these incidents set these men on the course toward tragic conclusions. What we see, then, is that deviant psychology, when allowed to fester in isolation, leads to tragedy. Fowler, Damon, and Waltz are united by receding into a form of isolation: Fowler puts up barriers through his limited social regimen and tendency to get locked in his thoughts; Damon self-isolates due to his distrust of others and his quick temper, plus his instinct to go into hiding; Waltz recedes into ostracism almost willingly, preferring over time to tend to his parents who are hardly human anymore but rather ghostly presences.

The tragic irony here is that these men were not in search of some transgressive means of escape or way to disrupt communal values. The rift that happens in their lives is outside their control, and yet it seems to affirm that they were outsiders in the first place, that they were in a position of being left behind by society. The underlying theme is that these are men of a different

time, who cannot help but be labeled as different: Fowler cannot handle changing sexual mores; Damon is a working-class black man who feels marginalized from centers of intellectualism, where he feels he belongs; Waltz's father was a friend of Hitler and a Nazi sympathizer, predilections that inevitably distorted how Rudy would experience socialization and acculturation. They are men apart in a number of ways, but the tragedy is that they can never bridge that gap.

Conclusion

Despite his posturing and duplicity, the loner represents nothing if not the claim to coherence. His is a coherent, if cynical, worldview and a coherent, if lonesome, life path. However, his integrity elides strict morality, thereby muddying an outside perspective's ability to infer the codes by which the loner operates. As this project has argued, narratives depicting the loner-protagonist often make ironic use of these amorphous or ineffable personal codes. In fact, the irony of such texts originates with the destabilizing realization that to utter the loner's integrity is to call it into question. To resolve this internal conflict and to prove his mettle, then, he must paradoxically uphold his sense of self against forces beyond his control. Testing his integrity is his undoing, though, and this tragic implosion demonstrates why the loner deserves to assume a foundational status in the thematic of American self-destructiveness.

Upon assessing the internal conflicts faced by the loner, his flaws become easy to peg even as his deepest motives remain unknowable. Within a psychoanalytic reading, however, the loner emerges as a meaningful category to describe those male characters who suffer from a manner of stifled sensitivity. This is an inward-oriented vulnerability, meaning the subject can easily feel slighted or unwanted while nonetheless resisting the urge to indicate any trace of woundedness. The loner is not effusive, then. Although not quite friendless, the loner transcends norms of communal allegiance and instead sets his sights on embodying more mythic, if more lonesome, ideals.

Such solitary characters are rarely warm with others, or even angry. Still, the volatility of their repressed emotions cannot be kept in check by an overriding dedication to reason, and so emotional responses will almost inevitably overwhelm them in the end. The loner may believe himself in possession of good sense, yet the pitfalls of his personality are overdetermined by his mercurial sensibility. If loner-protagonists at first appear apathetic and reluctant to accept accountability, they nonetheless are driven by dogmatic belief (or, at least, the desire to believe). This contradiction suggests the loner, at once detached and yet inescapably bound to familiar values, is best understood as an uncanny vision of the heroic; he may feign disinterest in the social order or adopt the posture of separateness, but his emotional investment in his normativity and privilege runs deep.

In setting on this journey of self-erasure that paradoxically still affirms the self, he capitalizes on his privilege by refusing to adhere to others' expectations: whatever others say he is or assume him to be, that set of parameters no longer define him. Given this liminal status and apartness, the loner is much like the trickster. However, the calm waters of his stoic presence manage not to betray his mercurial essence because, unlike the trickster, the loner is deadly serious about his performance. As he quests, he quests for a supposed unknown that is, in fact, a self of his own creation. From this perspective, the Other is the known that must be kept always at bay, while the self only becomes the Self by ritualistically shedding the cloak of knowability.

The loner's journey might seem like a cynical inversion of the epic tradition, which narrativizes the process whereby we might cast light on the unknown and turn away from darkness. However, the loner engages in his uncanny version of heroics with great sincerity. He travels into the self in order to find purpose, but he is also likely to subvert virtues such as courage, honor, or even self-reliance in the process. In fact, rather than assuming any instance of

self-reliance is a symptom of the loner's underlying integrity (however delusional that sense may be), this project has argued that his self-reliance is a performance in which the desired integrity (as much as it can be achieved) manifests less through action than through thought. What grounds the loner's motives and, indeed, his very claims to individualism is a thought process, in which his headlong commitment to a personal vision draws justification explicitly from rationalism and implicitly from white male privilege.

Despite this commitment, the loner suffers from a form of self-doubt that is distinctly masculine. Although he is unlikely to project bravado, there is still a form of machismo inherent in how the loner resists self-critique. In order to masquerade as the archetypal man of conviction, he must prove himself to himself. He appears aloof, but only to mirror what he sees as apathetic nature and society; hence, this is an existential state subject to naturalistic forces, but it is a subject position lacking the courage to embrace nihilism or non-conviction. This explains why the loner-protagonist has endured as an emblem of toxic masculinity: he is more perniciously malleable than the antihero, who brandishes questionable morals as a weapon. In contrast, the loner brandishes staunch conviction as a mask.

As we have witnessed throughout this project, the presence of an intensely individualistic or self-isolating male character in a text can make the distinctions between comedy and tragedy flimsy. The loner-protagonist disrupts our qualifications and categories for genre by interjecting an uncanny presence: delusions of greatness shadowed by self-doubt. The tragicomic absurdism of such characters—and the frighteningly mundane form of evil they inflict upon the world—exemplify existentialism while also exceeding it. Indeed, the loner-protagonist does not so much deconstruct the existential dilemma as magnifies it, because his self-destructive impulses necessitate a terminal narrative for either the loner himself or his wider network of social

relations. We see this dynamic, of course, when Lonelyhearts opts out of the caustic and superficial community at his workplace, only to be killed once Doyle seeks his revenge; we see it when Roark opts out of the petty and masturbatory community among tradition-bound architects, only to be sued and prosecuted at different points along his journey toward a fairytale ending of unearned vindication and an ironic windfall from Wynand; we see it when Fowler opts out of the judgmental and nepotistic community at his former employer, only to be cast out from another surrogate family that he revenges himself against by murdering Mabel.

The goal of this project was to portray both the loner-protagonist and the narratives he hijacks as cautionary examples. The suffering wrought within these texts occurs because of an intensely male and extremely privileged form of myopia. If the existential dilemma of our lives is that we must always be reminded we are alone in the world—must always be reminded that it is naïve escapism to forget we are born alone, dream and fear alone, and will die alone—then the two options are to commit to nihilism and become subsumed within solipsism or to commit to empathy and become buoyed by communication. One is a terminal black hole of navel-gazing, self-reliance, and personal exceptionalism, while the other could destabilize the ingrained primacy of the self. When introspective intimacy gives way to empathy, it challenges the secrecy and self-reflexive protection of private experience. Similarly, this bond of intimacy can shed light on our cynicism or even hypocrisy as we push away (or exploit) others. As we have seen, this gesture of opting out simply reflects the unjustified assumption that one's own experience should remain central in the narrative of greatness.

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