

AN UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF EXISTENTIALISM

THE REED

Volume 26  
2024

# The Reed Journal of Existentialism

Volume 26, 2024

St. Olaf College

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“The phenomenological world is not the bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but the laying down of being. Philosophy is not the reflection of pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being.”

*Maurice Merleau-Ponty,  
Phenomenology of Perception*

## *Letter from the Editors*

Each year at The Reed, a certain puzzle seems to engage the students of philosophy who submit their work. Common themes arise like a mosaic expressing the collective philosophical mind; these puzzles tug at the strings of our analysis, pushing the journal naturally toward a theme through which we aspire to encapsulate this fleeting mood.

As we emerge from fires of instability and unknowing, this generation of philosophers is growing into a keen awareness of the separation between our own perceptions and the happenings around us. In an effort to not let thrownness engulf our very being, we choose otherwise. This year, phenomenology has played a massive role in our journal— we edited many amazing works dealing with notions of being, knowing, experiencing, and emancipating ourselves from the common narratives that attempt to define us.

I am pleased to announce our Edna Hong Memorial Essay Prize winner, Shruti Sinha's "The Genesis of the Feminine Flame." This essay adds a literary flair to our philosophical journal, presenting a modern Beauvoirian analysis on the development of women through society's common myths, driven in part by the fairytales we hear as children and recite as mothers. I was grateful to work on this piece, and I highly recommend reading it.

We aimed to craft a narrative for you to enjoy throughout this edition, which is bound not by thematic cohesion but by a common thread of writing to experience, experiencing to understand the world around us and perhaps our very place in it. Ultimately, inspired by Merleau-Ponty's contribution to the world of phenomenology, we accept that phenomenology is "a problem to be solved and a hope to be realized."

Thank you for your continued support in The Reed and for reading this year's edition.

Best regards,

Alyssa Medin, Editor-in-Chief

Ziza Nshakira, Vice Editor-in-Chief

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# Time Weaver's Paradox

*Tali Finger*

In the quaint town of Lone Pine, Erwin, a writer with a penchant for the unconventional, embarked on his most ambitious project yet. His narrative centered around Dr. E. Brown, a scientist shrouded in enigmatic brilliance, who had crafted an extraordinary apparatus he, oddly, as he did most things in his atypical life, named the Bergsonian Metachronic Waveformulator (BMW). This device, residing in a space that felt more like a futurologist's den than a conventional laboratory with white lab coats and long narrow tubes, was not a mere time-travel mechanism but a complex manipulator of temporal perception and narrative structure. Erwin's journey to this latest project was fueled by a deep-seated curiosity and a desire to probe life's mysteries through his writing. Over the years, he had tackled various themes, each project pushing the boundaries of reality and perception. This narrative about Dr. Brown and his groundbreaking invention was not just another story; it was Erwin's way of grappling with the complexities of time, memory, and existence. Through

the lens of the BMW, Erwin was once again seeking clarity and catharsis, hoping to uncover new meanings in the tangled web of time and human experience.

The BMW stood as a testament to the profound capabilities of temporal mechanics, its essence rooted not in the physical traversal of time but in the manipulation of temporal perception and drawing upon the intricate philosophies of Minkowski spacetime and the transitivity of temporal events. Entwined with the frameworks of relativistic physics, the pseudo-time-machine's operational principles challenged the conventional demarcations of past, present, and future. Dr. Brown's machine operated on the underpinnings of Markovian determination and the second law of thermodynamics, where the categories of past and future were not defined by metaphysical distinctiveness but by epistemic access and interpretative narrative reconstruction. The BMW's core lay in its ability to manipulate not time itself, but the narrative threads that compose our understanding of it. Drawing from the underpinnings of relativistic physics, it blurred the lines between past, present, and future, testing the conventional frameworks that define them. A complex dialogue between Markovian determination and the nuances of thermodynamic entropy, the device altered not the physicality of the past but the epistemic access to its memory.

Erwin initiated the BMW's inaugural trial amidst the everyday backdrop of a Lone Pine local election, turning it into an experiment in shared perception. Dr. Brown's strategy wasn't about altering events but reshaping context, using the intertwining of ideas and memories to direct the town's opinion toward a pre-



ferred outcome. By subtly affecting prominent community members and integrating new narrative threads into public conversation, he modified perceptions of the candidates. The previously favored incumbent, viewed through the BMW, now seemed mired in obsolescence, whereas the challenger, seen anew, symbolized advancement. The BMW, exploiting time's flexibility, used the present to adjust the future, syncing collective memories with an updated recount of past events. This election in Lone Pine showcased the BMW's power not to change history itself but to transform its communal understanding, thereby shaping the future. It became a tool that manipulated the core aspects of temporal dynamics, applying the unyielding laws of physics in a way that could be reversed across time.

Erwin's narrative journey then delved into Dr. Brown's personal history, shedding light on the forces that shaped his motivations. It zeroed in on a defining episode from Brown's youth—the summer of 1976, etched in his memory by the bittersweet saga of his first love, Clara. Their story transcended a mere youthful romance, marking a critical juncture in Brown's life trajectory. The recollections of that summer were tinged with the anguish of their last confrontation, a fervent dispute beneath the ancient oak in the town park, where a maelstrom of misunderstandings and words left unsaid precipitated the end of their time together. Dr. Brown, immersed in his scientific endeavors, had always struggled with self-sufficiency, a gap Clara bridged with her nurturing presence. Her support was not just emotional but practical, enabling him to pursue his passion with a singular focus. In turn, Clara found inspiration in Dr. Brown's dedication and ingenuity,

which fueled her own ambitions. However, the pressure of a significant breakthrough eluding him led Dr. Brown to unfairly direct his frustrations towards Clara, fracturing their relationship under the weight of expectations and unvoiced grievances.

Rather than seeking to alter the fabric of time itself, Dr. Brown turned to the BMW to revisit and transform his memories of that pivotal summer. Through the lens of his groundbreaking invention, he returned to the day of their painful disagreement. This time, he approached their conversation with the patience, empathy, and unvoiced affection absent in their original exchange. As he navigated through these reimagined memories, Dr. Brown's perception of that summer—and of Clara—began to shift. The enduring bitterness that had clouded his memories for years started to fade, giving way to a reflection on what might have been. This introspection revealed a narrative of love compromised not by destiny but by the missteps of youth.

In revisiting these moments, Dr. Brown found that the sharp edges of his past grievances softened. The act of mentally reconstructing their final argument with a new understanding and kindness allowed him to view their relationship in a different light. This shift in perspective made the weight of past regrets less burdensome. Mornings became easier; he found himself walking past landmarks of their shared history in Lone Pine, each step a testament to the healing power of recontextualized memories. This process did not merely change his view of Clara but also enriched his connection to Lone Pine, imbuing it with a renewed sense of belonging and nostalgia.

Motivated by this newfound perspective, Dr.

Brown sought out Clara in the present. To his surprise, he found that Clara had made her way back to their hometown after years away. Their reunion, under the same old oak tree, was a moment of revelation and catharsis. They shared their life stories, the paths they had taken, and the lingering “what ifs” that had haunted them both. This reconnection led to a renewed relationship, one built on the foundations of their past but informed by the wisdom and experiences of their separate lives. Their re-established connection brought changes not just in their personal lives but also in their contributions to the community. Clara, now an esteemed environmental scientist, joined forces with Dr. Brown on various local initiatives, marrying her scientific acumen with his inventive prowess. Through Erwin’s storytelling, the profound influence of memory and perception on our life’s path is laid bare. Dr. Brown’s experiments with the BMW, coupled with his reconciliation with Clara, underscore a fundamental truth: our past, while unchangeable in fact, is infinitely malleable in its influence on our present and future.

As the story’s climax approached, Dr. Brown grappled with the ethical ramifications of his actions. It was Clara’s insights and their shared experiences that ignited a crucial epiphany in him: the power to mold perception and narrative, while groundbreaking, carried with it significant moral weight. If his new partner knew about the methods he had employed to rebuild their connection, would she, whose virtue Dr. Brown had always admired and aspired toward, choose to be with him still? He pondered the nature of reality and truth, questioning the authenticity of the new narratives he had artificially engineered through the BMW.

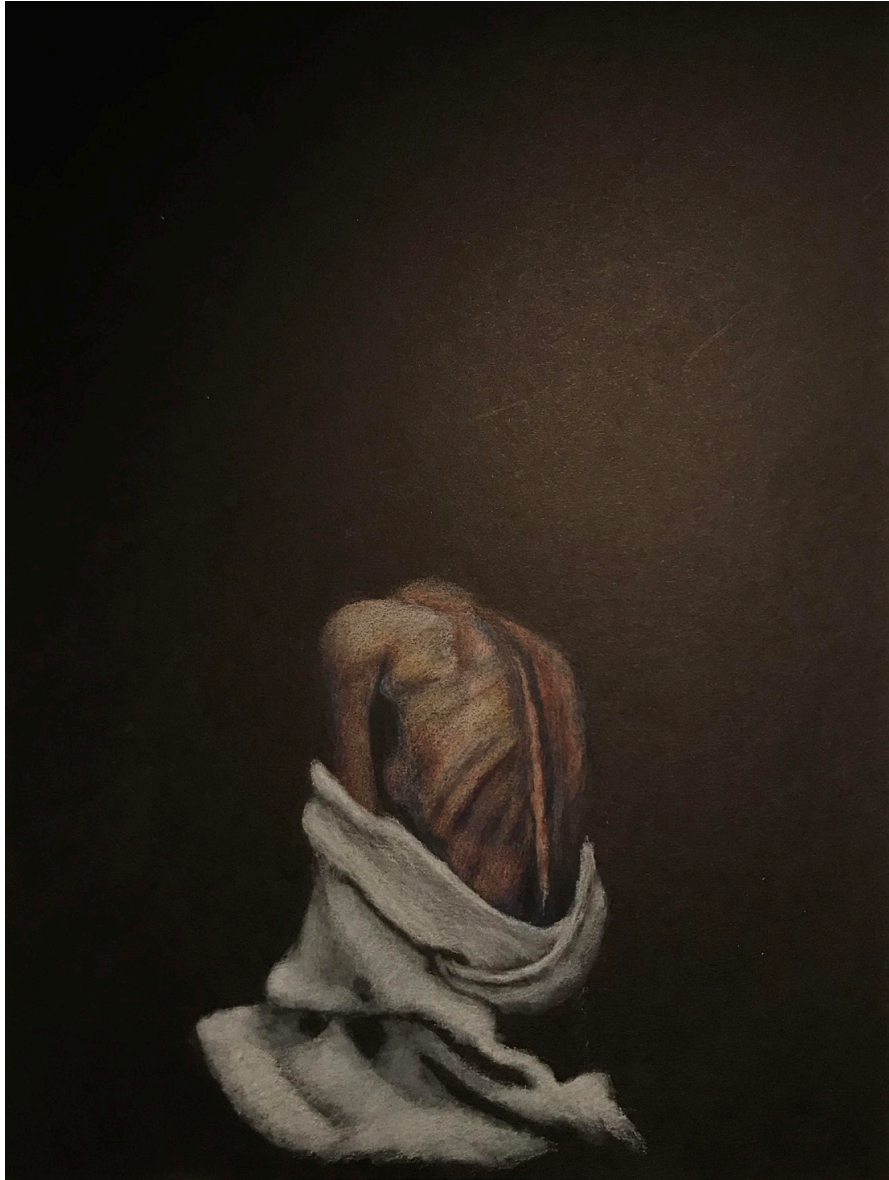
Were these new stories true to the spirit of the original memories, or had they been compromised?

In a moment of simultaneous genius and terror, Erwin experienced a life-changing breakthrough: the BMW, in all its complexity and mystery, was more (and much less) than a machine; it was a metaphor for the inherent human ability to shape our understanding and memory of time, already entirely within our grasp. The novel was not just a mere fictional exploration of temporal manipulation, but an acknowledgement of the influence of narrative in shaping human understanding of time and our grasp of reality and identity. Our past, Dr. Brown understood, is as flexible as the narratives we choose to believe and share. Our connection to our history is shaped by our perceptions, which are, in turn, influenced by the narratives we are exposed to or create ourselves. Our very own past, Erwin understood, is just as malleable as Dr. Brown's; our knowledge of and connection to it no less subjective, based solely on unreliable epistemic windows strategically (or not, you choose) placed to shape our perception. In a way, the past is as real as the future that has not yet arrived and, most importantly, just as alterable as the yet-to-come.

In the final strokes of his creation, Erwin, through the adventures of Dr. E. Brown and his Bergsonian Metachronic Waveformulator, transcended the boundaries of fiction to offer a deeper insight into the essence of time and our place within its continuum. The BMW, conceived at the intersection of relativistic physics and Markovian principles, emerged not merely as a scientific wonder but as a metaphor for the human capacity to shape reality. By giving life to Dr. Brown's journey, Erwin illuminated that our perception of the

past, often perceived as fixed and unalterable, is in fact a flexible narrative, subject to our present perceptions and emotions. The revelation that the power of the BMW is within each of us serves as a reminder of our inherent ability to influence the narratives of the past and thereby the essence of time itself. This realization brings with it a responsibility – the responsibility to wield our narratives wisely, recognizing their potential to alter not only our view of the past but also the course of the future.





# **Vulnerable**

*Ariannya Herbst*



# Death, Delusion, and Denial: A Comparative Study between Nietzsche and Mishima

*Kangdi Huang*

*The dread and resistance which every natural human being experiences when it comes to delving too deeply into himself is, at bottom, the fear of the journey to Hades.<sup>1</sup>*

-- Jung, Psychology and Alchemy

Yukio Mishima, a Japanese post-war novelist who spent his life worshiping the tragic way of death and eventually committed seppuku<sup>2</sup> for the emperor, and Nietzsche, who famously claims the death of the God and overman<sup>3</sup> born in his various writings, are both destructive geniuses. Together, their writings demonstrate a destructive tendency toward rationality, religion, and morality that shapes our society

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1 Carl Jung, Psychology and Alchemy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 439

2 Seppuku is a traditional ritual of taking one's own life committed among the Japanese samurai class by disemboweling oneself to cause an agonizing death. It was done to manifest one's courage, loyalty, and willpower.

3 Nietzsche's view of overman (another translation is superman) is extremely inconsistent. In some of his writings, he sees the overman as a return to the state of a child, seeing the world in a naive way, free of teaching and dogmas; in others, he sees becoming an overman as becoming a masculine figure, which is thought to get rid of the femininity that represents psychosis and reaffirms the masculinity; and in yet other writings, he seems to think that to become such masculine figure is to become a child. Strictly speaking, to say that the first is a correct understanding of Nietzsche and others are wrong understandings is still a misunderstanding of his thoughts.

and daily life. Meanwhile, the devastation is often directed at themselves, and the two authors love to taste the fierce pleasure through self-destruction. In their respective works, their rumination over death and destruction share some fascinating affinities and, on the other hand, have slight yet crucial differences. Through the comparative study of their thoughts on the levels of death and illusion, religion and God, and gender and sexualization, we might find that the ideas of Mishima and Nietzsche reveal the unconscious of the other. I wish readers to know that, in their writing, these three dimensions are not distinct from one another but are synergistic with each other. Both Nietzsche and Mishima share a profound insight into the perception and contemplation of death and its illusions, which is that death is not simply a physiological termination of life but various associations it signifies. However, Nietzsche's rejection of God and Christianity suggests what Mishima might be repressing due to death anxiety: his yearning for power and unconditional protection hidden beneath the ambivalent attitude toward God in defense against his vulnerability. In the same way, Mishima's writing on gender and sexualization might likewise reveal ideas that Nietzsche represses due to death anxiety: his hostility toward femininity and idealization of male sexuality illuminate Nietzsche's repressed anxiety of being emasculated beneath his vision of the overman as "warrior." By realizing the interchange between Nietzsche's and Mishima's unconscious, we are trying to find the possibility of transgressing the defensive mechanism of repression/resistance<sup>4</sup> in the human psyche to better understand and enrich Nietzsche's philosophy of "overman."

For both Nietzsche and Mishima, "death" is not just a

<sup>4</sup> Repression/resistance is a psychoanalytic term. It is a self-defense mechanism that keeps one's unacceptable and forbidden impulses, feelings, and ideas as something hidden, secret, and dark (the unconscious) to soothe one's anxiety about seeing them. For example, Mishima might repress his idea that he is vulnerable and powerless by his blasphemous imagination of murdering and sacrificing people. However, the existence of repression/resistance already indicates a certain degree of awareness of the repressed.

physiological termination of life. It is a wealth of death fantasies in which the physiological death only serves as a symbol that signifies them. We might find the common implications of death as the physical termination of life within their depictions of it. Nonetheless, we would miss the richness and diversity of meanings that “death” can have in various contexts and how it reflects important aspects of the human psychological and emotional condition if we only reduce “death” as a biological cessation of life, according to Nietzsche and Mishima. For both authors, death, the cessation of life, can implicate a total of four different human states, including different death fantasies, in different contexts. These four states are deprivation, including fantasies like separation, abandonment, rejection, laceration, and so on; consummation that concretizes itself through fantasies of restfulness, closure, reunification, sleep, stasis, etc; powerlessness, vulnerability, or susceptibility with the fantasies of being diseased, aging, old, corrupted, decayed, etc; eventually, atrocity or tyranny with fantasies of murdering, torturing, punishing, castrating, humiliation, and revenge, and so on. My comparative analysis of Mishima and Nietzsche will reveal death fantasies, which correspond to the four important human psychological states above, consisting of the death matrix.

As we have previewed, death could implicate a state of completion and consummation in their works, depending on the context. In Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity, death often serves as a hallucinatory wish for wholeness and completion due to the fearful aversion to the complexity of earthly life. For example, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he criticizes Christians as a group of despisers of the body. According to Nietzsche (1883), “The body is a great reasons, a plurality with one sense, a war and a peace, a herd and a shepherd.”<sup>5</sup> It is an

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5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 34.

assemblage of conflicting sensual desires, representing something contradictory and complex within ourselves. Humans are conflicting beings who might possess various ambivalent emotions like fear, hatred, humiliation, despair, and yearning for love and intimacy within themselves. Christianity is the condemnation of such passions; it is the hatred, fear, and denial toward the earthly world and such conflicting, complicated sensualities. They incessantly crave “reunification of life and pass away themselves.”<sup>6</sup> For Nietzsche, they long for “the sabbath of sabbaths.” Death, the cessation of the forever self-contradictory life, becomes a serene wish for the end, respite, restfulness, stasis, and sleep in denial of the forever contradiction, complication, and struggle in the secular world. On the other hand, Mishima also thinks that it is entirely possible for humans to be lured from this earthly life with eternity due to exhaustion and discouragement.<sup>7</sup> In his autobiographical novel *Confessions of a Mask*,<sup>8</sup> which sets World War II Japan as its background, for the protagonist, life is an obligation that he cannot fulfill but is imposed on him. He did not have the means to fulfill all sorts of obligations: to obey the drafting orders, to meet his father’s expectations of him, and to do the tasks given to him by various institutions, such as school. Life is also an eternal struggle and contradiction for him. As a result, the protagonist began to expect to be blown up by air raids, stating, “I was uncommonly afraid of them, and yet at the same time I somehow looked forward to death impatiently, with a sweet expectation.”<sup>9</sup> For Mishima, death is no longer simply a termination of life but a beautifully poetic symbol of

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6 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 45.

7 Ibid.

8 Yukio Mishima wrote a letter to Ryūzaburō Shikiba, a Japanese psychiatrist, in 1949 (Showa 24, the year *Confession of a Mask* was first published), confessing that the events written in this novel, except for a few character archetypal corrections or the fusion of two characters to make a single one, all came from his own personal, real-life experiences.

9 Yukio Mishima, *Confessions of a Mask* (London: Panther, 1972), 90.

restfulness, respite, and sabbath without further contradiction and struggling reflecting his inner yearning for completion and consummation.

Nevertheless, in different contexts, death also insinuates a state of loss and deprivation, which exemplifies itself as the terrifying fantasies of separation, abandonment, laceration, rejection, and more. For Mishima, death can be viewed as a miserable, painful, and humiliating abandonment. In chapter 3 of *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, which might be his most remarkable novel, the protagonist (Mizoguchi) witnesses a traumatic scene in bed where his mother copulates with a man named Kurai (Mishima alludes “dark” or “gloomy” with this word). For Mizoguchi, the traumatic scene of the sexual intercourse between his mother and the “darkness” is as mortally terrifying as a “sight of hell”. The love and intimacy supposed to belong to him are now taken away and possessed by another man. Here, death is a despairing deprivation of love and intimacy that threatens Mizoguchi with his mother’s abandonment and rejection in an unbearable sense of humiliation. The dread of death as the terror of deprivation symbolizes itself as the fantasy of laceration between the son and mother with forever and gloomy darkness by means of Kurai. When discussing Apollonian art, we see the same death fantasy of laceration and separation in Nietzsche’s debut work, *The Birth of Tragedy*. For Nietzsche (1872), death means to exist deprived of the beautiful Olympian world made of gods. When the ancient Greeks were immersed in the dreamlike beauty of the Olympian world, they escaped the pain of reality for a while by appreciating these objects of beauty. The real pain and suffering of ancient Greeks is caused by parting from it.<sup>10</sup> For Nietzsche, once they are removed and parted from this world of beauty, they might experience the excruciating terror

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10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (New York: Vintage Books Knopf, div. of Random House, 1967), 43.

of death by proclaiming, “to die soon is worst of all for us, the next worst---- to die at all.”<sup>11</sup> Human yearning and craving for beauty reflect our fundamental despair and anxiety for being deprived, defective, and disintegrated. Such a state of deprivation, loss, and disintegration symbolizes death for both Mishima and Nietzsche.

On the other hand, the signification of death (as the cessation of physiological functions) is not limited to the reference to the fantasies of consummation and deprivation. Death could also signify various imaginations of human powerlessness, vulnerability, or susceptibility. When Nietzsche writes about death, he frequently associates it with the inner state of vulnerability, thereby generating fantasies of aging, oldness, decay, disease, and corruption. For example, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche thinks of the dying person as “the hollowest nut [that] still wants to be cracked;” they are too aged and old, like “a toothless mouth [that] no longer has the right to every truth.”<sup>12</sup> For Nietzsche, death means becoming aged and old, and such fantasies of aging always involve the dread of corruption and decay. Those old people, according to Nietzsche, are “sour apples” that “become ripe, yellow, and wrinkled all at once,” and it is “cowardice that keeps them on their branch.”<sup>13</sup> Those fantasies of vulnerability also incorporate the hallucinations of corruption and decay. Death, as something that makes us so vulnerable and powerless, for Nietzsche, is “a poisonous worm [that] eats its way to their hearts,” and it “creeps up like a thief—and yet comes as the master” with a chilling and grinning smile.<sup>14</sup> For Nietzsche, death is malignant and poisonous: it invades you and eats away at your life. We could find the same fantasies of death that indicate the inner state of vulnerability and susceptibility

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11 Ibid.

12 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 72

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.



in Mishima's works. In *Confessions of a Mask*, the protagonist seems to be veiled and cannot escape the threat of death, as a shadow of disease, from the moment he is born. When he was only five, he "vomited something the color of the coffee."<sup>15</sup> The doctor thought he was hopeless, and after his family spent two hours with his corpse, he finally came back to life. Since that moment, "that illness—auto-intoxication----became chronic with me."<sup>16</sup> Even for Mishima, death, as the symbol of disease, is closely associated with being old and aged. He was snatched from his mother's arm by his grandmother the forty-ninth day after he was born. Ever since then, his bed "was placed in [his] grandmother's sickroom, perpetually closed and stifling with odors of sickness and old age, and [he] was raised there beside her sickbed."<sup>17</sup> His grandmother, who represents sickness and old age, is mortally terrifying to Mishima. According to John Nathan's (1974) biography of Mishima, his grandmother would even hold a knife to her neck at night to threatening Mishima with committing suicide if he left her.<sup>18</sup> For both Nietzsche and Mishima, death implicates an excruciating state of being powerless and vulnerable, which exemplifies itself as fantasies of being diseased, old, aged, and corrupted.

Besides the fantasies of being constantly threatened by the risk of decaying, diseased, and infected, death is also associated with something extraordinarily fiery and tyrannical. This involves fantasies of murder, revenge, humiliation, crucifixion, punishment, torture, persecution, and so on. These fantasies can be so easily found in both authors' writings. In Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, death as a state of dominance and tyranny concretizes itself through fantasies of murder, punishment, castration, and humiliation. Nietzsche describes moralists who advocate equality as

15 Yukio Mishima, *Confessions of a Mask*, 8

16 Yukio Mishima, *Confessions of a Mask*, 9

17 Yukio Mishima, *Confessions of a Mask*, 8

18 John Nathan, *Mishima: A Biography* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1981), 19.

tarantulas. Nietzsche asserts that those “tarantulas” pursue equality out of the “tyrannomania of impotence... aggrieved conceit, [and] repressed envy.”<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche thinks “equality” comes from the envy of a group of inferior creatures directed towards the self-autonomous and sovereign strong. Their power and sovereignty make tarantulas humiliated and jealous, so they invent the moral of equality to hurt the strong in compensation for their humiliation. Those people are symbols of death. They are “the hangman and the bloodhound [that] look out of their faces,” and those poisonous spiders are “the foremost slanderers of the world and burners of heretics.”<sup>20</sup> According to Nietzsche, death here implicates a state of dominance or tyranny involving fantasies of murder, persecution, punishment, torture, and so on. We could find precisely the same fantasies in the novels of Mishima. In *Confessions of a Mask*, the protagonist bullies his maid to tears, but she treats him like nothing happened with a smile the following day. At this point, “I would read all manner of evil meanings into her smiles. I could not believe them to be other than the diabolical smiles to poison me out of revenge. Waves of fear billowed up in my breast.”<sup>21</sup> For Mishima, death implicates an absolute dominance and tyranny of other people that involves being murdered, persecuted, avenged, and defeated. At the beginning of *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, he even imagined himself as “a stuttering, taciturn tyrant” who “wreck[s] (sic)<sup>22</sup> punishment on my teachers and schoolmates who daily tormented me.”<sup>23</sup> For both Nietzsche and Mishima, death as a state of ferocity always involves fantasies of destruction, re-

19 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 100.

20 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 101.

21 Yukio Mishima, *Confessions of a Mask*, 21.

22 This is probably a mistake in the English translation. It should read “wreak punishment” since no one wrecks punishment. Moreover, in other translations (for example, in my Chinese version), Mishima uses the term “execution” instead of “wreak punishment,” which is more specific than the latter and refers to killing someone.

23 Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (London: Everyman’s Library, 1994), 23.

venge, punishment, and more.

Therefore, we have shown that Nietzsche and Mishima are equally profound to the extent that both realize death signifies a host of meanings and fantasies besides merely the biological termination of life. Death becomes symbolic of complex fears, sufferings, and desires. The death fantasies that occurred in their writings could be summarized into four different states: consummation, deprivation, powerlessness, and atrocity. However, due to death anxiety, both authors repress certain ideas from their waking consciousness. Further, by use of Nietzsche's discourse on God, it can be shown that Mishima represses his yearning for unconditional protection with his vengeful desire for blasphemy and murdering God. This desire is due to the anxiety of being independent and abandoned. In the same way, we want to introduce Mishima's thoughts on women in his novels to argue that Nietzsche represses his fear and dread of femininity as something lustful, evil, dark, and performative by fantasizing about an idealized masculine figure

Mishima's attitude toward God is ambivalent in *Confessions of a Mask*. On the one hand, the protagonist (Mishima himself) shows his pious submission in the prose poem he creates for St. Sebastian, a Christian martyr persecuted by the Roman emperor. In this prose poem, he describes the execution of St. Sebastian as something sacred and extraordinary. According to Mishima, his martyrdom is a "brand which Fate had set upon him" as "the token of his apartness from all the ordinary men of earth."<sup>24</sup> St. Sebastian's death is a fate ordained by God, and his purpose was to differentiate him from all ordinary, mediocre men as someone extraordinary and sacred. However, on the other hand, the protagonist also displays a highly vengeful and blasphemous desire in regard to God. He feverishly and sexually fantasizes about the "ritual sacrifice for

your pagan ceremony” in chapter three, in which he gathers all the naked bodies of ephebes,<sup>25</sup> binds the most satisfying one to the hexagonal pillar with the rope, and slaughters him slowly with “a strange, innocent smile,” appreciating his despairing cry and twisting body.<sup>26</sup> Here, Mishima becomes disturbingly blasphemous, and he incessantly tries to irritate and humiliate God with his pagan ceremony.

We might illuminate the secret motive behind Mishima’s ambivalent attitude toward God with Nietzsche’s philosophy. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche (1882) famously describes a madman running into a market with a lightning lantern in his hand during the day, yelling, “I seek the God! I seek God!... We have killed him. All of us are his murderers.”<sup>27</sup> For Nietzsche, the “lantern” alludes to God as our absolute and authoritative measure of the world. Once God dies, everything falls into infinite darkness, and the world loses the laws and purposes by which it functions. “What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns?”<sup>28</sup> Losing God means losing the finitude and stability upon which we survive. According to Nietzsche, God represents unconditional protection from purposeless and chaotic uncertainty. Therefore, from a Nietzschean perspective, Mishima’s imagination of St. Sebastian, whose fate of sacrificing himself for God’s sake as the chosen one, is fabricated out of human despair for purpose and divine ordinance. He needs to fabricate the narrative to save himself from the threat of purposelessness and mediocrity. By dedicating himself to a grandiose being through the figure of St. Sebastian, Mishima escapes from the fears of insignificance and helplessness by running towards the comfort of unconditional protection. However, Nietzsche

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25 Ephebe is a young man of 18-20 years undergoing military training.

26 Yukio Mishima, *Confessions of a Mask*, 122.

27 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Gay Science* (New York: Random House, 1974), 181.

28 Ibid.

seems to have long realized the latent hatred and aggressiveness behind our dependence on God. The madman is desperately questioning, “Who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves?... Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?”<sup>29</sup> Humans are not only departed from God but also guilty of murdering Him, the absolute and authoritative measure. Nietzsche is insinuating here a wish to replace God as the absolute and authoritative measure after murdering Him. We need a narcissistic, omnipotent, and grandiose ego as God’s substitute to console the terror of being abandoned. It provides a novel perspective for us to understand Mishima. We find a wish to replace God with his omnipotent ego capable of determining the fate of others in his hands, coexisting with an unbreakable attachment to God in Mishima. By excitedly depicting such bloodthirsty atrocities, Mishima asserts his sovereignty and authoritative power alongside, even beyond, God. Therefore, Nietzsche provides a novel perspective to understand Mishima’s ambivalent attitude toward God. On the one hand, he yearns for unconditional protection from God as an authority by identifying with a martyr who dedicates himself to God; on the other hand, his blasphemous and murderous desire for God indicates a wish to replace God with the grandiose and omnipotent ego. Mishima’s ambivalent attitude indicates fear and dread of being helpless, powerless, and abandoned, which is repressed by his pursuit of grandiosity and ego inflation.

On the other hand, Nietzsche also shows his peculiarity in his discourse on women. For Nietzsche, a woman is mysterious, dangerous, and lustful. It is the challenge a man must overcome to be an overman. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he asserts that “everything about woman is a riddle, and

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.  
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everything about woman has one solution: that is pregnancy.”<sup>30</sup> For Nietzsche, a woman is filled with darkness and mysteries that man cannot decipher. A man is merely a means a woman uses to get pregnant with a child. Therefore, she is more dominant and powerful than men and cannot be easily mastered. Accordingly, Nietzsche thinks a woman is “for the recreation of the warrior.”<sup>31</sup> The warrior is the man who overcomes his inner fear and plays in danger like a child (overman), and in order to be such a warrior, a man needs a woman as “the most dangerous plaything.”<sup>32</sup> According to Nietzsche, an overman not only overcomes the woman as a danger but also enjoys the danger and its game.

Therefore, how should we understand Nietzsche’s opinions that the overman, as a warrior, is given birth by women from Mishima’s perspective? Once we shift our viewpoint, Nietzsche’s discourse on overman reveals his repressed anxiety and dread of being powerless and vulnerable in front of the mysterious and dangerous fantasized being of women. We find a coincidence in Mishima’s fantasies of the ideal masculine character with Nietzsche’s discourse on overman. Like Nietzsche, Mishima dreams about an ideal male figure who tragically faces death with courage and determination and overcomes his inner fear and timidity in front of it. In *Confessions of a Mask*, Mishima confesses that his earliest, unquestionable memory is a “strangely vivid image” of a night-soil man who “came down the slope carrying a yoke of night-soil buckets over one shoulder.”<sup>33</sup> In front of the dirty youth, “I was choked by desire, thinking, ‘I want to change into him,’ thinking, ‘I want to be him.’”<sup>34</sup> Mishima idealizes and eroticizes the worker as a powerfully masculine figure he wishes to be-

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30 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 66.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Yukio Mishima, *Confessions of a Mask*, 9.

34 Yukio Mishima, *Confessions of a Mask*, 10.



come. The motive behind the wish secretly alludes to itself as a repressed misogynistic anxiety of being emasculated by the woman. For Mishima, “excrement is a symbol for the earth, and it was doubtlessly the malevolent love of the Earth Mother that was calling to me.”<sup>35</sup> The night-soil man is erotically fantasized as a fearless tragic hero in defense against the malevolent love of the Earth Mother. Here, women are fantasized as evil, dark, and torturous beings who oppress and persecute males. They are annihilating and emasculating. In order to fight against the anxiety, he fantasizes about the occupation which provides him “a certain feeling as it were of ‘self-reunification,’ a certain feeling of indifference, a certain feeling of intimacy with danger, a feeling like a remarkable mixture of nothingness and vital power.”<sup>36</sup> For Mishima, the night-soil man, his idealized male figure, is the one who dares to go under into the earth.<sup>37</sup> Here, we see that Nietzsche’s usage of “earth” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is given a new meaning by Mishima: earth is the symbol of femininity, which is filled with darkness, dangers, and malice. When Zarathustra spoke this to the people who gathered together in the marketplace, “Behold, I teach you the overman. The overman is the meaning of the earth,”<sup>38</sup> from Mishima’s perspective to Nietzsche, one must become masculine, powerful, courageous, and vital in order to defend against the danger named “femininity” to become the overman. The night-soil man Mishima eroticizes is the Nietzschean overman who dares to go under, and the overman cannot exist without fantasizing about women as malevolent, evil, and malicious beings who lurk in the wings, waiting to persecute the overman. Therefore, from Mishima’s perspective, the night-soil man and the Nietzschean “overman” both indicate an anxiety about being emasculated, powerless, and vulnera-

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35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 15.

38 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 13.

ble in front of the dangerous and malevolent being of women.

Thus, what do we ultimately learn through a comparative study of Mishima and Nietzsche? Physiological death is a symbol that signifies various fantasies, reflecting the four critical aspects of the human psychological condition in total: consummation, deprivation, powerlessness, and atrocity. Moreover, to turn away from the mortal terror, from the Nietzschean viewpoint, we see Mishima try to repress the anxiety of being powerless and deprived of being protected into the unconscious by ambivalently fantasizing about God, on the one hand, as an omnipotent master who protects himself against danger and, on the other hand, an antagonistic enemy who needs to be defeated to replace him with the grandiose and inflated ego. Similarly, we see Nietzsche also resist his mortal terror of being devoured and persecuted by femininity through imagining a warrior-like masculine overman figure who plays in danger from Mishima's perspective. Through the project of comparative study between Nietzsche and Mishima, we might find that Nietzschean overman, to whom men are merely "a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment," cannot arrive unless we open a dialogue with others to let negativity go into our own visual field.<sup>39</sup> The overman may not be an individual but a whole new being born after individuals transgress and cross ego boundaries with each other. As Zarathustra has said to the people, "Only when you have all denied me will I return to you." Being an overman means accepting the mortal terror you repress for self-preservation and security by crossing the ego boundaries and standing in others' perspectives. The process might be painful and traumatizing, but perhaps with it comes the birth of a new and free life that triumphantly affirms his existence.

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39 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 12.

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**Brutalist**

*Auguste Bernick*

# The Structure and Meaning of Heideggerian *Dasein*

*Nicholas Meagher*

An evaluation of Martin Heidegger's phenomenological ontology ultimately posits *Dasein* as capable of a marked duality between empowering meaning and framing humans as not completely possessing free will. This essay will analyze *Dasein's* claim to authentic being through Heidegger's account of "*Being-in-the-World*,"<sup>1</sup> despite the constitutive contingencies of his inter-subjective ontology, and confirmation of the coherence of *Dasein* will be sought whilst assessing its empowering and disempowering implications. This analysis will culminate in a discussion of the tensions emerging from this nexus and how they impact the structure and meaning of *Dasein*. Heidegger's ontology allows one to realize the extent to which humans are not agents of free will, the extent to which others are responsible for our construction of meaning, and how this responsibility is an unavoidable contingency of intersubjectivity.

A certain difficulty arises when trying to critically evaluate a phenomenological ontology. This is because phenomenology – as the study of primordial structures

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<sup>1</sup> Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 40.

of consciousness – is trying to capture the pre-theoretical mode of Being which gives rise to the theoretical ability to criticize and analyze. The obstacle faced here is clear: how does one go about evaluating (which is a theoretical mode of Being) a pre-theoretical ontology which is trying to confine a viscerally apparent yet wordless awareness of being into a linguistically comprehensible form? This paper attempts to lash Heideggerian phenomenological ontology – wordless, embodied, and lived – to a trellis of linguistic construction, an abstract framework to which it does not naturally stick. However, this does not mean that Heidegger’s ontology is beyond scrutiny; it means that we must approach an analysis of Heidegger in the same way he attempted to answer the question of being. He revealed that epistemology (and thus ideology) comes after ontology, and his phenomenology is the platform from which his ideology takes flight.

In “*Being and Time*” Heidegger seeks to justify his theory of being as a phenomenological ontology by demonstrating that his is the only explication which can be derived from a being<sup>2</sup> that is “*pre-ontological*,” the observation that we assume the meaning of Being to be self-evident yet remain unable to formally articulate what being means.<sup>3</sup> Heidegger thus offers a phenomenological account of ontology as self-consciousness embedded within a network of meaning.<sup>4</sup> He refers to the lived experience of this ontology of

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2 Heidegger makes a key distinction between ‘Being’ and ‘being’; ‘being’ refers to a singular existing entity that is capable of various modes of existence, and ‘Being’ refers to any mode of existence that this aforementioned ‘being’ may adopt, i.e. a being who is Being a baker.

3 Martin Heidegger, “Introduction to *Being and Time*”, in *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1978), 54.

4 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 122.



self-consciousness as *Being-in-the-World*. What Dreyfus would later refer to as a seminal re-interpretation of the “activity of existing,”<sup>5</sup> Heidegger uses the term *Being-in-the-World* to collapse and supplant the classical epistemological distinctions between consciousness, world, subject, and object because “all consciousness is consciousness of something.”<sup>6</sup> As such, consciousness as *Being-in-the-World* cannot exist independently from perceptions, thoughts, and objects, nor can they exist without being beheld by a consciousness.

This primordial mode of being precedes – and gives rise to – the “*ontic*” realm of intellectual abstraction, within which meaning is theoretically ascribed to existence.<sup>7</sup> Heidegger therefore posits a phenomenological mode of existence to validate his inter-subjective ontology. Heidegger believes the fundamental question of ontology to be the explication of our mode of being which he calls *Dasein*: a being which “is always involved in an understanding of its *Being*.”<sup>8</sup> Our *Being* as *Dasein* could not and would not exist without the world and our interaction with others who constitute it.

As such, Heidegger’s phenomenology is positing an a-priori transcendental mode of *Being*. This mode of *Being* – *Dasein* – is the locus of the question of our existence, and at the same time is the way that we uniquely exist as beings. Our existence is distinct because it is endowed with the capacity to understand its *Being* and the *Being* of others unlike itself.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, to question what it is to be, we must clarify our mode

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5 Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 40.

6 Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 40.

7 Heidegger, “Introduction to *Being and Time*,” 54.

8 Heidegger, “Introduction to *Being and Time*,” 48.

9 Heidegger, “Introduction to *Being and Time*,” 58.

of Being as beings. Heidegger posits this mode of Being as *Dasein*, which is engendered by a *pre-ontological* experience of the world. It can manifest itself through two distinct capacities; the “*ontic*” and “*ontological*”<sup>10</sup>

The *ontic* capacity is *Dasein*’s ability to construct an “*existentiell*”<sup>11</sup> structure of existence, within which it can locate itself as a scientific object of study. It is not, so to speak, akin to the unreflective existence that we experience in the *pre-ontological*; rather it is a theoretical distillation of reality, depicted in the abstract for transmission to our reason. The *ontic* capacity of *Dasein* represents our ability to endow reality with theoretical constructions of knowledge. Heidegger concludes that the *ontic* refers to the dealing-with of beings that “do not raise the ontological question.”<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, the ontological capacity is *Dasein*’s ability to “describe” the nature of its existence in the form of an existential analytic.<sup>13</sup> It represents an existential engagement with the world which precedes our *ontic* interpretation of it. This elucidates *Being-in-the-World* as an “*existentiale*” of *Dasein*; one which enables it to construct theoretical knowledge.<sup>14</sup> Heidegger emphasizes the importance of understanding the sequence of experience through which *Dasein* should pass to make sense of its own existence; a fundamental ontology should “precede and guide all positive [*ontic*] investigation” because our ontological interpretation of the world will determine how we ascribe *ontic* meaning to reality.<sup>15</sup>

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10 Heidegger, “Introduction to *Being and Time*,” 11.

11 Heidegger, “Introduction to *Being and Time*,” 13.

12 Heidegger, “Introduction to *Being and Time*,” 24.

13 Heidegger, “Introduction to *Being and Time*,” 82.

14 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 149.

15 Heidegger, “Introduction to *Being and Time*,” 55.

Heidegger privileges the existential analysis of *Dasein* over the “existentiell” construction of being because *Dasein* is “foundationally intelligible” in a human world distinct from epistemic objects.<sup>16</sup> *Ontic* knowledge is arbitrarily ascribed, whereas ontological is simply an explanation of *Dasein* as the type of Being we always enact. This is because existential analysis has direct access to the *pre-ontological* question of being itself, which is embodied as *Dasein*. Heidegger develops his existential ontology through this sequential elucidation to illustrate *Dasein*’s realization or negation of its existential possibilities for “*authentic Being*.”<sup>17</sup> *Dasein* is ontological before it is *ontic* because it is consistently in a process of realization or negation as its engagement with the world is necessarily about approaching authentic being.

This paper affirms Heidegger’s conceptualization of knowledge as constructed, as does most postmodernist criticism across the humanities.<sup>18</sup> Feminism has been a particularly dominant voice in post-structuralist discourse which depicts knowledge as situated and generated from multiple locations.<sup>19</sup> The notion of constructed knowledge is an important way for culpability and plurality to be restored to the production of knowledge within the *ontic* realm. This is galvanized by Heidegger’s emphasis of existential ontology as preceding the *ontic*: “a science’s level of development is determined by the extent to which it is capable of a crisis in its basic concepts.”<sup>20</sup> By privileging the onto-

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16 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 36.

17 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 43.

18 Linda J. Nicholson, *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 42.

19 Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575.

20 Heidegger, “Introduction to *Being and Time*,” 50.

logical, Heidegger seeks to reconfigure the sciences to reflect the human as being by discarding their fallacious resemblance to objects of study.

To realize existential possibilities as a human being, it is first necessary to understand how we can become aware of them. Heidegger reveals possibility by positing social existence as an ontological network of meaning through which existential possibilities are articulated. This social existence is our *Being-in-the-World*. It consists of our “concernful” interaction with a world constituted by other entities.<sup>21</sup> Within this network of interaction, we approach others through our practical purposes; not as doubtable epistemic objects. As such, *Dasein* cannot ontologically account for its experience of the world as an intentional structure of a transcendental ego.

Thus, Heidegger illustrates the mistake of defining *Dasein* as a subject which is fixed. This would be akin to mistaking another *Dasein* as having a fixed “thingness,” which misconceives another Being which is like itself as an object which is unlike itself – an *ontic* object that is merely “present-to-hand.”<sup>22</sup> This false conception of others perpetuates an illusory divide between *Dasein* and the world, and isolates *Dasein* from other Beings like itself which, ironically, are responsible for its capacity to mistake the world as a doubtable separate realm. This exposes the perpetuation of Cartesian Dualism<sup>23</sup> – the concept that mental phenomena are non-physical and that the mind and body are two separate yet associated substances – as an *ontic concealment of the way in which *Dasein* pre-ontologically*

21 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 37.

22 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 53.

23 “2.3 Substance Dualism”, Dualism, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed March 8th, 2024, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dualism/#SubDua>.

experiences the world. The mind-world distinction does not exist because *Dasein* is never apart from the world; we are always immersed and embedded within it alongside others, which is evident from our immediate, *pre-ontological* world experience. This immersion in the world is enabled by virtue of the fact that it is with others. Heidegger aims to illustrate the point that the inter-subjective bonds we experience as *Dasein* by *Being-in-the-World* ironically give rise to our ability to doubt them in a theoretical manner, because the Being of *Dasein* is *pre-ontologically* “outside” the self.<sup>24</sup>

Heidegger constructs this notion of “transcendental intersubjectivity” to reflect the everydayness of *Dasein*’s engagement with the world as a referential network of constitutive meaning.<sup>25</sup> *Dasein* embodies a lived intentionality that is the implicit condition of its pre-reflective engagement with the world; the world is a realm of existential possibility that is revealed for *Dasein* through every day “concernful dealings” with other entities.<sup>26</sup> This pre-reflective engagement through practical endeavors can thus account for our own perplexity concerning the question of Being. This is because our engagement with the world is so intimately primordial that it is concealed by the *ontic* clarity of self which we all possess. Thus, this concealment through everyday engagement highlights the importance of an ontological analysis which can expose the possibilities of being for *Dasein*.

However this realization does not come without concerning implications. Does this mean that we are bound to be nothing more than theoretical constructs?

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24 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 152.

25 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 151.

26 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 96.



Evidently so, because we are our identity, which is an *ontic* construction filtered through a referential network, which is, importantly, beyond our scope of control. How I express myself linguistically (for example, in this essay), calculate mathematically, and express identity with tattoos or clothing is determined by my location within the network of meaning which we all constitute. By way of corollary, this paper affirms Heidegger in his desire to reconfigure the understanding of being, as the *ontic* is where humans collapse into mimicry; objectification of self seems to perpetuate the dominant norms which determine the way we construct identity. Consequently, this paper does not buy Heidegger's pseudo-compatibilist account of complete existential, "*authentic*" possibility, or the paradoxical notion of unfettered choice upon which it precariously rests. This complication will be explicated in the following paragraphs.

The revelation of *Dasein* as *Being-in-the-World* highlights the social necessity of others in forming an existential identity. This prompts the question of self-identity; if I am *Dasein*, then who is *Dasein*? Heidegger's answer is "being-with" as "being-one-self-in-everydayness."<sup>27</sup> This everydayness is epitomized by "concern"<sup>28</sup> with one's own existence and is thus characteristic of *Dasein*. This concern is directed towards the possibility of realizing existential potential; I own *Dasein* because I can Be in a range of modes, authentically or not. This reiterates that, despite the existence of choice for *Dasein*, it is not free or unhindered. How can freedom of choice exist within an inescapable network of meaning which determines the very legitimacy

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27 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 153.

28 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 96.



of my Being in the eyes of others? Does that mean I am unable to Be in a way that I truly deem fit as my own?

This exposes Heidegger's romance with ontological autonomy to a threatening paradox; he conveys an ideological conclusion from his ontology, one which attempts to simultaneously empower the individual with choice whilst emphasizing the inescapability of the others who are forever determining which "existential possibilities" are available and legitimate. Heidegger himself points to the "they" as a sea of mediocrity, whilst simultaneously subscribing himself to a socially legitimate mode of Being – an academic – to survive, delineate self, and disseminate ideas. However, Heidegger's categorization of the "they" as a sea of mediocrity betrays a deeper contextuality and subjective understanding that rests on his positionality as an academic; for someone impoverished in the same context of wealth, the "they" would certainly not be a sea of mediocrity, but rather a rich reservoir of potential benefactors, or oppressors, or otherwise. By way of attempting to generalize an ideological conclusion from an ontological autonomy which is inescapably contingent, Heidegger emphasizes the contingency which his ontology sought to minimize. We can deduce that this paradox occurs, not because Heidegger is incorrect in his deliberations, but because his ontology might not have the liberating effect which he intended to convey, particularly if it reveals the ways in which we are restricted, maligned, or at the very least dependent, in our Being on a daily basis.

So, what to do with this realization of contingent intersubjective dependance? Heidegger's hermeneutic of social existence goes on to posit that the world is re-

vealed to *Dasein* through “existential comportment.”<sup>29</sup> This comportment determines *Dasein*’s ability to reveal the world to itself as a plethora of existential possibilities. How we see the world (“*stimmung*”<sup>30</sup>) – and seize upon existential possibilities – is an ontological choice realized by *Being-in-the-World*. This capacity for existential agency is made possible by understanding the self in relation to the world as a web of “readiness-to-hand,” a term which Heidegger uses to distinguish the ontological status of things in the world which are being in the way of *Dasein* versus objects in the world unlike *Dasein* which possess a being of functional utility (for example a hammer or saw).<sup>31</sup> Within this web of readiness-to-hand, *Dasein* is empowered to re-adjust its position for an authentic engagement with its own existence.<sup>32</sup> This capacity is compounded by the temporal nature of *Dasein*; a mode of Being which is always “ahead of itself,” projecting into the future on the basis of possibilities according to a narrative of self which is permanently under construction.<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, this understanding of *Being-in-the-World* as existential understanding illuminates the “authentic” possibilities of Being for *Dasein* because any knowledge we ascribe to our existence is contingent upon our ability to existentially interpret Being. This consolidates *Dasein*’s understanding of Being as a *pre-ontological* phenomenon, and thus justifies Heidegger’s hermeneutic of Being as a corollary of the primordial mode – *Dasein* – which we enact. *Dasein*

29 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 118.

30 Katherine Withy, *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 500.

31 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 155.

32 Robert Brandom, “Heidegger’s Categories in *Being and Time*,” *The Monist* 66, no. 3 (1983): 387-409.

33 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 119.

cannot have raw access to an unmediated world which has intrinsic meaning; the world must always be filtered through consciousness, and thus have meaning ascribed to it by our existential projects. As such, “*Being-in-the-World-as-Dasein*” is a constant hermeneutic of existence for *Dasein*.<sup>34</sup>

So where, then, is the value of individual meaning to be found? If Heidegger posits that value is personally ascribed to experience, how are we then to mediate an existentially “authentic” compromise with the “they” to ensure our survival within society, particularly if an individual’s conception of the “authentic” is in sharp juxtaposition to dominant norms which determine possibility? This dilemma is further compounded by the fact that the method through which we ascribe meaning is determined by and articulated through others due to *Dasein’s Being-in-the-World*. If “the essence of an individual mind lies not in what it thinks, but how it thinks”, then Heidegger’s existentialism fills us with a bizarre confluence of emotion upon realizing how we think is determined by constitutive elements of Being which are beyond our control.

Stimmung seems to be the only inoculation against this uncomfortable realization, i.e. whether we choose to see *Dasein* as something bound and restricted, or something which can achieve potential through “authentic possibilities.”<sup>35</sup> If the context which constitutes *Dasein* is inescapable, perhaps stimmung may empower us to countenance – and attempt to calibrate – our reflexivity with the surrounding context that delimits the scope of possibility; the world may determine us, but we can also determine the world. Although the

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34 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 123.

35 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 166.

feasibility, tangibility, and scalability may vary according to the contingencies of context and positionality, this does not eliminate the fundamental existence of choice for *Dasein*.

By evaluating the impact of *Being-in-the-World* on *Dasein* we have disclosed the implications of a tension between authenticity and the determinants of context at the core of Heidegger's ontology. Indeed, what these implications could mean lay beyond the scope of this essay, however I encourage all readers to engage with the possibilities emerging from the dynamic relation between *Dasein* and *stimmung* due to one's *Being-in-the-World*. Heidegger's legacy invites the elaboration of these ideas within different schools of thought to unlock greater possibilities for authentic being.

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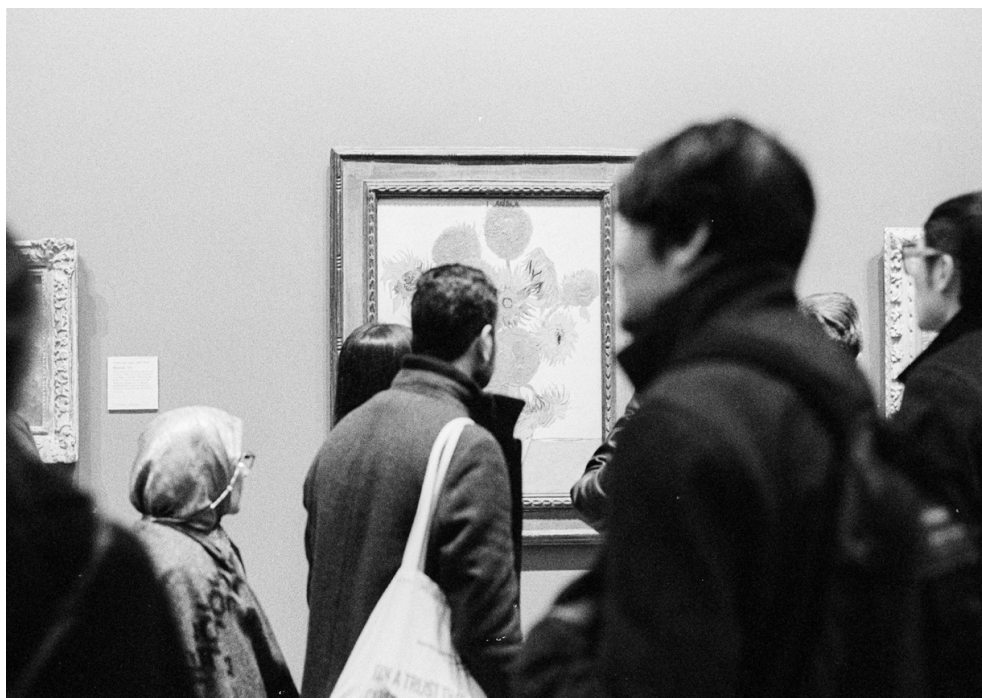
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# **Men by the Sea**

*Ella Stremler*





## **National Gallery Subject #5**

*Auguste Bernick*

# Resident Alien

*Mariam Shanshashvili*

My home is a gust of phantom dust  
—Peeled off my back—  
It clothes me with fingerprints,  
And a whooshing belt of “I” and “Am.”  
Mother, mother, I am home!  
I have erupted in your womb  
—A delirious gentle thorn—  
And laid my cuckoo’s eggs.  
An Imposter child in a naked shell:  
Veil-free  
Hide-free  
Alter-free.  
Nine masks of belonging  
On a deserter’s face.  
They thrust me under,  
Shrouded by a thick clay fog of stage fright.  
Consumed, I dance my native waltz  
Beneath the loving, hunting spotlight.  
Spinning until they burst from my skin,  
One after another,  
Spitting me back out  
Like a faulty blank sheet.

# Empathy and Merleau-Ponty

*Emily Richael*

We commonly think of empathy as an epistemic pursuit. When we empathize with someone, we aim to know what they are feeling. But this knowledge is difficult to attain considering the fact that we have no direct access to someone else's private mind. Minds are not observable; they are hidden behind bodies, making bodies one of empathy's biggest hurdles. To know what someone else is feeling, we have to get inside their head. One way in which we might attempt to do this is by imagining what it is like to be someone else. In colloquial terms, we might "put ourselves in someone else's shoes." We attempt to skirt their embodiment by using our imagination. Since we cannot directly access other people's minds, perhaps imagining their situation will afford us knowledge about what they are feeling.

However, Amy Coplan has called into question the epistemic effectiveness of this method. She suggests that putting ourselves in other people's shoes (hereafter called "perspective taking") leads to projection and misrepresentation rather than knowledge of another's emotional state.<sup>1</sup> Trying to transcend the body actually leads us to distort the other person's subjective experience. In light of this concern, I suggest

<sup>1</sup> Amy Coplan, "Understanding Empathy, its Features and Effects," in *Empathy, Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011): 3–18.

that we think about empathy in a different way. An account of empathy informed by Merleau-Ponty's idea of embodied minds can lead us to knowledge about what other people are feeling. This is because, according to Merleau-Ponty, we should not assume that minds are hidden behind bodies.<sup>2</sup> We can know what other people are feeling because emotions are embodied. We need to abandon the idea that in order to access another person's mind we have to circumvent the body. Our bodies play a central role in empathy; they are the medium—not the roadblock—through which we communicate our emotions.

The paper will proceed as follows: in section 1, I will describe the process of perspective-taking and explain why it fails to grant us knowledge of other minds according to Amy Coplan. Due to this epistemic failure, I suggest that we abandon the assumption that perspective-taking operates from, namely, the fact that minds are hidden behind bodies. Instead, we should move towards a picture of empathy informed by Merleau-Ponty because it can grant us knowledge of other minds. In section 2, I will expand on Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the mind as hidden and inaccessible by drawing on Søren Overgaard's paper "Other Minds Embodied." Merleau-Ponty argues that minds are embodied and therefore, emotions are perceptible. However, merely perceiving someone's emotion does not lead to knowledge. In section 3, I will demonstrate that embodied emotions also need signification in order for us to understand them. Ultimately, we understand what someone else is feeling because emotions are embodied and because body language has meaning. Finally, in sec-

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<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 366.

tion 4, I will outline how an analysis of Merleau-Ponty might inform an improved conception of empathy.

### 1. Epistemic Failure of Perspective Taking

Putting ourselves in someone else's shoes, also known as self-oriented perspective taking, leads us to project our own feelings onto the other. Self-oriented perspective taking involves an empathizer imaginatively replacing the target (i.e., the other person) with themselves. Consider a relatively simple example: if I were attempting to empathize with an actor who forgot their line on stage, I would imaginatively replace the actor with myself and note the emotional state that the situation prompts for me. I would imagine myself forgetting a line on stage—an incident which would likely cause me feelings of anxiety and embarrassment. Then, I assume that my own feelings represent the actor's internal experience.

Amy Coplan objects to this form of perspective taking because when we replace the target with ourselves, we are no longer empathizing with the target at all. We are merely empathizing with ourselves in the target's situation.<sup>3</sup> When I imagined how I would respond if I forgot a line on stage, the actor played no role in my simulation. Because I was imagining myself in their place, nothing about the actor was incorporated into my simulation besides their situation. When I imagined how I would respond in their situation, I learned nothing about how they would respond in their situation. Self-oriented perspective taking fails as a route to knowledge because a given circumstance will not elicit the same emotional state for everyone (e.g., forgetting a line on stage does not always lead to em-

<sup>3</sup> Amy Coplan, "Understanding Empathy, its Features and Effects," 11.

barrassment). How I mentally respond to forgetting a line on stage is not necessarily indicative of what a confident actor is experiencing. Therefore, based on my self-oriented simulation, it would be wrong for me to claim that I know what it is like to be the actor in that moment. When I conclude that the actor is embarrassed, I am merely projecting my own feelings of embarrassment onto them.

Take another example demonstrating how two people might have drastically different mental responses to the same situation. Say that my husband is trying to understand what it is like for me, a woman, to walk down the riverside path behind our apartment complex at night. My husband loves night walks, so if he were to imagine himself going on the stroll alone, he would likely report feeling relaxed and rejuvenated after the simulation. This, however, is far from what I would experience on the same night walk. I would primarily feel anxiety at the prospect of being uncomfortably approached or catcalled—the exact opposite of what my husband reported feeling. If my husband were to project his simulated mental state onto me, it would grossly misrepresent my feelings. The exercise fails to grant him knowledge about my mental state because our minds respond differently to the same night walk. Self-oriented simulation leaves him with knowledge about himself in my situation—he now knows that he would enjoy the riverside trail at night—but it does not bring him any closer to understanding my emotional state.

These examples presuppose the inaccessibility of the other mind and the body as an obstacle to empathetic understanding. If we view the body as an



obstacle to be overcome in order to know what people are feeling, then we end up with a distorted picture of their emotional state. We think that the disembodied process of imagination can grant us knowledge about other minds, but ultimately it leads us farther away from understanding. However, the main problem with perspective taking is not the process, it is the assumption that other minds are private and not directly observable. Merleau-Ponty rejects this solipsistic idea, and demonstrates how minds are, in fact, perceivable. He provides a way for us to think about empathy that does not presuppose the inaccessibility of other minds. An empathetic method that involves bodies rather than trying to avoid them is ultimately more successful at providing us with accurate knowledge of others' emotional states.

## 2. Merleau-Ponty and Embodied Minds

Overgaard argues that Merleau-Ponty is not troubled by the idea of other minds. Merleau-Ponty states: “what we have said about the body provides the beginnings of a solution to this problem.”<sup>4</sup> When we consider the fact that our bodies are an expression of our minds rather than a container for them, the problem of other minds dissolves. Having a mind entails a certain sort of being in the world. Seeing other beings engage in the world in the same manner that we do confirms their mindedness. Merleau-Ponty says:

If the perceiving subject appears (to me who is reflecting upon perception) as endowed with a primordial arrangement in relation to the world, drawing with it that bodily thing without which

there would be no other things for it, then why should the other bodies that I perceive not be equally inhabited by consciousnesses? If my consciousness has a body, why should other bodies not 'have' consciousness?<sup>5</sup>

The scare quotes around "have" indicate Merleau-Ponty's distaste for mind-body dualism. He does not think, as a Cartesian might, that our bodies are fleshy machines housing an immaterial mind. In other words, our minds are not embodied—we are embodied minds. That is, Merleau-Ponty denies the ontological gap between minds and bodies and instead claims, "I am my body."<sup>6</sup> Other minds are not hidden behind bodies, other minds are other bodies.<sup>7</sup>

The upshot of Overgaard's analysis is that emotions are observable. If the activity of other minds is not hidden, then we have immediate access to other people's emotional states. According to Merleau-Ponty, the emotions of other minds are perceptible in at least two different ways. First, Overgaard alludes to the fact that minds entail a certain sort of being in the world. Our world is shaped and colored by affect—a feature of our being that is observable to others. Merleau-Ponty says:

I perceive the other's grief or anger in his behavior, on his face and in his hands, without any borrowing from an inner experience of suffering or of anger and because grief and anger are variations of being in the world, undivided between

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5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 366-7.

6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 205.

7 Søren Overgaard "Other minds embodied," in *Continental Philosophy Review* 50, no. 1 (2016): 65-80.

body and consciousness, which settle upon the other's behavior and are visible in his phenomenal body, as well as upon my own behavior such as it is presented to me.<sup>8</sup>

People's engagement with the world shows how they feel, even if their emotion is not explicit. For example, a child might be engaging with the world as if they are tired without even knowing themselves that they are tired. They might rub their eyes, yawn, and express irritability and still assure their parents that they are not tired. The child's parents may know that the child is communicating their tiredness, despite their verbal denial, because of the ways he/she presents themselves in their embodiment. The child's emotions still show up in the world and to their parents without the child's awareness.

In the same quote, Merleau-Ponty makes a crucial point about not needing to consult our personal experience with an emotion in order to know what someone is feeling. For example, when I see a friend who is grieving the loss of one of their parents, I do not need to imagine myself in their situation to know that they are in pain. I also do not need to analyze their behavior before concluding that they are sad. As Merleau-Ponty says, "without any borrowing from an inner experience of suffering" I can observe how their engagement with the world changes, and know that they are grieving.<sup>9</sup> They may appear unmotivated, withdrawn, and distracted. This deviation from their typical mode of being in the world communicates their sadness. However, it is not just that certain behaviors communicate sadness.

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8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 372.

9 Maurice Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of Perception*, 415.

The sadness is the behavior; the emotion is a way of being in the world.

Another way in which our embodied emotions are observable is through specific body language. As an example, Merleau-Ponty draws on the idea of an angry gesture:

Consider an angry or threatening gesture. In order to understand these gestures, I have no need of recalling the feelings I experienced while I myself performed these same gestures. I have, from the inside, quite a limited knowledge of the gesture of anger, and so an association through resemblance or reasoning by analogy would be missing a decisive element. [...] The gesture does not make me think of anger, it is the anger itself.<sup>10</sup>

The angry gesture is distinct from someone's mode of being in the world because it is a specific movement; it embodies anger. For example, I might see an angry driver flip the bird at someone who cut them off. I do not know how this driver engages with the world, but from one gesture, I understand what they are feeling. Furthermore, I do not derive my understanding that the driver is angry from analyzing the gesture and pausing to think about what it might mean. I immediately perceive that they are angry. The gesture alone, without any reasoning on my part, communicates the anger. Hence, Merleau-Ponty's words "the gesture does not make me think of anger, it is the anger itself." Anyone who has received a middle finger from an angry driver can validate Merleau-Ponty's claim. Their anger is immediately received without any need to ponder the ges-

ture's meaning. The driver's feeling is wholly embodied in the gesture, and thus directly observable.

### 3. Signification and Knowledge

Up to this point I have only emphasized the importance of the body in knowing other people's emotions. But Merleau-Ponty also acknowledges another crucial aspect of understanding another person's emotional state: signification. W. E. S. McNeill paper "On Seeing That Someone is Angry" argues for a similar condition which he calls inference. I will draw on McNeill's paper to help make sense of Merleau-Ponty's argument. McNeill holds that we can only perceive the gesture as the anger itself if we understand that the gesture means anger. The specific position of their middle finger only communicates anger if the receiver of the gesture understands that the gesture is meant to convey anger. We have to understand the meaning of body language in order to grasp someone else's emotion.<sup>11</sup>

For example, say that in another country the peace sign is used much like the middle finger. If I were to visit the country and see someone make a peace sign, I would be unphased or confused, despite the geographic understanding of the sign. This demonstrates that the gesture itself is arbitrary, but the meaning must be mutually understood. McNeill argues that inference is a necessary component of understanding someone else's embodied emotion. To understand that the peace sign means anger, I first have to connect the gesture to the emotion of anger. Merleau-Ponty makes a similar point using a child viewing a sexual scene:

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11 W.E.S. McNeill "On Seeing That Someone is Angry," in *European Journal of Philosophy* 20 (2012): 575-597.



If a child accidentally witnessed a sexual scene, he can understand it without having the experience of desire or the bodily attitudes that it expresses, but if the child had not yet reached the degree of maturity at which this behavior becomes a possibility for him, then the sexual scene will remain merely an unusual and disturbing spectacle, it will not make sense.<sup>12</sup>

The child is not able to perceive the parent's emotion without understanding the significance of their body language. Similarly, our ability to know about other people's emotions depends on both embodiment and inference. Emotions are embodied, but in order for someone else to know what we are feeling, there has to be a mutual understanding of what the body language means. Embodied emotions are perceivable, but they are only comprehensible if they have a shared meaning.

This is not to say that every time I see the angry gesture I have to recall that the gesture means anger. This would undermine what Merleau-Ponty said earlier that “[we] have, from the inside, quite a limited knowledge of the gesture of anger, and so an association through resemblance or reasoning by analogy would be missing a decisive element.” There must be some point when we make the inference that a gesture means anger. Although we are not born with the association of anger with the middle finger, after the inference is made, the body language takes on meaning without any further need for inference. After the child reaches an age of maturity where the sexual scene has meaning, he does not have to consciously associate the scene with



certain emotions; the emotions arise without having to make any inference. In Merleau-Ponty's view, perception of emotions is not strictly innate or inferential. There is a role for both embodiment and inference to play in helping us understand another person's emotional state.

#### **4. Merleau-Pontian Empathy**

Returning to empathy, an empathetic method informed by Merleau-Ponty would look very different from putting ourselves in someone else's shoes. According to Merleau-Ponty, understanding other people's emotions arises naturally from the fact that emotions are observable and that there is shared meaning in their embodiment. Knowing what other people feel is much less of a feat when we reject the idea that emotions are hidden behind bodies. In fact, Merleau-Ponty would likely say that asking how we know what other people feel is an ill-formed question. Other people's emotions are already given to us in their embodiment. In asking how others are feeling, we assume that their emotions are hidden. Merleau-Ponty argues that emotions show up in our embodied engagement with the world. Empathy, then, is not trying to "access" what someone else is feeling. It is simply being attentive to another's body language and patterns of being in the world. By doing so, we will gain far more knowledge about their emotional state than if we try to imagine it.

To demonstrate how this Merleau-Pontian approach will grant us knowledge as opposed to perspective taking, let us return to the riverside trail example. When my husband tried to imagine how I felt on the riverside trail, he ended up misrepresent-

ing my feelings by projecting his own experience onto me. Merleau-Ponty would say that my husband failed to understand my feelings because he avoided, rather than attended to, my embodiment. My emotions are embodied, and are therefore only perceptible through my embodiment. In order to know what I am feeling on the night walk, my husband needs to observe my body language and how I am engaging with the world. My husband might notice that during night walks I am quiet and tense. He perceives my anxiety through the way that my being in the world changed. His attention to my body language is what gives him knowledge about my emotional state. My husband has a much better idea of how I feel from perceiving my embodied emotions than from trying to take my perspective. Obtaining knowledge of other people's emotional states is simple: just exist and perceive. No imaginative gymnastics are needed in order to understand what other people feel. If we can observe emotions as Merleau-Ponty suggests, empathy only requires that we be perceivers of them.

## **Conclusion**

Merleau-Ponty's perspective on other minds transforms how we understand empathy. Empathy is not a process of bridging the wide gulf between individually encapsulated minds. Nor is it about "accessing" other people's minds. For too long, we have assumed solipsism and prescribed empathy as the antidote. But when we reject solipsism, empathy is reborn. In light of Merleau-Ponty's idea that emotions are perceivable, empathy is no longer a rejection of embodiment. Empathy is understanding other people because of our embodiment. As Merleau-Ponty says, "the perception

of others and the plurality of consciousnesses no longer present any difficulty.”<sup>13</sup> We no longer need empathy to escape the hopeless problem of other minds; our feelings are already perceivable. We can take heart in the fact that we no longer need to put ourselves in other people’s shoes.

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## **A Rock of Kierkegaard**

*Ella Stremmler*

# Despair in *The Brothers Karamazov*: The Existential Struggle of Alyosha and Dmitri

*Diana Ochoa-Chavez*

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha, Dmitri, and Ivan Karamazov experience an existential struggle in the form of despair.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the novel, Alyosha and Ivan struggle to accept their bodily self; that is, they struggle to accept appetitive desires such as lust or hunger, which they instead repress. On the other hand, Dmitri is described as the brother who indulges in sensual pleasures. As a result, one might think that Alyosha and Ivan experience the same form of despair, one different from the form that affects Dmitri. However, this paper argues that Alyosha and Dmitri both suffer from the same form of authentic despair in their attempt to reconcile their seemingly opposed bodily and spiritual halves.

This paper employs two Kierkegaardian theories — that of despair and of the different spheres of existence. After describing these two theories, this paper applies the former to Alyosha and Dmitri to examine their struggles to reconcile themselves with their sensual desires. Both despair because of their struggle to accept themselves as beings with finite, bodily and spiritual sides. Moreover, this paper will directly address

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<sup>1</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).



the idea that Alyosha and Ivan both suffer from the same form of despair, a despair of not wanting to accept both the bodily and the spiritual parts of the self. Ultimately, the difference between the existential spheres that both brothers inhabit illustrates the characteristics that separate two seemingly identical forms of Kierkegaardian despair. Lastly, this paper applies Kierkegaard's theory on the existential spheres to argue that both Alyosha and Dmitri are in the religious sphere of existence which strengthens their existential connections and, therefore, struggles.

To understand the existential struggles of the Karamazov brothers, one must first examine how these struggles can manifest in different forms of despair concerning the self. *The Sickness Unto Death* outlines two relevant forms of despair.<sup>2</sup> The first authentic form of despair, "willing in despair not to be oneself," consists of a person accepting either the bodily or spiritual parts of the self.<sup>3</sup> However, such a person then completely rejects the opposing side. The second form of authentic despair involves a willingness "in despair to be oneself."<sup>4</sup> Someone in this form of despair recognizes the bodily and spiritual halves of the self and does not suppress either. However, the task of reconciling these halves causes this person despair.

Equally important to Kierkegaard's theory of despair is that of the existential spheres. In *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way*, he details the ethical and religious spheres of existence. Someone inhabiting the ethical sphere is strictly faithful to the societal rules that govern how one should act and bases their actions

2 Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* (London, UK: Penguin Classics, 2004).

3 Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 43.

4 Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 43-44.

on higher moral principles.<sup>5</sup> However, those inhabiting this sphere lack a connection to their spiritual half. In turn, a person at this stage responds to this division by repressing their bodily half, aiming to strengthen their connection to the spirit. Unlike those in the ethical sphere, a person in the religious sphere does not base their actions solely on laws. Instead, they base their actions on faith. In other words, this person believes that there are exceptions to moral laws while the person in the ethical sphere would not believe in such exceptions. Those in the religious sphere may have trouble reconciling the values from the ethical sphere with their spiritual side.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, a person's attitude of wanting to reconcile these halves of the self is what places them in the religious sphere.

When applied to the case of Alyosha and Dmitri, these Kierkegaardian theories support the argument that both suffer from the second form of authentic despair. From an early description of Alyosha, one notes his struggle to unify his sensual desires and saintly character. On one hand, Alyosha's commitment to his spiritual self is clear in his devotion as a monk to the town monastery.<sup>7</sup> Alyosha's father, Dmitri, and Madame Khokhlakov also describe him as an "angel," a symbol of an existence that transcends the bodily side of the human self.<sup>8</sup> Although Alyosha maintains this strong connection to his spiritual half, he has trouble reconciling his religious side with his sensuality.

As a schoolboy, Alyosha carried himself with "wild, frantic modesty and chastity," so much that he

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5 Soren Kierkegaard *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life* (London, UK: Penguin, 2004).

6 Soren Kierkegaard *Stages on Life's Way: Studies by Various Persons* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

7 Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 18.

8 Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 24, 105, 195.

could not “bear to hear certain words and certain conversations about women.”<sup>9</sup> Alyosha’s exaggerated levels of modesty, as noted in his discomfort with his peers’ conversations concerning women, indicates his struggle to synthesize his bodily self with his saintly self. This modesty may cause some to doubt that he experiences the second form of despair because his chasteness might instead signal an attempt to purify himself of his bodily half. However, Alyosha does not have the desire to eliminate all bodily desires like a person in the first form of authentic despair would. After all, when Ivan offers Alyosha cherry jam, Alyosha feels guiltless and pleasurable when he indulges this appetitive craving of the bodily half. By contrast, Father Ferapont, an extreme example of a person attempting to rid himself of his desires, abides by a pleasureless diet.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, Alyosha’s despair is not the product of his absolute denial of his bodily half. Instead, he despairs in search of how he must reconcile his body and soul.

Dmitri’s case is also illustrative of the second form of authentic despair. The narrator describes his contradictory nature, from his physical traits to his more personal character.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Dmitri describes an inner conflict that is identical to that of Alyosha’s despair. He describes his amazement at the competing forces within man which Dmitri refers to as “Madonna” and “Sodom,” or “angel” and “insect.” Dmitri proclaims identification with the “Sodom” side of the self but he wonders: “Can there be beauty in Sodom?”<sup>12</sup> This question indicates that, like Alyosha, Dmitri has an interest in connecting to something

9 Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 23.

10 Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 229.

11 Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 63.

12 Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 98.

beyond his finitude, but not through a rejection of his mortal nature. After all, Dmitri still expresses strong sensual feelings toward Grushenka alongside other indulgences. Therefore, both Alyosha and Dmitri do not attempt to resolve their despair by suppressing their bodily half. Rather, they experience the second type of authentic despair in their desire for the synthesis of the self.

For some readers, the question of which form of despair Alyosha suffers from may remain unclear, which in turn casts doubt on the conclusion that Alyosha and Dmitri suffer from the same form of despair. Some may observe that even after his childhood, Alyosha continues to repress his sensuality instead of confronting it, which seems to reflect the first form of authentic despair. For one, he incessantly avoids Grushenka — a woman who meets the Russian beauty standards — implying a struggle to confront his sexual attraction to her.<sup>13</sup> His unwillingness to confront his attraction even emotionally harms Grushenka since she interprets this as a hatred for her. In this way, Alyosha's inclination toward suppression is unlike Dmitri who is comfortable with his sensuality. However, one must understand that the difference between the first and second forms of despair is in the attitude of the despairing person toward the half they struggle with. By contrast, Ivan describes himself as an eyewitness, someone who is distanced from the sinful world. In distancing himself from the world, Ivan refuses to confront his bodily half which aligns him with the first form of authentic despair. While Ivan may have an attitude of avoidance toward his sensuality, Alyosha's attitude of willingness to confront his sensuality is the fundamental difference

13 Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 304.

between the first and second forms of authentic despair.

Additionally, Alyosha and Dmitri exhibit the attitude of someone in the religious sphere of existence through their readiness to reconcile their body and soul. For Alyosha, this commitment to the reconciliation of the self is exemplified by his willingness to follow his dying elder's wish for him to leave the monastery and confront the sensual world.<sup>14</sup> Although Alyosha could have stayed at the monastery to shelter himself from the sinful world, and the desires it prompts, he instead chooses to confront his bodily half. This dedication to the task of reconciling the seemingly opposed halves is aligned with the defining commitment those in the religious sphere have toward this task.

For Dmitri, his commitment to this task is clarified during the epilogue of the novel. Dmitri plans to flee Russia with Grushenka so that they may carry out a safer life together, one in which Dmitri is willing to become more angelic. However, for Dmitri, leading a new life of purpose amidst his condemnation for a crime he did not commit, does not mean extinguishing his bodily half. He shows no sign of wanting to rid himself of his sensuality, especially since he does not want to flee without Grushenka. Instead, he desires to reconcile both body and soul. For some, Dmitri's choice to settle in America with Grushenka might indicate that he commits himself to ethical societal norms of monogamy and marriage, meaning that Dmitri is in the ethical sphere of existence. While it is true that Dmitri is willing to pursue a monogamous relationship with Grushenka, the context surrounding his will to settle with her does not reflect the actions of the typical person in the ethical sphere. If Dmitri were in the ethical

<sup>14</sup> Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 162.



sphere, he would strictly adhere to societal norms. For the ethical person, even if the law found him guilty of a crime he did not commit, the rules — in this case, the judicial system in his society — must not be defied. Instead, Dmitri is willing to break the law in order to follow its spirit and pursue his authentic happiness. At bottom, Dmitri is innocent, and so is not bound by the verdict of the law. Therefore, both Alyosha and Dmitri adopt an attitude not of suppression, but of reconciliation toward their two halves. This places them in the religious sphere, strengthening their existential connections and struggles.

As supported by both Kierkegaardian theories introduced in this paper, Alyosha and Dmitri suffer from the form of authentic despair in reconciling contrasting parts of the self. Overall, the examination of existential struggles within *The Brothers Karamazov* through the lens of Kierkegaard's philosophy offers insights into the human condition. By exploring Alyosha and Dmitri's experiences with despair, one can better distinguish between nearly identical forms of despair. In turn, this fosters a greater appreciation for the nuances of Kierkegaard's theory. This analysis not only deepens one's understanding of Kierkegaard but also of Dostoyevsky. This underscores the enduring relevance of both works in navigating the complexities of modern existence.



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# **The Last Photo of my Grandmother**

*Auguste Bernick*

# Beasts and Time: Eleven Aphorisms on Being

*Sophia Gottfried*

1. *On Snakes* — The snake lives in both man's fear and reverence. In one part of spacetime he swallows the sun, in another he steals the root of life from bereaved Gilgamesh, in one more he eternally eats his own tail. They are all neck and mouth, no arms and very little brain. They are the opposite of everything man has prided himself on—they are unashamed of their gluttony, unbothered by their stupidity, and undisturbed by discarding their skin. Let us try living like a snake for a while, grasping with one's whole being, navigating the world with one's tongue, swallowing delights whole. But that manner-of-being is not the end: we will have to shed our skin again.
2. *On Gilgamesh* — Great feats grow from maggots feasting on the corpses of those we love.
3. *On Odysseus* — The biggest tragedy to the reader is when the one who has fought great monsters and made great journeys settles down. What difference is there between happily ever after and death?
4. *On Beowulf* — In the name of God and gold the ugly will perish! But why are they always ugly, and why do they always need the justification of God and gold to die?
5. *Dogs* — Dogs are proof that love and faith can exist without memory, without time.
6. *Cats* — Cats are proof that power can exist without opposable thumbs.

7. *Phoenix* — A phoenix no longer willing to endure fire is the most contemporary of tragedies. This tired phoenix does not die, she lives forever without youth.
8. *In Flux* — In the prime of their empire, the Aztecs asked the question: how do we root ourselves on such a slippery world? Our soil is muddy, saturated by the rains of time, and our feet can not take hold. Time passes: you forget the smell of your childhood home and your best friend's middle name. You slip, you slide. Time passes: they tear down your elementary school and you can no longer call yourself a child. Do we try to find solid ground to stand, or do we rejoice in the fall?
9. *The Problem of the Compass* — Are we beings-toward-birth or beings-toward-death? Do we point toward inception or destruction? Demagnetize the compass—pointing toward one moment devalues all others. Let us try, oh let us try, to find meaning in this perpetual spinning rather than at any fixed points.
10. *Age* — Children desire to be part of a story, and have the naive belief that great adventures will come to them. Adults desire to read stories, and have the naive belief that great calamities will avoid them. “I will be the one.” “I will not be the one.” Whose existence is more tragic?
11. *On Bodies* — One becomes most aware of embodiment when the limbs disobey, when the muscles revolt, when the bones become more like falling bricks than a working watchtower. No one is aware of all the parts when the machines work. The breaking of a body is also its unveiling, and what a terrible unveiling it is.





# Connections

*Emilie Boissonneault*

# The Genesis of the Feminine Flame

*Shruti Sinha*

Given patriarchy has historically occupied the vast majority of social hierarchies across the globe, adult men have long been held as the main focus of philosophical and psychological thought. The male existence is the “standard” lens used to analyze the world, the one which is believed to most ubiquitously encapsulate the complexities of the human condition. Just below them lies young boys, for their presumed naïveté makes them only slightly less enticing subjects for intellectual investigation. These perspectives intertwine within the lexicon evoked to describe the most visceral and intense emotional experiences in their lives: he is “emasculated” when he feels inept, or “castrated” when he is robbed of his vigor, no matter what age he may be.

Without access to this phallic dimension of existential awareness, however, women are conversely positioned as the estranged “Other” form of selfhood. As Simone de Beauvoir posits, “psychoanalysts in particular define man as a human being and woman as a female: every time she acts like a human being, the woman



is said to be imitating the male.”<sup>1</sup> Their elusion of the masculine vantage point necessitates the need to craft mythological and sociological dogmas to explicate their unfathomable quiddity<sup>2</sup> and tame the unrelenting terror men feel at the feminine mystique. Without a sense of masculinity to be corrupted, or testes to be plundered, men are faced with two possibilities: either women draw power from a source that cannot be tarnished as easily as the male ego (a notion which only hurts their pride more), or they do not experience the world at all with the same psychological depth men do. This false dichotomy is why men meekly presume the inner world of the young girl is one that is frivolous and shallow. It is believed that she sees the world as a bouquet of flowers: an array of beautiful—yet ultimately disconnected—experiences haphazardly gathered to draw the attention of men with its aesthetic vivacity. But they must be quick to ravish her charms; like the roses she embellishes herself with, they must convince her that she too will wither by the time she reaches adulthood.

To impart upon her the importance of being the innocuous rose and not the inscrutable human, these sentiments were transmuted into the allegories we call fairy tales. Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment* outlines just how deeply the morals of these stories have become ubiquitous to the perspective of children—especially young girls—across cultures and time. Herein, the prominent figures that reside in these narratives inform the way she sees the world, other

1 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage Classics, 1949), 85.

2 “Quiddity” refers to the essence of something, what it is that makes it different from any other. Literally translated as “whatness”, quiddity stands in opposition to the concept of “haecceity”, which is “thisness.” Quiddity differentiates beings from other types of beings; haecceity differentiates beings from other beings in their own type. As such, when men see women as the “Other” they do not do so in the sense that they are mystified by their own kind, but rather, by an entirely foreign existence altogether.

women, and herself— specifically in the dialectical opposition between the archetype of the princess and the witch. These roles teach her the qualities that society expects of her as she reaches adulthood, and the fate that will befall her depending on whether or not she adheres to this path. As Simone de Beauvoir discusses in *The Second Sex*, the imposition of these axioms on the psyche of the young girl causes her to feel just as distant from herself as man feels to her. Residing within the margins of her consciousness is an awareness between the implicit and contradicting duality of who she is told she must be, and “something other than her”<sup>3</sup> which threatens to thwart this shibboleth<sup>4</sup> to happiness. This conflict catalyzes the alienation that is implicitly quintessential to becoming the idealized “good woman” these stories deify. What the young girl does not learn from fairy tales, however, is that the fate of the princess and the witch are ultimately one and the same: she will always find herself being burned.

## Smoldering

As elucidated in *The Uses of Enchantment*, the fundamental purpose of fairy tales is to allow the child to “learn step by step to understand himself better; with this he becomes able to understand others, and eventually can relate to them in ways which are mutually satisfying and meaningful.”<sup>5</sup> As such, these stories opt for a rudimentary depiction of two existential polarities simple enough for a child to understand— one that is meant to serve as an example for the way one

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3 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 64.

4 The term refers to a custom or tradition of some kind which serves as a sort of “password” to identify members of one group and distinguish them from those who are not.

5 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (London: Vintage Books, 1989), 3,  
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should be, and the other to demonstrate the way one should not. This is the fundamental basis of the hero and villain dichotomy in all media: the honorable hero is placed on a pedestal for his virtue, and the villain is condemned for his lack thereof.

In reality, however, the message that the child interprets from this sentiment is not that they should embrace their heroic traits, but rather that they should fear and suppress their villainous ones. This introduces the child to the notion of conditional love, and, at a more abstract level, an anxiety towards the unfortunate circumstances will befall an individual who exhibits these qualities. Bettelheim goes on to state,

There is a widespread refusal to let children know that the source of much that goes wrong in life is due to our very own natures— the propensity of all men for acting aggressively, asocially, selfishly, out of anger and anxiety. Instead, we want our children to believe that, inherently, all men are good. But children know that they are not always good; and often, even when they are, they would prefer not to be. This contradicts what they are told by their own parents, and therefore makes the child a monster in his own eyes.<sup>6</sup>

Narratives written for male children emphasize this notion that his true, heroic self can be masked by a masculine transformation that transmutes his existence from that of a boy to a beast. The significance of this terror lies not in the notion that he himself may change, but rather that people misjudge or mistreat

him for his appearance. Although he knows himself to be a hero, if no one sees him as such, it will only be a matter of time before he gives into the condemnation and embraces the rage of the beast he appears as, not the boy within.

The common enemy that dominates stories with female protagonists, however, is the witch. Rather than being seen as something she is not, the young girl is instead taught that the greatest thing she has to fear is being seen as what she actually is, or will be someday. As a result, these “wicked” qualities within herself must be doused from existence before they have the chance to proliferate. This repression ultimately manifests as a divide between the girl’s perception of herself as the hero (that is, the princess) of her own story, and the villain of it (embodied by the witch). De Beauvoir posits this dichotomy in terms of alienations:

We are shown woman solicited by two kinds of alienations; it is very clear that to play at being a man will be a recipe for failure; but to play at being a woman is also a trap: being a woman would mean being an object, the Other; and at the heart of its abdication, the Other remains a subject.<sup>7</sup>

In this case, the subject of the “Other” is predicated on monstrous qualities that girls must estrange from themselves, and cast aside in order to achieve their desired happy ending. The irony here, however, is that shunning the witch, the Other, ensures that the girl will always feel her absence resounding within each step she takes— guaranteeing she will never be happy.

Before proceeding any further, however, it is nec-

essary to draw a line between the notion of the historical witch and the ontological witch which is imbued into the foundation of fairy tales. Ontology is concerned with the nature of “being”, and the categorical identifiers of what causes one to “be” a witch has changed considerably over the passage of time. This history is one that is riddled with phenomena once considered inexplicable with the limited scientific and rational scope of those who perceived them, and as such, stories were used to explicate these circumstances, regardless of their veracity. Thus, these faulty explanations and the supernatural systems that were crafted to support them can be generally categorized as “magic.” Phenomena which were viewed positively could consequently be attributed to “good magic,” while those viewed negatively were considered “bad magic.” Likewise, the capability of one to be a practitioner of good and bad magic were once ubiquitously understood to be fundamental facets of human nature. An individual’s morals, regardless of their sex, were what could allow one to be considered capable of this duality in equal measure. Over time, however, a disproportionate number of women were subjugated as these “bad magic” practitioners, often for reasons that had little to do with the supernatural. Suspicion could be aroused due to any number of traits that threatened the men around her, whether it be intelligence, beauty, or even masculine qualities. As such, this epistemological distrust towards the intersection of women and magic dominated the canon of world literature, inspiring more work based on the archetype. As Wolfgang Lederer states in *The Fear of Women*,

While there are a few male ogres in myth and



fairytale, there is no body of male monsters comparable to the female company... Significant, in other words, is the universal human image and preoccupation with a monstrous and deadly female, whether seductress or mother.<sup>8</sup>

This was the incendiary sentiment in the historical creation of the witch as a concept, and the moment that the labeling and burning of one as a practitioner of dark magic became synonymous with “femicide” rather than the universal “homicide.”

The ontological witch, however, represents the collective sociocultural understanding of what a “witch” is, in broad terms. Although the term used to describe her may vary depending on culture and epoch, the fundamental concept of a “witch” can be summarized as one immutable concept: a wicked woman. In the field of social engineering, a “wicked problem” refers to a problem that is difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognize. The term “wicked” here may be used to encapsulate the attitudes held towards both women and problems labeled as such—especially when one is attempting to mitigate the problem of women’s existence. The relationship between the term wicked as it applies to women and the notion of the witch can be seen in the following:

We use the term ‘wicked’ in a meaning akin to that of ‘malignant’ (in contrast to ‘benign’) or ‘vicious’ (like a circle) or ‘tricky’ (like a leprechaun) or ‘aggressive’ (like a lion, in contrast

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8 Wolfgang Lederer, *The Fear of Women* (New York Philosophical Library, 1970), 65.



to the docility of a lamb). We do not mean to personify these properties of social systems by implying malicious intent. But then, you may agree that it becomes morally objectionable for the planner to treat a wicked problem as though it were a tame one, or to tame a wicked problem prematurely, or to refuse to recognize the inherent wickedness of social problems.<sup>9</sup>

The features of a wicked woman, according to fairy tales, include all of these specific qualities: malice, wrath, duplicity, among many more that can best be surmised as attributes belonging to a woman who must be tamed. The young girl and her capability to devolve into a wicked woman is so terrifying that witches have remained an omnipresent source of antagonism in children's literature, regardless of their relevance to the issues that are encountered by girls in the modern day. However, fairy tales aim to do something that wicked problems do not necessarily require: to expunge these traits before they arise. Although the world has changed dramatically since the inception of the witch mythos, the desire to burn wicked women has remained as pertinent as ever. It is her ability to adapt and find ways to exist that will displease the arbiters of patriarchal standards—no matter how incomplete, contradictory, and subject to change the circumstances are—that makes the witch so wicked.

## Spark

The witch, historically, exists to demonstrate the

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<sup>9</sup> Horst W. J. Rittel & Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (1973): 160-161

fundamental concept of a “bad woman.” Likewise, her antithesis is embodied in the concept of the “princess,” the pious and exemplary “good woman.” In popular fairy tales, the role of the villain, time and time again, is placed upon the woman who maligns the princess—not any man who may have permitted, or even caused, the issues she faces as her central conflict. In the case of “Sleeping Beauty,” for example, the newly born princess is cursed to prick her finger on a spinning wheel and fall into a deep sleep because her father refuses to invite a certain fairy to the celebration of her birth, or because he is displeased with the gift she brings and treats her with ignominy.<sup>10</sup> Despite his futile attempts to remove all chances of the princess meeting this fate, his struggle is in vain when her curiosity is taken advantage of by the wicked fairy in the guise of an old woman. Bettelheim suggests that the blood from the princesses’ pricked finger is a metaphor for the spilling of menstrual blood, and posits the following:

It is very much the point that the king, the male, does not understand the necessity of menstruation and tries to prevent his daughter from experiencing the fatal bleeding. The queen, in all versions of the story, seems unconcerned with the prediction of the angry fairy. In any case, she knows better than to try to prevent it.<sup>11</sup>

This detail poignantly highlights the systems of misogynistic subjugation perpetuated across generations. Often, “good” women are so accustomed to the ego-destroying nature of their existence, they make no

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10 Sources will differ on which version of the tale is true.

11 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 232.

attempt to stand up against it. They know, intrinsically, that their efforts will be in vain, and thus allow their daughters to face the same suffering they did. They believe that the only way to avoid becoming a witch is to immolate herself before anyone has the chance to tie her to the stake.

Masculine menstruation anxiety is a quotidian one that has long permeated through theological and sociological practices with little debate whatsoever. For example, the belief in women being somehow “spiritually soiled” by merely experiencing pubescence can be observed across Eastern tradition as such:

Legends [in Japan] developed about women physically defiling the sacred mountain with their menstrual blood or other bodily fluid. The fact that these developments seem related to Japanese notions of purity and defilement raises the question of the extent to which they can be seen as specifically Japanese. Similar attitudes can be found in other forms of Buddhism. In Tibet, for instance, women pilgrims were until recently prevented from climbing beyond a certain point on Tsari (“Pure Crystal”) Mountain.

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The spiritually caustic reaction of menstruation on the body of the young woman is one that too comes with its own mythos. In the Bible, for example, menstruation is referred to as a “curse”, and Bettelheim suggests that “it is a female’s—the fairy’s—curse that causes the bleeding... the curse is inherited by woman from wom-

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12 Bernard Faure, *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity, and Gender* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 222.

an.”<sup>13</sup> Herein, we are able to glimpse man’s primary fear when it comes to the fleeting sanctity of young girls: that interacting with women, especially older women, who no longer serve the same value to the masculine ego, will soil the pure princess with her wickedness.

Thus, the man who idealizes his daughter is utterly aghast when he realizes that she will one day be defiled in the same way he believes all women fundamentally are as a result of their perfunctory bodily processes. The moment blood is shed, she is afflicted with a sort of filth that cannot be cleansed nor negated through the virtue of virginity in his eyes. The onset of pubescence makes him aware that his daughter is not an extension of himself as a human: rather, she is the aforementioned “Other” form of existence, the ever-terrifying and alienated woman. Her father, not wanting to resent his daughter for that which he knows she cannot control, looks for another woman to pin his despair onto.

The fairy is thus positioned as the perfect scapegoat for the circumstances that befall the princess.<sup>14</sup> Although the victim of her revenge is an innocent child, the moral of *Sleeping Beauty* neither preaches that conflicts should be resolved through diplomatic discussions, nor that it is wrong to judge people for their appearances. Instead, the message is that a virtuous and pure woman is one who lies in wait for a prince to come and awaken one from her pubescent slumber. *Sleeping Beauty*’s enchanting visage is so because she is the embodiment of the ultimate subservient woman. Her features are frozen in the youthful state in which

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13 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 233.

14 Despite her label, the fairy can very much be considered an archetypal witch as a female practitioner of the aforementioned “bad magic”.

she was cursed, showing no signs of filth or excrement on her lovingly maintained body. She is wholly incapable of consent, and the reawakening of her autonomy is a debt to which she owes recompensation to the Prince, a kind gift bestowed upon her rather than something she had the right to own herself.

Although the witch is a catalyst that stimulates the personal growth of the girl, to be a princess, she must reject this transformation and lie in wait for her existential awareness to be initiated by a prince instead. This provides a motive for the arbiters of patriarchy, such as the King, to crush the latent threat that lies in female solidarity. The strengthening of bonds between women would eliminate the shock and disgust the princess feels at the sight of her own maturing body— an anxiety that should only be assuaged when the prince takes the girl’s body for himself. If she were able to accept her transformation (the bestial, masculine one that men loathe and fear) with grace, she would become no better than the witch who cursed her. In fact, she might even be exiled in the same way, and brought to loathe the next young princess who is born to replace her.

### **Flashover<sup>15</sup>**

Another popular tale told to young girls is that of Snow White. This story is one of many that presents the witch not as an outsider, but rather as a danger that lurks in the young girl’s home, specifically in the maternal figures around her. The primary motive for the evil—or rather, wicked—stepmother’s resentment towards Snow White is presented as the envy she feels at having her beauty usurped by her. The flame of her

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15 “Flashover” refers to the sudden transition from the growth stage of a flame into a fully developed fire.

wrath, however, is incited not within herself so much as it is within the confines of her magical mirror, which tells her she has lost her status as “fairest of them all.” De Beauvoir explains the significance of the mirror:

The woman, knowing she is and making herself object, really believes she is seeing herself in the mirror: passive and given, the reflection is a thing like herself; and as she covets feminine flesh, her flesh, she enlivens the inert qualities she sees with her admiration and desire.<sup>16</sup>

Although her incantation of “Mirror, Mirror, on the wall...” may seem to be a ritual that summons up this mendacious and narcissistic demon, what she actually does through this practice is the learned mitotic division of the woman’s self from her Other, repressed witch-like qualities. Contained within these qualities are her insecurities, her fear, her wrath, and her envy—all distinctly un-princess-like. Although she may appear beautiful on the outside, the mirror-self, the Other, is the one who reflects who she truly is, easily overpowering the physical beauty she knows to be frivolous and easily put-on. As such, the threat of other people perceiving this forbidden, bestial form looms in her periphery, apathetic to the impetus with which she tries to escape it. Like the allegorical young girl does to her domineering step-mother, she acquiesces to the wishes of the Other in the hope that gaining her approval will allow her to stop pervading her thoughts once and for all.

For the stepmother, terror at the notion of ugliness and the consequences of being afflicted by it utter-



ly eviscerates her. This is, perhaps, the only feminine fear that holds a candle to that of castration anxiety—and that is precisely why little girls are deeply imbued with it:

The supreme necessity for woman is to charm a masculine heart; this is the recompense all heroines aspire to... It is thus understandable that attention to her physical appearance can become a real obsession for the little girl; princesses or shepherds, one must always be pretty to conquer love and happiness; ugliness is cruelly associated with meanness, and when one sees the misfortunes that befall ugly girls, one does not know if it is their crimes or their disgrace that destiny punishes.<sup>17</sup>

What makes Snow White a fascinating tale is that the stepmother appears to have already charmed a masculine heart, thus attaining the ultimate goal of female existence. And yet, her mirror-self still confabulates delusions of degradation and despoilment of her status. Therein, the real source of evil in the story is not her vanity, but rather in her inability to be satiated by the mere virtue of male approval. The ideal, princess-like woman is one who is content to merely idly sit by once she has been chosen by a man; but the reviled, witch-like woman finds her desires only grow as she gazes into the narrow, ornate mirror frame, and yearns for a way to make her Other self return to the shadows again—this is why she must banish Snow White.

Bettelheim provides another evaluation of the magic mirror:

<sup>17</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 352.

The magic mirror seems to speak with the voice of a daughter rather than that of a mother. As the small girl thinks her mother is the most beautiful person in the world, this is what the mirror initially tells the queen. But as the older girl thinks she is much more beautiful than her mother, this is what the mirror says later.

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The stepmother, who so dearly values Snow White's opinion, is thus horrified when faced with the notion that she may no longer acknowledge her long-maintained princess self. This threat to her ego quite literally becomes the voice of the Other, and it is her words (Snow White's) that prompt her to efface this imminent existential danger by deciding to eliminate her entirely. Yet, in doing so, she ironically seals her fate as the condemned witch. Therein, a significant portion of the actions that allow the queen to briefly triumph in poisoning Snow White begin to resolve themselves in actions not of alienation, but rather in acknowledgement of their notable similarities. This, the narrative argues, is precisely what makes her so wicked: the stepmother weaponizes her feminine experiences to destroy the young girl.

It is the very virtue of understanding and relating to Snow White and the wiles of adolescent womanhood that allows the stepmother (now, a fully developed witch) to infiltrate the bulwark of her male-dominated household. The allure of puerile paraphernalia, whether clothing or lace, is what allows her to finally succeed in duping Snow White into biting into the poison apple. As Bettelheim points out, "since it is Snow White's

own vanity which seduces her into letting herself be laced, she and the vain stepmother have much in common.”<sup>19</sup> Like the mirror is to the stepmother, lace and glittering trinkets are how the young girl reflects her lovely charm to the world around her. She recognizes that she must be adorned with beautiful things to be considered beautiful herself; and even in the middle of the woods, with only a roof over her head and the clothes on the back, Snow White will no longer know herself if she is not beautiful— no different than her stepmother.

The allure of beauty apparatuses are to a woman what weapons are commonly considered to be for man: a form of offense to those that intimidate her, and defense to her inner self. The pursuit of beauty is thus chased after with the same soul-crushing desperation, the same terrifying necessity, the same sacrifice of the self to maintain— this is precisely why the age-old adage of “beauty is pain” persists. Unlike war, however, the fight against ugliness is a battle that is fought against the self, and persists throughout a girl’s lifetime, when she eats with elegance, when she curtsies with grace, when she smiles with poise. Rather than beauty being an object, woman herself is the weapon, and beauty is the whetstone which sharpens her. Thus, when her beauty goes dull, it does not mean that her munitions have become useless— it is she herself who has become useless. Beauvoir explains that,

Above all, the adolescent girl is condemned to the lie of pretending to be an object... Makeup, false curls, corsets, padded bras, are lies; the face itself becomes a mask: spontaneous expressions

are produced artfully, a wondrous passivity is imitated... one's eyes no longer perceive, they reflect; one's body no longer lives: it waits; every gesture and smile becomes an appeal; disarmed, available, the girl is nothing but a flower offered, a fruit to be picked.<sup>20</sup>

When one submits to this objectification and finds herself eaten, withered, and rotting from the inside, the hysteria that accompanies it is nothing short of wicked. The mask is shattered time and time again when the woman, who was once a princess, loses her virginity, sees wrinkles etched into her face, and finds her long hair beginning to gray. The void beneath it, the gaping maw of the Other, is a worse kind of ugliness than anything she could have imagined. Therein, she realizes that to be remembered as a witch is preferable to being remembered as a monster.

Fairy tales naturally make no mention of this inevitability, and instead avert the reader's attention with the hackneyed conclusion of how the princess finds herself rescued from her plight. Similar to *Sleeping Beauty*, the action of *Snow White* succumbing to her own desires and consuming the apple is interpreted by Bettelheim to be a metaphor for her being lured into the false-death that is puberty. Therefore, the young girl is taught that the ideal princess experiences sexual maturation only through insipid deception, and whose body, rather than embracing these changes, is as shocked by the notion of her soiled purity as the man who idealizes her. She thus enters an introspective vegetative state, coming of age devoid of any experiential stimuli whatsoever. The princess emerges from the

imagination of the man who awakens her as a chimeric woman-girl— she is at once innocent, yet ready for sex, pure, yet wise, humble, yet still adorned by the lace her stepmother gave her so that she may appear beautiful, even in sleep.

The young girl understands from these tales that maturation into the woman society expects her to be is a process that requires her to die first. This is the only conclusion that can be drawn from the fundamental nature of the comatose princess as an ideological role model, the heroine she is intended to emulate. Unlike other narratives in which characters enter katabasis,<sup>21</sup> the existential reflection is expected to transpire within the amber of the world she already lives in, stagnant and seen only through a gold-colored lens. To men, this filter is commonly seen as one that only serves aesthetic purpose, and only furthers their belief that little girls and princesses alike are shallow creatures. Unlike diamond or crystal, however, amber will melt and degrade when exposed to heat. As the former princess sees herself being replaced by a new one, she draws closer and closer to the flames and begins to see the world as it truly is— but when she looks into the mirror again, it is the witch inside her who stares back.

## **Burning**

Yet another story that brandishes maternal connections as its source of wicked evil is that of Cinderella. As with the last two tales, the interference of the witch is not enough to prevent the princess from meeting a happy ending with her true love. However,

<sup>21</sup> Katabasis refers to a tale, originally in Greek mythology, that involves the protagonist descending into the Underworld. This term describes a specific iteration of the classical “Hero’s Journey” format, and usually, as observed in the fairy tales noted above, sees the individual returning back to the mortal realm in the end.

the abuse she faces is far less fantastical in nature, and thus commentates more succinctly on the dynamic between herself and the woman who antagonizes her. The original story of Cinderella notes that her name originates from her status as the one who sleeps among the cinders in the fireplace of the home she scrupulously maintains. Of this symbolism, Bettelheim posits:

The hearth, the center of the home, is a symbol for the mother. To live so close to it that one dwells among the ashes may then symbolize an effort at holding on to, or returning to, the mother and what she represents. All little girls try to return to the mother from the disappointment inflicted on them by the father. This attempted return to Mother, however, no longer works—because she is no longer the all-giving mother of infancy but a mother who makes demands of the child.<sup>22</sup>

Compared to the plights explored thus far, this one presents the most pitiable case for the protagonist. Although Cinderella does appear to disparage her stepmother and experience strife with her stepsisters, her hesitance to embrace them are natural, childish reactions to the feeling of one's connection with their sole parent being disrupted by an interfering set of relationships. Despite this, however, Cinderella appears to feel as though her grief at the loss of her father is an experience that only disturbs her and not the people around her, including the woman who married him.

The sense of sanctimoniousness that accompanies a young girl who assumes herself to be better than



the older woman she has arbitrarily placed herself in competition with makes her analogous to the idealized notion of the Vestal Virgin,<sup>23</sup> of which Bettelheim states that, “to be a Vestal Virgin meant to be both the guardian of the hearth and to be absolutely pure. After they had performed well in the role, these women made prestigious marriages, as does Cinderella.”<sup>24</sup> That the princess meets a happy ending in a societally advantageous wedding is seen as a reward not for her character, but rather for her virginity and perceived piety. This is a case in which, although the witch certainly enacts cruelty upon the princess, the princess is rewarded righteousness for a preconception of superiority over those around her—a quality that is unkind, but notably never considered unfitting of a princess. The narrative makes no attempt to posit that it is possible for a princess to be flawed and still deserving of a happy ending. In the same way a stepmother can only be evil, a witch who relishes in her wickedness to subjugate the threat to her spot as the primary female figure of the household.

Bettelheim unusually argues that there is no need to encourage the child listener to grapple with this emotional complexity:

The typical fairy tale splitting of the mother into a good (usually dead) mother and an evil stepmother serves the child well. It is not only a means of preserving an internal all-good mother when the real mother is not all-good, but it also permits anger at this bad ‘stepmother’... The

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23 A Vestal Virgin is one who worships and serves the Roman goddess of the hearth, Vesta. As such, the primary role of the Vestal Virgins was to watch and maintain the sacred fire perpetually kept burning on her altar.

24 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 254.

good qualities of Mother are as exaggerated as the bad ones were in the witch. But this is how the young child experiences the world: either as entirely blissful or as unmitigated hell.<sup>25</sup>

This sentiment outright contradicts his earlier notion that the main oversight of fairy tales is their black and white morality, which does not take into consideration the feelings of the children who listen to them and know themselves to be all but entirely gray. Would the child not be far more soothed and empathetic, then, if they were assured that all humans are inherently capable of the duality that is to be good and bad at the same time? Doing so would allow the child to understand that the choices they make to be good—regardless of their own not-good desires or occasional not-good actions—are a mere fraction of that which substantiates their existential whole. By extension, they might begin to view the people around them (such as their mother) not as a polarized pair of souls, but rather as a unified individual who, like them, is able to be multifaceted and deserving of love regardless.

But again, one must consider the young girl, whose wickedness looms on the horizon as she begins to understand both the world and herself. To preserve her princess-like qualities, she must be taught that this thought is blasphemous. Blasphemy is here used to describe the nature of this assertion not as being impossible, but rather as a truth that is irreverent of its reception and uncomfortably radical. Beauvoir claims:

Just as Christianity, by introducing the ideas of redemption and salvation, gave its full sense to

the word ‘damnation,’ the bad woman stands out in opposition to the sanctified woman... Some men only want to see the blessed woman they dream of, while others want the cursed woman who belies their dreams. But in fact, if man can find everything in woman, it is because she has both faces. In a carnal and living way, she represents all the values and anti-values that give life meaning.<sup>26</sup>

This reality, rather than being liberating, isolates the young girl even further. She realizes that no part of herself truly exists for her own understanding-- and all of it, even the resentment she feels towards being forced into the narrow confines of womanhood, are seen as an enticing challenge for the prince who seeks to conquer her. As such, the optimal way for the girl to survive is to estrange the witch-like qualities from herself as mysterious artifacts for her suitor to discover and claim as his own. She applauds him for delving into the depths of her soul to retrieve the truths about herself she had long flung to the bottom with her own hands. Her tenacity and desperation can be glimpsed through the facade as she lights the fire below her own feet and draws the man’s attention to the smoke so that he may play her savior, and be her awaited knight in shining armor. In doing so, she may allow herself to become a partial-witch, in the same way the peasant Cinderella becomes partial royalty—a princess—the moment she marries a prince. Both her humble past and her luxurious future ultimately are deemed the cost and reward of her sanctimonious piety.

## Decay

The witch trial that is womanhood ultimately exists only to offer deliverance on one simple thing: love. Love, to the young girl, is a complex matrix of paradoxical and unfathomably complex puzzles— it is a mystical panacea that will soothe the aches she feels in her heart, and finally quell the outcry of the Other as she may appear. Love is the embodiment of the long yearned for “good magic” that will prove her, although not a princess, to at least not be a witch. Though her own body is an abyss, a clepsydra of blood that threatens to overflow at any moment, she is taught to believe that love will allow her the chance to seal the Other away once and for all. The more she alienates the unloveable parts of herself, she thinks, the easier it will be for her to be loved. The more she is loved, the less witch-like she will be. And the less witch-like she is, the more she may finally come to love herself.

Rather than being an affirmation of her virtues, love is a brutal and bloody conquest to the fairy tale protagonist. She casts aside her own mother, falls into a coma, and permits herself to be violated time and time again in the hopes of winning that glittering token of happiness. She is told that it is only through love that she will see the purpose of her existence; not to make a man happy, but to make herself happy by pleasing a man. What young girls do not learn from this, however, is that attaining the coveted jewel of love will not kill the witch inside her altogether— it is the desperation to destroy her that only makes her stronger. It is only when the young girl grows to be a woman that she finds herself at the crossroads of this betrayal; loved, yet deep down, more unloveable and witch-like than

she has ever been. De Beauvoir explains this facet of alienation:

We have seen that the love act requires a woman's profound alienation; she is awash in the indolence of passivity; eyes closed, anonymous, lost, she feels transported by waves, caught up in torment, buried in the night: night of flesh, of the womb, of the tomb; reduced to nothing, she reaches the Whole, her self effaced. But when the man separates himself from her, she finds herself thrown back to earth, on a bed, in the light; she has a name and a face again: she is a conquered person, a prey, an object. This is when love becomes necessary to her.<sup>27</sup>

Although we live in an era where the support of a man is no longer essential to life so much as it is a convenient bonus, the utter devastation that is the yearning for love is far from being cured. As de Beauvoir outlines, it is only when woman achieves love, as unceremonious and disappointing as it is, that she finally realizes how desperately she needs it. In this way, fairy tales truly do maintain a certain wicked, timeless quality about them: no matter how times may change, the young girl's desire to be loved and understood preys upon her far more than the witch ever could.

The modern princess, at least, is acutely aware of the dissonance between the idealized image she presents to dispel any accusations of witchery, and the self that will inevitably be torn asunder for the man who proves capable of breaching her palisade. She knows neither truly represents her heart, but the charade of

the chase allows her to feel a semblance of control and privacy over her truth, a leash around the neck of the feckless Other who threatens to reveal herself at every turn. She is thus capable of appearing both keen and inviting to the interested prince, yet simultaneously disinterested in his affection. After all, to careen and yearn for male attention reveals too much of her human loneliness, and thus robs her of the mystique of her princess-like illusion. In doing so, however, she effectively also places an impenetrable barrier between herself and other women, who she unilaterally sees as competition. Beauvoir supplies an example of such an individual:

I knew one such girl, intelligent and talented but who had chosen to think herself a 'faraway princess': this is how she described herself in poems and literary essays; she sincerely admitted she did not remain attached to her childhood friends: if they were ugly and stupid, she did not like them; if seductive, she feared them. The impatient wait for a man, often involving maneuvers, ruses, and humiliations, blocks the girl's horizon; she becomes egotistical and hard. And if Prince Charming takes his time appearing, disgust and bitterness set in.<sup>28</sup>

Often, it is easiest for a young girl to imagine herself as a "faraway princess" precisely because she experiences a metaphysical distance between her true self and the coquettish, perfect ingénue she is told she must be. Other women may point out the duplicity of this behavior, but she is sated if the prince she covets



is temporarily entranced by her solitude, even if it is merely a charade. If she does not find success with this method, however, the consequences of her arbitrary isolation and existential fragmentation is devastating. Being raised under the belief that only a prince can save her, taking aliquots of her heart and concocting a finely brewed elixir of the “self,” only to not yield the desired result, the girl—now a young woman—storms into her own tower, and seizes the abandoned truths from where she artfully hid them. The moment she takes hold of them, she acknowledges her flaws and failings not as bruises to make the fruit of her body sweeter, but as the roots, leaves, and branches of her true self. She finds herself molting her skin and transforming, in the masculine sense, into a new creature altogether— one which bears the face of the Other and herself, merged into one. This is the moment in which the princess becomes the witch.

The solemn truth is not that all princesses will one day grow to be witches— it is that all witches were once princesses. Now unable to return to the hearth, the witch is endlessly doused in kerosene, the torches growing closer and closer to her by the day, the threat of immolation and personal annihilation eventually a quotidian threat. Her attempts to lure other young girls, other princesses, away from her path are treated as proof of her wickedness. The princesses, similarly, look at her grotesque visage and assure themselves that they will never resemble her, that the hearth will protect them and keep their bodies pure until the day their prince arrives. They see her with contempt, as the wicked stepmother, the incensed fairy, the damned and undesirable woman. But when he does arrive, when

her virginity is swept out from beneath her, she too will find the thanatotic vines of neglected personhood creeping around her heart as she grows more and more witch-like by the day.

The princess, the good wife, the honorable daughter, who has long since realized she did not marry a prince, finds herself growing uneasier by the day. She sees parts of herself, in flashes, that remain untouched from where she had buried them, now engulfed by too much sediment to ever see the light of day. And when the man she's devoted herself to dies, the last candle that had allowed her visibility of herself is extinguished, and she finds herself at the pyre alongside him.<sup>29</sup> This is the happy ending she aspired towards since girlhood, which she held like precious rose petals between her fingers and yearned for every night before bed. Wicked is the flame, capable of both supporting life and being an arbiter of annihilation, no different than the woman who nurtures it. As such, she finally understands that the fate of all women is ultimately the same: the subservient wife, the reviled sorceress, the Vestal Virgin who carries within herself the potentiality to be one or the other—perhaps even both—will always find herself at the mercy of the fire which seeks to extinguish her one and for all, and return her to the ashes from whence she came.

She is not a witch at this moment, and she is not a princess either. She is the lone tower, the pillar of her own solitude, the empty husk which once housed a dream. There is a cry between the roar of the flames,

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29 The Indian practice of Sati is a ritual in which a widow sacrifices herself by sitting atop her husband's funeral pyre so she may die and be cremated with him. Although outlawed now, the tradition itself is considered an act of deep devotion, and, historically, has been enacted by women both voluntarily and by force, usually due to pressure from the husband's family.

not for the necrotic husband, but for the witch. The one who raised her. The one who slept beneath the stars alongside her. The one who lives inside her. She begs her for forgiveness as she turns to ash. The eyes of the young girl, raised on fairy tales, are ablaze as she witnesses the genesis of the feminine flame.

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