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*Winner of the 2020-21 Robert T. Wilson Award for Scholarly Writing as well as Articulate's choice.

Into the Wild: Exploring the Power of Black Female Wildness in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

Maddie Dirrim

...

Toni Morrison asserts that when she and other authors write for black women, they “are not addressing the men as some white female writers do. [They] are not attacking each other, as both black and white men do” (Furman 7). Instead of putting her focus on the male figures in her narratives, and without attacking members of other races or genders, Morrison seeks to craft stories that are made for black women. This goal is prevalent in every novel she writes, but one story in particular that seems to stand out in this regard is *Jazz*, her sixth novel out of the many she wrote during her lifetime. The black woman characters in this novel each possess a sense of “wildness,” yet another theme that makes its way into many of Morrison’s works. The combination of this quality and her intended focus on black women allows conclusions to be made concerning the degree to which this portrayal of wildness is dangerous, and how much it is powerful. I would like to argue that it is more powerful and authoritative than dangerous, unless one frames this danger in relation to the men of the story; it seems that this established power is frequently over male characters, in which case, the wildness is a danger to them and them alone. The characters of Wild, Violet, and Dorcas in particular possess this quality – wildness – and use it as a way to work against the violence and stereotyping that is frequently perpetuated by men. In her novel *Jazz*, Morrison portrays the idea of wildness in black female characters as a powerful, authoritative quality rather than a dangerous one, demonstrating that it is necessary as a method of attempted survival.

The definition of the word “wildness” itself can have several meanings; it can connote that something is uncultivated, without discipline, or lacking sound reasoning. However, it can also indicate a strength of emotion, which is the definition that will

be used in this case. It is the strength of these women's characters that allows them to use their wildness as a way to gain authority over their male counterparts. This strength is a necessary one, as their external conditions and perceptions propel them to use their wildness in different ways in order to survive. As Doreatha Drummond Mbalia states in her essay "Women Who Run with Wild: The Need for Sisterhoods in *Jazz*," "Wild... signifies defiance, rebelliousness, aggressiveness, selfishness, and silence" (625). These qualities, the defiance and rebelliousness, translate to the innate power that lies in black women's wildness. It does, however, manifest in different ways. For the character Wild, her wildness lies in her status as a legend among men, as something for them to fear. Violet has "cracks" or violent tendencies, which come across as wildness and help her to make sense of Joe's affair. Finally, Dorcas's wildness resides in her ability to embrace her sexuality, allowing her to survive in a rather unconventional manner.

Wild, Joe's mother who is never truly present in his life, inherently gains authority over the men around her because of her elusivity and her ability to hold fear over their heads. Wild's identity is established as a mysterious and feared woman – the men can't even pin down her location. The legend of Wild was spread by word of mouth: "She lived close, they said, not way off in the woods or even down in the riverbend, but somewhere in that cane field – at its edge some said or maybe moving around in it. Close" (Morrison 166). Her looming presence, one that is incredibly close to the men working in the fields, is enough for them to be frightened. The wildness that she possesses even goes so far as to manifest in her lack of a home, instead portrayed as a woman who cannot be pinned down. Wild's unpredictability is even enough for the men's work to be disrupted, as they say that "[j]ust thinking about her, whether she was close or not, could mess up a whole morning's work" (166). She doesn't have to be seen, and the men do not have to experience her in person, for her to hold great authority over them. The rumors of her wildness inherently give her control, a control that has tangible consequences for the men and the work that likely fuels their own sense of masculine strength. With just one thought in Wild's direction, this part of

their masculinity is compromised. Wild's effects go deeper than their work as well. The fear perpetuated by her name causes them to actually feel physical reactions. Morrison lets the reader know that the men "weren't prepared for the way their blood felt when they caught a glimpse of her, or for how trembly their legs got when they heard that babygirl laugh" (167). Using a myriad of sensory experiences, Morrison demonstrates the raw power that Wild has over these men. The influence of her presence, even just a glimpse, is enough to have an effect that runs so deep that they can feel it in their blood. Presenting Wild's laugh as especially youthful and girlish emphasizes her femininity, reminding the reader of her womanly authority and affirming that no matter how she exhibits her presence, she exerts great influence on these men.

Despite the existence of Wild's control over the men that surround her, the need for her wildness is a result of how she is perceived by these male figures, and how black women have been perceived for quite some time. Just her name, bestowed upon her by Hunter's Hunter when he first took care of her and she bit his hand, lets these men know that she is not to be trifled with. Therefore, her wildness and the authority she – perhaps unknowingly – establishes through gossip is warranted in order to combat this untamed perception. In her essay on narrative and identity in *Jazz*, Carolyn M. Jones discusses the implications of violence that is ever-present in the lives of black Americans. She explains, "Women, particularly black women, become the objects on whom this violence is worked out in the culture. They, from slavery forward, are imaged as savage and sexual, like Wild. Thus, women must be armed" (486). Morrison chooses to arm Wild with the ability to cultivate fear among men due to her wildness. Wild leans in to the image of herself as savage, an unpredictable solution to the male gaze that results in her authority, her survival, rather than her inferiority. She has to value her wildness because to do anything otherwise would be to open herself up to the violence that Jones discusses; it is a survival tactic that allows her to gain power while also protecting herself. Mbalia's view is similar to that of Jones': "since there are traces of Wild in all the female characters—that is, there is a common bond among women of African descent in that they all experience a triple oppression—the

reader can infer that similar conditions cause all of these women to become wild” (626). In Mbalia’s eyes, the oppression and violence that inherently comes with the identity of being a black woman due to the stereotypes perpetuated in society bonds these women together, causing their wildness and establishing it as a necessary reaction to these external factors. Through Wild’s authority over these men due to her wildness, she is able to create her own sense of control and attempt to survive in spite of the outside conditions that actively work against her.

Violet’s wildness, which lies in her violent tendencies/cracks, is a defense mechanism in order to process the pain that has been thrust upon her by Joe and his affair with Dorcas. From the beginning of the novel, Morrison makes the reader aware of Violet’s inconsistencies and violent tendencies that are amplified by the affair and subsequent murder of Dorcas. The narrator describes these tendencies as “cracks,” a darkness that implies a sense of wildness as well: “Not openings or breaks, but dark fissures in the globe light of the day... Sometimes when Violet isn’t paying attention, she stumbles onto these cracks” (Morrison 22-23). It is said that these cracks didn’t used to exist, that Violet used to be a “snappy, determined girl and a hardworking young woman” but that things began to evolve into wildness when her and Joe disconnected (23). From the language that Morrison uses, it seems as though Violet doesn’t intend to be cracked, she only stumbles upon this condition because her life requires it. She must adapt to external forces, which is an idea that seems to be common among these women, as Mbalia so aptly articulated. Yeonman Kim frames this idea as involuntary vulnerability, one that inadvertently makes these women develop a necessary sense of wildness. Kim explains, “The narrative makes it evident that the characters are induced to do wrong by seducing, misleading, and oppressive external forces to which they are involuntarily vulnerable” (127). Violet has to stumble onto these cracks – is induced to do wrong – in order to survive her troubling marriage.

This form of a defense mechanism – her displaced wildness – is mainly displayed when Violet makes an appearance at Dorcas’ funeral, in which she attempts to stab her in the coffin. Alice, Dorcas’ mother, provides commentary regarding this incident by

saying that Violet was “[t]he woman who ruined the service, changed the whole point and meaning of it and was practically all anybody talked about when they talked about Dorcas’ death and in the process has changed the woman’s name. Violent they called her now” (Morrison 75). Violet’s public perception is altered by this incident, even adopting the moniker of “Violent” in response to her cracks. In this way, she quite literally embodies the violence instead of letting someone else commit more violence against her – that is, more than Joe already has. In addition to the oppressive forces that are systematically in place against black women, Violet must also find a way to process the betrayal and criminal acts committed by Joe. This violent act in particular, part of her perceived wildness, serves as a way for her to gain control over Dorcas and by association, Joe. Thus, even though the violence is misplaced onto Dorcas instead of Joe, it is still a way for her to try and maintain power in the relationship. Even though what results is a public image of her as a wild woman, Violet seems to be projecting her authority as Joe’s wife onto Dorcas, in an attempt to remind Joe that she is the one whom he married.

Violet’s idea of survival seems to be framed as persisting through this period of her and Joe’s life, the one marked by Dorcas’ presence. Part of what allows her to work through this difficult part of her narrative is acknowledging that her wildness exists and using that to find strength in herself, to accept this quality and channel it into surviving. In a candid moment in chapter four, Violet seemingly processes her wildness in a stream of consciousness section that spans several pages. After a long passage describing her spinning thoughts about the specific things Joe may have been doing with Dorcas while Violet was oblivious to the affair, she states,

That’s why. And that’s why it took so much wrestling to keep me down, keep me down and out of that coffin where she was the heifer who took what was mine, what I chose, picked out and determined to have and hold on to, NO! *that* Violet is not somebody walking up and down the streets wearing my skin and using my eyes shit no *that* Violet is me! (Morrison 95-96)

In this moment, Violet acknowledges her wildness and at the same time, demonstrates her desire for ownership and/or control over her relationship with Joe. She knows that this wildness is inside of her, but also knows that it is a way for her to sort out the traumatic event that occurred within her relationship. Violet couldn't "hold on" to Joe, couldn't maintain this sense of control and comfort, but she does have control over her own violent tendencies; as stated in the previous paragraph, she knows what she is doing when she attacks Dorcas and in an indirect way, attempts to affect Joe. This internal monologue and stream of consciousness acts as her realization of this fact, allowing her to own her cracks and see that she is the Violet who is wild, who will survive this part of her life.

Ironically, Violet survives by "killing" herself. Towards the end of the novel, the reader is introduced to Felice, Dorcas' friend who enters into Joe and Violet's life in search of her ring, one that Dorcas had borrowed before she was killed. Violet's survival is first confirmed by Felice, who tells the reader that other people thought Violet was crazy. However, Felice has her own opinion; she says, "'They're wrong about her. I went to look for my ring and there is nothing crazy about her at all'" (Morrison 202). This is one piece of evidence to suggest that the defense mechanism and method of processing that is/was Violet's wildness has done its job and allowed her to come full circle. Public perception sees this wildness as craziness, when in fact it is the thing that gave her the ability to work through this difficult series of events that occurred. After Felice meets Joe and Violet and they become rather friendly with one another, they begin to have dinner together. One dinner conversation between Felice and Violet discusses what kinds of people, what kinds of women, they want to be. Violet says that she realized she wanted to, and could, go back to the Violet she was before. The sequence of dialogue between the two goes as follows, with Felice posing the question at the start: "'How did you get rid of her?' 'Killed her. Then I killed the me that killed her.' 'Who's left?' 'Me'" (Morrison 209). This sequence demonstrates that Violet eventually realizes her wildness has served its purpose. She understands that she has gotten through the worst because of her wildness and that it would be better to get rid of it, since there is no

need for it anymore. She has processed the betrayal and her wildness, and now wants control of a different kind.

Dorcas' individual wildness lies in her ability to embrace her sexuality through her relationships with both Joe and Acton, giving her inherent power through Joe's male desire. Carolyn M. Jones has her own thoughts on Dorcas' sexuality, and her calculated way of discovering what she wants when it comes to her body. Jones explains, "Dorcas is only alive when she is a mirror of someone else. Her body is her offering, and she offers it until she finds what she wants" (484). Dorcas' ability to be alive, to survive, lies in her desire for a relationship, which in turn signals a way for her to lean into her sexuality rather than stray away from it for fear of being hypersexualized. Within the facets of oppression that black women commonly experience there lies a practice of hypersexualization, one that tends to make these women believe that they should not be sexual. Because of the existence of this external force, Dorcas develops her own sense of wildness, one that can be labeled as such due to the fact that she does not adhere to the norm. Therefore, her embrace of sexuality is her version of wildness.

It is clear that Dorcas has great influence over Joe within their relationship, exemplifying that her wildness allows her to obtain a sense of control. In a section of Joe's individual thoughts, one of the only ones the reader is allowed to experience, he describes how much he relies on his male friends versus his reliance on Dorcas. He reveals, "'Gistan, Stuck, whatever I said to them would be something near, but not the way it really was. I couldn't talk to anybody but Dorcas and I told her things I hadn't told myself. With her I was fresh, new again'" (123). Clearly, Joe relies on Dorcas more than his friends Gistan and Stuck – he goes so far as to declare that he has admitted things to Dorcas that he has not even admitted to himself. This demonstrates the influence she has and the power she holds in the relationship. Later on, when Dorcas is describing how Acton didn't want her to rub his neck while dancing (a factor that will be further discussed) she remarks, "'Joe wouldn't care. I could rub anywhere on him. He let me draw lipstick pictures in places he had to have a mirror to see'" (191). This cleverly sexual comment, one that allows the reader to

understand the hint that is proposed by Dorcas, shows how she is clearly embracing her sexuality when it comes to Joe. He doesn't care what Dorcas does to him, he seems to be content no matter what. She is in control both verbally – Joe can confide in her about anything – and physically – Joe enjoys her presence and the way she leans into her sexuality.

Dorcas also finds herself experiencing wildness while seeing Acton, even though their relationship differs from that of Dorcas and Joe's. It must be acknowledged that Acton is younger, more popular, and more commanding than Joe. As mentioned before, Acton tells Dorcas how to act, dress, and dance. This fact is extremely discouraging for a black woman like Dorcas who is attempting to embrace her long-diminished sexuality. Morrison herself recognizes the command that men have over women's bodies, a fact that has not evolved too much over time. In an interview, she admits, "The issues concerning what we do with our bodies haven't changed. This is very often determined by the command of men ... the whole beauty thing, is not about owning your body but having it defined for you by men" (Hoofard 89). In addition to hypersexuality, body image is another external construct that influences Dorcas' choice to love her sexuality and her body. Through her wildness, Dorcas attempts to gain agency over her own body while also commanding authority over the men who make demands regarding what she does with this body. While going out with Acton, Dorcas does claim that she is happy with him; she has just decided to leave Joe, and has claimed Acton's attention. However, this happiness does come with reluctance. While dancing with Acton, Dorcas' inner thoughts read differently: "He's coming for me. I know it. He's been looking for me all over. Maybe tomorrow he'll find me. Maybe tonight" (190). These wandering ideas are not in reference to Acton, but Joe – even though she is physically with Acton, she thinks about Joe instead. This indicates that perhaps she has chosen Acton for a purpose, as a way to further embrace her sexuality, yes, but also to make Joe jealous. In this moment, she knows how much power she has over Joe and uses Acton to exert this power.

Despite the fact that Dorcas is killed by Joe in the ultimate attempt for his own control, she survives through the power of

memory. After wondering if Joe will find her while dancing with Acton, he does just that; however, the consequences are unfortunate, to say the least. He shoots her at the party, the action that eventually claims her life. Clearly, Dorcas underestimated Joe's potential for jealousy and the power she holds in their relationship, as she did not predict his deadly actions. It seems as though her wildness and embrace of her sexuality was snuffed out by this act, but Morrison decides otherwise. Even when Dorcas is gone, she haunts both Joe and Violet. Early on, her presence is established; when describing their house, Morrison ends with, "The mantel over the fireplace used to have shells and pretty-colored stones, but all of that is gone now and only the picture of Dorcas Manfred sits there in a silver frame waking them up all night long" (Morrison 13). Dorcas is now able to exercise her power from the center of their living room, as she has such a great effect that Joe and Violet can no longer sleep through the night. Ultimately she is the one who leaves a rather permanent mark through her memory, surviving because of her occupancy in a large majority of Joe's heart.

These three black women – Wild, Violet, and Dorcas – all exhibit their own qualities that can be classified as "wildness." This idea, prevalent in many of Morrison's novels, can generally produce many interpretations. In this case, it is clear that wildness, no matter the woman, is a powerful trait that allows them to establish authority over both male characters and external forces that plague their identities. Wild seems to be portrayed as a legend among men, who in their minds is savage and sexual. However, the authority that she gains through her legendary status and the fear that is cultivated within these men makes her wildness necessary. The control that she gains through this fear allows her to survive in a world that makes its own definitions for black women. Violet's wildness differs slightly in that it is physically demonstrated by her violent tendencies. What remains the same is the notion that her wildness is warranted; Violet does this in order to process the events perpetrated by her husband Joe, as a method of survival that eventually leads to promising results. Finally, Dorcas' sense of wildness stems from the way she embraces her sexuality. This deviance from the norm of repressed sexuality due to a societal

expectation of black women's hypersexualization constitutes a wildness that creates Dorcas' authority in her relationship with Joe. He is so infatuated with her that he kills her; no matter, as Dorcas survives through her ability to haunt both Joe and Violet. All three women attempt to survive by developing different ideas of wildness, allowing them to establish authority over stereotypically dominant male figures and cementing the notion of wildness as power.

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I Don't Want [You] to See That:
Resisting Self-Disciplinary Performance in *The Comeback*

Sam Fujikawa

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Introduction

In the second season of HBO's *The Comeback*, we follow the tragically comic resurgence of Valerie Cherish, the larger than life, B-list actress whose career is revived upon being cast in a much-hyped about HBO series. Shot and stylized as a documentary, each episode of the show is presented as a collection of raw footage depicting Valerie and her daily life, filled with moments of discomfort and uneasiness attributed to Valerie constantly negotiating what should be a quotidian performance with a hyperawareness of being constantly filmed, constantly watched. The result is both comedic and uncomfortable, since we—as viewers—are given a front row seat in one woman's presentation of self, only being offered the footage that she allows to be recorded. The format of the show offers an interesting display of performance that relies on a raw, unfiltered stream of footage that explicitly demonstrates how self-presentation depends upon performance rather than some idea of inherent character value; the Valerie Cherish we see is constructed purely upon an ever-looming vigilance letting us know that what we see is actually an act.

In my reading of performance within *The Comeback*, I concentrate upon the eighth episode of the show's second season, "Valerie Gets What She Really Wants," which follows Valerie preparing for and attending the Emmys, where she is nominated for supporting actress in a comedy series. I specifically highlight how Valerie performs to fulfill and negotiate between multiple roles with conflicting requirements; additionally, I focus upon how the format and stylization of the episode acts as a rich site to explore and comment upon how performance operates as a disciplinary act in order to present an optimal self. Utilizing Erving Goffman's seminal work on performance and the construction of

the self, I illuminate how the episode portrays methods of performance—particularly Goffman’s concepts of the front, idealization, and concealment—in an especially explicit way that ultimately resists using performance as a maneuver of self-discipline. By applying this theory of performance to *The Comeback*, I display how artifacts of pop culture—such as an episode of television—can bring attention to facets of normalized performance and suggest resistive commentary that is valuable to the broader discourse of communication.

Description of Theory

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman suggests that individual behavior is much more akin to a performer on a stage rather than some innate essence externalized. Applying this metaphor of performance to everyday conduct, Goffman introduces a variety of terms to describe phenomena occurring within individual performances, starting with the “front.” The front refers to “that part of the individual’s performance which regularly function in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (Goffman 13). Thus, the front works as a fixture within performance that sets the stage and develops context for the performer to work with; however, fronts are often pre-established, selected, and maintained in ways that allow a performer to work with social norms and fulfill duties and roles effectively. Within the front are parts categorized as appearance—which function as indicants of the performer’s current social standing—and manner—which function as indicants of a role the performer intends to take on (Goffman 17-18). These stimuli are vital when analyzing performance, as they offer insight into how performers negotiate with existing and upcoming conditions in order to perform in a way that is deemed the most appropriate.

Goffman categorizes efforts within performance to fit societal norms and audience expectations as idealization; consequently, in order to perform in an ideal way, a performer must regularly conceal behavior and actions that do not neatly adhere to an idealized economy of behavior (23). Within the United States, the ideal performances rest upon a collective

privileging of civility, which in turn means that egalitarian performances are often upheld while crass performances are normally discouraged and in effect, concealed (Menand 297). This does not necessarily mean that human performance (therefore, socialized behavior) is inherently deceptive and idealized but instead refers to the social contract that takes place for both performers and audiences who rely on standardized methods of behavior to act as specific functions (Richards 62). However, the negotiation of presentation a performer must endure often is a self-regulatory one that disciplines a performer to behave in a socialized way that may initiate conflict between internalized fancy and external influence (Goffman 26).

Performance enables agency in self-presentation, which additionally acts as modes of governing social situations, assigning and fulfilling roles that are embedded and naturalized into a standardized social schema. Thus, in presenting a self, one relies upon socialized norms to properly project the role they are cast in and effectively fulfill the tasks they are assigned to (Brown 160-163). To perform is to opt into a social site that depends on a complex and constructed structure of various roles and find a way to somehow negotiate the drives of the self while simultaneously maintaining the organized conglomerate of social expectation.

Application of Theory

Any fan of *The Comeback* knows that Valerie Cherish—expertly portrayed by *Friends* alumna Lisa Kudrow and endearingly referred to as “Val”—is constantly negotiating with the documentation of her idealized “everyday” life as well as the unfavorable (though still documented) moments in her life. A common trope of the character is to directly look into the camera and offer direct commentary within scene, a widely understood faux pas within the sphere of documentary and reality filmmaking. Instead of utilizing the standard voice-over narrations and cutaway testimonials, *The Comeback* depends upon Val constantly breaking scenes of “real” life in order to directly address the crew, cameras, and, subsequently, the audience. By breaking this fourth wall, Val’s performance comes across as almost tongue-in-cheek; aware of the fabricated conditions and narratives of such documentation,

she lets the viewer in on the fact that she *knows* that this performance is for a camera and that she is acting in a way that she dignifies as respectable within this frame.

In “Valerie Gets What She Really Wants,” we see this hyperaware method of performance early on when Val discusses the entertainment industry to the camera while walking around a Hollywood party. Speaking to no one save for the camera, she posits, “You realize, you know, that despite the box office and glamor, Hollywood really is just a small company town, and you’re on the team... that’s a good end point Jane [her director].” Utilizing an egalitarian manner that is eloquent and optimistic, Val makes a statement of grandeur, takes a beat, then immediately tells her director how she should edit and use this footage and statement. She’s assuming the role of an idealistic Hollywood insider, offering a glimpse at what lies beneath the sheen of the entertainment industry and appearing to truly understand it as quotidian and familial in nature. It’s a small moment, but one that succinctly displays the sort of meta style of performance that Valerie Cherish clutches to when going about her day; with a camera crew always close behind, she employs narration as a way to take control of her appearance and manner, almost always playing a role that comes off as naively clueless to what her depiction actually suggests. Val’s behavior here exhibits her tendency to romanticize reality, a tendency that parallels a phenomenon that Brooke Erin Duffy qualifies as the “Instagram filter.” Commenting on the editing of self that social media has actualized, Duffy points to how this site of personal projection has created a culture that favors idealized performances over messy depictions of real conditions (2). Thus, Valerie’s coordinated and calculated performance is representative of this social media age, perhaps even offering a resistive view of this self-regulatory performance. By performing this editing in real time rather than behind a screen, we see how out of touch such acts of faux idealization truly are, prompting us to question a culture that privileges this self-regulatory facet within performance.

Val’s specific performance of career—almost always attempting a sense of idealism (which is often comically conservative in nature) and overdramatically displaying every

moment of negotiation when unideal conditions present themselves—is rich with cues to offer viewers regarding performance within a surveilling culture. Since her performance is constantly productive, as her life has been reified as commercialized content, Valerie becomes a hyperbolized example of how one negotiates between a performance of idealized career and conflicting aspects of personal life. This tension of performance, between idealization and concealment, often operates within “Valerie Gets What She Really Wants” in order to create humor; the show is written as a fictional reality and leans upon the tropes of reality television and documentary to generate moments of absurdity for Valerie to perform in. This comedic tension is perhaps best demonstrated when Valerie faces a crisis the morning of the Emmys: with *Entertainment Tonight* and her documentary at her home to film the big day, disaster strikes. Mickey, Valerie’s hairstylist, has gotten a bloody nose as a side-effect of his cancer treatment and is forced to back out of attending the show. Responding to this personal matter, Jane (the documentary’s director) suggests that Val send the *ET* crew home in the name of Mickey’s privacy. Val, aware of the competition for content Jane is in with the competing crew, declines to do so and asks Jane, “Can your agenda be any louder?” Valerie’s insistence on keeping the crew suggests her acceptance that messy moments may be caught on camera and that this loss of privacy is a price to pay in return for public attention; she opts against the choice to conceal an intimate moment of her friend’s health in order to perform as an ideal object for public consumption. However, just moments later a pipe from the toilet bursts and floods her garage and driveway with gray water. With a tremendous amount of fecal matter inhabiting her driveway and two crews of cameras there to capture it, Val reconsiders Jane’s original suggestion and declares that she thinks she will send away *ET*. The scene reveals a public renegotiation of performance and action on behalf of Valerie; under relatively normal conditions that do not fare poorly on her (like Mickey’s nosebleed), she remains collected and allows for public documentation, but as soon as conditions turned against her, she caves and chooses to opt out of performing for the camera, concealing a particularly messy moment of her life. With a

disgusting amount of poop entering the front she must perform in, the chances of maintaining an ideal performance of a dignified actress on her way to the Emmys practically vanish, so Val opts to perform privately, with the cameras off and the stream of content cut short.

These moments of disconnect within performances of reality not only portray how Valerie attempts to maintain an ideal façade of career but also how *The Comeback* utilizes reality television tropes to its advantage. In her analysis of British reality programming, Faye Woods notes that a “foregrounding of artifice—combined with [a] program’s knowing tone and awkward performances—can encourage a mocking audience position that pokes fun at... inarticulate excess” (206). Thus, these performances within reality television in tandem with a skillful edit can ultimately sway an audience to hold specific sentiments and opinions regarding the methods of performance that they are witnessing. Seeing Valerie go through hoops as a means to come off as an elegant and dignified actress doesn’t solidify her status as this ideal image but rather destabilizes any audience belief in the performance she is providing. Her efforts to conceal and idealize, all self-disciplinary and restrictive, are in a sense fruitless, as they encourage an audience to laugh at her inability to be what she so desperately wants to be, wants to have.

The most notable display of performance within this episode, however, occurs near its end, as Valerie is forced to decide whether to stay at the ceremony to accept the biggest award of her life or to visit Mickey at the hospital after receiving word from her disgruntled husband (who has declined to attend the ceremony with Valerie) that her friend has collapsed. Eventually choosing to go to the hospital, the choice marks a stylistic shift in how Valerie’s world is presented. Gone is that claustrophobic documentary-style footage, and upon leaving the theater, we finally get to see Valerie no longer performing for the camera. Stylized more similarly to a standard single-camera television show, *The Comeback* now offers viewers a chance to see Valerie—in a moment of direct opposition to the role her career necessitates—navigate the world on her own, without a crew to follow her or a camera to trace her movement. After disciplining

her behavior for so long to create an appearance of a dedicated and hard-working actress, Valerie finally allows personal obligations to trump professional. Her performance no longer is aware of the surveilling camera, so she performs purely to fulfill the responsibility of seeing her beloved Mickey and making sure he's okay.

Because of reality television's encouragement of suspecting emotional performances as facsimiles (Ellis 110), *The Comeback's* abandonment of that stylization to depict Valerie in a moment of emotional distress allows the program to finally let viewers in on who she really is, behind the camera, without the crew to surround her. We see that she truly cares about Mickey, that despite the series often suggesting that she cares about show business and her career more than anything else in the world, Valerie will even forego an ideal performance at the Emmy Awards in order to perform as a caring, compassionate friend. By creating such an explicit dichotomy in portrayal between her performance in front of the cameras and behind them, the series points to an often-disregarded component of how we all negotiate performance and the construction of self: performance is full of choices and allows for agency to resist societal pressures. By going against the advice of both Jane and her PR manager, whose careers rely entirely upon her own, Val suggests a method of resisting an economy of delusional performance ideals, ultimately allowing viewers an opportunity to reflect upon their own performances and priorities as a result. And in the end, by disregarding the methods of performance that constricted her and left her personal life in disarray, Valerie ultimately gets exactly what she wants: her friend, her husband, and an Emmy Award, which she accepts in the hospital room, thanking "the two most important men in [her] life."

Conclusion

Understanding the world to be a stage with an entire population of performers becomes especially useful in the application of artifacts within a surveilling culture that privileges formats like reality television and documentary. By analyzing the complex methods of performance within a show such as *The Comeback* (which utilizes a "reality" presentation in a fictionalized

storyline), it becomes clear that popular culture is aware of the phenomenon of performance and utilize it as both a comedic and resistive tool to cause affect upon consumers. As we get a glimpse at how the character Valerie Cherish negotiates between a multitude of demands within her performance, an overwhelming sense of her self-disciplining practices rises to the surface, showing how external factors create real effects on how she chooses to perform as herself. However, when *The Comeback* allows Val to finally be free of the camera's grip, viewers are presented with a performance that resists the external structures that demand (or that she assumes demand) a particular performance from her. True agency in choosing how to present herself—outside of the universal audience that a camera permits—lets Valerie finally perform with a sense of duty that focuses primarily on a function of care instead of the demands of a critical entertainment industry. Her performance acts as a call for understanding and evaluating performance in everyday life, as a method to refocus performance in an optimistic way that privileges internal hierarchies over external. Leaving the cameras, the globalized audience, the career demands behind, Valerie finally is able to let viewers into her world in her own terms both literally and figuratively. While the switch in style literally presents Valerie in a new light, a new front, her performance finally feels genuine and reflective of what she really truly cares about. It's revelatory and reminds us how we do not have to let supposedly required aspects of our self-construction distract us from overcoming difficulties that no longer feel possible in such a demanding economy of our performances.

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Embodied Knowledge:
Foucauldian Power Dynamics in *King Lear*

Riley Halpern

...

The tragedy of Shakespeare's *King Lear* is in its characters' inability to recognize their mistakes and embrace necessary change before the consequences of those mistakes become irreversible. Edgar recognized the triviality of his dilemma after the opportunities to save his father and foil his brother's plot had passed; Lear attempted to mend his relationship with Cordelia upon the inevitability of her death; Gloucester's realization that he trusted the wrong son came too late in Edmund's quest for power; Edmund tried to save Cordelia's life with his dying breath only after she had taken hers. However, these characters—Edgar, Lear, Gloucester, and Edmund—are united in their individual experiences with a version of disability that is “defined by knowledge that results from the experience and perspective of stigmatized, nonnormative bodies” (Row-Heyveld 159). In experiencing stigmatized, nonnormative bodies, characters gain a unique form of knowledge particular to those experiences—embodied disabled knowledge. Edgar in particular gains this embodied disabled knowledge that then prompts a critical analysis of his own actions as a previously abled person. Power and knowledge, according to Michel Foucault, are inextricably tied; “it is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” (Foucault 52). The characters in *King Lear* recognize their errors only after gaining embodied knowledge through their experiences with disability, belatedly exercising their newfound power in attempts to rectify disastrous situations. Yet, due to the relational nature of power—in that it “functions in the form of a chain...employed and exercised through a net-like organization” of individual relationships—some characters come closer than others to reversing the consequences of their previous actions (Foucault 98). Edgar finds himself subject to the relational aspect of Foucauldian

power/knowledge to a far greater extent than Lear, Gloucester and Edmund, bringing him closest—relative to the three aforementioned men—to repairing the chain of damage he left in his wake upon fleeing his father’s castle.

Prior to obtaining embodied disabled knowledge, Edgar’s initial naivety is evident in the ease with which Edmund frames him as the murderer of their father. Edmund acknowledges his brother’s innocence after convincing him to run to escape a death sentence:

...a brother so noble,
Whose nature is so far from doing harms
That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty My
practices ride easy (1.2.187-90).

Whereas Edmund, the illegitimate son, has to gain status through cunning plots, to “have lands by wit,” Edgar, the elder, legitimate son has been guaranteed inheritance and status from the moment he was born (1.2.191). Edgar is stripped of his naivety only after he disguises himself as madman-beggar, Poor Tom o’ Bedlam, taking “the basest and most poorest shape / That ever penury in contempt of man / Brought near to beast” (2.3.7-9). In experiencing the reality of disability firsthand, Edgar is forced to find new ways to navigate “the world as structured for people who have no weakness,” (Row-Heyveld 160). As Poor Tom, Edgar weathers the storm in act three nearly naked, talking of being given nothing and enduring much. He fabricates memories of being “whipped from tithing to / tithing, and stocked, punished, and imprisoned (3.4.141-42). Committing to his role as a wandering madman-beggar, Edgar obtains an embodied knowledge of disability. He also gains the embodied knowledge of what it is to deceive, thus able to comprehend his brother’s deception where he previously could not.

Edgar’s disguise grants him access to other disabled persons—access he would not otherwise have had. Moreover, because he is, in reality, of sound mind and body, Edgar can navigate a far greater number of relationships throughout the play than any of the other disabled characters, creating a longer “chain,” a larger form of the “net-like organization” of relationships characteristic of Foucault’s relational power (98). Edgar initially

stumbles upon a mad Lear in the middle of act three only to watch the fallen king spiral further and further into madness as he ruminates over his daughters' betrayal. Lear, so entrenched in his own world, can barely comprehend the reality of Edgar's "madness," asking time and time again, "Has his daughters brought him to this pass?" (3.4.69). Therein lies the difference between each man's experience with disability. Because Lear is so obsessed with his own reality and unable to comprehend the realities of others—even the realities of those with whom he is united in disability—he does not have access to the relational power Edgar does. The key to Edgar's power lies in his understanding of those with disabilities, an understanding that is possible only because he is merely pretending he is not of sound mind. On the contrary, Lear, the farthest he has ever been from sanity, does not share in this understanding. So, Lear's embodied disabled knowledge allows him to gain a new perspective on the world without gaining a new perspective of the people in it. Still unable to understand his youngest daughter, Lear's former actions toward her "sting[ing] his mind so venomously that burning shame / Detains him from Cordelia" until her army is defeated and it is too late to reverse the damage he has done (4.4.56-57). He acknowledges he has wronged, telling his youngest, "I pray, weep not. / If you have poison for me, I will drink it" (4.7.81-82). Shortly after, the two are captured and imprisoned by Edmund, and Cordelia is hanged. Unable to stray fast and far enough from "compensating for his feelings of inferiority by cutting himself off from the rest of mankind," building relationships "aimed only at fortifying...his goal of personal superiority," Lear fails to reverse the consequences of banishing Cordelia far more drastically than will Edgar in his attempts reverse his own mistakes (McLaughlin 37-38).

Near the end of his time with the suffering Lear, Edgar has an epiphany: "How light and portable my pain seems now / When that which makes me bend makes the King bow!" (3.6.118- 19). After seeing Lear endure debilitating madness brought on by the sudden betrayal and loss of his daughters, Edgar is able to grasp the triviality of his own predicament; his mistake—his weakness—was running from his family and a situation he was too naïve to

even question. It is this realization that presents Edgar with the opportunity to help his father—who is similarly disabled in his blindness—and he begins to exercise the power that accompanies his new knowledge. Again, some of this power lies in the reality that Edgar is only pretending to be disabled as he is capable of effectively channeling his embodied knowledge into progressive actions in ways other disabled characters are not. A significant moment of understanding comes when Edgar hears Gloucester say, “I have no way and therefore want no eyes. / I stumbled when I saw” (4.1.19-20). In hearing his father acknowledge how blind he was to Edmund’s malicious scheming, Edgar is able to offer love and forgiveness to a suffering Gloucester when he says, “Give me thy arm. / Poor Tom shall lead thee” (4.2.89-90). Because he is not preoccupied by his own disability and able to understand his father’s disabled reality, Edgar is able to save his father’s life, at least initially. When Gloucester hopes to jump from a cliff to his death, Edgar constructs an entire reality for his blind father so he falls mere feet off of a hill while believing he fell much farther. And after the “fall,” Edgar takes on a new disabled persona—a peasant—saying to Gloucester, “Thy life’s a miracle,” granting his father the strength to live a bit longer (4.6.69). Where Edgar is able to quickly interpret and understand Gloucester’s language at the beginning of the scene, Gloucester is unable to recognize earlier on that Edmund had ordered his blinding until Regan tells him, even calling to his younger son, “Edmund, enkindle all the sparks of nature / To quit this horrid act” (3.7.105-6). This discrepancy best exemplifies Edgar’s greater embodied disabled knowledge than that of his father. Moreover, Gloucester is so disheartened by his blindness that he does not find himself interacting with other disabled persons in the same way Edgar has been for a majority of the play. Gloucester does not form a “net-like organization” of individual relationships the way his eldest son does (Foucault 98). Subsequently, Edgar is able to save his father’s life once while Gloucester only grasps that Edmund is the true villain too late to stop his plot, too late to save even himself.

Edmund, perhaps the most intriguing of the disabled characters, lived all his life with the disability of his illegitimacy. One’s status as an illegitimate child is considered a disability

insofar as it fits into Row-Heyveld's characterization of disabled bodies as "stigmatized" and "nonnormative" (159). To be illegitimate is to be stigmatized, to be nonnormative, which is seen early in the play when Gloucester says, in reference to Edmund, "His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge. I have so often blushed to acknowledge him that I am now brazed to 't" (1.1.9-11). Gloucester is ashamed of his illegitimate son, and Edmund's status leaves both of them open to ridicule. Yet because Edmund viewed his illegitimacy merely as a disadvantage by which others could insult him, he never gained any sort of embodied knowledge from it. He neither embraces it to any extent nor uses it as an opportunity to understand others or the world around him. He bitterly scorns the way society brands him a bastard, using his bitterness to fuel his quest for vengeance:

Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.
Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
As to th' legitimate. Fine word, "legitimate."
Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed
And my intention thrive, Edmund the base
Shall top th' legitimate. I grow, I prosper.
Now, gods, stand up for bastards! (1.2.17-23).

Edgar, simply because he is the eldest son *and* legitimate, interacts with his brother without any knowledge or understanding of what he is going through as a bastard in a society that disdains illegitimate children. In the end, Edgar's understanding of Edmund's deception by means of his *own* deception—counterfeiting as Poor Tom—grants him the power to be the cause of his brother's death in their final duel. Upon drawing his sword, Edgar says to his brother, "...thou art a traitor, / False to thy gods, thy brother, and thy father" (5.3.161-62). Edgar knows exactly who his brother is—both literally and the evil that dwells in his heart and his actions—yet Edmund cannot fathom his naïve brother ever drawing a sword against him. As with Gloucester, Edmund does not understand the reality of the situation until Edgar explicitly tells him.

In another vein, Edmund's fatal wound could be viewed as the disability that leads to a shred of embodied knowledge and the analysis of his previous actions. As he lay dying, Edmund retracts

Cordelia's death sentence, saying, "I pant for life. Some good I mean to do / Despite of mine own nature" (5.3.291-92). The most futile of all attempts throughout the play to reverse any consequences of previous actions, Edmund has neither embraced the embodied knowledge accompanying disability nor interacted with other disabled persons to possess the relational power Edgar does. Like his father, Edmund does not form the "chains" and "net-like organization" necessary to produce the relational power on which he can draw (Foucault 98). His order to save Cordelia comes too late, after she has already been hanged, and her death leads to that of her father.

The power/knowledge with which Edgar finds himself at the end of *King Lear* is far more substantial than that of anyone else in the play. He embodies not one but two disabled personas—madman-beggar Poor Tom and a peasant—and he interacts with a plethora of disabled persons in his own experience with disability: Lear in his madness, Gloucester in his blindness, Edmund in his illegitimacy, even Lear's Fool who is disabled in experiencing "what it means to be silenced...destitute...and to live (or die) at the mercy of others' amusement or contempt" (Row-Heyveld 160). This relational power is what enables Edgar to come closer than any other character to reversing the consequences of his previous actions; when Edgar fled Gloucester's castle, he granted Edmund the confidence to carry out his scheming quest for land, wealth, and status. In observing Lear's madness, Edgar is able to gain a sense of understanding of a parent's love which allows him to forgive Gloucester and initially save his father's life. And, in the end, Edgar is the one to stop Edmund from harming anyone else. Yet, though he makes a valiant attempt to save those around him, Edgar's extensive embodied knowledge comes too late to fully reverse the consequences of his choices prior to his unique experience with disability.

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Time, Masculinity, and Isolation in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

Olivia Bernard

...

No community can exist in stasis. Time moves forward, and with it, societies must change. However, it's all too easy to become obsessed with or victim to times long gone and events long past, and in doing so, lose sight of the current day. What causes this disconnect? In her collection of short sketches, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Sarah Orne Jewett examines how the inability to balance the past and present is linked to isolation from society and reliance on patriarchal institutions. This observation holds true whether the social detachment involves the male characters, who are oblivious to their predicament, or the single female character for whom it is self-imposed. By contrasting balanced, feminine, interdependent characters like Mrs. Todd with their unbalanced, masculine, solitary counterparts, Jewett underscores the importance of respecting the past while not becoming consumed by it. Only by doing this, she argues, can one lead a fulfilling life and build a functioning community.

The Country of the Pointed Firs begins and ends with the bond forged between the visiting, unnamed female narrator and her host, Dunnet Landing native Almira Todd, whose balance represents a strong alternative to the masculine characters who will be discussed later. Mrs. Todd's centrality in the community is deeply tied to her practice as a healer and herbalist. Other residents of Dunnet Landing seek her remedies and medical authority. The narrator describes her "standing in the doorway ... while she muttered long chapters of directions, and kept up an air secrecy and importance to the last" (Jewett 43). When the narrator explains to Mrs. Todd that she will be unable to continue acting as a business partner to give Mrs. Todd time to collect wild herbs, the narrator "felt that I was cruel to a whole neighborhood in curtailing [Mrs. Todd's] liberty in this most important season for harvesting the different wild herbs that were so much counted upon to ease

their winter ails” (Jewett 45). Clearly, Almira Todd is a pillar of this community, central to its function and running a social network on her step. Many of Mrs. Todd’s herbal remedies, too, come from both a long history of use and are used to treat specifically female infirmities. Black and blue cohosh, which are members of her garden, tick both boxes; these plants were used by Native Americans to treat gynecological complaints such as alleviating period cramps, easing childbirth, and treating menopausal symptoms (Jewett 43n1). By distributing these treatments among her community of female patients, Mrs. Todd carries the traditions of the past into the present. She is, in effect, a stand-in for the greater community of Dunnet Landing, and her relationships with and contrasts to various characters similarly represent that greater whole.

Mrs. Todd’s balancing of the past and present is further linked to both herbs and femininity with her favorite herb, pennyroyal, which is commonly used to stimulate abortion (Jewett 47n1). However, pennyroyal’s importance to Mrs. Todd is much more personal. When she travels to a special location on Green Island to pick pennyroyal, she explains to the narrator that “Nathan, my husband, an’ I used to love this place when we was courtin’ ... when he was lost, ‘t was just off shore tryin’ to get in by the channel out there between Squaw Islands, right in sight o’ this headland where we’d set an’ made our plans all summer long” (Jewett 77). The pennyroyal is a means of remembrance to Mrs. Todd, both of her late husband Nathan and to the other man she would’ve married had his parents not considered her to be beneath him. As she says, “this pennyr’yal always reminded me, as I’d sit and gather it and hear [Nathan] talkin’—it always would remind me of—the other one” (Jewett 77). Even Mrs. Todd’s sorrow is then linked to a long history and tradition; the narrator compares her to “Antigone alone on the Theban plain” (Jewett 78), and soon after, describes her as “a renewal of some historic soul” (Jewett 78). Her loss is linked to a lineage of grief, tying her to a much greater past that she embodies and carries on, much as she carries on the memories of her two past loves through the pennyroyal.

Readers also meet Mrs. Todd’s male counterpart, the village doctor, early in the book, and are presented at once with

two sets of contrasts: masculinity versus femininity and solitary versus communal. Institutional medicine, especially in the late 1800s, was a solely male practice, and hence the doctor is figured as a kind of masculine version of Mrs. Todd, presumably offering remedies for ailments she also treats. It's worthy of note, too, that the doctor's form of medicine is a much newer institution than the centuries of "Indian remedy" (Jewett 43) Mrs. Todd's practice follows. However, calling the doctor marginal to the story is almost an overstatement; he briefly appears twice in the entire book and is never named. Where Mrs. Todd's status as a healer centralizes her in the community, the doctor seems to exist only at the sidelines, largely irrelevant. Healing alone is not what centralizes Mrs. Todd; rather, her place is cemented by servicing the feminine in the community and balancing the past with the future.

It is in this primarily female social network that the narrator will spend the rest of the book. As Elizabeth Ammons argues in her article "Going in Circles: The Female Geography of Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs*," Mrs. Todd's house is a symbol of the bond between the narrator and her host, which "deepens and broadens but does not undergo fundamental or unexpected change—it is steady, solid, unshakeable" (85). The narrator's relationship to the community is founded upon her relationship to Mrs. Todd, putting it in contrast to the traditional hero's journey plot structure. The hero's journey is generally centered around a protagonist overcoming a hierarchy of increasingly difficult challenges. If interpersonal relationships are involved, they compete with or replace one another. However, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is a network of non-hierarchical encounters and accumulative relationships. As Ammons summarizes, "relationships do not vie with but complement each other. The narrator does not go through a series of people; she adds new friendships onto her life multidirectionally" (85). This expanding circle of structure, as Ammons argues, is fundamentally feminine, as it both breaks away from the traditional masculine plot structures and decentralizes lone wolf male heroes as the focal point of the story. In the common literature of the day, the male doctor would have been the story's main character, with Almira

Todd as, at best, an endearing quack of a minor character; his story would've followed a hero's journey brand of plot structure, using and discarding relationships. Instead, by centralizing and radiating out from the narrator and Mrs. Todd's friendship, Jewett pushes back against male centrality and focuses instead on female love throughout the Dunnet Landing community.

This story's structure of a relationship web is also linked to time in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. As in her essay "Visions of Time in 'The Country of the Pointed Firs,'" Margaret Baker Graham describes linear time as a fundamentally masculine effort to find relationships between events where none exist, strongarming them into a tidy cause and effect much like a traditional plot structure would. One event or person generally dominates the story. Feminine time, by contrast, is cyclical, with time and events "recurring without cessation and without agency" (Graham 30), much like the seasonal cycle to which Mrs. Todd and her plants are so wedded, and to which the female bodily functions—menstruation, gestation—that these plants treat are commonly linked. In fact, Mrs. Todd even directly links both her heartache and her femininity to the rotation of seasons: "a woman's heart is different; them feelin's comes back when you think you've done with 'em, as sure as spring comes with the year" (Jewett 45). In addition, the most socially significant events in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* are cyclical—that is, feminine—as well as notably all community- or relationship-oriented, from the annual Bowden reunion near the end of the book to the funeral (death being part of the cycle of life) the narrator sees in the fourth chapter.

Both Ammons and Graham note that the novel follows an alternating pattern of juxtaposing joyous feminine community with dejected masculine solitude. As Ammons writes, "we first meet robust Mrs. Todd, then sad Captain Littlepage, then lively Mrs. Blackett, then tragic Joanna, then delighted Bowden reunioners, then tearful Elijah Tilley" (87). After all, "If relationships are the focus rather than the background of one's world, as has traditionally been the situation of women, one inevitable rhythm ... is constant oscillation between vitality and morbidity, happiness and sadness, life and death, addition and loss" (Ammons 88).

Similarly, this emotional narrative push-pull is also alteration between characters occupying masculine, linear time and those occupying feminine, cyclical time, as Graham observes (30). This structure further serves to contrast balance with imbalance and highlight the factors that contribute to each character's respective connectedness with the community or detachment from it. The alternation makes it all the clearer who's leading a fulfilling life and who's not, emphasizing the ability of balance to bring about happiness. The disconnected, imbalanced characters share masculine traits which isolate and sadden them, starkly contrasted against the cheerful, feminine social network that surrounds them.

In the fifth chapter, the narrator has her first personal encounter with a male character on the fringes of society, much like the doctor was. This theme will remain consistent with virtually all of the male characters in the book. Captain Littlepage is a reclusive former sailor for the shipping industry, a predominantly male profession for the time period. He spends most of his time cut off from the world, watching the greater society of Dunnet Landing from behind closed windows. He wanders alone into the narrator's presence while she's trying to write and tells her about his past travels on the ocean, in particular his encounter with "a kind of waiting-place between this world an' the next" (Jewett 59) in the far north, populated by elusive, shadowy "fog people." Captain Littlepage is an example of a character occupying masculine, linear time—and his timeline has frozen in the past with the death of the shipping industry. As Graham observes, he is "unable to recognize the recurring processes of life that remain" (31), and therefore Littlepage "becomes the story he cannot forget" (31). He cannot find balance, and as such, he cannot participate in the community surrounding him. Instead, he's an outsider in his own hometown, a relic of days long gone and rather ghostly himself. So isolated is the captain that later, the narrator describes "Captain Littlepage ... sitting behind his closed window ... there was a patient look on the old man's face, as if the world were a great mistake and he had nobody with whom to speak his own language" (Jewett 108). Littlepage is an object of sad confusion and pity to Mrs. Todd, who speaks for the community when she says ruefully, "Oh, he used to be a beautiful man!" (Jewett 62). His

hero's journey has ended, and because he cannot move beyond that kind of solitary, masculine, linear time to balance his past and present, now he is only a sorry relic on the fringes of society.

Later in the narrative, after a joyous reunion with Mrs. Todd's mother, Mrs. Blackett, on Green Island, the narrator encounters the tale of the second character to live outside of the community: Joanna Todd. This character, being female, is the exception to the rule of male solitude in the novel; however, she follows a similar pattern of isolation and detachment, showing that this theme is not essentialist. Joanna has been dead for twenty-two years before the narrator's arrival at the Landing, but her story lives on through Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett, who explain how heartbreak led Joanna to turn the sparse and tiny Shell-Heap Island into a hermitage where she lived until death. Unlike the male characters, who seem oblivious in their isolation, Joanna makes a conscious choice to detach herself as punishment, believing that "I haven't got no right to live with folks no more" because her thoughts were "so wicked towards God that I can't expect ever to be forgiven" (Jewett 98). Joanna's self-seclusion began with her inability to move past the end of the linear timeline of her failed love life and rejection of the church. Like Littlepage's obsession with the dead shipping industry, Joanna's faith in another patriarchal institution ultimately led her to solitude and detachment. She believes that she will forever be defined by these events, and as such, forces that belief to be true. Joanna also rejects the community's attempts to bring her back into the fold, which are once again symbolized by Mrs. Todd and her visit to Shell-Heap Island. The conscious attempts of the rest of Dunnet Landing to free Joanna from her solitude are something else that sets her apart from the male characters, whose isolation the rest of society seems to have accepted. However, because she continues to refuse this outreach, Joanna still cannot balance the past and present.

The second-to-last chapter of the book consists of the narrator's final major meeting with a relic of the past: Elijah Tilley, a widower who cannot move forward from the death of his wife eight years earlier. His entire house is a shrine to her; everything is just as she left it, a fact made all the more significant by the narrator's observation that "a man's house is really but his larger

body, and expresses in a way his nature and character” (Jewett 131). His character cannot extend past his grief for his wife and the life they led, and the unchanged interior of the house reflects that; as Elijah explains, “I try to keep things looking right, same’s poor dear left ‘em” (Jewett 132). Like Littlepage, Elijah cannot move on from the past, and he says as much multiple times, first when he remarks to the narrator that “Folks all kep’ repeatin’ that time would ease me, but I can’t find it does” (Jewett 132) and soon after, when he says, “I can’t git over losin’ her no way nor no how” (Jewett 133). Like Littlepage and Joanna before him, Elijah’s despair once again stems from a patriarchal institution, marriage. His timeline, like theirs, is linear and masculine, and it ended with his wife. His wife is, as Graham puts it, “a symbol of the past wherein he traps himself” (32).

Elijah Tilley, in many ways, serves as male foil for Almira Todd, further emphasizing the masculine and feminine differences that set them apart and allow the latter to thrive into the present while the former withers into the past. Both characters have lost spouses, and each is still dealing with their loss and reminiscing over their late partners. However, Mrs. Todd is not hindered by the death of her husband. Instead, she finds ways to commemorate him that don’t restrain her ability to live in the present, such as gathering the aforementioned pennyroyal to aid her position as a healer. She still tenderly recalls about the times they shared, but her reminiscence isn’t her entire existence.

Elijah, on the other hand, not only makes preservation of the past the entire point of his life, he smooths over and idealizes this past. As Graham observes, he does not really see his wife as an individual. The memories that Elijah recounts, too, paint a much less cheery picture than the one he imagines; Graham notes that from what we know, Sarah Tilley was “a timid woman afraid of bad weather, afraid to tell her husband she had broken a cup, afraid to sail to Green Island” (32). In addition, “Rather than understanding or helping his wife overcome her fears, Elijah Tilley worsened her fears by staying out late and laughing at her timidity” (Graham 32). He never calls her anything other than the patronizing “poor dear”; readers only learn her first name (Sarah) from Mrs. Todd, who values the dead woman’s individuality more

than her husband does. Mrs. Todd says that “there ain’t one o’ her old friends can ever make up her loss” (Jewett 137), commemorating Sarah Tilley’s place in the larger Dunnet Landing society. The differences between these two characters further underscore how the feminine approach to grief and healing—remembrance through a shared bond of community—is what enables Mrs. Todd to achieve balance where Elijah Tilley is left stranded and alone in the past.

Between these three clear examples of stagnant, solitary, masculine isolation are several more instances of male characters detached from society, and although they don’t get nearly as much depth or story focus, they still bear mentioning. William, Mrs. Todd’s brother, is eccentric and shy; at first, he even hides from the narrator and remains reclusive even when his female relatives wish he would participate in community events. The ineffectual Reverend Dimmick, a character in Joanna’s story, “seemed to know no remedies, but ... had a great use of words” (Jewett 99) and is figured as ignorant to Joanna’s needs and completely aloof. Santin Bowden, a washed-up drunkard and wannabe soldier, uses the members of the community around him as actors to live out his outdated military fantasies rather than connecting with them on a more meaningful level. All of these male characters are marginal and detached from the central web of female relationships. Without that community, they are either stuck at various points in the past, bound up in patriarchal institutions, or both, and as such, they are figured as sad objects of pity and unfulfillment.

By contrasting these antisocial, masculine loners with the warm community centered around and embodied by Mrs. Todd, Jewett highlights the importance of the cyclical, the communal, and the feminine. Only once the importance of these factors is realized can the delicate balance of the past and the present be achieved, leading to a gratifying life and a functional society. *The Country of the Pointed Firs* warns of the power of regret and hindsight to overwhelm and stifle a life. Instead, it presents an alternative where the past is honored but not obsessed over. The narrator takes this message with her as she leaves her elderly friends and the fading village of Dunnet Landing—representatives of the past—at the end of the book to return to her own “present”

in the city. She and the reader alike now bear both the cautionary tales of the male characters and the positive role model of Mrs. Todd as they depart Dunnet Landing.

The lesson of balance applies on a scale from the personal to the national to the global. History should be acknowledged and atoned for, but it must also be learned and moved on from. Society at large tends towards masculine thinking; single people or events are made to define eras which begin and then end with a clear cause and effect. Ghandi led India to independence. Napoleon caused the rise and fall of France. Less attention is paid to the greater situations and communities surrounding these people and events. Ghandi became the icon of an independence movement that had been growing in India long before he arrived. Napoleon came to power in a time of great upheaval following the French Revolution. These larger frameworks cannot be overlooked. By understanding the full picture, the state of societies around great events and the relationships of those events to one another, the lessons of the past become visible and applicable, and finally observers can reach an understanding about how that past can be appreciated and honored without it overpowering the current day. Only once the past and the present are balanced can one then look towards the future.

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