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Articulāte Vol. VII

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During the review process, all information identifying the author is removed from the essay and the essays are read as anonymous works of writing. After all submissions have been read, the editorial board meets to discuss and choose the essays to be published. The identities of the authors are not revealed until all decisions have been made.

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Submissions will be accepted throughout the academic year and should combine research with original insight. Submissions should not exceed fifteen typed, double-spaced pages, although essays of greater length which are of exceptionally high quality will be considered for publication. Please use MLA documentation.

Initial submissions should be in hard copy. Those writers selected for publication will be asked to submit an electronic manuscript of their work. Please submit your essay with a cover sheet including your name and Slayter box. The journal accepts submissions at any time during the academic year.

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While the writers of the major novels during the Victorian period were handcuffed by the demands of propriety, writers of the extremely popular sensation novels enjoyed a freer rein in terms of what aspects of society they could reproduce on the page. Ellen Wood’s 1861 East Lynne stands out as a prominent contribution to the short-lived genre, reportedly selling 500,000 copies by 1900 (Maunnder 9). But if these sensation novels, and Wood’s in particular, were popular, it was not for their conservative content. One of the most striking features of the sensation novel was the ambiguous view of feminine morality that it presented. East Lynne is a particularly good example of this characteristic—Isabel Vane, the main character, must be punished (and is, severely) for her dual sins of child abandonment and sexual expression (as evidenced by her attraction to and flight with Francis Levison); yet, the novel continually sympathizes with and eventually redeems her through her maternal urges. Despite this ambiguity, I suggest that Wood does offer a strong argument, counter to the prevailing ideology of the day, for the presence of female sexuality alongside of maternity. In doing so, Wood makes explicit other contradictions inherent in the expectations placed upon women. Nowhere in the text do we see the complete “ideal” woman (as wife and mother). Wood shows, in the figure of Isabel Vane, that a woman is physically able to fulfill both roles; however, the social constructions of “wife” and “mother” are so contradictory that a woman inhabiting both roles is a semantic impossibility. Thus, a woman who defies the previously prescribed language of the Victorians by enacting both the “wife” and “mother” roles is left unnamed and, consequentially, excised from the text.

Ambiguity in female morality was a defining characteristic of Victorian sensation novels. Generally, Patrick Brantlinger argues in “What Is ‘Sensational’ About the ‘Sensation Novel’?” that “virtue [was] rewarded and vice apparently punished at the end” of the novel (5). And yet, moral ambiguity slipped in the novels because of the heavy dose of domestic realism they contained. The content of sensation novels—“crime, often murder as an outcome of adultery and sometimes of bigamy, in apparently proper, bourgeois, domestic settings”—was shocking enough to draw criticism from reviewers, but it was “dangerous” because it was taken directly from the current society. Brantlinger writes that “Historically there is a direct relationship between the sensation novel and sensational journalism, from the extensive crime reporting in the Times and the Daily Telegraph to such early crime tabloids as the Illustrated Police News” (9). Barbara Leckie, in her book Culture and Adultery, strongly agrees with Brantlinger, writing that the sensation novel “translated social and sexual anxieties into domestic detective novels that enjoyed a popularity inexplicable and disturbing in terms of prevailing ideologies” (119). Because the content of sensation novels was taken from the pages of the newspaper rather than simply the imagination of authors, Brantlinger labels the novels as “generally exploitative” in its treatment of “controversial issues like bigamy and adultery” (6). The novels were a useful tool in sparking cultural debate: critics who feared that the novels were morally corrupting were forced to turn their attention to the source of the sensational content—current domestic reality as represented by divorce and criminal court proceedings. Thus, sensation novels simply fed back into the debate swirling around female morality, stimulating and reinforcing the same kinds of questions that they were representing in the first place. Finally, the immense popularity of sensation novels (and East Lynne in particular) was a bitter pill for critics to swallow: not only did the novels simply reflect what you could find in any newspaper, but they proved that people actually cared about those proceedings and were concerned about the questions of domestic life they posed.

Of course, with questions about female morality floating around, many answers sprung up in response. Literature about how women should be—including conduct books, medical guidebooks, and periodicals—proliferated. In this literature, women were continually identified as keepers of the social morality. In 1842, Sarah Ellis writes of her work entitled “The Women of England” that “All I have written in this volume, imperfect as it is, has been stimulated by a desire to increase the moral worth of my countrywomen, and enhance the domestic happiness of my native land” (33). And most of this moral responsibility was grounded in the role of women as mothers—Natalie McKnight writes, in Suffering Mothers in Mid-Victorian Novels, that “Motherhood was the cornerstone of the social
structure” (5). However, the expectations placed upon mothers in the conduct literature were unreasonable. Indeed, McKnight writes that “The claims for and on mothers in these books are so excessive at times as to be laughable, when they are not flatly self-exasperating” (3). The fear generated by sensational journalism (and sensation novels) coupled with this insistent and unrealistic over-regulation of female behavior left mothers—frustrated and others wondering where the truth lay. Into this void came two extreme views of women—perpetuated by sensational journalism and conduct literature—stepped woman writers who were perfectly situated to address concerns over female morality. A series of novels, East Lynne being one of them, with layers of narrative emerged; an overt layer celebrating female morality was consistently undermined by a more covert layer condemning restrictive views of the ideal “woman.”

In East Lynne, the ambiguity surrounding female morality is apparent in the figure of Isabel Vane. Barbara never receives. The narrator’s sympathy for Barbara and other women in the novel as one-dimensional while presenting Isabel as two or three-dimensional. Regardless of the way that the narrator’s sympathy for Isabel is uncovered, Heller is right in saying that East Lynne’s “maternal melodrama was ideally suited to express ambivalence about female sexuality in a period where gender roles were once again unstable and shifting” (138).

In mentioning “female sexuality,” Heller points to the area of East Lynne on which I would like to focus. I suggest that the ambiguity surrounding female morality in the novel stems from the tension between female sexuality and female morality. Motherhood in the Victorian period was just not simply the most morally justifiable role for a woman, it was also the very safeguard of morality as far as sexuality was concerned. Unmarried women were of course supposed to be virginal, without knowledge of sexuality. Married women, shocked and dismayed on their wedding night by their first sexual encounter, were supposed to view sex as only a necessary ingredient of their most important role—motherhood. Thus, female sexual desire (if it existed at all) was channelled into a desire for maternity (Curtis 79). Shuttleworth points out that even medical discourse was supposed to be virginal, without knowledge of sexuality. Married women, shocked and dismayed on their wedding night by their first sexual encounter, were supposed to view sex as only a necessary ingredient of their most important role—motherhood. Thus, female sexual desire (if it existed at all) was channelled into a desire for maternity (Curtis 79).

East Lynne, the fallen mother remains a sympathetic as well as a morally culpable figure because the narrator shows us the “wild tumult” (Wood 334) of Isabel’s thoughts” (137). As well, Sally Shuttleworth points to the development in comenting on the novel’s sympathy to Isabel: “Barbara, although initially given to sexual excess, learns to regulate her feelings and is rewarded with wifedom and the subsequent extinction of all independence or narrative interest in her personal life” (40). I argue that this discrepancy in “narrative interest” is a result of Wood’s choice—important to her social comment—in presenting Barbara and other women in the novel as one-dimensional while presenting Isabel as two or three-dimensional.

Indeed, McKnight writes that “The claims for and on motherhood were so excessive at times as to be laughable, when they are not flatly self-exasperating” (3). The fear generated by sensational journalism and conduct literature—stepped woman writers who were perfectly situated to address concerns over female morality. A series of novels, East Lynne being one of them, with layers of narrative emerged; an overt layer celebrating female morality was consistently undermined by a more covert layer condemning restrictive views of the ideal “woman.”

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The reasons for seeing Isabel as only a mother after her elopement are numerous. For starters, she is immediately overshadowed by immense regret and remorse:

Poor thing! Poor Lady Isabel! She had sacrificed husband, children, reputation, home, all that makes life of value to woman: she had forfeited her duty to God, had deliberately broken His commandments, for the one poor misdeed of flying with Francis Leviston. But, the instant the step was irrevocable, the instant she had passed the barrier, repentance set in. (335)

And with regret, remorse and repentance comes the inevitable contribution of religion. Just as with Brontë's The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, where the heroine, Helen, becomes increasingly angelic and pure with her embracing of Christianity, Isabel becomes suddenly consumed with thoughts of guilt that are suggested by Biblical scripture. Reflecting on her sins, Isabel thinks

"What a cross was hers to take up! But she must do it; she had passed the barrier, repentance set in. That was only that we may reap in joy, hereafter. 'What a cross was hers to take up! But she must do it; she had passed the barrier, repentance set in.' (362). Since Isabel's punishment—represented by her Christ-like suffering in coming back to East Lynne—is tied up with her mothering role, critics have assumed that the source of her sin—her sexuality—is completely obscured by maternity as per the social codes of the day. Certainly, Wood explicitly shows enough factors—Isabel's excessive mothering and religious guilt—that Isabel's redemption is palatable to readers, but in no way does that mean that Isabel's sexuality, apparent in the rest of the novel despite her image as a "proper lady," immediately disappears.

Isabel's sexuality is communicated by Wood in a couple of ways. First, her reappearance at East Lynne as a lame governness begs inquiry. Cindy LaCom writes that nineteenth-century writers "[r]esigned a negative attitude by associating female disability with decreased female sexuality and suspect men that perhaps Isabel's disability serves as a disguise in two ways: one, to hide her true identity from the Carlyles, and two, to mark her as sexual or deviant (from the asexual mother code) to readers (190). The other aspect of Isabel's disguise—her strange dress—could also be a clue to her continuing sexuality. We find out immediately that Isabel's dress is notable for its deviance: "Wilson was thinking she never saw such a mortal fright as the new governess. Those blue spectacles capped everything, she decided: and what made her tie her collar and stock, at once!" (467). Isabel's gender deviance in choice of clothing, while perhaps not glaring, is a small detail that points to her overall deviance. And, in doing so, it carves out a place for the continued presence of her sexuality. Isabel's role as a governess, as well, throws light on this question of her sexuality.

Governesses occupied a contradictory place in the Victorian imagination: although they were fulfilling the role of mothers (they were sexually regulated through maternity because they were unmarried). Therefore, as Jill Matus states, "Governessing focused anxieties about working women, class boundaries, [and] the preservation of the domestic ideal of maternity" (94). In presenting Isabel as a governess, Wood brings to the Victorian mind fears about "unregulated sexualit[y] that Matus uncovers (Matus 94).

These are small details about Isabel's position and appearance that signal the continued presence of her sexuality; I feel that we can see evidence of her sexuality simply within her thoughts that we are privy to thanks to the narrator. In addition to her obviously physical attraction to Leviston in the beginning and middle parts of the novel, Isabel experiences a renewed love for Carlyle when she returns to East Lynne. Wood makes this feeling explicit through Isabel's intense jealousy of Barbary:

[Carlyle] did not perceive that anyone was present, and he bent his head and fondly kissed his wife. Isabel's jealous eyes were turned upon them. She saw Barbary's passionate, lingering kiss in return, she heard the fervent whispered greeting... Isabel flung her hands over her face. Had she bargained for this? It was part of her cross that she had undertaken to carry, and she must bear it. (468)

We see that Isabel progresses to admitting not just jealousy but love for Carlyle when we read "Oh! to love him as she did now! to yearn after his affection for calmness" (583). In her response to Carlyle at this time, they must compete with her role as a mother. "Wilson was thinking she never saw such a mortal fright as the new governess. Those blue spectacles capped everything, she decided: and what made her tie her collar and stock, at once!" (467). Isabel's gender deviance in choice of clothing, while perhaps not glaring, is a small detail that points to her overall deviance. And, in doing so, it carves out a place for the continued presence of her sexuality. Isabel's role as a governess, as well, throws light on this question of her sexuality.

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type of motherhood that Isabel does. The most lengthy treatment than Isabel in the end. Barbara is perfectly happy with her marriage to Carlyle, and Afy is rewarded though it has not received a large amount of criti-
card Hare and the emphasis on dreams in the novel—suggest numerous things about Victorian society and could even impact my analysis of maternal sexuality presented here.

works cited
Heller, Tamar. "Victorian Sensationalism and the Silence of Maternal Sexuality in Edith Wharton's The Mother Reconc-
and sub-humans. In the middle of this circle is an ob-

won't be caught committing acts of deviant behavior.

monitor their own behavior and conform to standards

ates a feeling of an omnipresent spectator. As Foucault

chical notions that I have described. The state man-

in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent vis-

structed by the super-humans, and put in contrast to

The second monstrous identity is that of the sub-

human. This identity is found in the large masses of contemporary society, and yet they are given a feeble hierarchy. This monstrous identity is the most fearful to the super-humans because it threatens the power structure through its large num-

ber, and its resistance or inability to conform to the constructed notions of normalcy. The sub-human's existence is as the abject. Barbara Creed defines the abject as

"The place where I'm not. The abject threatens life; it must be radically excluded from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self...Although the subject must exclude the abject, it must, none-

theless, be tolerated, for that which threatens cannot attain or adapt to the notion of normalcy that the super-humans have conceived. In light of this sen-
timent, the human is many times transformed into the super-human and the human to define itself by what it cannot attain or adapt to the notion of normalcy that

human's monstrous creation, in that the sub-human
can culture, it is necessary to look at society's allow-
enance to the workers quitting their jobs or taking ac-

or her ability to break free from the standards of soci-

Thus, they begin literally to run from the law, which

takes the first step to defy her compliant human status

of super-human, has constructed a notion of normalcy

corresponds to a human's monstrous creation, in that the sub-human cannot attain or adapt to the notion of normalcy that the super-humans have conceived. In light of this sen-
timent, the human is many times transformed into the

The sub-human's position as the abject allows the

super-human and the human to define itself by what it

is not, which is the sub-human. Thus, the sub-human identity is based upon an otherness that is given a sub-

ordinate value. As the super-humans are given the privilege to see, the sub-humans are created and seen. The super-humans determines the sub-

human's monstrous creation, in that the sub-human

cannot be read. The monster's body quite literally in-

corporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (arachnic or incendiary), giving them a life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projec-
tion, the monster exists only to be read: the monster is etymologically 'that which re-

'that which warns,' a glyph that seeks a hierarchot (4).

The simplest in applying this notion to my theory, what the super-human monsters have is too much, and what the sub-human monsters have is not enough. In order to understand contemporary Ameri-
can culture, it is necessary to look at society's allow-
enance to the workers quitting their jobs or taking ac-

Thelma urges her to go to the police and explain their

throughout the movie as the primary reason Louise dis-

Thelma's existence as sub-humans is

demonstrated the male social construction of normalcy

The two dominant sub-humans in the film are the title

ignorance of the super-human's monstrous identity.

Thelma and Louise’s existence as sub-humans is

The first text to which I will apply this theory is the

of super-human, has constructed a notion of normalcy

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Thelma's existence as sub-humans is
Thelma and Louise, I will apply this monster theory to a film entitled Fight Club. Fight Club's main character creates names for himself to serve as various identities. At the beginning of the film, the super-humans have transformed their appearances into asexual entities. At the beginning of the ride trip, the firm points to various human beings and forces them to sign up for a program. This notion is demonstrated when, at the beginning of the film, the cinematography captures the sweeping landscape encapsulating the two women's journey. The same car mirror that Thelma has used to inspect her appearance is now a looking glass into the world around her. They are suddenly the ones with the eyes they open.

When Thelma and Louise become sub-human, they begin to reject the need to conform to the way in which the super-humans want them to be seen. Throughout the movie, the two women are constantly being honked at while on the road; this is most often done by one truck driver who makes crude and demeaning sexual advancements towards them. The progression of their reactions to the truck driver is symptomatic of their progression into sub-human status. The first time that the truck driver makes crude motions, the two women are revolted and disgusted. The next time that they see him, Louise suggests that they just ignore him. However, the last time that they encounter him, they decide to teach him a lesson. They seduce him until he agrees to pull off onto a field on the side of the road. He mistakenly comes under the assumption that they have yielded to his advances, and can't suppress their sexual desire for him. When he arrives, the women engage in an intervention of sorts, explaining to him that his actions were crude and that, if he knew what was best for him, he should immediately apologize. However, he stubbornly refuses, so they blow up his truck. In this scene, they are demonstrating their refusal to exist for the purpose of being seen.

Unfortunately, I have stated in my monster theory, the sub-humans may become aware of their own oppressive status and attempt to reject it, but in the end, they are still subjected to the constraints of society. The women feel more and more free as they go against societal laws and the super-humans' constructed notions of normalcy, but in the end they are still subjected to the super-humans' rules and punishments. At the end of the film, the humans and the super-humans have caught up to Thelma and Louise, and they are ready to exercise any necessary disciplinary actions. Under the same gazing eyes that they had been escaping throughout their journey, they decide to exercise the sole mode of control that they have, and kill themselves.

Since I have discussed the role of the super-humans and sub-humans in the film Thelma and Louise, I would like to take a moment to focus on the human influence on the film. The main human identity that is found in the film is the detective. He is the man who is sensitive to their weakness, to their needs, to their need for self-defense. The detective is the only one who treats them as human beings, even after their move into sub-human status. However, this sensitivity is clouded by his constant reference to the women as being "girls." As much as he is sensitive to the submissive and disrespectful manner that they have been treated, he is demeaning in his notion that these "girls" should not be subjected to the same treatment as regular criminals. He holds the same notion of the super-humans chains through his unwillingness to reject the super-humans' authority and help the women as well as in his notions of masculinity.

Next, I will apply this monster theory to a film entitled Fight Club. Fight Club's main character embodies the human's attempt to conform to the dictated notions of identity that the super-humans have constructed. The main character lives the human's "middle of the road" life. He works in a good job and obeys his boss, and he fills his apartment with furniture from Ikeas in order to build a respectable identity for himself. His only problem is insomnia. It is later in the movie that the audience understands that his insomnia is a symptom of his multiple-personality disorder.

The difficulty in discussing the main character is that the film never grants a name to this character. The character creates names for himself to serve as various aliases. He does so, to disguise himself when he goes to the various help groups. He goes to these help groups in order to cry, and thus have a chance to sleep. His character's lack of name is appropriate symbolism for the human's faceless and nameless identity. The human merely follows orders from the super-humans, and he or she attains what he or she has been told will lead them towards living a happy life. In order to lessen the confusion, throughout the rest of this examination I will refer to his character under one of his aliases, Cornelius.

To the audience, it seems that Cornelius is living the omenous, human life, until he befriends a sub-human and super-human hybrid. However, at the end of the film, it becomes evident that Cornelius has subconsciously created this alter ego, referred to as Tyler Durden, to escape the constraints of his human identity. Tyler's identity has been constructed at night, when Cornelius's mind shuts down from lack of sleep and allows for Tyler to take over. By creating another identity of the ultimate monstrosity, Cornelius is attempting to distance himself into a super-human. In this fashion, he becomes the creator or the super-human. Also, in his rejection of his role as the compliant human, he also becomes sub-human. The monster that Cornelius creates embodies "everything that he wishes he was," and he is free in all of the ways that Cornelius wishes he was. Unlike Cornelius, Tyler does not feel the need to control everything in his immediate proximity because Tyler's identity is not being controlled by the super-human upper class. Tyler, embodies the sub-human by rejecting the people, power and the lifestyle that the super-humans' chains through his unwillingness to reject the super-humans' authority and help the women as well as in his notions of masculinity.

Tyler is a man that has rejected all material possessions. He explains that, "what we own, ends up owning us" and he encourages Cornelius to "let that, which truly does not matter, slide." Cornelius is tired of simply being submissive to his material possessions and to his boss, and Tyler demonstrates that Cornelius has a choice in these matters. Cornelius's alter ego, Tyler, has burnt down his apartment to show him that, contrary to what the super-humans say, the possessions that he owned did not construct his identity. Instead he held his identity captive. Tyler lives in a broken down home that contains only what is necessary to survive in their society. In every element of Tyler's existence there is a rejection of the super-human's power and construction of normalcy. Tyler works the human's professional position, but in his every move, he is abusing the power systems. For instance, he excretes bodily fluids into the food he serves to the rich, and he implements fluids into children's movies that are explicitly R-rated. Tyler is trying to get Cornelius to help him in his efforts to reject the super-humans. As time goes by, Cornelius increasingly becomes Tyler, and relinquishes his past banal, perfunctory, and submissive existence.

Not only is Tyler created as a sub-human, due to his rejection of the super-humans' socially constructed notions of normalcy, he also holds various attributes of a super-human. The other humans of the world begin to admire Tyler's rebellion. The humans are attracted to the establishment of his fight club. They are attracted to this raw, violent behavior because it makes them feel real. Their strength and identity is tested based on its raw and natural abilities. Thus, their worth is not measured by a lack of human attributes in society. This notion is attractive to the humans who are accustomed to their own worth being measured merely by how much they produce or own. This "fight club" begins as a violent release of anger, and becomes a "fight" against the super-humans. In this fashion, he becomes the creator or the super-human. Also, in his rejection of his role as the compliant human, he also becomes sub-human. The monster that Cornelius creates embodies "everything that he wishes he was," and he is free in all of the ways that Cornelius wishes he was. Unlike Cornelius, Tyler does not feel the need to control everything in his immediate proximity because Tyler's identity is not being controlled by the super-human upper class. Tyler, embodies the sub-human by rejecting the people, power and the lifestyle that the super-humans chains through his unwillingness to reject the super-humans' authority and help the women as well as in his notions of masculinity.

The movie contemplates the important, and yet devalued super-human. The movie demonstrates that the super-humans may become aware of their own oppressive status and attempt to reject it, but in the end, they are still subjected to the super-humans' rules and punishments. The movie exemplifies the human's attempt to conform to the dictated notions of identity that the super-humans have constructed. The main character lives the human's "middle of the road" life. He works in a good job and obeys his boss, and he fills his apartment with furniture from Ikeas in order to build a respectable identity for himself. His only problem is insomnia. It is later in the movie that the audience understands that his insomnia is a symptom of his multiple-personality disorder.

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the credit card companies, and allow everyone's worth to start at zero, disallowing people to have more based on mere privilege. Tyler explains, "If you erase the debt record, then we all go back to zero." However, before this destruction takes place, Cornelius begins to realize that Tyler is a mere self-created alter ego. Although Cornelius has been adapting to Tyler's ideologies and lifestyle, his conscious is still in place and he cannot allow Tyler to cause so much destruction. Finally, he decides to shoot himself, to rid himself of Tyler's influences. His wound is symbolic of the handicap that he will have to bear as he tries to "piece himself together" and reconstruct his identity. It is obvious that he will not be able to go back to human status, and instead he will remain in sub-human status. However, he has gained a clairvoyance that will allow him to survive and reconstruct his identity based on his natural being and not based on what he owns. In its simplest terms, the movie becomes a lesson to both the human and the super-human. To the super-human, it is a warning. To the human, it is a lesson that serves to invoke an illumination of their own lifestyle, subservience to those in power, and construction of identity.

The monster theory that I have laid out and applied to *Thelma and Louise* and *Fight Club*, is a generalized notion of the monsters that are created by our hierarchical consumer culture. The super-humans have deemed the material possessions that the humans own, as measures of their human worth. The only reason that the humans persist in this existence is because they dream of moving into super-human status. From the super-humans' creation of the norm, there grows a mass that I have termed the sub-human. These people cannot or will not fit into the constructed standards of normalcy, and thus are left as anomalies and consequently become alienated from society. The super-human fears this group most. The sub-humans are the ones with the ability to take the super-humans' power away. Thus, the super-human has permeated a deep surveillance system into every mass institution of the society. It is important to note that in this hierarchy each level contains its own system of hierarchy.

As Cohen suggests, looking at the monsters that have been created in any given society will allow for insight into the culture and values of that society. In the aforementioned system, it is obvious that the society values wealth and ownership. The texts that I have analyzed have demonstrated how a super-human can create an inferior, sub-human identity. The films have also shown how easy it is for the human to begin to open his or her eyes and reject the super-humans, thus placing himself or herself in sub-human status. In a hierarchical society, such as this, the people on top don't realize that their very existence as a person in a position of power is dependent upon those underneath them.

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**Works Cited**

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Introduction:

One of the hallmarks of post-modernism is the fragmentation of meaning. This splintering has opened everything up for interpretation, even the monsters that go bump in the night. Our culture defines its post-modern monsters as tightly as midnight slashers and as loosely as anything that is other than the self. Since the monster acts as a palimpsest on which we layer our fears, scholars often think of the monster as only a cultural construct that morphs along with the culture that created it. Although cultures assign monsters many of their attributes, I do not believe that they are solely cultural constructs. As a culture rests on top of a specific economic base, so do its monsters. In order to understand a monster and the culture that rejects it, one must first look at their shared economic origins.

During this essay, I will reevaluate Jeffery Cohen’s “Monster Culture” from a Marxist perspective in order to show that the economic base, not the superstructure, created Bigger, the monster in Richard Wright’s Native Son. In order to do this, I will first fuse Cohen’s theory and a Marxist understanding of base and superstructure. This will uncover the economic essence of monsters. As a logical repercussion, this finding will depreciate “Monster Culture” because Cohen’s theory hinges on the idea that the monster is solely a cultural construct on which a culture writes its fears. After I have established this Marxist-Monster theory, I will then use it to reveal how the economic base in Native Son created Bigger, instead of the superstructure. This essay will conclude with a deconstruction of Bigger so as to show how he threatens both the economic elite’s privilege and the class structure that created him.

Marxist-Monster Theory:

In Marxist theory, the superstructure encompasses all social and ideological structures such as religion, law, art, and monsters. It is often referred to as culture. The base comprises all the interactions between production and consumption. In simplified terms, it is the economy. The base supports the superstructure while it influences its shape. Ron Strickland from Illinois State University reaffirms this interpretation of Marxist theory when he states “that the mode of production determines the character of the social, political, and intellectual life” (Strickland). Cultural scholars often try to uncover hidden maxims or unsaid metanarratives to clarify cultural phenomena such as monsters, but those maxims are still part of the superstructure, and therefore they still originated from a specific base that can only uphold a limited number of superstructures. Since the nature of the base determines the possible superstructures, I find it necessary to explore the base in order to interpret the superstructure’s monsters.

Cohen’s “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” effectively investigates monsters and the superstructures that engender them, but since it only concerns itself with monsters as cultural constructs it is unable to address the monster’s economic essence. Although all seven theses relate to the base, this essay focuses on the first thesis because it has the most significant connection with the base and it triggers the last six theses. The first thesis states that “the monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read” (Cohen 4). I do not doubt that reading what the superstructure considers as other or as an outsider can produce significant findings, but when monsters are linked to their base, they move out of the realm of cultural theory and into the material world. The monster becomes more than just the other; it becomes a rival economic subject to be feared.

When readers view monsters from an economic perspective as Wright does in Native Son, they find that within capitalism the monsters are almost always the economic object. The superstructure flenses out its monsters by adding sharp fangs or the race that is “just plain dumb black crazy” (Wright 8). The monsters can signify a multitude of anxieties, but the essence of capitalism’s monster is its poverty, where it is “devoid of political, social, economic, and property rights” (Wright 397). Superstructures place their fears on monsters in layers, but they do not create them, the base does. Monsters have an economic skeleton before they have a cultural body so that within a capitalistic society the monster is forged out of the industrial working class.

The working class monsters threaten the affluent by competing for economic privilege and by attacking the class structure. Both threats are economic rather than cultural, but only the second is directly concerned with the base. In regards to the first threat, the monsters stay within the class structure and take economic power through private or public revolution so that “Every desire, every dream, no matter how intimate or personal is a plot or a conspiracy. Every hope is a plan for insurrection” (Wright). When the monsters take economic control, they also take control of the superstructure.
The protagonist’s existence threatens this class structure in two ways. First, Bigger’s presence as the “other,” as the economic abject, allows for the possibility of rebellion and class consciousness. Second, he disrupts the interactions between classes when he rejects his class identity and kills two women, one poor and the other wealthy. By asserting his identity as an individual outside of his class, Bigger poses a threat to the class structure, itself, and therefore, anyone with privilege within the class structure. From the wealthy white perspective, this makes him a monster worthy of slaying, but he is not actually executed until after two murders and a formal trial. If his existence threatens the class structure, then why do the affluent, who have the most to lose, allow him to exist?

In order to survive, capitalism creates a working class, a group of monsters that produces goods that both the affluent and the impoverished consume. This maintains the base and sustains the class structure. The dominant class maintains the working class by cordonning it off in a ghetto with limited or false opportunities and mind numbing releases that convince it of the reality of its situation. They provide fantasies that promise better lives to the working class. The dominant class makes the working class feel guilty with metanarratives about individual responsibility that contradict the economic base so as to keep the monsters working. The monsters are ashamed of who they are for two reasons: the poverty that they are in and the impossibility of escape. The channel for legitimate economic advancement is blocked, so they use the movies to escape.

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From within their poverty, the working class only dream to pull herself up by her bootstraps and succeed. Bigger knows that the movies do. He does not believe in “the old voice of his mother [that tells] of suffering, of hope, of love beyond this world” (Wright 283). He knows that “the white folks like for [the working class] to be religious, [because] then they can do what they want to with [them]” (Wright 356). He knows that the hope for heavenly recompense blocks the energies for earthly justice. Both the movies and the religions, the monsters look for a way to either escape or improve, but in actuality, their fantasies and false hope only lock them in the prison cell of their class. The hope and fantasies blind the poor to the capitalistic forces that flow below and to the reality of their class. They cannot see that wealth perpetuates wealth and poverty perpetuates poverty without regard to effort but to capital.

If these fantasies fail the disadvantaged monsters, like they did for Bigger and his lover Bessie, then they turn to what Max Horkheimer calls the “false promise of sex and alcohol that let them check out of their reality of shame even if they do not let them check into a fantasy for a new world.” Where the fantasies blind the poor with lies, the alcohol numbs them so that they cannot feel the injustice that the movies allow. Bessie reaffirms this interpretation when she states:

“There is no opportunity for a better life. It is her identity. Instead of using fantasies to escape her reality, Bessie uses alcohol to supplement the life that she misses because she is constantly working. She tries to improve her life by drinking. Bigger and Bessie are similar in their need to escape their poverty so that where Bessie “wanted liquor...she wanted her” (Wright 139).

The only difference between the two is how they create their escapes. Where alcohol numbs in order to mobilize, sex physically stimulates the working class. Both prevent it from pooling its physical and economic resources in order to instigate a revolution. Bigger does not use his energy and limited funds to better his economic situation or call the class structure into question because he uses them to “give [Bessie] liquor [so] she would give him herself” (Wright 139). Max finds that they are both trapped because “they are...physically dependent upon each other” (Wright 401). One needs alcohol while the other needs sex, so they can blot out their lives. Max understands that “if it were not for the backwaters of religion, gambling, and sex draining off [the labors]’ energies into channels harmful to them and profitable to us, more of the them would be [on trial for murder]” (Wright 394). What they want to be an escape becomes a way to reaffirm their abject economic situation.

The channels for legitimate economic advancement such as education and work are not available to the working class monsters, but they are presented as if they were in order to sustain the base. The characters in Native Son work without any opportunity for advancement.

Bessie worked long hours, hard and hot hours seven days a week, with only Sunday afternoons off; and when she did get off she wanted fun and fast fun, something to make her feel that she was making up for the starved life she led (Wright 139).

She has no illusions as to what her life is. She knows that she will never move outside of her class and most likely she will work herself to death. When she says, “I just work...I m black and I work and don’t bother nobody” she knows that all she can hope for is that she does not slip any lower on the economic scale than she already has (Wright 180). She knows that the American dream to pull herself up by her bootstraps and succeed does not pertain to her. She knows that it is a lie. The hope that education can free the monsters from their poverty becomes another lie that is dressed up to look like an opportunity when actually it only is a lie.

The hope that education can free the monsters from their poverty becomes another lie that is dressed up to look like an opportunity when actually it only solidifies the class structure by increasing production.

The idea that work will improve her life does not enter Bessie’s thoughts, but the idea that work is the essence of her being is branded on her mind. There is no opportunity for a better life. It is her identity. Instead of using fantasies to escape her reality, Bessie uses alcohol to supplement the life that she misses because she is constantly working. She tries to improve her life by drinking. Bigger and Bessie are similar in their need to escape their poverty so that where Bessie “wanted liquor...she wanted her” (Wright 139).

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The education that is open to the working class is all vocational training. Bigger's sister, Vera is taking "sawing classes at the Y", but this education only teaches the monsters how to produce more without necessarily making any more money (Wright 298).

Even when education gives the working class student skills that are valuable in the marketplace, the custom still dictates whether or not the affluent will initiate the educated monster into their class. Mrs. Dalton claims, "the last man who worked [at her house] went to night school and got an education"(Wright 61). But the education does not transfer into a better life because after Mr. Dalton answers no to Max's question: have you ever employed any of the Negroes you helped to educate," the reader knows that an education is as worthless to the monster as hard work. Wealth not only supplies opportunities, but it also sustains them until the individual can take advantage of them. Without wealth to support opportunities such as education, the opportunities become elaborate lies that further trap the monsters in their class.

The monsters that escape their poverty and assimilate into the dominant class do so at the expense of their identity. The Dalton's have never hired a disadvantaged man to a job higher than a chauffeur, even after they have educated him, but they let members of the working class come to their home as if money and education could act like a green card. Although it may seem as if these men's lives have improved because they possess opportunities that are similar to those of the dominant class, they only exchange one role for another that is just as restricting. The working class's ex-patriots have wealth and opportunities, but they only have them at the pleasure of the dominant class. The liberal wealth let the monsters visit their class "to slave another that is just as restricting. The working class's economic conditions along with false opportunities for advancement and release create the working class monster that threatens to either take the affluent's privilege or destroy all privilege with a revolution that rejects the base. Although it may be difficult to believe that a working class as oppressed as it is in Native Son could rise up and take the wealth for itself, the mere fact that there is a monstrous other makes it possible for the affluent to be dispossessed. Since it is possible, it can be feared and attacked. Bigger cannot stage a widespread rebellion, but he finds that "the thing to do [is] to act just like others [act], live like they [live], and while they [are] not looking, do what you [want]"(Wright 106). Bigger finds this power when he realizes that all people are blind, "siled like his mother, his brother, his sister, Peggy, Britten, Jan, Mr. Dalton, and the sightless Mrs. Dalton", because all they see is class (Wright 173). As long as Bigger looks like he is part of the working class he can do anything he wants. This is how he gets away with killing a rich white girl for as long as he does, and how he begins his revolt against the rich white world.

When Bigger asserts his identity outside of class and moral codes, the dominant class executes him in order to drive out any doubts that might lead to a rebellion against the class structure that the moral codes stand upon. Bigger releases himself from his class identity with his crime that "[weighed] him safely in time; it added to him a certain confidence.. .He was outside of his family, over and beyond them"(Wright 105). Max supports Bigger's feelings when he finds that "[his killing] was an act of creation!" an act of subject formation (Wright 400). But this subject formation threatens the wealthy class because to have an identity without class is to be a threat to all classes. The upper class destroys Bigger in hopes that his death will prevent other defectors, other Biggers that move into their own class (Wright 173). As long as Bigger looks like he is part of the working class he can do anything he wants.

The threats that make a monster like Bigger scary for capitalist societies, have less to do with layers of moral meaning and cultural taboo, than they have to do with the economic base. Present day capitalist America dresses up its monsters in the same way that past superstructures have. They may not have fangs and fur, but we still make signs for our monsters. Our present day Boogie Man has not changed much from the Boogie Man that Wright presents because the United States' economic base has not changed significantly in the last sixty years. Bigger, the black man with a knife, still lurks at the end of out dark alleyways waiting to rape and murder. But it is my belief that if his face were white, if he did not have a knife, if he were without every symbol with which we mark the monstrous, he can still terrify Americans just so long as he is still part of the working class. Just so long as he is still poor. The monster does not threaten our spiritual or moral well-being. Its threats are more basic. They go deeper. We are afraid of the monster because it threatens our ability to earn and spend. We are afraid because the monster is a sign of our blind reliance on the class structure that the base generates and our oppression upholds.
The words 'woman', 'mujer', 'Weib' and 'femme' have nearly the same meaning, yet their configuration and pronunciation differ greatly, showing that the relationship between concepts, images and words is arbitrary. Words come to have meaning not because of some external exigency but through social consensus. The linguistic system consists of signs, linguistic units which are made up of two interrelated yet asymmetrical parts, a signifier and a signified. Signifiers are the material support of language; they could be described as a series of sounds and/or a network of written letters. For communication to take place, each sound or group of letters is a signifier which needs to be differentiated from all other signifiers in its category. The link between signifier and signified is an arbitrary social convention. (Furman 67)

Although the above passage taken from Nelly Furman’s “The Politics of Language: Beyond the Gender Principle?” is both dense and lengthy, it is an appropriate preface to an essay such as this. Discussing the use of language as a tool for human expression creates difficulties and distress. How, one must ask, can I argue that language is an inadequate tool for expression if it is the very tool that I have chosen to use?

Within To the Lighthouse and Orlando, Virginia Woolf repeatedly ponders that question. Although she critiques the problems of language, she attempts to carve out a new mode of expression within language by shifting the focus off of particular words and onto the mood invoked from a series of present and absent signifiers. Woolf’s awareness that language is an inadequate tool for human expression is often voiced through her characters. In To the Lighthouse, Lily Briscoe, a character whose experiences with painting suggest a parallel with Woolf’s own writing, thinks, “One could not say what one meant” (24). Simply stated, Lily sums up the problem with language: one can never express exactly what one feels.

Describing her process of characterization, Woolf once wrote: “I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect [and] each comes to daylight at the present moment” (Showalter xviii-xxi). Although Woolf states that in reference to her characters, it is also a description of her use of language: she digs out beautiful caves behind her words. Words, as Furman argued, are units within a linguistic system, strings of phonemes that together create a particular signifier that, due to social constructs, signals to the reader a signified. Through her careful negotiations with language, Woolf uses words while remaining aware of their socially contrived significance. It is through this awareness that she digs out beautiful caves behind the words. The words themselves are individual signifiers that, together, create a series of signified references that form an impression. A series of sentences, in turn, create a series of impressions. These impressions then culminate, in Woolf’s work, to produce a particular image. It is through such imagery that she attempts to escape the trappings of language. Dismissing the mythical “perfect word,” which she addresses in Jacob’s Room (“Then his mouth – but surely, of all futile occupations this of cataloguing features is the worst. One word is sufficient. But if one cannot find it?” [59]), she instead creates caves behind her words to house her images; images that connect and come to daylight as the novel.

“Meaning is never truly present, but is only constructed through the potentially endless process of referring to other, absent signifiers” (Moi 106); Woolf’s writing builds upon this concept by creating imagery through the signified objects, as well as through absent words which correspond with the objects. Woolf uses standard language as a screen under which she weaves together images created by the particular signifiers that she chooses. The imagery she creates is not dependent on individual word choice; instead, it is the relation of the words to each other that invokes a mood which, in turn, is an adequate form of expression.

In To the Lighthouse, Woolf creates such an image for both Lily Briscoe and the reader. Highly critical of Mr. Ramsay, Lily must constantly remind herself that he is a great man – a philosopher – in order to consciously respect him (“‘Oh but,’ said Lily, ‘think of his work!’” [28]). It is “his work” that prompts Lily, and consequently the reader, to picture a kitchen table “‘when you’re not there’” (28). “So she always saw, when she thought of Mr. Ramsay’s work, a scrubbed kitchen table . . . a phantom kitchen table, one of those scrubbed board tables, grained and knotted, whose virtue seems to have been laid bare by years of muscular integrity, which struck there, if four legs in the air” (28). The example of the kitchen table is two-
fold: first, the word “work” in connection with the words “Mr.” and “Ramsay” are signifiers to Lily which produce the kitchen table as the signified; second, the kitchen table is an image that Woolf creates in the cave behind her words. For Lily, Mr. Ramsay’s work always connotes the kitchen table, even years later when she and the Ramsay’s first return to the summer house after Mrs. Ramsay’s death.

The kitchen table was something visionary, autotrophic, not ornamental. There was no colour to it; it was all edges and angles; it was uncompromisingly plain. But Mr. Ramsay kept always his eyes fixed upon it, never allowed himself to be distracted or dawdled, until his face became worn too and ascetic and partook of this unornamented beauty which so deeply impressed her... He must have had his doubts about that table, she supposed; whether the table was a real table; whether it was worth the time he gave to it; whether he was able after all to find it. (169-70)

A lonely kitchen table will forever symbolize what the important Mr. Ramsay thought about when he worked.

Woolf’s image of the kitchen table is created, half hidden, in the cave behind her words. Although Lily describes her vision of the table to the reader, Woolf leaves it unremarkable. The kitchen table, then, may sit in one reader’s mind as the round, blond, scratched table of her youth, yet to another it may become something entirely different. The image then is created, not with description detailed to the last wooden peg, but with the flow of words producing an image that the reader must bring to the novel.

And she began reading here and there at random, and as she did so she felt that she was climbing backwards, upwards, shoving her way up under petals that curved over her— and action packed, implying rapid movement by the quick succession of verbs, further modified by adverbs. To this reader, Mrs. Ramsay is no longer “sitting down” in a particular chair under a particular lamp (127); instead, she becomes transported into a jungle where she climbs up large green stalks, swings on vines, and gets softly cocooned within fragrant flowers. Like Mrs. Ramsay, the reader may “not know at first what the words [mean] at all” (129), yet as she read, and so reading she was ascending, she felt, on to the top, on to the summit. How satisfying! How restful! All the odds and ends of the day stuck to this magnet; her mind felt swept, felt clean. And then there it was, suddenly entire shaped in her hands, beautiful and reasonable, clear and complete, the essence sucked out of life and held rounded here—the sonnet. (131)

Although Woolf does not tell the reader that the scene changes as Mrs. Ramsay explores the sonnet, it is expressed nonetheless with the change in mood and tempo. Woolf counts on the dialogue between reader and writer, causing the reader to interact and produce the absent signifiers that are individually triggered by the particular signifiers present.

Woolf continues experimenting with creating a new form of human expression via language in Orlando, a fantasy disguised as a fictional biography. One of the images that Woolf creates in Orlando and expands upon is the relationship between language, specifically names, and mood. Orlando recognizes the multiple meanings of language and uses it to express the variations in her mood by conveying, through a single word, an abundance of emotions. Woolf explores the relationship of signifiers to signifieds in her imagery concerning Orlando and Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine. The biographer explains to the reader, in Woolf’s voice, the significance of Orlando’s nicknames for Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine. Each nickname, a single word, denotes a particular mood: “Mar” (meaning baths and evening fires) or Shelmerdine (meaning crocuses in autumn woods) or Bonthrop (meaning the death we die daily) (213). In an expanded explanation of Orlando’s mood, the biographer notes when she called him by his second name, “Bonthrop,” it should signify to the reader that she was in a solitary mood, felt them both as specks on a desert, was desirous only of meeting death by herself, for people die daily, at dinner-tables, or like this, out of doors in the autumn woods... all of which the reader should hear in her voice when she said “Bonthrop.” (179)

Orlando uses the nicknames as signifiers, expressing the varying imagery through the use of one word, delineated for the reader by the biographer. By doing so, the signifier “Mar;” for example, then expresses the mood surrounding hot baths and evening fires. The mood is expressed through descriptive words, which in no manner describe anything logically related to the name. Instead, it becomes socially learned, from Woolf to the reader, that Mar translates into warmth, comfort, relaxation, and spiciness. By clearly giving the reader a reference for the signifier-signified relationship, she helps to form a personal image, a beautiful cave, within the reader’s mind of the mood expressed through the utterance of “Mar.”

It becomes evident after reading Virginia Woolf’s later novels that she believes language is an inadequate tool for human expression. Although this may seem hypocritical, considering that as a novelist her main mode of expression is through written language, it is not. Woolf critiques the limitations of language, yet attempts to expand its boundaries through her own writing, illustrated through her consistent creation of characters wrestling with the difficulties of expressing themselves via language. While recognizing the problem, she actively attempts to carve out new forms of expression using language. Woolf uses signifiers designed to create individualistic images as the signified. Through her imagery, Woolf then expresses mood and emotion without having to say what she meant. Doing so, she moves past the superficiality of the bare sentence to conjure images in the beautiful caves behind her words.
The ideologies of a nation are not in historical textbooks but in the everyday literature of the time. During the Renaissance period, the "everyday literature" was plays held in theaters like The Globe. Shakespeare, although seen as a literary genius, still gave into the misconceptions and beliefs of his audience by reinforcing their prejudices through his works. An ideology that is prevalent in Shakespeare's plays (such as Romeo and Juliet, Richard II, and Hamlet), therefore in the minds of the English, is "Age is unnecessary [the elderly have no worth]" (King Lear. II, iv, 150). Shakespeare's plays, especially King Lear, reveal the English fear of aging, death, and ugliness through the dismal treatment of the elderly.

Elderly males and females of the Renaissance had differing criteria to be categorized as old. Herbert S. Donow, in his article To Everything There is a Season "Some Shakespearean Models of Normal and Anomalous Aging," addressed how old men experienced a gradual process towards old age. They were, for instance, Lear, "portrayed as figures of diminished power," (Donow 734). Old women, on the other hand, were judged in terms of their gender. When they could no longer procreate and/or lost their beauty, they were deemed old. From this stance, women would always "age" before men, for power is easier to sustain than beauty and one has no power over one's body. Shakespeare in his play, King Lear, displayed the "diminishing[ ]" power of the elderly man very well. Lear went from having absolute power to begging his children for a place to sleep. Combe and Schmader summed up Lear's continued loss of power when they stated, "Lear blunders his way from public sway to a solitary, private death" (Combe 39).

In almost all of Shakespeare's plays, there is violence and usually it is the young, strong man who is the victor. Claudio, from Much Ado About Nothing, is a prime example of the Elizabethan ideal man: he "hab borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion" (II, i, 12-14). Throughout the play, references are made to Claudio's youthfulness and strength; it makes one question how those who have "suffered" aging are viewed. Are they approached with respect and deference or with scorn and disgust? The answer to this question is found in King Richard II. Act Two, scene one, when Richard says of the dying John of Gaunt, "And let them die that age and sullens have; / For both hast thou, and both become the grave" (139-40). The elderly had no true place in English society, except for its outskirts and graveyards.

The phrase "majority rules" takes on a new face when looking at the pitiful way the elderly view themselves. Because the majority of Englishmen, and Shakespeare's plays, portray the aging as weak, they begin to internalize and believe it of themselves. Lear, who by anyone's standards is strong, gives into "society's deleterious stereotype of old age as a second childhood" when he reveals that he "thought to set [his] rest on her kind nursery" (Deats 25). Society burdened the aging with its beliefs that they were useless invalids. They could either fight against these erroneous accusations or accept them as penance for their failing youth. Even a man of Lear's stature and power placed himself below another because of his age. "Here I stand your slave, / A poor, inflamed, weak, and despised old man!" (King Lear. III, ii, 19-20). If Lear would go so far as to refer to himself as a "slave," where does that leave those who have no status and therefore more degradation to look forward to? It leaves them in the slums with only the grave to be their haven. Shakespeare ALIVE! says the aged poor were "forced to walk the country from place to place"; it continues on to say "as they are driven from one parish to another, [they] just die, some in ditches, some in holes, some in caves and dens, some in fields...like dogs" (7). The contradictions between the treatment of the elderly in Shakespeare's time and the ideologies about them are endless. Although they believed the elderly to be physically weak with bodies "that shak[e] for age and feebleness" there was no place for them to relax in their last days. The English thought of them as children, or as Jacques states, in "the second childhoodness..." yet no one protected and provided for them as they would children (As You Like It. II, vii, 165). The aged were left to their own devices to die...like dogs" (Papp 7).

Not only was the physical strength of the elderly questioned, their mental ability was also doubted. For everyone knew that "old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with the most weak hands" (Hamlet, II, ii, 196-99). King Lear adds to the gerontophobia of the English because Lear is mentally unstable.
Shakespeare augments the audience’s existing prejudices since not only is Lear mentally feeble, but his actions cause the tragic ending. In a way this view of the elderly as mentally feeble is to their benefit. It gives them some leniency in their actions. Lear realizes he has wronged Cordelia and in order of directly apologizing he blames it on his age: “I am a very foolish fond old man, I / fear I am not in my perfect mind... You must bear with me. (Pray you now forget and forgive. I am old and foolish)” (King Lear, IV, vii, 60, 63, 84-85). On the negative side, the views and thoughts of elderly persons, no matter how sensible, are not heeded and put off as foolish. Commonly, the only time Elizabets believed an elder was when he was uttering his last words, which were always taken as being the truth. Despite his belief, Richard, ever refuses to listen to the dying John of Gaunt! York, trying to assuage Richard’s ire, tells him, “I do beseech your majesty impute his words/ To wayward sickliness and age in him” (King Richard II, II, i, 141-42). If John of Gaunt had been listened to, the tragic events of the play would not have unfolded.

Shakespeare, because of the superstitious tendencies of the time, makes a correlation between age and devility. Many elderly people were killed because they were deemed witches; this title was not restricted to women. The common criteria to be a witch was to be “ugly, poverty-stricken, diseased, and diseased, or as a contemporary put it, “commonly old, lame, bleary-eyed, pale, foul, and full of wrinkles” (Shakespeare ALIVE! 43). In Shakespeare ALIVE! there is a story about a young man who calls an elderly woman a witch because she was “foul-looking” (42). Her response to his rudeness was to curse him; when he became ill the old woman was put to death. Stories similar to the aforementioned abound. They show how youths could dislike and ridicule the elderly and because of their age and/or appearance the aged person would suffer. There was no tolerance for those lacking in youth and beauty. Shakespeare contributed to this intolerance when in Macbeth, Banquo says, “What are these, / Unwieldy, slow, heavy and full of wrinkles” (Romeo and Juliet. II, v, 16-17). Many people of that time compared being old with being dead. "As you Like it, II, vii, 165). The elderly are the forgotten entity, the forgotten population, and as such their needs are not thought of. The English disrespect of the elderly knew no bounds. Usually the status of a person would give him some insurance of benevolence, no matter how fake, by his counterparts. However, this rule did not apply to the elderly, who were held in such distaste. Many aristocrats, and those as high up as the King, found themselves looked down upon. Lear’s rule was never a good one; however, his misfortunes are attributable as much to his age as his character, as his daughter Regan realizes “’Tis the infirmity of his age; yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself.” (King Lear, I, i, 292-93). Lear’s situation profoundly demonstrates how status does not influence kind treatment if one is old. Lear, a king with the power of armies behind him, because of his maltreatment announces to the Gods, “You see me here, you gods, a poor old man. / As full of grief as age, wretched in both” (King Lear, II, iv, 267-68). Society’s prejudices had the power to diminish a king, to make him belittle himself.

Even John of Gaunt in Richard II despite his power and status, suffers because of his age. He tells Richard that because his child (Bolingbroke, exiled by Richard) has gone “thou made me gaunt. / Gaunt I am for the grave, gaunt as a grave” (King Richard II, II, i, 81-82). In Act Two, scene one alone, words pertaining to death and dying are mentioned thirteen times. A person’s age had such influence over whether they would be accepted by society that no elderly person was safe. Richard’s disrespect for the elderly was so great that, although he knew Gaunt was dying, he says to his attendants, “Now put it, God, in the physicians mind/To help [Gaunt] to his grave immediately!” (King Richard II, I, iv, 59-60). Using Shakespeare, and the other playwrights of the Renaissance, as refersents to normal living conditions, we find that this kind of uncaring selfishness was taking place everywhere in English society.

The elderly during the Renaissance were feared not because of physical or mental strength but because of the English fear of death. When one is afraid of something the first response is to remove oneself from its presence. The same thought process applied to the aging. They represented all that the English thought of as repugnant and heinous. As people get older their beauty diminishes, their power over their surroundings begins to flag and, because of the prejudices placed on the aging, their very humanity is stripped away. No one looked forward to being treated this way themselves, yet none attempted to change their environment. The maltreatment of the elderly in Shakespeare’s works could be a warning to the audience that if they do not change the way society perceives and receives the elderly, they will soon find themselves in the same predicament.

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An analysis of Coetzee’s novel reveals that the meta-fictional narrative contained in Foe portrays narrative writing as a colonizing act, while the internal narrative it contains depicts colonization as the act of writing or creating an identity for the colonized other (Coetzee, Doubling the Point 247). The progression of the novel is poignantly described by George Packer as quoted in Penner, “Foe reads as if Coetzee started out to reinvent Defoe’s famous tale through a woman’s eyes, became intrigued with the linguistic and philosophical implications, and ended up writing a commentary on the elusiveness of his own project” (129). Coetzee admits in Doubling the Point, “Where I do my liberating, my playing with possibilities, is in my fiction [not in criticism]. To put it in another way: I am concerned to write the kind of novel—to work in the kind of novel form—in which one is not unduly handicapped (compared with the philosopher) when one plays (or works) with ideas” (246).

One of the ideas that Coetzee “plays with” is that there is no absolute truth in a narrative or in life—only constructed accounts of individual perceptions exist. One of the first places that the reader encounters the notion that Susan is relating only her perceptions occurs when she says, “They say Britain is an island too, but that is a mere geographer’s notion. The earth under our feet is firm in Britain, as it never was on Crusoe’s island” (Coetzee, Foe 26). Later, she demonstrates an understanding that she is perceived by others, and that these perceptions are more important in society than who she really is: “I laughed when he said this—what kind of woman was I, in truth?” (Coetzee, Foe 42). Susan and Foe relate their unique perceptions of their own first meeting during their banter on pages 138-139, further reinforcing that life is a series of varying views.

This also applies to the narrative. That is, stories are constructions of truth bent to the perceptions and desires of the storyteller. Susan asserts that, “to tell the truth in all its substance…” one must have imagination and mastery of language (Coetzee, Foe 51). Later in the book, she gains a deeper understanding of the role of the storyteller, and this is demonstrated when she tells Foe, “the story I desire to be known by is the story of the island. You call it an episode, but I call it a story in its own right.” (Coetzee, Foe 121).

Susan realizes that one of the few freedoms she has is the autonomy to tell her own story and that of her castaway companions. She colonizes them as she constructs a story that meets her desires: “All of which makes up a story I do not choose to tell. I choose not to tell it because to no one, not even to you [Foe], do I owe proof that I am a substantial being with a substantial history in the world. I choose rather to tell the island, of myself and Crusoe and Friday and what we three did there: for I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire.” (Coetzee, Foe 131). She only maintains this tenable power, however, when she is relating her story to Foe. Once he writes it for the rest of the world, her autonomy is lost.

Coetzee shows that truth does not matter, only the appearance/substance of truth is important in life and in art. One cannot have this substance without a story, and that story can be told only from the position of colonizer. It will contain a construction of the identity of the colonized through the perception of the colonizer. The substance of truth that is necessary for a person to define his own identity must be constructed through a story told from the colonial perspective of that person to a colonized individual. Without a subjective audience, one has nothing to confirm the truth of his/her being. The only substance of truth that can be constructed or told in a narrative is that of the colonizer or subjugator.

All storytellers are colonizers and all subjects of stories are colonized. Coetzee advises the reader that words are tools used in subjecting the other to one’s will or colonizing him/her (Coetzee, Foe 60). Susan attempts to persuade Foe of this point:

The story of Friday’s tongue is a story unable to be told, or unable to be told by me. That is to say, many stories can be told of Friday’s tongue, but the true story is buried within Friday, who is mute. The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday” (Coetzee, Foe 118) Foe and Barton, by the end of part III, have not succeeded in giving Friday a voice, and given the events in part IV, it seems that they never do.

Cruso also lacks a voice in the story. He becomes a colonized other. Susan asks: “Who but Crusoe, who is no more, could truly tell you Cruso’s story?” (Coetzee, Foe 51) “Truly,” the answer is no one. Ver-
colonized other, which, once affected by colonization, 
wholeness and beauty are forever undone? Perhaps"
all the mutilated. Why is that so, do you think? Be-
thoughts: "An aversion came over me that we feel for 
colonization can never be reversed or erased. Coetzee
desire, generate and focus our energies, construct out 
of Foucaultian philosophy, "constitutive" power of co-
make, I think, by telling" (183). If this is true, then
To tell the story of another is to not only colonize, but 
live the stories we tell 
...what matters is what we
can never return to its former state.
This quote addresses the second point, that all human relationships, including story are based on sto-
ies, are colonial, and that the relationship between the 
colonizer and the colonized is dependent upon a condi-
tion: that the desires of the colonizer are the only de-
sires known. For the colonizer, to learn the desires of 
the colonized is to acknowledge him/her as human—
as having a soul—and to do so constructs the 
colonizer’s perceptions of his/her role in the world. It
does so by forcing the colonizer to realize that his/her
role is dependent upon the role of the colonized, a role
assigned to him/her by the colonizer and which does
not meet his/her desires. Therefore, the story of the 
colonized must never (can never?) be told to the colo-
nizer if roles are to be maintained. As Durant points
out, the history of colonization is “the history of the
forgetting of the humanity of certain peoples,” (435).
The character of Foe speaks to this when talking to
Susan about Friday, “[W]e deplore the barbarism of
whomever maimed him, yet have wo, his later masters,
not reason to be secretly grateful? For as long as he
is dumb we can tell ourselves his desires are dark to us,
and continue to use him as we wish” (Coetzee, Foe 148).

To destroy the colonizing relationship, the desires 
of the colonized must be made known to the colonizer
but, as is represented by Friday’s missing tongue and
subsequent silence, the story/desires of the colonized
cannot be told to the colonizer because to do so the
colonized must use the language of the colonizer.
Therefore, “Friday’s story is unavailable, unless it is to
be appropriated and misrepresented” (Head 121) to be
told by the colonizer. For the colonizer, to tell the story
of the colonized inevitably is to create a comfortable
truth regarding him/her—not to tell his/her true story.

In Susan’s perception, Foe attempts to colonize
her reality to make it a part of the greater story he will
tell the world of her by concocting the young Susan
Barton and planting her in Susan’s life “to make his
fiction come to life and persuade her of its validity”
(Penner 120). Here, he attempts to not only write her
identity, but her experience in the world in order to suit
her desire.
The History of the colonized (as represented by 
the story of the parentage of the young Susan Barton)
is known only through stories told by the colonizer (the
father). The colonized can only be known to the world
in terms of the identity constructed for him/her by the
colonizer. The colonized individual does not have a
voice, only a story told by the colonizer (Coetzee,
Foe 91). Individuals in modern society are
constantly being written by the colonizing other.

Through Susan’s rejection of the mysterious girl
claiming to be her daughter, Coetzee articulates the idea
that the only believable history is that which imitates
art. She says, “The world of stories of mothers searching
for sons and daughters they gave away once, long ago. But there are no stories of daughters search-
ing for mothers. There are no stories of such quests because they do not occur. They are not part of life”
(Coetzee, Foe 77). Susan uses this as justification for her
deception, the young Susan Barton is her daughter:
“Thus, to be pliable, life must imitate art,”
(Penner 121). If this is regarded as reasonable—life
imitates stories—, and all true events have stories told
about them, then is it not true that nothing has existed
unless a story has been told about it? Is story-telling a condi-
tion of existence? If lack of evidence, of a story, is
evidence of lack of existence, then it may be said
that Friday does not truly exist or have a past outside
himself nor partially outside the minds of Susan and
Foe. His story is not told, therefore, he does not exist
outside the partial story/identity of him that Susan and
Foe maintain through their interactions with him. But
If Friday dies, will he cease to have existed? Perhaps
he will then be only an idea of a partial existence in
the mind of the colonizing others.
The final idea, that to tell a story about a person is
to end his/her life or make them static, is dealt with
most intensely by Coetzee in the fourth section of the
novel when he supplants Susan as the narrator. To tell
a story is to colonize, which in itself is an act of objec-
tification and classification that takes what is insu-
stantial in life and freezes it in art and in the mind of
the colonizer (Penner 118). Such is the nature of the
narrative. To tell one’s story is to necessitate his/her
death (Penner 127). This is true whether the subject is
living or not. Cruso dies one-third of the way into the
book, and as such, his story is left to be told by Susan
(Coetzee, Foe 45). Paulo Pasolini, in an essay describ-
ing why that of Oedipus is a story, articulates the na-
ture of this storyteller-subject relationship:

The moment the subject dies, there occurs a
lightening synthesis of the span of his life.
Thousands of actions, expressions, sounds,
voices, words are lost forever, and no more than a
ten or hundreds survive. The enormous
number of words of his life are lost in an in-
finite silence or in a silence that lingers on,
miraculously; they are inscribed in
memory like epigrams. They hang forever in
the light of a morning, or in the sweet shadows
of an evening: his wife, his friends, when they
remember them, shed a tear. The task of
the storyteller is to select the relevant words, the
ones which by chance survived the disaster.
Death is the necessary condition to make a story
of his life.Death has sanctified a version of
what he once was. (Pasolini 6-7)
The storyteller, in selecting details of a subject to
include in a story of him/her, creates this “condition”
of death in the subject. Cruso is dead in reality, but
the other subjects of the colonizing narratives are still
alive in reality and forever undone. Death has sanctified a
version of what he once was. (Pasolini 6-7)

But it is not just the characters whose existences are
arrested. It is everything in the world of the narra-
tive as well. As Penner points out, “Until a reality, even
a reality embodied with colorful lies, is fixed in the
durable pigments of words, it is protein, shifting, van-
ishing [...] Barton’s principal concern [the principal
concern of the novel?] is the relationship of fiction to
life. Revising her earlier insistence...on the primacy
of truth in art, she now accepts the truthism that “what
we can accept are events” (Penner, 118). To write a story
is to create a history, to send things into the past and make them static. Here, they can be objectified, classified, made both mythic
and comprehensible. In addition, they must be shaped
and distorted until they are acceptable.

The only character whose story escapes this end-
ing is also the most symbolic character in the novel,
Friday. He is subject to Susan’s writing of him while
they are still alive, a fact of which Susan is well aware:
Friday has no command of words and there-
fore no defence [sic] against being re-shaped
day by day in conformity with the desires of
others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a
prisoner; I say he is a cannibal and he be-
comes a cannibal. What is the truth of Fri-
day? You will respond...he is a substantial
body, he is himself, Friday is Friday. But
that is not so. No matter what he is to himself...
...what he is to the world is what I make of
him. (Coetzee, Foe 121)

But as for being laid down in Susan’s narrative and
“living” forever, after a manner” his story alone
eludes this end (Coetzee, Foe 58). Perhaps the
most abstract part of the novel, section four serves to
gesture that because Friday’s muteness protects him from
becoming haltingly contained in a narrative, he “lives
forever, after a [different] manner.” At the end of
the novel, three hundred years after the other characters
have passed, Friday is still alive (Coetzee, Foe 157). He escaped the fate of those who are destined to become fixed in the past, read about, and forgotten. Instead, he evades language as an agent of oppression (Penner 127) and is found by the narrator in his home, a place "where bodies are their own signs." (Coetzee, Foe 157) singing with "the voice of man," (Coetzee, Foe 22) which flows "to the ends of the earth" (Coetzee, Foe 157). This can be seen as symbolic of the concept that Friday and the ideas he embodies live on in the consciousness of all people in the world, even without a Susan Barton or a Mr. Foe to tell his story. In fact, Friday reaches people who will never learn of such characters, never read a story.

To conclude, one must look back to a conversation early in the book. In the scene, Susan tries to convince Cruso of the value of keeping a journal:

"Suppose, that one day we are saved. Would you not regret it that you could not bring back with you some record of your years of shipwreck, so that what you have passed through shall not die from memory? And if we are never saved…would you not wish for a memorial to be left behind, so that the next voyagers to make landfall here…may read and learn about us, and perhaps shed a tear?... with every day that passes, our memories grow less certain…what memories do you even now preserve…? (Coetzee, Foe 17)

At the end of this speech, Susan feels that Cruso is unmoved, and indeed, he does not agree with her logic. He replies, "Nothing is forgotten…nothing I have forgotten is worth the remembering." (Coetzee, Foe 17).

This suggests that writing, as asserted earlier, is not only a colonial act of construction which takes the elusive and changing and forces it into an enclosure which stifles its vital reality, but also, contradictory to Susan’s beliefs, one of allowing to forget.

Writing something down makes it constantly accessible whenever one desires to read it. As such, one does not have to labor to remember it or store it in the mind for recall. Rather, one can forget or ignore it at any or every moment one chooses, for it is in no danger of being lost—it is written down. And one can choose when to revisit it, if ever. Michiko Kakutani is quoted in Penner as saying, "the operative forces [of Foe] are not so much history or politics as art and imagination—how can one individual’s story be apprehended and translated through language by another?” (113). One may conclude from a close reading of Foe that the "apprehension and translation" into narrative art of realities and lives, including (or especially), those colonized lives of pain, such as Friday’s, can be done only at the inevitable risk of distorting them or allowing them to be altogether forsaken. As a child of post-colonial civilization, if one resolves to attempt a process of departure from colonial activity, one must, as Coetzee seems to have realized in the course of his novel, relinquish the right to tell the story of the colonized other.

Notes:

1 The colonized other is one whose subjectivity is "continually located in the gaze of the imperial Other [or colonizer]," (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 170).