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Major 20th Century Writers

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Acquainted

Over the course of this semester, I've read many books which have expanded my view of the world, and how I relate to it. I've looked over my midterm paper and realized that with the additional books under my belt, my concept of, and reaction to, the earlier pieces have changed. As a woman, especially one of some measure of vim and vigor ("tom boy" was the phrase I heard most while growing up), I find that I seek out authors and artists who are women, and pieces which tell the tale of women in the world. Those are the pieces I most enjoyed reading this semester. It's important to me that women are well represented -and represented well- in literature and other forms of art.

My journey through global literature hasn't been nearly as diverse as my upbringing. My favorite writers tend to be women, typically poets. Particular favorites include Alice Walker, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Jane Austen, Aphra Behn, and the fragments we have from Sappho. I also have a soft spot for The Odyssey and its many translations.

I dislike heavy books with no resolution, or an upsetting resolution. I prefer to read for joy. I don't need a roller coaster ride of a plot, or to journey through someone else's trauma unless it's about coming to terms with it and moving on, as is the case in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, and Marjane Satrapi's *The Complete Persepolis*. There are enough heavy things in the world, and enough adrenaline-inducing events, that I avoid these in my personal reading. I've had to read enough of them for classes that I refuse to read them on my own time.

There has always been someone who is viewed as The Other by society: Someone darker, someone poorer, someone of less than ideal status. The ones who have the power create the standard, and then use that standard to further ensure their place in the top echelon. This is done through racism, sexism, classism, colonialism, ableism, and more. Taken together, these pieces weave a tapestry of gender, race, religion, class, and wealth to form a picture of society, and how it has changed, in increments, over the course of the 20th century. What I've come back around to since the midterm is that, women are the hardest hit by fundamentalism, terrorism, and generally bear the brunt of all of the "-isms." Women are also expected to bear the burden of the care of the world, in particular the medical caregiving, and the peacekeeping. Our journey through 20th century literature began with two men, in one of the most diverse places in the world:

In New York City, Ta-Nehesi Coates found that Others of every stripe banded together, or perhaps ignored, what made them "other" and instead, just lived.

"New York was another spectrum unto itself, and the great diversity I'd seen at Howard, solely among black people, now spread across a metropolis. Something different awaited around every corner. Here there were African drummers assembling in Union Square. Here there were dead office towers, brought to life at night by restaurants buried within that served small kegs of beer and Korean fried chicken. Here there were black girls with white boys, and black boys with Chinese-American girls, and Chinese-American girls with Dominican boys, and Dominican boys with Jamaican boys and every other imaginable combination. I would walk through the West Village, marveling at

restaurants the size of living rooms, and I could see that the very smallness of these restaurants awarded the patrons a kind of erudite cool, as though they were laughing at a joke, and it would take the rest of the world a decade to catch on. Summer was unreal—whole swaths of the city became fashion shows, and the avenues were nothing but runways for the youth. There was a heat unlike anything I'd ever felt, a heat from the great buildings, compounded by the millions of people jamming themselves into subway cars, into bars, into those same tiny eateries and cafés. I had never seen so much life. And I had never imagined that such life could exist in so much variety. It was everyone's particular Mecca, packed into one singular city." (p. 29)

I was moved by the above passage from *Between the world and me*, by Ta-Nehesi Coates because it showcases his love for New York City. This is my favorite aspect of NYC: Everyone, from every background, living side by side. I grew up on one of the most diverse blocks in the world, in Brooklyn, New York. I was ignorant of the concept of racism because I believed that everyone everywhere must be surrounded by the same kind of diversity. I didn't even understand what "diverse" meant, because it was "homogeny" that was foreign to me. I didn't see the different ways in which it manifested around me. I didn't understand how people could be so scared that they could hate someone they didn't even know. Why would anyone be scared of or hate Dean, my kind, next door neighbor who happened to be Black? Or Jorge and Iris, both of whom hailed from Puerto Rico and proudly considered themselves such despite having lived on the block for 30 years. I feel the same way now that I no longer reside in Brooklyn- when asked where I'm from, that's my reply.

My work in Opera is routine, for opera anyway. There's a certain set of popular operas, and small theatre companies with tight budgets need to produce the ones with name recognition to draw the crowds. I can't count how many times I've helped produce Carmen or Barber of Seville. One of the reasons why I so love playing the Tamburello is the rich history behind it.

I'm a professional Tamburello player (Italian frame drums) and have performed in several towns throughout southern Italy. My practice sessions aren't limited to practical work on the frame drums, it also involves serious research into the folk traditions of the towns from whence these musical forms emerged, and their ties to the many cultures which had a hand in shaping this art form, in particular the role of women in shaping and continuing them. I'm active in my local Italian-American community, and perform and teach Italian folk drum and dance, along with Italian pre-Christian folk traditions.

Italy, much like America, was the melting pot of its ancient day. Italy owes the richness of its heritage to the many peoples who came, and stayed. My father's family were Thracian colonists from Greece who took up residence near Naples. My maternal grandfather's family was from Sicily, by way of North Africa. They all, somehow, wound up in America, forced to leave home out of economic necessity. They weren't physically forced to go, but they had no choice but to leave or starve.

The troubles they faced when coming to America makes me sympathetic to those who currently find themselves on the bottom rung of the immigration ladder- always the latest group to enter this country. My people faced massive discrimination in housing, jobs, school, with police, government, and mobs of those who were angry and needed a scapegoat. Perhaps that is why Millay is one of my favorite poets- she fought for the release of Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italians who were executed after one of

the most scandalous trials America has seen, and eventually declared innocent, long after they had been killed.

Fear struck the Italian American community, which had largely kept to itself, in their own corners of cities. The language was no longer taught to the children. Assimilation was the watchword of the community. This is nearly the same experience Coates had with his father, punishing him out of fear that he wouldn't assimilate. The sad part is that no one would ever fully assimilate, or achieve acceptance. Perhaps that is what drove the fear- that parents could never do enough to make their children entirely safe. That the power of acceptance and therefore safety, was out of their control.

Dad did what every parent I knew would have done—he reached for his belt. I remember watching him in a kind of daze, awed at the distance between punishment and offense. I remember watching him in a kind of daze, awed at the distance between punishment and offense. Later, I would hear it in Dad's voice—"Either I can beat him, or the police." Maybe that saved me. Maybe it didn't. All I know is, the violence rose from the fear like smoke from a fire, and I cannot say whether that violence, even administered in fear and love, sounded the alarm or choked us at the exit.

Coates starts this passage with an allusion: What Dad did with the belt doesn't have to be explained, we know that he took it off and used it to beat his son. The idea of the beating is softened by the poetry of this metaphor- because he is in a daze, we are in a daze. The use of "distance" not only evokes the imagery of the large repercussions of an otherwise small infraction, and how on its face it made no sense, but also distances the reader from the pain of the experience, as the author is doing in this moment for himself. The musical alliteration of the later lines, starting with

the same word, having the same number of syllables gives equal weight to each option.

This passage from *Between the World and Me* by Coates reminded me of *A Small Place* by Jamaica Kincaid.

Have you ever wondered to yourself why it is that all people like me seem to have learned from you is how to imprison and murder each other, how to govern badly, and how to take the wealth of our country and place it in Swiss bank accounts? Have you ever wondered why it is that all we seem to have learned from you is how to corrupt our societies and how to be tyrants? You will have to accept that this is mostly your fault.

Kincaid postulates that those who took over ("elected" officials) when Antigua gained independence from the British, acted in the same, corrupt manner the British had. She blames the British for this corruption for many reasons: The British set the pattern for the Antiguans, and they no longer remembered another way of living, except under a corrupt, imposed government. The people didn't trust the government, did not expect them to act in their best interest, so why would the Antiguans care if the government was corrupt? Because a pattern of governing had been set, once there was a power vacuum, those who filled it followed the same pattern.

Coates relates the idea that in the African American community that it's better for the parent to beat/kill their offspring than for the police or anyone else to get them/do the same. That if there is enough violence at home, it will somehow save them when they are out on their own, facing the mean streets, or the police. Coates is trying to reconcile what is done at home, the violence out of "love," and how that violence at home perpetuates

the violence on the street. The art of bullying (using superior strength and intimidations/influence) is learned at home. Those who use violence on the street are the ones who faced violence at home. His simile of violence and smoke is very apt. Does it sound the alarm that this is what one will face out in the world and they're now aware of it because they have been subjected to it by people they love and trust? Does it "save" anyone from that violence, or does it perpetuate the violence which was instituted in times of slavery? Coates doesn't specifically lay out an answer- he's not trying to write a roadmap for change, but a meditation on the what.

Coates' *Between The World and Me* was written in 2015, and is very timely. This book gives a frank accounting of this time and place thanks to Coates's honest, clear voice. He comes across as a reliable narrator because he is writing to his son. New York City is what people often think of when they hear "America," and this voice coming out of NYC, seems authentic. He and I have birthdays within weeks of each other. His 1990s and my 1990s were somewhat similar, but I had the advantage of growing up in NYC where diversity reigns. I wonder if his experience would've been different had he grown up here, if Howard University would have been as much of a revelation for him.

I can't understand much of his experience - there were no "others" for me except those who decided that "others" were worthy of hate. The biggest difference was that I was never viewed as a dangerous element, being creme colored, blonde, and 5'3". They same way Coates was given the undue burden of perceived danger, I was dismissed, as most women are, as not only being dangerous, but unworthy of notice in that context. Two sides of the same coin of societal expectations.

A global audience would benefit from this glimpse at what is happening in America from the point of view of one of the people most effected by it. Friends in the UK don't quite understand what the racial climate is like here,

but with the dawning of Brexit and the anti-immigrant/anti-refugee mentality that is currently so prevalent in the world, they're starting to understand the tension here. *Between The World and Me* gives a background history of 40 years, relating events of the not so distant past to the present in a way that everyone can grasp.

Using his personal experiences, Coates covers the 1970s through the current day, picking up where James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* leaves off in 1963. I selected the passage below to illustrate one of the similarities in style, the epistolary form. A first person point of view is more intimate than a straight forward essay. It confers a sense of honesty, and of greater access to the world of the author, even if you, the reader, is not the intended recipient of the letter.

"Well, you were born; here you came, something like fifteen years ago, and though your father and mother and grandmother, looking about the streets through which they were carrying you, staring at the walls into which they brought you, had every reason to be heavy-hearted, yet they were not, for here you were, big James, named for me. You were a big baby. I was not. Here you were to be loved. To be loved, baby, hard at once and forever to strengthen you against the loveless world. Remember that. I know how black it looks today for you. It looked black that day too. Yes, we were trembling. We have not stopped trembling yet, but if we had not loved each other, none of us would have survived, and now you must survive because we love you and for the sake of your children and your children's children."

The passage above is sly in its simplicity. It reads easily, in print, and out loud. The internal rhyme, the consonance, the use of alliteration and metaphor- it all steers us toward emotional engagement with this piece, the

way a musician steers the listener toward the chorus of their song. Baldwin builds momentum with recursion. He slips synecdoche past us in the guise of metaphor when he talks about *The Walls*, and how the day was Black. His use of connotation and denotation demonstrate that there is much more to be found beneath the surface of the words. This isn't just a letter, it's an encrypted letter. If we take the time to study it, so much more is revealed about race and identity and civil rights in the first half of the 20th century.

We were asked to explore the rhythm of language in our reflections on this piece. My first impression was that Lin Manuel Miranda has nothing on Baldwin! The quality of Baldwin's writing is so musical that I could swear I've heard this song before. I finally recognized the same rhythm was used in the musical, *Hair*, written in 1966. The two pieces are so close in time, that I wonder if this was the cadence of that era, or if the writers picked up on the musicality Baldwin had put into the atmosphere just a year or so prior.

The line from the above passage, "looking about the streets through which they were carrying you," evoked the imagery of pall-bearers in a funeral procession, carrying the deceased to the cemetery. I wondered if the symmetry of images, which can indicate the start of life or the end, was intentional. Considering the subject, race relations in America and how young, black men were faring the the world, I concluded that it was intentional. When we write about our hopes, our fears are often addressed, even if indirectly.

Baldwin was a youth minister, raised by a Baptist minister, so there is no question where he gets his skills in rhetoric. He was well practiced at tuning in to an audience and moving them- be it to testify, convert, or add money to the collection plate. He builds a rhythm with words which evoke the past, and then he ties it to the present. Using a slight change in the form of the word from past to present intimates that he is predicting the future. Baldwin writes as if he is speaking, an informal address, a familiar one which

gains the trust of the reader; another reliable narrator. It's as if he's saying "I know the entire history of your father, and you, so here is what I can tell you about the history of your times as I've seen it effect you."

Despite the challenges and horrors which have befallen past generations of the Baldwin family, they have survived because they have stuck together and supported each other. The "Trembling" mentioned evokes images of the branches of the family tree. he continues this theme by mentioning several future generations. They are the ones whom we owe the effort of making the world a better place.

Coates was praised by Toni Morrison as filling the void Baldwin left in the world. While Coates imitated Baldwin's style, the writing is very different. Yes, they both address a family member in the form of a letter, and yes, they address the topics of racism, but those are the only similarities. Those are surface similarities. The style that Coates tries to imitate seems shallow when compared to Baldwin's deep resonance: Coates lacks his panache, his eloquence, his talent with turning a phrase. Baldwin elevates his phrases with the aforementioned musicality, while Coates breaks down an idea in simple rhetoric.

I also find that, despite the heavy topics, Baldwin's work seems much more hopeful. I think the above paragraph is hopeful- I picked it for that very reason. I've said before that I don't like reading heavy books with little hope and no answers. If there are no answers, there better be some light at the end, at least some humor or irony. In an interview with Rolling Stone, Coates explained his take on this point:

"There's hope in there. There's beauty in there. But it's not a bowl of sugar. It's dark chocolate. It's a little bitter. And that's how it's supposed to be... I don't have to make people feel good at the end of the book." Coates is right: It's not his job to make people feel good, only to tell his truth, but it means I don't plan to seek out any of his other writing. How you present

something is as important as what you are presenting. It is difficult to spread your message, to grow your audience, if no one is listening to your discordant notes. Alice Walker has an excellent perspective on sharing your truth:

“Storytelling, you know, has a real function. The process of the storytelling is itself a healing process, partly because you have someone there who is taking the time to tell you a story that has great meaning to them. They're taking the time to do this because your life could use some help, but they don't want to come over and just give advice. They want to give it to you in a form that becomes inseparable from your whole self. That's what stories do. Stories differ from advice in that, once you get them, they become a fabric of your whole soul. That is why they heal you.”

Looking at these first two books of the semester, both written by men about the male experience, I found that, in addition to the other angles which caught my attention, I was drawn to the instances where we encounter the women in their lives. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin begins with the women, the foundation of the family, the moment where the baby he eventually writes to is brought home. *Between the World and Me* discusses the way in which women helped him to develop a broader sense of the world, of sexuality, race, and expectations:

“She was raised by a Jewish mother in a small, nearly all-white town in Pennsylvania, and now, at Howard, ranged between women and men, asserted this not just with pride but as though it were normal, as though she were normal. I know it's nothing to you now, but I was from a place—America—where cruelty toward humans who loved as their deepest instincts instructed was a kind of law.”Because each of

these pieces have been written from a first person perspective, I can take them in as a story, with no regard for whether it is a truthful memoir, or a story pulled from thin air, the effect is the same.

As a conclusion to the section on racism, it was refreshing to read a woman's take on race and what it means to her personal identity in Jesmyn Ward's piece from *The Fire This Time, Cracking the Code*. Racism is real, and it is endemic and it is deadly, but race is a human construct. Which means we do not need to continue to prop it up, it is a choice. Ward took the 23 and Me DNA test and found some surprising results:

"...it was discomfiting to find that my ancestry was forty per cent European—a mixture of British, Irish, French, German, Scandinavian, Iberian, Italian, and Ashkenazi—thirty-two per cent sub-Saharan African, a quarter Native American, and less than one per cent North African. For a few days after I received my results, I looked into the mirror and didn't know how to understand myself. I tried to understand my heritage through my features, to assign each one a place, but I couldn't."

Ward goes on to discuss how she "remembered" herself, or re-membered herself. She put her self, her identity, back together, by identifying with those with whom she has a cultural bond, as a black American. I have a similar genetic story: DNA proving the stories handed down through my family, ancestors who were people who would have been enemies, one group who did oppress the other.. it was an odd experience to discover those, as Ward says, "whose genetic strands intertwined to produce mine."

The point of racism, or any "-ism" is to Other someone. Race has been used to oppress, to make the "undesirable" race the lower class. This

oppression, this machine, is not limited to race, it includes those who are poor. I would venture as far as to say that this would include anyone who is not "of the blood," which is ironic, considering that technology has made it easier to determine blood ancestry, as noted above by Jesmyn Ward. This concept of othering is illustrated in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, particularly in the form of class. He describes the area where the poor are nestled between wealth and commerce to great effect:

"About half way between West Egg and New York the motor-road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile, so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land. This is a valley of ashes--a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of grey cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-grey men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud which screens their obscure operations from your sight."

Fitzgerald's use of personification makes the area another character in the book. The road is hasty, it shrinks, the ashes grow and take form. He uses alliteration, and contrast to add to the monochromatic portrait of this gray, crumbling place. By drawing a comparison to a farm and wheat and hills, our sense of desolation grows. The ashes are a motif, it has symbolic significance threaded throughout the entire piece. The concept of "The American Dream" is that if you work hard, and have the drive and determination, you can "make it" in business, amass a fortune, and become one of the elite rich. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald demonstrates many

times, in many ways, that this "Dream" is a just that- something which will never be achieved by those not born into it.

The Valley of Ashes is situated between The Eggs (West Egg and East Egg), and New York City. The latter places are full of the colorful glitz and glamour of the elite. Their homes, clothes, lives, and personalities are colorful, both literally and metaphorically. By contrast, the Valley of Ashes is monochromatic. It is crumbling, desolate. It is filled with desperate people who, like the cars, are barely advancing. The Valley of Ashes is where we find the service people, the industries which make the glamorous lifestyles surrounding them possible. The people who live there feed the machine of the American dream, they make the dream possible for others, but they remain invisible. The elite rich and nouveau riche of the Eggs, the ones who invest in these industries, are completely ignorant of what goes into maintaining their fortunes and lifestyles, the pollution that is caused, the health of the people who do the work. These are a passing thought, a blur on the road as the elite drive from one desirable location to the other. They are only forced to witness it if they are on the train and it stops for a time, as it did the day Tom took Nick to meet Myrtle. Tom was looking at the source of his continued wealth, and distracted himself with the one thing the ashes did not cling to: Myrtle. She was ambitious, trying to escape the Valley- she was not like the others who "moved dimly," she was sharp and as colorful as she could be. Myrtle was trying to escape the only way she knew how at that time: On the arm of a wealthy man.

The contrast between the idea of a Valley and the place described, is quite sharp. The denotation and connotation are set wide apart: A farm, a valley, is a green place where there is a colorful abundance of life, where things grow. Ashes are associated with waste, as in what's left after a fire burns out. Ashes are also associated with death, as when someone is cremated. Calling this place a Valley, and referring to it with words such as

“farm” and “garden” makes it easier for the elite to ignore it, or to make a joke of it thereby lessening any emotional impact. Their privilege allows them to not concern themselves with this place, which is literally beneath them.

If there is a valley, there must be a mountain. The Valley, and its denizens, are at the bottom, while Tom, Daisy, Jordan, Nick, and Gatsby are at or near the top of the mountain. Those at the top look down on the denizens of the Valley, and anyone who dares to rise up from it. Our titular character, Gatsby himself experienced this because he started life poor, on the proverbial wrong side of the tracks. He worked his way into wealth, but was never able to work himself into respectable society for two reasons: He was of low birth, and his wealth came from illicit activities. Even when he did climb up out of the “valley” he was not accepted. They kept moving the proverbial goal posts for acceptance until it was impossible. They were never going to accept anyone outside of their sanctioned circle. Nick was the perfect central character of this piece: He has the blood pedigree, but he is not wealthy. This is why he was welcome in both world, represented by East and West Egg.

By the end of the book we see that the privilege of the rich extends to literally getting away with murder. After killing Myrtle, Tom’s mistress in a hit and run using Gatsby’s car, Daisy is protected by Tom, and by Gatsby. Tom sends Myrtle’s husband in Gatsby’s direction. Gatsby, even if given a chance to speak, would not have outed Daisy to defend himself. In chapter nine, Wilson is described as “an ashen figure” when he confronts Gatsby, who is floating in his pool.

Daisy and Tom face no consequences for their actions. Wilson’s actions were chalked up to that of a grieving husband, to provide the simplest explanation, and the case closed. The circumstances of this book are different from those which inspired *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehesi

Coates, but the outcomes are the same: Those with privilege (green or blue), rarely ever face the consequences of their actions, others are left to pay for it. There might be attention to a travesty for a time, usually akin to spectacle, but then the incident fades into memory, more ash for the pile, ignored by those privileged enough to race by.

We find this kind of privilege in *Heart of Darkness*, not only on the part of those exploiting the Congo at large, not just on the part of Kurtz, who was deified by the local tribe, but all of European society, all of those who live in the bliss of ignorance:

“I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretense, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew. Their bearing, which was simply the bearing of commonplace individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety, was offensive to me like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger it is unable to comprehend. I had no particular desire to enlighten them, but I had some difficulty in restraining myself from laughing in their faces so full of stupid importance...”

After reading *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, I understood why Francis Ford Coppola had a nervous breakdown. It happened while he was filming *Apocalypse Now*, which he based on Conrad's work. Within the framework of the narrator listening to a story, we have a man who believes atrocious things about people who were forced into atrocious positions. By

framing the story in this way, Conrad has further removed the reader from the action. The events were observed and reported by Marlow, then told to the narrator, where we readers eavesdrop on the happenings. There are now even more levels, more "safety" between the reader and "the darkness."

There are many kinds of darkness alluded to in this work: The darkness of the human heart - avarice, hate, delusion, corruption, and more. There is also the literal darkness of the Congo at night or under a canopy of trees. Then there is the darkness of skin color, another frightening kind of darkness for those telling the story. If Darkness is the absence of Light, and The Company is made up of those who represent light, then to be cut off from The Company, as Kurtz was, is to be plunged into Darkness.

I chose to focus on a paragraph toward the end of the book, after the "adventure" had been completed. It appealed to me in the way the final chapters of Lord of the Rings held appeal: After an adventure, the adventurer returns but is changed. It's only when they return to that origin point that they can feel and otherwise observe that change. In the above paragraph, he is angered by average people who he, before his adventure, had no care for or quarrel with. Now however, he realizes that they are ignorant, as he once was, and perhaps as he wishes to be again. It's too late, he cannot return to his "pure" state because he has been touched by the many forms of darkness.

In "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'" Chinua Achebe argues that a dichotomy has been set up between Africa and Europe, one being the "antithesis" of the other. I don't disagree. We also agree that, for all of the language used to describe these two falsely antithetical cultures, it's the "light" culture that Conrad is chiding, exposing their ill treatment, their hypocrisy, their actual darkness. Where Achebe and I part ways is that he believes Conrad should have provided another point of view, an "alternate frame of reference" so that the reader can judge the

characters. I don't believe the story would be as effective had Conrad done so. He wants Conrad to counter the blatant racism of the book. However, Achebe is writing in 1977, and Conrad is writing in 1899. The time period of the book must be taken into account. Conrad did no damage by describing the characters as he did, for these were already the prevailing thoughts of the day. He is a writer, not a leader or politician, and under no obligation to change the world with every stroke of his pen. I also believe that Conrad did take a bold step, for his time, is exposing the hypocrisy of the Europeans. "For his time" is the pertinent phrase.

Achebe's writing is important, because, as we look back through the lens of time, we can now call out how this insidious language affects everyone. We are now past the point where *Darkness* was a bold step, and need writers and critics and commenters who will analyze the piece from both places- what the book meant at its origin, and what it means to us today. We have another layer besides the narrator and the character telling the story: We have time. It's been over 100 years since this book was written. We have more history. We have more words, we have a better understanding of right and wrong and humanity and light and darkness. We need to keep analyzing this book in terms of what we know now. Because we have more experience and knowledge than the original readers of *Heart of Darkness*, it is up to us to use our experience to better understand our world, and where we came from, as Marlow did.

Marlow is an excellent example of an antihero. He is not a classical "hero," but because he is the perspective through which we engage with the world of the book, we are forced to root for him, or at least to value his survival because otherwise that world is closed off for us. He is, as the passage above notes, forever changed by his experience. He cannot leave it behind and return to the world, for him, the world has changed.

One of my fellow students, Miles Quinn, brought up this concept in relation to Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* and the central white male character, Nathan Price. I disagree that Nathan was poised to be the hero of the piece: he did not journey, he did not change, and we did not engage with the world of the book through his eyes. We need not place him on Joseph Campbell's Hero Cycle. I do agree that this was Kingsolver's way of picking apart the concept of the Hero's Journey itself, and that the character had a different version of the Hero Complex, a Messiah Complex. He took on the "white man's burden" of trying to support and teach and "save" those he considers lesser- anyone of a different gender, race, or socioeconomic class, or religion. I also agree that the typical hero embodies these negative traits, but must also overcome them to survive and complete the journey.

Kingsolver's book is about The Heroine's journey. Campbell's template relegates women to the role of "helper" or "goddess" or one to be rescued. Campbell dismissed the idea that women need a journey at all, since they are considered whole already. I couldn't disagree more. Women, thanks to oppression and subjugation and "enculturation." as Maureen Murdoch calls it, need their own journey. I don't exactly agree with her version of The Heroine's Journey- there is too much emphasis on adapting to the inner masculine and matching up the cycle with The Hero's Journey.

However, there already exists an entirely different Heroine's journey. One of the earliest examples we have is *The Descent of Inanna*: At each checkpoint of the cycle, represented by the gates she reaches along the journey, she is stripped of her worldly belonging (jewels, clothes, possessions, symbols of position and rank); Inanna enters the underworld with nothing, facing death in the form of her sister with whom there is tension. She surrenders herself to the experience, dies, lends her own healing/generative powers to her sister, and is thereby revived. She returns

to the world above, forever changed, having left her own permanent mark on her sister's realm.

This is what happened with Orleanna, almost step by step: She is stripped of the things she valued most before her descent (brought the wrong things, never enough supplies, everything is harder to recreate "three thanksgivings a day"), she deals with Mama Tataba and the other women of the village who alternately challenge or help her; She surrenders to Mother Africa itself, taking to bed in her death-like state. She eventually rises, is touched by death, then makes her way back home. However, she is changed by her experience. I had selected a passage which melds with the conversation about The Hero's Journey, and who really is the hero of this book:

He noticed the children less and less. He was hardly a father except in the vocational sense, as a potter with clay to be molded. Their individual laughter he couldn't recognize, nor their anguish. He never saw how Adah chose her own exile; how Rachel was dying for the normal life of slumber parties and record albums she was missing. And poor Leah. Leah followed him like an underpaid waitress hoping for the tip. It broke my heart. I sent her away from him on every pretense I knew. It did no good. While my husband's intentions crystallized as rock salt, and while I preoccupied myself with private survival, the Congo breathed behind the curtain of forest, preparing to roll over us like a river. My soul was gathered with sinners and bloody men, and all I was thinking of was how to get Mama Tataba to come back, or what we should have brought from Georgia. I was blinded from the constant looking back: Lot's wife. I only ever saw the gathering clouds.

Getting the story from Orleanna's point of view in this passage give us a portrait of her entire family. The use of iambic pentameter and denotation really gives us a feel for her character's inner workings, and her idiolect. She uses a lot of allusion, metaphor and simile which makes the reader feel like a friend, someone on the inside. She also uses a lot of description of their surroundings, as if they are in it, but not of it.

I've come to the conclusion that *The Poisonwood Bible* could be two different books: one about Belgian occupation of The Congo, the other about the aftermath of "independence." Then again, that also reflects the Congo: Three different countries: before occupation, during occupation and after the sham of independence propped up by the USA and other countries. *The Poisonwood Bible* is a "Family Sized" *Heart of Darkness* that actually has a heart. I appreciated the different feminine voices telling the story: they were distinct. The different perspective of each character shone through. Funny how, despite not having his own entries into this tale, Nathan Price was still the central character, the thing which bound these characters together for better and worse.

The theme of colonization is demonstrated on many levels throughout the book. Each of the women is treated as a colony, a territory of the Price nation, ruled by a tyrant who has the say over life and death of the colony. The Price Family was a microcosm for, or representative of America, and the other Western Colonial powers. The sheer arrogance of Nathan Price, to believe that he held the one true way to live, and to try to impose it on the local people, was staggering. To take without acknowledging, to live free and easy without care is what he believed his birthright to be. Orleanna and his daughters took care of him completely- everything from cooking to cleaning to medicines, and more. He didn't offer a word of acknowledgment or thanks, or payment in kind. The only payment he offered was the imposition of his will. This is colonialism in a nutshell.

One of my favorite poems, One Art, by Elizabeth Bishop, also speaks to the experience of the women in The Poisonwood Bible, and The Heroine's Journey overall:

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster

I was taken with the paradox of those who don't have enough sharing everything, and those who have too much sharing nothing. The Price family was like Mobutu, the corrupt puppet leader of the Congo after "independence," who lives in a palace with gilded chandeliers, but turns out his pockets to show he has no money. It was only after Ruth May's death that Orleanna realized this. Once she stopped clinging to the material things which didn't matter, she was set free, figuratively and literally from her husband.

I gathered through overhearing my parents that Brother Fowles had entered into unconventional alliances with the local people, and too he was a Yankee. I heard them saying he was New York Irish, which tells you a lot, as they are notorious for being papist Catholics. Father explained to us that he had gone plumb crazy, consorting with the inhabitants of the land. That's why the Mission League finally allowed us to come. At first they'd insulted my father by turning us down, even after our Bethlehem congregation had done special tithes for a whole year to fly us here for the perfusion of Jesus' name. But no one else volunteered for the Kilanga post, and the Underdowns had requested that it be taken by someone steady, with a family. Well, we were a family all right, and my father is steady as a stump. Still, the Underdowns insisted that our mission last no more than one year— not enough time for going plumb crazy but only partway, I guess, even if things went poorly. Brother Fowles had been in Kilanga six years, which really when you think about it is long enough for about any kind of backsliding you could name. There was no telling how he might have influenced Mama Tataba. But we needed her help. She carried all our water up from the river and cleaned and lit the kerosene lamps and split wood and built the fire in the cookstove and threw buckets of

ash down the hole in the outhouse and paused to kill snakes more or less as a distraction between heavier jobs.

I chose this section to examine because I can really feel Leah coming through as a character. She, and her father, and her situation, are full of contradictions. She is too young to understand the situation fully, and too young to do anything about the little she does understand. Leah understood enough to know that the family needed Mama Tataba's help, but she was unable to reconcile anything that conflicted with her father's opinions. He was the center of her world and the only one whose approval she craved. She already had the acceptance and approval from her mother and sisters. Leah operated on the principle that Father Knows Best, and if father was wrong about something, he could be wrong about everything, and then she would have no frame of reference from the world, no touchstone.

This passage includes many foreshadowing references to what will become of Nathan Price and to some extent, the whole family. I always enjoy some excellent foreshadowing. Immediately after this passage, Mama Tataba discusses the mode of gardening. She warns Nathan of the titular poisonwood- a stump he tries to remove. This stump, a description Leah applies to him affectionately, also reveals the father's character. He is poison to the family, he causes pain, and he can be fatal. It was his insistence on staying which led to Ruth May's death. It was his insistence on his own way of gardening which doomed his crop. It was his insistence on his right of dominion which allowed him to think that his seeds could grow wherever he planted them.

This is one of the points in the book where we can really see the arrogance of "white man's burden." He looks at Mama Tataba "with Christian patience." He is "mansplaining" about how her own homeland works in regard to cultivation. He believes it is his right to "tame" a plot of land

because God had willed it to be. He had the arrogance to consider himself among the great ministers in Christendom, one who had a direct line to the Christian God. Mama Tataba explained how to plant on her native soil. When Price didn't listen, she did them a favor and made it so. Yet in his arrogance, he undid her work, and doomed the crop to failure. I find his speechifying to Leah offensive as well. He was as desperate as she to have approval, and feel superior, so he wielded his paternal authority over his daughter and "instructed" her on Gods Ways. Owing to her age, or her own psychological need for her father to be right, she didn't contradict him even when she literally held evidence in her hands that his ideas were incorrect.

Later in the book we see Orleanna questioning her complicity is propping up her husband. The daughters did the same, but out of ignorance. Orleanna propped up her husband because she thought it was her place to do so, her burden in life. She was exhausted from taking care of the children, including one with a disability. She was exhausted from all of her responsibilities. Orleanna grew up in a place and time in which women were regarded as little more than children, meant to be directed by their father then husband. Orleanna felt complicit, but what choice did she have? She was responsible for her daughters, and there was little opportunity at the time to change her circumstances, especially if she wanted to raise and help her children. The law, and culture were both on Nathan's side.

When given the opportunity to do right, Orleanna took it: She shared the abundance with the villagers at the picnic, she gave money when she could. She at least tried to learn the local ways and do what she could until she had a nervous breakdown. She had barely been holding on while at home, and moving the proverbial show to a foreign country where she didn't know the language or customs, a country that had none of the conveniences she was used to, she broke. She lost her frame of reference- her ability to care for her family in the way to which they were accustomed. It wasn't

possible to operate in the same fashion once they were in the Congo, but it was all she knew. I hold Orleanna blameless for whatever guilt she thought she deserved. Perhaps because I'm an exhausted worker, wife, mother, and student, myself, one who has dealt with too many entitled mansplainers. Orleanna did the only thing she could- she got out as soon as she was able to, and she worked to help those in the Congo and bring awareness of the situation to the outside world. That's all we can do: learn from our mistakes and try to improve the world from that point forward.

I found that Nathan Price and Tom Buchanan from *The Great Gatsby* have many things in common, and they they fulfill the same type of role in each story: The football player, the golden boy who was entitled, a bully when he didn't get his way. Always assuming he was correct simply because he was white and had relatively more affluence. Nathan Price and Kurtz from *Heart of Darkness* are also similar in that Kurtz starts out wanting to do the work of "humanizing, improving, instructing" the native population. Another bully, another arrogant man, and like Nathan, meets his end in the Congo, tho I don't believe that Nathan ended his days wanting to "Exterminate all the brutes!"

Another similarity I noticed between *Gatsby* *The Poisonwood Bible* was the description of passing trains:

"Of course you have to look the other way when the train goes by the townships, because those people don't have any perspective of what good scenery is, that's for sure. They will make their houses out of a piece of rusted tin or the side of a crate—and leave the writing part on the outside for all to see! But you just have to try and understand, they don't have the same ethics as us. That is one part of living here. Being understanding of the differences."

This quote could be describing The Valley of Ashes in Long Island City, the way station between one "civilized" area and the next. Both are places where the waste of industry collects. Both populations are considered lesser because had they ethics or gumption or smarts, they would have "pulled themselves up by the bootstraps" and escaped the place.

Gatsby and Poisonwood are almost the inverse of each other, perspective-wise: Gatsby's tale is filtered through a member of the middle class who has entree into the world of the wealthy and rises with their fortunes, while Poisonwood is about a middle class family who gets a glimpse of the poor, and sinks with their fortunes. In both books, the class of the character whose eyes we see through is made clear- they're in the middle and they get to glimpse both. They're also touched by the plight of the classes above and below them.

While not an epistolary work, it can be compared to the Coates and Baldwin books we've read in terms of intimacy, including the character speaking directly to the audience in Gatsby and Heart of Darkness. Each of these books seems honest because the information is always coming from a first-person perspective. In Poisonwood it's five someones, each with their own voice. It might be a fictional work as opposed to the others, but the honesty of the characters comes through even when they are revealing their hypocrisy or dishonest moments.

To begin the unit on terrorism, I watched *The Patience Stone*, a film based on the book of the same name by Atiq Rakimi. In an unnamed, war torn, middle eastern city, a young wife and mother (The Woman) cares for her comatose husband (The Man). Despite having no money left, and having no more credit extended to her family for such basic supplies as water, she remains in the home, caring for her husband, neglecting her two young daughters. As the days pass and the violence gets closer to the house, The Woman talks to The Man, tentatively at first, but eventually telling him more

and more until she reveals her deepest secrets. She treats him as if he is her Patience Stone, a fabled stone which absorbs fears, pain, and darkness. Once the stone has been filled, it will break and the world will end. True to the fable, The Woman filled The Husband with her pain and darkness, and he cracked, killing her - ending her world.

I am always skeptical when someone who is not of the demographic they are writing for is credited with "giving voice" to that demographic. I have a serious issue with a man being credited for giving all Afghan women a voice. His voice, coming out of her mouth, comes across as inauthentic. It was a man's fantasy about breaking taboos, and about punishing the woman who broke them. The biggest taboo in this piece was not the subversion of sexual mores, it was the act of being honest about them. As long as she kept her secrets, things would've gone on as they had been.

The only thing I appreciated about this piece, despite being hit over the head with it, was the concept of the comatose husband serving as her patience stone. I felt condescended to as an audience member, as I believe anyone who knows the fable would be.

Did Rahimi have to dump all of this tragedy onto one woman? It's as if he believes that the more suffering The Woman faces, the more heroic she is for carrying the burden. Yes, sexuality and woman's sexual autonomy (and autonomy in general) is taboo in middle eastern countries, but this woman does not stand in for all women and therefore bear every possible type of suffering for all women.

She has the burden of caring for The Man, for her children, for figuring out how to get them all food and water and medicine, and hide from looting soldiers. She endured the lust of his brothers and then their abandonment when they left the city. She endured mistreatment by her mother in law, feared for her life, and in desperation, broke her marriage vows to save her life.

His identity, from The Woman's point of view, is wrapped up in being a war hero. Yet he throws away caution and is wounded by one of his own men over words. He didn't give one thought to his wife and children, only of his own identity and honor. She was never part of his identity, he was a hero, not a husband and father. Meanwhile, she was allowed no identity outside of being his wife and mother of his children. That is bad enough of a tragedy for a woman to suffer, but to pile on the rest of this abuse seems like a sick male fantasy.

The Woman lies about selling her body so that she isn't raped by a pair of soldiers. They considered her too unclean to rape, which says a lot about the male mindset in that culture. You must be clean enough to rape there, but here, if a woman is sexually permissive or experienced, she is seen as having no right to say no. This "western" moment happens when the Young Soldier of the pair returns, and rapes her. The Woman is stunned, but then after taking the money he has left for her, allows him to return. She takes charge of the situation and her sexuality. She uses The Young Soldier to get what she didn't have with her uncaring husband, physical pleasure.

She pours this into her patience stone. She has sent her two daughters to live with her aunt, and uses the money to keep The Man alive. Why doesn't she use the money to take her daughters to safety? Why does she stay with him? Why does she continue in his role as caretaker? This is not her only opportunity to unburden herself. Her aunt is also her confidant, the keeper of her secrets. Why is this not enough? I can only account for these questions by once again pointing out that this was written by a man who does not understand the relationships women can have. The author has decided that The Woman must unburden herself to The Man. He ignores the relationship of mother and child, and her obligation to them now that their sole means of support is incapacitated.

At the start of the film, she speaks to him deferentially, as if he is awake and aware and whole. She prays, she reads the Koran. She tries to remain holy and rid herself of the awful thoughts she is thinking. Over the course of the film, the prayer beads are gone. The Koran is gone. The praying is gone. The deferential treatment is gone. I can only believe she is caught up in revenge, and that this is why she uses him as her patience stone.

The Woman tells a story about the wife of the prophet who scares away what he thinks is a demon by revealing her hair when the being appears. She determines that the being was an angel because it fled the sight of her hair whereas a demon wouldn't give her that respect. The woman decides that the wife should have been revered as a prophet instead since she was the one who had such wisdom and was able to protect her husband.

At the end of this piece, when The Woman reveals that the children aren't his, The Man snaps out of his comatose state and chokes her. How he would have the ability, after being shot in the neck and comatose for so long, to exert any kind of pressure, let alone enough to kill her, I will chalk up to the fable of the patience stone. As he is choking her, she doesn't fight him, instead she stabs him with his knife- the knife which was The Man's stand in at their wedding. This was an over the top symbol. He was hoisted by his own petard. Why did she care for him so long just to stab him? Why didn't she fight him off? Was this what we call "suicide by cop?" Her final words were concerned with claiming her role as prophetess as her customer arrives on the scene to watch them die.

This is quite obviously a male telling of a female story because it involves the redemption of the woman's sexuality through rape, through prostitution, and through another man. The tagline of this film is "She achieved her independence by telling stories filled with forbidden secrets."

She never achieves any kind of independence. Her pleasure must be gained from an alternate male that she can take charge of while he is not in a coma, take charge of sexually. Her identity is still attached to a man. She has not transcended anything. She's just broken more taboos, brought another fetish to life.

I was searching for a connection to the books I've read for this course, and can most easily make a comparison between Orleanna from *The Poisonwood Bible*, and *The Woman*. Both are oppressed by dominant husbands, part of a culture wherein they are forced to stay in their situation or risk death or being cut off from society, which is the same in many cases. The difference between the two is that in *The Poisonwood Bible*, it's not sexual conquest which finally moves Orleanna to action, but the death of her daughter. *The Woman* is never moved to action, not the necessary action of leaving *The Man*. The action is necessary because as long as she is tied to him, she is not living. She chooses to remain tied to him and it is her end. This also reminds me of Daisy from *The Great Gatsby*. Daisy is forced by the dictates of society into her marriage, and into staying in her marriage. It would have been more than Daisy was able to do to leave Tom and their daughter and their lifestyle, it would also mean leaving her family and all she had ever known. In that book it's Gatsby who pays the price in lieu of Daisy. In *Poisonwood*, it's Rose May who pays the price instead of Orleanna. In *Patience*, there is no one to pay the price for *The Woman*, so her life is taken. This is an age old trope- someone is punished for transgressing the norm, a sacrifice is made in order for change to occur. In *Patience*, it should have been *The Man*, but as always, especially in this culture, *The Woman* pays the price.

Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka is another example of what happens to a family when a sudden medical tragedy strikes, both from the perspective of the stricken, and of the caregivers. They are so busy surviving and

caregiving that they inadvertently withdraw from the world. In the process of withdrawing, they lose more friends who scatter at the first sign of difficulties. *The Patience Stone*, of all of the other books I've read during this course, is most directly in line with *Metamorphosis* and the concept of caring for someone who can no longer communicate. From *Metamorphosis*:

"Hearing these words from his mother made Gregor realize that the lack of any direct human communication, along with the monotonous life led by the family during these two months, must have made him confused... He had come very close to forgetting [his humanity], and it had only been the voice of his mother, unheard for so long, that had shaken him out of it." The woman, despite using her husband to unload her emotions, was accidentally, and to her eventual detriment, also sharing her humanity, her suppressed but deep emotions. It filled him back up and revived him, at least for a time."

This story is still pertinent today: Most bankruptcies are due to medical debt from an unexpected emergency. The Samsa family wasn't wealthy, but they were comfortable thanks to Gregor's efforts. This is reminiscent of *The Great Gatsby*: Each book involves a shift in class: *Gatsby* was on his way up in terms of money and status, while the Samsa family was on their way down the social and financial ladder. A similar thing happened in *Persepolis*. Friends of the family, a couple Marjane stayed with when she first moved to Austria, used to be wealthy. The husband had an important position. They lived a life of relative upper-middle class ease, until they were forced to move and live in reduced circumstances. This created such great tension between the couple that they often argued. The same happened in *Metamorphosis*.

Grete was too young to be expected to take on so large a burden as to be Gregor's primary caretaker, but there was no one else to do it, so she was forced to grow up very quickly -take on the role of woman while she was still a girl- much like the daughters in *The Poisonwood Bible* when Orleana fell ill. In both books, the family had a mere taste of the physical and emotional one who holds things together goes through.

In contrast to our unit on racism, *Metamorphosis* is concerned with a single Family and not society at large. *The Fire Next Time* and *Between the World and Me* are personal stories, but that is the launching point for a larger conversation about the coming together of a community because of a shared history, and shared tragedy. The only ones sharing the tragedy in *Metamorphosis* is the Samsa family, they have no community. Like the above mentioned books, both are shunned or oppressed to excluded to some degree by society; In this book, society is represented by Gregor's boss who comes to admonish him for being late, then turns and runs when Gregor's tragedy is revealed.

In *The Complete Persepolis*, by Marjane Satrapi, we get another perspective on terrorism in the middle east, but this time, as with *Poisonwood*, it takes us on a woman's journey from childhood through adulthood. At the beginning of this piece, when she is a child, the story is about terrorism in the grander sense, the oppression of all women, of all people who don't conform to the new regime. As Marjane matures, so does her perspective, and she can relate to the instances of terrorism more personally because she has a better understanding of events, their context, and how her world has changed.

This autobiography is different from what one would expect because it is done in what's commonly called "comic book" style. The visuals add to the intimacy and authenticity of the experience while making it easier to digest than many of the other memoirs out there by Islamic women of the same

time period. Every single word is curated within an inch of it's life because of the constraint on space for text. Because of this, every phrase, whether they form description or dialogue, has a significant impact on the reader. Satrapi gets her point across quickly without being weighed down by excess prose. She uses a drawing style called "high contrast inking." Her visuals are starkly black and white, a metaphor for how her country is viewed by the West.

Persepolis is, thematically speaking, about forming an identity: of a single person, of a family, of a country. The book follows Marjane from the age of 10 through the age of 25. We begin to develop an awareness of that which is outside of ourselves and our small sphere of home life around age ten. I find it appropriate that the book opens in 1980 with a ten year old Marjane. It was the year after the Islamic revolution swept through her homeland. She went from being a carefree, modern child of educated, liberal parents, to a girl burdened by the trappings of religious fundamentalism and war.

Marjane comes of age against a background of war, oppression, and religious and class discrimination. She quickly learns the history of her people, which has been defined by one conquest of their land after another: Oppression by emperors, Arab invasion from the west, Mongolian invasion from the East, followed by modern imperialism chasing after oil. She learns the history of her family, as inheritors of the last princes of Iran. She also learns of and meets her Uncle, a wanted rebel who is later executed. Marjane takes it upon herself to learn everything she can about the world through reading her parent's extensive book collection. She admires famous revolutionaries and attends protests which sometimes turn violent. By age 13 she is decidedly western and enjoys the black market and underground world of such outrageous things as make up and music and jeans and sneakers. She is nearly arrested by the religious police for inappropriate dress, but manages to talk her way out of trouble.

Worried for their daughter's rebellious teenage spirit, Marjane's parents send her to live with friends in Austria. While she was abroad, Iran was defining itself as a country, one constantly at war with itself as well as outside forces. Marjane might have been safer in Austria, but she is doubly burdened with being a stranger in a strange land, with no one who spoke her language, and without her parents to raise her.

I was reminded here of *Between the World and Me* by Coates. Marjane faces both blatant and subtle racism while in Austria, much along the lines of an incident Coates relates: He attended a movie theater in an affluent white neighborhood with his son. A woman pushed his son out of her way, and when Coates confronted her, others automatically came to the woman's defense. Coates felt threatened by her "pulling rank" in the situation, by her use of privilege to turn the situation to her advantage. Coates and Marjane were the only people of color in a predominantly white area and were confronted with this fact in a threatening way. Marjane was accused of stealing from her landlord because Marjane was a suspicious character, and was kicked out of her boyfriend's home by his mother who was unabashedly racist.

Marjane realizes that most people don't understand what is happening in her country, or really the difference between her country and its middle eastern neighbors. Until The United States started The Gulf War (which started a panic regarding the "axis of evil"), no one paid much attention. Most people went on about their daily lives much in the same way Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* describes Marlow's fellow countrymen walking around in complete ignorance of what is really happening in a not so far away part of the world.

Marjane eventually returns to Iran after a breakdown, living on the streets of Vienna for several months, and suffering severe bronchitis. She

was treated well once she was taken to a hospital, but made to leave as soon as possible.

Compared with Iran, the treatment styles are worlds apart. When she was younger, a family friend had suffered a heart attack and was unable to receive treatment. There were no facilities available for his surgery. His family had to apply for a medical visa, but because there was such a long waiting list, he died before he could be treated.

Another component of these two incidents is class: Marjane's parents and friends are what we would call upper-middle class. They are skilled and educated, have money for large homes, fancy cars, and vacations. They also have live-in servants. Her parents might protest the incoming regime, but they have been upholding a class system which oppresses others, and they don't even recognize their own privilege. One such incident saw the father ending a budding relationship between their live in maid and their neighbor. Once the father informed the neighbor that she was a maid and not a relative, the neighbor broke off communication, and broke her heart.

The new regime had a different basis for their class system, this one measured by devotion to the regime instead of level of wealth and education. Those who were the biggest supporters of the regime were now the upper class. It was this group who got the plumb government jobs. I place this mention here because the application for the medical visa was made to a former window washer. The implication was that he had no right to the job, and only his support of the regime earned him the position. As a former window washer, he used to be considered low class, uneducated. Now the family had to appease him to get necessary medical care, and they resented it. The implication of Marjane's quick release from the hospital in Vienna was that because she was a vagrant, she wasn't invited to stay. Marjane collected on a debt owed to her mother and went home.

Marjane wasn't recognized by her father when he picked her up at the airport. That recognition was superficial. The friends she reconnected with didn't recognize who she had become, and likewise, Maryjane didn't understand these girls either. I was reminded of Rachel, the eldest daughter in *The Poisonwood Bible*. She seemed superficial, concerned with all that she had been missing out of from society, yet even when they leave the patriarch, Nathan, behind, Rachel never returns to America. This is because she is afraid that she has been too changed by this other country, that she will never be a "normal" American again. Marjane returns to Iran to learn this lesson.

Married, divorced, having lived through a return to oppression which only got worse with the Kuwait war, Marjane leaves Iran, and her family, for good. She moved to France where she tells the story of her experience and her people.

It was interesting to see her growing up in these pages, moving from a child's understanding to that of an adult, and one who can make a difference in that world. I've looked back at my own personal development, including old journals, and can see my progress throughout the years. I hope that the work towards my degree, as well as the degree at the end of this scholastic journey, will help move my trajectory in the direction of Satrapi's: someone who can help to shape society by telling their story, and the story of their people.

Robert Frost's poem, *Acquainted with the Night*, reminded me of Marjane's young adult years, and in more than one way: It could be about her return from Austria to her home, but it also fits with her leaving home permanently. Marjane hit bottom while living in Austria: Her boyfriend was having an affair, her landlady accused her of stealing which effectively kicked her out, and she ran out of money, leaving her homeless. It was only after her life was in danger that she returned home. "Home" was a point of

comparison for Marjane. She was able to renew her connection to her roots, and compare how she had changed during her time away. She was unrecognizable to her loved ones, both in appearance and in attitude. I was reminded of the Lotus Sutra, better known in the west as "the parable of the Prodigal Son." She returned home, feeling like a failure, and received a reception she didn't expect: acceptance, and a chance to renew.

I have been questioning why Marjane's parents didn't also leave Tehran with her, and instead sent Marjane away, essentially on her own at a young age. Her mother had already "accepted the veil," and her father no longer protested. So why didn't they go with her? Why did they not make arrangements to leave with their precocious daughter and protect her? The answer lies in the presentation of the friends of the family, first looking at the couple Marjane first stayed with in Austria. They used to be wealthy. The husband had an important position. They lived a life of relative upper-middle class ease. However, in Austria, they were struggling. His former position meant nothing in this new country and he wasn't making enough money to support the lifestyle to which they had been accustomed. Other friends of the family who were trying to escape the bombings in their area, sold off their possessions at a fraction of their worth. They were once extremely wealthy, but their money didn't help them to avoid trouble.

These examples lead me to believe that Marjane's parents were willing to conform to the regime as long as they were comfortable. They knew that Marjane's rebellious attitude would cause the family trouble, and they sent her off on her own. It's portrayed as a noble act, but it looks quite selfish. The family should have packed up and gone with her. The only reason I think of to justify their staying in Tehran was, not only were they comfortable, they had not experienced an event which forced them to change. Likewise, Orleana, the matriarch from *The Poisonwood Bible*, didn't leave her abusive situation, or protect her daughters, until one of them had died. This was her

moment of disaster, the tipping point between inaction and action. The Woman in The Patience Stone also finds herself in the same place, unable to leave her husband, despite finding a way to survive without him.

I am also reminded of Daisy Buchanan, to a lesser extent. She didn't actually want to leave her husband, Tom, despite his affairs, or his bullying nature. Her affair with Gatsby was revenge for Tom's indiscretions, as well as a chance to relive her past, to take a look at what might have been, were circumstances different. I was comparing parents relationships with their children, so as to Pammy, Daisy went out of her way to introduce Pammy to Gatsby as her dream, as the person she loved most in the world, calling her "blessed and precious." This demonstrates that Daisy, despite not being happy with Tom, is happy with her life and situation in general. For Gatsby, meeting Pammy is startling, but Daisy's sentiment doesn't penetrate enough at that point to destroy his dream. The sentiment expressed is regarding Pammy, who might be a piece of Tom, but is very much Daisy, perhaps a younger version of Daisy. We only know that Gatsby was quite amazed.

Whether it was at the passage of time, Daisy's new status as a mother, or her similarity to Daisy that struck Gatsby, we'll never know for certain. The life altering event for Gatsby comes after he realizes that Daisy does love Tom, that this marriage wasn't one of convenience, forced upon her against her will. Gatsby gives up on his dream, gives up on Daisy and life, proving to her that he was the better man for her because he would willingly die for her.

Returning to Frost, "the night" also represents the "dark night of the soul," the game-changer, that thing which makes you feel uncomfortable enough to be moved to change the status quo. Each of these characters did just that, and their lives were never the same. Frost's poem leaves us hopeful: He is acquainted with the night, but he does not live in perpetual darkness.

To close out the unit on terrorism I read *Bel Canto*: a novel, by Ann Patchett. The story is loosely based on an actual event: The Japanese embassy in Lima, Peru was attacked by terrorists and everyone inside was taken hostage. They kept the hostages for several months. Unlike the actual incident, there was no opera diva present. The author has said she thought the incident sounded operatic in nature, and so added her Diva, Roxanne Cross.

What I found most interesting, aside from the characters and their relationships, was the structure of the story itself. It is structured like one of the many operas referenced by the characters. Opera is the motif here, or at least the trope: The soprano's voice has magical powers which leave everyone enchanted or confused, at least reeling. Everyone is in love with the soprano. There is a secondary female, an alto, the one who is "earthy" of from the wrong side of the tracks, often the friend or confidant of the soprano, represented here by Carmen. The bad guys are straw men who, once they set things into motion, are barely present until an adversary is necessary to move the action along once again.

Bel Canto is an opera in three acts. Act I establishes the main characters, and the situation into which they've been thrust, the movement from the every day to the heightened reality. Act II is the creation of the society, and anticipation (of love, of action, of getting what they want). They figure out how to get through the day to day, cooking, cleaning, establishing the daily routine (before singing, singing, after singing), and discovering who they are when removed from their every day reality. This is less "Stockholm syndrome" and more the formation of a society from stressed circumstances. It called to mind *The Patience Stone* and how our protagonist can't seem to leave her comatose husband. She has no serious loyalty to him but uses him for her own growth. The hostages and captors have no loyalty to each other at the start, but as relationships develop, loyalty

develops, even between characters who don't like each other. This act is all rising action. Act III is not the epilogue. The climax of the story is when the entire group moves outside together. This is the last thing they can do together as a group, the farthest their new world can possibly expand without bursting the bubble. We also find the lovers together in this act, happy in relationships which can only take place in this fantasy world: Gen & Carmen, Hokosowa and Cross, The soap opera on television, and the live soccer game as opposed to the one on television.

The epilogue gave me pause: An opera would end with the tragedies and hostages being freed, but in a book, well, maybe the tragedy needs to be mitigated, or at least to end on a bittersweet note., figuratively, where an opera would end on an impressive note literally. I liked that Gen and Roxanne marry. If not because of a love for each other, then as a way to keep the best part of that time together, to remember the mutual people they shared. They each loved Hokosowa and Carmen, and had a great affection for each other. It's only fitting that they carry on together with the other hostage who was an active part of their world. He did the cooking for the group. The others just sat around smoking and being waited on. None of them grew through the experience and were not worthy of note in the epilogue.

Thanks to my background in opera, I was trying to decode the meaning of the arias. For example: What does it say about Hokosowa that his first opera was Rigoletto and that he identified with Gilda? Gilda is a character who gives herself up to an assassin in order to protect the person she loves, so this could be seen as foreshadowing Hokosowa's untimely end. He requested that Roxanne sing Rusalka. She is the siren who loses her voice, and when she finds it again, it leads to the demise of her lover. Again, more foreshadowing. Tosca's Vissi d'arte is a lament about living for art and love and a prayer to see her through an untenable situation. Every aria was

appropriate for the circumstances, and having read that Patchett became an opera fan, I can see the logic in her choices.

This book is written in the third person, almost seamlessly moving from character to character. It gives the piece an intimacy along the lines of Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, and Coates' *Between The World And Me*. These two pieces were written as an intimate letter to a relative so we are given to trusting what the author says. In *Bel Canto*, the story is told through an impartial, omnipotent narrator who happens to be inside the head of each character. Truth is conveyed with this technique. We have the intimacy of being inside each character's head, along with the bonus of a dependable narrator. If a character is lying to themselves, or puzzling out their thoughts, it comes through in the combination of their third person narrated inner monologue plus their actions and spoken dialogue. Patchett sometimes plays with these elements to give the reader that sense of a character's inner life and inner motivations which lead to their outer actions and words.

In *The Metamorphosis*, the family is held prisoner by Gregor's condition, likewise he is also imprisoned.

"After that, the three of them left the flat together, which was something they had not done for months, and took the tram out to the open country outside the town. They had the tram, filled with warm sunshine, all to themselves"

This line reminded me of the feeling of freedom the hostages felt when they were able to go outside, nearly back out into the world.

One of the themes of *Bel Canto*, which is also reflected in *Gatsby*, *Poisonwood Bible*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *Persepolis*, is the line between the haves, and the have-nots. Much like *Gatsby*, this is set in the lap of luxury.

The terrorists from the countryside have never experienced such opulence. Opera is a luxury. It's a privilege, and these poor children experienced it for the first time in this awful situation. The generals are older, and have a clear agenda, but their soldiers are very young teenagers. Why were they not able to recruit soldiers of proper age and training? Soldiering is a valuable skill and too expensive for this group, so the have-nots took on the have-less, the children who had nowhere else to go, no other opportunities. The chance to play and learn languages and music are luxuries.

Time is a luxury. Neither group has time to sit and reflect, to ponder the world, to step outside of their responsibilities. Some of the young soldiers, when given an opportunity, realize immense talents. Some of the adults, the "haves," when given an opportunity, realize they want out of the proverbial rat race. They want to pursue their dreams, not just their professions. They have time to dream once outside of their daily grind.

Some of the captives realize their true nature and their desires, too, ie: the Japanese accountant who once played as a hobby, but now lives for playing. Carmen learns languages, falls in love. Gen the translator, the tenor of this operatic story, learns to speak for himself, not just for others, and walks away from the experience, not as an extension of another, but now a fully formed person standing on his own, using his voice for his own purpose, a lesson all of the characters, and readers, can take away from *Bel Canto*. With the subsequent addition of *The Bell Jar* to my collection of books, I can say that Ester could've used this advice as well.

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath is a bildungsroman, which is my favorite literary device (just because of the name - it sounds like "building the Roman"). This is the coming of age story of a young woman set in the 1950s. My first thought after reading this was that nothing has changed except for the technology. Today, this would be called a quarter life crisis and she would be handed a prescription for anti-depressants. I chose the

passage about the fig tree despite the fact that I hate to use the most popular or cliché quotes as my focus because it entirely encapsulates the biggest problem Esther faced: nearly unlimited choice.

Esther was a victim of her time period: The 1940s saw a large wave of women enter the workforce. This opened up new possibilities for women, but they were expected, in the 1950s, to return to their traditional pre-war roles as wives and mothers. By the 1960s, the women's movement was in full swing. Esther was a pioneer of these rough waters. She had the option to be a famous and powerful editor, or an Olympian, or a writer, or a wife and mother, but she didn't believe she could have it all. That notion of "having it all," that slogan used to market to women, would come later. She wasn't strong enough to discard the expectations of society (marry and have children) to forge her own path, instead she was caught in the time pre-women's revolution where you can be anything you want to be, but also must be everything society dictates. No matter how many figs were on the tree, they were essentially forbidden fruit. This is why Daisy Buchanan wished for her daughter to be a "perfect little fool" in *The Great Gatsby*: Ignorance is bliss, having no choice can be a comfort- there is no chance to make the wrong choice is there is none to make.

One of the things which has changed between now and then, is awareness and acceptance of depression as an illness which can be mitigated, if not entirely cured. The availability of information about depression, the removal of the stigma of mental illness, increased awareness surrounding depression and suicidal thoughts, and new science, has made living with depression easier.

This book is incredible in its insight into depression. Plath was a truly gifted writer who knew her subject intimately. The way she used language is impressive: The lines, the paragraphs, the choice and repetition of words, all underscore what she is trying to convey: A disjointed mind (she wasn't really

awake for 21 days straight), fading in and out of awareness as her situation changed, as the treatments took effect.

A bell jar is a perfect metaphor for depression: a distorted perception of the outside world, feeling exposed yet suffocating, being treated like a specimen, something to study (as in the case with the score of doctors who would visit her en masse). Esther was suffocated by the expectations of society.

Considering that one of Esther's issues was an overwhelming amount of choice, I realized that quite the opposite happens in *The Poisonwood Bible* where they go from such western luxuries as a washing machine and gas stove, to a place where they have little choice in what they do to survive, or how they do it. Another similar theme between the two is the role of a woman in society, and how she would exercise her rights- whichever ones she had.

In comparison to our unit on racism, I thought about the various levels of oppression that white women and men of color face, and the double discrimination against women of color. The only person of color in *The Bell Jar* was a man who helped serve food to the patients. There were no women of color in the posh asylum where Esther recovered. It seems that many of our movements, even today, begin with white women getting attention then maybe, after being reminded, turn the mic over to women of color. Jesamyn Ward's *The Fire This Time* addresses some of this throughout the various pieces, particularly in the piece on Rachel Dolezal, the woman who calls herself "transracial." I can almost see how she might believe that, but camaraderie through oppression is not universal. What I have been through as a woman is quite different from that of a person of color. Having the same oppressor doesn't necessarily mean having the same experience.

In *The Complete Persepolis*, Marjane faces her own bout of depression and suicidal contemplation and eventual attempt. Her situation is much like

Esther's: She doesn't quite fit in to her society, is not the type to enjoy the role that society expects her to play. and has no real outlet or assistance in overcoming her depression. Both had to contend with male doctors who dismissed her concerns, or who treated her as an experiment instead of a person. Likewise, The Woman in The Patience Stone had little choice in her situation, even when she was the only conscious adult in the family. The burden of expectations placed on her were too heavy. The secrets she had to keep because of such expectations weighed her down. She used her husband to unload, but imagine if she had been able to speak with someone about these things, a professional who could help her process her emotions and move on with her life. She wouldn't have committed a kind of "suicide by cop" by imploding her patience stone and bringing on her personal armageddon.

We know, rather believe, that depression is anger turned inward. When we cannot process our anger at the world, or other people, or at a situation, some people tend to turn that anger on themselves. The line from the book which sticks with me the most, which rings the most true: "But when it came right down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn't do it. It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, a whole lot harder to get at." The secret place where we feel fear, disgust, hate, frustration... all of these things were taboo for a woman of the 1950s to feel, let alone process, and Esther stopped feeling. Dr. Nolan was pleased when Esther declared that she hated her mother because she was starting to feel, and to place those emotions onto the people who caused or deserved them.

Esther was well acquainted with Frost's version of "the night." She "should have" been happy by the standards of the day, but despite meeting so many of society's benchmarks for female success, she wasn't. Esther was

in a black and white world where you were either this or that, either a whore or a prude, either a career women or a mother. She so thoroughly believed that she couldn't have it all that she fell into a deep depression. It's unfortunate that Sylvia Plath didn't get the help she needed, didn't get what seemed like Esther's happy ending, walking out of the asylum with the ability to handle her emotions, her demons. I'm glad she left us the gift of this book.

Taken together, the books I've surveyed, which range in time from 1899 to the turn of the 21st century, can best be summed up by Robert Frost's poem, *Acquainted with the night*.

"And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky
Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night."

To be "acquainted with the night" is to be acquainted with the dark, lonely place that women often occupy in the world. Night... dark... moon vs sun... female vs male. I think that is why it was such a revelation to a man such as Frost- this is the place where women live, certainly all of the women from these esteemed books. They have also demonstrate how society has become more accepting of certain things- people, beliefs, and traits which were once viewed as "other." That does not mean the "othering" has stopped. Religious oppression, racism, ethnic boas, classism, and gender biases are symptoms of the illness, the structure which keeps an elite group in power. How to change that power structure once and for all is something that is still beyond me. I only know what I can do personally: keep journeying, keep accepting, and keep reading.

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