

The Effort to Know: A Literary Journey

Literature is not merely a subject, it offers a perspective. As each individual inhabits their own respectively unique lens, a variety of different views is rendered. Even with this consideration, perspectives change over time, thus, leaving the door open for more opinions. Differing views culminate in different eras throughout time that mirror reality. Through the literary journey of our selected novels, essays and poems, we are provided with insight into perspectives, how they intertwine and relate to how the world once was and how it has grown. Our literature journey through colonial and postcolonial works offer a thematic approach as we glimpse at how the history of the world has unfolded. The stories are evocative of the time in form and content – revealing atrocities and deep truths we should never forget (Keefer). Connections are made by people, by movements, by goods, and by ideas. Historical lenses of the unilinear, dominant Eurocentric vantage point of time in history has prevailed where this Western dominance has had a butterfly effect on the rest of the globe, but consideration of connections is crucial. As the web of human stories continuously grows, it strengthens and pushes history into the future. These stories facilitate powerful fictional entities that enable the organization of people and reality, just as they describe and shape reality, our identity is then formed. Through my own reflecting on the stories and poems read throughout this semester, a clearer picture of the human network of history has evolved, allowing me to shed perspective on reality. It was through this process of readings that I came to know that fiction is vital to us as humans. The writings provided by the authors provided a lens to gain a more meaningful perspective on human suffering. Suffering caused by our belief in some entity or fiction, a religious myth, a nationalistic allegiance or even our lack of effort to know, therefore we must continually strive to distinguish myth from reality. Racism, dehumanization, religious ideologies have propagated feelings of superiority based on fiction, leaving suffering of the “other” and the ramifications of that, the true reality. Just as all stories are tools for mankind, their lens provides a framework that can impact, influence and change perceptions of the real cultural perimeters that we are operating in, even today. **So** how do we really know ourselves in this dizzying world, when we are so immersed and intertwined with other people’s stories, with what we believe is true and with what they believe is true. Our stories, our identities are told and retold, created and recreated, as fitting tales for others and ourselves. We use others’ stories to illuminate our own story. Truth and reality are created by our stories and how we use them to identify who we are. We must analyze how we determine if something is real? The solution could be “very simple – just ask yourself, ‘Can it suffer?’” (Harari p.177). Forcing the bigger question for humanity of not what is the meaning of life, but how can we stop suffering in this world? For me, this was one of the biggest learning outcomes I gained from this journey. Additionally, I accumulated more perspective on the value of literature, as a tool, as a living body of work, that provides our society the ability to reflect, to influence and to shape our ever-evolving human experience. Through comparative connections of themes regarding religion, dehumanization, identity and racism in historical context, as well as the chosen style and

structure of the assigned readings, reveal integrations of thoughts, multiple perspectives and varied cultural narratives that allow us, as the reader, to integrate a more comprehensive picture of the shared human experience.

Just as literature connects us to our own humanity and truths, it stores our human experiences. Our truths are often connected to our beliefs and our beliefs, in turn, can be connected not only by our experiences but also through religion. Religious beliefs throughout history have been attractive as a means for the basis of morality as well as other human desires such as social contact, order, acceptance, a way to cope with death, salvation, forgiveness, among other desires. Religious narratives spoken in black and white terms of good and evil often fuel aggression and justification of oppression. Even if we feel that most religious beliefs are not true, the crux is that the emotional brain does not much care. Religion may anesthetize, but it can also invigorate the believer, sometimes to the point of hazardous, puritanical morality. Christianity for the colonists was a driving force for justification; for their high-minded desire to civilize non-Europeans. As the imperialists expanded their reach, Africa became a prime location due to its abundance of resources, it was ripe for exploitation and Christianity was one of the sanctifications. Christianity rode on the back of the imperialist idea of the white man's burden." The "white man's burden" was to civilize and reform this African "barbaric" culture. For Christianity represented civilization and morality, lending the "white man's burden" as a euphemism for imperialistic expansion. This "white man's burden" to civilize non-whites was expressed in Rudyard Kipling's poem:

*Take up the White Man's burden—
Send forth the best ye breed—
Go send your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need
To wait in heavy harness
On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half devil and half child
Take up the White Man's burden
In patience to abide
To veil the threat of terror
And check the show of pride;
By open speech and simple
An hundred times made plain
To seek another's profit
And work another's gain
Take up the White Man's burden—
And reap his old reward:
The blame of those ye better
The hate of those ye guard—
The cry of hosts ye humour
(Ah slowly) to the light:*

*"Why brought ye us from bondage,
"Our loved Egyptian night?"
Take up the White Man's burden-
Have done with childish days-
The lightly proffered laurel,
The easy, ungrudged praise.
Comes now, to search your manhood
Through all the thankless years,
Cold-edged with dear-bought wisdom,
The judgment of your peers!"*

Through the lens of Kipling's poem, the reader sees the white man's responsibility, his racial superiority. Metaphorically, the white man is stronger and nobler than the "sullen." The rhythmic pattern of the poem beats in an orderly manner in line with the order the imperialists aim to bestow upon them. Paradoxically, the white man comes to bring peace to the savages through force. The poem implements devices such as personification, "as sickness has ears," repetition (anaphora) of "mark them" as well as allusions referring to the biblical story of the Canaanites being freed from Egypt. Kipling was considered a great imperialist poet and propagandist who believed that colonial expansionism was the way to bring peace to the "heathens" backed by the culture of superiority of that current zeitgeist. The content of the poem is clearly racist under the lens of our current zeitgeist, therefore context and history must be considered in examining it. Notably, the poem instills the idea that the *White Man's Burden* was to better savage peoples (read non-whites), however, it does conveniently disregard the economic motivations. Kipling captures the imperialist attitude with "your new caught sullen peoples, half-devil and half-child," referring to the European belief that the Africans were savages. "European missionaries called upon the tenants of Christianity to spread what they believed was a just and compassionate doctrine" (Philosophy of Colonialism). The missionaries would degrade the culture and society of the African people, so they would come "slowly to the light" and lament their release from "bondage." In essence, Kipling may have believed that "these non-white racial groups were so backward that they would be unable to comprehend the benefits of Europeanization." For missionaries of the time, this racially based logic was used to convert the "heathens" to the intrinsically "superior" culture and religion.

The infiltration of Christian missionaries into Igbo society undermined cultural beliefs in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Personal identity is challenged when beliefs and customs are repressed. With the eventual arrival of the Christian missionaries, the white man's culture gains influence, repressing and enslaving the Igbo people. The new established white government synchronized with the religious authority openly supported the Church and punished the Igbo for practicing their beliefs. This was an attack on their identity as to what makes them who they are as African people. Use of a variety of character lenses in the novel allows the reader to many different viewpoints as different vehicles for the same story. The writing style of the novel incorporates proverbs from the Igbo tradition, an oral tradition of storytelling is forthcoming in Achebe's use of smaller stories within the larger context of the novel as well as Igbo vocabulary (foo-foo), voice and phrases to capture the true essence of the Igbo culture.

“The market in Umuike is a wonderful place, said the young man who had been sent by Obierika to buy the giant goat. “There are so many people on it that if you throw up a grain of sand it would not find a way to fall to earth again” (Achebe p.116).

The main character, Okonkwo, epitomizes Igbo culture and tradition, a self-made man, who aspires to be the tribal leader. An unfortunate event of Okonkwo’s gun explosion leads to an accidental killing of a fellow clansman and he is banished. When Christian missionaries arrive to convert his village, Okonkwo’s son, Nwoye, converts. Obierika, Okonkwo's best friend laments:

“The white man says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up this religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (Achebe p.129).

The Igbo abandon their own beliefs for Western culture, thus creating a divide among themselves as converts to Christianity feel “superior” to those who hold onto to Igbo tradition. This split works to the advantage of the Church’s survival. This strategy of disempowerment, generating conflict between the believers and non-believers and lastly, infiltrating the government to establish a Christian alliance and control, formed the insidious disintegration of Igbo culture. “European powers strategically implemented Christianity as a divisive imperialist tool” (Philosophy of Colonialism). The title of the novel itself, *Things Fall Apart*, foreshadows the falling apart of the Igbo tribal commune, compliments of the “white man’s burden,” the Christian church and the newly formed English government together had dissolved Igbo social and religious structure. As Achebe, himself, raised in the Christian church, learned more about colonialism and its Christian backdrop, he embraced his forefather’s beliefs in Igbo traditions. Achebe wanted to recapture African culture and tradition and reclaim it from colonial ideology. The theme of suffering at the hands of colonial powers as well as the suffering that Okonkwo brings upon his own, serve as instruments that identify the paradigm of suffering. Suffering may serve as identity and Achebe may be providing the “duty of memory.” His novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is not only a story of the Igbo people and tradition brutalized by the imperialists, but a mirror held to how Western morality and superiority lost their own morality. In essence, the real savages were converting the “savages.”

Christian missions not only justified colonialism through “civilizing” the barbarians but it was deeply enmeshed in the ambition of the colonial empires, as even today, missionaries go to Africa to “help”. In *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver, her character Nathan Price, a missionary, is a representative of religion as oppression. He does battle with his religion on the local Congolese and loses. Nathan Price’s abusive, one-sided, religious, self-deluding, egomaniac character is the arrogant centering point from which his daughters and wife exist in the novel. Nathan laments his “burden”:

"Up to me to make amens; I see no amens to make! The Belgians and American business brought civilization to the Congo! American aid will be the Congo's salvation. You'll see!" (Kingsolver p.121)

"First of all, young man, I do not fear any man in Kilanga. I am a messenger of God's great good news for all mankind, and He has bestowed upon me a greater strength than the brute ox or the most stalwart among the heathen." (Kingsolver p. 130)

The author captures the colonial voice through her choice of words as it relates to the ideology of the white man's burden and a superior white culture through religion. America will save the Congo through its messenger of God – Nathan. Use of words such as "civilization," "amens," "salvation" provides a traditional, colonial narrative of thought and superiority. Use of exclamation marks express his excitement and passion to civilize the barbarians. Kingsolver contrasts this missionary stereotype with the loose Christian-pantheistic Brother Fowles, who also is a missionary, but his spiritual religion is very different. Brother Fowles, represents spiritual religion without animosity towards others beliefs, on the contrary, he is open to exploring and accepting other beliefs, transcending his own ego. In effect, presenting the "true" meaning of Christianity and those that adhere to it as opposed to those who use it to control and oppress others. He comments:

"There are Christians and then there are Christians." (Kingsolver p.255)

Nathan's Christianity is rigid and dogmatic to strengthen his own ego. He is selling religion as a set of rigid beliefs to prove himself "right" and everyone else is wrong. His evangelic religion is not implemented for the "good" of the Congolese but rather to patronize them to assert his truth. His true identity, in reality, is masked by appearance as a "savior" but eventually, the Price family learns to see both themselves and Africa for what they are. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, the imperialist presumption and cultural arrogance of bringing the people of the Congo a better way of life backfires when the Congolese take a democratic vote on whether or not to accept Jesus as their God. Kingsolver uses the novel to make a political point and the poisonous effect of the Bible, metaphorically entertained in the title. Like Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, Kingsolver implements a variety of character lenses. She incorporates multi-narration of five different women, Orleana (the wife) and her four daughters. In doing so, she allows the reader to interpret the novel from these five different viewpoints for multiple interpretations and insight of the same story. This wider catch of narration allows the reader to a multiple critique of the colonization, offering a variety of emotional feelings that appeal to pathos. Additionally, Kingsolver is giving women a voice and the opportunity for the Congolese to be heard. The narrative structure not only allows us to piece different viewpoints together, but it also reminds us that there is always more than one side to a story. In contrast, she foregoes giving Nathan a narrative part in the novel because "he represents an historical attitude" which is not shared by the narrating Price women, which is why their interpretations and views of him throughout the novel prove important to the story" to additionally reveal the toxic effects of colonialism and human suffering. The novel exemplifies how Christianity in colonialism had aptly set the tone for the rest of the Congo's history, a legacy of racism, corruption and social stratification.

James Baldwin, in *The Fire Next Time*, believed that Christianity had historically oppressed black people and it is not only a tool that white people have used to suppress others, but it also writhes with hypocrisy. Baldwin realized that his “fate had been sealed forever, from the beginning of time” because the Bible had been written by white men and he was the descendant of Ham, who had been cursed and predestined to be a slave (Baldwin p.36). What Christianity perpetuated, kept black people stagnant and in their place. In Baldwin’s second essay, *The Fire Next Time*, “*Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind*” he addresses his personal experiences with Christianity and God throughout his life. The church initially saved him and then “oppressed” him, for Baldwin, its divisive messaging prevents the progress of society. This appeal to ethos, as Baldwin is a prominent and valid speaker, bares weight within the black community but extends to white America as well. This inclusivity of both races questions the collective blind faith in a time where society must question and disrupt the norm to ensure the progress of society. Ultimately, Baldwin believed that religion, in general, holds both white and black people back from true liberation. This suffering from religions crosses racial lines. Evident is the disconnect between religious theology and actual practice. Religion has historically been used to oppress black people and it is riddled with hypocrisy, the same hypocrisy evident in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Baldwin compared the church “to being in a theatre where he was behind the scenes and knew how the illusion worked” (Baldwin p.37). Additionally, Baldwin’s Christianity was not only oppressive but is self-deluding.

“It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being (and let us not ask whether or not this is possible; I think we must believe that it is possible) must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church. If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him.” (Baldwin p.47)

Baldwin’s tone is a call to action. His use of negatively connoted words, “divorce,” “prohibitions,” “crimes,” “hypocrisies” are associated with the church, appealing to pathos. He eloquently implements his rhetorical force through the use of repetition and contrasts. Although, I do find it interesting that Baldwin advocates that not only do black and white people need each other, but black people must accept white people with love. To me, this is more consistent with proposing a belief or a faith that transcends ego much like Brother Fowles in *The Poisonwood Bible*. In the following passage, Baldwin comments on America’s use of a Eurocentric lens through which white people have been manipulated by their own ignorance and inability to hold a mirror to historical atrocities.

“You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they (black men) are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity. Try

to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality." (Baldwin p. 8-9)

Baldwin implements rhetoric devices of repetition, metaphor, contrasts of "us versus them," in an empathetic tone to appeal to pathos. White people, too, have been manipulated by their own ignorance. Their inability to hold a mirror to historical atrocities. White people have to believe in this inferiority. Baldwin felt that this is compounded by belief in organized religion where historically Christianity oppressed, dominated and converted the masses during colonialism/imperialism, spreading white inferiority. Christianity was the excuse. "Do not believe what the white people say about you" he warns in an open letter to his nephew in his first essay entitled "*My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation.*" Baldwin personally addresses his nephew, James, acknowledging what it means to be a black man while delivering a plea for his nephew to retain hope. White America has a history that it has yet to come to terms with. What they know to be true would be shaken at its core. When he writes "*You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature,*" he relays empathy as well as provides a symbolic reference to the order of nature and its relation to Christianity in terms of the laws of nature, relevant to the laws of Christianity (Baldwin p.8). Natural order is the moral source of natural law. Baldwin reflected upon personal experiences with Christianity and God throughout his life with the stand that it's messaging prevents the progress of society. He attributed the religious belief of an afterlife to be destructive to people as it prevents them from dealing with their present reality, as there is no finality to life. Baldwin heeds the necessity to discard these beliefs and accept death or suffer the consequences of an escapist society in denial. He believes that this state of denial is a deep-rooted cultural issue of white culture developed by religious practices. Christianity was the religion of whites and could not satisfy Baldwin's yearning for discovering his identity. Baldwin expresses how white people have no sense of accountability for their acts of oppression towards African Americans compounded by their denial of their own morality. Concluding that once this belief system is changed, America may have a promising future of equality and freedom. The necessity for white America to open their eyes to their "innocence" and Black individuals to accept their past, racial conciliation and integration can actualize. "The danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity," Baldwin wrote in the letter to his namesake nephew in *The Fire Next Time* (Baldwin p.8). "Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature"(Baldwin p.9). Imagine that warning in the context of the volatile racial climate of today. Baldwin ironically addresses that the black suffering has brought beauty into the world as black people are in the position to teach their oppressors to see beauty as a consequence of the oppression they have endured.

Jesmyn Ward's anthology of *The Fire This Time* inspired by Baldwin is divided into three themes of the "negro problem" to examine the ineffectiveness of religion, continued generational influences and relationships. Just as Baldwin begins his plea for more understanding and broader thinking for white and black people in America, designating

Christianity as oppression for black people, the black Muslim point of view, in Baldwin's opinion holds the same prejudices against white America that white America has historically held against black people. This is not a resolution to racial issues. It relays a narrow-minded, limited view of the American perspective that is blinded by collective truths. Baldwin provides a very inclusive approach to handling race conciliation. Ward then applies his work to black America today where black men are, unfortunately, unjustly shot by police. *The Fire This Time*, shifts from the future to the present tense, from prophecy to confirmation. However, in "contrast to Baldwin's singular epistle, Ward's book is an anthology. As such, it gathers a range of perspectives that don't always align," however, this provides insight into the complexity of black life" (Sorett). A truthful and real discussion on what is happening in America today can only shine a light on the darkness of race relations. The anthology provides a black lens to America and the harsh reality of the lack of acknowledgment that is as true today as it was when Baldwin wrote of the black life experience. Ward had wrestled with her "feelings about Zimmerman's acquittal (the officer who shot black teenager Trayvon Martin) which gave her the idea to "gather new voices in one place, in a lasting, physical form, and provide a forum for those writers to dissent, to call to account, to witness, to reckon" (Smith). In *The Fire This Time*, Poet Claudia Rankine's conversation on how being black right now in America feels overwhelming, it is to "be in a perpetual state of mourning" (Staff). Applying the black lens to America provides a framework that can impact, influence and change perceptions of the real cultural perimeters that we are operating within today. Trayvon Martin. Tamir Rice. Charlottesville riot. America's racial divide has exacted a heavy toll on black men and boys. Ward ruminates on the issue of identity "Ward reflects on her strong and proud connection to her blackness even after genetic testing reveals that her ancestry is more European than African" (Jones). She found the result "discomfiting," she writes, "I looked into the mirror and didn't know how to understand myself" (Ward). This illuminates the racial fictions that hold up our identities. Despite scientists' ability to isolate genomes, many of us proudly maintain familial ties that bypass biology, as "Mitchell Jackson's essay on the five men who fathered him powerfully illustrates within the anthology. Identities and affiliations, at times, resist the claims of science and reason" (Sorret).

Ta-Nehisi Coates, in *Between the World and Me*, rejects Christianity for its whitewashing of America. Like Baldwin, he provides an intimate dialogue in a letter written to his 15 year-old son, Samori, where he passes down his personal account of what it means to be a black male living in America and the perils that it entails. It is a history rooted in the "dream." Coates "*Between the World and Me*" utilizes structural and thematic elements from Baldwin's work and clearly draws influence from "*The Fire Next Time*" through its formatting and account of racial issues in a more modern-day application. Although both works tackle racial issues in America, the authors' perspectives considerably differ. First and most notably, Baldwin's tone and affect in his writing lend him to stylistically be the "reverend," whereas Coates lays out his messages like a "rapper" or "emcee." For me, Coates rhetorical style is highly emotional, angry and boldfaced. In Baldwin's first essay, he conveys a more idealistic message of an optimistic future to his nephew James, a plea to the future generation. Whereas, Coates's alerts his son to what he views as an unwavering bleak reality in which underlying racial tension and the issue of the "dream" that has been conjured throughout history and reinforced throughout media. The

white supremacist ideology of the Christian church and the notion of a white god for Coates is inherently racist. For Coates, white supremacy in and out of the church is forever woven into the fabric of America; it will never be eradicated. Since God does not exist, Coates argues, there can be no collective hope or national redemption. "The civil-rights movement that borrowed so much of Baldwin's intellectual force was powered on ideas: Christian brotherhood, post-Enlightenment notions of freedom, the counter-Colonialism that swept Africa throughout the '60s and put America to shame. Today it sometimes seems that ideas have lost that ability to charge and to chasten. It seems we need to see a body" (Bild). We live, Coates tells us, in an amoral universe in which the powerful have little desire to help the powerless. This Coates describes as his general theory of life, one in which "no one was coming to save me." What specifically makes black atheism black, according to Coates, is the recognition that white people, like all peoples, are inclined towards self-interest and therefore appeals to moral conscience or universal laws about racial injustice are bound to have little effect. Religion is often by its very nature exclusionary. Atheism can, for some, allow for a real coming together"(Steinmetz-Jenkins).

"America understands itself as God's handiwork, but the black body is the clearest evidence that America is the work of men." (Coates p.12)

"Religion could not tell me." (Coates p.29)

"I could not retreat, as did so many, into the church and its mysteries." (Coates p.28)

"We would not stand for their anthems. We would not kneel before their God. And so, I had no sense that any just God was on my side." (Coates p.28)

"I have no God to hold me up. And I believe that when they shatter the body they shatter everything, and I knew that all of us—Christians, Muslims, atheists—lived in this fear of this truth." (Coates p.113-114)

"A god whom I cannot know and in whom I do not believe" (Coates p.142)

These passages reiterate his lack of belief in the system of Christianity as beneficial for the black community. He implements rhetoric devices of repetition, negatively connoted words and contrasts to forcefully drive his message through an affective tone. In essence, Coates exudes this fatalism about white supremacy, the pessimism of black freedom and the myth of the "American Dream" perpetuated through religion.

Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* presents an identifying theme that pervades across the system of monotheistic religions-the body is always associated with shame, something that should be rejected, something that has an expiration date and will go back to the earth. "In the beginning of the novel the woman has no body, she is ashamed of her body, and the man, his body, is lying there as a stone. He is on the floor, he doesn't move, he has no desires. Both bodies, of the man and of the woman, are objects of suffering, elements of shame" (Rahimi).

The subjugation and oppression for women through religion and culture is comparable to the same suffering at the hands of colonialists, where men are seeking power and control. Encouraged by religion we see women viewed with inhumanity because they are seen as “impure” or “inferior.” I enjoyed reading this novel as a powerful piece of feminist writing by a courageous, male author. No matter how hard men may try to repress women, our humanity cannot be denied. This is apropos to the current climate of the women’s movement becoming mainstream. In the novel, the wife, who remains nameless to represent all women, shares the truth of her life. When women are suffering all of society suffers. Since women represent half the population, equal representation across all aspects of life needs to be implemented in this male-oriented culture. As women, we offer a stronger partnership together with men than set apart from them. The wife’s internal dialogue provides a voyeuristic insight into her every thought and feeling. Rahimi implements rhetoric devices of repetition of her “voice” throughout the novel. Her voice that has been silenced like many other women in her culture. The unnamed wife in *The Patience Stone* is steeped in a culture with certain expectations from her as a Muslim wife where she is portrayed as invisible. References to how women should be treated laid out in the old and new testament may be read as oppressive, playing the role of man’s servant. Women endure coarse treatment from their own religious beliefs as well as those of their husband. Thomas Aquinas’s thoughts on women as divinely inferior may have a basis in Aristotle’s theory on reproductive biology, where the sperm is the “formative agent” and the woman merely a vessel. Women by nature are “defective and misbegotten” in this Aquinas quote:

“As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active power of the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of a woman comes from defect in the active power . . .” (Thomas Aquinas)

The portrayal of female characters in literature such as Daisy in the *Great Gatsby*, render her a shallow, fake, foolish, materialistic person, who despite her husband’s blatant infidelity puts on an act to maintain her social status and her appearance in the community as an upper- class lady of society. The role of women, in a male dominant culture, deems what a woman does and what she must tolerate. When Daisy’s daughter is born, she remarks:

“I am glad it’s a girl. And I hope she will be a fool, that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool” (Fitzgerald p.17)

A woman’s place in society is fixed and rigid in the eyes of Daisy. Repetition of “girl” provides emphasis on the importance of how that gender will be received and perceived in society. Her reference to hoping she will be a “fool” defines this expectation that women are silenced, without a voice to speak their truth, comparable to *The Patience Stone*. Most of the female characters in *The Great Gatsby* are negatively portrayed as foolish, selfish and materialistic. It is possible that this characterization was common thought during that era. In consideration of the time in history and the audience, this may have been very well accepted by both genders. This was a time when women were not equal to men and definitely had their

place. The negative portrayal of women in his novel deems women have little substance and only care about material possessions, only to be saved by the men in their lives. The characterization of these damsels in distress archetypes has had a long history in our literature. This brainless characterization of women is comparable to the concept of race biology, where black people were deemed less intelligent based on their race. The character of Marlow in *The Heart of Darkness* goes into great lengths in his comparison of his superior European culture to the local, less intelligent culture of the African people. But most notable in the novel by Conrad is the lack of a role women play as well as their treatment as second-class citizens. The novel begins with women knitting, who are reduced to nothing but body shapes. They do, however, provide foreshadowing of his fate. Furthermore, when Marlow's aunt helps him obtain employment, he is humiliated to have stooped so low as to ask her. Women were seen as naïve, not of much value and not very intelligent. Women are mere delicate flowers that must be protected as they cannot handle the truth about the world. They must be kept in their bubble. In a patronizing tone, Marlow remarks:

"It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up, it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over."(Conrad p.193)

This patronizing passage about Marlow's aunt deploys rhetorical devices of "they" referring to women, for emphasis on this "weaker" sex. Use of winding sentences and commas provide storytelling to the climatic ending where men have been living with women in this manner since the beginning of time. In essence, taking away the power of women.

I found Rahimi's writing simplistic, poetic, and thoughtful. Abundant with figurative language as noted in the following passage describing the body of the wounded husband:

"He has a beard. Pepper and salt. He is thinner. Too thin. Nothing but skin and bones. Pale. Wrinkled. His nose more hawk-like than ever. He still isn't laughing, and still looks strangely mocking. His mouth is half open. His eyes, even smaller now, have retreated into their sockets. His gaze is fixed on the ceiling, on the exposed, blackened, rotting beams. His arms lie passive along his sides. Beneath his translucent skin, the veins twine around the jutting bones of his body like sleeping worms" (Rahimi p.6).

This passage implements a poetic rhythm with short interspersed sentences. The short sentences provide emotional emphasis for the reader. Descriptive wording provides this contrast of poetry to the unfortunate plight of the husband. The reader receives this image of a living corpse. Use of words such as "passive", "half-open," "smaller," reveal his loss of power. Today, I believe there is this sense of men feeling as though they are losing power and authority over women in relation to sexist ideology. The hegemony of the past is slowly being replaced with different people, people of color, women, and other minorities. The preponderance of the white man's story is shrinking.

In *God Dies by the Nile*, El Saadawi exposes the cultural patrimony and religious fundamentalism in rural Egypt, exposes this microcosm of oppressed women, through the eyes of a non-western perspective. Through the rights of religion, women's bodies are invaded, their bodies are not their own. Young girls undergo female genital mutilation despite the dangerous health effects it has on their bodies, a practice rooted in religion and gender inequality that attempts to control women's sexuality and preserve ideas about purity, modesty, and beauty. This reading was emotional for me, in regards to the fact, that this genital mutilation continues today, despite its ban in 2008, speaks to the difficulty in eroding cultural traits that are steeped in beliefs that hold this "tradition" because it prevents women from becoming adulterous, it makes women pure and clean as well as the misconception that it is a religious rite of passage that gives young girls dignity and probably the most confounding fact of today is that doctors in Egypt exacerbate the problem by performing these procedures as a means of extra income. El Saadawi addresses the double standard of society as well as the ingrained cultural ethos of the importance of "virtue" in girls. Men forbid in women what they permit for themselves. Sex is about pride and virility for men but for women, it is shame and degradation. The Mayor's son, Tariq, feels that "girls have no morals these days" (Saadawi p.66). "Tariq, uses his class status to molest and violate female servants in the Mayor's household. This is conveyed to us by Tariq's mother who is conscious of the plight of poor servant women. Tariq's aggressive sexual conduct can be considered as a violation of the powerless women by the powerful upper -class people where the values of greed, lust, extravagance and pleasure are allowed to flourish on the misery of the toiling masses" (Shihada p. 168).

The Mayor's wife challenges Tariq, "Why not admit that its men who no longer have any morals?"

The Mayor laughed. "there is nothing new to that. Men have always been immoral. But now women are throwing virtue overboard, and that will lead to a real catastrophe."

"Why a catastrophe? Why not equality? Or justice?"

The son shook his head and gave his mother a reproving look.

"No, mother. I don't agree with you when you talk of equality. Girls are not the same as boys. The most precious thing they possess is their virtue." (Saadawi p.66)

The hypocrisy of Tariq's virtue is questioned by his mother as he has a known history of assaulting women such as the servant girls in the household. Tariq justifies the double standard. Chastity and virtue are essential for women as lust and dominance are natural for men. There is a preoccupation with female virginity set by the moral codes of men who rule the upper class. El Saadawi narrates the male privileged discourse between Tariq and his father to appeal to pathos. Writing from a female perspective to articulate a feminist perspective through the mother, who is also shaped by the Islamic culture as a traditionally silenced female voice. Interestingly enough the reader is allowed, courtesy of the author, to view the female characters from the periphery of the male-dominated culture. Nefissa, Fatheya, Zeinab, and

Zakeya also provide the female perspectives through the third person narrator. They are different voices in the story of female oppression. In *The Patience Stone* by Rahimi, the nameless woman also confronts the social and cultural issues directly. She articulates the gender inequalities that privilege males and suppress her as a woman. This theme of women as nothing but vessels to bare children, adhering to strict sanctions on sex, while men are free is pervasive in both *God Dies by the Nile* and *The Patience Stone*. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad's female characters are silent, seen but not heard, as evident in the figure of Kurtz's African mistress.

In *God Dies by the Nile*, Zakeya kills the abusive Mayor, silencing him. After her arrest, Zakeya tells her fellow inmates that she buried Allah on the bank of the Nile. The oppression of the religion in the hands of the corrupted men of the village dies. When she kills the Mayor, it was because it was Allah's choice. Zakeya is able to restore her power, but only through resistance. The silencing of women at the hands of men in the name of religion is also exposed in *The Patience Stone*, where Rahimi provides a voice for women that shows the inside of their bodies as well as their conscious thoughts. Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* addresses this gender inequality by providing a multinarrative voice of the five women, in contrast to foregoing Nathan Price a narrative position in the novel. Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart* provides insight into this male dominance and female oppression, where women have their place, as "we all know that a man is the head of the family and the wives do his bidding (Achebe p.132). Women were reduced to being vessels to bear children and completing domestic chores. The social attitudes towards women were emphasized through gender stratification and ingrained patriarchal values and religion. El Saadawi has criticized religion as the "root of the oppression of women lies that in the global post-modern capitalist system which is supported by religious fundamentalism." As her character Zakeya looks for Allah to save her, she realizes in order to save herself she must expose the truth about cultural patrimony and religious fundamentalism by killing the Mayor. The role of religion in the oppression of women warrants discussion of truths versus beliefs. Economic and social paradigms must be transformed to address the violence against women to reverse this systemic structure that generates abusive behavior, potential aggressors, as well as the effects of poverty and social marginalization to provide a more conducive environment to rid ourselves of gender violence. El Saadawi writes that certain Islamic practices promote the function of women to motherhood, limiting her identity and notion of self within the social constructs in which she lives, where suffering under this patriarchy precedes psychological oppression that is generationally passed down through the very real societal limitations of gender and class, manifested in the form of self-oppression. Self-oppression in one's mind's eye as well through one's social identity.

In *The Great Gatsby*, the "eyes" of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg see everything, the new religion is wealth. This religion of wealth takes the place of an organized religion, but it is also oppressive in that it stratifies society. In Rushdie's *The Golden House*, there is no amount of money that can free a man of his "sins." Could money and religion be more similar than we actually realize? Perhaps money is a superhuman controlling power unlike our God of religion? "It's not that (all) people outwardly worship money — or the economy or financial institutions. But many of the trappings of organized religion *are* based around them" (Brown). As our financial

system is based on faith. There is undoubtedly suffering that happens around money. Comparatively, this theme of religion signifies what both Baldwin and Coates, as well as Kingsolver relayed, religion used to justify colonial actions. The watchful gaze of Dr. Eckleburg's eyes witnesses a world that has lost its moral compass and replaced it with indulgence. With the inherent lack of religious belief in the upper echelon of society, Fitzgerald's God stands apart from an organized religion, leaning on capitalism, as it presents in the physical form as the billboard. The billboard with omniscient eyes positioned high above the mortals below. The narrator, Nick Carraway, describes Gatsby's early history through a comparison of Gatsby and Jesus, that alludes to how Gatsby created himself. Metaphorically, Fitzgerald aligns the concept of Jesus, who makes himself the son of God to Gatsby's invention of himself as a "platonic conception of himself" (Fitzgerald p.97). Gatsby, like Christ, becomes an idealistic image of himself. Through descriptive words relating to faith, negative vocabulary in relation to his father's business, and use of commas and longer sentence structure to impart the storytelling. His winding sentences take the reader on a journey through the character's arrival. Fitzgerald uses contrasts when he symbolizes West Egg as new money and the present versus East Egg which symbolizes the past as well as the decline of morality.

"The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God, a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that" and he must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty. So, he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen- year- old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end."
(Fitzgerald p.97-98)

The character of George Wilson warns his wife that "God sees everything. You cannot fool God" through the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg on the billboard is a reminder that you cannot fool yourself into thinking that a materially driven life will be better than one filled with emotional and spiritual fulfillment (Fitzgerald p.160). Gatsby executes this illusion of wealth, dwelling on the falsehood of a materialistic "American Dream." A shift towards commercialism was a move away from Christian values. Fitzgerald depicts a world without religion that promotes a trajectory of materialism, relevant and significant to WWI when organized Christianity was already declining, being replaced by nationalistic thinking. George depicts this shift, with moving away from the church as "that was a long time ago." (Fitzgerald p.157).

"Have you got a church you go to sometimes, George? Maybe even if you haven't been there for a long time? Maybe I could call up the church and get a priest to come over and he could talk to you, see?"

"Don't belong to any."

"You ought to have a church, George, for times like this. You must have gone to church once. Didn't you get married in a church? Listen, George, listen to me. Didn't you get married in a church?"

"That was a long time ago." (Fitzgerald p.157)

Fitzgerald's use of literary devices in this rhythmic passage include the use of repetition (anaphora) of "maybe", "you" and "church" (epistrophe) to emphasize this conjuring of doubt with religion or the church. Written in 1925, the American economy was soaring, private parties sprang from Prohibition and the shock of meaningless deaths of WWI that dispelled its myth of valor and glory shifted conservative thought resulting in a change in social norms, including religion. The American dream was an illusion, a never-ending chase that Fitzgerald was criticizing. He reveals this colonial ideology that hides at the heart of American culture through an exploration of the core identity "where culturally privileged people "other" culturally subordinate people distancing themselves emotionally to gain or maintain control" (Postcolonial African-American Criticism). The Great Gatsby may be read as a way in which colonial psychology and ideology operate in America to keep the imbalance of power.

This imbalance of power, evident in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is presented through a "punitive" god environment, symbolized through the character of his father who transforms from a financial failure to a worthy power of authority. The limitations that Gregor is afflicted may be referring to how "a boundless god of old, confines his creations" (Russ p.303). Perhaps related to an overbearing upbringing in Kafka's own religion, however, reportedly Kafka did not place much credence in this idea of faith in God. Kafka did have a turbulent relationship with his father which caused him a great deal of psychological grief. The historical context of the novella, as published in 1912, may express Kafka's own personal feelings of alienation as a Jew living in a highly anti-Semitic era, struggling with issues of identity and what it means to embrace it, both the ugly and the good. I reveled in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* because of its ability to personalize the alienation Gregor endures as well as have him play a part in his own fate. This revelation is a poignant reminder of our human tendency to manifest our own expectations and how we can all be trapped in situations we cannot escape. As Jewish emancipation throughout Europe and the western world allowed access to education, employment, and housing, integration and assimilation presented a new challenge to establishing a Jewish identity. "*The Metamorphosis* reflects the anxiety that pervaded the psyche of assimilated Jews in turn-of-the-century Prague. "The newly emancipated Jews of Europe occupied a precarious place in society at the turn-of-the-century. Expected to participate in society but denied acceptance, the Jews adapted to their hostile environment through assimilation. They held steadfast to the hope their cooperation and low profile would protect them. Instead, anti-Semitism spread and intensified throughout Europe as the Jews tried harder and harder to hide their Jewishness" (Classon). Assimilated Jews were not living their best authentic life since they never gained full acceptance – this theme is also present in our previous readings on what it is to be black in America. "To be black, in a society that invented race for the specific purpose of dehumanizing people who are black, and then invented an equally formidable system of denial, is to carry the burden of history that others would rather forget" (Hirsh). Black people are living in a racialized reality, much like the Jews of Europe at that time and I would say that includes our current modern times, they are living so without a choice. Often when the reality of a situation is too ugly, we deny it as it is too hard to accept. In a racially unequal society, there remain bodies without a voice, bodies that are alienated and unified in the denial of society. Kafka entertains reason and existential

uncertainty. As Kafka was writing about his own time and in his own world through the contrived character of Gregor Samsa. The self-loathing Kafka felt as a Jew in Prague was his reality mirrored as fiction in the *Metamorphosis*. He experienced this double oppression in his real life as a German speaking Jew in anti-Semitic Prague. Religious questions explored through literary means of the *Metamorphosis*, it is difficult to say whether or not Kafka believed in God, in Christian terms or in the Mosaic terms of his own Jewish tradition. Whether I thought Kafka believed in God at all is a difficult question to answer. Kafka did not deal in doctrines. "Like the great Jewish Rabbis, including Jesus, whom Christians name as the Christ, he told stories: parables which quicken the imagination and open possibilities and visions and provide intimations of realities beyond all doctrinal formulation. When all the interpretive suggestions have been made and explored by critics reviewing this story, I suspect Kafka would have said that no one of them is finally right though no one of them is finally wrong either. All these things are present in the story, which is what makes the story so rich and so endlessly suggestive"(Wardlaw). Kafka famously inscribed in one of his journals that "Religions get lost as people do"(Kafka).

The theme of losing oneself or identity is inevitably tied to themes of oppression, gender inequality, alienation, and racism. In the search for identity, meaningful transformations are critical to evolving into your authentic self through the sum of your past, allowing integration of those experiences into your timeless, authentic identity. You do not discover your identity as much as evolve into it. In Kafka's novella, *Metamorphosis*, Gregor's identity is deeply affected by how the others' treat him, thus revealing to the reader how identity is socially constructed, rather than being innate. Our identity is not fixed but transforms over time, largely through our interactions with others. He begins his disconnect from the actual insect body he incurs to his human thoughts and feelings. Kafka alludes to the "animal" or "insect" in all of us, a side of our own human nature that cannot be ignored. As an insect, Gregor must rebuild his lost identity or possibly he lacked an authentic identity, to begin with. "Among Gregor's first thoughts upon awaking in his monstrous state are the duties of his occupation, an occupation forced upon him by his family's past financial disgrace" (Russ p.300). Although we come to find out later that the family was never in such dire financial straits as Gregor was led to believe. So here "the past that sustained Gregor's life, gave it its orientation and meaning, is shown to be a lie (Russ p.300). This lie, self-imposed starvation, along with the apple that was lodged into Gregor's back by his violent father, eventually kill Gregor. An additional layer regarding the theme of identity is the loss of the family's social status when Gregor can no longer provide. The reaction of the family shifts Gregor's identity as his mother no longer views him as her human son. She responds to Gregor as an ugly insect and no longer his son when she:

"...caught sight of the gigantic brown blotch on the flowered wallpaper, and before it really dawned on her that what she saw was Gregor, cried in a hoarse, bawling voice, "Oh God! Oh God!"(Kafka p.27)

Kafka's simple writing style in *The Metamorphosis* begins with what appears to be the climax of the story, that of Gregor's shocking discovery of his metamorphosis. Kafka's writing

invokes this feeling of transformation from human to insect as an everyday occurrence. The imagery invokes the absurdity of this transformation as everyday life. Each chapter digs into a deeper layer of Gregor's character and relationship with his family. Injected with humor, Kafka diffuses the situation of the grotesque reality with Gregor's humorous attempts to get out of bed. Symbolic imagery of Gregor's new insect body likened to a cockroach, may symbolize the human condition or represent survival. The use of the word "vermin" invokes the idea of "lesser than" perhaps reflective of Kafka's own life as a Jew in highly anti-Semitic times, amid the rise of Nazism. Kafka offers many symbolic references throughout the novella. The symbolic stand-in for Jews - "vermin" or "other" may be Kafka projecting himself as an "insect," in an effort to describe his own feelings of self-loathing and worthlessness. The symbolic picture frame, Gregor's cherished possession, is thought to represent Gregor's attempt to hold on to humanity. The picture within the frame has been considered a reference to "*Venus in Furs*," a novel by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, that drew on themes of female dominance and sadomasochism. There have been many varied analyses of the meaning(s) of Kafka's "*The Metamorphosis*" that render the novella, a timeless, literary masterpiece that is still debated today.

Salman Rushdie's novel *The Golden House*, also examines the theme of identity, as the youngest son, D, attempts to come to terms with his gender. Through the character of Riya, Rushdie comments that "you can be what you want to be" (Rushdie p.116). Sexual identity is not a given. It's a choice" (Rushdie p.116). Tackling the theme of identity in Rushdie's novel overlaps throughout various references, that go beyond the political and societal realm, where he examines the construct of identity where man is both good and evil. Cleverly reflective of our age of bitterly contested realities, in which one man's morality is another man's evil. Rushdie also explores society's need to identify, as there was a museum in New York for every identity imaginable. At the heart of the Identity Museum was the question of the identity of the self, starting with the biological self and moving far beyond that. (Rushdie p.75). Kafka begins the identity question in this biological, physical form as Gregor's real identity begins to emerge, as he literally sheds his skin. His new body becomes his true identity. His new insect body does provide an escape from his mundane work and family duty. However, this escape results in just another way for Gregor to feel trapped. He is confined to his room and at the mercy of his family. In the end, his only escape is death. In escaping his history with his new freedom, Gregor has a way out, however, through his new freedom he lost the ability to engage with his history. In Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby, by "changing his name and abandoning his origins, is an extreme example of the potential in 1920s America for the self to be remade. Recreating oneself in order to achieve wealth and exploit economic opportunities. Additionally, in *The Great Gatsby*, the topic of National identity is a particular concern of the character of Tom Buchanan, arguably the most representative member of his social class. Tom expresses considerable anxiety about the influence of 'other races' and worries that the 'dominant race' will lose their power and, consequently, civilization will disintegrate" ("Identity"). Like Kafka's character of Gregor, there is a transformation of the character of Roger Casement, in Vargas Llosa's *The Dream of Celt*, where Casement journeys from a colonial ideologist to a converted Irish nationalist, shifting his sense of identity. Both Casement and Conrad's character of Marlow in *The Heart of Darkness*, become apprised of the myth of

colonialism which lends itself to Kafka's commentary on the myth of the security of his family and community support when he is no longer able to work or blend in physically. "His family, the supposed lucky ones, continue to live in ignorance and the artificial constructs of society" (Classon).

James Baldwin's struggle for identity as a black American author and spokesperson for the black community, he must "examine his cultural heritage, for the past is all that makes the present coherent" (Jones p.107). He believes that we must understand the present before we can look to the future. The "Negro problem" is actually a white problem as white people have created the conditions that make black people the problem. As Baldwin feels that black people must accept white people for who they are and not try to change them. Identity is then shaped by the negative space that surrounds it. "Identity is based on the social hierarchy of privilege, an assemblage of responsive parts that reorganize relative to the cultural context. Baldwin argues, isn't something we are born with — rather, it is something we claim for ourselves, then must assert willfully to the world. You've got to tell the world how to treat you. If the world tells you how you are going to be treated, you are in trouble" (Popova). Baldwin looks at finding identity as labeling yourself by labeling all the things you are not. He stresses the importance of history in defining one's identity "as you are always the receptacle of what has gone before you, whether or not you can reach it" (Popova). If both black and white people mystify racial identity it becomes interpreted as something fixed, determinative and almost supernatural. For Coates, this "whiteness is a talisman," "an amulet" of "eldritch energies" that explains all injustice...where whites are preordained to walk that special path. This can be a dangerous vision of life we should refuse no matter who is doing the conjuring" (Williams). "Implications of gender in the white world has built its dignity and built its sense of identity on the fact it wasn't black, the way males in this country built their sense of superiority over the fact that they are not female" (Popova). This female subordination is accounted by the control of women by men, excluding them as equals, fostering an internalization of sexism that leads women to then adopt the oppressive attitudes of the culture they participate in. For women of color, a double oppression of racism and sexism presents a dual identity where they are forced to choose sides — "black" or "female" as their experience is neither black male or white female.

In *God Dies by the Nile*, women and the poor encounter severe psychological oppression that is generationally passed down through the very real societal limitations of their class, manifested in the form of self-oppression. El Saawadi, writes that certain Islamic practices promote the function of a woman to motherhood, limiting her identity and notion of self within the social constructs in which she lives. Her function as a mother is sanctified and thus obscures her varied roles. This cycle self-oppression is also predominant in Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*. Targeted people internalize the myths or misinformation that society has communicated about them, turning the oppression inward. There is the tendency to turn the oppression on one another. In Morrison's novel, the divide between light-skinned blacks and the darker skinned is distinctly apparent in the treatment of Pecola. The theme of physical beauty being a virtue which affects their judgment and their own internal biases, placing Eurocentric ideals of beauty as the set standard. This results in shame and self-hatred for Pecola. Pecola is victimized by her own family and community. She is labeled "ugly" because of

the darkness of her skin. She endures physical and sexual violence at the hands of adults. Pecola fantasizes to become more beautiful, to have blue eyes, would translate to being seen, to being more loved, and to see things differently. Not only are the young girls influenced by white cultural beauty, Morrison identifies how pervasive this ideal is passed down. Morrison describes this female oppression through the character of Pecola Breedlove, who is raped by her drunken father Cholly, directing his own form of oppression over her. Cholly, in turn, is repeating the cycle of oppression from his own traumatic, humiliating experiences. His own self-hatred could not allow him to feel the love from his own daughter, leaving him frustrated and angry. Morrison chose to narrate the rape through Cholly's perspective to illustrate his oppression against women. Pauline, Pecola's mother, beats her when she learns of the rape. She does this since women are oppressed by men, they exercise authority over their children, thus directing their own forms of oppression. This cycle is repeated, the self-hatred reinforced, internalizing beliefs their blackness is inferior. This self-oppression is also presented through social stratification in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Asia*, where author Hamid demonstrates the difficulty one has in breaking out of their deemed social class. Adhering to strict gender roles imparted by religious laws left women without a way to break out of their "gender class." Traumatized and victimized by perpetual cycle of oppression stretch the overall reaching effects of the history of white supremacy, of racial inequality laying groundwork for social and class barriers, the internalizing ideals of white beauty, the ever presence of childhood innocence lost, have shaped black oppression intrinsically and extrinsically permeating every aspect of both white and black American culture. Jesmyn Ward, who candidly writes in *The Fire This Time*, that "it (the idea of white as the standard of beauty) was as familiar to me as my own eyes, my own nose, my own hair, my own fragile chest" (Ward p.137) This familiarity, the pervasiveness of "it" penetrates everyday life, creating and fostering a negative internal dialogue. This sense of "ugly" is internalized as black self-hatred. In Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, where he employs his own self-loathing through the character of Gregor ties back to the anti-Semitic sentiments of the era and his difficult relationship with his tyrannical father. Kafka presents Gregor as a man "so utterly controlled by the obligations of his life that his own identity—to the point of his very being as a human—became lost in the mix. The lack of clarity of what type of vermin or insect is purposeful, the new condition signifies the difficulty of coming to terms with one's identity. Just as Gregor, it seems that Kafka himself struggled to establish his identity—wanting desperately to please his father with his writing, but failing—and devolved into self-loathing" (Omeka RSS)

Kafka was writing about his own time and in his own world through the contrived character of Gregor Samsa. The self-loathing Kafka felt as a Jew in Prague was his reality mirrored as fiction in the *Metamorphosis*. Morrison also provides personal insight in *The Bluest Eye* through her female characters. Just as Pecola, in *The Bluest Eye*, was doubly oppressed as a female and by the color of her skin, Kafka also experienced this double oppression in his real life as a German-speaking Jew in anti-Semitic Prague. Self-oppression is presented through social stratification in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Asia*, where author Hamid demonstrates the difficulty one has in breaking out of their deemed social class is also a relevant theme in *The Golden House* and *The Great Gatsby*. Kafka reiterates the fact that Gregor cannot break out of his duty to work to support the family, he is reduced to a commodity as well as viewed as

“working class.” Gregor’s physical transformation in this sense represents his place in society. Gregor in his new form eventually defies societal pressures because he can no longer work or get food for himself. He falls from being the family “savior.”

As my literary journey has revealed, human history has spawned terrible events that have stripped people of their basic human traits. The lingering influence of colonialism and overtly racist text through literary works such as *Heart of Darkness*, prompted Achebe’s post-colonial literary discourse in his essay, *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness*, which states that Conrad, through his character of Marlow, deliberately portrays Africa as “the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality”(Conrad p.1). Africans are likened to beasts, non-humans. Dehumanization justified enslavement. Conrad derogatorily describes the fireman as “he was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs” (Conrad p.1). This dehumanization and deployment of a rhetoric depicting whiteness as the pervasive desire has placed limitations on black people which white people often fail to acknowledge as relayed previously by Baldwin and his work. This historical trauma has generationally manifested itself a culmination of internalized self-hatred. Toni Morrison’s novel, *The Bluest Eye*, hits “the nerve of racial self-contempt and exposes it” through her character portrayals there is an internalized self-hatred (Morrison p.58). The impact of colonialism and slavery is manifested today with distrust and abuse by police, self-hatred, the cycle of poverty, lack of adequate education and healthcare, increasing the stress of living while black. Jesmyn Ward’s anthology, *The Fire This Time* is a testament to the continued oppression and characterization of black Americans. She addresses the “it,” the white standard that penetrates everyday life, creating and fostering an internal negative dialogue. Achebe’s essay looks to change the narrative and like Baldwin, seek acknowledgment of the fact that white people have benefitted from a society that prospered from slavery, a dehumanizing institution that caused physical and psychological trauma. During Nazi Germany, Jews were depicted as rats. Kafka’s dehumanizing of Gregor Samsa, transforming him into an insect can be interpreted as his own self-exposure and self-dehumanization. Kafka describes the human, Gregor, as nonhuman. Additionally, Kafka’s character of Grete, who also transforms in the novella, however, in a way that is also dehumanizing through a stereotypical, determinant gender role, as she transforms into a woman now ready to marry. Dehumanization through a stripping of identity, removal of original culture and tradition, enslaving and killing, depleting all dignity has continued aftershock effects.

Throughout the story of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow portrays the Congolese as savage, dark, diseased, and deathly over and over again, building this rhetoric into the minds of the reader. Marlow goes to great lengths in his comparison of his superior European culture to the local African people. Conrad has been accused of deliberately stereotyping Africans as savages and subhuman, which Achebe claims in “*An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness*” directly influences the reader and perpetuates the myth of white superiority but more importantly the criticism of Conrad’s novella as racist literature is a hurdle in the Eurocentric framework of the world. *Heart of Darkness* is heralded as one of the world’s

greatest works of fiction. In terms of story, literary style, however disagreeable the content may be to Achebe, it still remains a work of art. It does not agree with Achebe's point on the atrocities of imperialism, but it does agree with the cultural climate of that time. Achebe states that Conrad uses his stand-in character of Marlow to veil his own racist attitudes, however, that was the pervasive thought in Europe at that time. "The book has been read as many things, from an exploration of the individual psyche to a prophecy of genocide. Conrad indicted the European imperialists who plundered Congo in the name of progress even while he portrayed Africa, in terms that seem racist today, as irredeemably backward" (Jasanoff). Reading *Heart of Darkness* provided a definitive example of colonial brutality. Conrad provided ample evidence of his condemnation of colonial abuse which was courageous for the times but the actual reading of the 40,000 pages was laborious for me. It can be appreciated as a time document and is an impressive novel that has maintained relevancy. Writings penned at a point in history, need to be understood in the zeitgeist of that time. We, as readers now, have the luxury of reading it from a historical distance.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the character of Marlow's ambivalent tone provides a descriptive narrative of his account of the horrors of imperialism and the consequences of their greed with overworked slaves, who are malnourished, sick and left to slowly die. Marlow as he narrates the novel stays in this mindset of imperialistic justification. Eurocentric views perpetuating racism and these European imperialist powers not only raped the land and culture of Africa then but created global inequalities that we see today. The Congolese are not even seen as humans but are referenced as animals or creatures. Marlow himself does not see them as fully human or unique cultural human beings - nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Marlow is haunted by what he sees but in the context of imperialism, he turns a blind eye. The economic exploitation was dually justified by spreading "civility" to the barbarians. This was done in the name of Christianity. Marlow as he narrates the novel rooted in this mindset of imperialistic justification.

"They were dying slowly-it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now- nothing but black shadows, of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air – and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of the eyes under the trees. Then, glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly. The man seemed young – almost a boy- but you know with them it's hard to tell." (Heart of Darkness p. 277)

Conrad's implementation of figurative language, use of rhetorical devices, scheme of arrangement and literary allusions combined with the ambivalent tone of imperialism of that zeitgeist built a focused and concise frame of view. Here, Marlow is not just referring to a

cross-race bias, but the significance is the lack of experience and exposure the colonists have with the Africans as “with them it’s hard to tell” is reflective of the Christian colonists one-sided perspective and mission.

Conrad’s predominant theme in *Heart of Darkness* is the symbolism of light and dark. Africa is defined in terms of darkness or blackness equating it to savagery. Lightness is descriptive of the Europeans that equates them to an enlightened and civilized people. Kafka’s Gregor finds comfort as a newly transformed insect in tight dark spaces, this darkness represents him as the “other” and the alienation of Gregor. In Kingsolver’s *Poisonwood Bible*, the theme of light versus dark is also woven throughout the story and well noted in Lumumba’s speech when he claims to make Africa the “heart of light” in direct opposition of “heart of darkness” contrasting the civilized people with the heathens. As light is typically associated with positiveness, hope, purity, cleanliness, and good. This literary imagery is used as the light referencing Africa and the darkness referencing colonial oppression, the brutality of it all. Nathan’s mission to civilize and “enlighten” the savages of the Congo is another contradiction on what is the actual light and what is the darkness. The colonists, representative of the light, are nonetheless a light that is fueled on hypocrisy and evil. Darkness may be deemed a natural space before the light was shone, the light, in this case, is contrastively a guise. By suppressing others, they are able to “shine.” The people of the Congo are perpetually brutalized by the imperialists, worked to death, exploited, and dehumanized to feed the frenzy of the ivory demand by the Europeans. Adah provides perspective of the luck of the draw for admission to heaven, it is for her entirely up to chance when she comments:

“According to my Baptist Sunday-school teacher, a child is denied entrance to heaven merely for being born in the Congo” (Poisonwood Bible p.171).

A black Congolese child is denied entrance into the “light” or heaven for merely being born black, referencing darkness. Kingsolver uses the novel to make a political point and the poisonous effect of the Bible, metaphorically entertained in the title. These toxic effects of western culture are forced onto the Congolese while shamelessly raping the resources. The Congolese are affected by their history of colonialism and struggle with their identity today, without more discourse on the reign of terror under the rule of King Leopold II, there remains a lack of “acknowledgment” of their “civilizing” movement. Due to King Leopold’s imperial force, the Congo was left with the legacy of political, ethnic and economic destabilization, plagued by poverty and political oppression, the Congo has fallen under exploitive and authoritarian regimes. To maintain power in post-colonial Congo, now Zaire, social stratification continues to exist through a dehumanizing class structure that keeps the poor, poor.

The Dream of Celt, by Mario Vargas Llosa, is Roger Casement’s profound journey from colonial ideologist to converted Irish nationalist. The novel weaves the life events of Sir Roger Casement, a diplomatic consul for the British in the Belgian Congo, who witnesses the atrocities and human rights violations on behalf of King Leopold II’s exploitation of the Congolese. The young Roger Casement initially believed that “they (Congolese) don’t know what they’re doing, but we know it’s for their own good and that justifies the deceit” (Vargas Llosa p.26). In his command with famed explorer Henry Morton Stanley, a hero to the young Casement, he would

soon be apprised to the myth of colonialism in the Congo. The myth that colonialism is for their (Congolese) own well-being, that missionaries will lead them out of paganism, physicians will vaccinate them against epidemics and cure them without witch doctors, companies will give them work, they will be taught how to dress, how to pray to the true God and little by little their barbaric customs will be replaced with modern western values. Their children and generations to come would thank the colonialists for these services, however, through Casement, the contradictions, the exaggerations, and the fantasies allow “differentiating reality from fiction” indicating that nothing was corresponding to the actual truth (Vargas Llosa p.29). Similar to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Vargas Llosa provides an informational account to the audience of colonialism’s “civilizing mission” that is deeply enmeshed in the ambitions of the empires at the expense of other humans. Both Casement and “Marlow” would learn this truth, deliver it to their audiences, revealing the rhetoric depicting “western values” as the pervasive desire and the dehumanization that justifies enslavement. Both novels are presented to the audience in the third person omniscient, however, the tone of the stories differ as Casement is informative and Marlow is ambivalent. Both report the colonial abuses to the audience through a digestible palate of the current zeitgeist yet differing in their respective approach. Both men shaped the emotional language used to describe Africa from a European point of view. It is important to understand that the colonial language used to differentiate themselves from the African slaves was implemented to distinguish themselves as superior. Again, this is an anglicized construct, promoted as the ultimate goal (Coates).

If the atrocities had occurred in the Congo, why could they have not happened in the Amazon? For Casement, even though the Congo and the Amazon were far apart, they were joined by an umbilical cord (Casement p.120). He found the same horrors inspired by greed, the whippings, mutilations, rapes, and murders of the indigenous peoples. The Amazonian indigenous people were considered unhuman, and closer to animals than to civilized people. The difference is that Zumaeta spoke Spanish and the Belgian functionaries spoke French, both “believed that harvesting rubber and making money was a Christian ideal that justified the worst atrocities against pagans who, of course, were always cannibals and killers of their own children” (Casement p.133). Casement’s *Report on Putumayo* reported the crimes committed by the Rubber barons against the native people, concurrently sparked a “patriotic fanaticism” converting Casement to an Irish nationalist. He did not want to “permit colonization to castrate the spirit of the Irish as it had castrated the spirit of the Amazonian Indians” (Casement p.192).

The third -person narrative structure of *The Dream of Celt*, implements flashbacks and then cues to the present on alternating chapters told through the eyes of Roger Casement, who initially ventures to Africa to civilize and free its inhabitants, much in the same way the Price family and Joseph Conrad had respectively ventured into the Congo. Casement witnessed how colonial control locked Africa into a perverse path of commodity supplier to the West, through violence and cruelty by the colonial master, Belgium.

“But then, in the middle of 1902, he had his third attack of malaria, one even worse than the previous two; he had suffered from the disease ever since he had decided in 1884, in an outburst of idealism and a dream of adventure, to leave Europe, and come to Africa

to work, by means of commerce, for Christianity, western social and political institutions, and the emancipation of Africans from backwardness, disease, and ignorance. They weren't merely words. He had a profound belief in them, when, at the age of twenty, he reached the Dark Continent.”(Vargas Llosa p.22)

Vargas Llosa's choice of words “idealism,” “dream,” “adventure,” “emancipation” was reflective of the colonial zeitgeist. The language was symbolic of Casement's inner thoughts and beliefs – colonialism as virtuous. Casement reiterates his belief that European colonization would civilize the barbarians for their own betterment, however, he lists the reasons why to foreshadow these “colonial lies.” They were not just words because he had a “profound belief” from his own experience in the “Dark continent.” Initially inspired to help aid and civilize the Congolese, Casement would soon learn that the colonization of the Congo was brutal, dehumanizing, sparking in him a personal outrage. Vargas Llosa's novel retraces Roger Casement's life, taking the reader through the “lies of colonialism” to his ultimate resolve as an Irish nationalist, fighting against the oppression of the colonial master, Great Britain. This story is a tribute to Casement and his fight to uphold human dignity by reporting his first-hand accounts and rallying citizens to “acknowledge” and understand the true effects of the occupation and exploitation of the Empire. Vargas Llosa provides an informational account to the audience of colonialism's “civilizing mission” that is deeply enmeshed in the ambitions of the empires at the expense of other humans where “western values” are held as the pervasive desire and the dehumanization that justifies enslavement. This enslavement is the lowest category in any stratification system for reasons in a belief of inherent superiority.

A strong lack of social mobility through divisions of strong social stratification in a post-colonial Asian country is revealed in the satirical self-help book, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* by Mohsin Hamid. He implements a second-person perspective, referring to you, the protagonist. Hamid (a former student of Toni Morrison) refers to his work as a literary novel that is a self-help book. Use of second person effectively implicates the reader as a character. This point of view differs from our previous readings in the first and third-person point of view. Hamid does not use names in the novel to appeal to the universal character. The success of Hamid's metafiction plays well in this ironic self-help farce, where a young man tries to change his fate from a poor village boy to successful business owner. He struggles through the social issues in search of his new identity and economic success. In *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, the once young man with a dream to succeed financially misses the mark on what is truly important within a society that has rigid boundaries, corruption and lack of basic resources for its citizens. Despite his best efforts, through carefully planned steps, he fails. The issues he faced were rooted in colonial history that shaped the country (an unnamed village in Asia) and continues to disrupt advances politically and socially as a reference to Pakistan.

“Your father is a cook, but despite being reasonably good at his job and originating in the countryside, he is not a man obsessed with the freshness or quality of his ingredients. Cooking for him is a craft of spice and oil. His food burns the tongue and clogs the arteries. When he looks around him here, he does not see prickly leaves and hairy little berries for an effervescent salad, tan stalks of wheat for a heavenly balloon of stone-

ground, stove-top-baked flatbread. He sees the labor by which a farmer exchanges his allocation of time in this world for an allocation of time in this world. Here, in the heady bouquet of nature's pantry, your father sniffs mortality." (Hamid p.7)

Hamid addresses the social issues of a stratified social order in a post-colonial Asian country. Hamid liberally implements figurative language to paint a picture for the reader of what it takes for the young man, the referential "you" to go meticulously step by step to achieve economic success in a system that oppresses his class order. There is a survival mode, that the father operates under as other basic needs are not readily available to the citizens. Unsanitary water and lack of educational opportunities for the underclass also make social mobility difficult. The "dream" is to move to the city from the village in hopes to "make it." The foreshadowing of this passage addresses this type of search for identity but ultimately, takes the reader to acknowledge that it is not the material things but our connections to family and love that matter. In this unnamed country, people wrestle with breaking free of the post-colonial shackles as they weed through the pervasive corruption. The passage provides a sarcastic tone that lends itself to the contradictions of the intended meaning from the author. Father doesn't care about his cooking, but actually, there are little resources left for him to do so. He is a cog on the wheel, labor is divided. There is sincerity in the sarcasm that is his life. The importance of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is that it points out the dehumanization of citizens within the social system in the unnamed Asian country, which the reader assumes is a reference to modern day Pakistan. Kafka's *Metamorphosis* has been read as a "fable of alienation from patriarchal culture, with its tyrannical bureaucracy, its class warfare between appropriators and expropriators, its conversion of workers, like Gregor into dehumanizing things who are exploited" (Straus p.654).

The theme of dehumanization of people ties our readings together through powerful personal accounts such as Coates and Baldwin as well as Ward to stories constructed to enlighten us from Morrison, Vargas Llosa, Fitzgerald, Rushdie, El Saadawi, Rahimi, Achebe, Kingsolver, Kafka, and Conrad. Dehumanization is alive in today's political climate, we see increased intolerance to immigrants coming to America. Dehumanization allows us a loophole for justification of horrendous acts. Decolonized people developed a post colonized identity-based on the interaction of the inherent racism imperialists generated, sending them into the "Third World" and other residual effects such as a post-colonial identity crisis. The given country itself presents the audience with an identity crisis. If Pakistan is the stand-in country in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Asia*, we know today that it is a country divided into many ethnic, religious and linguistic groups which are then divided further into caste-like systems that provoke social issues of discrimination and inequality. The strive for power and wealth is met with failure and the young boy, who is now a businessman returns to poverty, culminated through nepotism. This circular pattern of rising to fortune and falling attempts to divert emphasis on the importance of materialistic pleasures versus social value. Kafka only validates Gregor when he is able to work to support the family, once he transforms into an insect he is no longer of value. Gregor, long before his metamorphosis was essentially enslaved. Gregor was already an "insect" scurrying about for job to serve his family, powerless. Rushdie's *The Golden House*, though there is little discussion of overt colonial oppression, however, the resulting

aftershocks are felt in his historical references. This idea of the civilized man versus the barbarian still continues in our modern day as a non-Christian, females, persons of color, may be deemed lesser than a white middle class “Christian” counterpart. This is a continued representation of our history of dominance and oppression that lingers. After 911 – Rushdie implements the rhetorical device of amplification of this when Rene states:

We remembered the fearfulness that made taxi drivers put little flags on their dashboards and stick God Bless America decals on the partition screen, and attacks on Sikhs in turbans embarrassed us because of our countrymen’s ignorance. We saw the young men in the Don’t Blame Me I’m Hindu T-shirts and we didn’t blame them and were embarrassed that they felt the need to wear sectarian messages to ensure their safety” (Rushdie p. 38.)

The attempts of new immigrants to be part of the American melting pot, taking on new identities, leaving the past behind, for what Rushdie describes as “moving from the historical to the personal.” Baldwin tackles this idea of blending into a “melting pot” in which he argues that this identity is not something we are born with but rather something we claim and this idea of “melting pot” metaphor is “deeply problematic in honoring the actual architecture of identity” People are not “melted”, people do not want to be “melted” down. Today, with the internet, “where identity is hidden behind the veneer of anonymity, allows a shield by which people commit monstrous acts” (Popova). This shedding of identity and reinvention in the name of the “American Dream” was magnified in Rushdie’s *The Golden House*:

“People in America were called all sorts of things—throughout the phonebook, in the days when there were phonebooks, nomenclatural exoticism ruled. Huckleberry! Dimmesdale! Ichabod! Ahab! Fenimore! Portnoy! Drudge! To say nothing of dozens, hundreds, thousands of Golds, Goldwaters, Goldsteins, Finegolds, Goldberrys. Americans also constantly decided what they wanted to be called and who they wanted to be, shedding their Gatz origins to become shirt-owning Gatsbys and pursue dreams called Daisy or perhaps simply America. Samuel Goldfish (another golden boy) became Samuel Goldwyn, the Aertzoons became the Vanderbilts, Clemens became Twain. And many of us, as immigrants—or our parents or our grandparents—had chosen to leave our pasts behind just as the Goldens were now choosing, encouraging our children to speak English, not the old language from the old country: to speak, dress, act, be American” (Rushdie p.12).

“They would wipe the slate clean, take on new identities, cross the world and be other than what they were. They would escape from the historical into the personal, and in the New World the personal would be all they sought and all they expected, to be detached and individual and alone, each of them to make his own agreement with the everyday, outside history, outside time, in private. It did not occur to any of them that their decision was born of a colossal sense of entitlement, this notion that they could just step away from yesterday and start tomorrow as if it wasn’t a part of the same week, to

move beyond memory and roots and language and race into the land of the self-made self, which is another way of saying, America" (Rushdie p.20).

Toni Morrison presents a community in her novel, *The Bluest Eye*, that has internalized white supremacist ideology and black inferiority. This construct has evolved and manifested itself. "Even in the first decades of America's "founding," white supremacy has woven itself in the minds of its people, who yearned to be uniquely defined and formally recognized as a progressive and just nation. Although many former Europeans viewed this as an opportunity to culturally reestablish themselves, this 'shedding' of culture seems to be more prevalent for immigrants who fail to phenotypically represent what Morrison defines as the "unifying force" that is whiteness"(Pimentel). Morrison's noted writing style is vivid with vocabulary and issues concerning the black community, through the eyes of black characters, similar to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The authors present black people talking to black people through literature, as does Ward's anthology, *The Fire This Time*. In Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, women in the novel are doubly oppressed as black females, by race and sexism. Morrison addresses the dehumanization of black girls, who are often most vulnerable to societal ills of poverty, gender, and racial identity. Pecola's drunken father, Cholly Breedlove, a victim of trauma himself, displaces his own anger, rapes Pecola, resulting in a pregnancy. Cholly, a victim of dehumanization himself during an incident when he was having sexual relations with a young - women named Darlene, two white men stumbled upon them, forcing them to continue intercourse, degrading him as a "coon." The white men reduced Cholly to an animal and Cholly, in turn, reduces Darlene to an animal with "claws."

"Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her. He almost wished he could do it - hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much. The flashlight wormed its way into his guts and turned the sweet taste of muscadine into rotten fetid bile. He stared at Darlene's hands covering her face in the moon and lamplight. They looked like baby claws" (Morrison p.1870).

Morrison implements word choices associated with animals such as "wormed," "guts," and "claws." Morrison's negatively loaded word choices additionally provide a distasteful image for the reader when she comments the contrast of "sweet muscadine into rotten fetid bile." Her writing taught me a lot about race and its role in history and culture through a black female perspective. The empathetic tone she delivers allows the reader to feel the sorrow of the evils of racism and the lack of empathy it exudes. Morrison's language and delivery of her characters and their circumstances appeal to pathos.

"In white America there is a cultural belief that the black community is dominated by its female members, it's men having been emasculated by the historical vicissitudes of slavery and contemporary economic forces" (Staples).

Black men emasculated by racism turn to violence and aggression against black women to gain their lost masculinity. Pecola is victimized and locked in this patriarchal environment which she cannot escape. The baby dies and to escape it all, Pecola fantasizes to become more beautiful, to have blue eyes, would translate to being seen, to being more loved, and to see

things differently. She internalizes that blackness is inherently ugly and inferior, additionally, she is encouraged to be self-loathing by upper-class blacks such as Maureen Peals, who deem her skin too dark. Pecola's ability to cope is to internalize this fantasy of white beauty as the panacea to all that ails her, her mother Pauline Breedlove, as well as Claudia's sister, Frieda, also suffer from an inferiority complex that white beauty is the gold standard. This internalized colonialism sustained by white supremacist and sexist patriarchal ideology passed generationally, can only be deconstructed by examining the factors that have contributed to it. Morrison not only addresses white supremacist racism but additional factors of oppression within her own culture, both rooted in feelings of superiority. The oppression and dehumanization of children in the novel fuel the internalized and deluded beliefs in white supremacy, which Morrison likens to the hegemony the adult's experience. The parent-child relationships in the novel are detrimental in repeating the vicious cycle. The generational lens of the characters in *The Bluest Eye* reveals a cycle of oppression, not only suppression by white America but black parents oppressing their kids from an early age as a result of the white racist paradigm. Morrison focused on how "something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female" (Morrison p.42). The oppression continually crosses all generations in this way, the oppression by a white supremacist society, the oppression transmitted generationally through the black community as a result of living in this Eurocentric framework and the oppression across gender, shaping black oppression intrinsically and extrinsically.

The importance of upholding dialogue must continue as our current headlines highlight the pervasiveness of racial inequalities. *The Fire This Time* by Jesmyn Ward, inspired by James Baldwin, has provided a collection of new black voices in a three-part anthology on the topic of living while black in America. The essays and poems included in Ward's book provide insight into the repetition of a black history of devaluation perpetuated by the myths of both white and black America. *The Fire This Time* provides the reader with various perspectives from various black writers giving a wider lens of black life. Taking inspiration from James Baldwin's, *The Fire Next Time*, Ward too, calls for the consciousness of white America to help end the racial nightmare and plant America's feet firmly on the soil of racial conciliation. It is necessary for both "sides" to fight the fight, as Isabel Wilkerson, states in *The Fire This Time*, in her essay *Where Do We Go from Here* that "we seem to be in a continuing feedback loop of repeating a past that our country has yet to address." The theme of America's Eurocentric lens is reiterated through Ward's acknowledgment where she writes that "old myths still hold a special place in many white hearts: the rebel flag, Confederate monuments, lovingly restored plantations, *Gone with the Wind* (Ward p.139). Ward personally accounts:

"Though the white liberal imagination likes to feel temporarily bad about black suffering, there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black: no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning onto this street, no entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while black. Eleven" (Ward p.1566-1567).

Ward's somber tone and rhetorical device of repetition (anaphora) of "no" adds emphasis to the daily strain of living while black. Her writing provides a sense of sincerity, disparage, and candidness regarding race relations. Race is a social construct defined by skin color, hair color and eye color that in essence is not biological. The passage alerts the reader to the lack of value placed on black bodies. This appeal to pathos is an everyday life-sustaining occurrence-like breathing air. The reader becomes aware of the suffocating environment. Increasing the reader's awareness and providing knowledge is a springboard for profound conversation. To avoid repeating history, change must come from awareness and understanding of the civil rights black America continues to struggle for. The black experience is the antithesis of what America says it stands for as the land of the free, however, black people are continually denied the same liberties and freedoms from which this country stands to believe. This myth of equal rights, the hypocrisy of liberal promise prevails today.

The Fire This Time enlists the works of other black voices, who continue the literary work and dialogue that Baldwin first set forth in *The Fire Next Time*. Baldwin's essay, *The Fire Next Time* provides his own personal experiences and beliefs along with proposed solutions for racial reconciliation. The book opens with *My Dungeon Shook*, an open letter to his nephew, followed by an essay entitled "*Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in my Mind*." Baldwin advises his nephew on how to live in a country where black men are devalued, a country that is against them, a country where they are "trapped in white history". As white America's Eurocentric view has justified a perceived authority.

“. . . white men have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men” (Baldwin p.9).

Despite the oppression towards himself, Baldwin advocates finding a way to accept white people, as they are ignorant and innocent. With an empathetic tone, Baldwin uses rhetorical devices of repetition of "white men" to stress the contrast in terms of "us" versus "them." White America must be loved and accepted, in order to reconcile racial inequality. Baldwin provides solutions that rely heavily on opening up the mindset of white America and not letting hatred overpower the black community. Hatred provides a protective layer or shield around wounds where feelings of love cannot penetrate. As Baldwin remarks:

"I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain" (Baldwin p.5).

Like Baldwin's essay, Coates's novel *Between the World and Me* provides a personal account of what it means to be a black male living in America and the perils that entail. The inherent hardships and racism are compounded by the lack of value placed on black bodies. Contrastively to Baldwin's more optimistic outlook, Coates relays a sense of pessimism to the reader through his tone. Coates explains that the idealized "American dream" is a white construct rooted in slavery, police brutality, racial profiling, and has a long colonial history. In his letter to his son, Coates attempts to awaken the reader to their collective delusion of the American dream and its continued myth.

“When the journalist asked me about my body, it was like she was asking me to awaken her from the most gorgeous dream. I have seen that dream all my life. It is perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is treehouses and the Cub Scouts. The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake. And for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies (Coates p.11).”

Coates implements tropes of relation and comparison as well as schemes of repetition, metaphor, and simile, compounded by an appeal to pathos with the selected word choices. Written in epistolary form, he provides a voyeuristic perspective as he shares his personal thoughts. He creates tension and anger through his tone, relaying a sense of pessimism to the reader. Allowing the reader privy to these inner thoughts provides a profound way to empathize and humanize the real pain. He writes that “when the journalist asked me about my body, it was like she was asking me to awaken her from the most gorgeous dream” signifies how white America turns a blind eye to reality, perpetuating a blissfully ignorant framework. Ta-Nehisi Coates reiterates this allusion of the American Dream, referring to those who live the American Dream without acknowledging the history of black suffering, without acknowledging the black bodies used to build that dream, that the dream was built on racial inequality lays dormant in the minds of white America. White America may hold tight to that dream because they were benefactors of it. The distorted narrative of the dream extends to even having the hope to dream.

African American poet, Langston Hughes, wrote “Dreams” during a time when black people’s dreams were silenced by racism. He was an important African American voice, who inspired Martin Luther King’s “I Have A Dream” speech. “One of the greatest issues that Hughes confronts in his poetry is the African American’s constant quest to attain the ‘American Dream,’ and throughout his poetry Hughes links attaining or losing this dream with the city of Harlem, the race capital of African America” (Eschner). “Dreams” by Langston Hughes advises the reader to hold on to their dreams, dreams of the future give us purpose and meaning. I believe this speaks to a cross-cultural dialogue that black people are not allowed to follow their dreams. Without dreams life is difficult. He metaphorically compares life to a “broken winged bird” and a “barren frozen field,” the dreams are what we live for and they are what makes us complete. The imagery of birds is often associated with hope and freedom. A barren field does not yield a crop, a crop is associated with prosperity. Hughes personifies dreams as they are able to “die.” The brevity of the poem alludes to a call to action. “Hold fast to the dreams” is direct and to the point. The instructions of the poem are simple “if” dreams are not nurtured they will die. He repeats “dreams” to emphasize their importance.

Dreams by Langston Hughes:

*“Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die*

*Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.*

*Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field*

Frozen with snow.”

Placing all his value on his ability to work to provide for the family, the importance of this value is also indicative of the economic status of the “American Dream.” In *Metamorphosis*, Gregor is devalued when he can no longer provide for his family. The job kept him isolated and detached from forming meaningful relationships. He was living and working for others, ignoring his own needs as he was steeped in what he believes is his duty to his family. Conversely, Rushdie laments the myth of the “American Dream,” his dream where one can reinvent themselves. In *The Golden House*, Rushdie attempts to offer new immigrants to be part of the American melting pot, taking on new identities, leaving the past behind. Rushdie’s “American Dream” is a for those only who fantasize that they will not be judged by their past and are free for a total reinvention of self. For Coates, in his novel, *Between the World and Me*, the idealized “American Dream” is a white construct, rooted in slavery, police brutality, racial profiling, and has a long colonial history. Coates attempts to awaken the reader to their collective delusion of this dream and its continued myth. This is comparable to Kafka’s character of Gregor, who may represent Kafka’s own personal sense of alienation, as a Jew in hyper Semitic times, where Jews were seen as less than or the “other.” Part of achieving the “American Dream” is the ability to belong and adapt to American culture. In Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola cannot blend into society, as she can never be the ideal white beauty. This ideal American superiority or exceptionalism imposes a superior doctrine, this doctrine was apparent in *The Poisonwood Bible*, *Things Fall Apart*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Dream of Celt* and *Heart of Darkness* where the American dream is presented as corruption. When this type of “exceptionalism lying trampled in the gutters of bigotry and racial and male supremacism. American masks must be ripped off to reveal the Joker faces beneath (Rushdie p.363)

Rushdie laments the myth of the “American Dream,” his dream is where one can reinvent themselves. This altruism may be far from the norm. “There is no escaping destiny, Rushdie seems to be saying, because character creates destiny. This is as true of an individual as it is of a country” (Forna). The concept of social mobility was also recurrent in *The Great Gatsby*, *The Bluest Eye* and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Asia*. Rushdie’s “American Dream” is a for those only who fantasize that they will not be judged by their past and are free for a total reinvention of self. For Coates, in his novel, *Between the World and Me*, the idealized “American Dream” is a white construct, rooted in slavery, police brutality, racial profiling, and has a long colonial history. Coates attempts to awaken the reader to their collective delusion of this dream and its continued myth. This is comparable to Kafka’s character of Gregor, who may represent Kafka’s own personal sense of alienation, as a Jew in hyper anti-Semitic times, where Jews were seen as less than or the “other.” Part of achieving the “American Dream” is the ability to belong and

adapt to American culture. In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola cannot blend into society, as she can never be the ideal white beauty. The Jews of Europe, perhaps foreshadowed by Kafka, were unable to "blend." The ideal American superiority or exceptionalism imposes a superior doctrine, this doctrine was apparent in *The Poisonwood Bible*, *Things Fall Apart*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Dream of Celt* and *Heart of Darkness* where the "American Dream" is presented as corruption. When this type of "exceptionalism lying trampled in the gutters of bigotry and racial and male supremacism, Americans' masks must be ripped off to reveal the Joker faces beneath" (Rushdie p.363). As we wrestle with the question of identity throughout our lives, defining it is a lifelong quest as we seek fulfillment and meaning.

In a culture of white hegemony, measured through a pervasive Eurocentric lens, there lay many "black bodies" devalued in an inherently racist American Dream, where black people have "searched for answers in nationalist myth, in classrooms, out on the streets, and on other continents, finding the question unanswerable, which is not to say futile" (Coates p.12). Deploying a rhetoric depicting whiteness as the pervasive desire has placed limitations on black people which white people often fail to acknowledge. In *The Bluest Eye*, by Toni Morrison, she linked this rhetorical delineation of what whiteness means for black people through Pecola's journey as a young, black female in America during the Depression Era. *The Bluest Eye* was inspired by Morrison's own childhood experience with a young girl who wished for blue eyes, that internalized racism incited Morrison to write this novel. Morrison "tried to hit the raw nerve of racial self-contempt, expose it" (Morrison p.58). As a reader, I felt more connected to the characters written by both Kingsolver and Morrison as told through a female point of view, in the first -person, allowed me to be more intimately connected to the characters and my own internal dialogue of gender issues. These authors challenged the status quo and stereotypes of women providing a dialogue for the readers. How fitting for our current zeitgeist. I believe that the world would be a different place if women were in charge. I'm very optimistic, women's voices today are being heard like they have never been heard before. We are marching, protesting and breaking our silence. We are mobilizing, diversely, I might add. Men are joining us in this movement, not just as "women's issues" but in the name of human rights. The female characters of *The Poisonwood Bible* for me, are part of the movement.

Fitzgerald, like many modernist writers, opposed colonialism, disentangling imperial discourse through writing. Through a postcolonial lens, *Gatsby* points out racism through the character of Tom:

"The fellow has worked out the whole thing. It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these races will have control of things"(Fitzgerald p.13).

Tom expresses his concern that black people will take over:

"if we don't look out the white race will be — will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved" (Fitzgerald p.13).

Fitzgerald clearly voices the ingrained colonial psychology through Tom, who reinforces his thoughts with scientific backup. In this way, it is factual, as it is scientifically proven. Scientific racism was used to support white supremacy. Ultimately, it can be boiled down to two races—the masters and the slaves. Tom’s colonial voice is supported by Daisy as she responds:

“We’ve got to beat them down,” (Fitzgerald p.13)

Fitzgerald’s use of a short, emphatic sentence to reinforce this imperialistic thinking. In *The Great Gatsby*, there are very few black characters throughout the story, indicating their lack of voice. This “colonial script” is played over and over within the other selected readings. Fitzgerald reveals that post-colonially, the discourse, thought and practice of the imperialists are internalized in modern day. This is particularly interesting when reading *The Heart of Darkness*, which was written during the height of colonial expansion.

In James Conrad’s novella, *The Heart of Darkness*, the uncivilized, barbaric Africans might as well be slaves for they are described as less than human throughout the story. Conrad has been accused of deliberately stereotyping Africans as savages and subhuman, which Achebe claims in *“An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness’”* directly influences the reader and perpetuates the myth of white superiority. I disagree with Achebe on this point of view because I feel he is exhibiting a “chronocentric” ideology by interpreting other historical time periods, in terms of understandings of today and more importantly, for me, I read Conrad as shining a light on colonial atrocities. Achebe states that Conrad uses his stand-in character of Marlow to veil his own racist attitudes, which was the pervasive thought in Europe at that time. Concern for the lingering influence of colonialism and overtly racist text through literary works such as *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe’s postcolonial literary discourse in his essay states that Conrad through his character of Marlow deliberately portrays Africa as “the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality”(Conrad p.1). Africans are likened to beasts, non-humans. Dehumanization justified enslavement. Conrad describes the fireman as “he was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs” (Conrad p.1). This dehumanization and deployment of a rhetoric depicting whiteness as the pervasive desire has placed limitations on black people which white people often fail to acknowledge. This historical trauma has generationally manifested itself into a culmination of internalized self-hatred in the black community.

Kafka poses this commentary on the destructive effects of assimilation on man’s sense of self. Gregor’s duty to his work to pay the family debts relegates him to a dutiful son, however, this is an allusion as he transforms into an insect, no longer able to support his family, no longer able to blend in human physical form, initially pitied he then is cast aside. Kafka observed the futility of assimilation, where one worked to serve families and communities, with no regard for personal and spiritual needs. The social norms can chip away at the core of our authenticity. Gregor cannot be authentically himself, his life lacks meaning and through morphing into an insect he is able to achieve a glimpse of freedom. This happens despite the

fact that the world around him cannot see him for who he is. Unable to move past this physical transformation to an insect, to the outside world he is grotesque. As he spends his days reflecting on the simple things of his new life as an insect, his family continues to abide by the “artificial constructs of society.” Gregor feels empathy for his family despite their abuse towards him. His struggle to gain true acceptance and his struggle to connect with others around him are universal themes, common to all humanity. When Gregor finally becomes his true form, an insect, no one wants to see him, but it is at this point that he is truly real. He is his authentic self, no longer living as someone he is not. It is apparent that his human form was his mask.

As a traveling salesman, Gregor suffered feelings of alienation as he notes how fleeting his relationships had become. The actual metamorphosis alienates him further from other humans as he is no longer part of the human race. This isolation additionally prevents him from developing strong emotional bonds with others. Gregor's identity is deeply affected by how the others' treat him, thus revealing to the reader how identity is socially constructed, rather than being innate. Our identity is not fixed but transforms over time, largely through our interactions with others. He begins his disconnect from the actual insect body he incurs to his human thoughts and feelings. Kafka alludes to the “animal” or “insect” in all of us, a side of our own human nature that cannot be ignored.

Our identities, everything we believe ourselves to be, are all dependent on something else and what part we play in that story. As Humans, we are storytelling animals that think and exist in stories. Whatever the story, it remains incomplete, so in order to “construct a viable identity and give meaning to one’s life, a story needs satisfy two conditions – it must give us a role to play and it must provide me with an identity and give meaning to my life by embedding me with something bigger than myself” (Harari p.281). Although a good story must extend beyond my horizons and give me a role to play, it does not have to be true. All stories remain human inventions. We tend to believe in these fictions because our personal identity is built upon that story as well as our collective institutions. As an insect, Gregor must rebuild his lost identity or possibly he lacked an authentic identity to begin with. “Among Gregor’s first thoughts upon awaking in his monstrous state are the duties of his occupation, an occupation forced upon him by his family’s past financial disgrace” (Russ p.300). Although we come to find out later that the family was never in such dire financial straits as Gregor was led to believe. So here “the past that sustained Gregor’s life, gave it its orientation and meaning, is shown to be a lie (Russ p.300). This lie, self-imposed starvation, along with the apple that was lodged into Gregor’s back by his violent father, eventually kill Gregor. An additional layer regarding the theme of identity is the loss of the family’s social status when Gregor can no longer provide. The reaction of the family shifts Gregor’s identity as his mother no longer views him as her human son. She responds to Gregor as an ugly insect and no longer his son when she:

“...caught sight of the gigantic brown blotch on the flowered wallpaper, and before it really dawned on her that what she saw was Gregor, cried in a hoarse, bawling voice, “Oh God! Oh God!”(Rushdie p.27).

Salman Rushdie's novel *The Golden House* includes exploration of society's need to identify as there was a museum in New York for every identity. At the heart of the Identity Museum was the question of identity of the self, starting with the biological self and moving far beyond that. (Rushdie p.75). Kafka begins the identity question in this biological, physical form as Gregor's real identity begins to emerge, as he literally sheds his skin. His new body becomes his true identity. His new insect body does provide an escape from his mundane work and family duty. However, this escape results in just another way for Gregor to feel trapped. He is confined to his room and at the mercy of his family. In the end, his only escape is death. In escaping his history with his new freedom, Gregor has a way out, however, through his new freedom he lost the ability to engage with his history. "His family, the supposed lucky ones, continue to live in ignorance and the artificial constructs of society" (Classon).

The culmination of this literary journey in stories, essays and poems are stories of our humanity. The "story" is always what and who we are, it is how we interact based on what we believe, it is formative to shaping us. In this way, the literary journey has shaped our minds and bodies and through them, it is impossible to not experience the shifting weight of our opinions through our respective lenses. Our frame of view expands, not by one story (Eurocentric) but a collective narrative on perspective through global, regional, and national lenses that contribute to what it means to be human. It has been a personal journey of expanding my own frame of reference, shifting my opinions to examine a much broader scope of how these interconnections of history can be understood. It allowed me to discover new relationships and patterns that were previously unknown to me. The close text analyses made me a more empathetic reader. The mirrors held up through the novels we have read are important in the growth of our human history, a move towards equality, as inequality is our collective failure - our biggest lesson. Exploring the novels through the lens of different writers, from Baldwin to Kafka, allowed me access to varied narratives to develop a more comprehensive picture. The authors have created these stories but so has the reader. We cannot change history but by acknowledging what it represents, we can alter the "myth." We can identify the storyline of colonialism and its aftershock: disempower through ideations such as religion, dehumanize the inferior culture, establish a "superior" controlling government, reject opposition to western superiority for eventual erasure of that culture. The literature selections unfolded descriptions of oppression, themes of religion, identity, dehumanization, and racism through differing perspectives and voices at different periods of time that run through the common thread of suffering. This wide sweep of readings allowed me to personally develop and shift my own frame of view. The authors implemented different writing styles, tone, and varying narrative structures, however, the goals of the authors are similar, to reveal the perpetuation of racism, the destruction of cultures, the exploitation of resources and dehumanization of people that have lingering effects today, creating community and global inequalities, social polarization, and stratification. As we are humans, it is no surprise that the Congo or other faraway lands are inextricably linked to our history. Our humanness binds us together in a world in which everything is interconnected, the moral imperative is the imperative to know. I intend to continue on my quest in "the effort to know" and arrive at discovering that our sense of self is highly reliant on what others tell us we are not. This becomes the story we believe. Harari states that "while a good story must give me a role and must extend beyond my horizons, it

need not be true. A story can be pure fiction, yet provide me with an identity and make me feel that my life has meaning...none of the thousands of stories that different cultures, religions, and tribes have invented throughout history are true. They are just human inventions" (Harari p.285) So why bother believing in these myths? Our personal identity is built upon them, we listen to these stories as grow up and we become so heavily invested in the story that we are more apt to rationalize it than doubt it. Our personal identities are our stories that are also formed by our collective institutions. "Most stories are held together by the weight of their roof rather than by the strength of their foundations" (P.286 Harari). As humans, we need to believe in the stories, reinforce them with rituals, with sacrifices, in the human quest for meaning. Historically, the atrocities committed are not just rooted in greed and hate but even more so from ignorance and feelings of indifference. As "Charming English ladies financed the Atlantic slave trade without ever setting foot in either Africa or the Caribbean. They then sweetened their four o'clock tea with "snow-white" sugar cubes produced in hellish plantations about which they knew nothing" (Harari p.231). So how do we make a sincere effort to know?

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