The Kirby Canon

2010-2011

WilkES University

Department of English
A winning compendium

of student compositions,

reviewed by faculty and peers.

“If you would not be forgotten as soon as you are dead, either write something worth reading or do things worth writing.” – Benjamin Franklin

“Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret.” – Matthew Arnold
The 2010-2011 edition of The Kirby Canon presents outstanding essays from each level of courses offered by the Wilkes University English program during the 2010-2011 academic year.

Essays were self-nominated or nominated by faculty. All essays were evaluated by a group of faculty and student reviewers.

The editors of The Kirby Canon wish to thank the students and faculty who submitted essays and participated in the production of this anthology.

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Dr. Helen Davis
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Kyla Halsor

“Illusion and Magic in Blanche DuBois’s Character”

Written for English 120: Introduction to Literature

taught by
Dr. Chad Stanley
Illusion and Magic in Blanche DuBois’s Character

Throughout Tennessee William’s play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, there is a prominent and continuous theme of realism and magic. In particular this theme manifests itself deeply in one specific main character, Blanche DuBois. In the play, Blanche finds herself in a consistent struggle with reality; she has immense difficulty accepting her true life, her reality. Because of Blanche’s role in the tragic suicide of her first love and husband, she becomes entirely overwhelmed and wrecked by guilt. Blanche acknowledges and claims the responsibility in her husband’s suicide as she reveals to Mitch, her momentary boyfriend, her knowledge of her husband’s affair with another grown man. Blanche unveils her spiteful comment, her love’s incentive for suicide, as she states “It was because-on the dance-floor-unable to stop myself- I’d suddenly said-‘I saw! I know! You disgust me…’” (Williams 96). Thus Blanche fervently attempts to invent a new altered life characterized by frantic, compulsive lies to conceal this heartbreaking incident and her guilt. Before long the accurate details of her life not only become blurred and concealed to her friends and family who surround her but to Blanche herself; true reality appears detrimental and painful to her.

Blanche travels from her hometown of Laurel to her sister Stella’s home in New Orleans. This trip presents an opportune time for Blanche to obtain a blank slate to inscribe a new life and simultaneously gain support from Stella. By use of her neurotic lies, it is here in New Orleans Blanche not only changes events of her past but also her personality. Blanche hides her real self behind a mask. She acts and portrays a beautiful, kind, caring, modest victim rather than her factual drunken, sexually deviant self, resultant from the suicide of her former husband. For an example, consistently throughout Blanche makes a blatant habit of secretly drinking a good
quantity of alcohol. This habit becomes very apparent to the reader when Stanley and Blanche initially meet. As soon as Stanley offers Blanche a shot Blanche responds “No, I rarely touch it” (Williams 30). Blanche attempts with her lie, her mask, to portray herself as someone of good morality. There are three specific instances in the play that exemplify Blanche’s fantasy and illusion of her life and her struggle with reality. These instances also mark three stages in the breakdown and deterioration of her pretend façade that she tries so hard to front.

One chief example of magic and illusion evident in Blanche’s life occurs in scene seven. Blanche is bathing herself in the Kowalski tub while simultaneously in the other room Stanley and Stella are bickering. Stanley is revealing the truths to Stella of Blanche’s past that he has learned from a reliable source. Stanley openly sees through her illusion and her mask, but needless to say Stella is reluctant to believe him for Blanche is her sister, her family. Stanley’s character represents the harsh light of reality. Stanley is the reality that is cracking her mask, trying to break her down from denial to reveal her secrets. While he is conveying the truth to Stella in this scene, Blanche is heard singing a song ironically telling of the magic and make-believe she is exercising. She is singing the song “It’s Only a Paper Moon” by Ella Fitzgerald. This song contains lyrics such as “It’s a Barnum and Bailey world, Just as phony as it can be-But it wouldn’t be make-believe If you believed in me!” (Williams 99). These lyrics explicitly clarify that indeed Blanche is purposely lying about her past. The upbeat lyrics and tone of the song justify and reveal how harmless Blanche feels her pretending is. She feels life would be simpler and her lies indeed true if only everyone such as Stella, Stanley, and Mitch would just “believe” her. It seems obvious at this moment in this scene that Blanche does not consider her lying habits to be destructive. Though it is increasingly evident that Stanley is peeling back her layers and stripping away her mask; he is discovering the truth, the first stage in her destruction.
A second exceedingly important instance of Blanche’s magic in *A Streetcar Named Desire* occurs in scene nine. Mitch, Stanley’s friend and Stella’s brief love interest, visits the Kowalski home to speak to Blanche. From Stanley, Mitch learns the truth about Blanche’s past. She is certainly not the kind, modest girl that he has been tricked into believing. Once Mitch makes it more and more obvious to Blanche during their conversation that he is fully convinced she has been a liar, that he will not be deceived by her attempts to trick him, and that he now sees through her mask, she fruitlessly exclaims “I don’t want realism, I want magic!...I misrepresent things to them. I don’t tell the truth” (Williams 117). Blanche is rather explicitly admitting to Mitch that she has been lying. Not only is Blanche providing backing and more evidence to Stanley’s claim, her statement is also exposing her denial, emphasizing that she is perceiving the reality of her actions. Reality begins to crash down upon her. Her ability to live her pretend, make-believe life is fading rapidly; she begins to spiral out of control. Blanche no longer can use illusion as a shield to protect herself. This inability is the next stage of her inevitable advance to destruction.

The third central instance and stage of Blanche’s illusion arises in the last scene of the play, scene eleven. Blanche recognizes that everyone including Stanley, Stella, Mitch do not believe her lies anymore. In spite of her avid attempts, they all are aware of the traumatic details of her past. She finds that she has no escape or a new means to guard herself from the harshest reality. Blanche has quite simply gone crazy; she does not know how to successfully or happily live without her mask. After Blanche’s mental state becomes all too clear to Stella, she decides to bring a doctor and nurse to the house to take her away. Stella does not have much choice. It is clear Stanley wants Blanche expelled from the house. Stella justifies the action by portraying Blanche’s removal as the only promising means to attempt to help her ill sister and to maintain
her own illusions, helping her deal with her relationship with Stanley. As the harsh light of reality comes crashing down upon Blanche, she grasps that there is no escape, a doctor is in fact there to take her away. Blanche once again puts up an illusion and pulls on her mask. She cannot handle the truth of the situation so by the only means that she knows how Blanche changes reality by make believing in her mind that the situation is entirely different. The doctor is now the gentleman caller she has been waiting for, Shep Huntleigh, an illusion made real. Her illusion is exemplified as she exclaims “Whoever you are-I have always depended on the kindness of strangers” (Williams 142). This exclamation illustrates a relapse; Blanche has put a façade up to protect her from the callous reality of her new future in the mental hospital. She is only trying to make the best out of the dark situation that she is met with. This statement also acts as a representation of her complete mental separation from the real world. She is in her final stage of destruction, a full mental meltdown and a break with reality. Blanche plunges back into illusion.

Although Blanche meets her downfall, illusion does not end with Blanche in the play. As Blanche is whisked up and taken away, the ominous and foreshadowing tones of illusion are seen again. Stella, unable to cope with the idea her own husband raping Blanche and the idea that she has kicked her own sister out of her house, she begins to put up a familiar mask of denial. As she states to Eunice, her friend and neighbor, “I couldn’t believe her story and go on living with Stanley” (Williams 133). In order to preserve and maintain her constructed illusion that Stanley is a proper, ideal husband, a complete contrast to his actual abusive self, it is imperative that Stella removes Blanche from her home. In Stella’s illusionary state, Blanche serves as her representation and constant reminder of the reality of Stanley’s abusive, rapist personality. Stella cannot remain living with Stanley if Blanche is rousing his nasty, aggressive behavior. Therefore Stella needs to remove Blanche from her home. It is easier for Stella to move Blanche out rather
than Stanley; she does not know how she would successfully and happily live her life without Stanley. The idea is not only daunting and testing for Stella but also, even more importantly, Stella and Stanley’s future child. The play leaves a sense of ambiguity and foreshadowing of the role of illusion in the Kowalski’s future.

In Tennessee William’s play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, there is a common, continuing theme of reality versus illusion. Reality inevitably provokes and thrusts the characters, in particular Blanche and Stella, into a world of magic and illusion for protection. Blanche’s illusions act as a mask and as armor against the cruelty of the truths of her past, her reality. She uses both magic and illusion as defense mechanisms to keep herself motivated and happy so she can both mentally and physically manage to live out the remainder of her life after the traumatic suicide. The only effective manner in which Blanche can deal with her past is by completely avoiding it. She twists and contorts the past into something entirely new, innovative, and different. Stanley as seen prior does not allow Blanche to continue living in a dream. He functions and represents the harsh unsympathetic reality of life that in due course leads to her spiral into mental breakdown, a breakdown characterized into three stages. Williams leaves to the imagination how illusion and reality will play into Stella’s future life for we see her advance into the perplexing, destructive world of illusion near the end of the play. Blanche serves as a constant reminder for Stella of the reality of Stanley’s violent and foul actions. Thus Stella desires and needs Blanche out of her house; she is not capable of living without Stanley especially with the upcoming birth of their first child. Rid of reality and consequently Blanche, Stella can continue on living a normal ‘perfect’ life with Stanley, a life characterized by illusions. It is unclear at the end of the play if her mask, developed to cope with her sister’s departure and her husband’s suspicious actions, will result in a downfall marked by three specific
stages similar to her sister’s. Stella at the end of the play is certainly in the first stage of deterioration, she is living in a pretend world using illusions to shield herself from reality. Although Williams foreshadows an ominous downward spiral of Stella’s mental health after her jump into an illusionary world, in the end only imagination will tell if illusion and reality will result in the same distressing and traumatic events in Stella’s future as they did in her sister Blanche’s life.
Works Cited

Best 200-Level Essay:

Kelly Clisham

“Kids on Campus: On-Site Child Care at Wilkes University”

Written for English 228: Professional and Workplace Writing

taught by
Dr. Marcia Farrell
Kids on Campus: On-Site Child Care at Wilkes University

Prepared by Kelly Clisham

Report Distributed December 9, 2010
Abstract

Child care is a necessity for working parents of young children. Finding a quality, affordable child care provider can be both difficult and stressful. Though on-site child care is not a quick fix, Wilkes University could help employees solve a major work/life dilemma by establishing such a facility. *Kids on Campus: On-Site Child Care at Wilkes University* examines the number of parents nationwide and statewide who use child care and shares child care experiences of three current Wilkes employees. The report offers examples of successful employer-sponsored programs and providers, as well as detailing the potential benefits of such a program for staff, their children, the Education Department, and the University as a whole.
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Preface

When my son Ayden was born, I was fortunate enough to have family members care for him for the first three years. As he got older and more active, I decided to remove some responsibility for his care from my grandmother and in-laws. After significant research, I was able to find a quality program at a convenient location. Still, the cost was shocking. When my daughter was born a year later, I could no longer rely on family members to provide regular care. With two children in day care four days per week, my monthly child care costs were more than my mortgage. At this point in time, any employer assistance in the realm of child care certainly would have improved my morale, increased my company loyalty, reduced my stress, and cut down on unscheduled days off. Though I am not sure that employer-sponsored child care will ever become the norm, my hope is that increasing awareness of the potential of such child care programs will be a step in the right direction.
Executive Summary

*Kids on Campus: On-Site Child Care at Wilkes University* provides a look at some of the issues facing millions of working parents across the United States today. The report offers examples of various types of child care available and the questions parents must ask when choosing a child care provider. Once a decision is made, child care can still be stressful. It often accounts for a significant amount of a family’s income. Finances aside, spending forty hours a week away from their children can be difficult for working parents.

One solution which can help ease the stress and help working parents achieve some work/life balance is employer-sponsored child care. Though such programs are far from the rule, their numbers are increasing. *Kids on Campus: On-Site Child Care at Wilkes University* offers three examples of providers who specialize in on-site, employer-sponsored child care facilities. The report also shares case studies on some of the providers’ successful programs.

In addition, *Kids on Campus: On-Site Child Care at Wilkes University* details the benefits of on-campus child care to parents, children, early childhood education students and faculty, and the University as an employer. Finally, the report suggests that an on-site child care center is worth pursuing, and briefly discusses a feasibility study as well as the next steps in the process.
Introduction

Should I go back to work after my child is born? Can I afford not to go back to work? Who will care for my child while I spend eight hours a day at a desk? Millions of families with young children struggle with these issues every day. The answers to these questions affect children and their parents, as well as employers who need to attract and retain qualified employees.

Like thousands of other working parents across the state, and millions across the country, Wilkes University employees with young children need to ensure safe, reliable child care during work hours. Parents need to examine many factors when deciding on a suitable child care program, including quality, location and cost. The establishment of a child care facility on the Wilkes University campus would help employees struggling to find suitable, affordable child care.

Though employer-sponsored child care is rare, employers across the country, in a wide variety of industries, make such programs work. Many of these child care programs are run not by the employers themselves, but by providers that specialize in on-site child care such as Bright Horizons Family Solutions and Children’s Creative Learning Centers. Locally, Hildebrandt Learning Centers (HLC) is the leading provider of employer-sponsored child care, with 40 different sites, including the King’s College Early Learning Center.

While such programs are appealing to working parents and their children, the University would also reap the benefits of employer-sponsored child care. Faculty and students of the Education Department would have the advantage of a convenient internship site for the Early Childhood Education program. As an employer, Wilkes could expect reduced absenteeism and increased employee productivity. In addition, an on-site child care center would serve as a
powerful tool to help Wilkes attract and retain top talent, positioning the University as an employer of choice in the region.

Child Care by the Numbers

For many households, child care is a necessity: “Child care allows families to earn more than one income—which is economically what many families need today to survive. For families with income under $60,000 annually, a mother’s income accounts for more than half of household income” (Child Care in America). While essential, child care is also a tremendous expense. For a married couple, the cost of full-time care for an infant in a child care center accounts for anywhere from 7% to 18% of their annual income. For a single mother of an infant, the percentage of her annual income which goes to child care is a staggering 26% to 67% (2010 Child Care in the State of Pennsylvania).

Families and Children Requiring Child Care

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pennsylvania</th>
<th>United States</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two-parent families, both parents working</td>
<td>335,089</td>
<td>8,913,970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-parent families, parent working</td>
<td>201,040</td>
<td>5,778,619</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total children under 6 requiring child care</td>
<td>536,129</td>
<td>14,692,589</td>
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Table 1. (2010 Child Care in the State of Pennsylvania)

Child Care Dollars

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pennsylvania</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average fees for an infant</td>
<td>$10,550</td>
<td>$4,560 - $18,773</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average fees for a preschooler</td>
<td>$8,632</td>
<td>$4,460 - $13,158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average income for a full-time child care provider</td>
<td>$19,800</td>
<td>$20,350</td>
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Table 2. (2010 Child Care in the State of Pennsylvania)

Types of Child Care

Once parents realize that child care is a necessity, the questions are just beginning. First on the list is “What type of child care will be the best fit for our family?” Potential child care options include:
• **Child Care Centers.** Child care centers provide care for children in groups. These centers are licensed by the state in which they are located, and the states hold the centers accountable for minimum health, safety, and training standards. Centers are subjected to state inspections annually. Parents often choose a child care center based on the reputation of the program or institution backing the center. Parents may feel that centers are safer than other child care options because of state regulations, more dependable because of multiple child care staffers, and more educational due to a variety of available activities and equipment.

• **Family Child Care**
  When a provider cares for a small number of children in the provider’s home, it is known as family child care. Many states require licensing and regulation for family child care if the provider cares for more than a certain number of children. Family child care providers will often submit to voluntary regulation by the state to enhance the setting’s credibility. Parents often appreciate the homey atmosphere and smaller group size, and referrals from others who have used the service may play a large role in the choice.

• **In Home Caregivers**
  In home caregivers, such as a nanny or a housekeeper, provide care in the child’s own home. Most are not regulated by the state, though these caregivers do receive some oversight if they work through a referral agency. Parents often feel this option gives them greater control over their child care situation, and they appreciate the flexibility and convenience of having the provider in their own home. In home care is typically the most expensive child care option, though if there are multiple children in the family, it may be slightly more cost effective.

• **Relatives or friends**
  Some parents are fortunate enough to have a relative, such as a grandparent, or a trusted friend who can provide child care. In these situations, care may be offered in the child’s or the provider’s home. These personal caregivers are not licensed by any state agency. Parents believe that these providers will offer more loving care than a stranger and feel greater sense of security with this option. This choice is typically the least expensive, but it is not available to every parent.

**Questions to Ask**

The questions do not end once a family chooses a type of child care. Some of the things parents still need to consider include:

• What is the staff to child ratio?

• How many other children are in my child’s group?

• What are the qualifications of the staff and the director, and do they receive continuing education?

• Does the staff have first aid training?
• What are the site’s standards of cleanliness (for staff, children, diaper changing stations, tables, toys?)

• Are toys and activities age-appropriate and educational?

• Are safe, secure indoor and outdoor play areas available?

Child Care Needs at Wilkes University

Information on child care needs at Wilkes University is lacking. Neither Human Resources nor the Office of Institutional Analysis and Planning had data on the number of employees who currently use child care programs or who might be interested in an on-site child care program. Of three providers close to campus—King’s College/St. Mary’s, the Greater Wilkes-Barre YMCA, and the Catholic Youth Center (CYC)—only one replied with the number of Wilkes employees with children at their site. Though these personal insights cannot be considered a representative sample, they do offer a look at some child care concerns of the Wilkes community.

Dr. Sean Kelly of the Wilkes University English Department takes his 3 ½-year-old daughter, Gwynneth, to the King’s/St. Mary’s site on South Washington Street in Wilkes-Barre. The location, within walking distance from campus, is convenient, but child care problems still come up occasionally. A few weeks ago, Dr. Kelly went to the center to drop his daughter off, only to learn a black-out in approximately 75 buildings in the area forced the site to close for the day.

Desperate to make it to his 2:30 and 4:45 classes, Dr. Kelly brought Gwynneth to work. The alternate arrangement was far from ideal: “I tried to occupy my daughter in my office, hoping that someone might be able to watch her for 15-20 minutes during the classes while I handed out assignments, but she soon became bored, cranky and anxious. She is also in the late
stages of toilet training, a huge complication for which I was simply not prepared” (E-mail).

Gwynneth was clearly not enjoying the Kirby Hall accommodations, and in spite of his best efforts, the professor ended up leaving for the day at 1:30:

Throughout the morning, I kept bumping into students who thought it was really neat that I had my daughter on campus, assuming that she would just sit mildly in the corner and color with crayons. Unfortunately, she is too unpredictable at this age, and there is no way I can perform my job while also negotiating her needs.

(E-mail)

Dr. Helen Davis, also a faculty member in the English Department, uses the same facility to provide care for her 4-year-old daughter, Abby. Though Dr. Davis had to alter her schedule during the blackout, cancelling student conferences and missing committee and club meetings, her overall experience with the site has been positive. She is pleased with the center’s proximity to Wilkes. “It’s not on campus, but it’s pretty close” (Interview). More importantly, she is satisfied with the program’s quality, the educational curriculum, and the staff’s interaction with her daughter.

The biggest child care issue for Dr. Davis was finding a quality program. When she accepted the position at Wilkes, she immediately started looking into child care options. Since the University did not have any referral information available, she turned to the Internet. Dr. Davis was dismayed at the lack of information available to help her make an informed decision on local child care. She was also shocked at some posted comments which, rather than offering helpful insight on personal experiences with child care in the area, suggested that as a mother, she should simply stay home.
When Dr. Davis started at Wilkes, she still did not have child care arrangements in place, but at least she was able to check with colleagues for recommendations: “When I arrived on campus to begin my job, I started asking around, and the only two daycares anyone knew anything about were the YMCA and King’s/St. Mary’s. I did research on the two to learn about their accreditation, ranking, etc., and took a tour of both facilities” (Interview). Dr. Davis was more impressed with the standards at the staff at King’s/St. Mary’s. Even though she was comfortable with her decision, the child care dilemma still wasn’t solved. The center had a waiting list for two-year-olds, and Abby was not able to attend until September when King’s/St. Mary’s opened another class for that age group.

Margaret Petty, the Assistant Director of the Center for Continued Learning, has been employed by Wilkes for 8 years. Her son Stephen was born after she started working for the University, so it did not affect her decision to accept the job. Still, Petty knew if she were to return to work, she needed to find quality, convenient child care for her son. The downtown location of the King’s/St. Mary’s site was appealing, and the educational nature of their program even more so. The center uses “The Creative Curriculum for Infants, Toddlers, & Twos,” providing interactive learning experiences for even the youngest children there: “It is a learning center where they actually teach the children things instead of just babysitting them” (E-mail).

Petty’s only frustration with her current child care provider is that the center is unable to care for children when they are sick. Though she understands the reasoning behind the policy, it still forces her to find another option when the inevitable childhood illness occurs. Fortunately, on the day of the blackout, Petty received a phone call before arriving at the center and was able to make arrangements to have her mother watch 4-year-old Stephen. While she never considered
not returning to work, balancing a career and child care has left Petty thinking about working part-time.

**Successful Employer-Sponsored Child Care Providers and Programs**

All three Wilkes employees interviewed agreed that they would take advantage of on-campus child care. Though such programs are still the exception to the rule, employers’ interest in their employees’ child care needs is increasing. For the past twenty-five years, *Working Mother* magazine has published an annual list of the Best Companies for Working Mothers. On the magazine’s first list, only 7 companies offered on-site child care. On the most recent list, published in the October, 2010 issue, 99 out of 100 companies offered some sort of child care services, ranging from on-site care to back-up care, before and after school care, and summer camps for employees’ children.

Bright Horizons Family Solutions, based in Watertown, Massachusetts, has been providing employer-sponsored child care since 1986. The company serves more than 700 clients in the United States, Canada, England, Ireland and Scotland. American Express, Marriott International, NBC Universal and Target are just a few of the clients who have taken advantage of Bright Horizons’ child care solutions worldwide. In addition to providing day care for infants, toddlers and preschoolers, Bright Horizons operates elementary schools, Montessori schools and after-school programs.

One of Bright Horizons’ many successful ventures is its child care program for Alston & Bird, LLP. Based in Atlanta, Georgia, the firm’s 800 lawyers provide legal expertise to clients around the globe. Alston & Bird is well-known for its innovative thinking not only when it comes to law, but when it comes to diversity and professional development.
In the early 1990’s, the Atlanta firm was already thinking about work/life balance and
took the next step by providing access to back-up child care for its employees. Alston & Bird
wanted to do more, and an increase in tax credits for employers who offer child care allowed the
firm to move in that direction. After partnering with Bright Horizons to learn more about the
child care needs of their attorneys and staff, Alston & Bird opened the A&B Children’s Campus

The full-service child care center offers Alston & Bird employees full and part time
enrollment options, back-up care and school-age programs. Becoming one of the first law firms
in the country to make on-site childcare available provided evidence of Alston & Bird’s
commitment to work/life balance and workforce diversity. The child care program is just one of
the benefits that makes Alston & Bird an employer of choice not only in Atlanta, but in the legal
profession as a whole. From the firm’s point of view, the Children’s Campus is one more way to
attract, retain and advance talented lawyers who are also working parents.

Children’s Creative Learning Centers, Inc. (CCLC) is a national child care provider with
headquarters in Portland, Oregon. Founded in 1992, CCLC specializes in employer-sponsored
child care centers with programs for children ranging in age from six weeks through twelve
years. CCLC has more than 100 child care centers nationwide, tailored to the unique needs of
their clients in industries from manufacturing to entertainment. The company’s client list
includes Daimler Trucks North America, Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey,
Electronic Arts, and Pixar Animation Studios.

CCLC serves a number of clients in the field of higher education, including the
University of Utah, Stanford University, Oregon State University, and Northwestern University.
The University Children’s Center, serving Northwestern employees in downtown Chicago, is just one example of a successful campus child care program.

The University was aware of the need for quality, convenient child care among its faculty, staff and students, but lacked the appropriate space for a child care facility. Recognizing the problem, Northwestern partnered with CCLC. CCLC identified a building just two blocks south of campus which provided the necessary convenience for University employees and could be renovated to suit the needs of a child care site. CCLC assumed financial responsibility for the remodeling project and management of the property lease.

The University Children’s Center began serving Northwestern families in January of 2005. Though services are available to parents in the surrounding community, children of Northwestern employees and students receive priority enrollment and discounted fees. The center features ten classrooms and can accommodate 112 children. Just a year and a half after opening, the program’s enrollment was near maximum capacity.

The convenient location of the University Children’s Center is clearly beneficial to Northwestern employees, who can stop in to visit their children any time courtesy of the center’s open-door policy. Parents can also rest assured that their children are receiving quality care, backed by CCLC’s years of expertise. As an employer, Northwestern has also reaped the benefits, with their child care program providing an additional tool to retain and attract quality staff and students.

Hildebrandt Learning Centers, LLC (HLC) is a leading developer and manager of employer-associated early learning centers in Pennsylvania and the Middle Atlantic region. Headquartered in Dallas, Pennsylvania, HLC was founded in 1991. The company established its first child care center at Lancaster Laboratories, and now oversees 40 different sites, providing

HLC’s client list includes Sanofi Pasteur, the Social Security Administration, the Internal Revenue Service, and Olympus America. HLC also provides services to several institutions of higher learning, including Gettysburg College, Penn State-Harrisburg, Franklin & Marshall College, Lafayette College, and West Virginia University.

The West Virginia University Child Learning Center (CLC) opened its doors in August of 2009. With a 200 child capacity, CLC provides full and part-time care to children of University students and employees at a reduced rate. The center’s open door policy allows for parents to visit during the day, though security is ensured via a coded keypad and visitor registration and identification.

HLC took child care to college in Wilkes-Barre when the company opened the King’s College Early Learning Center in September of 2009. While HLC has a child care center downtown at its King’s/St. Mary’s site on South Washington Street, the construction of the new, state-of-the-art facility on the college campus provides additional convenience for King’s students and employees. The Early Learning Center serves as a field experience site for King’s early education students who operate under the supervision of full-time HLC staff. The center offers priority enrollment to children of the college’s students, employees, and alumni, and King’s staff members receive a tuition discount. The convenient location, experienced management team, trained staff, and discounted rates combine to make the Early Learning Center an attractive option to parents of young children in the King’s College community.
Who Would Benefit from On-Site Child Care at Wilkes?

The obvious answer to the question of who would benefit from on-site child care at Wilkes University is employees with young children and the children themselves. The more surprising and more accurate answer is the entire Wilkes community.

For Wilkes employees with young children, the convenience of child care on campus would be an advantage. They could save time in the mornings and after work by eliminating separate stops to drop off and pick up their children. Parents would have an increased feeling of safety and security knowing their children are nearby. They could check on their children at breaks and even stop in for lunch. A breastfeeding mother could take advantage of having her baby in close proximity for feedings. Removing the worry of safe, convenient child care would reduce stress, helping parents be more productive and engaged at work and at home. Depending on the fee structure, these employees could also expect to save money on child care costs.

Children also benefit from an on-site child care arrangement. Like their parents, they feel an added level of comfort knowing mom or dad is nearby. They have more time to bond with their parents, whether on the commute or during brief visits throughout the day. Positive experiences in an early childhood program, like the curriculum-rich HLC program, position children for success in school and in life, providing both immediate and long-lasting advantages: “Studies have shown that children who attend quality preschool are more likely to graduate from high school, less likely to end up in jail, and are more likely to pursue advanced education” (Employer Benefit Plan Review).

Wilkes students in the Early Childhood Education program would also reap the benefits of a child care center on campus, according to Dr. Caroline Maurer, Chair of the Department of Undergraduate Education. Such a center would not only be a convenient site for internship
hours, but it would provide the additional advantage of a shared experience, with all of the future
teachers able to discuss the same curriculum and students. Furthermore, while faculty
supervision of these early childhood education internships is now outsourced or handled by
adjuncts, if all of the teachers-to-be were working at one site at the same time, the faculty could
increase their involvement.

As an educational institution, the University could benefit by positioning the child care
center as a lab school or training facility for other child care providers. “One of the benefits to
having a center at a college is if it becomes a lab school and serves as a model for other child
care centers. It’s a non-monetary benefit, but it’s a benefit,” said Maurer, who ran a lab school at
the high school level for 7 years and at the college level for 6 years (Interview).

Finally, from an employer’s point of view, an on-site child care center would offer
significant advantages to Wilkes University. Employers who offer such programs report
increased retention and recruitment, as well as reduced turnover and unscheduled absenteeism.
These employers also experience higher employee productivity, greater job satisfaction, and
increased company loyalty. Surprisingly, these benefits do not only come from employees using
on-site child care, but the work force as a whole: “I was impressed with the near universality of
positive feeling workers showed about working for a company that had a childcare center. They
liked the idea that their company took care of the person who worked down the row from them,”
said Rachel Connelly, co-author of Kids at Work: The Value of Employer-Sponsored On-Site
Child Care Centers (Bowdoin).

When examining the benefits of on-site child care, the numbers speak for themselves:

• 94% of employees with children in at-work centers say that work-site child care would
  affect their decision to make a job change (Bright Horizons).
• 90% of parents using these centers report positive effects on concentration and productivity (Bright Horizons).

• Convenient child care solutions can save a company more than $60,000 a year by reducing absenteeism (CCLC).

• After a year and a half, not a single employee with a child in on-site child care left ECS, a Pennsylvania environmental insurance company (CCLC).

• 85% of employers with child care programs reported more positive public relations (CCLC).

• For every $1 invested in work/family programs, Johnson & Johnson reported saving more than $4 (HLC).

**Conclusion**

Quality, affordable child care is a concern for parents of young children across the nation, throughout the state, and on the Wilkes University campus. While an on-site child care center is not a quick and easy fix, the potential benefits of such a program to parents, children, early childhood education students, education faculty, and the University as a whole are clear.

Of course, a traditional community like Wilkes is often resistant to change, particularly change that comes with a price tag attached. “If there was a site here, I’d gladly support it, but I don’t want to fight for the money for it,” said Dr. Maurer (Interview). However, studies have shown that expenditures for on-site child care are exceeded by savings in the areas of retention, recruitment, and absenteeism, providing a significant return on investment. Research into tax breaks and available grants may also allay financial fears. Other common objections include liability and facility issues, but by working with a child care provider such as HLC, these
concerns can be dealt with through licensure, hold harmless language in the center contract, and reverter language in the lease between the employer and the provider.

In short, there are employers throughout the country, from manufacturers to institutions of higher learning, which find ways to offer convenient, quality, cost-effective child care programs. With a little ingenuity and a partnership with a qualified provider, child care at work can work. An on-site child care center at Wilkes University would benefit the entire Wilkes community while demonstrating the University’s commitment to its people:

A campus child care center makes a powerful statement that a college or university is family-friendly and cares about its faculty, staff, and students’ needs by providing them with the necessary supports to be successful. While a center alone will not address all of the work/life challenges faced by faculty, staff, and students, it demonstrates an investment by the institution in their futures. (Bright Horizons)

**Recommendations**

Following this research, I propose that Wilkes University engage in discussions with an employer-sponsored child care provider such as Hildebrandt Learning Centers to discuss a potential child care center on campus. HLC would conduct a needs assessment to determine the specific child care concerns of the Wilkes community. If the project is deemed feasible, a site analysis could follow. With the recent focus on master planning, the timing would be ideal. The provider could then proceed to cost analysis, development, project management, and eventually, day-to-day management of the facility.


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Best 300-Level Essay:

David Cook

“Drinking Coffee in the Hofgarten: An Examination of the Themes of T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden”

Written for English 370: Studies in Modern British Poetry

taught by

Dr. Chad Stanley
Drinking Coffee in the Hofgarten: An examination of the themes of T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden

W.H. Auden, as noted by Edward Mendelson, “was the first poet writing in English who felt at home in the twentieth century; and who understood its special temptations” (Mendelson xv). Mendelson continues this argument, noting that Auden does not withdraw from the modern world, and that, in his poetry, he searches for answers to modern problems, unlike the Modernist poets who found themselves completely removed and isolated from the society around them (Mendelson xv-vii). Mendelson’s argument, however, does not take into account the changes in Auden’s expression of poetic purpose as he matures. As Auden matures as a writer, his work moves from poetry which believes it can create changes within the world to poetic expressions which realize the failure of the poetic word in inducing changes. In essence, then, Auden shifts from a moralist poet to a Modernist poet who shares in the tradition of T.S. Eliot. Therefore, Auden can be defined as a Modernist through juxtaposition with the overarching narrative of T.S. Eliot.

Before discussing the works of Auden and Eliot key must be defined. The principle term which needs defining in the context of this work is “Modernism.” The definition which will be presented comes from the fourth edition of the Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory, compiled by J.A. Cuddon. In literature, “modernism reveals a breaking away from established rules, traditions and conventions, fresh ways of looking at man’s position and function in the universe and many experiments in form and style” (“Modernism” 515-6). This definition has
further been selected because it eliminates, at least to an extent, the problems which arise in those definitions which are date orientated. In addition to Modernism, the term “poetic outcomes” needs to be defined and explicated. Poetic outcomes refer to the final purpose or goal of the poem; what the poem calls for; a change in action, or a focus on a change in audience perception. A poetic outcome in the context of Auden, for example, would be his use of the pathetic fallacy as a direct result of the action or subjective motive of the poem.

Next, in order to make a fair comparison between Auden and Eliot, criteria for judgment need to be established. Each criterion below has been selected because it uniquely reflects the principles of Modernism in ways which are unique to T.S. Eliot’s poetry.

- Modernist poetry captures human experience
- Modernist poetry engages themes of isolation and alienation

As indicated in the listed criteria above, Eliot’s poetry strives to capture human experience. In this particular regard, there are a few key facts to observe. First, Eliot’s early poetry, that poetry which was written between 1907 and 1910 for the Harvard Advocate reflects on different human experiences than his later works. In the poem, “Song,” which was published in 1907, Eliot engages human experience through the theme of time. In the first stanza Eliot writes, “If space and time, as sage say,/ Are things which cannot be,/ The fly that lives a single day has lived as long as we./ But let us live while yet we may,/ While love and life are free,/ For time is time, and runs away;/ Though sages disagree” (Eliot, “Song”). The first stanza of the poem is engaging in the tradition of the metaphysical poet in order to embody a truth of young human experience. The speaker is encouraging the other actor in the poem embrace life and freedom, to engage existence before time runs out. Within the stanza, the speaker not only shows his desire to enjoy all of the bounties of life, but also expresses his fear of time running away
before he is able to do what he sets out to accomplish. By placing these two sentiments in juxtaposition with each other Eliot captures the duality of human experience, and further exemplifies the human emotions and thoughts which are prevalent in the college aged person, which Eliot and his contemporary audience were at the time of publication. The final stanza of “Song” also engages in the theme of time, but has a poetic outcome which would not be part of Eliot’s later works. In the final four lines of the stanza, the speaker decrees, “But let us haste to pluck anew/ Nor mourn to see them pine,/ And though the flowers of love be few/ Let them be divine”(Eliot, “Song”). The speaker, in these final four lines addresses the inevitable decay of life, and insists that life should be lived and the world should be engaged regardless.

While the poem, “Song,” does capture human experience in the modernist tradition, the poem is not fully modernistic, and this is was written in Eliot’s first stage as a poet, while he was still developing his techniques. Even so, consider his use of the metaphysical poetic tradition. This particular form of poetry was not one which was given much credence, and Eliot selected it as a style and made it new, a mantra of the Modernist period. Thus, even though the poem does not reflect the mature and pure High-Modernism of the later Eliot, the poem does give credence to Modernist studies, and therefore qualifies as an early Modern work by Eliot.

Another poem which embodies human experience, and comes from Eliot’s more mature work is the “Love song of Alfred J. Prufrock.” Published in 1917, the work engages the same themes as “Song,” but portrays them through a much older speaker, a speaker much older than Eliot was at the time of publication. As Valentin Videnov notes in “Human voices in silent seas: A reading of Eliot’s ‘Love Song:’”
“though jarring and easy transitions, Eliot contrasts the privacy of observation insight, and dream within the social functioning of man, his appraisal by others, and his appraisal of himself as reflected in “the eyes” (55), thoughts, and words of others. What unifies these opposed entities is human experience—the repeated instances of the present prefect tense (‘I have known’ [49, 55, 62] and ‘I have seen’ [82, 84, 85,126]); the ‘overwhelming’ (10, 93) desire to shape the ‘impossible’ (104) unity in the moment of its perfected completion” (Videnov 126).

Videnov’s engagement in the specifics of human experience highlights the mature Eliot’s way of manipulating communal understanding and engages in deep-rooted sentiments which many in the 1920s did not desire to recognize.

In addition to capturing human experience, the work of Eliot’s Modernism is also alienating and isolating. From an artistic standpoint, Patrick Terrell Gray, discusses Eliot’s isolation in terms of his theoretical approach to poetry, writing, “Eliot, who calls himself an ‘Inner Deaf Mute,’ consigns people like him to the rigors of a life of tedious discipline rather than one of inspiration. ‘What needs to be insisted upon,’ Eliot writes, ‘is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career’” (Gray 313). In this quotation Gray has transcribed Eliot’s own criticism and applied it to his work, painting a picture of an isolated poet who does not engage in surface emotion for its own ends. Furthermore, the complied theoretical discourse of Eliot provides insight into *The Waste Land*, a poem which fully engages the past, and remains distanced from the self through changing voices and classical allusions. Outside of the theoretical position of the poet, Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land* also engages in themes of isolation
and alienation on societal levels. Within “The Burial of the Dead,” the speaker writes, “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/ Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man, / You cannot say, or guess, for you know only/ a heap of broken images…” (Eliot, “Waste”). In these lines the speaker posits that mankind can no longer see their reality, those “roots that clutch” their society, and that their metropolitan life style, the “stony rubbish,” is destroying them. Further, the “broken images” are the fragments of communal existence, which man still shared, but they are so basic they are inadequate to provide for basic provisions needed to sustain life, “shelter” “food [cricket],” and “water.” Additionally supporting this argument is Marianne Thormahlen in her article “the city in The Waste Land,” wherein she writes, “…In The Waste Land, the metropolis is a huge, decaying receptacle which holds millions of people unable to reach across to one another” (Thormahlen 236). Without the basic necessities for life, and without the “ability to reach out to one another,” humans become isolated individual nomadic tribes removed from even the most basic experience.

With the criterion now explained, Auden’s development from a twentieth century moralist poet into a Modernist poet can be discussed. In order to see the transition one must analyze Auden’s poetic outcomes as Auden progresses through two distinct periods as a writer. In classifying periods, a model was used which indicates developmental works and then mastery; which are referred herein as “early” and “late” pieces. The first stage of artistic development, the learning of the craft, is not discussed because poetry is an ongoing developmental process for the “greats” such as Eliot and Auden.

In general, Auden’s early work, which ranges from around nineteen twenty-five, to nineteen thirty-five, has poetic outcomes which are supportive of an argument which positions Auden as a poet who believed his work could solve the problems within society, or in the least,
have an effect on society. One example of Auden’s early belief in poetic change can be found in “Sir, no man’s enemy,” published in October 1929. The first 13 lines of the text read as a plea for change in the way society views retreat in war and the misappropriation of honor in death. Making this claim especially clear are the lines, “Prohibit sharply the rehearsed response/ And gradually correct the coward’s stance” (Auden, “Sir”). However, in the ending lines, Auden’s voice turns from a plea for change to a reflection on the world post change, as if reading the poem until this point has evoked the audience to correct their stance on honor. In these final two lines Auden writes, “look shining at/ New styles of architecture, a change of heart” (Auden, ‘Sir’). The turn in voice is seen in the imperative structure of “a change of heart.” Unlike the rest of the poem, this final phrase is written as a matter-of-fact point, which is in contrast to the promises and hopes of gradual correction earlier in the poem. The desire to change the world and preserve life distinguishes this poem as a moralist piece. In this Moralism, however, Auden is still using the shared human experience of war-time death in order to evoke his audience, which shows Auden’s predisposition to Modernist themes and sensibilities.

Another example of Auden’s early belief in poetry’s ability to affect the world can be found in “Funeral Blues,” which was written in April of 1936, and represents a late work within his early period. This poem differs from “Sir” in that its poetic outcome is one wherein the reader can begin to see a shift in Auden’s view of poetry. Even though hints of Auden’s later work can be seen within the poem, the poem’s overall outcome is one which causes direct changes in both nature and humankind. Just like in “Sir” Auden presents the imperative mood when expecting or anticipating change in the audience, or world, in “Funeral Blues.” The difference, however, is Auden’s positioning of the imperative mood within this poem. “Funeral Blues” opens with the imperative with the speaker commanding, “Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone./ Prevent the
dog from barking with a juicy bone./ Silence the pianos and with a muffled drum/ Bring out the
coffin, let the mourners come” (Auden, “Funeral”). By opening the poem in this fashion, the
speaker is making the silent claim that the story he has to tell is so moving and powerful that it
should predispose you to listening to his message and heading his commands. This presumption
promotes Auden’s early belief in poetry’s ability to evoke change. The final stanza of the poem,
however, reflects more of Auden’s later perception. In the final stanza the speaker notes, “The
stars are not wanted now; put out every one, / Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun, / Pour
away the ocean and sweep up the wood; / For nothing now can ever come to any good” (Auden,
“Funeral”). This stanza serves as transitional material to Auden’s later poetics. The lines still
suggest a change take place, but in the final line, the speaker realizes ‘nothing now can ever
come to any good’ which relates as much to the loss of the speaker’s lover as it does to the
ability of poetry to make change. In this line, then, we see Auden begin to develop a sense of
Modernist isolation and alienation. While the other cited work, “Sir no Man’s Enemy” evokes
communal understanding, this work expresses a more detached persona which is incapable of
connecting to the world around him. Auden’s speaker wants to remove himself from the shared
experiences by “stop[ing] all the clocks, cut[ting] off the telephone, and [by] prevent[ing] the
dog from barking with a juicy bone,” (Auden, Funeral) and in doing so becomes removed from
the society around him. Those who would disagree with positioning “Funeral Blues” as a poem
which engages in isolation and alienation engage in discourse which treats this poem as a love
poem, but doing so engages the personal fallacy and assumes without question that Auden is
writing only about a lost love. However, given this poem’s publication and use in film, (Four
Weddings and a Funeral), one can see how the poem transcends any possible direct correlation to
Auden’s personal life, given the difference in interpretation between the film, and the intended
original meaning of this poem as a poem about a lover who has left a relationship, and not one who has perished in the more literal sense.

While Auden’s poetry still reflected a sense of connectivity and moralism in 1936, in two years time Auden’s work would become increasingly withdrawn, and would begin to more fully echo Modernist sentiments of isolation and a “modern” human experience. Auden’s execution of these sentiments, however, takes on a more narrative and comparative approach than the allegorical, historical, utopian mythology of Eliot’s modernism. This comparative approach to isolation and human experience can be viewed first in Auden’s “Musée de Beaux Arts” which was published in December 1938. At its core, the poem presents a metaphor for all of human suffering through the painting, *The Fall of Icarus*, and presents an argument indicating humanity is blind, or unwilling to help end suffering. Such an argument differs from Auden’s earlier work which would have offered a solution, or in the least, evoked a sense of moral change in the reader. Instead, this poem ends with a bitter sentiment about humanity, with the speaker saying, “and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen/ Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky;/ Had somewhere to get to and calmly sailed by” (Auden, “Musée”). These final lines not only reflect on humanity, but also on Auden’s own poetic positioning. He recognizes that even if he presents “a boy falling out of the sky” the world will continue moving without even the slightest bit of recognition. Such an understanding, which positions humans as being isolated from each other, to the extent that they do not care or recognize the death of another, is also present in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, specifically in “A Game of Chess,” and is an example of the Modern human experience. In “A Game of Chess” Eliot introduces a new character to the poem, and dedicates the time of her description to her chair and the scene around her, dedicating 33 lines to this subject. This dedication of lines to the tangible, the non-human, captures the nature
of the female character in the text, and moreover captures the society’s disinterest in humanity and human suffering. Clearly, the woman is suffering, as indicated in the erratic lines she utters between lines 111 and 115, yet no real attention is dedicated here, not even by the speaker’s companion in the text. Thus, in Auden, we see the continuation of the theme of Modern experience—wherein one turns a blind eye to human suffering—through the development of Icarus’ fall as a metaphor for humanity. This argument is further supported by the opening stanza of the poem, wherein the speaker notes, “About suffering they were never wrong. / The Old Masters: how well they understood/ Its human position; how it takes place/While someone else is eating or opening a window or just/walking dully by” (Auden, “Musée”). In this opening stanza, Auden is reaching out to the ‘Old Masters’ in an attempt to connect and accept what they know; that human suffering will always occur, and that to those not suffering, the event is unimportant. Auden’s need to connect with those ‘Old Masters’, thus indicates that Auden understood he was becoming isolated and removed from the society around him, as Eliot did. As noted earlier, he does present this isolation in a unique fashion from Eliot; a bitter lashing out at both himself and the world around him. He clearly wants the world to take heed of his metaphoric ‘boy falling out of the sky’, his poetic messages, but in the end, his poetic outcome is of bitterness and resignation, much like the question, “what shall we ever do” (Eliot, “Wasteland”). The question is never answered because life and history have no meaning, and only chess can provide comfort because of its mechanical and arbitrarily assigned values (Brooks 192). Given the distinct similarities between the theme of Auden’s “Musée” and Eliot’s Wasteland, the positioning of Auden as a Modernist becomes justified.

This resignation, and the theme of humanity’s inability to recognize the suffering of others, is carried over in his poem “Refugee Blues,” published in March 1939, which further
solidifies Auden’s position as Modernist. On the surface, the poem is representing the plight of
the German Jew in Hitler’s Germany. However, on a deeper level, the poem also represents
Auden’s isolation, as he recognizes his own position as poet positions him as a refugee without a
home. Observe, for example the opening two stanzas of the poem, wherein the speaker states,

Say this city has ten million souls,

Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:

Yet there’s no place for us my dear, yet there’s no place for us.

Once we had a country and we thought it fair,

Look in the atlas and you’ll find it there:

we cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now (Auden, “Refugee”).

In this poem, Auden is taking the isolation of the Jewish people and transcribing it as an outward
expression of his own isolation. The speaker’s inability to return home represents Auden’s
inability to find the world he longed for in his earlier poetry. This inability to return home is
similar to Eliot’s isolation, as expressed through his use of historical allegory and borrowed word
verse. Again, as in “Musée” Auden, unlike Eliot, addresses this inability in a bitter expression
about humanity. The poem’s opening line captures the bitter sentiment candidly. In the ten
million souls, Auden is indicting the entire world, noting that there is no person on this earth that
will listen to his messages, who will make the changes he sees that will help humanity. In this
regard then, Auden has become totally isolated from the world, and can see no legitimacy in
Modern humanity.
All of the bitterness, and indeed Auden’s views of Modern humanity’s illegitimacy, in the two above selections is resolved in one of Auden’s final poems “Archaeology” which was published in August of 1973. In this poem, the reader can see the final point of Auden’s poetry. In this work, Auden is accepting the poet’s role as Archaeologist, making predictions about life, attempting to understand the world, but knowing it will never understand, and never change what has occurred. One can see the acceptance in the fourth stanza of the poem which reads, “Knowledge may have its purposes, / but guessing is always/ more fun than knowing” (Auden, “Archaeology”). This poetic sentence is far removed from the early work of Auden, which values the confirmable ‘fact’ above all other things. Moreover, the argument is supported by Auden’s final poetic sentence of the piece, wherein Auden recognizes that all of humanity has its faults, and in this recognition, accepts his own role within the scheme of human failure, as the speaker notes, “What they call history/ is nothing to vaunt of, / being made, as it is, / by the criminal in us: goodness is timeless” (Auden, “Archaeology”). This line supports the above argument in its use of ‘us’. In the early work, Auden’s final lines are directed at a society which does not include him. In “Sir” Auden gives a command, “a change of heart”, at the end of the poem, which implies the speaker is directing his words at ‘you,’ and in “Funeral Blues” a similar command is given at the end of the poem. In this however, he indicts himself, which indicates Auden understood his role as poet was to be isolated, as the archeologist is from the civilizations he studies. In this accepted isolation and the understanding of his role, Auden is truly encapsulating all of the Modernist sensibilities discussed. First, he captures human experience by writing about knowledge and the limitations it has, especially for the modern society which has access to so much, that life is meaningless when dictated by it. Therefore, as Auden posits, “but the guessing is always more fun than knowing,” he knows the statement plays into the heart of
the majority of civilization, from the youngest child to the oldest man, and in doing so cultivates a truly modern sense of humanity. Also, this change in tone reflects Auden’s understanding of the poet’s need to be isolated. The isolation is what allows him to achieve his role as archaeologist. The archaeologist is removed from the society being studies by thousands of years, and the poet too, is removed from their society through layers of meaning, metaphor, history, allusion and a deeper understanding of the world than the reader can achieve. This realization is pivotal to the function of Modernism, as it is what allows to objective correlative to function, and moreover, is what allows the Modernist poet to remain aware of the world, without corrupting its poetic images with inward desire or self-mutilated expression.

Therefore, even as Auden moved towards the twilight of his life in the 1970s, far removed from the traditionally conceived dates of the Modern Period, Auden was still evoking the traditions, themes, and values of the Modernist poets, especially T.S. Eliot. Auden’s similarities to Eliot come not in the form of layered meanings hidden through classical allusions and manipulated voices, but through th
Works Cited


Best 400-Level Essay:

Sarah McNew

“Mythmaking in Modern Poetry”

Written for English 370: Studies in Modern British Poetry
taught by Dr. Chad Stanley
Mythmaking in Modern Poetry

Traditionally, a myth is defined as a story that has been passed down through generations that functions to teach a lesson or explain something about the natural world. From a sociological perspective, these tales serve to help define and shape the mores and values of a culture through the construction of a shared history, or set of stories that members of the group can readily identify as familiar and valuable. Despite their clear cut categorization as fiction, Richard W. Slatta points out that frequently, “Myth, not social reality, undergirds the assumptions and perceptions of many people around the world” (81). These stories have the power to inform and influence both belief systems and the social structures that manifest themselves upon those beliefs. The function of myth, therefore, extends far beyond entertainment and into the sphere of actually developing cultural identity. As such, myths become an inextricable element of a groups’ fundamental understanding of the world, and these shared stories become the vehicle through which reality is navigated.

There is no question that myth informs cultural identity, and subsequently cultural identity influences the development of self-identity. Writers utilize myth as a means to connect the past to the present, a way to trace the origins of identity from then until now. As Paul Beekman Taylor asserts, “To join poetry to human need, to translate and transform the nature of the past into present relevance, is the heroism of a poet” (220). This is indeed a monumental undertaking, and poets attack the task from myriad directions, and with different ends in mind. The poetry of W.H. Auden, for example, draws heavily upon ancient Greek and Icelandic mythology, and it often focuses on the poet’s attempt to reconcile his self-identity with his sense of displacement and exile from the larger culture (Taylor 213).
Myth is a particularly useful tool in this endeavor because, as John R. Boly insists, “it emerges from a unified cultural system with a coherence of its own, and is capable of forcing displacement to become self-revelatory” (153). Margaret Atwood’s work with myth takes a different position as she reinterprets traditional Greek and American mythologies as a means to comment on the social institutions they embody and consequently perpetuate. Both writers draw upon the wealth of images and iconography myth provides as they work to explore the influence of the past on the present.

Auden’s poem entitled, “Atlantis,” draws upon the legend of the lost city to express the intense frustration created by an often vain quest for self-discovery and acceptance. The story of Atlantis is a myth that has its origins in the writing of Plato, which describe the island as a paradise created by the Gods at the beginning of time. The city began with the union of the god Poseidon to the mortal Cleito, and from them the royal family of Atlantis descended. The population of Atlantis was peaceful and prosperous for generations, until hubris and greed led to its downfall. When the residents of the city began disregarding the laws of the gods, they were struck by a series of earthquakes that sunk the entire island to the sea floor (Hefner). Today, Atlantis is still regarded by some as an actual city as opposed to a myth, and the search for evidence that proves the existence of the lost island continues. The legend of the lost city of Atlantis has evolved, as a result, to symbolize the quest for an undiscovered and unspoiled paradise.

In Auden’s poem, the search for the island is expressed as an unachievable goal, but it is nonetheless a compelling journey. The narrator begins by immediately criticizing the would be explorer, noting that,

Being set on the idea
Of getting to Atlantis,
You have discovered of course
Only the Ship of Fools is
Making the voyage this year (1-5)

This stanza represents an interesting play between despondency and optimism as it simultaneously dismisses the search as foolish and acknowledges the fact that the traveler is, “set on the idea,” despite that fact (1). Here Auden draws upon the mythology to create tension in the opening lines of the poem, thus exposing a nearly universal human desire; the search for the indefinable, intangible paradise. For Auden, paradise represents the resolution of his nearly constant sense of displacement, a reconciliation he relentlessly pursued no matter how elusive it proved to be.

As the poem progresses, the narrator follows the traveler as he makes stops at various locations in the search for his Atlantis. Each stop represents the potential end to the quest, as distractions and facades are cast in front of the seeker. The contrast with which the poem began, the juxtaposition of faith and doubt, pursuit and surrender, continues throughout the text. At the first stop, the subject encounters scholars, “Who have proved there cannot be/ Such a place as Atlantis” (18-19). Although these learned individuals may have their beliefs grounded in the firm bedrock of irrefutable logic, the narrator implores the traveler to realize that, “its subtlety betrays/ Their enormous simple grief” (21-22). Much like the first stanza, the speaker is compelled to encourage the journey, despite the fact that it is predicated on a myth.
The quest structure represented in the poem corresponds to the journey Auden made in his own life as he struggled to find contentment with himself and his environment. As the text continues, the speaker questions the fortitude of the traveler, asking,

With each refuge that tries to
Counterfeit Atlantis, how
Will you recognize the true? (46-48)

Over the course of his career, Auden exhibited a profound restlessness as he worked to define his position in the public sphere and to reconcile that role with his own personal identity. His efforts resulted in dramatic shifts in his underlying value system as he eventually progressed from being, as Edward Mendelson describes, an “amoral romantic anarchist,” to a Christian who, “adopted a chastening public orthodoxy” (xviii). In accordance with his fluctuating ideologies, Auden frequently relocated his physical residence, leaving England and traveling extensively across Europe and spending time in both China and Iceland before finally settling in America (Mendelson xxii). Much like the subject of the poem, Auden was compelled to wander from place to place, driven to search for a paradise he was not even sure existed, and questioning whether he would even know he was there when he finally arrived.

One clear source of Auden’s sense of exile was his sexual orientation. Taylor notes that, “His sexual proclivities, which both bothered and stimulated him, linked Auden’s sense of love with his sense of isolation” (215). In “Atlantis,” Auden laments the manner in which society often forces individuals to conform to type in order to gain acceptance. Even as he quests for paradise, the traveler is required to put on an act to please the group. In order to be allowed to participate in the search, he
Must therefore be ready to
Behave absurdly enough
To pass for one of The Boys,
At least appearing to love
Hard liquor, horseplay and noise (8-12).

The irony here is tragically inescapable. In order to even begin the pursuit for acceptance, the subject must engage in the act he seeks to escape; he must willingly take on the role that thrusts him into isolation in the first place.

The conclusion of the poem engages in a similar irony, but the text still ends with a sense of accomplishment that is a far cry from its cynical beginning. By the second to last stanza, the traveler nearly reaches his destination, but on the cusp of success, he, “collapse[s]/ With all Atlantis shining/ Below” (64-66). In a vast departure from the tone set in the first stanza, in place of a scathing rebuke, the narrator offers comfort, assuring the journeyer he, “should still be proud” of his efforts, despite his failure to arrive in paradise (67). Ultimately, the speaker releases the traveler from the obligation to complete his quest, allowing him to, “Give thanks and lie down in peace,/Having seen your salvation” (72). This conclusion reiterates the notion that the myth drives reality; in the search for self-discovery, the intangible paradise sought is, and forever will remain, a myth. This revelation, however, in no way negates the necessity of the journey itself.

Unlike Auden, who was sometimes accused of, “ignoring universal social causes” in favor of his personal concerns, Margaret Atwood’s poetry utilizes myth primarily as a means to criticize modern social structures, especially as they reflect gender stereotypes (Taylor 225). Because the mythological stories are widely known, they are available as
starting points for modern authors to challenge or critique commonly accepted social institutions. Alicia Ostriker labels this strategy, “revisionist mythmaking.” She explains that, “Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends” (72). A popular example of this technique is the “Fractured Fairytale,” a genre that retells traditional fairy tales in a way that works to reform or update or the lessons they originally intended to teach. By utilizing myth in this way, Birgit Tautz argues,”the same force that sustains gendered myth and narrative arises as a powerful tool to expose its limits” (172). This is exactly what Atwood does in the poems “Siren Song,” and “Backdrop Addresses Cowboy,” as she repositions mythical figures in order call their traditional iconography into question.

The Sirens Atwood alludes to are three female figures from Greek mythology that lure passing sailors to their death with an irresistible song. Although there are many variations of the tale, the male figures are generally the focus of the stories, and they are portrayed as either helpless victims of the seductresses, or heroes who succeed in overcoming their charms. In her poem “Siren Song,” Atwood recreates the myth by telling it from the perspective of one of the Sirens as opposed to the sailors. According to Ostriker, Atwood is concerned with, “describing the depersonalizing effects of myths on persons, they way they replay themselves over and over” (72). Changing the point of view from which the story is told complicates the typically one-dimensional portrayal of the Sirens. In the traditional story, the women collectively are little more than symbols used to warn men to remain ever wary of the evil power of the female temptress, but in the poem, the individual speaker indicates the presence of a much more complex identity.
While most representations of the Sirens afford them little individuality, the speaker of Atwood’s poem implies she is much more than a mindlessly warbling bird-woman. In the myth, the Sirens come to live on the island after they fail in their mission to find the kidnapped Persephone, and their presence there serves no real purpose. Additionally, the lethal reaction they cause is not deliberate; it is merely an inconvenient side effect their singing happens to produce in human men. From this position, the Sirens are afforded almost no real power apart from their ability to accidentally kill men. This reflects the paradox women frequently find themselves in due to the fact that, “the female power to do evil is a direct function of her powerlessness to do anything else” (Ostriker 78).

In the poem, however, the speaker flaunts the ease with which she is able to control the sailors. First, she emphasizes the advantages of learning the song, working to exploit the masculine desire for dominance. The text begins by describing that,

This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: the song
that is irresistible (1-3)

The text then continues to inform the audience that it is, “the song that nobody knows” (7). This description implies that the allure of the song lies in its secrecy, and the speaker alone has the ability to reveal or withhold it. Further emphasizing its power, the speaker portrays it as,

the song that forces men
to leap overboard in squadrons
even though they see bleached skulls (4-6).
Through these descriptions, the speaker is implying that knowing the song would allow one to control and exercise its seductive powers.

Later in the poem, the Siren deliberately positions herself as the damsel in distress in order to manipulate her target. She implores him to, “Come closer. This song/ is a cry for help: Help me!” while she proceeds to stroke the ego of her potential victim, assuring him that, “Only you, only you can,/ you are unique/ at last” (21-22, 23-25). Hence, by pretending to need the man’s help, the Siren is actually exploiting the stereotype of the submissive and helpless female in order to gain power over the sailor. When the knight arrives on his shining horse though, he finds that he is the victim, rather than the champion. Once the sailor gets close enough, the poem reveals that the cry for help was actually the irresistible song the singer promised to reveal. Not only has the man been deceived, the final line indicates that, “it works every time,” implying that the woman has the ability to exercise her power over men time and time again (27). Here again we see the way the myth is doomed to, “repeat itself over and over,” as the poem spirals back to its self-perpetuating cycle (Ostriker 72).

Although it may seem that Atwood is positioning the Siren as dominant over the naïve sailors, the relationship between victim and victimizer is actually far more complicated. Consistent with Ostriker’s position, “revisionist poems do not necessarily confine themselves to defiance and reversal strategies,” and Atwood’s reconstruction of the Siren myth is more than a simple refutation of the seductive female archetype the tale exemplifies (74). In some versions of the myth, the Sirens become depressed and drown themselves in the ocean when they fail to seduce the men. From this perspective, the speaker of the poem is still dependent on the male to provide her with purpose, despite the
fact that she can so easily seduce him. Additionally, the poem indicates that the speaker is unhappy, stating that,

I don’t enjoy it here
squatting on this island
looking picturesque and mythical
with these two feathery maniacs,
I don’t enjoy singing this trio
fatal and valuable (13-18).

Furthermore, the speaker does not achieve any sense of satisfaction through her victory. At the moment when she finally succeeds in drawing the sailor in, instead of reveling in her triumph, she only sighs, “Alas/ it is a boring song/ but it works every time” (25-27). While the poem does work to recreate the myth in a manner that affords the Sirens both individuality and power, in the end the control they have is still predicated upon the stereotype of the feminine seductress, and without men to seduce, that power is useless.

In the poem, “Backdrop Addresses Cowboy,” Atwood satirizes the mythic figure of the American cowboy, portraying him as a character that is simultaneously ridiculous and dangerous. In the American cinematic tradition, the genre of the Western depicts the cowboy as an iconic hero and a symbol of the American spirit. Through his unflinching bravery, he triumphs over the evil villains and rescues the helpless townspeople. His strength and gruff exterior also allow him to conquer the harsh and barren landscape of the American west, working to make it a place where others can survive. Despite its pervasiveness, Slatta describes the reality that defies the mythologized version of the cowboy figure. He points out the irony of this myth as he notes that, “Mythologized
cowboys came to represent the ideal of rugged individualism even as they carried out their communal chores” (84). It was primarily through media adaptations that the myth was created, and Atwood appropriates the iconic image to comment on the destructive power a highly cherished modern American ideology—the individual's ability, and subsequent right, to conquer through force.

In the first stanza of the poem, Atwood reconstructs the stereotypical hero, describing him as a,

Starspangled cowboy
saundering out of the almost-
silly West, on your face
a porcelain grin,
tugging a papier-maché cactus
on wheels behind you with a string (1-6)

This humorous sketch represents the cowboy as a caricature of the traditional hero, calling into question his iconic status and suggesting he may not be worthy of the blind adoration he traditionally inspires. As Slatta describes, “Cowboy justice, more admired then questioned by most Americans, meant swift, sure, reflexive action through the barrel of a gun” (85). Through her description, Atwood rejects the cowboy’s designation as hero, especially as the title is earned through blind violence, alternately depicting him as a hyperbolic and ineffectual projection of a Hollywood stereotype.

To continue this deconstruction, Atwood clearly indicates that the cowboy himself is responsible for creating the air of violence that permeates the poem. He is not confronted by villains, rather he creates them. The speaker observes that,
as you move, the air in front of you
blossoms with targets
and you leave behind you a heroic
tail of desolation (11-14)

This description criticizes the idealization of victory through brute force, calling attention to the waste left behind through such an approach. Additionally, the enemies the cowboy overcomes are not dangerous outlaws, they are, “beer bottles/ slaughtered by the side of the road,” and “bird-skulls bleaching in the sunset” (16-19). Here, the role of the cowboy as the protector of the helpless is nullified, as he actually becomes the terrorist from whom protection is needed. By the conclusion of the poem, the cowboy is no longer a triumphant hero, he is an ineffectual clown who is nonetheless, “innocent as a bathtub/ full of bullets” (7-8).

In addition to attacking the increasing prevalence of film star worship in America, Atwood also works to deconstruct the gender stereotypes the iconography perpetuates. The speaker points out that,

I ought to be watching
from behind a cliff or a cardboard storefront
when the shooting starts, hands clasped
in admiration, but I am elsewhere (20-24)

As Slatta observes, “traditional frontier myths’ focus has a decidedly masculine flavour…

Women occupied a few stereotypical roles: Hapless heroine in need of saving, schoolmarm spreading civilization, or prostitute, meeting demands for the heavily male population” (88). Atwood removes the stereotypically helpless female from the story, choosing to
utilize the feminine to represent the landscape that surrounds the cowboy. As D.G. Jones suggests, “she is the inclusive feminine embodiment of the land, of nature herself” (232).

The title, “Backdrop Addresses Cowboy,” indicates that it is the landscape speaking to the cowboy, reinforcing the idea that the cowboy fails in his efforts to conquer the land, and reaffirming the absence of the submissive female archetype. Jones asserts that, “The speaker in ‘Backdrop Addresses Cowboy’ is herself America” (232). The narrator describes herself as, “the horizon/ you ride towards, the thing you can never lasso” (29-30). Despite his violent assaults, the cowboy will forever remain a miniscule figure against the vast landscape.

Although the cowboy may never be able to achieve dominance over the land, his foul stamp is left on the environment in the form of, “tin cans, bones, empty shells, the litter of your invasions” (34-35). The imagery in these lines exposes the failure of man to achieve any sort of symbiosis with the land, emphasizing the often destructive force of American ideology. Jones maintains his position linking the landscape with America itself, resolving that Atwood’s landscape corresponds to an image in which the land is, “raped, exploited or simply ignored... an America that remains unrecognized, inarticulate, unrealized still” (232). Thus, the poem also becomes a lamentation on the failed attempt at constructing an iconic image that embodies the American identity, a failure that is inevitable due to the lack of a cohesive American identity.

Although people frequently regard myths as fictional stories whose main purpose is to amuse the audience, in reality a culture’s stories do much to reveal they way its members navigate the world. Through the reconstruction of these traditional stories, authors can encourage readers to revisit and perhaps reconsider their views. As Atwood’s
work suggests, if social structures are in part constructed through the sharing of stories, then those institutions can potentially be influenced and reshaped by the transformation of those stories. Additionally, myths can be accessed to provide an individual a framework through which he or she may explore identity in the same manner as Auden's work does.

Despite its potential, when modern literature is juxtaposed with traditional mythology, the end result is often ambiguity, and sometimes a nearly irreconcilable sense of ambivalence. This result does not represent a failure, however. Instead, the appropriation of myth reveals the way in which, “literary tradition can produce instability and simultaneously open up space for poetic innovation” (Tautz 167). This conclusion is an inherently optimistic one, implying that writers are not, as Nietzsche suggested, doomed to endlessly repeat already exhausted literary forms. Instead, they are gifted with the power to transform those structures to reveal a world of possibilities. We are neither prisoners of the past, nor are we required to completely forget history in favor of the future. Instead, revisiting mythology provides the option of existing between, of finding a means to draw upon the past as a means to fortify the future.
Works Cited


