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## Final Master's Portfolio

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Final Portfolio

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Submitted to the English Department of Bowling Green State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in the field of English,  
Individualized Track

April 17, 2022

Dr. Lee Nickoson

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### **Introduction: Course of Study**

This will be my third master's degree; my first, in 2001, was in social work, and I completed an MA in sociology in 2019 before immediately launching my Bowling Green education. I already have a full-time tenured faculty position in social work at College of Lake County (CLC) in northeast Illinois, where I have taught classes in our psychology, social work, human services, and gender studies departments. It probably does not make a lot of sense on the surface that I would undertake a master's degree program in English, but I was nearly an English major in my undergraduate studies, and had been encouraged by every one of my English professors to consider that path. I do not regret taking the social work route, but I always felt like I had unfinished business.

I love language and literature alike, though I hardly consider myself an expert in either. My past students would most likely think of me as a grammarian, and I have admittedly been a stickler for so-called "proper" writing in the past. One might expect that getting an English degree would only exacerbate that inclination, but instead I have moved in the opposite direction, and I am grateful for that change. Bowling Green's program has opened my eyes to problematic aspects of education, including the way we police language and expression.

Part of what inspired me to pursue this degree—and to justify it for the purposes of tuition reimbursement by my employer—was a desire to help my students develop into better writers. My institution is a community college that draws a diverse group of students with greatly varying levels of preparation for college (including many English language learners), and writing across the curriculum is an ongoing point of emphasis in our instruction. Obviously, different disciplines have different writing expectations; social work tends to emphasize the ability to write clinically, objectively, and technically, since there is so much documentation involved in

working with clients—nearly everything a social worker composes becomes a medical and/or legal document. When I started in 2020, I hoped that this program would help me become a better instructor of writing, even if it was not in a formal English classroom setting.

I also was eager to consume diverse works by many writers and theorists with whom I was unfamiliar. I felt this was important not only to broaden my art appreciation horizons, but also to expand my exposure to works that represented stories from varied backgrounds, and hopefully to be able to better relate to my college's diverse students. CLC has been engaged in ongoing efforts to promote educational equity, and this aspect of my BGSU program dovetailed nicely with those endeavors.

In order to reach these goals, throughout my time at BGSU, I have taken courses that explored graphic novels and social movements, Black films, antiracist pedagogy, linguistics, the teaching of writing, theory and research, fiction writing, and more. To my amazement, I found myself engaged in a program that felt like it was designed for a social worker—a graduate program in English that seemed very focused on equity and social justice. Perhaps that was just the path I carved for myself, but it started early, as Intro to Linguistics got me thinking about dialects and how we arbitrarily designate some as more proper and intellectual than others, even though they all have rules of grammar and similar levels of internal consistency. I came to recognize the ways I had been complicit in linguistic racism and I set out to find opportunities through my studies at BGSU to correct these tendencies instead of perpetuating the problem.

Finally, I also chose the individualized track of the MA because I wanted a diverse graduate school experience, including the ability to pursue a writing workshop course or seminar topics offered in a particular semester. I fully anticipate this is the final degree I will earn in my lifetime, and I wanted it to be both personally and professionally fulfilling. I still love to learn,

and the individualized track gave me the ability to follow my whims each semester to a large degree, so I took the opportunity to push myself. My classes on Black film and graphic novels required me to reflect on many creations I had never previously explored. My fiction writing seminar was my very first creative writing workshop at any level, and my first time writing fiction in about 20 years, following a lot of fruitful years of academic writing (i.e., research, curricula, and textbooks). Thanks to the freedom offered by the individualized track, I found myself with both freshly piqued interests and rediscovered passions.

### **Portfolio projects**

The pieces I have selected reflect the various ways in which this program has helped me to grow. There is no common theme, per se, except that I have stretched myself in new directions thanks to the variety of courses available to me in the pursuit of this degree.

#### *Advancing to Destruction*

My first portfolio paper is one of the two included works involving substantive research and analysis, and it actually originated with an idea I first explored in my undergraduate writing. I have always been a huge fan of Ray Bradbury's work, and his stories were especially common assignments in my schools growing up because he hails from my home county, Lake County, Illinois. I have long been fascinated with his dual treatment of the machine, as both a static example of supreme order and predictability and an agent of disorder and destruction. However, having taken only a few composition courses and no literature-specific courses in my undergraduate work, I did not get much of a chance to explore these ideas. Thankfully, my Theories and Methods of Literary Criticism course with Dr. Khani Begum reintroduced me to the concepts of postmodernism and poststructuralism—approaches that had thoroughly engaged and fascinated me in my recent graduate studies in sociology—as well as the burgeoning realms

of ecocriticism and posthumanism. These theories gave me a perfect lens through which to explore Bradbury's depiction of the machines that we create to enhance our lives, but which ultimately act as agents of devolution and devitalization.

My process of revising and improving this piece involved doing a more thorough job of explaining the theories of ecocriticism and poststructuralism. While I commanded a solid understanding of these theories and explored them eagerly, I needed to demonstrate my comprehension in a way that could assist any reader who was less versed in those theories, given their more tenuous connections to mainstream discussions of literature and other art. Of course, since it was written for a theory course, I recognized that the instructor knew those theories well, but I decided to revise this project for a general audience. I also worked on tightening up some of my analysis, focusing on both conciseness and word variety.

#### *Dystopian creative writing unit*

I was very excited to have the opportunity to take a seminar course in dystopian literature with Dr. Erin Labbie and was not disappointed in the content of the class. We explored two novels (Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*) as well as several short stories that I had not previously read. Since I had taken a seminar course in antiracist pedagogy as well as Teaching of Writing prior to this class, I felt like I might be able to tackle teaching a class in our English department, given proper time to prepare. For the final project in this course, I created a dystopian-themed writing unit for an online creative writing course at my college. I specifically chose an online section because it is more likely that I would get assigned such a course; the only face-to-face creative writing classes at our college that take place in the classroom are quickly claimed each semester by full-time English faculty, and as a qualified

faculty member in another department, I would have to take what was left over after they claimed their choices.

We did not receive any written feedback on any work other than discussion boards in the dystopian literature course, so I relied on my portfolio course's peer partner to help me improve this lesson plan from the previous submission. Given his feedback and my review, I aimed to explain my assessment methods for the work more specifically, make the final assignment for the unit more manageable for introductory creative writing students, and to provide a rough outline for the first nine weeks of the course in order to clarify how this unit would be situated in the course of the semester. As a final change, I modified the format from MLA to APA for the sake of consistency throughout the portfolio. Though I am still a novice when it comes to teaching English, I feel like this is the sort of unit many students could enjoy, particularly given the popularity of dystopian fiction in both film and literature.

#### *Liberal to a Point*

One of the most memorable classes I took in this program was the seminar course Black Films Matter, taught by Dr. Khani Begum. I took it in the summer of 2020, immediately after the murder of George Floyd, when I was also making a point to read books like *White Fragility* and *Between the World and Me*. I had never seen some of the foremost films in the Blaxploitation genre, including *Shaft*, *Coffy*, and others. I had never even seen *Black Panther*, as my young kids have made it a challenge to make time to go see adult movies for a few years now. The analysis of the films was interwoven with a strong discussion of theory and its application to film, including critical race theory, just as the national dialogue on that topic became very politically charged (even though many anti-CRT politicians could not explain the theory if they tried).



Given the climate of that summer and Prof. Begum's encouragement to explore the films through the lens of critical race theory, I chose a similar focus for my final project. I analyzed *Coffy*, *Black Panther*, *Shaft*, and an additional film we did not watch for the course, Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You*, through CRT, particularly focusing on critical race theorists' debate of assimilationism versus nationalism strategies. For my revision in this portfolio course, I brought the discussion into the present day, because it was written in the midst of the 2020 Presidential campaigns and ongoing Black Lives Matter protests and rallies during the early COVID-19 pandemic, and events since that time have deepened some of the relevant CRT debates. I also incorporated an additional film, Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, which I had wanted to include in the paper the first time around, but excluded because I ran out of time before the due date. It is a natural fit for the topic and helps build on the paper's CRT themes.

#### *Vanishing Point*

My final piece in the portfolio is something I never could have imagined creating a few years ago. I used to enjoy creative writing greatly, but I had not done it in over 20 years. I have published two editions of a social work textbook, a chapter in a criminal justice textbook, and a variety of other academic works, but in order to challenge myself to engage with the specific writing muscles I had allowed to atrophy over the years as an academic, I decided to enroll in a writing workshop course in fiction. It truly intimidated me, as I did not believe my success was in any way guaranteed, but that was what ultimately prompted me to take the plunge.

My professor for the course, Joseph Celizic, treated every one of us like a respected author, handling each of our submissions with respect and genuine interest. It was transformative to see something I had written regarded as literature. My first major piece in the class was a chapter for a prospective YA novel, and I was so nervous for the feedback. When it was mostly

positive and encouraging, I actually cried with both relief and gratitude. Flexing those creative muscles got me in a more confident frame of mind for the second major piece, which is what I have included here in my portfolio—a short story entitled “Vanishing Point.”

Prof. Celizic made some suggestions after the first draft which I incorporated into my final submission for him, but I also appreciated the great feedback I got from my assigned peer reviewer for this story, Taryn, along with my portfolio advisor, Dr. Lee Nickoson. I revised some phrasing, diversified my language choices, and endeavored to clarify the protagonist Adrian’s motives (unresolved family issues, low self-esteem). I also developed his wife Emily’s character slightly more, without doing too much, because I wanted the reader to see her primarily through Adrian’s eyes. Of all the writing I have done in this program, “Vanishing Point” surprised me the most, and represents my proudest moment.

### **Conclusion**

I leave this program altered in ways I could not have anticipated. I am changed as an educator, because I now recognize how I have been complicit in linguistic racism, and I intend to prompt discussion and enhance awareness of linguistically racist practices among my colleagues and students. This alone has changed the way I grade, the way I think about language, and the way I conceive of myself as an instructor. I have told more than one person that my course on antiracist pedagogy ripped off my limbs and put them back on in a new way (paraphrasing a quote from R.E.M. singer Michael Stipe about Patti Smith’s seminal album *Horses*). I wish I had read April Baker-Bell’s *Linguistic Justice* before I had gotten 15 years into my career in higher education. It has changed everything for me and my future students. The individualized track of the MA program allowed me to pursue a path that was social justice-focused, and BGSU allowed

me to perfectly wed my interests in English and social work. I am no longer the same teacher, and my students have already shown they are appreciative of that.

I have also changed as a consumer of literature and art. I am more deliberate in my efforts to expand my reading and viewing repertoire, including poetry, graphic novels, nonfiction, fiction, international literature, and books well outside the typical canon taught in high school and undergraduate literature courses. It has broadened my perspective and caused me to fall in love with writers and filmmakers I did not know previously. That has enriched my life and will continue to do so.

Finally, I have changed as a writer, both academic and creative. As noted, I already had a decently accomplished professional and academic record—nothing spectacular, but I have publications and I am proud of them. The greater recognition I have of systemic oppression in our educational system and the way we value and evaluate language will help me to be a better citizen, educator, friend, and social justice warrior. I have also rediscovered a love for creative writing, and a desire to tell stories in written form. I have always been an avid verbal storyteller—I seek out unique experiences because of the great stories they enable me to tell. However, before my BGSU education, I did not imagine I would ever write a story worthwhile of publication. That too has changed thanks to Prof. Celizic's fiction writing workshop, and I am inexpressibly grateful for it. I will pursue publication of my story "Vanishing Point," and whether I succeed or not, I am going to continue writing creatively. It has helped me feel fulfilled in unexpected ways, and I am committed to honing my craft, even if only for my own enjoyment.

Though this program was outside my discipline, I am thrilled with the outcome of these last three years of hard work. The pursuit of this degree was more transformative than I could

have predicted, and I am excited for the ways it has molded me and given me exciting new directions for my career and hobbies alike. I was fortunate to stumble into BGSU's program—it was a perfect fit.

Advancing to Destruction: Machines, Nature, and the Elimination of Humanity in Ray  
Bradbury's "The Veldt" and "There Will Come Soft Rains"

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## Abstract

Ray Bradbury's "The Veldt" and "There Will Come Soft Rains" present a picture of humanity made less human through technology, as well as the mistakes made by people presuming they have dominion and superiority over nature. "The Veldt" tells the story of family living in a fully automated home with a futuristic seemingly holographic playroom, and what occurs when the children become obsessed with a fantasy scene of an African veldt with lions feeding on a recent kill. "There Will Come Soft Rains" focuses on a different automated home, one that has continued to perform its regimented functions long after the family that inhabited it were vaporized in a nuclear blast, and its eventual destruction by the natural world surrounding it. These stories are analyzed using both post-structuralist and ecocritical theoretical perspectives, providing opportunities for commentary about human relationships—with each other, with other animals and the natural world, and with the technology they invent—and the fact that as much as humans may try to escape or protect themselves from nature (while simultaneously seeking to simulate it), their lives are more threatened by their own creations.

### Humanity, Nature, Difference

Authors and other artists often explore what it means to be human—or even more generally, what it means to be alive. Are there universal elements to the human experience? If so, what are they? In what ways do we differ from each other, and are those differences congenital, conditioned and socialized, or some combination of those? What is the natural state of humans? Do we aspire to a deeper meaning for ourselves and for our very existence, or do we focus instead on simple survival? Are we inclined toward self-interest or the common good? Productivity or recreation? Adam Smith and Karl Marx argued that capitalism encourages us to become greedier and more individualistic while simultaneously marginalizing our own health, and posit that we have internalized its directive to be productive (West, 1969). Sometimes, in both our lives and the stories we write, the objects and processes we create in the name of productivity aim to reduce the need for our own presence in our lives; in more pessimistic (but perhaps sage) fiction, they may even catalyze our own obsolescence or destruction.

There is a seeming contradiction in our tendency to seek leisure while still avoiding sloth, and our fascination with the advantages we can draw from our own technological prowess and its purported ability to simplify our lives. Celebrated science fiction author Ray Bradbury's stories "The Veldt" and "There Will Come Soft Rains" both portray the problems that technology poses as it interacts with, supplants, and dooms the people who create, install, and normalize it. While machines and automation are anticipated as enhancements to the lives of the characters in both stories, they ultimately supersede, outlive, replace, and/or destroy those they are supposed to serve.

### Theoretical frameworks

This paper will analyze Bradbury's stories through two primary theories: post-structuralism and ecocriticism. Post-structuralism arose not merely "in the wake of structuralism's popularity but also because it constitutes a reaction against structuralism's orderly vision of language and human experience" (Tyson, 2015, p. 243). While structuralism asserts that there is a knowable, objective reality which can be observed and reliably anticipated, post-structuralism eschews any sort of trust or belief in such immutable truth. Even the language we use to explain reality (and, for that matter, fantasy) is rife with dynamic meanings and structures, so a single sentence that endeavors to deliver an objective fact is likely to be interpreted differently across cultures (and certainly across eras). As Belsey explains, "communication changes all the time, with or without intervention from us, and we can choose to intervene with a view to altering the meanings—which is to say the norms and values—our culture takes for granted" (2002, p. 6). If language is ever-evolving, post-structural thinking posits, then why would we believe that we can objectively explain anything? Poststructuralists argue that our language shapes our ideas rather than the reverse; if we accept that premise, then reality necessarily shifts alongside language, and something as supposedly stable and objective as the structuralist notion of truth seems like an illusion at best. This analysis will explore how Bradbury's tales exemplify that malleability of existence, blurring lines between fantasy and reality and perhaps asking if those lines exist at all.

The second theory applied here, ecocriticism, "takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (Garrard, 2011, p. 4). It is a profoundly political theory, one which might well be decried by some as having too transparent of an agenda and thus best relegated to the fringes rather than mainstream literary discourse (Roos, 2011). Of course, ecocritical writing would



largely mock the notion that any wholly apolitical literature exists, as it is a position of the utmost privilege to claim an ability to be objective because one has no metaphorical skin in the game. Even a supposedly apolitical text is inherently political through its claims of neutrality on issues that profoundly impact the lives of others. The Bradbury stories discussed here directly depict and deconstruct the relationship between the human and nonhuman, presenting a perfect opportunity to employ ecocriticism (Garrard, 2011).

Ecocritical and post-structuralist analyses of these stories have multiple opportunities to dovetail; as Garrard notes, ecocritical theory involves even “critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself” (Garrard, 2011, p. 5). As this paper will explore, Bradbury’s fiction not only questions the distinction between human and nonhuman, but even more broadly, the difference between living and nonliving.

In “The Veldt,” a short story featured in Bradbury’s *The Illustrated Man*, the Hadley family live in a Happylife Home, a technological marvel which aims to remove the mundane tasks from their lives so they can live in leisure (Bradbury, 1951). However, the loss of those pedestrian responsibilities robs them of their connection to each other and their own humanity, eventually accelerating the parents’ untimely deaths. In particular, a room known as the nursery—a highly advanced, huge, holographic playroom in which the residents can simulate any scene—becomes the children’s obsessive daily focus. Over a year’s time, the Hadley children, Wendy and Peter, shift from using the nursery to conjure a wide variety of play environments like Wonderland, Oz, and nursery rhyme settings, to focusing solely on an African veldt populated by vultures and predatory lions feeding on unknown victims (Bradbury, 1951). Wendy and Peter become so intensely attached to the room and its plastic realism that they

clearly hold it in higher regard than their parents; the nursery becomes the most glaring example of the house usurping the parents' roles (Bradbury, 1951).

Conversely and unusually, "There Will Come Soft Rains," a 1950 story from Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, creates its drama without relying on dysfunctional family dynamics; in fact, it entirely lacks human characters. Instead, the automated house presents as a protagonist of sorts while the natural world acts as the antagonist. The house exists as a character due to its seeming facsimile of life in the absence of humankind, for whom it was ostensibly created, in the aftermath of a nuclear strike that killed the family which occupied it. Undeterred, the home has continued its automated processes even in the absence of its vaporized residents, unable to cease or to recognize its own desuetude. After a fallen tree sparks a fire, nearly all of the house gradually succumbs to nature over a few hours' time, fruitlessly resisting all the while, mustering far more of a fight than its former inhabitants could manage (Bradbury, 1950).

In Bradbury's stories, machines serve simultaneously as both servant and master, aide and destroyer. The existence of these innovative advancements, created by humans in pursuit of a life free of drudgery, comes at the expense of human happiness and life itself—or, at the very least, shows indifference to it. Technology comes to undermine and outlast human life not through any flaw in design, nor the nefarious rebellion of artificial intelligence as foretold in many other works of fiction; no, instead technology replaces and simulates humanity because that is exactly how its creators designed it. Still, even that technology cannot escape the natural world from which it was cobbled together.

"The Veldt," though published later than "Rains," is nonetheless arguably its prologue. Both homes have technological playrooms known as nurseries, where vast spaces in three dimensions can be simulated for the children, rather than their imaginations having to do the

work. “Rains” represents not just the impotence of “Veldt” parents George and Lydia Hadley, but spotlights that the marvelously efficient and productive home that outlives them is still inferior to the natural world from which its components were extracted despite the ecological and biological consequences. In attempting to improve their lives, Bradbury’s humans created, developed, and sold technology which aimed to provide the simulacra of life, and yet were bested and outlived by their own creations. As if to carry the critique of humanity and its creations to an even more fatalistic extreme, even the mechanical marvel of a home is eventually no match for the natural world around it, as surrounding vegetation and fire prove to lead to its demise.

Though we are led to believe the increased automation of our lives and the assistance of machines and technology will bring us closer to a state of relaxation where we can spend our time on the oft-cited ‘things that really matter,’ the actions and experiences that make our lives worth living are too frequently those that we produce machines to take over for us. We are therefore compelled, as Marx might posit, to eliminate ourselves by a socialized drive toward destruction masquerading as production. Put another way, “the system no longer needs universal productivity; it requires only that everyone play the game” (Rivkin & Ryan, 2017, p. 459). In Bradbury’s stories, that game takes place out of sight, yet leaves citizens too spent to take on tasks both domestic and recreational.

Literature has no shortage of dystopias presented as utopias; without that illusion, the dystopian arrangement of a society might never take hold in the first place. Bradbury is no stranger to this construct, from perhaps his most celebrated book (*Fahrenheit 451*) to the stories analyzed here. These two dystopian tales present a world where lines are blurred between the living and mechanical, utility and destructiveness (malicious or not), reality and imagination,

health and doom, eventually resulting in pervasive disorder. However, utopias are “concerned with order, established hierarchy, and obedience” (Akman, 2015), themes explored through “The Veldt” and “There Will Come Soft Rains.”

Bradbury’s vision of the loss of humanity to technological distraction, at the expense of lost freedom and domination by the powerful, was a frequent theme throughout his oeuvre (McCorry, 2018). His depictions of the future present a world where people have unwittingly orchestrated their own dehumanization, and even their own death, via the very creations that were supposed to make their lives easier. These tales paint a bleak picture and perhaps presage our own fate as we continue to invent technology that automates more and more of our daily tasks, even perhaps the jobs that led to its creation. Whether we view these stories through the lens of post-structuralism or ecocriticism, a common thread emerges: human life is difficult to define, its purpose difficult to articulate, and its presence is anything but necessary.

### **Post-structuralism**

“The Veldt” provides a strong opportunity to undermine the major assumptions of structuralism: that “knowable structures underlie empirical acts,” “knowledge operates according to axiomatic, unquestionable procedures,” and “reality has meaning and a logical sequence” (Rivkin & Ryan, 2017, p. 447). The playroom’s constructed reality can be recreated or modified seemingly at the children’s will; despite the fact that it purportedly can only *simulate* reality, which is its entire *raison d’être*, it first becomes alarming to George & Lydia Hadley for its preternatural ability to do so, and eventually it is seemingly revealed to be able to create truly living things (Bradbury, 1951). The machines making up the home, supposedly inclined toward predictability, reliability, and service, instead show an inclination toward disorder by upsetting the power structure of the home, obeying the children to the detriment and destruction of the

parents. This subverts the apparent logical sequence of the home's assigned tasks as well as the process of socialization and upbringing typically carried out by one's guardians.

The story furthers the idea of a malleable reality when the family calls in psychologist David McClean to analyze the nursery, something he had done previously at their request (Bradbury, 1951). When he enters the nursery with George, after the children are shooed away, McClean detects the same foreboding energy in the simulation of the veldt that George and Lydia felt earlier in the story, and admits it. When the father asks for harder facts instead of a vague sense of doom, McClean replies, "My dear George, a psychologist never saw a fact in his life" (Bradbury, 1951, para. 191). Undoubtedly, many psychologists would bristle at this assertion, but feminist theory and post-structuralism alike would give a knowing nod to McClean's comment.

George's reliance on cold, hard facts, his tendency to value the quantitative over the qualitative, a traditionally conditioned masculine quality in many societies, is misplaced here. As Nietzsche said, "In a world that is essentially false, truthfulness would be an antinatural tendency...Lies, deception, dissimulation must arouse astonishment" (Nietzsche, 1967, p. 469). The family has been living for years in a home where deception is part of daily life, by design, at the very least in the presence of the nursery. The justifications for the vast room's creation and existence are a series of lies: this space will provide a healthy outlet for children's impulses; it will enable the children's imaginations to flourish in ways otherwise impossible; the nursery will provide an escape from stress or the humdrumness of existence whenever we need it. The house, while purportedly freeing its inhabitants, instead denatures them into oblivion—not just via the nursery, but the entirety of the home and its annexation of human behavior. This culminates when Peter says, in the midst of an angry exchange with his father over the parents' plans to turn

off all the house's automated functions, "I don't want to do anything but look and listen and smell; what else is there to do?" (Bradbury, 1951, para. 165). The nursery could easily be understood as a metaphor, then, for capitalist society, a system in which people are reduced to machines alienated from the products of the labor, alienated from themselves, alienated from their own families. People become divorced from what makes their lives worth living and are fooled into playing a constructed game, much like those created by the Hadley children in their nursery. Bradbury's notion of the nursery serves as an excellent parallel to the economic system that purports to give us freedom and control over our lives, while in reality extracting time and energy from us and leaving us wondering (in our more lucid moments, if we're lucky) what we are actually doing with our lives.

Why is this desire for objective fact foolish? Well, in *fact*, the playroom should not feel quite as realistic as it does; however, Nietzsche would disagree in classic post-structuralist fashion: "It is only after the model of the subject that we have invented the reality of things and projected them into the medley of sensations" (Nietzsche, 1967, p. 469). That is to say, reality is a subjective construction anyway, and the veldt is every bit as real as the rest of the house and the Hadleys—if any of *them* are real. In *fact*, the nursery cannot create actual living, breathing lions from scratch. Nevertheless, Deleuze points out, "Pure becoming...is the matter of the simulacrum insofar as it eludes the action of the Idea and insofar as it contests *both* model *and* copy at once" (Deleuze, 1989, p. 472). If true for language, then certainly it could be said to be true for anything described by that language. In *fact*, there is no reason for George to fear that his children's imaginations would be enough to lead to his and Lydia's demise. However, his wife relies on her feelings from the beginning, rather than these supposedly objective facts. Her terror

at the frequent existence of the veldt playspace is enough to convince George to investigate the matter, even though he initially finds her fear a source of mild amusement (Bradbury, 1951).

By the time McClean gets there, George has begun to understand Lydia's emotional state, but he still presses the psychologist for facts. Mr. Hadley gives in eventually when McClean insists that they be brought to him every day for therapy for the next year, and that George shut down the nursery permanently (Bradbury, 1951). Had George been more inclined to listen to his wife's sense of foreboding, or more in touch with his own emotions instead of an insistence on facts, the eventual crisis and trauma of the story may have been averted. One could argue that the HappyLife Home not only took over the routine tasks of everyday life from the Hadley family, but their ability to tune into their emotions as well. Just as Bradbury's societies (much like our own) created machines to carry out human acts, the home's machinery turned its inhabitants into automatons—each thing aiming to replicate itself, but to what end?

Returning to one of the tenets of structuralism—"knowledge operates according to axiomatic unquestionable procedures"—we can discuss the automated home of "There Will Come Soft Rains" (Bradbury, 1950) whose conception by Bradbury predates that of "The Veldt" by a year. It would seem that the house, in all of its fantastical programming, should recognize its own obsolescence. Instead, it continues to read poetry, rock beds, cook and serve food, report the day's agenda, put out the table and cards for bridge club, draw baths, defend against potential intruders, and even recognize the family's severely irradiated pet dog months after the people are gone. This calls into question what *life* actually is—while we have a definition for it thanks to biology, post-structuralism also sows doubt about the reliability of the scientific method and other empirical fact-finding endeavors.

In a story without human characters, is the home truly supposed to be simply a building, or does it stand in for the people we are used to cheering for? Does the house continue to operate and fulfill the only purpose it has ever known because that is what it *must* do, the closest thing it has to a biological imperative? Is there anything *less* alive about the constructed edifice than there was about the family that occupied it? One can question whether the distinction between life and automated existence is even useful or valuable. Does it have any hope of being considered accurate? Has the technological progress performed by humans in the years leading up to these Bradburian fictional snapshots erased the line between life and the eminently believable simulation of it, or was the theoretical existence of that line always an illusion? Life, after all, is an idea, and ideas “are like units of language; they are generated by difference; they have no substance apart from the networks of differences...that generate them as effects” (Derrida, 1973, p. 474). In this context, there is no way to define life without defining its opposite, so life and its opposite can scarcely be objectively identified at all.

Has the machine taken on life by persisting in its work far longer than it would be necessary? Even the idea of ‘necessity’ would be called into question here. The home of convenience in “There Will Come Soft Rains” was supposed to relieve its inhabitants of drudgery, freeing them to do whatever they wish. The home’s automated processes were not necessary to the lives of its dwellers, but they were supposed to, in some way, increase the humans’ capacity for interesting endeavors. However, in the absence of the family’s existence, it now seems that the reverse is true—the home’s functions continue, its behaviors never abate, and to some extent they seem to be evidence of life and purpose, even though there is very little accomplished through these acts. The exchange of the roles of human and machine cannot be ignored—in “Rains,” the house doesn’t need the family to exist, but their presence would have



added interest to the home's day-to-day existence. The consciousness usually ascribed to humans seems to exist within the house instead—and why not, particularly given Freud, Nietzsche, and Derrida's notion of consciousness as yet another construct, a meaningless idea without the opposing presence not of unconsciousness, but of *non-consciousness* (Derrida, 1973, p. 486)? It can even be said that the house's indifference to the humans' absence mirrors their own burgeoning non-consciousness, which only makes sense. The process has been taken to its logical conclusion—the inhabitants of the HappyLife Home had likely become less able to manage their daily tasks without the home's constant intervention, approaching that state of non-consciousness. Since the home was created to act in essentially human ways, assuming the roles of those who purchased it, its fate as an unthinking and repetitive actor mirrors the devolution of the humans who occupied it.

To further emphasize the presentation of the house as a stand-in for human life—a fine example of the deconstructionist nature of the narrative that further emphasizes the post-structuralist difficulty of defining life itself—when Bradbury shows the home's destruction as it succumbs to fire and the natural world reclaiming it, as there's no one around to help it defend itself, the reader may well feel a desire to cheer for the home's survival. It has taken on a quality of life many a reader can easily recognize within themselves—namely, the continued automatic process of quotidian existence, the purpose of which many humans never question, at least not down to the finer details of food preparation, dusting and other chores, bedtime routines, and bridge games. The home was even loyal to the family dog when it returns home nearly unrecognizable after a long absence, just as a person would happily open their arms to their prodigal pet. How can the reader be expected to do anything *but* cheer for the home to survive? The fact that it is so easy to replicate human behavior, perseverance, determination, and even

obliviousness to an undercurrent of ennui within a fictional technological being lends a lot of credence to the viewpoint of post-structuralism.

Through this lens, one can definitely argue that the home is as human a character as any person in any other story. It performs human tasks, by design, and seemingly with a great deal of pride and fastidiousness. It fosters relationships, even those that have long since ceased to exist—and many humans could talk of doing the same in their lives. Importantly, “Rains” is the only story in Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles* that is actually set on Earth, and yet people are only mentioned as a memory. The difference between ourselves and the machines we craft from earthen materials may not be much wider than the difference between ourselves and the offspring we create via biology: reorganized matter, in either case. A post-structural reading of Bradbury asks us to consider whether there is a distinction between life and the lack of it. More specifically, this question of the difference between the human and non-human, and whether it even exists, finds purchase in both post-structuralism and ecocriticism.

### **Ecocriticism**

In “The Veldt,” the lines between the children and their chosen play environment, the African veldt, become significantly blurred. It is posited within the story (both by their parents and the psychologist they consult) that their dark transition into more violence-focused, animalistic versions of themselves is caused variously by the parents spoiling them, mother and father vacating their parental responsibilities, the nursery’s realism, and the children’s own naturally violent tendencies being brought to the fore (Bradbury, 1951). In a seeming paradox, Wendy and Peter, who have grown up with every material and technological advantage at their disposal, appear to long for a more primitive surrounding in their play, a return to something more natural that is simulated by the nursery. It’s a natural world that they have likely known

about only through rumor; while they go outside and presumably interact with nature, even that seems limited; when the story opens, as their parents discuss the nursery and its state, the children are off at a “plastic carnival,” only to return soon thereafter in a helicopter (Bradbury, 1951). Given an opportunity to complete household and personal/hygienic tasks for themselves—an exertion of independence that children under age ten often relish—they object and claim that existence and sensory activity is all they wish to engage in.

While a more common reading of “The Veldt” leads to one commenting about the children’s seeming descent into something more deeply primitive as they use the nursery to play out their fantasies of their parents being eliminated, ecocriticism would question the initial separation between human and animal in the first place, and the constructed hierarchy that has placed more value on human than animal at all. This idea has been called post-humanism (Marland, 2013), an endeavor to take the focus off of the stories of humans and to challenge the convenient idea that they are in the rightful place of dominion over all creatures and the whole of nature.

In this school of thought, the children’s acceptance of their animal drives, their focus on the need for death in order to achieve the position of power they wish to obtain within their own clan, is not a behavior that should be considered foreign to humans, since humans *are* animals. Certainly, the idea that humans are *better* than animals continues to be a popular notion, and it is used to justify untold numbers of atrocities against other animals both direct (e.g., sport hunting) and indirect (as in pollution of the natural environment and decimation of natural habitats that leads to pain, struggle, endangerment, and extinction). But “The Veldt” calls this into question; the degree of comfort achieved by George and Lydia through their HappyLife Home has caused them to be weak, turned them from nominal matriarch and patriarch into potential prey—as

psychologist McClean puts it, the nursery has become the children's mother and father, so the parents' presence is a nuisance to the children rather than a necessity (Bradbury, 1951).

The relationship of the Hadley family to their house reveals a deep and often contradictory set of inner conflicts. They wish to have fewer mundane tasks in their day initially, and yet the forfeiture of these tasks causes them to feel unfulfilled, even nonexistent. They wish to be surrounded by technological tools, but when given the opportunity to choose any place they can go in a boundless fantasy scene, the children return time and again to a most foreign natural environment. Even the parents, upon choosing to install the nursery in their home, are encouraged by the ability to envision beautiful natural scenes for a quick getaway. The very purpose of the nursery is to provide this sort of realistic, sensually immersive experience (smells, sights, sounds, tactility), and yet its realism becomes disturbing when it shows a natural world in detail too convincing to be dismissed as imagination manifest. When George makes the decision to turn off the nursery to save his family, they pack to go on an actual trip rather than using the nursery to do so more affordably and conveniently (Bradbury, 1951).

The nursery (and at times the rest of the home) is spoken of in terms one would use for living things: "Nothing ever likes to die—even a room" (Bradbury, 1951, para. 215); "The house was full of dead bodies. It felt like a mechanical cemetery" (para. 229); "Don't let father kill everything!" (para. 230). The lines between living and nonliving are blurred by the house's technological advances and the family's self-imposed complacency with their existence. This provides common ground between the ecocritical and post-structuralist views of these stories.

Of course, there are multiple schools of thought within ecocriticism. The Deep Ecology movement focuses not on how to maintain a sustainable approach to business and industry that uses nature "responsibly" for human efforts toward financial success, but on the respect animals

inherently deserve (rather than the respect they earn because of utilitarian economic ideals; Roos, 2011). “The Veldt” could certainly be viewed as a critique of humans’ approach to animals.

Given that the Hadley family had no pets to speak of, the only animals they seem to interact with regularly are the lions of the nursery veldt. They brought them into existence, in a sense, via the children’s imagination, so the hierarchy of human over (other) animal is even easier to maintain and justify. The children use the lions for their own purposes—first through fantasy and then eventually through the actual homicide of their parents. They are seen as tools the children have the right to utilize, and something to be feared. Peter effectively makes this threat explicit when George discloses the parents’ plan to shutter the nursery permanently, telling his father, “I don’t think you’d better consider [doing so] any more, Father” (Bradbury, 1951, para. 169). His ability, his implicit right, to command the lions to do as he wishes is still a form of violence against nature, even though the target of his violent impulse is his parents.

Additionally, one could consider the parents’ decision to terminate the use of the nursery to be an act of violence against those same animals—justified as self-preservation. Other ecocritical thinkers may claim the Hadleys are each making their own calculated decisions to enable their own survival in a home that, for all its shiny surfaces and machinery, is still essentially part of nature. Deep Ecology theorists may take “The Veldt” as a warning about the rights humans mistakenly believe they have over other animals, and how exercising that imagined right can lead to negative outcomes for all involved. After all, though it isn’t covered in the story, one can reasonably assume that a hypothetical successive chapter would involve Wendy and Peter being taken into someone else’s custody and the nursery being shut down despite their efforts to preserve it. Further, the children may also no longer have interest in

playing in the veldt, since it had served its purpose; either way, it would cease to exist, advancing the notion that people often see nature as existing only for use as a tool or item of convenience.

Some ecocritical theorists have been concerned with the fact that the line between what is natural and what is humanmade has become blurred or ceased to exist (or perhaps, in line with post-structuralism, that its nonexistence has simply become clearer). The current era of Earth has been referred to as the Anthropocene, a time in which humans are not just biological entities, but have taken to actively transforming the planet and all of its ecosystems, making a distinction between natural and artificial difficult if not impossible (Heise, 2011). McKibben (1989) discusses this in his seminal climate change book *The End of Nature*: “By changing the weather, we make every spot on Earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning...we have ended the thing that has, at least in modern times, defined nature for us—its separation from human society” (pp. 58, 64, as qtd. in Heise, 2011). The nursery is a vivid example of this paradox of artificial nature, and its moment of climax serves as a fitting wound the humans have inflicted on themselves.

Bradbury confidently turns the traditional human-centered nature of most literature on its head in such adept fashion, readers may not initially realize there were no humans present in “There Will Come Soft Rains.” Its capacity for involving the reader in its drama and even potentially aligning the audience’s empathy with the house furthers confusion about whether life and even humanity can be objectively defined or known—even by readers who supposedly have both.

“Rains” represents another strong meld of artifice and nature. The choice of the title comes from the final poem the house reads to the family’s deceased mother, by Sara Teasdale. As the family was destroyed by a nuclear blast, this selection of title and poem by Bradbury is

far from incidental. Its recitation immediately precedes the house's death and makes no secret about its meaning: it says that "Not one will know of the war/ Not one will care at last when it is done/ Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree/ If mankind perished utterly/ And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn/ Would scarcely know that we were gone" (Bradbury, 1950, para. 43-45).

As in "The Veldt," the home is referred to in terms usually employed to discuss living things: the house "bordered on a mechanical paranoia" (Bradbury, 1950, para. 14), "tried to save itself" (para. 50), "began to die," (para. 47), "its nerves revealed as if a surgeon had torn the skin off to let the red veins and capillaries quiver" (para. 60) as it displayed "sublime disregard" (para. 62) and continued to carry out some of its tasks "at a psychopathic rate" (para. 64). The house angers, it sighs, it questions, it soldiers on—all behaviors that seem to require sentience, choices being made.

Nature is first posited as the antagonist of the house in the story, though humanity is the implied antagonist to both nature and itself. With no humans to relate to, the reader is drawn to the house as the central identity, the focus, the hero—at least initially. It is a resilient entity, continuing in the work it was made to do, despite the pointlessness of it all. (As noted earlier, it is not difficult to see how this could be relatable for many people.) There are no humans to serve; the house must know it has not heard an inhabitant's voice in many days, but it does all it exists to do. The home comes complete with mechanized versions of living things—cockroaches, mice, crickets, snakes (Bradbury, 1950), recalling the way that the Hadleys use their home to simulate nature in "The Veldt." In "Rains," when the family dog returns home and dies, the automatic cleaning mice sense its decay within an hour and remove it piece by piece in fifteen minutes, accelerating the process of decomposition by acting as nature's catalyst. While seemingly far

from natural, the home still seeks to reproduce nature for its obliterated inhabitants even though they once shut themselves away from it.

When a tree comes crashing through the roof, splashing cleaning fluid over a stove cooking dinner for no one, nature breaches the home, initiating the crisis that drives the rest of the story. The fire—also at times personified: lying, standing, behaving cleverly, backing off—spreads despite the home’s valiant efforts to control it. When the fire reaches the home’s central computer (“brain”), the blistering heat overtakes the circuitry and, since the home’s water reserves that have become depleted in its derelict state, it succumbs. The fire rages, killing the house’s voices and mechanisms, even as the robot cleaning mice continue to fulfill their pointless jobs, the band playing on as the Titanic sinks. Only a single wall is left by the time the fire runs its course, and it continues to state the current date to the radioactive wilderness and ash that surrounds it.

Just as without nature, there is nothing but humans (according to McKibben), we can argue that without humans, there is nothing but nature. The tree breaking through the wall and roof of the home is not nature’s intrusion on man’s space as much as it is nature doing what it always does—reshaping itself through entropy. Every component of the home was taken from nature and shaped into a different purpose—one that, to humankind, seemed higher. Wind, gravity, and heat—all natural forces—coincided to facilitate the house’s destruction, but it could just have easily have been any building, or any human invention. Without nature, none of our creations exist, and therefore, we can scarcely claim accurately to have created anything. Humans have merely rearranged the ingredients that were always there, just as we do with sounds in creating language, and with language in constructing stories, through rearrangement into a configuration we find more appealing or useful.



Nature, however, can't be fooled in the same way the "Rains" home can. The house carries on with its regimented schedule and seemingly would do so ad infinitum, but the natural world recognizes that the home belongs to it, and that matter is bound to be redistributed into natural creations that differ from its prior sources and its current presentation. The humans of the world that went to nuclear war in "Rains" used rearranged components of nature, like those materials comprising the house, to protect them from nature, but could not fend off the most destructive forces present in nature—themselves. And while the technological 'creations' of humans may outlive them, even those are no match for the process of nature, no matter how much we pollute or disrespect it. In fact, the more we seem to interfere with it, the more it strikes back, not with vengeance—that would be too human—but with natural consequences.

### **Conclusion**

Bradbury's approach to the subjects of technology and humanity often carried a sense of foreboding. His concerns about anti-intellectualism are well-known, as is his worry that technological advancement would lead to our own uselessness and a loss of our nature, a link in that chain of human devolution. In the anthropological history leading up to his stories, humans recognized their intellectual superiority and used it to proclaim their rightful occupation of the zenith of the natural hierarchy; they even went so far as to separate themselves from the animal kingdom and plunder the planet's resources for the supposed betterment of life, but really for their own individual advantages over other humans, an additional hierarchy within the pinnacle of the first.

The lessons of "There Will Come Soft Rains" and "The Veldt" can be interpreted much like those of many famous science fiction stories: we are willingly submitting to a process that removes what makes us human. We are destroying each other and our shared home. It's no

coincidence that much of Bradbury's writing concerned potential human colonization and utilization of other planets. He saw the potential for us abusing our own planet to the point of no return, eliminating entire species and throwing ecosystems off kilter, poisoning the environment we live in through misguided efforts to improve our lives, doing so in ways that paradoxically make it uninhabitable. The lines we draw between natural and artificial, primitive and advanced, human and nonhuman are all arbitrary—defining the desired only in opposition to the undesirable. It should be no surprise given our familiarity with this sort of behavior that we might be designated undesirable ourselves, and that the rest of nature will scarcely care when we are gone.

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**Dystopian Fiction Project: Teaching Unit**

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### **Abstract**

A two-week unit for a college creative writing course (to be offered online) is discussed in detail. The lesson focuses on three examples of dystopian fiction—Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery,” Ray Bradbury’s “There Will Come Soft Rains,” and Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*. Students will also read and discuss additional critical writing related to these dystopian works and the wider genre. By the end of the two-week unit, students will be tasked with writing a short dystopian fictional piece of their own connected to one of the assigned texts.

### **Course Description**

ENG 222 is the introductory creative writing course at College of Lake County, where I am currently employed as a full-time faculty member in the human services/social work department. As noted in the college's course catalog, ENG 222 is

designed to introduce students to a variety of approaches, writing techniques and stages of the crafting process in the genres of prose fiction, creative nonfiction and poetry.

Students will complete writing exercises in these genres. They will analyze professional prose and poetry. The course emphasizes creative expression and critique of student writing (College of Lake County, 2021, p. 289).

### **Context within the Course**

I have no English teaching experience and this is a new endeavor for me, but I have consulted with English colleagues to determine when this might fall in a potential creative writing course. The first weeks of the course will focus upon basic foundations of creative writing—"Thinking About a Reader" by Judith Grossman will be an early assignment, for example. We will also employ readings explaining concepts like *in medias res* and other options for starting a story, defamiliarization, character development, outlining plot, and more. Before we get to the dystopian fiction unit, we will focus on some broader genres and writing types like mini-memoir/nonfiction, science fiction/fantasy, historical fiction, and poetry. Students will have some agency to decide which styles most align with their interests and skills, but will also be required to work on at least one piece of realistic fiction (i.e., not fantasy, science fiction, or surrealist) and one nonfiction story.

My estimate is that this unit and its related assignments would begin around week ten in a typical 15-week semester. Given that writing dystopian fiction is not as simple as some other

creative writing endeavors, it should not come too early in the course. The students need to have some familiarity with techniques and methods for creative work in general before tackling something of this sort. I do not wish for it to be the final unit, but I would like students to have some practice with it in case they would like to use it for their final writing project of the semester.

It may seem a bit advanced to discuss dystopian work in an introductory creative writing course, but many students enjoy the genre, and dystopian tales have enjoyed popular success in recent years (e.g., *The Hunger Games*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, the resurgent interest in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*). I feel many students would enjoy a dystopian unit and the opportunity to practice composing in this genre.

### **Explanation of Teaching Approach**

#### **Teaching Creative Writing Online**

I have been a professor for fifteen years, and while I've worked with my students on their writing, before my program at BGSU, I had never learned how to *teach* writing, let alone creative writing. This will be a challenge for me, but I plan to take great advantage of the many instructional resources around me as well as my more experienced colleagues. I have taken an online creative writing course, so I do have an idea of what is helpful from the student perspective. Only one section of creative writing is taught in a face-to-face format each semester at College of Lake County, and it is most likely that if I were given a chance to teach this course, it would be in an online format.

Weekly discussion boards have helped me to solicit feedback, to see helpful examples of others' creative writing to spark my own ideas, and just simply to be engaging in regular writing practice. I aim to give my students the chance to engage in short creative writing assignments on



a weekly basis, to get peer and instructor feedback via the discussion board, and to revise and post a final draft.

### **Organization of the Weekly Lessons**

In the class syllabus, the students will be prompted to begin reading Zamyatin's *We* before the first week of this unit commences, with the goal of finishing it by the end of that first week in preparation for a related writing assignment to be shared on the discussion board in week 2. They will also read two short stories in week 1—Ray Bradbury's "There Will Come Soft Rains" (from *The Illustrated Man*) and Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." The discussion board prompts for each week are described in the lesson plans at the end of this paper.

### **Student Assessment**

Students will be graded on completion of work and their ability to incorporate the elements of dystopian fiction covered in the reading that prepares them for writing their own piece. As creative writing quality is inherently subjective and this will be the first time many of them have attempted to write a dystopian story, students will not be graded on the quality of their narrative as much as their adherence to genre expectations, general writing conventions, and meeting assignment expectations. A holistic comment-based rubric will be employed, with focus on the potential growth of the story and ways to improve it should the student wish to use it for their final project in the course. As is the case with all of my courses, students will have the opportunity to submit revised work for the potential of a higher grade if they wish.

### **Texts**

Students will read "The Lottery" and "There Will Come Soft Rains" in the first week of this unit, along with the following articles:

“Even Better than the Real Thing—Counterfeit Realities and Twentieth Century Dystopian Fiction” (Lovén, 2001): <https://humanit.hb.se/article/view/165/174>

“Human Rights at Stake: Shirley Jackson’s Social and Political Protest in ‘The Lottery’” (Ismail & Khalifa Ali, 2018):

<https://www.journals.aiac.org.au/index.php/IJALEL/article/viewFile/4822/3649>

The stories and critical articles will form the basis for the first week’s discussion board and will provide a general introduction to dystopian fiction. These two stories approach the idea of dystopia from quite different angles—one is based in a seemingly agrarian municipality and focuses entirely on a human tradition with unknown origin, and the other in a futuristic, post-apocalyptic nuclear wasteland without any human characters. In the case of “The Lottery,” Jackson focuses on a single and seemingly unjustified ritualistic act of violence that the townspeople (and the populace of nearly every other town, city, or village) engage in annually, perhaps because they believe it ensures a good harvest; while there is some talk about other towns ending the ritual (before the reader knows with certainty it is violent), the general attitude among the crowd seems to be that doing so is a shameful break from tradition. That is only openly expressed by one resident, Old Man Warner, who predicts there will be a devolution to primitive living: “First thing you know, we’d all be eating stewed chickweed and acorns...Nothing but trouble in [ending the lottery]...Pack of young fools” (Jackson, 1948, p. 2). The story is deceptively simple on the surface, leaving more questions for the reader than answers. The mundanity of the injustice is key to the disorienting feeling the story imparts to the reader—prompting them to question how can such a monstrous act be not only embraced as an important cultural tradition, but seemingly carried out so dispassionately. Jackson’s commentary is implied in this depiction: violence is human and inhuman all at once, and it continues to exist

in part because we find it unremarkable, necessary, and/or justified. Gender dynamics also play a part as Tessie Hutchinson is chosen in the lottery and stoned to death over her understandable protests, not even garnering any support from her family. This emphasizes the dismissal of women's voices and concerns as men play the key roles in the administration of the lottery ritual and Tessie's husband does nothing to support her or even comfort her as her death approaches (Ismail & Khalifa Ali, 2018).

In "There Will Come Soft Rains," an automated house presents as a nontraditional protagonist of sorts while the natural world acts as the antagonist. The house exists as a character due to its seeming facsimile of life in the absence of humankind, for whom it was ostensibly created, in the aftermath of a nuclear strike that killed the family which occupied it. Undeterred, the home has continued its automated processes even in the absence of its vaporized residents, unable to cease or to recognize its own obsolescence. After a fallen tree sparks a fire, nearly all of the house gradually succumbs to nature over a few hours' time, fruitlessly resisting, but putting up far more of a fight than its former inhabitants could manage. The story has no human characters, but plenty of action that provides their echo; technology outlasts them and, though purposeless, continues to forge ahead (Bradbury, 1950). As in many similar works warning of the dangers of technology supposedly meant to improve our lives, these augmented realities instead "take on disastrous proportions, as fundamental cultural values and institutions crumble under the corrupting influence of collective escapism" (Lovén, 2004, p. 4).

Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* deals with dehumanization as so many dystopian tales do, but of a different sort—the sterilization of our humanity in the name of conformity and predictability, a destruction of individuality reminiscent of Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron," with similar implications: the continued prestige, power, and comfort of the ruling class/group. This text will

serve as the main reading for the unit. Like many longer dystopian works, *We* not only depicts a supposed utopia, but exposes everything that the audience would find far from ideal as well as the underground movement to undermine the forces subjugating the masses of the One State (Zamyatin, 1924). This portrayal of the hoi polloi's efforts to overthrow the One State's power, and more importantly its ideology, is a key element in many dystopian works, where the protagonists are often the leaders or foot soldiers in such efforts. In *We*, however, readers learn of the events through the largely pro-One-State historical journal of D-503, who experiences great ambivalence toward the opposing philosophies of the One State and its revolutionary faction, the Mephi (Zamyatin, 1924). It is an unusual perspective for a dystopian tale—the reader is exposed to both sides of the argument, for and against those in power. D-503 seems eager to give up all that is illogical about him, including his creativity, to become more like a machine, less human. It is undoubtedly difficult for the reader to empathize despite his passionate efforts to extol the virtues of the One State.

These varied texts and settings will give the students a good cross-section of the dystopian genre, told from first-person and third-person perspectives; the texts focus on the world during and after dystopian events, the dangers of technology and of political power, always with the potential loss or irrevocable elimination of what makes us human.

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# ENG 222 online: Dystopian unit, week 1

<b>Lesson Plan Ref.</b>	ENG222-010	<b>Course Ref.</b>	010
<b>Subject/Course:</b>	ENG 222: Creative Writing		
<b>Topic:</b>	Dystopian fiction		
<b>Lesson Title:</b>	Introduction to dystopian stories and tropes		
<b>Level:</b>	Sophomore	<b>Lesson Duration:</b>	1 week

## Lesson/Objective

Students will read two short stories, two analytical articles, and complete a discussion board related to the readings. Students will complete their reading of Zamyatin's *We*, begun in the prior week, in preparation for next week's written assignment. The short stories and analytical article will be read at the beginning of the week to provide material for the discussion board assignment, while the completion of *We* can take place later in the week to prepare students for the writing assignment in week two.

## Summary of Tasks/Actions

1. Read Ray Bradbury's "There Will Come Soft Rains"
2. Read Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery"
3. Read Ismail & Khalifa Ali's "Human Rights at Stake: Shirley Jackson's Social and Political Protest in 'The Lottery.'"
4. Read Lovén's "Even Better than the Real Thing."
5. Complete reading Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*.
6. Complete related discussion board.

## Discussion Board Prompt

Answer at least two of the following prompts.

- 1) Does "There Will Come Soft Rains" have a protagonist? An antagonist? If so, who/what are they? How does the lack of human characters impact the structure of the story?
- 2) What is the message behind "There Will Come Soft Rains?" Is there a moral or inherent warning to the story? Given the Lovén reading, what would you say about the story's impression of technology and its impact on human life?
- 3) What does "The Lottery" have to say about groupthink? Tradition? Violence? Human nature?
- 4) Ismail and Khalifa Ali note Jackson's masterful ability to raise questions and comment on broader issues of social justice indirectly. What examples can you identify in the text that align with the common elements of dystopian writing? How can you connect the article to the humanless landscape of "Rains?"

## References

Ray Bradbury's "There Will Come Soft Rains"  
 Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*  
 Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery"  
 Ismail & Khalifa Ali's "Human Rights at Stake: Shirley Jackson's Social and Political Protest in 'The Lottery.'"  
 Lovén's "Even Better than the Real Thing."

**Major Assignment**

Finish reading *We* in preparation for the original short story assignment next week

## ENG 222 online: Dystopian unit, week 2

<b>Lesson Plan Ref.</b>	ENG222-011	<b>Course Ref.</b>	011
<b>Subject/Course:</b>	ENG 222: Creative Writing		
<b>Topic:</b>	Dystopian fiction		
<b>Lesson Title:</b>	Writing dystopian fiction		
<b>Level:</b>	Sophomore	<b>Lesson Duration:</b>	1 week

### Lesson Objectives

Students will learn foundational elements of dystopian fiction writing. They will compose, edit, and finalize their own short dystopian story based on one of the three dystopian works read for this unit.

### Summary of Tasks / Actions

1. Read Vincent's "Writing Dystopian Fiction: 7 Tips."
2. Having completed the reading of *We*, post a draft of an original dystopian short story based on one of the three pieces of dystopian fiction assigned for this unit.
3. Provide feedback to three or more peers on their rough drafts.
4. Submit a final draft of the story.

### Discussion Board Prompt

The discussion board this week will be used to post a rough draft, provide feedback to others on their drafts, and solicit feedback on one's own draft.

### References

Vincent's "Writing Dystopian Fiction: 7 Tips"

### Major Assignment

Write an original dystopian short story using one of the following prompts.

- 1) Describe the events of a Lottery Day when Old Man Warner was much younger and someone close to him drew the lot with the black spot, indicating they would be stoned. Describe Warner's feelings about the lottery before this event, during, and afterward. Did he participate or watch? How did he feel as a result, and how did this play a part in shaping his stance toward the lottery today?
- 2) Describe what is happening in the northern village that is talking about discontinuing the lottery. What has led to their consideration of this major change? Has something happened in their village, or another, to influence them? Is there general agreement or major opposition? How might neighboring villages react to the change, if this town eliminates the lottery? What are the risks involved in such a controversial change?



- 3) Imagine the final day before the nuclear blast that struck the area preceding the events in “There Will Come Soft Rains.” What was the family like? What did their last day consist of? What led to the nuclear blast? Were there preparations for it, or any warning? If not, why not? If so, why was this family caught unprepared? Explain the events leading up to the blast.
- 4) Write three journal entries about the events in *We* from the perspective of a character who knew D-503. You may select O-90, I-330, R-13, or U.

Your story should be at least 5 full double-spaced pages in 12-point Times New Roman font. Post your rough draft by Thursday night; provide feedback to peers by Saturday night; complete your edits and submit your final draft by the following Monday night at 11:59pm.

**Liberal to a Point: Black Films, White Foils, Assimilation, and Social Justice**

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April 17, 2022

### **Assimilation versus Nationalism**

American history textbooks and teachers often promote the idea of America as the *great melting pot*, a place where cultures come together from all around the world and make a unique, novel, and greater *new* culture together (Cullen & Cullen, 2015). The concept is presented as if it's an ideal outcome that means greatness for everyone involved—that America takes the best of what everyone has to offer and combines it into a new whole, a creation that transcends its components and encourages people to leave their insular identities behind in favor of the pursuit of a new ideal, a sort of multicultural vein of American exceptionalism. In doing so, however, there is an implicit devaluing of one's heritage—not a blatant disregard or dislike for it, but to some degree a loss of that unique identity. By coming together to create an American culture, people are led to believe they are a part of something bigger. It's better than the idea of forced assimilation to the supposed “American way,” but it also means giving up some element of oneself. If America means the best of what everyone has to offer, the powers that be still determine what is wheat and what is chaff, and something is always left to waste after the threshing.

In contrast, cultural pluralism is the idea that different peoples can come together and create a great new whole without losing any of their singular identity in the process (Cullen & Cullen, 2015). The strength is in the unique perspectives, beliefs, and traditions of the various people who have coalesced into a new society. This is generally seen as more respectful, empowering, and valuing of differences, and is an outcome more likely to be championed by progressives and people who might embrace the sometimes derogatorily-offered label of “social justice warrior.”

It will come as no surprise to most readers that not everyone's cultures are so valued. People who look like those who hold a majority of the power in a society (in this case, America) are more likely to be encouraged to embrace and retain their cultural heritage; those whose ways differ more significantly from the majority are more likely to be encouraged to assimilate, to cast off what makes them unique and to "do things the way we do them here." That means language, dress, rites, values, religion and faith, food, art, and other elements of culture may be devalued, treated as lower-class (or anti-American), even outlawed and punished—all in the name of becoming something *better*.

This is not merely a relic of the past, but a process that continues in America today. Immigrants continue to come to this country looking for a new life, to escape violence, war, poverty, and/or persecution. Historically, America has presented itself as a place where such people can find safety and solace as liberty opens her arms to welcome everyone in pursuit of a better tomorrow. However, that is truly just the postcard picture that people in power have strived to present as America, despite the often uglier truth. While American leaders have not always been outward and obvious about their American exceptionalism and xenophobia, President Donald Trump, his administration, and his associates embraced these views, sometimes in the crudest of ways (e.g., referring to non-White immigrants coming from "shithole countries," claiming many immigrants are murderers, rapists, and drug dealers; and helping to promote conspiracy theories about the first Black and Asian-American woman to earn a major party nomination for Vice-President, Kamala Harris; Dale et al., 2020). The Trump administration's open prejudice—not that it is a uniquely Trumpian phenomenon—should have thoroughly dispelled any notion that racism and nationalism are fringe behaviors and philosophies.

Our current national zeitgeist is deeply divided. A significant portion of Americans have shown support for former President Trump and the Republican Party's notions of American exceptionalism and isolationism—keeping “others” out while putting America first. A large number of Americans also continue to believe America should be a land of opportunity for all, and that people from other cultures and traditions, with different perspectives and values, can make the country stronger, not simply dilute whatever is meant to define “America” (sometimes used as a stand-in for “White, Christian, heterosexual, cisgender families”). Recently, Senator Mitch McConnell exemplified this notion of America's supposed Whiteness when he said, “African American voters are voting is just as high a percentage as Americans,” a comment that could be interpreted to mean the two groups were distinct (Schreiner, 2022).

In the 2020 Presidential race, when White people in power attacked the very *right* of Kamala Harris to seek high office despite clearly verifiable facts that show she is eligible (Eastman, 2020), critical race theory (CRT) remained just as relevant as ever, even as it came to be a symbolic boogeyman vilified by conservative politicians. Whether non-White people should take an approach of nationalism or assimilation is a matter of ongoing inward debate and critique among critical race theorists (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Nationalists argue that assimilating to the culture and expectations of those in power serves to dilute the power and value of one's identity, one's culture, and oneself. Examples of nationalism include Black activists supporting all-Black schools in order to give students positive Black role models and teach them to value their identity (more than just in February); the legitimacy and equal importance of the Spanish language for Hispanic and Latinx/o/a people; and minorities owning guns for self-protection given the discriminatory and often violent ways they are treated by those who are in power and have weapons (i.e., the criminal justice system, especially police; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Nationalists might point out that despite Kamala Harris's efforts to "play the game," to disrupt the system from the inside by rising to power as a minority woman who brings a different perspective and voice into the conversation, when she threatened to rise too far, her very right to be considered was called into question. They would note that this illustrates exactly why the system cannot be infiltrated by people of color looking to advance social justice—the system itself will conspire to prevent them from reaching a point where they can make any real changes, and even when they reach those heights, roadblocks will continue to frustrate them. The system is inherently self-serving and self-preserving because it was set up that way.

Assimilationists share a belief that their culture is valuable, but they advocate working within the system to create lasting change (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Harris may well see herself as doing exactly that, as she has been an Attorney General, a Senator, and now the first woman and BIPOC individual to serve as Vice President. In her position, she can obviously do a lot to influence policy simply by being a visible person of power. Just as Barack Obama made it more obvious that a person of color could occupy the White House, showing BIPOC children around the country that it was a viable dream, Harris could do the same for girls of color, and that in itself is a profound contribution to social change. Representation matters, both in reality and in the world of fiction, and assimilationists would say that by achieving a position of power, one has the chance to make lasting change happen; instead of remaining separate, for example, Black people can be a part of the power structure at all levels to help enact policies that strive for true equality.

### **Can Film Help to Create Social Change?**

For all of American history, White voices have been emphasized in politics, education, religion, and art. Black stories have been relegated to specialty status rather than meant for

general consumption, while blockbusters featuring White directors using White actors to tell White stories are assumed to be fit for *all* audiences. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Black filmmakers started to be given more freedom to tell Black stories, particularly when it became clear to the major studios that those films and stories could be profitable regardless of their prior perception to the contrary (and contradicting today's popular right-wing catchphrase of "go woke, go broke"). Those stories have often sought to explore the same sorts of themes discussed in the first section of this paper—assimilation and nationalism, isolation versus participation, and invisibility versus equality.

In "Beyond Idolatrous Whiteness: Resisting Racism," Daniel Boscaljon (2020) defines "idolatrous Whiteness" as a phenomenon in which "the appearance of Whiteness becomes a dominant force in how a social hierarchy is constructed and controlled" (p. 269). He points out that assimilationists sacrifice their culture and individuality in order to align with this notion of idolatrous Whiteness, which gives them tangible benefits as long as they agree to play by the rules set up by the White majority. He nearly equates the idea of assimilation with that of segregation, since in either case, those who are not White are not truly free—either they have to align themselves with behaviors and norms valued by the majority and deny their equal humanity, or they have to accept inferior treatment in order to be allowed to maintain and appreciate their own cultures, values, and traditions. While segregation is often regarded as a relic of the past that should never have been inflicted on people, replacing it with forced, coerced, or even simply encouraged assimilation is not much progress toward true social justice. Boscaljon believes people can reject (or overturn) the idolatry of Whiteness through artistic expressions like film, providing examples of a few movies that seek to do just that.

### ***Black Panther***

*Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) is a somewhat divisive movie in academic literature.

Based on a Marvel comic superhero introduced a half-century earlier, it presents the story of Wakanda, an isolated nation in the midst of Africa, one which has remarkably successful policies of separation and self-reliance that have kept other nations from interfering in its way of life. However, this is buoyed by Wakanda's technological advancements and great scientific accomplishments, which have allowed it to camouflage itself from the outside world. While the globe sees Wakanda as a poor, rural nation, they in fact have a thriving economy, a nearly utopian society where women and men alike fulfill important roles (though men are still the ultimate leaders and figureheads), and little worry. Their isolationism comes at a price to the rest of the world, however. While much of the African diaspora outside Wakanda suffers in various ways (the film touches upon or alludes to police brutality, sexual slavery, economic oppression, and more), Wakanda thrives by keeping its wealth and resources hidden from others. The central conflict of the film is driven by this dichotomy, as the new king of Wakanda, T'Challa, has two people in his life presenting viewpoints that challenge his continued support of the country's isolationist policies. His former lover, Nakia, has left Wakanda in order to pursue social justice initiatives that are close to her heart. Although she and T'Challa love each other, their divergent philosophies on what Wakanda should do for the rest of the world prevent them from pursuing a relationship. T'Challa believes he is doing what is best for Wakanda, while Nakia believes she has found a greater purpose for her life outside the confines of their small, wealthy nation (Coogler, 2018).

Later in the film, T'Challa endures an attempted overthrow by a relative previously unknown to him (Erik Stevens, or Killmonger) who has grown up in the United States and come



to resent the fact that Wakanda is not doing more to help Black people around the world. T'Challa recognizes Killmonger's right to challenge for the throne even as he attempts to find common ground, but Killmonger bests T'Challa in ritual battle and believes he has killed him, thus entitling him to the crown. The newly seated king immediately orders a series of actions that cause a lot of collateral damage and death in order to carry out his vision of Wakanda's obligations to the people of the African diaspora, before T'Challa (with the considerable help of several important women of Wakanda and less important assistance from a White American man) retakes his crown (Coogler, 2018). T'Challa comes to recognize that Wakanda could be a leader in righting the wrongs done to Black people around the world, through the sharing of their resources, and the movie ends with the discussion of a plan to open the first Wakanda outreach center in Oakland, California, the city from which Killmonger originated.

Boscaljon (2020) notes that while Killmonger's policies sought to use the violent acts often perpetrated by White-commanded military forces on other nations (and by the criminal justice system against BIPOC people) to set his people free and flip the power structures of the world, T'Challa is able to triumph and come to an understanding of Wakanda's responsibility to the world (and especially oppressed Black people) "guided by the wisdom of female leadership...understanding openness as a work of strength...achieving justice for the least fortunate in a way consistent with Black feminist thought, using resources to advantage the marginalized" (p. 272).

In this presentation of the debate between assimilation and nationalism, Wakanda's separatism yields to what the hegemonic White power structures believe it needs to be, and therefore aligns it with assimilation to a significant degree, while Killmonger's nationalism is equated to a penchant for violence as a tool for change. (While Black nationalism and violence

are often conflated in particular by those who seek to quash so-called ‘radical’ Black groups, in reality, many nationalist groups and thinkers eschew violent tactics.)

Not everyone sees *Black Panther* in such a positive light, however. Benash (2020) questions whether the very characteristics that brought *Black Panther* to massive worldwide success serve to undermine its credibility as an important piece of Black art. Benash argues that the film “place[s] less emphasis on authentic representations of Black people and culture, and primary emphasis on box office profit” (2020, p. 1). Rather than seeing the film’s success as proof that Black stories can have mass appeal, he posits that it is “not as vested in Black Power or Pan-African philosophy as it may initially seem” (Benash, 2020, p. 1). Though the movie takes care to present Wakanda as a nation very much steeped in its culture and not at all prone to Western White expectations (e.g., with royal sentry and warrior Okoye bristling when having to wear a wig that exemplifies Western expectations of Black beauty, preferring her shaved head), Benash posits that the film intentionally glosses over the more difficult conversations about Black nationalism and the need for the sort of radical actions that might make White moviegoers uncomfortable. In doing so, Benash (2020) claims the film is doing little more than *pretending* to be racially progressive and in favor of Black power; in reality, it is still adhering to White notions of what makes a film successful, and that is by having a healthy enough dose of violence without ever directing that violence toward Whites, never forcing a radical reimagination of power onto the White people who hold it. Taken in this light, the establishment of a Wakandan outreach center in the United States at the film’s end instead serves to placate the White audience and provide a wholesome neoliberal ending to the moral and political conflict at the film’s core.

Benash (2020) also argues that Killmonger is too easy to villainize for the White audience, playing into what Christopher Lebron called “tropes of inner-city gangsterism” (p. 7),

and lamenting the fact that while other Marvel comic supervillains live to see another day and fight on, Killmonger dies (despite being given the opportunity to live), leaving him without the opportunity to grow or to be a part of the solution that he wanted, even if it came about somewhat differently than he had envisioned.

However, there remain scholars who find that Coogler's film is more radical than Benash gives it credit for. Curtis (2019) instead asserts that the film is not assimilationist at all, but that Killmonger is much more complex than the simple gangster trope that Benash and Lebron describe. As the author notes, the choice of Oakland for the origin of Killmonger is no accident, since that is also the birthplace of the Black Panther Party in 1966. In Curtis's view, the fact that Killmonger originates in a city that requires a radical overhaul to reach equality, a place that gives him the perspective of the oppressed in a very personal and tangible fashion, demonstrates that he has a superhero's pedigree. He is "grounded in the experiences of a 'bounded community,'" as even within the affluent country of the United States, poor Black and other minority neighborhoods still suffer under the essentially colonial rule of a White criminal justice presence at all times (Curtis, 2019, p. 268).

Killmonger is a complex villain—the viewer can empathize with his anger and frustration while still not wanting further violence to occur, Curtis and others would argue (from perhaps a middle stance between a philosophy of assimilation and one of nationalism); Benash and others might instead say that Killmonger is still oversimplified and easily dismissed in the same way that people demean Black Lives Matter protests occurring in American streets today, by pointing out the occasional violence and property damage that may occur and using it to delegitimize the larger message. Ultimately, T'Challa's choice of the outreach center can be seen as *both* assimilationist and nationalist. He is aiming to spread the good fortune of Wakanda to others

around the world whose ancestors originated from Africa and have been oppressed throughout their diasporic history, in a way that both promotes Wakanda's accomplishments and culture and seeks to bring it to other countries in ways that those nations might find more palatable.

### *Shaft*

Blaxploitation is a term that gets applied perhaps a bit too broadly, as it gives the impression that any movie featuring mostly Black actors and a storyline that appealed more to Black audiences was exploiting its stars' hopes for a film career by casting them in roles that were stereotyped and presenting stories that were consistently *othered*, showing Black characters as having questionable motives or behavior that might be considered inappropriate to White audiences. However, many films now given this label had an empowering effect for the Black community, both in employing them as actors and crew and as providing representation for them as heroes and heroines in successful stories that permeated the American cultural landscape, giving White audiences examples of Black characters as something other than simple victims or token inclusions.

*Shaft* (Parks, 1971) is often given credit for the creation of the Blaxploitation genre (along with *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and *Cotton Comes to Harlem*). The original movie has spawned remakes/sequels and even a short-lived TV series and is known well beyond Black audiences as a classic American film. Starring Richard Roundtree in the title role, *Shaft* presents a character who has to strike a balance between assimilation and nationalism, doing so with varying degrees of success. The movie's plot consists of Shaft agreeing to take a job for a local Black mobster (Bumpy Jonas) whose daughter has been kidnapped by White mafia members with whom the mobster is having a business dispute of sorts. Shaft, an independent detective, accepts the offer of a significant amount of money despite personally loathing the

mobster who hired him and the way he takes advantage of the Black community (Parks, 1971). Through his connections, wits, bravery, and cunning, along with his ability to recruit others to assist with his efforts, Shaft is able to recover Jonas's daughter and return her to safety. Along the way, he both runs afoul of police procedure and uses police assistance for his own ends, thanks in part to having an ally in the New York Police Department (Vic Andruzzi) who allows him to bend rules in order to accomplish his goals, which also happen to help the NYPD reach some of their own (Parks, 1971).

In this sense, Shaft acts in ways that straddle assimilation and nationalism. He understands there are some ways he must work within the confines set forth by the NYPD, yet he does so with a sense of defiant independence. When he is allowed the opportunity to question gangsters that could help him locate Bumpy's daughter's whereabouts, it is due to his ability to help the NYPD find those men in the first place. Shaft plays the game the system demands and is rewarded with access he might not otherwise be allowed. He gets to call his own shots and is given leeway to push back against the establishment, despite some within the NYPD thinking he is afforded too much latitude (Parks, 1971).

Novotny Lawrence (2019) noted that Shaft continually worked *against* the White establishment by working somewhat *within* it. He engaged in a number of *quid pro quo* sorts of exchanges of information and status with those in the traditional power structure, but chose to stay outside of it. One could claim that this is nationalist in nature; Shaft wants to pursue justice for Black people, and he knows he needs the assistance of those in power to make it happen, but he ultimately uses them for his own ends, giving them enough assistance along the way to continue securing their aid without losing any of his identity. In fact, Shaft's bold penchant for independence can be seen in particularly confrontational ways at certain points during the film,

as when Andruzzi encounters him at a hot dog stand and asks Shaft what he's got, to which Shaft replies, "I got laid" (Parks, 1971).

Furthermore, Shaft's sexuality, while an important part of the character and portrayed in multiple scenes, is not the single defining characteristic he has, and it also is not in line with the often-promulgated White depiction of Black male sexuality as inherently aggressive, dominant, immutable, and violent. In fact, Shaft is shown engaging in sex with both his girlfriend and a White woman he encounters while undercover in a bar, but in neither case is Shaft truly the Black aggressor Whites have often portrayed in film, going all the way back to *Birth of a Nation*. The White woman in the bar actively shows interest in pursuing *Shaft*, initiates their interactions through a bar employee (Parks, 1971), and when she is back at his apartment, it is she who pursues him into the shower rather than waiting for him to dry off afterward and come back to her. This is much like Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), in that the characters' sexuality (and prowess) are portrayed with straightforward clarity, but not shown to be predatory or aggressive. Neither one pursues sex with someone who is unwilling, and Sweetback's sexuality is even sympathetically shown to have developed in part from unfortunate childhood circumstances over which Sweetback had no control (and yet, which did not lead him to a life of aggressive sexual behavior). In these ways, the portrayals of both Shaft and Sweetback serve to navigate a compromise between assimilation and nationalism. While they feed into the stereotypical expectations of Black sexual prowess, they do not do so to the detriment of their characters; their sexuality is shown to be far more complex, and still only occurring in a relationship or one-time interaction that is consensual. That subjugation of expectations and racial stereotypes is not assimilationist, but more nationalist, claiming space for Black sexuality that is not defined by White portrayals or fearmongering.

Lawrence (2019) also encourages viewers to recognize that *Shaft* was subversive of audience expectations, as it contradicted the comfortable, chaste blandness of Sidney Poitier's characters while also offering a much more positive portrayal, far afield from other cinema's archetypal plantation slaves or minstrelsy. Lawrence viewed *Shaft* as pushing back against the establishment, but in a way that the White audience could handle and appreciate, thereby both making *Shaft* stand out from other Black characters and enabling the film to be a box office hit. The film also takes a nationalist tack through *Shaft*'s alignment with characters, like Buford, who are clearly styled after the Black Panthers. He finds a way outside of the main criminal justice system to help them pursue the justice they seek, by enlisting them as paid assistants in his efforts to recover Jonas's daughter, providing them with the money they require to bail many of their (ostensibly unjustly) jailed compatriots out of the correctional system (Parks, 1971). While not actively a nationalist himself, *Shaft* recognizes the importance of the work they are doing and helps them find another way to obtain the resources to do it. For this to have happened in a film that had such a wide release and was viewed by more than just a Black audience is an important element of what makes *Shaft* more nationalist than assimilationist in scope.

### *Coffy*

*Coffy* (Hill, 1973) is another film that presents a different view than what moviegoers had often been offered in the past. *Coffy*, however, is no detective, but a middle-class professional working woman—a nurse who takes it upon herself to exact revenge on behalf of her young, drug-addicted sister Lubelle. Unsatisfied with the mainstream justice system's apparent impotence in dealing with the criminals who have preyed upon Lubelle, *Coffy* chooses to use her clever creativity as well as her sexuality to make anyone connected to her sister's addiction pay, usually with their lives.

Pam Grier, in the role of Coffy, represents an empowered Black female protagonist that had largely been absent from films given a wide release. Coffy's fearlessness in pursuing justice does not stop in the face of considerable danger that would have caused many people to turn back or take a less dangerous approach. She seduces drug dealers and kingpins, eventually meting out violence to avenge her sister's victimization (Hill, 1973). It is apparent throughout the film that she could have chosen to work within the system—a young Black police officer (Carter) is clearly enamored with her and was once dating her, and she could choose to come to him with the information about the men in the drug trade, but she sees him as a man who is engaged in assimilation. When she tries to set a foundation for revealing to him why she has chosen the actions she has, Coffy also learns that Carter is a relatively straight shooter, preferring to allow the wheels of the legal system to deliver justice. He ultimately suffers for this; having refused to engage in a corrupt scheme with a fellow officer, whom he threatens with exposure for his behavior, Carter's is subsequently assaulted by his fellow officer's accomplices and ends up in a coma. This further convinces Coffy that assimilation is not an option; it confirms that she needs to clear her own path to get her righteous revenge (Hill, 1973).

Roach (2018) celebrates the outsider nature of Coffy's revenge quest and the way she leverages her sexuality in order to help achieve it, saying the film "establish[es] Grier as a sex object who can and will leverage black pussy power to get close to the individuals responsible for hurting" her sister (p. 14). She knows she cannot work within the system, but must circumvent it in order to accomplish her goal. In fact, Coffy specifically indicts the criminal justice system's failure to address the drug problem, concluding that it has a vested interest in the continued subjugation of Black people. Roach explains that Coffy's sexuality—similarly to the same sexual agency of later Grier character Foxy Brown—"animates the insurgent potential of



black pussy power to secure nominal black freedoms in the face of state-sanctioned infringements on black erotic life” (2018, p. 7). From this perspective, Coffy is more nationalistic and less assimilationist than Shaft *or* Black Panther, and her techniques pay off in the end with her desired results.

### *Sorry to Bother You*

Hip hop artist Boots Riley’s 2018 film *Sorry to Bother You* is a satirical postmodern take on the assimilation versus nationalism debate. Set in a modern-day America where economic inequality has driven an increasing number of people to sign lifetime contracts with an employer called WorryFree, a company which promises a job, housing, and meals for life (while actually providing very spartan accommodations and engaging in questionable labor practices), the film follows its protagonist Cassius (given the tongue-in-cheek nickname “Cash”) and his girlfriend Detroit’s efforts to make enough money to survive. Cash gets a job with a telemarketing firm named RegalView, where he is advised by an older Black coworker to use his “White voice” in order to rack up sales. Cash begins to experience significant success just as his coworkers (including Detroit, who has joined him) organize in order to demand better pay and benefits. Cash is forced to choose between the chance to make considerably more money as a “power caller,” which could enable him to help his uncle keep the home where Cash and Detroit are living in the garage, or to stay allied with Detroit and his other coworkers who are picketing on a daily basis to force their employer into better working conditions (Riley, 2018).

Upon choosing the promotion route, Cash learns that RegalView is actually helping to sell WorryFree contracts to companies around the globe to increase their revenue—essentially profiting off of slave labor. This presents a conundrum for Cash, but he is making such large sums of money and so enjoying finding something at which he is talented, he chooses to

continue. This costs him his relationship with Detroit, along with several friendships, but he somehow takes solace in having a nice apartment (Riley, 2018).

WorryFree CEO Steve Lift taps Cash as a rising star employee and endeavors to recruit him into a role that will pay him 100 million dollars for five years of work, but Cash discovers that WorryFree has actually started turning some of its employees into horse-human hybrids (or “equisapiens”) in order to increase productivity and further enrich the company’s coffers. This is the final straw for Cash, who realigns with Detroit and her fledgling vigilante justice campaign against WorryFree, vandalizing their signage and attempting to spread the truth about the company, joining their coworkers to fight against the evil deeds of the amoral corporations (Riley, 2018). In the end, despite having come around to fight against the oppressors after initially being a part of their system, Cash discovers Lift slipped him the substance that will turn him into an equisapien; after transforming, he leads a revolt of his fellow horse-human hybrids against Lift himself.

*Sorry to Bother You*, while clearly satirical and somewhat absurdist, demonstrates once again the conflict of assimilation and nationalism. Not only does Cash have to give up his Black voice (and in large part his Black identity), he is only encouraged (allowed?) to express his Blackness when it would be entertaining to the White people in power. When Lift hosts a lavish party, the CEO goads Cash into performing a rap for a large audience despite Cash’s insistence that he cannot rap and will only be embarrassed if he attempts it. Cash is nevertheless given a microphone and attempts to freestyle a story about himself, failing in a clunky manner. Having essentially given up, he begins chanting, “Nigga shit! Nigga shit! Nigga nigga nigga shit!” which leads the crowd to engage in an enthusiastic call and response with him, clearly loving the performance (Riley, 2018). This illustrates the lack of interest the power structure has in genuine

Black experiences and people, and how they only feel comfortable when Black people fall into their expected and prescribed boxes—when they are entertaining, or when they help others to make money (far more money, usually). In this case, Cash was useful when his White voice brought profits in, and ‘cool’ when he engaged in a reductionist racial slur-laden performance that personally served him in no way other than escaping a deeply uncomfortable situation (Riley, 2018).

On *Sorry*, Boscaljon claims that “[t]he movie clearly shows that Blacks are punished for pursuing power through Whiteness” (2020, p. 272), and makes the argument for existing outside of the power system in order to create change. In fact, he argues that even Detroit’s performance art falls in line with what White expectations of that artform are, and only when she chooses to engage in artistic actions outside those parameters (by engaging in the protest painting of WorryFree signs) do her behaviors have an impact in creating change. The idolatry of Whiteness, all the way down to performative White voices heard over the phone by soothed and spendthrift customers, serves in the end only to further the needs of the majority, perhaps while throwing enough scraps to BIPOC people to keep them in line.

### *Get Out*

Jordan Peele’s massively successful 2017 horror film *Get Out*, on its surface, also seems to focus on the debate of assimilation versus nationalism and its impact on individual relationships. While (as noted) those themes are explored in *Shaft* and *Sweetback*, Peele’s film makes the micro-level interactions between partners and family members the focus for much of its first half. We are introduced to characters Chris Washington—a Black photographer—and his White girlfriend Rose Armitage, who claims never to have had a Black boyfriend before. They are embarking on a standard “meet the parents” weekend trip as Chris will be introduced to

Rose's mother and father for the first time (Peele, 2017). His experience as a young Black man has indicated that meeting a White girlfriend's parents for the first time, perhaps especially when they are rich and successful, is potentially fraught with tension and awkward moments. Will he have to behave in a typically White way to be accepted, maybe even affecting a White voice as the characters in *Sorry to Bother You*? Will her parents be themselves or try to "act cool" and make a hamfisted effort to represent themselves as allies?

While Rose does her best to soothe Chris's concerns, their initial meeting with his parents proves to fit certain stereotypes—Mr. Armitage tries to establish his credibility and appear cool and antiracist by making references to Jesse Owens' racism-defying performance at the Olympic Games (Peele, 2017). The family employs a Black groundskeeper and maid, which seems to heighten the apprehension Chris feels about potentially becoming a part of this family. Rose appears embarrassed by their behavior and apologizes to Chris when they have a chance to be alone that evening, but as the viewers will learn, even this seemingly overly wrought attempt to appear accepting of Chris is a ruse to make him think nothing is amiss, that the Armitages are well-meaning but inexperienced with Rose bringing Black men home (Peele, 2017).

As it turns out, Chris is just another in a series of several Black boyfriends Rose has lured to her parents' estate under the guise of meeting her family. She maintains the façade throughout a supposed reunion gathering at their home that is actually an opportunity for everyone to meet Chris and assess whether to bid on the right to inhabit his body. Through a complex process involving hypnosis and a brain transplant, developed by Rose's grandfather Roman Armitage (founder of the Order of the Coagula), Rose has been assisting in identifying and entrapping victims to be purchased to extend wealthy cult members' lives (Peele, 2017).

While Chris does not fully recognize what is happening, he becomes deeply uncomfortable and asks Rose to leave with him. She agrees, but when it comes time to depart, she cannot find the car keys, and then joins her family in blocking his exit until her mother can employ a hypnotic ‘trigger’ she implanted the prior evening, knocking him out (Peele, 2017). Chris awakens in the basement, bound to a chair, shown a video explaining what is about to happen to him. He is to be next in a sequence of victims whose bodies have been occupied, just as Rose’s grandparents’ brains are now residing in the bodies of the individuals Chris came to know as the maid and groundskeeper (Peele, 2017).

Chris escapes the basement, killing Rose’s parents, brother, and grandparents with the help of a friend, Rod, whom he had alerted to his misgivings. Rod suspected something was amiss, but couldn’t get authorities to listen to his insistent claims that Chris was in danger, so he drove to the grounds himself and arrived after Chris barely escaped the murderous Armitages (though he couldn’t bring himself to kill Rose when he had the opportunity). Rod and Chris drive off, with the final consequences of the entire situation unknown (Peele, 2017).

The Armitages’ behavior is fitting, according to nationalist advocates. They are particularly powerful to cast as villains given their apparent liberalism and welcoming nature. They may not carry any of the calling cards of stereotypical racists, and yet they are every bit as dangerous to Black people as proud Ku Klux Klan members, and perhaps more so because they are not as easily identifiable as threats. They praise and admire Black people for their bodies, and seek to steal them, an unmistakable 21<sup>st</sup>-century parallel to American slavery. What they present as a genuine openness to having Chris join the family (and countless other Black men and women before him) is really just an interest in having Chris around because he is useful to their ends. This aligns with nationalist thinking on a familial level; while powerful White people may

seem to be open-minded to having Black people join their families or inner circles, it quickly becomes apparent that they intend to use them for their own means, and when they cease to be useful for fulfilling White wishes, they no longer have any value at all. Even supposedly progressive White people, therefore, cannot be trusted or aligned with, since they came of age in a structurally racist system and cannot avoid having their perceptions poisoned by it.

White people are all too happy to take advantage of Black bodies in reality, nationalists might point out. Perhaps it is not as gruesome as the methods of the Armitages in *Get Out*, but owners of major sports franchises and networks that broadcast their games typically are white, and they are quite willing to support professional athletes (who are disproportionately Black when compared with the United States population at large) as long as those athletes are using their bodies and not their mouths, hearts, or minds. The example of former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick is perhaps the most well-known, but there are plenty of others as well. For example, when basketball superstar LeBron James speaks up about cultural issues—something which he has done on a frequent basis—and his stance is not in alignment with those who own media outlets and sports teams, he is told to “shut up and dribble” and derided for daring to speak his mind when he is paid hundreds of millions of dollars to “bounce a ball” (Sullivan, 2018). As soon as Chris seems unsure of the Armitages, he is subdued by physical and psychological force. Rose toys with his emotions one final time to get him not to kill her, and instead of returning the favor to spare him, she is quick to call for police assistance when she hears a siren approaching. Thankfully, the siren turns out to be Rod. Rose’s final acts emphasize once again that White allyship often only extends as far as it’s useful to the White person, but not when it challenges them to risk anything.

## Conclusion

While the debate over assimilation and nationalism is certainly not settled by theorists or by these films, the characters of Shaft, Coffy, Cash, and Black Panther all show that there is a lot of grey area between the two camps, while Chris in *Get Out* serves to exemplify why assimilation is always a risky choice. Derrick Bell has said that “minorities of color should not try to fit into a flawed economic and political system, but transform it...high income...is not worth pursuing if the system itself remains unworthy and unjust,” as in *Sorry to Bother You* (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 70). Another intermediate position claims that BIPOC people can pursue positions in prestigious professions as long as they do so to help BIPOC people to rise up themselves, which could be taken as both the lesson of *Black Panther* and *Shaft*. The final intermediate position described by Delgado and Stefancic holds that a strong economy benefits everyone—but it is clear those benefits do not apply equally across racial groups.

*Coffy* and *Sorry to Bother You* embrace a nationalist (non-assimilationist) perspective for change, while *Shaft* and *Black Panther* seem to find some value in both approaches. *Get Out* offers little hope, but can perhaps explain why some may find it hard to accept White allyship, given the risks. What seems clear is that assimilation has limited benefits and only works in more ideal circumstances than may exist in reality. While the power structure can be useful to an outsider like John Shaft, it cannot ultimately be depended upon to look out for anyone but itself. While White society promotes certain acceptable channels for pursuing change, these portrayals of successful Black people working around the system serve as examples of different paths to success.

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Vanishing Point

A short story by

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Adrian Edenloff wasn't unhappy; he had no discernible reason to be. He had an honorable (if not prestigious) job and a loving, committed partner. He was well-liked by his peers, respected by his colleagues and students, and popular among his friends.

Adrian wasn't in trouble; he wasn't living a double life, and had not been having a secret affair. He had never been on the dark web—wouldn't know how to get there if he wanted to. He didn't have an alias, never owned a fake ID, had never shoplifted. He didn't even own a set of lawn darts, because he knew they were illegal—even though he had seen a circa-1970s box of them at Goodwill six months ago and wanted them. Adrian knew he would probably never see a set for sale again. He didn't buy them, though, and he'd spent an inordinate amount of time in the last 26 weeks regretting that inaction.

Adrian didn't want to die, at least not by his own hand. He occasionally took strange and unnecessary risks, but they probably only seemed like risks to someone who was accustomed to a comfortable and secure life.

Adrian wanted to *disappear*.

He convinced himself at times that this was his fate, instead of an odd yearning that had developed for reasons he didn't want to unpack. He felt like it was unnecessary to discuss it with anyone if it was simply his destiny; people might try to pinpoint *why* he felt this way if they knew the wish had developed when he was a teenager. They'd think he was broken, and Adrian knew otherwise.

No one wants to disappear when they're a toddler; it's delusional to act like it could be a natural desire. His father Kevin's ever-lengthening absence, his mother Christina's tranquilizer-addled fog, and his stepfather's distaste for him made him feel invisible at times, but it wasn't enough. People like Adrian want to disappear because they're tired of being seen, and he had felt

that way since age fourteen—no one’s favorite—when he started to feel the pressure that well-meaning adults put on gifted young people. *The sky is the limit, you could be anything you want, what do you want to be anyway? Surely a doctor or lawyer! Just think of all the scholarships that will come your way with those amazing test scores you’ll achieve.* Sometimes, he thought they were living vicariously, wanting him to excel so they could feel like they had a hand in someone else’s great success story. They had all but given up on making much of an impact beyond their classrooms, and that was not sad in itself, but he felt pity for them because he knew *they* felt it was sad.

The pressure of others’ expectations—that was the initial catalyst. It was the first time Adrian remembered wishing that he couldn’t be seen. He worried about being the cause of others’ happiness, despair, pride, or pity. While his peers dreamed of making their mark, Adrian sought inconsequentiality.

As he soon learned, though, even seemingly nondescript people are mourned. An eighth-grade classmate, Robert, died in a freak accident in phys ed a few months before graduation when the new kid in school, Zeke, tossed a medicine ball at the back of his head. Adrian was watching as the heavy sphere knocked Robert to the ground face-first, causing a blood vessel in his frontal lobe to burst. Years later, he could still clearly envision Robert seizing on the cheap, abstract mosaic of the gymnasium’s mismatched linoleum floor.

Robert was thoroughly average. He certainly was not athletic enough to be on any sports teams, nor smart enough for the honor roll. He did not do volunteer work and was not a remarkable dancer; he did not have a girlfriend or a boyfriend. Yet the school day as Adrian knew it was abandoned. Girls were crying in huddled groups in the hallway, and some teachers looked ashen. A group of boys gathered in the bathroom and debated whether Zeke was trying to

hurt him, and whether he might get suspended or even expelled. They also talked about Robert, of course, even though there wasn't much to say. Jack thought he had a sister in sixth grade. Jorge said Robert came to the first day of volleyball tryouts last year, but left after thirty minutes, saying he had an upset stomach. Despite these unremarkable facts of Robert's life, the predictable afternoon schedule came to a halt. No classes were held for the last three hours, and social workers moved from classroom to classroom, putting their crisis management skills to the test.

Age 14 was probably the wrong time to disappear. Vanishing may not be the same sort of loss, but when a child is suddenly gone—by death or disappearance—tears are shed, lives are altered, and scars form. Adrian made up his mind after Robert's death: he would wait until after age 35. Even young adults are seen as tragedies when they go missing. After 35, you're not young, he decided. No one is impressed by a 37-year-old doing *anything*, especially not the way they are when a 14-year-old understands calculus.

He was disappointed to come to this conclusion; Adrian quickly calculated that he was only forty percent of the way to the minimum potential age for his disappearance. Waiting twenty-one more years was nearly unfathomable. To appease his own displeasure with this delay, Adrian resolved to learn as much as he could about the art of vanishing, while living his life like someone who never thought about such things. After all, he deduced, a successful disappearance was probably hindered by people watching you, waiting for it to happen.

Adrian only truly began planning in earnest after he started college, and those plans remained in flux as life events caused continual recalibration and reevaluation. He studied stories of disappearances in the same way he read up on war history, advanced math, or astronomy. He considered true stories of missing people to be as important and instructive as his academic

pursuits, but openly shared his interest with no one. He read plenty of his favorites in the library, but never checked them out; at home, he was always sure to clear his browsing history.

One person fascinated him most of all. The North Pond Hermit, Christopher Thomas Knight, walked off into the Maine wilderness with very few possessions, and remained there for 27 years, surviving off the spoils of hundreds of burglaries over his time as a forest-dwelling recluse: tents, sleeping bags, propane tanks, a camp stove for food preparation and winter warmth (importantly, without smoke), food, shoes, batteries, a radio, books, cookware. Cabins, homes, and campgrounds in the vicinity were his theft targets, which eventually turned out to be his downfall—there were only so many in the forest, and even as he spaced out his acquisitions, he was eventually caught by a motion detector that alerted local authorities to his presence. He surrendered without incident and served seven months in jail.

The Hermit's story inspired 20-year-old Adrian to start compiling a list of rules he'd need to follow when it came time to disappear. He created a password-protected file on his computer and typed:

*Rule 1: If you break the law, you'll eventually get caught. Make sure you are in a position to remain disappeared without committing any crimes.*

Adrian knew he probably didn't have a career criminal streak in him. He definitely wasn't willing to steal unless his life was at risk. Ethical disappearance was a challenge, but Adrian felt it was a worthwhile goal. He didn't plan on being found like Knight, but should it happen, he wanted the authorities to have no reason to take him in.

There was something particularly impressive about the North Pond Hermit's story: amazingly, he had never been reported missing. His parents were not alarmed by his sudden absence from their lives and just figured he had chosen to cease contact with them. He had no

significant other, no friends close enough to be concerned when he was incommunicado. No one had ever gone looking for him.

*Rule 2: Keep people at a distance. If it's normal for you to isolate yourself, no one will notice you're gone until it's much more difficult to find you.*

Adrian figured this was a cinch. He wasn't sure he liked people all that much, anyway, or that they liked him. He decided to major in education so he would have three months a year to isolate without anyone noticing. It would be good practice.



Emily introduced herself to Adrian when he was student teaching his senior year at Northwestern; they'd been in a few classes together, but Adrian didn't seek out friendships, so it fell to her. She didn't think he was selling himself short by becoming an English teacher, like most of his family had said—some to his face, and some when they thought he couldn't hear. Emily had also been a highly regarded student, but was no more interested than Adrian was in pursuing medicine or law. He sensed she was the first person in a long time who did not deign to aspire on his behalf.

Emily made Adrian feel worthwhile, and that confused him. Most of the time, he enjoyed mattering to her—it was a novel experience—but the yearning to disappear didn't dissipate entirely. Adrian considered that the desire might be misplaced, or something he was growing out of.

Everyone over age 10 knows that a magician's disappearing act is merely an illusion, or as Adrian learned in a vocabulary workbook when he was 11, *prestidigitation*. There was a time in his early relationship with Emily when Adrian contemplated whether he could be happy as a part-time performer on the side—if the simulacrum of disappearance would sate him enough to

allow him to live a more conventional life otherwise. He attended a single magic show to see if he would find inspiration, but it only solidified his original wish. Though Emily clearly cared for him, he strove to keep others at a distance, to minimize any further complications.

After graduation, they each found teaching jobs at the same small high school in Harvard, Illinois, a town whose biggest event was an annual festival called Milk Days, and moved together into a two-room apartment above a storefront. They thought it was cosmically funny that they ended up there—“the wrong Harvard,” they called it—and joked identically with their parents that they should have been more specific about their dreams of seeing their children on the Harvard campus.

Inevitably, after Adrian consistently proved himself over several years to be the decent and kind person Emily had always seen, she mentioned marriage. She even thought she might want to have children with him, but Adrian knew that wouldn't do. He never told Emily *why*, exactly, but had a variety of plausible explanations that came to mind—climate change, the cost of a family on teachers' salaries, his feeling that he would be a bad father—some of which Emily couldn't argue with. On one point she did disagree: she said he *would* be a good father, no matter the role models he'd had. Still, through teary and difficult conversations, she eventually relented. It was the first time he would break her heart, but Emily wanted to marry Adrian even if he didn't want children.

He loved her, and even though marriage had the potential to derail him, Adrian knew he was not going to disappear for at least another 6 or 7 years. He thought that was long enough to have some happy times with Emily before enacting his plan. Another, quieter voice in the background said that maybe marrying Emily would make him feel like he didn't need to disappear after all, which made him simultaneously optimistic and irritated. He'd had the same



wish for the last dozen years or more, but had never told her. That was the only way that Emily was like everyone else in his life. He debated whether she would try to change his mind, should she ever learn of his plan. Would he be weak enough to let that happen?

He thought not, so they planned a summer ceremony. Well, Emily did. Adrian participated and provided input, but didn't drive any of the decisions. Some people would have observed their interactions and concluded Adrian was being dragged into marriage, but he had just never imagined it. Emily included him in the process because she understood, and she loved him enough that the details were less important than the time they spent together.

After the wedding, Adrian had to admit he was happy, happier than he'd expected. Their life didn't change much, despite his parents and cousins telling him marriage changed *everything*. Emily was the same person she'd always been. He felt like he was too, except that he thought less about the future.

Adrian felt properly visible.



Five years into their marriage, in their new home, both Adrian and Emily settled into comfortable patterns, but when he felt his waistbands slowly getting tighter, he decided to start taking better care of himself. He didn't want people thinking he was depressed or letting himself go—that would bring unwanted attention—so he decided to take up running.

To his surprise, Adrian found he was the kind of person who *enjoyed* running, especially the solitude it offered. After taking some weeks to get in proper running shape, he ran every day—at least three miles a day, without fail. What started as a quest for personal improvement became something he anticipated and couldn't live without, and soon he had run over two thousand miles in sixteen months. Even on days he felt under the weather, or when there was

sleet or a true Midwestern blizzard, he would slip into his tech shirt, pants, fleece, moisture-wicking socks and hat, and force himself through a subpar run—just to silence his own critical voice, which sometimes seemed like his stepfather’s, except that it gave a damn.

Sometimes, Adrian would wait until 10pm or later to run, venturing out of his house in the dark with a flashing wristband and another blinking safety light clipped to the side of his hat. Their middle-class subdivision was surrounded by forest preserves and farms, with several lots still vacant after the housing market’s bubble had burst. Outside the entrance to the subdivision was a rural thoroughfare, with a few branch streets intended to be part of the second phase, the expansion of the neighborhood, now leading nowhere. Weathered, faded signs were evenly spaced up and down each avenue, soliciting the purchase of tangled plants and rocky piles of mud. Half the widening cracks in the asphalt had been claimed by waist-high weeds. Despite the needless risk of it, Adrian would venture outside his subdivision to run along that darkened main road. It had no sidewalk, and such a steep shoulder of loose gravel that he had no choice but to follow the white painted line at the asphalt’s edge. He could have run on the sidewalks all throughout the handful of well-lit blocks surrounding their home, even if it would take multiple loops to make his daily distance. But Adrian felt drawn to the dark.

Some nights he turned onto the empty side streets; on others he ran right along that winding black road, between cornfields and forested groves, until he reached about half the distance he wanted to run that night, when he turned around to head home. Animals rustled through the underbrush and the crops, and sometimes even darted across the street, shadowy streaks swallowed by the night. He wondered if any were dangerous, and he sort of wanted them to be.

Though Adrian always wore the safety lights, he also knew nighttime drivers sometimes nodded off or lost focus. Still, Adrian thought, if he died while he was running, that probably wouldn't be the worst thing. It would be over fast if he got hit by a car, and then he wouldn't have to deal with any bullshit expectations or conversations with extended family that included some variation of "Oh, you decided to become a teacher after all? Did you have to go to Northwestern for that? Those loans...on a teacher's salary?"

But he never got hit by a car, or stalked by a coyote. Never twisted an ankle on a pothole, rolled down the shoulder, and died of exposure. The closest he got was one night when a truck veered *toward* him instead of giving him a wide berth like most did. Adrian waved his arms, yelled fruitlessly, and edged onto the crumbly shoulder as his pupils dilated and the high beams nearly blinded him. The vehicle's side mirror almost brushed his arm as it passed, and for an instant Adrian could see the driver's face illuminated by his phone screen, his eyes pointing toward his lap. The front right wheel hit the gravel shoulder a moment later and the vehicle jerked back onto the road, steadied its path after a bit of tire screeching, and continued off into the night. The guy had never seen him.

The ensuing flood of relief reminded Adrian that he didn't want to die.

He wanted to disappear. He had stopped working toward that goal; he couldn't even remember if he'd ever come up with more than two rules. But as he turned around to head back home, three miles out, his heart pounded with the adrenaline of the near-death experience and his thoughts buzzed. It was a reawakening. Here he was, 34 now, just a year away from the youngest proper age to enact his plan. He hadn't deliberately sought out a story of someone's disappearance in the last...twelve months? Eighteen? He sometimes read those stories on his phone or tablet at night, next to his sleeping wife, but since he started running, he'd felt more

alive, even more attractive, and sex had usurped his attention from browsing news articles and Wiki-hopping. He tsk-tsked himself for allowing it to distract him from his larger goal for so long. As his legs churned and the distance between Adrian and his home shortened, he started to remember what appealed to him about each case. In his cooldown just before he got home, he set a vague reminder on his phone for the next day: *Work on List*.

When he walked into the house, he could hear Emily was awake, laughing quietly in the living room. After slipping out of his running shoes while standing up, still sweaty, Adrian quickly walked over and leaned down to kiss the top of her head as she lounged in her pajamas. He didn't normally do that after getting home, but he felt happier to see her than usual. Emily was watching a video on her tablet, wearing her reading glasses, and looked up at him after the kiss, smiling and wrinkling her nose. "Love you, too, but please go take a shower," she said. Adrian nodded and headed for the second floor.

He stopped halfway up the stairs, wondering if he should tell her about the truck. He decided it could wait, but while washing his hair, instead chose not to tell her at all. She would worry, and she might ask him to turn on the feature on his phone that would let her check his location at any time. He'd have to come up with a reason not to—and he really didn't want to lie to Emily.



Adrian's phone was set to remind him the next afternoon to return to his documented plan. Emily normally drove, but she was in the middle of texting a friend after work, so Adrian was in the driver's seat with his cell on the center console. He'd forgotten about the alert he set, and when his phone lit up, it reminded him, *Work on List*. He tried to flip it over nonchalantly—an easy task for some, but not Adrian—and was thankful Emily seemed to be engrossed in her

digital conversation. When they arrived home, he searched for the document on his laptop, unable to immediately remember the file name or location at first. He chastised himself for his poor memory as he thought about the rule he'd decided to add today.

Adrian had a connection to another disappearance, through a friend, and it both served as a fascinating example *and* made him feel guilty sometimes for wanting to disappear himself. One of his college friends, Brock, had a sister who'd gone missing. It had been a significant news story when it happened, and Adrian's befriending of Brock happened later—in fact, it was only after they'd been friends for a year or so that Adrian even realized that Brock's sister was the girl he'd seen on TV a few years before: Caroline.

One morning after she had worked a closing shift at a local coffeeshop, Caroline left her cell phone at home and started driving. She told no one of her plan, and appeared to have made no stop other than filling her tank up first and grabbing a few snacks, based on the local convenience store's security footage. She was 19, too old to be listed as a runaway, so the police did not initially take it very seriously when her mother called, frantic that she had not come home from work and wasn't answering her calls. Hoping to mollify Caroline and Brock's mother, they talked to Caroline's boss and learned she had simply left a note for him saying she had to quit her job, that she was sorry, and that her final check should be mailed to her parents' address. No one else knew she'd quit—or where she had been all day.

Caroline's car was found the next evening abandoned just south of Fort Knox, between the Waffle House and Lee's Country Chicken in Radcliff, Kentucky, with the keys dangling from the ignition. It didn't seem like she'd gone into either restaurant; a waitress recalled seeing a young woman with a big backpack trying to hitchhike out near the road earlier that afternoon, but couldn't be sure she matched Caroline's description. Some of her belongings were later

found at the Golden Rule Pawn Shop in Elizabethtown, a dozen miles south, including a sapphire-and-diamond ring that had belonged to her great-grandmother. The pawn shop employee admitted he'd been high when she came in, saying, "I can't be sure it was her who hocked this stuff," but nodded in recognition of the possibility when a deputy showed him Caroline's picture.

That was the last trace of a lead. Caroline was never found. Adrian spoke of her in the past tense like that, as most people did, but Brock's verbs belied his lingering hope that his sister would one day return, or at least reach out in some way to confirm she was alive and content. Luckily for Adrian, Brock almost never talked to him about her. He wondered at times whether that was because Brock knew Adrian didn't believe she was still alive, or because Brock would have to admit that he really didn't, either. Nonetheless, Caroline inspired an addition to the plan.

*Rule 3: Give yourself plenty of time before they start to look for you. Talk to as few people as possible while you're traveling.*

Adrian had been stashing emergency cash in various places since he was young, at the recommendation of his grandfather, and it would come in handy for reasons the old man likely hadn't anticipated. Adrian couldn't use a credit or debit card as he moved, or he'd be easily tracked. Cash was key.

Still, he couldn't just start driving south one day like Caroline did. Adrian thought perhaps it would be better to plan some sort of summer excursion Emily wouldn't be interested in, like a half-marathon in another state, but actually go somewhere else entirely. He'd have plenty of time to get there before she realized he was late returning home. Of course, he'd be expected to take his cell phone, to let her know he had arrived safely, and he'd leave all sorts of digital footprints that would make it easier to narrow the search. The more obvious step that

needed to be taken to simplify the whole process continued to escape Adrian—either that, or he actively avoided thinking about it.



As his 35<sup>th</sup> birthday drew nearer, Adrian accepted he had irrevocably broken Rule 2, with immense consequences. By allowing Emily into his life, he'd screwed up the one thing the North Pond Hermit did perfectly—there was someone in Adrian's life who would suffer if he went missing. Adrian had more or less stopped speaking with his mother the prior year as her tranquilizer addiction made it increasingly difficult to communicate coherently anyway. His father hadn't shown his face or sent so much as an email since Adrian turned 21, and his stepfather was happy not to have to pretend to care about him, though a few relatives remained in contact by text or on Facebook. Emily still loved him after 13 years, and he hadn't anticipated that.

And although he and Emily didn't have an especially vibrant social life, Adrian knew there were friends and students who liked him. He had performed well enough at work that he'd been nominated for Harvard's Teacher of the Year award twice, but there was an application for nominees to complete, and he made sure to find reasons not to submit it. There were other deserving nominees, he said; truthfully, the last thing Adrian wanted was his name on a plaque in the school lobby for the next 20 years.

One thing he'd gotten right: there were no children for him to disappoint the way Kevin had. Marrying Emily, though, was still a huge tactical error. At the time, Adrian saw it as harmless enough, figuring the relationship would go well for a while but eventually she'd tire of him and they'd agree to an amicable split. Having seen his own parents' behavior, he hadn't anticipated Emily's steadfastness. A complete overhaul of the plan was necessary.

How to end it—that was an ongoing source of anxiety for him. Should he turn into the kind of asshole she'd be happy to divorce? Sleep with someone else? Grow more and more distant until they had an empty-shell marriage and separation or divorce was a formality? Whatever it was had to appear to be in character for him. In her unusually insightful, bold way, instead of demanding he move out, Emily might see right through him having a one-night stand and call him out for exactly why he did it.

Adrian needed to enact the new plan as soon as possible. Though it would certainly take the longest, it was clear that becoming progressively more emotionally distant was the way to go. He was already reticent, so it would be a smooth transition. In some ways, it would be more painful—heartbreak by a thousand unkindnesses—but Adrian felt it would be believable. It was how people like him slowly fucked up their relationships, only to say later they didn't realize how bad things were until it was too late.

Adrian wrote out the steps in a secret note on his cell phone:

*Step 1: Spend more time alone.*

*Step 2: Say insensitive things.*

*Step 3: Stop having sex.*

*Step 4: Resign my teaching position, effective at the end of the school year.*

*Step 5: Present Emily with divorce papers.*

With his 35<sup>th</sup> birthday just two months away, Adrian knew he needed to get started; otherwise, he might lose his nerve. Emily had already succeeded in getting him to forget about his plans for so long, and it would not be hard for her to do so again. She was already talking about vacation plans for the summer, and Adrian wanted court proceedings to be fully in swing by that time.



*Step 1: Spend more time alone.*

Adrian made sure to take his daily runs as often as possible in the evenings, even at mealtimes, reducing his time to interact with Emily. He rarely went to bed at the same time she did, saying he had to stay up late to grade papers, or he just needed some more time to unwind. At first, Adrian occasionally looked at porn, because he'd read somewhere that men who used pornography frequently started to become more dissatisfied with their partners' bodies. Instead of making him long for someone more beautiful, though, Adrian found it made him appreciate how Emily refused to conform to certain arbitrary beauty standards. The women in the videos looked plastic, even if their preternatural bodies aroused him, and they seemingly never giggled, made nerdy jokes, or ran their hands through anyone's hair.

*Step 2: Say insensitive things.*

It wasn't easy to be deliberately mean to someone who really had never done anything wrong to him. Emily had thick skin and tended to see Adrian's words in the best possible light. He found that subtly insensitive comments didn't make much of a dent, and the thought of being more directly hurtful was intimidating. If he wanted her to believe he wasn't up to anything, he knew he couldn't just effect a big behavior change. She had to slowly come to believe she was seeing the real Adrian for the first time.

He got an opportunity when Emily asked him about something he'd forgotten—the reminder he set on his phone, which he thought she'd missed as she was engrossed in writing a text. “Adrian,” Emily began as they lay in bed at 9:00am one lazy Saturday in February, “I've been meaning to ask you something. A couple of weeks ago, we were driving home, and something popped up on your phone that said, Work on List. And ‘List’ was capitalized, like it was a title. What was that about?”

Adrian felt his heart thumping, but managed to blunt his facial response. He had to think fast, and he wasn't sure he could avoid lying to Emily now. "Work on List?" he asked, buying time. "Oh...I think that was about this thing I've been writing on my laptop on and off."

"A list?" Emily asked, confused. "Of what?"

Adrian considered his response carefully. "I don't know what to call it yet, but I'd rather not talk about it, if that's okay."

After a pause, without looking away, Emily responded, "I don't think it is."

"Well...I'm sorry, but it's private."

Emily blinked a few times, perplexed, but kept looking at Adrian for about 15 seconds, then rolled onto her back and sighed. "You know, Adrian, I want to trust you. I do. I've seen you typing intently now and then, and I wonder what you're up to. Maybe writing a story or something. I'd like to ask about it. But you do make it hard to get close to you sometimes."

After working up the nerve, using a tone that was a bit too matter-of-fact, he offered, "Well, sometimes I want to be by myself." He resisted the immediate urge to say more, to soften the statement, to apologize, as Emily turned her head, then got out of bed and walked away.

"OK. Wish granted, then," she said with a quiver, closing the bathroom door behind her.

*Step 3: Stop having sex.*

Emily and Adrian initiated sex pretty equally, usually two or three times a week in total—more often during summer break. Adrian resolved to stop initiating, and to find reasons to turn Emily down about half the time at first. Their frequency fell to once per week, then less often, and it was easier than Adrian expected since he was already not going to bed with Emily consistently. Sometimes, she would try to start something once he came to bed, even if she had to wake up from a dead sleep—so Adrian started sleeping on the couch a couple of times a week.

He'd leave his laptop open nearby along with a few student papers, so she would think he fell asleep working. One morning, Emily finally asked, "Adrian, do you think you could come to bed with me tonight? I know you're swamped lately, but I'm feeling lonely, to be honest, and I want to be with you tonight." He always found her directness about her needs alien, but admirable.

*It's working*, Adrian thought. "Sure, babe, I can do that."

Emily sighed with relief, encircled him from behind as he sat eating breakfast, and kissed him on the cheek. "Good. Can't wait."

But that night, when Emily cheerfully announced she was ready for bed, Adrian said he just needed to wrap up a couple of things first. Without looking up from his computer screen, he could feel Emily's disappointment. "Oh. Be up soon, then? Fifteen minutes or so?" She was mustering some hope.

"Yeah, as soon as I can, Em," Adrian offered with a half-smile, glancing up for just a moment. Emily softly responded, "OK," walked over, and leaned in as if to kiss him, but stopped herself, squeezing his arm instead before making her way to the bedroom. Adrian found himself on the edge of tears, but reminded himself this was necessary. He'd never be able to disappear if he couldn't get her to stop caring about him first.

Emily's own tears came as she lay in bed, alone, 90 minutes later.



*Step 4: Resign my teaching position, effective at the end of the school year.*

This was a bit trickier, since there was no way to hide it from Emily. Even if he didn't tell her, she'd hear about it. There would be an email about an open teaching position for the following fall, and she would put two and two together and be understandably upset that he didn't talk to her first. Adrian realized that he probably had to coordinate steps 4 and 5 in quick

sequence. His 35<sup>th</sup> birthday was now just a week away, the following Friday, and he had been waiting nearly 21 years already. If he resigned from his job on his birthday and had the divorce papers ready to present that evening, Adrian knew that might just make Emily upset enough to split up.

After she went to bed quietly on the eve of his birthday with a simple “Good night,” not even asking him to join her, Adrian typed up his letter of resignation, printed it out, signed it, sealed it in a plain envelope, and slipped it into his briefcase.

*Step 5: Present Emily with divorce papers.*

He also gave one last look over the divorce decree he had created from a couple of online templates, leaving some blanks to fill in based on the details of their financial settlement. Adrian hoped Emily would be relieved for it all to be over, glad he had taken the step of creating the paperwork to save them legal fees, and anticipated that she would cry through the process of signing the papers, but not because it was the wrong thing to do. He clicked the print button on his word processor, waited by the printer until the lengthy document had materialized, slipped the stack of pages into a manila envelope, and stashed it with the letter before again falling asleep on the couch.

In the morning, they drove to work together as usual, Emily behind the wheel, but in place of their typical conversation, she turned on the radio. Adrian sensed everything coming together—she couldn’t even talk to him, he thought—and he wasn’t even listening to the goofy morning show hosts coming over the speakers until he heard them say, “Birthday rollllll calllll! Who do we got today?” For a moment, Adrian considered that Emily may have turned the radio on to hear a happy birthday wish she had requested from the station, but the list of names and

ages passed, with all its zany fanfare, without his name being read. They pulled into their usual parking space and Emily turned the car off, but neither one of them moved to open their door.

Finally, Emily looked over at him, reaching out to touch his knee. “Happy birthday, Adrian,” she said quietly, before leaning over and kissing him on the cheek—more physical affection than they usually showed each other once they were on campus. She efficiently gathered her things from the backseat, left the vehicle, and was halfway to the entrance before he was out of the car.

The day largely passed uneventfully, with a few students playing harmless April Fool’s jokes on teachers and each other. When Emily came to Adrian’s room immediately after the final bell to see if he was ready to leave, he was already packed up, with the envelope in his hand. Her spirits seemed a bit elevated compared to the morning, and Adrian found it slightly disorienting compared to the slowly increasing melancholy of the last week.

“What’s that?” she asked, glancing at the letter and raising her eyebrows.

Adrian stumbled a bit. “Oh. Uh, just a letter of recommendation. I’m gonna drop it off at the office as we leave.” He hadn’t planned to lie to her about the letter, hadn’t prepared for the moment at *all*. He regretted it almost instantly, having tried to move through this whole process as ethically as possible, but Adrian couldn’t take it back. He slipped the letter into the principal’s mailbox as they bid the office staff a good weekend, and he accepted one last round of birthday wishes.

As they drove home, Emily sang along quietly to the radio. There was no awkward silence, and Adrian again felt like he’d lost his bearings. Her mood was unexpected—Emily didn’t try to hide behind fake cheer when she was truly out of sorts, and he couldn’t understand what had changed since this morning. Within a block of home, she was smiling for reasons he

still couldn't discern. As they rounded the corner and approached the house, Adrian could see a collection of large letters stuck into their front lawn, reading "Happy 35<sup>th</sup> Adrian!" from one of those businesses that place celebratory signs so the whole neighborhood knows the family includes a high school graduate or a new baby. "Surprise!" Emily said, parking a bit askew in the driveway. He was slackjawed—she'd never done anything like this for a birthday of his before, and this year seemed less likely than most for such a display.

"Come inside and open your *present*," Emily teased in a singsong voice, releasing his hand and walking quickly into the house. Adrian sat in the passenger seat a bit, staring at the pastel lawn display, before walking inside and setting his briefcase on the kitchen floor. Emily brought over a package resembling a Mondrian painting, wrapped piecemeal with multicolored printer paper and plenty of black electrical tape. "We didn't have any gift wrap...or Scotch tape," she laughed, placing the box on the dining table.

"I know things have been hard lately, and you've been working a lot," Emily started, nervously. "But I think we're just both getting stressed and trying to fix it ourselves instead of leaning on each other. I think we can do better." She paused and sat down, taking Adrian's hand. "So let's try to forget the last few weeks and have some fun tonight. If we need to talk about anything else, it can wait until tomorrow." Emily sounded wishful, not dismissive, and Adrian started to doubt his timing for everything. Several thoughts came to him in a cascade: *Emily still loves me. I was foolish to think I could push her away this quickly. I should have held off on the resignation letter. The divorce papers will have to wait too.*

Emily tugged at Adrian's arm, her eyes both on the edge of tears—what kind Adrian wasn't sure—and flashing with excitement. "Come on. Sit. Open it."

Adrian scrambled mentally as he joined her. How could he have gotten so focused on doing everything on this one day? Just because when he was 14, he thought this age somehow represented the moment he would mean less to anyone than he ever had? How stupid he'd been. The older he got, the more he meant to people, Emily in particular—and the harder it got to disappear.

He was on autopilot as he opened his gift, with Emily watching intently, but he snapped out of it once the torn paper revealed a box with a picture of a green lawn, legs adorned in tube socks and tennis shoes, and a white plastic hoop on the grass. He paused for a moment, staring at Emily, stunned. “Are these...”

“Lawn darts,” she finished his sentence. “They’re lawn darts.”

Adrian slowly removed the rest of the paper until the vintage, water-damaged box was fully unwrapped, then turned to Emily again. “But I didn’t say...how did you...?”

“I saw you look over at that display case at Goodwill a few times, but I had to guess what caught your eye. Was I right? Is this what you wanted?” She leaned in, looking around conspiratorially even though they were alone. “They’re, uh, illegal, you know.”

“Yeah,” Adrian said, turning the gift over in his hands. “That’s why I didn’t get them.”

“I went back the next day before they could figure out they shouldn’t be selling them.”

Adrian should have felt even more disoriented by the surprise, but this was exactly how observant Emily was, and even though he'd been working to push her away, he hadn't succeeded. In her eyes, they were just having a rough patch, and her commitment to him apparently hadn't wavered an iota. He'd never imagined that possibility. “You’ve been hiding them for six months. That must have driven you crazy.”

“I figured if that was what you were looking at, it made sense you wouldn’t get them. So I took care of it,” Emily beamed, pressing her lips to Adrian’s cheek once again, then turning his face to hers so she could softly kiss his lips instead. “Sometimes you’re challenging. More so lately. But usually, Adrian, you’re too good for your own good.”

Adrian knew that wasn’t true, though.

Bestowed a thoughtful and forbidden gift from his steadfast wife, he was flummoxed, unmoored. Tears gathered in the corners of Adrian’s eyes, and he could feel the heat in his cheeks. Emily’s expression changed from excitement to concern and she leaned in to hug Adrian as he quietly broke into slow sobbing. “Babe, what is it?”

Adrian gripped Emily more tightly than he had in months as he waited until he was composed enough to speak.