& ADAPTATION INNOVATION

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CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review, based in Toruń, is a yearly interdisciplinary journal addressed to young researchers in the field of English studies. It was founded in 2013 by the Academic Association for Doctoral Students of English Philology, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and its first issue was released in 2015. The journal is dedicated to all aspects of English studies, including linguistics, literary and cultural studies, translation, book editing and ESL teaching. It seeks to explore interconnections and differences between various sub-disciplines and approaches within English philology, providing a platform for debate to young scholars. *Currents* invites contributions from students of English departments in Poland and abroad, pursuing BA, MA and PhD degree programmes. The major part of each issue consists of academic articles related to the key themes described in call for papers published in the latest issue or on the journal website. A separate section is devoted to book reviews, conference reports and students' creative projects. The journal applies a double-blind review procedure; each article is reviewed by one or two academic referees. All submissions and queries should be sent to the journal address: currents.journal.umk@gmail.com.

Editors-in-chief
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Joanna Porębska, Edyta Lorek-Jezińska & Nelly Strehlau
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ADAPTATION AND INNOVATION:
AN INTRODUCTION

Keywords: adaptation, innovation, genre, intertextuality, posthumanism

> "'Adapt or perish, now as ever, is nature's inexorable imperative."
> H.G. Wells *Mind at the End of Its Tether*

It is our great pleasure to deliver the eleventh issue of *CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review*. The central themes addressed in this year's volume are adaptation and innovation and their conceptualisations, representations and manifestations in Anglophone literature and culture as a response to a changing world.

Change can be a natural process, or a human-inflicted one; in either case, it requires a response. Many recent theoretical approaches have emerged as inevitable reactions to sudden changes or gradual transformations of natural and social conditions. For instance, posthumanism developed as a response to the growing need of redefining a human. Departing from the 17th century humanist model, rapid technological advancement and discoveries in animal studies became the root of posthuman thought, leading to "fundamental changes in the human species and its relationship with the world" (Badmington 2011: 1212). Just as posthumanism can be positioned as a response to certain

changing realities, the same can be done with postcolonialism, feminism, and environmental criticism, among others.

The articles gathered in this volume examine various aspects of adaptation and innovation. Each article presents different approaches and theories, analyzes cultural works belonging to different genres, and shares many insightful observations, proving how ubiquitous the themes of adaptation and innovation are. The majority of the articles submitted thematize dystopia (given that even *Firestarter* shares certain features of the genre); however, poetry and romantasy likewise prove relevant to the discussion.

Articles: adaptation and innovation in literary and cultural studies

The part of the volume dedicated to adaptation and innovation, featuring six articles, opens with "Yōko Tawada's Post-Apocalyptic Playground: Memory, Mutations, and Multispecies Futures in *The Emissary*" by **Anuska Saha**. The author discusses the novel's posthuman aspects, dystopian features and notions of hope. Through them, Saha explores Tawada's re-imagined, post-apocalyptic world with endless possibilities for humanity and beyond.

In the next article, "The Machine Must Be Stopped: E. M. Forster's 'The Machine Stops' as a Looking Glass into Modern Technological World," **Chrysoula Titi** uses a classic text of dystopian fiction to contemplate the way in which adjusting to technology may become counter-adaptive, leading to humans' overreliance and even worship of "the Machine" and limiting innovation and resilience. Titi's article demonstrates that Forster's text remains particularly relevant in today's world, where de-skilling is already becoming a looming danger.

This techno-dystopian theme is likewise explored in "'Maybe love transcends severance': Control of Emotions and Rebellion against Developing Technology in the Dystopian TV Series *Severance*." **Zuzanna Sanecka** considers late stage or post-capitalist commodification of emotions, and how this process is conceptualised in the analyzed text through characters whose selves are

divided into work and non-work personas through a futuristic medical procedure, in order to better serve a system that abuses and exploits them. The essay notes that 21st century dystopia need not be associated with authoritarian state power, but may reflect the influence of technologies and corporations instead, demonstrating the dark side of innovation and adaptation.

In "Posthumanist Reading of Stephen King's *Firestarter:* Surveillance, Experiments and the Ethics of Alterity," **Julia Borkowska** applies a posthumanist framework to the 1980 science-fiction novel and, through the story of its protagonist, explores the themes of dehumanization and identity seeking. Through application of posthumanist concepts, Borkowska examines how the novel challenges the traditional notions of being human.

"Inverting the Male Gaze in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney and Medbh McGuckian" by **Marta Struglińska** comments on the significance of the aisling tradition in Irish poetry. In her article the author adopts a feminist perspective to discuss how the aisling tradition has contributed to presenting Irish women as passive and victimised. Juxtaposing two poems by Medbh McGuckian with Heaney's poetry, Struglińska points to an important difference in approaching this tradition, which involves changing the perspective that shifts power and agency from the male to the female figure and also inverts, as the title suggests, the male gaze in women's poetry.

In the final article of this volume, "Romantasy as an Intertextual Genre: Responses of and to Sarah J. Maas' *A Court of Thorns and Roses*," **Gabriela Iwanowska** proposes to look at this relatively recent genre in terms of an intertextual chain reaction. Drawing on theories of intertextuality (Kristeva, Barthes, Barth and Lyotard), the author traces references of *ACOTAR* to earlier texts and genres and, more importantly, points to how it has been instrumental in the development of the romantasy genre and its fandom across various media.

Conference reports

This section contains two reports on the international conferences organized at the Faculty of Humanities, Nicolaus Copernicus Univeristy. The first report, written by **Aleś Makkaveyeu**, presens the conference devoted to the problems of "Adaptation and Innovation: Linguistic, Cultural and Literary Responses to a Changing World" organized by the Academic Association for Doctoral Students and Students of English on May 22, 2025 (online). With Dr Alice Haylett Bryan from King's College London as a keynote speaker, the conference gathered eighteen participants from Poland, China, Ireland, Greece, India and the United States. In the second report, **Katarzyna Przygońska** presents a general outline of the main themes and research areas addressed during the international hybrid conference on "Feeling Cultures/Culturing Feelings: Emotions and Affects in Cultural Practices" organized by the Department of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Comparative Studies on April 9-11, 2025. Over seventy participants from Poland, the United Kingdom, Norway, the United States, Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Ireland, Slovakia, Lithuania, Albania and India attended the conference either in Toruń or online, including Dr Xavier Aldana Reyes (Manchester Metropolitan University) and Dr Nicole Falkenhayner (Norwegian University of Science and Technology) as keynote speakers.

Students' corner

The students' corner in this issue of *Currents* features artistic projects by NCU students, devised for the courses in: "Intertextuality and Adaptation" and "Detective Fiction" taught by **Edyta Lorek-Jezińska** as well as "Introduction to Literary Theory" and "Ecological Explorations in Literature, Film and Art" taught by **Katarzyna Więckowska** (both part of English Studies, BA programme, 2nd year and MA programme, 1st year). The intertextuality projects (a film script, a board game, paintings, collages and photographs) are the effect of the students' creative engagement with the circulation of Shakespeare's

Hamlet in contemporary culture. Four detective stories written for the course on detective fiction present the students' creative re-imagining of the genre in our local setting. The literary theory project is a collection of haiku written in English by the course participants. It is followed by creative works addressing the problems of climate crisis and consumerism: a solarpunk painting and three short stories exploring environmental issues and ways of responding to them.

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ARTICLES:
ADAPTATION AND INNOVATION
IN LITERARY AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Anuska Saha

Independent scholar

YŌKO TAWADA'S POST-APOCALYPTIC PLAYGROUND: MEMORY, MUTATIONS, AND MULTISPECIES FUTURES IN *THE EMISSARY*

> It is still possible to speak now to those not yet dead
> Inside my stomach are entrails I have still not touched
> Someone I have not yet met consoles me for a crushing sorrow I have not yet felt
> The language I use at that moment is one I have not yet started to learn
> The poems I have not yet written are already written
> I hope that the other creatures that I cannot yet imagine
> That will inhabit the earth far into the future
> Will be far happier than us
>
> 未 or Not Yet by Yōko Tawada[1]

The disaster imaginary of Japan underwent a violent shift in March 2011, when its northeastern coast was struck by an earthquake and a tsunami, followed by a nuclear fallout in rapid succession. This triple meltdown exposed the destructive consequences that underlie the promise of "clean energy" and technological emancipation, unleashing a fresh wave of nuclear panic, aggravated by ambiguous protocols, censorship and lack of transparency from the government. It is this climate of crisis to which Yōko Tawada responds in her novel, *The Emissary*.

Despite being widely read as an eco-dystopian satire, the novel has so far been met with limited critical engagement that barely manages to capture the full breadth of its imaginative and ethical vision. Very often, the term "dystopia" invokes the image of protagonists or communities challenged by the oppressive logic of a technocratic or totalitarian state or, as in narratives of climate change, by ecological catastrophe. These narratives often dramatise a contest of values—freedom versus control, humanity versus dehumanisation—and propel the plot toward decisive, often climactic events. As Isomaa et al. note in their 2020 study, dystopian fiction "typically imagines negative futures for humankind, [each] focus[ing] on some specific aspect of the undesirable future world" (xii). Such texts may employ cautionary depictions of technological disaster, state surveillance, environmental collapse and post-disaster survival, addressing anxieties and ethical dilemmas entangled with the present and the future. *The Emissary* certainly resonates with many of these tropes—the spectre of nuclear poisoning, ecological precarity, food scarcity, and intimations of state isolationism and surveillance—which invite readings rooted in dystopian genre conventions. The politically charged climate in which Tawada was writing certainly facilitates the assumption that her project was simply to galvanise discourse and policy, which usually includes mapping complex, long-term historical processes onto a recognisable and emotionally charged "tragic frame"[2] centred around a "monocausal crisis" that must either be avoided or rehabilitated (O'Leary 385; Garrard 105).

Yet the novel, while conversant with the dystopian tradition, diverges from the genre's familiar teleological drift, where usually a binary opposition of interests resolves in a definitive narrative climax. It does more than satirise the present or warn of an imminent future; in fact, it altogether evades the proleptic function of traditional dystopian narratives by refusing to name its perpetrators and divesting significance from human action and decisive events. It inaugurates instead a "comic frame" (Garrard 107) which eschews oppositional logics and operates on the complexity of shared vulnerabilities

and relational existence. The result is a text that teeters on the threshold of dystopian fiction, drawing upon established motifs even as it reconfigures their meaning and stretches the genre's boundaries. The novel may most suitably be counted among post-apocalyptic stories that are "portray[als of] survival and new beginnings, the apocalyptic catastrophe destroying the organised society and creating a state of nature that calls for the creation of a new social contract" (xxiii). In *The Emissary*, however, the formation of the promised 'new social contract' is neither explicated nor carried through, instead left suspended on a sea of uncountable possibilities. This deliberate ambiguity is part of the novel's scheme to design what may be seen as a posthuman eco-ethical framework, enabling a "creative treatment of humanity's relationship to its environment" (Isomaa et al. xxii). This framework invites the reader to inhabit the speculative counter-vision of post-apocalyptic Japan as a productive field for re-imagining ways of entangled existence and transformative care in a post-disaster and posthuman world.

The Emissary presents a world upturned by an unspecified ecological catastrophe where children are born weak and frail, while the elderly, having gained unusual physical robustness, have lost the ability to die. The story unfolds in a series of mundane interactions, interwoven with inner reflections, forebodings, memories, and flights of the imagination filtered primarily through the lens of Yoshiro, his great-grandson, Mumei and others who are part of their mundane existence. Dan Fujiwara (2019) identifies these as features of "spherical temporality," which, in mirroring the roundness and flux of the earth, refuses a chronological reading of events and allows accidental narratives to emerge through gaps and unexpected digressions.[3] In Tawada's novels, this is often enacted through linguistic techniques including, but not limited to, word-play, language-mixing, play on accents and scripts, material translations and neologisms. Language does not work toward a teleological end but rather disorients the pattern of chronological time, which is necessary for imbuing actions with significance—what Frank Kermode observes as constituting "plot"

(45). In *The Emissary*, the very shape of the narrative precipitates around the absence-presences of dead animals, technologies and languages that haunt the post-apocalyptic landscape. Moreover, the creative process of writing itself is bound up with the possession of an earth-bound consciousness.

Yoshiro, who is a writer, finds his efforts impeded by the inability to feel "the roundness of the earth beneath his feet" (Tawada 2018: 25). Geographical restriction imposed by the ban on foreign travel translates to an impediment in creative sensibility; therefore, he must "follow [the] curve in his mind" (25) if he is to write at all. Objects, words and symbols frequently become launching points for imaginative flights, which disturb the linear causality between episodes necessary for "plot." The mundane act of buying mandarin oranges at the bakery sets off a meandering exposition of public holidays, climate change, and the economic geography of the state. This stream of reflection, effectively blending the past with the present, finally lands at a conversation with a postcard seller, where Yoshiro is forced to confront sinister suspicions about his daughter's circumstances in Okinawa: "Yoshiro felt sure something was wrong: either…her mail was being censored, or she was hiding something from him. Her postcards were frustrating, as if the most important part was covered by the back of an invisible hand, making it impossible to read" (61). Even this alarming realisation remains a suspended loose end, without any promise of further inquiry or discovery of culpability, followed only by a reflection on the obsolescence of telephones and how that has reshaped the familial relationship between father and daughter.

If the function of plot, according to Kermode, is to "humanis[e] time by giving it form" (45), *The Emissary* seems to flout this purpose in two senses: firstly, by refusing a chronological temporal frame and secondly, by adopting an alternative frame which New Material feminists call "thick time" (Neimanis & Walker 2014: 561). The flow of the novel's telling dramatises the constant intrusion of the past and the future upon the present, not just through Yoshiro's numerous mental excursions but in the abrupt temporal shift in the last few

pages of the novel, which transfers the reader several years into the future where Mumei is fifteen years old and female. Such analeptic movement draws attention to how the past and the future are not exclusive or locked into a "back then" or "out there," but are felt as overflowing, congealing and co-existent with the present. The use of the verb "felt" is intentional because "thick time" views bodies and temporal processes as co-constitutive. Within this frame, time is not organised between a beginning and an end to be given meaning by human action, but rather "a transcorporeal stretching between present, future, and past" (561) implicated within bodies, both acting upon and simultaneously being acted upon by them.

Ruminating on the systematic way the trunk of a tree records its years in successive rings, Yoshiro conceives of his own body as "a disorderly pile, like the inside of a drawer no one ever bothers to straighten" (Tawada 2018: 6). For him, as for his generation of "the elderly," the stretching of time is made literal by their extended life span so that temporal anchors like "beginning," "middle" and "end" lose their moorings. Thrust into this limbo-like stasis where traditional markers of human time—finding a partner, marriage, having children and grandchildren—have lost their significance, he is inhibited from feeling not only the "roundness of the earth" (25) but also the normative flow of time. His general pessimism is characteristic of a generation daily forced to come to terms with the inefficiency and invalidity of the systems of belief, meanings and values they once took for granted; a generation of people who "unable to turn back the clock…let themselves be turned" (69). As a counter posture to Yoshiro's generational guilt and anxiety as to the future, is Mumei's unburdened consciousness, his ignorance of "what 'suffering' meant" and inability to "feel sorry for himself" (33). He exhibits, at several points, an intuitive affinity with non-human presences and even a self-acknowledged psychophysical connection with the earth, manifesting occasionally in sensations:

> This map is definitely my portrait [...] The Andes Mountains curve outward then inward again, just like the bone of my right leg from my hip to my ankle...All my bones are curved. Not that I bent them, they were just like that to begin with—if this is what's called pain, it was there from the start, for no particular reason.... My neck, which connects Africa to Europe, is twisted, with swollen thyroid and swollen tonsils, screaming for help. Australia is my gut, a big bag. There's lots of food in the bag. But I can't eat any of it. (123–124)

If transcorporeal time imagines bodies as archives of history and shifting phenomena, it merits noting that radiation—the ubiquitous cause of destruction in the novel's post-apocalyptic Japan—is never directly mentioned, but only expressed in the drama of the bodies and objects affected by it. It may be possible to infer, then, that radioactive poisoning, though it has physically enfeebled Mumei's generation, has also sensitised them to alternative ways of conceiving themselves as subjects. The altered earthly bodies—whether humans, plants, or the soil—even as they become sites of destructive encounters between planetary and technological forces, are also potent with new possible ways of becoming. Rather than mere casualties of an apocalypse, they become "ecotones" (Neimanis 2012: 93) or "contact zones" (Haraway 179) between an erroneous past and possible futures. The point is not to reduce them to a mere transitional chronotope funnelling a past into a better or worse future, but rather to identify them as critters of a constantly evolving post-apocalyptic topos, dwelling in a continuous present, for it is the present which concerns Tawada; it is the *here* and *now* she fictionalises in her novelistic attempt to call for creative thinking and world-building.

The novel's narrator consistently practises a blurring of boundaries between human and non-human entities by evoking other-than-human figures to detail bodily experience. Children are frequently described in terms of bird-like fragility, and there is a tacit awareness that their genetic alterity, caused by radioactive poisoning, undermines the foundational notion of human beings as a unitary species. In this, the novel effectively utilises what Rosi Braidotti calls a "method of defamiliarization" that disconnects the subject "from familiar and

habitual patterns of identity" (19). In instances where Mumei finds himself struggling against the laws of physics, unable to move his body to his will, he engages in an imaginative drama wherein his limbs turn into independent appendages ill-equipped to perform terrestrial tasks like putting on clothes and walking on two feet:

> He wanted to take off his pajamas, but with two legs he couldn't decide which to start with, and while he was puzzling over this problem he remembered the octopus. Maybe he had eight legs, too, and it just looked like two because each one was a bundle of four, tied tightly together… There was an octopus inside him: Octopus, get out of there! … They were a mountain of cloth, with tunnels running through it. His legs were the trains, trying to get through the tunnels…There were two tunnels, so the train headed for Tokyo can go in one, while the train going in the opposite direction comes out the other… Flesh-colored steam engines slide into the tunnels. Chugga chugga choo choo. (Tawada 2018: 97)

The figure of the octopus, as Seungyeon Kim points out, is an "optic of the other" (262) through which Mumei surpasses victimhood and designs for himself an outward-bound posthuman subjectivity which constantly disorients and reorients itself through an intra-active process of reciprocal exchange with the environment and its non-human others. The wayward limbs of the octopus represent the "multilayered and multidirectional relational force" of nomadic thinking and subjectivity, as articulated by Braidotti (17–19), which opens up the subject to the consciousness of its transversal connections across human and nonhuman matter.

Braidotti traces the disidentification of the human "along axes of becoming-woman [...] becoming-animal or -earth, [where] the process of becoming earth demands a more radical break with established patterns of thought [and] can involve a sense of loss and pain, which in turn can produce fear, vulnerability and a sense of nostalgia" (20). Mumei's strange psychophysical embodiment of the earth, manifesting often in physical pain and loss of consciousness, as well as his transformations, first into a human-avian hybrid and later into a girl, are physical manifestations of this break. This posthuman break, which Mumei eases into, is for Yoshiro and the elderly, naturally, a painful and sometimes

unnerving process far more difficult to reconcile themselves to. He occasionally reacts with an anachronistic pathos but comes to acknowledge its necessity at length, as when he muses:

> "you know, the human race may be evolving in a direction no one ever imagined. I mean, maybe we're moving toward the octopus."
> "So in another hundred thousand years we'll all be octopi?"
> "Maybe so. People always thought of that as devolution, but it might just be evolution after all." (Tawada 2018: 14)

Kim's essay delineates how the kinship between Mumei and Yoshiro, who cannot even be placed "on the same page in the *Illustrated Guide to Animals*" (Tawada 2018: 101), is predicated on "an ambivalence of *self* and *other*" (262). While Kim reads this ambivalence as a pathway for transcending otherness, posthuman theory would treat this as a premise for the inter-relational process of making and re-making the self through the "optic of the other." In an instance that demonstrates such transfer of optics, Yoshiro absorbs Mumei's synesthetic association of sourness with the colour blue, so that "whenever Yoshiro saw a lemon, it seemed to him that blue was mixed in with the yellow—and that made him feel that for just a moment he had touched the raw, spinning earth" (Tawada 2018: 45). Through his grandson, whose very existence amplifies tenfold the alterity intrinsic to life, Yoshiro ultimately comes to terms with the necessary practice of spontaneous world-making *with* others than the self for survival and thriving on a damaged planet (Haraway 136; Tsing).

Yoshiro passes down forbidden knowledge in the form of extinct words, names and images; Mumei draws them anew from his imagination, weaving them into cat's cradle figures. Yoshiro "carv[es] out the road to health and life" (Tawada 2018: 32) for Mumei, tailoring customised garments and foraging for nutritious food. In turn, the child's "mysterious kind of wisdom" (36) illuminates and expands Yoshiro's jaded worldview into a more hopeful one, grounded in provisionality rather than anxious avoidance or anticipation of utopic or apocalyptic futures:

> This life with his great-grandson was about all he could manage. And for that he needed to be flexible, in mind and body, with the courage to doubt what he had believed for over a century. Sloughing off his pride like an old jacket, he'd have to go around in his shirtsleeves. If he was cold, rather than buying a new jacket it would be better to think of ways to grow a thick coat of fur like a bear's. (40–41)

The juxtaposition of "jacket" with a "coat of fur" draws attention to the contrast between human-engineered insurability against what is outside and the semi-permeability of the provisional, self-grown, thickened skin, made in direct interaction with, and as a consequence of, external phenomena. Foregoing the anxious fixation on an unforeseeable future or the guilt of the past, Yoshiro commits to "staying with the trouble" (Haraway) and moving forward with partial clarity, "[keeping] his eyes open, taking each day as it came, hoping the present won't crumble under his feet" (Tawada 2018: 29). The relationship he builds with his transgenic great-grandson is based on reciprocity and a sense of mutual responsibility and response-ability[3] grounded in the contingent aftermaths of the post-apocalypse.

The secret Emissary project, the novel's titular concern and central intrigue—insinuated through the recurring emblem of the candle with exact proportions—hints at the possibility of some discovery or remedy at the end of Mumei's anticipated journey beyond the border. However, his travel is abruptly truncated as the novel closes with him losing consciousness on the very shore from which he is supposed to set out. This characteristic denial of resolution is a deliberate and oft-used narrative strategy in Tawada's works[4] that underscores her poetics of land and water, fixity and flux, and resistance to assimilation.

Katherine Maurer, in "Translating Catastrophe," points out how disaster islands like Hiroshima and Fukushima have time and again been made into "segregated islands of meaning… function[ing] as projection screens for nationalist politics" (187). The atmosphere of suffering and mourning following 3/11 became, for the government, fertile ground for cultivating a nationalistic

sentiment of renewal and restoration predicated on an idealised myth of a past era. Critics like Tienfong Ho and Kiyoshi Abe highlight how optimistic "narratives of resilience" that surface after calamities are often stories "perpetuated to popularize a particular outcome or cause" (Ho 1), usually political and economic. Thus, latching on to an idea of a so-called "Edo Renaissance" (Maurer 187)—based on a nostalgic longing for the *sakoku* (seclusion policy) years of pre-modern Japan—the conservative right-wing government took to justifying its nuclear accelerationism and censorship by indirectly, yet conveniently, projecting the blame for the catastrophe onto the nation's opening its borders to the world. Moreover, the highly polarised socio-political environment of Japan at the time allowed the government to double down on its exclusionary policies and extreme vigilantism against foreigners. Tawada, who has been an open critic of the nation's isolationism, stages the dys/utopic island in her fiction as an enduring metaphor to respond to such post-3/11 reactionary discourses.

Tawada's Japan in *The Emissary* takes insular island thinking to extremity; its retreat into itself is enacted in successive layers of interiority, each heavily controlled by restrictions on movement and communication. Not only has it isolated itself from the world outside, but the neighbouring southern island of Okinawa has sequestered itself from the Japanese archipelago, asserting its separate identity through the self-fashioned image of a paradisiac orchard with fruit as its primary economic staple and regional emblem. Old institutions and systems of power have crumbled, but have given rise to new ones in their wake. Rules around language and expression, despite efforts to be more inclusive, end up producing an absurd alterity in the outlawing of foreign words. Yoshiro is compelled to bury his children's book as well as his ideas for a new novel for fear of unspoken laws surrounding redundant objects and off-limits places. Beneath the veneer of prosperity, the reality of Okinawa's *orchard* is that of a fruit factory operating on the tireless labour of employees "working in one all day, cut off from the outside world" (Tawada 2018: 60). Tawada's intentions in

this extravagant portrayal of neo-Edo Japan are undoubtedly satirical and serve, as in her other post-3/11 works, to "demystify the Edo period and ... turn this era into something productive" (Tawada 2012: 91).

Yoshiro explains contemporary post-apocalyptic Japan's misguided plan to "solve its problem" with self-isolation using the following analogy:

> Every country has serious problems, so to keep those problems from spreading all around the world, they decided that each country should solve its own problems by itself. Remember... the Showa-Heisei Museum? All the rooms were separated by steel doors, so if a fire starts in one room it can't spread to the next one. (Tawada 2018: 42)

The analogy of fire, however, fails to account for the poisoned water surrounding the archipelago, which flows unchecked by political borders and state policy, connecting distant lands, habitats and species, both terrestrial and aquatic. In a lecture titled "Dejima" (2012), Tawada proposes a planetary model, an alternative to the island's insularity, based on the counter-motif of water, explaining that "[t]he water of the ocean holds the whole world together in one single sphere. The contaminated water does not stay in one position, and I do not mean that metaphorically" (120). Disregarding watertight binaries such as inside/outside, self/other, centre/periphery, or native/foreign, as well as any notion of fixed origin, the people of "the ocean water... of the waves... repeatedly recede but always come back," (120) though never the same as they left. Tawada's protagonists inhabit this deterritorialising watery space of flux where origins and fixed territories of belonging and identity no longer apply, and they become open to infinite possibilities of metamorphoses.

Water, however, is more than a symbol for a totalising "planetary energy" (190) or a medium for connectivity as Maurer proposes; it is also itself full of vital materiality and life, forming rich and fluid nexus zones between landmasses. Tawada's planetary model, attuned to both the symbolic and material fluidity of water, promotes a global eco-ethics that urges responsibility for a vulnerable planet beyond national or species borders. Marine bodies contaminated by the nuclide-infused wastewater around Fukushima have not

only impacted local health and livelihood but may have long-term implications on a global scale, as Xiaoqi Zhou infers:

> The ocean plays a crucial role in the biogeochemical cycles of the Earth. The discharge of radioactive elements from the Fukushima nuclear wastewater into the ocean can lead to the spread of radioactive nuclides, causing long-term unknown effects on the evolution and health of marine organisms, ultimately impacting human well-being. (Zhou 4)

The mutual imbrication of human and marine life is crystallised and given full meaning in Mumei's hybrid body; its comparisons with that of an octopus connect them in their shared alterity, while the porosity of their boundaries entangles them in the same fleshly existence. This instantiates, to use Alaimo's term, a kind of "kinship inscribed in the bones" (151) in which the body embedded in the present is imagined as stretching across vast historical narratives of co-evolution between human and aqueous species. This way, water becomes not just a metaphorical medium of transformation or dissolution of identity but also an alive and breathing habitat where immersive epistemological considerations—ways of knowing and understanding the nature of one's own fluid materiality—can give way to onto-logics of becoming and possibility (Neimanis 2017: 102). This prepares the theoretical grounds against which one must read Mumei's final drop into "the pitch-black depths of the strait"[5] (Tawada 2018: 138) in the last sentence of the novel, the strait implying a space in between or rather, an ecotone between the ancient landmasses of historical value systems epitomised in the human faces of Yoshiro and Yonatani. The fall, which undercuts a seemingly optimistic project, may be understood, alternatively, as a subconscious resistance to assimilation into an object of international scientific inquiry, and instead forge his subjecthood through an immersive mode of inquiry entirely his own, based on relational configurations with his earthly kin.

In this light, the double meaning behind the novel's Japanese title, *Kentoshi* (献灯使), acquires a new dimension. The term, which translates to "lantern

bearer," is Tawada's play on the homophone 遣唐使, referring to cultural envoys sent to Tang dynasty China between the seventh and ninth centuries. The imperial mission of cultural assimilation is spun into Mumei's role of assimilating a multispecies consciousness as an emissary of a posthuman future—one who carries not the lantern of anthropocentric enlightenment, but the flickering light of relationality and care, symbolised by "the candle two inches in diameter and four inches tall" (31, 81, 131).

The posthuman worlding of *The Emissary* proposes a venture in affirmative thinking, inviting readers to dwell in the material-semiotic muddle (Haraway 31) of the present, in which both language and matter become sites of concurrent destruction and creation, loss and possibility. The demise of technology, the extinction of animals and the strange mutations that perplex the fixity of species boundaries, instead of becoming incentives for paranoia, inspire alternative ways of storytelling, world-making and constructing subjectivity. Discarded washing machines become "capsule hotels for fish" (Tawada 2018: 8), traces of extinct animals and foreign cities persist in the nomenclature of vehicles, shoe brands and bread varieties, not as mere relics of a vanished past but as elements continually repurposed to shape and redefine the present world. Tawada's novel does not merely respond to the post-3/11 moment but offers a reparative frame of storytelling for imagining ways of ongoingness in the face of ecological threats. The novel's open-endedness is not a failure but a provocation: to view apocalypse not as an end to be avoided or a crisis to be dealt with but as a transformative playground for reimagining what it means to exist in flux, not just within but with a more-than-human world.

Endnotes

1. In *A Poem For a Book* 2015, Ed. Bei Dao et.al. The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 22–23.
2. Greg Garrard, in his discussion on 'Apocalypse,' draws on Stephen O'Leary's idea of "frames of acceptance," where a "tragic frame" is based on an epochal understanding of time: "a systematic symbolic division of historical time that accords weight to actions and events in history by mediating the relationship of the past, present, and future" (Garrard 87; O'Leary 385).

3. Haraway (2016) coined this term to express a "capacity to respond" (78) to, or cultivate a "praxis of care" (105) and accountability involving shared pasts and futures with species others.

4. Some notable examples include *Wo Europa anfängt* [*Where Europe Begins*] (1991) and *Schwager in Bordeaux* [*Brother-in-law in Bordeaux*] (2008), and *Das Bad* [*The Bath*] (1989). See Julia Sowacka's "Faces of Water: Hydrontological Spaces in Yoko Tawada's Literature" in *Transpositiones* Vol. 4 (2025) for a detailed examination of the water motif in Tawada's oeuvre.

5. Dan Fujiwara (2019) notes how the loss of consciousness shapes spherical temporality in Tawada's narratives. It is this sphericality, concordant with transcorporeal time, that Mumei internalises in his final 'drop'. Seungyeon Kim (2019) furthers this point in reading this 'drop' as a transfer of the travel motif to a travel of the mind through the murky depths of memory, which has the power to imagine the past and the future in continuity with the present.

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Abstract

This article examines Yōko Tawada's novel *The Emissary* as a response to the post-3/11 ecological and nuclear crisis in Japan. It explores how the novel reimagines the post-apocalypse landscape not as a dystopian warning but as a space for provisional and interrelational world-building. The analysis examines the novel's narrative structure and thematic preoccupations within posthumanist and new materialist frameworks,

revealing its rejection of apocalyptic temporality in favour of transcorporeal time and materiality. The study also examines water as a motif for challenging contemporary isolationist post-Fukushima discourses by contextualising the novel within an alternative planetary eco-ethics based on theories of Hydrofeminism. The article demonstrates how Tawada repurposes a genre "born out of crisis" into a speculative "playground" for reparative storytelling grounded in multispecies care and ecological negotiation.

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THE MACHINE MUST BE STOPPED: E. M. FORSTER'S "THE MACHINE STOPS" AS A LOOKING GLASS INTO MODERN TECHNOLOGICAL WORLD

Keywords: science fiction, dystopia, technology, rebellion, adaptation

Introduction

"The Machine Stops" is a science fiction short story by the English author E. M. Forster (1879–1970) published in 1909. It is set in a futuristic world where the humanity resides underground, having lost the ability to live on the surface of the Earth, and relies on an omnipotent global Machine to cater to all its needs. There is no concept of family or community, so each individual lives in isolation in private rooms, and there is minimal physical contact, as travel has become unnecessary. Communication is almost exclusively virtual, through what is today known as video conferencing and online interaction. People's main activity is the sharing of "second-hand" ideas (Forster 28) which essentially consist of pieces of information and dry knowledge, the function of which seems to be constant distraction. Individuals are permanently virtually connected to each other, almost always available, and yet there seems to be no real, in-depth communication.

The two main characters, Vashti and her son Kuno, who live on opposite sides of the world, are introduced at the very beginning of the story by an anonymous narrator. The stark difference in their perspectives becomes immediately clear. Vashti is content with her life, whereas Kuno is a skeptic and

a rebel; he has visited the surface of the Earth, which is considered a dangerous endeavour as it is uninhabitable. This has resulted in his becoming disenchanted with the sanitised, mechanical world, and so he tries to alert his mother that life on Earth, in a world free of the Machine, is possible. Most importantly, he wishes to warn her "that it is we that are dying, and that down here the only thing that really lives is the Machine" (24). In order to do this, he persuades her to visit him in person, a request which Vashti reluctantly accepts. This is also an attempt at protecting himself, as his clandestine visits on Earth could mean his expulsion from their underground society and thus, presumably, death—what is referred to as "Homelessness" (13)—should he be apprehended again by the Mending Apparatus. Believing her son's deviations to be unforgivable, Vashti dismisses his concerns as dangerous madness, and returns to her room, never to see his face again.

Years later, two important developments occur: "the abolition of respirators" (28), which makes visits to Earth impossible, and the "re-establishment of religion" (29). Though the term itself is "sedulously avoided," individuals are essentially forced to adhere to "undenominational Mechanism," believing the Machine to be "omnipotent, eternal" or face Homelessness (30). This confirms Kuno's early realization that the Machine is worshipped as a deity. Having been transferred to a room near that of his mother, Kuno makes another attempt at communicating with Vashti to warn her that the "Machine is stopping" (32), which she once again dismisses, but defects to the system soon start appearing and become increasingly worse, sparking panic. It is revealed that the Mending Apparatus that sustains the Machine has been broken, but the knowledge of how to repair it has been lost and so the collapse of civilization is imminent. Disaster finally strikes, the Machine stops entirely and the underground city crumbles "like a honeycomb" (39). Vashti and Kuno reunite in the darkness, touching and talking "not through the Machine" (38), before they both perish. There is a glimmer of hope, however, as Kuno believes that

"humanity has learned its lesson" (39), the Machine will not be restarted and the Homeless on the surface of the Earth will rebuild the world.

This short story can be seen as a cautionary tale against humanity's increasing reliance on technology, highlighting the dangers of this becoming the ultimate controlling force. The story depicts the last days of "decadence" which this society is "quietly and complacently" sinking into (31). As Gorman Beauchamp puts it, Forster sets the story in the "twilight of the deus ex machina" (57) and draws a "technophobic moral" that technology "should be made for man, not man for technology," questioning whether it is possible to "keep the slave from becoming the master" (58). This is a question that "haunts dystopia" (58) as well as modern society, which very much resembles Forster's futurist, "market-driven and technophilic" world, obsessed with "informational texts and information systems" (Lynch 297). It is "probably the first modern dystopia" that reveals what a "true technotopia," a "push-button paradise of mechanical marvels" (Beauchamp 57), could be like. It raises important questions concerning modern society and what can happen when humanity disengages itself from its physical and emotional existence, becoming incapable of adapting to changing environments as a result of the "dehumanizing and destructive effects" of technology (54).

"The Machine Stops": Dystopia and Technology

Dystopian fiction "emerged as a distinct genre at the beginning of the twentieth century," though the term became more widely used later on, and it stood against its opposite, utopia, meaning the good place that exists nowhere (Horan 54). This distinction can be called into question depending on whose perspective is taken into account; in other words, Thomas Horan argues it is "inherently subjective" (54): what might seem like a dystopia to one character might be a utopia to another. Taking the short story in question as an example, for Kuno the underground world is a dystopia, a terrible place which prevents him from exploring the world above, but for Vashti it is a utopia which she fully

embraces, accepting its values and lifestyle, and overall being perfectly content with the comforts she enjoys in her small, underground room, "hexagonal in shape like the cell of a bee" (Forster 3). At least, this is the case until the collapse of the Machine, which transforms her worldview altogether, so that she finally comprehends Kuno's words about the vulnerability and destructiveness of the Machine that ultimately brings about their demise.

In a sense, dystopian fiction is "one of the most revealing indexes to the anxieties" of the time during which literary works such as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) were written (Hillegas 3). Such works have also been called anti-utopias as "they seem a sad, last farewell to man's age-old dream of a planned, ideal, and perfected society" (3–4). Forster's short story was written at a time during which technology was developing rapidly and people had already invented the telephone, the radio, cars, and even airplanes. Similar, but more advanced features are found in the underground society of "The Machine Stops:" namely the long-distance video calls, unlimited entertainment options and air-ships, which to readers at the time might have sounded too far-fetched; to readers today, however, the core principles of many of these amenities and comforts are taken for granted. Forster takes rudimentary innovations of his time and imagines how they might evolve and what effect they might have on people and society. In this respect, the short story is a pessimistic reflection on the dramatic transformations society underwent during the Second Industrial Revolution (1870–1914).

Apart from the technological changes, there were also ideological ones. Technological advances brought about the questioning of older belief systems and ways of life which gradually gave way to rationality and efficiency. These transformations are most notably reflected in the story in the way this futuristic society is structured. In-person interactions are deemed unnecessary, thus discouraged as being "contrary to the spirit of the age" (Forster 6); communication is exclusively carried out virtually, and individuals are

completely isolated in their rooms, with "buttons and switches everywhere" (6) ready to respond to any physical need as well as provide entertainment. There is no concept of family, as parental duties "cease at the moment of birth" (10) and infants are moved to "public nurseries" (10). Religion in the traditional sense does not exist in such a rational and technology-dependent society, and yet the Machine is worshipped very much like a deity, as Kuno recognises. But for this complex technological system, humanity would have apparently gone extinct. People created the Machine in order to survive, but with time it became too complex, to the point that few could truly understand how it works, and so the increased mystery around it and their absolute dependence on it transformed it into a deity, though few would care to acknowledge it. Indeed, Vashti, who denies that she worships the Machine when Kuno challenges her, performs a nightly ritual during which she takes her Book of the Machine "reverently in her hands" sitting up in her bed and "half ashamed, half joyful" murmurs "O Machine! O Machine!" and raises it to her lips, kissing it and inclining her head three times (8). Therefore, humanity has not managed to rid itself completely of what it has come to consider irrational; the urge to believe in a higher force is still there, as is motherly love. Despite understanding and accepting the values set forth in the Book of the Machine, Vashti still experiences these ostensibly primitive emotions. She desires to believe in something and loves her children; she thinks "there was something special about Kuno" just like "there had been something special about all her children" (10). This could explain why she accepts Kuno's request to visit him in person, in spite of her dislike of air-ships.

"The Machine Stops" offers a commentary on Forster's own time and an admonition against what humanity could become should it rely too much on technology, forgetting that it is its own creation. As Kuno reminds Vashti, men made the Machine, "great men, but men" and, while it "is much," "it is not everything" (4). Similarly, people may revel in the new comforts provided by technology, but becoming complacent and uncritically accepting of these

advancements can have undesirable effects. Naturally, there would have been a sense of optimism in light of such developments that would give the impression of a utopian society about to be formed. This hope for a better world can be seen in the work of H. G. Wells (1866–1946) who, in fact, had a significant impact not only on works such as *We*, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but also on "The Machine Stops" (Hillegas 12–13). A preoccupation with the future is central to much of Wells's writing, given that he was a "supreme rationalist and believer in science and the scientific method" (14). Mark Robert Hillegas argues that Forster's work presents "a vision of man's nature, his place in the universe, and the power of science which is the complete antithesis of the vision that by the 1930's was commonly considered Wellsian"; in other words, "a utopia filled with super-gadgets, mechanical wonders, run by an elite of scientists and engineers for the good of the people" (16).

Nevertheless, there is a "darkness which actually permeates" much of Wells's early work, Hillegas continues (17). Wells set about to attack vigorously the "late Victorian complacency" as he believed "there was no greater enemy of progress than a belief in inevitable progress" (18). From this perspective, Forster is in agreement with Wells as they both seem to consider complacency a fatal flaw. The inability to evolve, either through "knowledge of man himself and of man in relation to the things about him" (15), following Wells's views, or through an introspective rediscovery and acceptance of emotion according to Forster's idea, can have dire consequences. Evolution and adaptation require freedom of thought, curiosity, and even an element of rebellion that makes one question the norm. Ultimately, it is the desire and willingness to learn that leads to progress, rather than strict adherence to a set way of thought and behaviour based on accepted principles. The latter can give rise to something more akin to a repressing kind of religion, which is evident in the world of "The Machine Stops."

As Horan points out, speculative fiction in general "anticipates what transpires when societies are put under extreme pressure" (71). Indeed, there

seems to be a "certain turn towards pessimism in modern culture," as M. Keith Booker notes, which he believes starts at the end of the nineteenth century with the notion of degeneration, a theory according to which "far from moving inexorably forward in its social and biological evolution, the human race could quite possibly move backward toward savagery" (2). The examples of dystopian fiction mentioned so far attest to this concern over retrogression not necessarily seen as following a lack of technological development, but often leading to it. The sense of crisis in this type of fiction becomes all the more intense considering it is "a reaction to frustration at the outcome of centuries of utopian dreams related to the coming of the Enlightenment in the West" (4). Booker adds that the emphasis on the "capabilities of individual human beings" and their ability to "comprehend their world through the application of reason and rationality" gave readers hope that they could eventually build "better or even ideal societies" (4). Change, however, brings uncertainty, which can be fearsome, and the advancement brought by the Enlightenment could lead to "dystopian nightmares" rather than "utopian dreams" (4). In "The Machine Stops," the fruits of the intellectual curiosity and ingenuity of previous generations that sought to address pressing societal issues have become products that individuals take for granted; the Machine has not only replaced the initial interest in what gave rise to it, but it has also undermined the engagement with principles on which it was created, meaning curiosity and experimentation. The period of Enlightenment that the Machine has helped bring about cannot be sustained without the courage and willingness to question, to learn, to change and finally to adapt, resulting in social stagnation and eventual destruction.

"The Machine Stops" perfectly illustrates how absolute faith in technology and progress is not by definition the way to create a better world. Given that technological developments will almost always outpace social changes, as the latter require time, it is imperative that the fear of stagnation does not lead to a rigid social, mechanical social structure. It seems that a more humanist

approach that is "grounded in art, emotion, and imagination as well as critical thought" (Horan 71) is what Forster is advocating in his short story. Although people in their underground society perish and the Machine finally stops, the remaining people on the surface of the Earth, "the Homeless" (Forster 38), who are freed from that civilization, can start to reconstruct the world "to-morrow" (38). There is hope at the end of the story despite the bleak images that can "lead the reader to despair" (Vieira 17). This is the case with most writers of dystopian fiction, who seem to "expect a very positive reaction on the part of their readers," who in turn are presented with a possibility of what "they have to learn to avoid" rather than an inescapable future reality (17). This is what can prompt readers to take such warnings seriously and strive for social improvement. A utopia is impossible, but a better society that can develop and adapt is attainable.

The Beehive and the Bee: Two Opposing Forces

It seems clear from the beginning of the story that the two main characters represent opposing perspectives; on the one hand, complacency which can lead to stagnation, and on the other hand, curiosity and critical thinking. In a world where each citizen is "cocooned in an identical private chamber," a "totalizing social system" controls every aspect of life and "cultural variety has ceded to rigorous organization" (Adams & Ramsden 722), Vashti seems more than content with this way of life. She has accepted the norms of this society so much so that Kuno's concerns about their overreliance on and quasi-religious worship of the Machine only drives them further apart. Her son's transgressions, curiosity and original ideas—as opposed to the second-hand ideas of the rest—vex her and she takes offence at anything he says that might be remotely critical of the Machine. She is presumably a representative of the majority of the people in this society who have become complacent, "hopelessly reliant" on "the efficient operation of the Machine" (722). The result is the total collapse of their world, which is Forster's "condemnation" of a world that

adopted the "social structure of the bee" (723). Though bees are social insects, Forster's beehive world traps its inhabitants into "social isolation and zero-diversity conditions," effectively leading to stagnation rather than development, and so the result is a "curiously asocial man" (723).

Vashti stands for the prioritisation of the collective beehive where the individual bees are interchangeable, but the whole beehive structure has to survive for the benefit of the group. The individual bee here is represented by Kuno, who is inquisitive, critical towards the Machine and seems to crave genuine human contact. He insists on his mother visiting him "so that we can meet face to face, and talk about the hopes that are in my mind" (Forster 5), as he begs of her in the beginning of the story. This need sets him apart from the "sickly passivity" (Caporaletti 35) of the rest and their adherence to their "hypertechnological world"; he is dissimilar from those who are "unaware of their unnatural condition" and "completely forgetful of their true human dimension" (33). As Emelie Jonsson points out, Kuno is "the only anomaly in the uniformity that reigns absolute in the world of the Machine" and it is telling that he is the one to denounce the dangers of materialism and conformism "imposed by rigid social conventions" that expose the "spiritual barrenness" and "emotional impoverishment" of such a world (Caporaletti 36). Belonging to the youngest generation that is supposed to represent the future, it makes sense for Kuno to be the one who embodies such ideals. It is not only his way of thinking, but also his actions that are significant. His visits to the surface of the Earth are a behavioural transgression, as Earth has been designated as a "place of non-desire" rather than a forbidden one, and so the fact that he found a way there by himself, using "his own poor muscles to emerge to the surface," rather than applying to the Machine, is defiant (35). His very desire to visit Earth is a lapse on his part; in the beginning, it is considered an oddity but, in light of the failing Machine, it is perceived as an offence, a danger to the beehive.

It can be argued that Kuno serves as Forster's voice (Jonsson 165). Through this character, the writer warns against turning away from "core human

concerns" and being "strangled by the mechanical garment it has woven" (165). Yet Kuno is still part of that beehive world, and so he remains limited by the constraints of his environment (165). In the end, he does not really manage to bring about any significant change other than making Vashti see beyond the narrow world of the Machine. Even that is accomplished at the end of the story, just before they both perish, when it is too late for them and their underground world. It seems like Kuno has played his part, however small, in challenging someone's set worldview, which could potentially lead to a better future world for the survivors on Earth, though that is again quite vague and there is no guarantee that "some fool" will not "start the Machine again, tomorrow" (Forster 39), as Vashti fears. It would have been interesting to see Kuno's individual rebellion translate to collective action, though it is questionable whether he would have been successful given the steadfastness of this society. In essence, Kuno is meant to represent the hope of change for the better, no matter how slim that might be. Readers are indeed left with a hopeful message: should they heed the warning against the "folly of adapting to tools and technology rather than adapting them to human use within an environment" (Jonsson 173), they can prevent this dystopia from realising itself.

There is, however, a caveat to this which is not all that evident in the short story. As Jonsson points out, in the attempt to avoid becoming too dependent on tools and to regain an appreciation for direct experience (169), one should not romanticise "natural man encountering nature" without "addressing the reality of a struggle for survival" (174). That is to say, one should not forget society's "dependence on cultural inventions," including tools (174) like the Machine in the story in question, or any other sort of technology that enables survival. The right balance is crucial, seeing that becoming complacent can lead to torpidity and eventually destruction. Within an overly rationalised existence, the need for imagination is critical (March-Russell 56), as is the need to nourish the inquisitive human spirit and cultivate communal bonds in order to maintain this balance.

Much like the main characters in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), Kuno seems to be more perceptive than others who surround him and dreams of setting humanity free (Lisboa 136). This could explain why he tries to make Vashti aware of the dire situation they are in, though for meaningful change to occur, more people would have to be liberated from the Machine and motivated to think differently. It is not clear exactly what enables Kuno to think in this way to begin with, meaning, how he arrives at the conclusion that "the universe should be at least partly man-shaped" (Meyers 8). Ultimately, the Machine breaks down on its own, a result of wear and tear rather than his actions. The fact that he is able to see beyond the narrow scope of their beehive world, while hopeful, leaves room for doubt about whether the emerging new society will not "exaggerate the factors that resulted in cataclysm in the first place" (Lisboa 137) and repeat past mistakes; namely, an excessive dependence on tools which can stand in the way of adaptation and evolution, a "kind of binary thinking" and a "lack of critical self-awareness" (March-Russell 58) that can keep individuals in the dark.

The allusion to Plato's allegory of the cave is unmistakable, as Paul March-Russell points out (58). Doris Meyers explains that in this allegory the people in the cave, whose knowledge consists of "shadows of reality," refuse to believe that there is a real sun outside which lights real objects that cast the shadows they see in the cave (7). This is a closed universe, in which some live contentedly, while others attempt to escape (7). Similarly, in "The Machine Stops" readers are introduced to the closed universe of the underground technologically advanced world of Vashti and Kuno, where the "general idea" of something, including people, was "good enough for all practical purposes," and the "imponderable bloom of the grape was ignored by the manufacturers of artificial fruit" (Forster 5). In this way, Forster portrays how technology causes "the alienation of human beings from one another," reinforcing the idea that such a closed system, with all its technological marvels, can also create a trap for those in it (Meyers 7). In other words, people in this world built the Machine

to enable life and make it comfortable but then had to find ways to adjust to the Machine's limitations (8), rather than to those of their environment. As a result, they have now found themselves imprisoned and dehumanised within a system that "severs human connections while apparently facilitating communication" (8).

This relates to Forster's views as a "secular humanist" who believes that life's meaning derives from "the capacity of human beings to love and communicate with one another" (7). This is most evidently illustrated through Kuno, who seeks connection and genuine communication with his mother. Having understood how the Machine has come to take over all physical human activities, he refuses to talk to Vashti through the Machine (11) and treasures the fact that his wish is granted, albeit right before their death. According to Philip Stevick, the story's ending affirms that "mankind endures" (233). That final scene reinforces the possible interpretation that Forster is in agreement with Kuno's hopeful message; otherwise, the author would have included something that would demolish this hope instead of allowing Kuno's words to "stand, without confirmation or denial, content with the irony that they have learned too late" (233). Therefore, despite the "unanswered questions" (Meyers 8), Forster presents "a calculated 'way out'" (Stevick 235) through human interaction occurring through language that goes beyond sophisticated communication systems which, in fact. "discourage people from speaking" as they are detached from "the physical nature of the human being" (Meyers 11).

Conclusion

"The Machine Stops" elicits a "specific *aesthetic (ethical) response*, which is that of a *warning*" which "underlines the potentiality of the depicted" while ensuring that it still "remains fictional" (Farca 71). Readers today can recognise elements that bear a striking resemblance to how contemporary society operates, including the way individuals interact with each other and the world, and how they communicate with others, inform and entertain themselves, while being a

part of an interconnected society. Technology is ubiquitous and virtually everyone seems to be connected to the world wide web, very much like the hyperconnectedness sustained and promoted by the Machine. In fact, Forster has created a world technologically superior to that of the modern world in the sense that everything is provided to each individual in their own private space so that one does not even have to venture out. To some extent, this holds true for contemporary readers as well, which is why the messages in the story still resonate with people today. Indeed, as a result of the "effect of estrangement" that the short story produces as it proposes a "perverted and paradoxical version of future reality" (Caporaletti 43), it poses some "disquieting questions on the ethical and social evolution of a civilization that expects to find in science an answer to many of its problems" (37).

Forster's short story urges readers then and now to reflect on their own circumstances and question to what extent technology serves or enslaves humanity. More specifically, it highlights "the level of physical comfort as part of what keeps people imprisoned," juxtaposing the closed, safe environment of such a world to breaking out of it and "accepting some discomfort" (Meyers 11). The story effectively reflects the anxiety of the era regarding automation (Shriver 155), which is also becoming a growing concern for the modern world, especially given the rapid technological advances of technologies that most people do not fully comprehend yet depend on. Technology outpacing the ability of individuals and societies to adapt is even more evident today, which heightens the fear of stagnation, of not keeping up with the latest development and of constantly seeking to acquire the next best product that will make life more comfortable. Physical comfort and progress take precedence over the long-term survival of the collective. The idea that a machine which can tend to every human need eventually creates "a race of biological incompetents" who are doomed once the machine breaks down and no one can repair it (155) seems like a tangible threat for modern readers. Forster's denouncement of technological overdependence in "The Machine Stops" demonstrates what can

happen when the survival of the collective hinges on the rigid worshipping of technology; this results in a society which functions much like a beehive, and is believed to be autonomous, but it "absolutely shuts out the rest of the environment" and so "eliminates even the possibility of an adaptive response to the environment" (Jonsson 170).

This story is the author's warning against "the maladaptive adaptation to a narrow and unreliable niche," ultimately proving that it is necessary to adapt to and be aware of the larger environment (162). Individual qualities, namely, freedom of thought, curiosity, courage and willingness to change, are essential for the collective to not only survive, but also thrive (Lynch 297). These qualities are found in Kuno, who has experienced "first-hand ideas" and has engaged in "direct observation" (Forster 28). His visits to the surface of the Earth and his contact with the people above, "hiding in the mist and the ferns," (38) have sparked his curiosity. He is no longer mentally reliant on the Machine and can think more critically, free of its yoke and the fear of living without it. His doubts and rebelliousness are the necessary link for the transition to an improved world, more in tune with nature. Although Kuno does not see this new world, the next generation, the Homeless who survive on Earth, have a chance to do so. By the end of the short story, readers may ultimately find themselves identifying not with the main characters, but with those remaining on Earth, the surviving individuals who will have to adapt to the circumstances and reconstruct a community.

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Abstract

"The Machine Stops" is a science fiction short story by English author E.M. Forster, set in a world where humanity resides underground, relying on an omnipotent global machine to fulfil all its needs. The two main characters, Vashti and her son Kuno, represent two opposing worldviews, giving rise to questions regarding the survival of the collective as opposed to the freedom of the individual. The Machine has become essential in the preservation of this society, which later proves to be incredibly fragile: a society which has come to solely rely on the comforts provided by the Machine and has renounced the physicality of its inhabitants. Forster predicts humanity's increasing reliance on technology, highlighting the dangers of this becoming the ultimate controlling force, a concern that is also relevant in modern society. The futurist, information-oriented world presented reveals what can happen when humanity disengages itself from its physical and emotional existence, becoming incapable of adapting to changing environments. Examining this world through the lens of the beehive metaphor, the objective is to explore the danger of complacency which leads to

stagnation. By delving into how individuals can resist the tendency of the collective to numb their inquisitive human spirit, the necessity of adaptation is revealed. The story delivers a warning and a hopeful message about growth in new global realities, which may resonate with readers to this day.

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"Maybe love transcends severance": Control of Emotions and Rebellion against Developing Technology in the Dystopian TV Series *Severance*

Keywords: dystopia, *Severance*, capitalist affects, grief, emotion as commodity

Dystopia, Emotions and Capitalism

Since the release of Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), dystopian stories such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) or *The Hunger Games* (2008) have turned towards the illustration of subordinated societies. Often alienated from the rest of the world, countries placed in alternative realities serve as a warning against contemporary or possible threats to human agency. In some of the most recognizable narratives, such as George Orwell's *1984* (1949) or the abovementioned *The Hunger Games* (2008), written by Suzanne Collins, a conflict preceded the emergence of the new oppressive order. These stories imply that the easiest way to gain control over a group of individuals (whether a district, country or continent) is to do so during or in the aftermath of a chaos-inducing event, such as a world war or at least an internal political conflict. Moreover, they reflect anxiety connected to the loss of agency of the individual under the government. In his totalitarian dystopia, Orwell expressed his fear of the corruption of intellectuals in the socialist movement (Claeys 118). Collins wrote *The Hunger Games* influenced by a number of factors, including the Iraq War and its portrayal (Finnsson 15). These literary works can be classified as

rebellious responses to palpable instances of the abuse of power by the government.

In 2022, the dystopian genre welcomed a new addition. It was no longer a literary work or a movie adaptation thereof, but a TV series—*Severance*. Its premise also differed from that of its predecessors. The setting of *Severance* does not involve any particular military conflict, nor does it seem to comment on a totalitarian government. In fact, *Severance,* in an unusual style, focuses on the relationship between workers and corporations. Its vision of everyday reality welcomes the viewers to a cryptic world of numbers and classified data. Early into the show, it can be noticed that *Severance* does not mirror the twenty-first century reality, but exaggerates it in a sinister way. The aim of this essay is to examine *Severance* as a piece of dystopian fiction and showcase the correlation between emotions, agency, and consumption in the story.

Dystopias often refer to what comes after: the aftermath of the collapse of the current social order, government, or even economic systems. Mariya Zhurkova and Elena Khomutnikova state that the dystopian genre is concerned with "the disastrous consequences that the attempts of bringing to life the utopian society might lead to" (188). They describe the dystopian society as "miserable and wretched," highlighting that it is a place "where inequality and injustice prevail" (2019: 186). Dystopias warn readers against a failed attempt to bring utopian visions to life. Moreover, they highlight that the state under the dystopian conditions makes society "easily manageable" and prone to submission (188). In *The Rise of Knowledge Society*, Peter F. Drucker states that capitalism became society (1993: 52). He suggests that in its late stage, capitalism no longer serves as the economic system, but rather, it becomes intertwined with daily life of a person to a degree that no longer makes it a part of life but life itself. The fundamental rules of capitalism have thus become the fundamental rules of life; capitalism no longer influences society but dictates its very existence. This late extreme stage of capitalism may later transform into a post-capitalism. Drucker predicts that "[t]he post-capitalist society will be

divided by a new dichotomy of values and of aesthetic perceptions," stating that "[t]he dichotomy will be between 'intellectuals [...] and 'managers,' the former concerned with words and ideas, the latter with people and work" (2012: 7). With the idea of the clear division of society, there emerges the question whether the separation itself is not a catalyst of dystopia. The question seems to be answered by David Beech; he explains that "[p]ostcapitalist discourse is always utopian," stating that post-capitalist world consists of human beings "freed from the need to work or the drive for capital accumulation" (2019: 2). Therefore, postcapitalist society is a dual structure designed to free humanity from its relentless chase after a higher income. It can be deduced that the members of postcapitalist society, or some of them, according to Drucker, may be able to detach themselves from the purely economic value of the world and simply be able to enjoy what the rest of the world has to offer. The postcapitalist utopia, whose inhabitants are freed from the need to work, omits the shifts through which society would need to go in order to attain this transformation. Perhaps these mechanisms and their emergence make room for dystopia.

While Drucker states that capitalism and society are inextricably bound, Eva Illouz focuses on the capitalist self and its individual relationship with emotions. In her book *Emotions as Commodities: Capitalism, Consumption and Authenticity*, she states that, "consumption works from within the very core of the cultural scripts of selfhood" (2018: 7). Moreover, Illouz writes that "consumption directly taps into the core elements of social identity—sex, gender, desire" (2018: 7). With consumption being a preconceived part of selfhood that takes over various spheres of one's consciousness, the freedom of an individual seems to be in jeopardy. Strictly dictated capitalist goals and a simultaneously nurtured internal need for continuous consumption limit one's point of view to a degree that influences a person's hierarchy of needs, taking away or at least limiting their agency. Fueled by the capitalist paradigms, the

desire to consume in Drucker's dichotomic society can be fulfilled according to one's place in the hierarchy.

As suggested by Illouz, it is not only the outside system that takes away one's agency. Occasionally, the agency of a person can be restricted by their own decisions or the limitations imposed by or on their physical body. In "The Contingency of Pain," Sara Ahmed mentions period pains as the pain she tries to move away from, "even though what is being moved away from is felt within [her] body" (26). The period pain mentioned by Ahmed manifests itself as a physical sensation and is a result of biological and chemical changes in her organism. A body tries to move away from something that seems unknown and unwelcome, despite being a reaction of the same nervous system that fights it. The alien sensation sabotages the body that has created it. In cases such as chronic pain, the internal, physical pain affects the mental state of the person. One's agency is restricted by physical pain: it disturbs the one who experiences it, prevents a person from performing regular tasks despite being the product of the same body.

As pain from the inside may influence one's perception of reality, it is worth mentioning that there exists a range of services dedicated to the improvement of one's mental state. In *Emotions as Commodities: Capitalism, Consumption and Authenticity,* Eva Illouz comments on such services and their role within the capitalist system; referring to her earlier study, she writes that mental health services are "an industry which sells mental health, self-realization, well-being, and *an ideal emotional make-up*" (Illouz 2008 in Illouz 2018: 20, emphasis original). The involvement of the mental health industry within the framework of the capitalist system expands the notion of consumption to include the emotional sphere. Illouz not only states that the need for consumption is an emotion of its own that tends to dominate over other emotions, but also comments on commodification of those subordinated emotions. Paying for a therapy session itself is an act of participation in the capitalist framework imposed by the mental health industry. Patients pay to exchange negative

emotions for solutions found during therapy sessions. The expected result is to feel better and to be able to do more. Illouz's "ideal emotional make-up" is therefore something that directly taps into the capitalist system. The services meant to improve one's mental state improve it in a way that leads to increased productivity, and, as a result, benefit the status quo. A complementary observation is made in her book *Ugly Feelings* by Sianne Ngai, who states that certain negative emotions are not erased but rather "counter-valori[zed]" by the capitalist framework (3). Ngai provides examples of such practices: she describes the transformation of fear and anxiety about being replaced in the workplace into "flexibility, adaptability, and a readiness to reconfigure oneself": in her analysis, these negative emotions are not discouraged but "integrated" into the workplace (4).

Both Illouz and Ngai address the subordination of the individual's emotions to capitalist ideas. The desire to be productive and serve the system well exceeds the simple need to feel good in one's body, and makes individuals better subjects. Counter-valorization and emotional make-up reconstruct negative affects by turning them into "the psychic fuel on which capitalist society runs" (Ngai 3). Finally, the notion of self-care becomes a myth slowly growing into self-policing and self-preparation to excel as a part of capitalist framework.

Corporate Dystopia

The Apple TV+ series *Severance* (2022–) shows that, on the surface, a postcapitalist dystopia does not need to be drastically different from the reality as its viewers know it. The show tells the story of Mark Scout, a seemingly unremarkable everyman, whose work for the Lumon company is described as "mysterious and important" (*Severance* Season 1 Episode 4). The name of the show originates from the severance procedure present in the series: the surgical insertion of a severance chip into the brain of the employee, causing the consciousness of the person to split into two separate personas—an "innie"

who exists on the severed floor of Lumon, and an "outie," who has no memory of their actions at work. According to Dan Erickson, the creator of the show, the idea for it was born from life itself. The creator admitted that the idea of splitting oneself into two, in order to avoid work, occurred to him as his own desire. Erickson added that after a deeper analysis he realized that the idea left room for abuse on the side of the employer (Dean 2022). However, the mystery of unawareness became a catalyst for the story.

Severance takes the insipidity and boredom of the so-called 9-to-5 work and twists it. The conventionality of corporate life in *Severance* seems almost off-putting. According to some critics, despite its eeriness and uncanniness, the viewers have found the show relatable: perhaps precisely because of its depiction of white-collar work as nonsensical and alienating. One of the reasons behind its popularity may thus have been its premiere during the early stage of post-COVID era, when some employees began to question their relationship with their work (Arunasalam 2025). The show delves into the core of corporate life. The insight into the severed floor reveals Mark S. to be a part of a small team of Macrodata Refinement workers whose job is to sort numbers that "feel different." Besides Mark S., the team consists of Irving B., an older man devoted to company's mission and its core principles, Dylan G., who, unlike Irving B. seems to be motivated by benefits offered by Lumon instead of an internal need to fulfill some sort of mission, and Petey K.—the well-liked department-chief. Irving's religion-like devotion to the workplace and Dylan's materialism surely resemble characteristic the viewers may have noticed in their own coworkers, albeit depicted in an exaggerated way. The average viewers of *Severance* may see themselves in the character of Mark S., who initially does not seem to possess any characteristics that make him unique in his workplace. However, the balance of Mark S.'s life is disturbed when his friend Petey disappears (*Severance* Season 1 Episode 1). Later in the same episode, Mark Scout notices a strange man in the woods outside of his sister's house. As the plot unravels, Mark S. begins to uncover new layers of the system he is a part of. Moreover, his

curiosity is fueled not only by his interior motives, but also by his encounters with Helly R., a rebellious figure whose main goal is to leave the company and the work she has been assigned to do.

The case of Mark and his colleagues becomes an example of Drucker's dichotomy. Because of Lumon's invention, the division is no longer between intellectuals and managers designated as separate groups consisting of different people; instead, it comprises different parts of the same person. In this case, Drucker's theory leaves room for abuse mentioned by the creator of the show. While individuals such as Mark Scout agree to the procedure, willingly subjecting their body to work, the innies, as separated fragments of their consciousness, experience the work physically and mentally. However, due to Lumon's policy, they are not able to resign, as it is their outside selves who make the final decisions. Mark S. cannot ever leave the floor where his only purpose is to meet the end-of-quarter goals; he ceases to exist the moment Mark Scout's consciousness is triggered by the sound of an elevator. To Lumon, Mark S. does not exist outside of the company; to Mark Scout and his family, he initially exists as the idea; to the rest of the world, he is nonexistent. His time on the floor depends on his performance as the employee and, as the second season reveals, his existence will be terminated the moment he finishes refining the last file. Mark S. is set to exist for only as long as he brings profit to the system that created him.

However, Mark Scout also cannot live outside of the economic system he serves, and that is why undergoes the eponymous severance: Mark S.'s existence is rooted in Mark Scout's need to persists in the capitalist system. Moreover, the abbreviation of worker's full surnames into a single initial immediately highlights the degradation of an innie to a unit. The surname is something inherited or taken from a spouse: it is a sign of connection and belonging, indicating a personal history and bonds with others. In contrast to outies, innies do not have the privilege of remembering their roots, as their purpose is not to form relationships but to produce satisfactory outcomes for

the company. Additionally, the contrast between the innie and the outie becomes permanent with Helly R.'s failed journey to freedom. Conscious of her fabricated existence, Helly does not hesitate to test the limits of her own agency. Desperate for freedom after having her request to resign denied by her outie, Helly decides to hang herself in the elevator that allows the workers to enter the severed floor (*Severance* Season 1 Episode 4): an attempt that is prevented, showing that innies do not even have the right to terminate their own existence.

In contrast, because of the chip, Mark S. seemingly considers himself to be "living" his best life, at least at first. He likes his job and most of his colleagues, and he does not appear discouraged by the hostile, labyrinth-like design of the severed floor, which itself creates a dissonance between the viewer and the characters. Understandably, to the innies, the severed floor is all that they initially know, but the viewers can notice the disturbing artificiality of white walls and green floor coverings. This unwelcoming minimalism strikes from the first introduction of the oddly symmetrical workstations of Mark S. and his coworkers. The hyperbole of regular corporate activities such as a celebration of achievements also contributes to the awkwardness of a place. However, Mark S. seems to enjoy various activities prepared by his supervisors as means of reward or entertainment. In contrast, Mark Scout, who decided to subject the body to the severance procedure and, therefore, seems to have more power over it, struggles with his reality. At the beginning of the first episode of the series, he can be seen crying in his car before entering the workplace: however, it is not the workplace that causes this reaction. Further glimpses into Mark Scout's life prove that he is experiencing more difficulties. Moreover, the coldness of the outside world escalates his alienation and withdrawal. While the office setting presents itself as hermetic through set design, the world outside is represented as endlessly empty and lonely, with the snow-covered and seemingly nearly empty town. Similarly, the house Mark lives in appears impersonal and the neighborhood it is a part of seems desolate. The world in

which Mark Scout lives is thus an embodiment of a "miserable and wretched" reality mentioned by Zhurkova and Khomutnikova.

A valuable perspective on the role performed by Mark S. is afforded by Ngai's concept of a "knowledge-seeking man." Drawing upon Fredric Jameson's analysis, Ngai explains that a "knowledge-seeking man" in conspiracy film is a stand-in for the postmodern intellectual who attempts to unravel the possibly infinite network of relations which establish the social order. The character at some point of the story finds out that he is just a part of the system that functions beyond his comprehension and control (298–299). The duality of the world presented in *Severance* illustrates the complex network of connections with innies, outies, and characters that exist between or outside these notions. As representatives of the dystopian genre protagonist, Mark Scout and Mark S. find themselves in the middle of such a system orchestrated by the Lumon company. Additionally, Mark's ability to comprehend the reality he is a part of is limited by the severance procedure. The role of the knowledge-seeking man is not a role he is initially introduced with, but, rather, it is something that is passed onto him and encouraged by outside factors, such as Petey's (dis)appearance or Helly's attempt to free herself. The severance procedure and chip become not only elements of dystopian development meant to entrap him but also symbols of capitalist goals. They limit his agency as the innie, but also extend the restraint to the person he is a part of—Mark Scout.

Furthermore, from the beginning, the show directly showcases an abuse of the severance procedure through the character of Harmony Cobel. Known to Mark S. as Ms. Cobel and to Mark Scout as Mrs. Selvig, Harmony supervises Mark S.'s work inside of the company and spies on Mark Scout as his neighbor. She embodies the paradox of Lumon's policies and dystopian, everlasting control over the employees/citizens. On one hand, Lumon's marketing strategy highlights the balance and separation that may result in full psychological autonomy from the capitalist morals and goals which prioritize productivity and performance. Lumon advertizes the severance procedure as an

unbreakable wall that separates the innie from the outie, enabling the outie to never concern themselves with their job. However, Mark's autonomy is repeatedly violated by the presence of Harmony in his life. At first, he is unaware of the oppression he faces. The initial episodes of *Severance* explain the severance procedure as a security tool, highlighting that not only is the job "mysterious and important," which means it can only be done by a severed employee, a person freed from everyday distractions, but also that the data Mark is processing is so sensitive that it must be protected from the outside world. However, one of the earliest demonstrations of alternative reasons for chip usage can be seen in the fifth and sixth episode of the first season when Mark's sister, Devon, meets a severed woman, Gabby Arteta, outside of the company headquarters, which is supposed to be the only "severed" location. At first, Devon encounters Gabby at a "baby camp," a retreat consisting of cottage-like buildings, where Devon (accompanied by her husband and brother) goes to give birth.. As the two women talk about parenthood, Gabby mentions that she plans to name her son William. Devon notices the woman again later when they are both in the park with their newborns. She approaches Gabby, who does not seem to recognize her. Shortly after they begin an awkward conversation, Devon tells her that her newborn son "looks like a William," to which Gabby responds, "his name's Bradley, actually" (*Severance* Season 1 Episode 6): Gabby has no memory of the name her innie wanted to choose for the child she birthed. The chip, whose sole purpose was supposedly to prevent company secrets from being released into the outside world, seems to be used as a method of avoiding unpleasant experiences by those who can afford it: the Artetas are revealed to be wealthy, as Gabby's husband is a politician supporting the legalization of severance.

Emotions under Capitalism

As demonstrated above, *Severance* takes the already existing industry of emotional make-up to the next level by selling good emotions (or at least, a way

to dispense with negative emotions) with the help of futuristic technology. This example highlights the implied class difference but it also proves technology to be a tool of power which might easily contribute to imbalance in a relationship such as a marriage. Gabby Arteta's innie, despite going through labor, does not possess any decisive power, as she is unable to control the name of a child she gave birth to: she is effectively enslaved by Gabby and her husband, and exists only for the purposes of going through unpalatable birth experiences; at the same time, Gabby is divided into two, while her husband does not need to undergo a similar dangerous procedure to benefit from the way it makes it possible for him to have more children than his wife might otherwise want, as implied in the ninth episode of the first season. The existence of innie Gabby implies inequality between a woman and a man in a marriage. Despite having her consciousness split in two, Gabby's body remains as one. She is subjected to the dangers of birth and severance procedure at the same time. Additionally, the existence of her innie raises questions about the notion of consent in the relationship as outside the Lumon company, severance seems to be a procedure unregulated by any law.

Episode seven of the second season helps the viewer uncover yet another truth about Lumon's developments. The episode focuses on the mysterious character of Gemma, who haunts the narrative from the beginning of the show. Gemma is Lumon's special project, as her consciousness has been divided into twenty-five alters instead of the regular two presented in all previous cases. One of her innies exists solely to go to the dentist and undergo dental procedures, another writes Christmas cards for an eternity, and the third flies as a passenger in an apparently crashing plane. In Gemma's case, the chip is a commodity able to erase the smallest fears of the human who can afford it. While the outies slowly approach an emotionally utopian phase of societal development, their innies continually experience both common and extreme horrors, deprived of any comfort. Mark Scout and Mark S. become an extension of Drucker's theory; meanwhile Gemma, similarly to the mother mentioned in

the paragraph above, represents the effects of efforts to achieve "an ideal emotional make[up]" as introduced by Illouz. The invention perfected by the exploitation of Gemma's body is presumably meant to allow individuals to experience a pain-free, fearless life without the need to undergo therapy, as negative experiences can seemingly be severed and externalized: Gemma and her innies become a means of outsourcing all negative emotions. While therapy helps a person with healing, it also requires time, effort, and energy put into the process of becoming a healthier version of oneself. In contrast, the severance procedure reduces the time contributed to the process of healing by temporarily erasing negative factors from the life of a severed person.

It is important to mention that while Lumon offers a range of commodified effects and seems to possess significant power, the procedure remains controversial in the world of the show. Mark's choice to sever himself is something that becomes a topic of an uncomfortable debate. His sister refers to it as something that he is supposed to share with people only if he decides to do so (*Severance* Season 1 Episode 1), implying the need to shield him from negative reactions. However, at first Mark sees himself as benefiting from the procedure. During the first episode, when Mark and Devon talk, she asks him about the therapy he is supposed to be attending to cope with the tragic death of his wife Gemma and the depression he suffered as its consequence. Her question is met with Mark's response, "Well, the work thing's helped," which implies that he has abandoned the more traditional form of treatment. Devon replies, "I just feel like forgetting about her [Gemma] for hours a day isn't the same as healing" (Season 1 Episode 1).

To Mark, the severance procedure may be compared to extremely strong painkillers. Mark's pain is something that he experiences as an emotional reaction to grief. It is the pain from within that he tries to move away from by avoiding it with the help of severance. In the second season, Mark's grief is confirmed to be "a primary motivator for severing." During the same scene, the pain associated with losing a loved one is connected to the physical sensation

as a metaphor for the suffering. One of the characters, Mr. Milchick, tells Mark, "You said that since she died, every day feels like a year. That you feel like you were choking on her ghost" (*Severance* Season 2 Episode 2). The reaction of choking moves the choking subject closer to death. The pain from within is something that a person usually desperately tries to move away from, but for obvious reasons cannot. Even when the pain someone feels inside is physical and can be treated with medication, the thought of it still keeps it present; therefore, the person in pain does not move away from it. The inventors of the severance procedure, or, rather, its sellers, prey on that. In the same conversation, Mr. Milchick tells Mark that his innie is happy and knows nothing about the pain that is visible in Mark's reaction at the moment (*Severance* Season 2 Episode 2). On some level, severance proves to be more effective than medication or therapy, because it eliminates pain from one's memory. Innie Mark does not know about Gemma and her fate; therefore, he cannot experience longing for her or associate anything with her past presence. In turn, even though Mark Scout does not know life without pain, he is able to function more effectively in the postcapitalist social framework because of the existence of Mark S.; consequently, Mark Scout becomes capable of fulfilling the role of a worker, even though it is only through externalizing the work tasks onto a separate persona. Therefore, Mark Scout is perceived as functioning better than before, when he was constantly affected by his grief and his emotions interfered with his productivity and, accordingly, his social value.

Conclusion

Emotions, agency, and consumption function indissociably in the world of *Severance*. It can be stated that consumption is a predominant factor as it is the core of the capitalist and postcapitalist self. The story of Mark's severance begins with his inability to perform at his workplace due to the traumatic loss of his wife. It seems significant that despite his grief being an omnipresent part of Mark's life, it is precisely when he is unable to work that he ultimately

decides to pursue the procedure. By severing himself, Mark gives up a part of his free will. Arguably, grief as a pain from within, an alien feeling overtaking his body, also restricted him without the need for physical presence. Despite being the product of Mark's life and psyche, grief seemingly limits his agency. The severance procedure, connected with a well-paid job and a number of bureaucratic arrangements, seems to create an illusion of control, necessary when fighting against unrestricted emotions. In order to fulfill his role in the economic system, Mark decides to give his agency away to Lumon instead of having it restricted by his own grief. It is the act of making a decision itself that differentiates severing oneself from grieving. While involuntary surrendering to grief reduces his productivity almost completely, the severance procedure increases it by separating his consciousness from his internal pain. However, it must be emphasised that Mark falls victim to the misleading advertising of commodified affects sold by Lumon. As stated before by Zhurkova and Khomutnikova, the society "bends into submission" because of how "easily manageable" it is (188). By selling something that basically turns off negative emotions and experiences, Lumon company slowly subordinates people. Mark Scout has two motivations in severance—to remain a capitalist consuming subject and to escape pain even temporarily instead of either working through it or living with it. The severance procedure becomes the key to fulfillment of both of these desires. However, it leads to the creation of another subject— Mark S.—whose dystopian existence is removed from view while he undergoes labour and torture in the service of the system he is subordinated to. Mark S.'s existence and life on the severed floor makes it impossible for Mark Scout to learn about Gemma's suffering. As the viewers observe Mark S. and the relationships he has formed and developed on the severed floor, it becomes evident that Mark Scout's choice to undergo the procedure will result in disastrous consequences. Between the two seasons, Mark S. seems to have evolved from the character whose sole purpose was to separate Mark Scout from the memory of Gemma to a bridge that finally reconnects Mark and his

wife. However, as the show's plot concludes with the final episode of the second season, Mark S. becomes a character of his own with separate goals and struggles, despite still being tied to Mark Scout. Nevertheless, his rebellion induced by his romantic relationship with Helly R. ties to the show's premise. In his case, love transcends severance because it encourages him to fight for his right to permanently exist in a world that designed him as a temporary solution to Mark Scout's problems.[1]

Endnotes
1. The early draft of this article was submitted as an assignment for Literature and Culture Today: The American Nightmare course taught by Dr Nelly Strehlau in 2025.

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Abstract

A number of literary works, especially those from dystopian genre, such as George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) have been concerned with the notion of agency and its limitations, and have explored it in various settings. In 2022, the broad catalogue of dystopian media welcomed a new addition, the Apple TV+ series *Severance*. The show creates a setting familiar to the potential viewer by exploring the eerie corporate world of consumption-fueled capitalism, whose subjects chase after emotionlessness required for satisfying results in a profit-oriented workplace. The show explores the relationship between negative affects and late-stage capitalist society, modified by the use of a neurological chip designed to increase the productivity of an employee. The aim of this essay is to apply notions developed by, among others, Sara Ahmed and Eva Illouz, to explore the connection between the agency of a person, their emotional make-up, and an economic system enhanced by futuristic technological advancements.

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A Posthumanist Reading of Stephen King's *Firestarter*: Surveillance, Experiments and the Ethics of Alterity

Keywords: posthumanism, Stephen King, surveillance, subjectivity, embodiment

Introduction

When people first encountered Stephen King's 1980 novel, they might have expected a dynamic science fiction thriller. Instead, they found a work that raised profound questions about government control, military exploitation of individuals, and whether humans should be subjected to any enhancements. Engagement with these themes makes *Firestarter* particularly relevant to contemporary posthumanist thought, which questions the very nature of being a human and asks if, in the times of technological advancements and biological intervention, the current definition of human is still applicable. In light of these concerns, this article's primary aim is to explore *Firestarter* from a posthumanist perspective based fundamentally on the approaches of N. Katherine Hayles and Cary Wolfe.

Although *Firestarter* appears to be a fast-paced science fiction novel about a young girl with pyrokinetic abilities, its deeper significance demonstrates when interpreted through the lens of posthumanist theory. Drawing on N. Katherine Hayles's argument that the posthuman view tends to value information and patterns over the physical body itself, or, as she puts it, "privileges informational pattern over material instantiation" (Hayles 199: 2), the novel reveals anxieties about reducing human identity to data and control systems.

Similarly, Cary Wolfe's critique of Enlightenment humanism helps illuminate how King's depiction of governmental experiments exposes the marginalisation of those who deviate from normative definitions of the human. In this way, *Firestarter* not only dramatises biopolitical practices that instrumentalise human subjects, reducing them to data or tools, but also confronts the reader with the need to redefine what the human really is.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the science fiction genre employed here by King provides a favourable space for examining issues related to posthumanism. As indicated by Sherryl Vint in *Bodies of Tomorrow* (2007), science fiction "is particularly suited to exploring the question of the posthuman because it is a discourse that allows us to concretely imagine bodies and selves otherwise, a discourse defined by its ability to estrange our commonplace perceptions of reality" (2007: 19). This is because science fiction does not reflect the world through the author's mere depiction but through their speculative reworking. It is the author's responsibility to present the world, its ethical intricacies, and the laws governing it to the readers. The author introduces characters who operate according to rules different from those in the real world, allowing readers to explore alternative subjectivities, as well as the relationship between the body and technology or identity.

Moreover, Vint insists that science fiction should function as "a space in which models of possible future selves are put forward as possible sites for identification" (2007: 20). In this context, *Firestarter* can be seen not as a story illustrating posthumanist thought but as a text that enacts it or brings it to life by encouraging readers to empathise with the main character, Charlie, a child whose body was altered even before her birth due to technologically-engineered mutations of her parents, and who was later subjected to further violations by a governmental system of control. At the same time, Vint underlines that technology is "neither emancipatory nor repressive in and of itself and can be used to signify new forms of exclusion as well as new spaces of freedom" (2007: 21). Consequently, the moral and ethical implications of

technological involvement are shaped by the social context of the imagined reality.

According to Vint, technological changes are inevitable, but they do not have to be associated with the end of the human era. It is therefore imperative that we develop an ethically responsible model of embodied posthuman subjectivity which enlarges rather than decreases the range of bodies and subjects that matter (2007: 190), and that is precisely what King tries to achieve with *Firestarter*. By connecting it with governmental control and oppression, the novel illustrates how technological intervention diminishes personhood, yet simultaneously advocates for a more inclusive approach to who or what constitutes a human.

Hayles and Disembodied Posthuman

According to Hayles, the defining feature of humans is not the physical form or body but the unique informational patterns each human being carries. In *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), she argues that "the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life" (2). In her framework, a person's identity is composed of patterns of thought, behaviour and memories rather than their bond with the biological form. This notion could be clearly illustrated by the concept of teleportation, according to which the human body may be scanned, converted into pure data, sent somewhere else and reconstructed exactly as it was, indicating that what truly matters is not the material body but the encoded information. In that sense, Hayles suggests that the body becomes "the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born" (3). This reconfiguration of embodiment challenges conventional humanist ideas of identity, posing a fundamental question regarding the boundaries of the human.

Posthumanism contests the traditional definition of the human as one unified identity, centring its focus on individuality and autonomy of the subject. It also emphasises the profound impact of technological advancements and informational networks on human identity, noting that the understanding of what counts as a human is currently being reshaped. Moreover, the definition of a human is not fixed but, rather, fluid and unstable, as the boundaries between human and machine become blurred. Hayles further states that "[t]he posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines" (3). In this context, the human mind can be integrated into a broader network of information and computation. Since human identity is primarily defined as informational patterns, a computer operating complex software may not be fundamentally different from it. In Hayles's view, the human subject is no longer perceived as a purely biological, autonomous subject but rather as a complex system made of technological and informational components. She explains that "[t]he posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components" and should be treated as a "material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (3). According to posthumanist thought, the human is a hybrid or assemblage of parts with fluid boundaries rather than a unified flesh-and-blood individual.

In contrast to Hayles, who highlights the posthuman shift from material embodiment to informational pattern, Sherryl Vint urges that any posthuman discussion should remain focused on the body. As she explains, "my concern is less with tracing how the history of cybernetics leads to a disembodied view of the subject... and more with attempting to think through how we might develop another concept of the posthuman that is attentive to embodiment" (218). Her standpoint is also relevant in the context of *Firestarter*, as the physical body of the main character, Charlie, serves as a site of posthuman changes and is being prepared to be used as a military asset beyond Charlie's control. In the novel,

posthuman reality does not present itself as an abstract idea but as a tangible, embodied experience for the protagonist.

At the core of *Firestarter* lies the need to redefine the boundaries used to frame the human subject, exemplified by the novel's protagonist, Charlie McGee, whose identity is perceived as a data system measured in terms of utility rather than subjectivity. Charlie's situation results from external factors she had no control over. She "is purely a victim of circumstance and greed by ruthless adults" (Wiater et al. : 267). While at college, her parents, Andy McGee and Vicky Tomlinson, had voluntarily participated in a governmental experiment involving a drug called Lot Six, which caused them to develop mild psychic abilities. Although their powers are weak, their daughter is born with a terrifying gift: pyrokinesis, the ability to start fires with her mind, making her an unintended and possibly dangerous outcome of the experiment. The agency responsible for the experiments (the Shop) identifies Charlie as both a threat and a potential military asset. Their desire to investigate the girl's abilities leads to a pursuit of her and her father (with the girl's mother, Vicky, being killed in the process). Eventually captured, Charlie and Andy are taken to a secret facility where scientists aim to study and weaponise the little girl, while simultaneously keeping her father sedated to suppress his abilities. The Shop's approach in treating Charlie and Andy clearly shows that in their eyes, the girl and her father are not people with their own subjectivities, fears and emotions, but objects that can be used.

Firestarter is "about a father and daughter on the run, alone and vulnerable, while all around them a powerful government machine works to find them" (Brown 92). Since rescuing Charlie from the hands of the Shop's agents for the first time, Andy and his daughter have been constantly hunted. Amid their escape, they find themselves defenceless and vulnerable, unable to face the upcoming danger. Their oppressors are influential and relentless; they possess vast resources, including governmental authority, which can make the life of the McGees significantly harder and their escape unlikely.

From the very beginning, the Shop's goals and objectives regarding Charlie and her father are clear and straightforward. As described, the Shop is "a top-secret government agency doing whatever it takes—including parascientific research—to create fantastic new weapons for America's arsenal" (Wiater et al.: 267). They want to militarise the girl's psychic abilities for strategic advancements, identifying her not as a person but as a possible prototype of future biotechnological warfare. Their need to dehumanise Charlie stems from the deep-rooted fear of the unknown. The scientists are deeply concerned about the potential consequences of Charlie's abilities which are far beyond typical and still an uncharted territory; accordingly, "[t]hose still working for the Shop remain deeply concerned that a girl with Charlie's power might one day, as she matures, gain the awesome power to split the world itself in two with merely a concentrated thought" (Wiater et al.: 267). For the Shop, this hypothetical vision in which Charlie might one day lose control of her powers and cause widespread destruction is enough to justify the drastic measures undertaken to capture her and later ruthlessly experiment with her pyrokinesis. In their actions, they reduce Charlie and Andy from actual humans with their thoughts and feelings to possible weapons of destruction, viewing them through the lens of their abilities.

Since the Shop operates as a top-secret government agency devoted to weaponising human abilities, Charlie's body becomes for them a site of experimental curiosity and technological exploitation. This attitude aligns with the posthuman tendency to understand the human in terms of data, function and utility. In the novel, it is exemplified by the repeated measurements of her pyrokinetic output (recorded in degrees Fahrenheit) and by the assumption that once sufficient data is collected, Charlie will be eliminated and replaced with other subjects. Although Charlie appears to be physically ordinary, her body is reduced to the role of a mere instrument generating heat and fire, and precisely that reduction denies her recognition as a human. She is not seen as a frightened, grieving and confused little girl but as a system to be optimised. The

Shop aims to analyse and control the pyrokinetic pattern within Charlie, using her as a prototype whose abilities can be replicated, viewing her less as a person and more as a material, military asset to be used. Indeed, Charlie is both dehumanised and technologised, treated not as a subject but as an object of experimentation and control.

The Shop's approach to Charlie and Andy exemplifies the shift in the treatment of humans seen not as individuals but as an informational systems that can be interpreted, controlled and used in the service of institutional power. From the beginning, Andy is deeply concerned with the Shop's willingness to conduct further experiments on him and his daughter. He quickly realises that the men from the Shop were the ones "who wanted to pick them apart and see what made them work—and to see if they could be used, made to do things" (King 28). This cold and analytical approach of the Shop's scientists reflects what Hayles described as a defining feature of the posthuman condition. Her concept of the "material-informational entity" accurately describes the logic according to which Andy and Charlie are regarded as carriers of strategic potential rather than as individuals with moral worth or personal agency.

Firestarter serves as a powerful counterpoint to the posthumanist idea of reducing individuals to data-producing systems. Charlie goes through various tests, but at the same time, she manages to gain a deeper understanding of her abilities. She rejects the idea of her powers being a destructive military asset and rather accepts them as a meaningful part of her identity, not a resource but a personal capacity. This shift is evident in a moment of internal reflection: "Why shouldn't I want to do it? If people are good at things, they always want to do them" (King 1980: 296). Here, Charlie indicates a point of injustice at being denied the right to express natural and integral parts of her selfhood. In doing so, she takes agency and reclaims a form of embodiment which was stolen from her by the Shop. Charlie does not want to be framed as an instrument; she wants to establish a more complex definition for her humanity, grounded in

feeling, choice and autonomy. As Wiater, Golden, and Wagner observe: "Charlie is tempered by it [her power], like steel in the forge. She emerges only more powerful—and wiser—after the tragedy of her tale" (267). Through her transformation, the novel reaffirms the importance of subjectivity and resistance to the system that seeks to instrumentalise the self.

Other scholars, K. T. Tamilmani and V. S. Sridheepika, argue that "Charlie's arduous struggle to harness and control her formidable powers emerges as a poignant allegory, shedding light on the complex psychological consequences of transcending the confines of conventional human capabilities" (313). Their perspective supplements Vint's argument, which underlines the fact that a truly ethical posthumanist approach must remain attentive to the body. Charlie's initial fear of her own abilities and potential illustrates the price she had to pay for her parents' involvement with a governmental experimental programme. Her body is portrayed as both a frightening source of danger and a locus of her agency, which she must accept and learn to live with (King 296: 465).

The dynamic and the need for experimentation and exploitation exemplify features that Hayles described as characteristics of the posthuman subject. As previously mentioned, Hayles sees the human condition as no longer grounded in the notion of a coherent, autonomous self but rather in patterns of information. In *Firestarter*, this logic is present in the actions of the Shop, which deploys advanced surveillance and unethical methods to study Charlie and her potential with a methodological and dehumanising approach. As a consequence, Charlie's identity becomes increasingly fragmented and unstable. The Shop sees her as a subject to observe, a weapon to control, an anomaly to contain with "scientist at both their best and worst, blue-skying a hundred new ideas on one hand and worrying tiresomely—and considerably after the fact—about how to control on the other hand" (King 350). Those categories, of threat and weapon, are imposed on Charlie by the systems of biotechnological governance and technological discourse. Her value is not measured in terms of who she is, but by what she can do and what can be achieved if the Shop gains

control over her power, and that is a possible reactivation of the Lot Six programme (King 137).

Cary Wolfe's Critique of Liberal Humanism's Approach

Charlie struggles not only with the surveillance imposed by the Shop, but also with the system that devalues subjectivity in favour of utility. The way in which she is treated illustrates how, in the posthuman world, identity is no longer grounded in physical presence or inner life. The narrative of *Firestarter* leaves the reader with an urgent demand to redefine and reconsider what it means to be human. After all, Charlie, as a character, evokes sympathy and compassion rather than fear and concern in the reader. Along with the need to redefine what the human is comes Cary Wolfe's posthumanist critique, which offers a framework for exploring the philosophical foundations of Enlightenment humanism and its persistent effect on contemporary ethics and understanding of what counts as human. While Hayles focuses on the transformation of the human into an informational entity, Wolfe examines the foundation of what qualifies as human in the first place. For him, the exclusion is not merely a side effect of humanist thought but a problem deeply grounded in its foundation. He blames liberal humanism for employing a very narrow set of criteria, favouring exclusion, marginalisation, and denying anyone who does not fit into its model the right to be considered human (136–137).

As mentioned before, Wolfe's main argument is the claim that liberal humanism constructed its model of the human based on a highly specific set of features, which in turn led to the exclusion of anyone who, to some extent, does not fit. By setting such a rigid standard for inclusion, the humanist model has had far-reaching consequences for people with disabilities, racialised groups, and women, marking them peripheral to ethical reflection. As he states, even well-intentioned humanist promises "reproduce the very kind of normative subjectivity—a specific concept of the human—that grounds discrimination against nonhuman animals and the disabled in the first place" (Wolfe xvii).

To illustrate this notion, Wolfe describes the humanist model as a conceptual house, building broadly called the human. The doors to that house are open for the ideal or model individual (able-bodied, mentally stable, economically independent white male) while also allowing entry, through reforms or exceptions, to the rest, like people with disabilities, racialised individuals, or nonhuman animals. At first glance, this model may seem to acknowledge or validate other forms of existence; however, its underlying principles remain unchanged. Wolfe stresses that disability and nonhuman interests are treated "as merely the next room added onto the (increasingly opulent and globalising) house of what Richard Rorty has called 'the rich North Atlantic bourgeois democracies'" (Wolfe 137). As he explains, liberal humanism allows small surface-level reforms while, at the same time, preventing more profound changes to the foundation.

Given the reluctance to change present in liberal humanism, Wolfe's posthumanism calls for a radical approach; instead of adding more rooms to the house, he proposes a complete redefinition of the human. By challenging the very foundation of the humanist framework, Wolfe's posthumanism opens the possibility for a system that is more inclusive, able to adapt and respond to the needs of contemporary existence, like, for example, in Stephen King's *Firestarter*. The novel provides a powerful image of institutional response to abilities falling outside the normative categories, while, at the same time, urging for a much broader understanding of the human. As soon as Charlie's pyrokinetic abilities begin to manifest, she ceases to be seen as a child but, rather, is perceived as a potential threat or weapon. She is repeatedly referred to as a monster or a witch by both the Shop's scientists and ordinary people (King 133: 468). Those labels do not stem from her actions but from what she is, as she is different from what liberal humanists used to perceive as normal. Her pyrokinetic abilities mark her as fundamentally different, not only in degree but also in kind, resulting in positioning her outside the criteria established by liberal humanism.

Wolfe writes that "posthumanism means not the triumphal surpassing or unmasking of something but an increase in the vigilance, responsibility, and humility that accompany living in a world so newly, and differently, inhabited" (47). In his view, human exceptionalism should not be idealised but approached with awareness and accountability regarding humans' position in the world. Although the character of Charlie McGee in the novel is presented as surpassing human limitations and ordinary abilities, Wolfe's posthumanist perspective helps to reveal that her transcendence should not be seen as superior but as coexisting with other life forms. The government's treatment of Charlie's abilities, viewing them as a resource to be exploited, is the exact opposite of Wolfe's approach. Instead of considering her as a part of a "newly and differently inhabited" world, the state desires to weaponise her difference.

The novel vividly depicts people's failure to face the real posthuman difference. Charlie, although looking and behaving like a normal little girl, is approached with apprehension and distance because of her extraordinary abilities. She evokes fear even in people who were sent to capture her and who later experiment with her powers, because even though the Shop's agents are all properly trained men who understand the dangers of their job, a close encounter with Charlie and her destructive powers frightens them. Faced with a manifestation of power beyond their understanding, they instinctively seek escape: "The three men he [Al Steinowitz, the best agent in the Shop's employ] had sent running down toward Andy and Charlie from the front end of the porch had forgotten their duty to God, country, and the Shop" (King 130). Their abandonment of their commitments only amplifies their failure to acknowledge what is different. The novel exposes the fact that the deep-rooted impulse to fear and reject difference is not limited to institutional structures. As mentioned before, the Shop's scientists and agents are not the only ones who approach Charlie with fear and distrust.

Marginalisation and worry, caused by an encounter with the unknown, accompany the girl in most of the human-to-human interactions. Charlie's stay

at the Shop ends in conflagration, killing many people and animals and destroying the whole facility. On her way out, Charlie encounters a panicked woman with a broken arm who responds with apprehension and aggression. As Ingrid E. Castro notes, the woman "accuses Charlie of being a witch, advising that Charlie should kill herself" (108: see also King 468). This moment highlights how, despite her young age, Charlie is perceived not as a child in distress but as a monstrous figure, an embodiment of anomalous power. The accusation of witchcraft reflects a long-standing cultural pattern: the tendency to demonise those who exceed or defy normative expectations, especially when their difference cannot be rationally explained. The woman's reaction, urging Charlie to take her own life, reveals how ordinary individuals can become agents of exclusion and violence when confronted with the unfamiliar. Her response underscores the extent to which fear of otherness can override empathy, even when the supposed threat is a vulnerable and mistreated girl.

These reactions, coming from frightened, ordinary people, demonstrate that the fear of difference is not limited to powerful institutions concerned with collective well-being, but is also deeply embedded in societal attitudes. In addition to the previous interaction with the woman at the Shop's headquarters, mention may also be made of the reaction of Norma Manders, who, despite initially caring for the girl, after witnessing her powers, perhaps guided by self-preservation instinct, refers to Charlie as a monster and orders her father to "[t]ake [his] monster and get away" (King 133). However, Andy McGee, a loving and understanding father, rejects this logic of fear and dehumanisation. Despite confronting the horror his daughter's powers evoke, he refuses to see her as a threat and instead proposes a more empathetic approach, calling her his Zippo lighter (King 24). He defends his daughter by saying that "She's no more a monster than a kid in an iron lung or in a home for retarded [sic] children" (King 135). While the language is outdated, this passage shows Andy's attempt to reframe Charlie's difference in humanising terms. Like children with disabilities, his daughter should not be defined by her difference,

but, instead, approached with compassion and understanding. In making this analogy, Andy challenges the cultural narrative equating what is abnormal with what is monstrous, offering a vision of humanity that includes vulnerability and difference.

The social and political aspects of *Firestarter* also resonate with what Tamilmani and Sridheepika (2024) describe as "the potential perils associated with unchecked transhuman capabilities and the resultant societal paranoia they may incite" (2024: 313). Charlie and her father are relentlessly pursued by the Shop; the girl is repeatedly being called a threat, a monster or a witch. These attitudes reflect the exclusionary logic of liberal humanism as presented by Wolfe. In the eyes of most characters in the novel, Charlie cannot be accepted within society; moreover, if her difference cannot be understood, it has to be feared and controlled. She is seen as a weapon whose potential can only be obtained by imposing authority and manipulation, denying her the right to be treated as a regular human.

Conclusion

Although at first *Firestarter* may seem like an entertaining novel with a fast-moving and interesting plot, on closer analysis, it reveals an engagement with posthumanist ideas. Following Hayles's critique, the novel shows us a different approach to people treated as informational systems, while their physical bodies recede into the background. At the same time, it engages with Cary Wolfe's redefinition of the human in a "newly, and differently inhabited" world through its engagement with societal treatment of Charlie and her father. In the world of *Firestarter*, difference, exemplified by Charlie and, to some extent, by her father, is feared and approached with distance and the need to analyse it, not to understand, but to learn to manipulate it and use it for systemic purposes.

The novel demands that the readers deeply rethink and expand their definition of the human to make it more inclusive. It challenges people to

reconsider their perspectives and what it means to be human in a world shaped by technological and ethical complexities. Although contemporary approaches such as disability studies, feminist theory, and animal studies have begun to challenge traditional notions of humanity by focusing on what has been neglected, the most profound transformation must still occur within human perception itself.

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Abstract

This article applies a posthumanist framework to Stephen King's *Firestarter* (1980), focusing on the systems of surveillance, the ethics of experimentation on humans and the cultural dehumanisation of what is considered unknown. Charlie McGee, a child born with pyrokinetic abilities, resulting from a government experiment conducted on both of her parents, embodies concerns central to posthumanist theory as outlined by N. Katherine Hayles and Cary Wolfe. Hayles argues that posthumanism "privileges informational pattern over material instantiation" and redefines the human as "an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components" embedded in systemic networks. Her ideas fit Charlie, whose identity is deeply shaped by such a network, one of surveillance, experimentation, and exploitation. Meanwhile, Cary Wolfe's critique of liberal humanism reveals how traditional definitions of the human exclude those who differ from normative standards. As he writes, posthumanism "forces us to rethink our

taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes and affective states of Homo sapiens itself." Charlie is labelled a "monster" or "witch," revealing the cultural forces behind her exclusion. As she gains agency over her powers, she emerges as a figure of posthuman resistance, reclaiming autonomy from the system that sought to control her.

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INVERTING THE MALE GAZE IN THE POETRY OF SEAMUS HEANEY AND MEDBH MCGUCKIAN

Keywords: *aisling* tradition, Irish poetry, colonialism, feminism, female agency

Literature is a part of larger cultural and political phenomena; nations use literature to construct their mythology and sometimes even to defend their sense of national identity from invaders and colonial influence. This also concerns Ireland, whose culture was strongly impacted by the decades of British rule. There are various genres, motifs, and themes created either by the then British imperialists to justify their occupation of Irish land, or by Irish people striving to keep their national identity. The latter can be represented by the *aisling* tradition. The word "aisling" means a vision or a dream ("Aislinge"). It originated as a Gaelic literary genre which can be found in ancient Irish texts connected mostly with sovereignty and love ("Aisling" 9). These texts usually told a story of a sacred kinship between the future ruler of the land and a female goddess symbolizing Ireland (or a specific part of it). This kinship ensured the transfer of power over the land from the goddess to the king (Apple 222). The *aisling* tradition changed in the eighteenth century, when it started to be used as a political tool to symbolically portray the situation of Ireland at that time. The image of Ireland personified as an ideal woman who comes to Irish men in their dreams, urging them to fight for their country, became the focus of the *aisling*. It was observed by Jerzy Jarniewicz that even

though such a portrayal could indicate to some people that in Irish culture the status of a woman is elevated, it soon became a symbol of her exclusion (175). On the one hand, a woman in the *aisling* tradition symbolized a pivotal issue for the Irish nation—its sovereignty and land. In the vision dreams central to the *aisling,* she inspired resistance for Ireland and represented something precious meant to be protected at all costs. However, on the other hand, the *aisling* tradition upheld a rigid, idealized image of womanhood that did not allow for the diversity of female experience. According to this image, the perfect woman was supposed to be pure, obedient, and quiet (a source of inspiration but not an independent entity with agency). Consequently, women who differed from this image were often marginalized and their attempts to express themselves were discouraged and ostracized.

Elizabeth Cullingford, a feminist literary critic, gives two reasons for the creation of such a personification of the Irish land. On the one hand, it was a way for Irish men to constrain Irish women and force them into a stereotype of pure and passive beings. On the other, it was used by British imperialists to justify the propaganda describing the whole Irish race in a pejorative way. It may have given the British the momentum to continue their "oppressive colonial strategies of representation" since their portrayal of the Irish as feminine was treated as proof of the latter's need for a masculine monarch (1).

In modern times, Irish feminists have started to point out how the *aisling* tradition imprisoned women and suppressed their sexuality. According to Clair Wills, the personification of Ireland as a woman in the post-colonial rhetoric has strongly influenced the post-colonial pursuit to reconsider aspects of Irish identity. The treatment of female sexuality is also currently a part of the discussion about the impact of the *aisling* tradition. Furthermore, the *aisling* tradition was also a factor contributing to the opposition between culture perceived as inherently male and nature perceived as female. Elizabeth Cullingford argues that this distinction confines women to passivity and silence (1). Katharina Walter further explains that one of the main reasons why women

poets in Ireland have been protesting against the tradition of symbolically portraying Ireland as a female figure is the oversimplification of both Ireland and femininity (2). Irish women poets have been striving to reverse harmful elements of the *aisling* tradition in their work by giving women a voice and agency. A great example of a poetess who succeeded in transforming the aisling tradition is Medbh McGuckian, who deconstructs it by adopting a female perspective in her works.

The strategy of changing the perspective from male to the female one corresponds to the process of inverting the male gaze, which is mentioned in the title of this article and will be an important reference in analysis. The term "male gaze" was first coined by Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). Although Mulvey focuses on mainstream cinema in her paper, her observations can be applied to other fields of art. According to Mulvey, the male gaze can be defined as a dynamic in which a man is actively looking at a woman who is the passive object of that look as she "holds [it], plays to and signifies male desire" (11). Furthermore, Mulvey observes that "the image of a castrated woman" is a source of "order and meaning to its world" (6). This aspect shares a similarity with the *aisling* tradition, for even as a vision a woman serves the male subject in her representation of Ireland. Her identity is erased to become part of national mythology and provide Irish people with source of inspiration and strength to fight for their country. The gender division of the original dream—between the object and subject of gaze—parallels distribution of power and perspective described by Mulvey.

In what follows I will demonstrate the shift from the "male gaze" in Seamus Heaney's poetry to the "female action" in McGuckian's poems, comparing two poems by Heaney ("Act of Union" and "Ocean's Love to Ireland") with two poems written by McGuckian ("The Hollywood Bed" and "The Heiress"). These poems allude to the *aisling* tradition, yet they differ in their attitude towards it. There have been cases of literary critics comparing Heaney's and McGuckian's poetry, most notably juxtaposing "Act of Union" and "The Hollywood Bed"; for

example, the poets' different approaches were examined by Alison Garden and Kennedy-Andrews (see references). This article broadens the scope by including other poems by these authors ("Ocean's Love to Ireland" by Heaney and "The Heiress" by McGuckian). Its focus on the inversion of the *male gaze* allows for a feminist reading through the lens of the *aisling* tradition and its modern reinterpretations.

Seamus Heaney was born in 1939 in a Catholic family living in Northern Ireland, in County Derry. Therefore, he was part of an Irish native minority during the time in which sectarian violence had a huge impact on daily life. He is often believed to be "Ireland's greatest poet since Yeats" (Kearney 552). In his poetry, he was preoccupied with "images of mythology, archaeology and genealogy, of returning to forgotten origins" (552). Despite his recognition, his poetry (especially his more political poems) was at times regarded as controversial. Some critics even suggested that he contributed to the consolidation of the "myth of a never-ending Irish violence" (Quinlan 64). In 1969, when the crisis in Northern Ireland started, Heaney was already recognized as an important new voice in Ireland.

"Act of Union" and "Ocean's Love to Ireland" were included in the poetry collection titled *North,* which was published in 1975. This was the period during which Northern Ireland (Heaney's homeland) was in the most violent stage of the Troubles—a sectarian conflict between Protestant loyalists and Catholic nationalists that lasted from 1968 to 1998. This stage was marked by incidents such as the McGurk's Bar bombing clearly highlighting the political violence and bloodshed of that time. Within this context, the volume *North* created controversy, as it depended to a large extent on metaphorical gender dynamics. In these poems, Heaney presented and commented on Ireland's history and its colonization by pairing images of contemporary sectarian bloodshed with those drawn from the Iron Age. The second set of images was inspired by P.V. Glob's book titled *The Bog People,* published in 1969. Notably, *North* is the collection in which Seamus Heaney explores, as Brazeau notes, "the

relevance of mythology as a context for understanding contemporary political and social realities" (162).

Medbh McGuckian was born in 1950 in Belfast, in the generation of Northern Irish poets following Seamus Heaney's. Her childhood and youth spent in Belfast differ greatly from the experiences of Heaney in rural County Derry. In an interview with Michaela Schrage-Früh in 2005, McGuckian emphasized how she associated her hometown with poverty and unhappiness, even comparing it to a ghetto. Her style of writing has been often described as "dense, oblique, and at time cryptic" (Schrage-Früh 2). In her poetry, she uses images of domestic life and nature, focusing on themes of femininity and motherhood. McGuckian had a personal relationship with Seamus Heaney. He was her teacher during her studies at the Queen's University in Belfast and later on became her mentor. This acquaintance may explain why McGuckian refers to Heaney's poems in her own work.

"The Hollywood Bed" and "The Heiress" were published in 1993 as part of the volume titled *Flower Master and Other Poems.* At that time, Northern Ireland was still affected by the Troubles. The ongoing conflict drew people's attention to matters of Irish identity and national mythology. It is not surprising that McGuckian decided to include a discussion of these issues, especially in the context important for her (i.e., women's rights and freedoms). Schrage-Früh pointed out that in McGuckian's poetry "the political level is frequently obscured by a private domestic one" (2). However, this tendency started to change after the beginning of the Peace Process, when she began to address political issues more candidly. Her previous reluctance to do so may be a result of the fear for herself and her family since, in contrast to poets such as Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon, she chose to remain in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the two poems analyzed in this article illustrate that she was already making allusions to sociopolitical problems before the Peace Process.

The analytical part of this article starts with the examination of the "Act of Union"[1] (Heaney 1975: 43). The title refers to the moment in history when the

colonization of Ireland by England became "politically official" (Armengol 12). The Act of Union of 1800 was crucial to later historical developments because it dissolved the Irish Parliament and "established the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland" (Kelly 236). It is often referred to as the central issue in complicated Anglo-Irish relations and as the final stage of colonization.

The speaker in "Act of Union" (Heaney 1975: 43) is a powerful male figure (a symbol of England) who is talking to his female lover (a symbol of Ireland). The symbolism is evident in the comparison of the female body to the borders and landform of Ireland (in such lines as "your back is a firm line of eastern coast," "your gradual hills" and "heaving province"). Later on, images of the pregnancy and subsequent birth symbolize the emergence of Northern Ireland, further connecting the female body with Irish land.

Interestingly, despite the domination of the male speaker as his "legacy culminates inexorably" within her borders, he states that "conquest is a lie." The word "conquest" has two meanings. It can simply convey the act of conquering a country or a land which suits the nationalist aspect of the poem. However, it can also refer to a person whose favor or hand someone managed to win. If analyzed through the lens of the latter meaning, we can treat it as an admission on the part of the male figure to the involuntary participation of Ireland (the female figure) in this relationship. Neither her favor nor hand had been given freely to England; rather, it had been a forced union that brought benefits only to one side. On the other hand, if we choose to focus on the more literal meaning of the word "conquest," we can interpret it as Heaney's way to criticize British colonizers who sought to justify their actions in Ireland and lied about the true nature of their activity in this country. Both of these readings can suggest that, despite his rather faithful following of the power dynamic of the *aisling* tradition, Heaney noticed some of its harmful elements and decided to discuss them in his work.

However, despite this shift, the poem still contains elements reinforcing the patriarchal narrative of the *aisling* tradition. The male figure is a powerful

entity endowed with influence and agency. It has been pointed out by Joseph Armengol that the woman is restrained to silence and passivity, while the man is allowed to speak. It reflects the constraints that women were subjected to in Ireland. The woman in the poem is not a human being of flesh and blood but merely a "mythical representation of a traditionally feminine Ireland" (18). These types of portrayals of women in literature can strengthen existing stereotypes and assumptions about them.

An important aspect of the poem is the description of the sexual act, which has been interpreted in various ways. The poem has been famously criticized by Ciaran Carson (an Irish poet publishing at the same time as Heaney) for depicting colonization as "something as natural as a good fuck" (185).[2] However, the depiction of the intercourse is much more layered than Carson's claim seems to suggest. While it is not stated explicitly whether this intercourse happens with the consent of both parties, it is evident that the male speaker seems to enjoy the act, which can be noticed in phrases such as "I caress." The overall sensual description also adds to the impression of male pleasure. At the same time, the female figure suffers during the act, which can be noticed in Heaney's phrases such as "boom burst," "rendering," and "the battering ram." In Ireland, women's sexuality has been suppressed for a long time, and, therefore, this depiction can reinforce the perception of sex as only enjoyed by men. Furthermore, this manner of depicting a sexual relationship creates a dynamic in which women are only "passive vessels" that can be possessed actively by men. Women's bodies are in this way reduced to the role of servants of history whose responsibility is to passively create future generations (Walsh 5). It is also important to mention that this way of portraying the sexual act stands in opposition to the depictions of it in the early form of the *aisling* tradition (emerging in ancient Gaelic times) in which the woman entering the sexual union was the one with power as it was through the intercourse that she gave the power to rule over the land to the man. It was only when *aisling* began to change into a political nationalist poetry in the 18th century that the sexual

dynamic underwent a transformation, putting the female figure in the position of a passive victim of sexual violence (Cullingford 5–6).

Additionally, the underlying violence also affects the way pregnancy is depicted in the poem. The child conceived as a result of the sexual act brings pain and chaos both in the literal sense and in the allegorical one, since it can be seen as a symbol of Northern Ireland and its turbulent past and present (see Andrews, Corcoran, Morrison). In that way, pregnancy becomes dangerous and violent. This is an important aspect in relation to McGuckian's poetry, which generally celebrates pregnancy and maternity, contrasting these domestic joys with violence outside of the home.

Another poem in which Heaney politically engages with the *aisling* tradition is titled "Ocean's Love to Ireland" (Heaney 1975: 40–41)[3]. Similarly, to the "Act of Union," the poem refers to a historical situation by presenting it allegorically. This time, it alludes to Walter Raleigh, who, in the 16th century, arrived in Ireland to suppress a rebellion against British colonizers. Once again, the speaker in the poem is a male figure in the person of Raleigh and the Irish maiden remains silent until the last part of the poem, when she "complains" but does not try to rebel or produce a statement of her own. In this way, the female figure is confined to silence and passivity.

Another salient issue in the poem is the association of the female figure with the land, which is present throughout the whole text. First, lifting her clothes is compared to "weed lifting," and then the poem mentions "mushroom-flush." Finally, in the last verse, we can read about "the ground possessed and repossessed." This verse ultimately confirms the link between the Irish maiden and the land—in a way making the two equivalent. This connection can reinforce the perception of women as objects that can be rightfully taken by men and made into their own. Elizabeth Cullingford has pointed out that this divergence between female Nature and male Culture imprisons women and reduces them to objects rather than "speaking subject[s]" (1). The ground (soil, earth) is there to be possessed by humans—in this cultural context, especially

by men. In the Irish culture that has been strongly influenced by the Catholic Church, this relation between the ground and its ownership is especially strong. It is a consequence of the words written in the Book of Genesis, where the governing of the land according to human will is stated explicitly by God. Therefore, if a work of art compares or links women with land, it may give a signal that dominating them is the right given by God. As has already been mentioned in the analysis of the previous poem, there is a shift between the original form of the *aisling* and its politically weaponized version of the 18th century. In Gaelic times, the woman was the one who had the agency to transfer the power over the land from her to her male partner, while in the 18th century tradition, she was compared to the land, which turned her into an object to be possessed and repossessed.

Moreover, we can see a distinction between femininity perceived as nature (the land) and masculinity seen as embodying culture in the poem. The links between the female figure and the ground have been explained in the previous paragraph. In contrast, the male figure can be seen as close to culture by Heaney's use of phrases such as "his superb crest," "in London, his name will rise," and also in the mention of historical events such as the Siege of Smerwick in 1580. Raleigh might be particularly associated with two elements of culture: social hierarchy and language. Those two elements in Ireland have been inherently connected with power. Therefore, the association reinforces the perception of men as powerful beings who have the right to rule civilizations.

While in his statement Heaney claimed that the loss of sovereignty by Ireland is only temporary:

> an indigenous territorial numen, a tutelary of the whole island, call her Mother Ireland, Kathleen Ni Houlihan, the poor old woman, the Shan Van Vocht, whatever; [whose] sovereignty has been temporarily usurped or infringed by a new male cult whose founding fathers were Cromwell, William of Orange and Edward Carson... (1981: 57),

this poem does not show a sovereign entity, to begin with. Although there are some signs indicating that the female figure is struggling to overcome Raleigh's

violence (for example, her strands are "breathless"), all her attempts prove to be futile and Raleigh manages to rape her. However, the *aisling* way of depicting women as fragile creatures is an inaccurate representation, since Ireland's history and mythology feature many powerful women. A good example of such a figure is Grace O'Malley, who was "the legendary pirate queen of Connacht" (Murray 16). Moreover, Celtic mythology abounds in warrior queens and war goddesses.

As already mentioned, Heaney's poems can be juxtaposed with two poems by Medbh McGuckian: "The Hollywood Bed" and "The Heiress," in which the poetess strives to reverse the male gaze and give the female figure a chance to speak about her experiences. In these poems, McGuckian focuses on the domestic reality, but she also includes some historical references. In "The Hollywood Bed" (24) McGuckian alludes to some parts of the "Act of Union" and "Ocean's Love to Ireland."[4] The reference to the former is seen in the use of the word "imperial," which naturally has associations with the sentence "I am still imperially male" present in Heaney's previously analyzed poem (l. 6). Heaney connected two spheres in his poem—the national/historical and the intimate one—to allegorically portray an important moment in the history of Ireland (in a way making the female figure an instrument used to describe a historical narrative). McGuckian, however, turns her attention to home and struggles related to domestic life. There are some references that allude to those historical narratives, such as the word "imperial" or the comparison to Columbus, but the majority of images are associated with a sense of domesticity that is familiar and relatable in many aspects. Moreover, as in the *aisling* tradition of the 18th century a woman was treated as a source of inspiration, the grand narratives that women were forced into did not give them space to share their own desires and wants. As it has been observed by Aimeé Walsh, they were turned into "servants of history" (5). Therefore, turning attention to homes may give them a chance to speak about their experiences.

In my reading of the poem, the gender of the speaker is vital for McGuckian's play with the *aisling* tradition. Contrary to Heaney's poems, the speaker is female, which gives a woman a chance to share her perspective and gives voice to her experience. Both Heaney and McGuckian engage with the same imagery rooted in the *aisling* tradition, but while Heaney shows the female figure as a passive and silent personification of Ireland, McGuckian transforms her from a symbol to an entity with agency. However, interestingly, it is difficult to tell the gender of the speaker at the beginning of the poem, since there are no pronouns that indicate it. Furthermore, even though the speaker is focused on describing their partner, it is not entirely clear whether it is a man or a woman. Due to the use of the word "Columbus" in the poem and the traditional image of a relationship in this genre, one can assume that it is a male figure. Nevertheless, it is not stated explicitly in the poem. McGuckian's decision not to make gender evident for the reader can signal her disapproval of traditional gender roles and the relationship dynamic ascribed to them.

The change of the speaker's gender gives the female figure a chance to describe her feelings connected with the intercourse, which was not possible in Heaney's poems. As a result, the readers can observe how the woman struggles to assert her independence and agency, for example, by her position in bed: "I lie crosswise, imperial as a favored only child" (McGuckian 24). Subsequently, the readers are also confronted with the speaker's feelings of violation by her partner's actions. Those feelings are visible in the phrases she chooses to depict the beginning of the intercourse: "you blew open my tightened bud." This is another element that differentiates Heaney's poems from "The Hollywood Bed." Heaney's eroticisation of the political conquest is a tool to criticize the violence and injustice connected with it, but at the same time, it puts the female figure into a position of a "passive vessel" (as observed by Aimeé Walsh). In McGuckian's poem, sexual intimacy becomes the space for the woman to try and regain control over her sexuality while not idealizing the sexual act and still portraying it in an ambiguous way.

In addition, in the second stanza, there is a change from the male gaze to the female one, when the speaker observes her sleeping partner. It has been noted by Allison Garden that McGuckian is focused on the descriptive possibilities of language, which she connects with the image of the sleeping man: McGuckian reverses the male gaze by portraying the sleeping man as an object that can be constructed and modified with the power of language (1361). What might support Garden's remark is an observation included in Laura Mulvey's essay discussed above. Mulvey describes how "the erotic [is] coded into the language of the dominant patriarchal order" (8). If the interplay between the eroticization of women and the language is a factor contributing to the patriarchal dynamic of the male gaze, McGuckian gives the female speaker in her poem a chance to defy the said dynamic by making her the one with agency to use the language as a tool to describe and even modify the image of a sleeping man. The reversal of their roles is also evident in the last two lines of the poem: "the outline that if you were gone would find me in your place."

The domesticity conveyed in the poem can be seen as an enclosing space that creates a claustrophobic effect. This effect begins as soon as in the first line, when the speaker states: "we narrow into the house, the room, the bed." Furthermore, in later parts of the poem, there is a comparison between lovers and spoons in the drawer. McGuckian decided to look closely at the intimate and domestic sphere, which may prompt the readers to reinterpret the usual way of perceiving the female-male relationship by portraying it in a space which differs from the grand historical narrative. Furthermore, this imagery frees the female figure from being seen purely as a symbol and a "servant of history" (Walsh 5), because it focuses on her perspective, which has value even if it is not used to achieve a political aim.

"The Heiress"[5] (McGuckian 15) can be seen as a further exploration of the nation-as-woman trope (the *aisling* tradition). However, the allusions to Ireland and its struggles are more direct than those in the previously analyzed poem. The speaker in the poem is a female figure whose inner thoughts are revealed

to the readers. As a result, in contrast to most works connected with the *aisling* tradition, the woman is given a chance to express her feelings about the position she finds herself in.

There is a strong presence of restriction and lack of freedom, as the speaker is addressing an ambiguous "you," listing their commands directed to her. For instance, "[y]ou say I should stay out of the low fields" and "I should creep." It has also been suggested by Shane Alcobia-Murphy that the words "low" and "dark," used in the first stanza, are not descriptions but "moral indicators" (130). Both words can have multiple meanings: they can simply mean "close to the ground" and "with little light," respectively. However, they can also be used to describe moral categories, since low can mean "not honest or fair" and dark can stand for "evil or threatening." This could be a way of highlighting the demands for women to be pure and innocent, which can be referenced in the phrase "heart-shaped." These demands were also at the core of the *aisling* tradition; a woman in the poems inspired by the said tradition had to appear as the exact person the men wanted to see (Kiberd 294). Therefore, she had to be a personified perfection, and according to the culture of that time, that included being pure, obedient, and passive. The addressee of the poem (referred to as the mysterious "you") forbids the female figure to explore the land around her and justifies it by portraying the outside world as evil and dangerous. Yet, this may in fact be a way of manipulating her.

The comparison to Italian rooms, which are "no longer hurt by sun," in McGuckian's poem adds the aspect of forcibly created illusion because, in colloquial American speech, Italian rooms are the spaces which are usually separated from the rest of the house to trick guests into perceiving the hosts to be wealthier than they actually are ("Italian room"). This comparison could allude to the ideal version of a woman created partially by the *aisling* tradition and, therefore, suggests that it is a false image.

"The Heiress" makes a clear connection between women and land. First, the speaker talks about "the husbandry of a good spadesman" while observing a

man who is working on the land. This fragment alludes to Heaney's famous poem "Digging" (1966), in which, as has been observed by Mary Brown, the poet "celebrates the muscular activities of his father and grandfather who dug with a spade" (289). However, if we connect it with the subsequent fragment of the poem "my pinched grain hanging like a window on the smooth spot," we can sense the ambiguity. On the one hand, the man in this poem can simply work on the land, trying to provide for his family, as it was in the tradition of male, rural Ireland. On the other hand, we can read it as the male figure struggling to form his female partner according to the ideal he has in his mind, and in this reading, woman is symbolized as the land. Although the symbolism of perceiving the land (and nature) as female was often connected with portraying women as objects to be rightly possessed and conquered by men, McGuckian transforms its effect by mentioning "the birth of an heiress," which results in the "gobbling of land." It can be argued that "the gobbling of land" occurring during the process of childbirth depicts the disruption caused by freeing oneself from the norms of the surrounding reality. This is especially apparent when the readers consider that the child is also female, which could symbolize the emergence of a new generation of women whose struggle for their rights and freedoms will transform and challenge Irish society. This line can also be read in the historical context. Alcobia-Murphy pointed out that the ending of that poem may refer to the rivalry for the throne between Mary the Queen of Scots and her half-sister Elizabeth in the 16th century. Her observation was inspired by Antonia Fraser's book *Mary Queen of Scots*. The scholar also draws the readers' attention to the fact that the tense situation in the 16th century was connected with the growing antagonism between Catholics and Protestants. This could signal that McGuckian wanted to allude to the ongoing sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland. However, it is important to note that the poetess herself rejected this interpretation, claiming she does not think in sectarian terms (130–131).

Different scholars pointed out the importance of the scene in the poem when the speaker drops her "black acorn buttons." Their interpretations focus on different aspects, for example, Clair Wills sees them as a comparison to children, which can serve as a metaphor for poems. Those poems give their female author agency and influence by allowing her to express herself (72). On the other hand, Shane Alcobia-Murphy suggested the connection between dropping those buttons and the Irish Republican prisoners' protests which happened in the 1970s and 1980s. Those prisoners wanted to be treated not as regular convicts but as political prisoners and in an act of protest they were smearing their feces on walls. To support her hypothesis Alcobia-Murphy mentions McGuckian's interview in 1995 during which the poetess stated that the poem is "about the dirty protest" and that "black acorn buttons" are meant to refer to "shit" (a word she wanted to avoid in her poetry). The scholar argues that Republican prisoners were using their feces to regain political agency (132). This would mean that the speaker's act of dropping the buttons is an act of rebellion and showing her strength.

In conclusion, both Seamus Heaney and Medbh McGuckian engage with the themes rooted in the *aisling* tradition in the analyzed poems. The *aisling* tradition contributed to the patriarchal portrayal of women in Irish literature (as also noted by literary critics and feminists such as Elizabeth Cullingford, Aimee Walsh, and Patricia Coughlan, whose observations are mentioned earlier in this article) and might have reinforced some of the misogynistic stereotypes in Ireland. These Irish feminists and artists have also made an argument claiming that the "1980s counter-insurgence against women's liberation" was influenced by the nationalist ideology, including the *aisling* tradition (O'Connor 270). In "Act of Union" and "Ocean's Love to Ireland," Heaney gave voice to a male figure portrayed as a powerful entity who dominates the silent and vulnerable woman. The female figure's perspective is not present in these poems, and she is not given the chance to express her feelings. McGuckian, on the other hand, in the two poems analyzed in this article, gives voice to the

female figure. As a consequence, the readers gain deeper insight into the experiences of women in Ireland. The poetess focuses on describing intimacy and sensuality using a language which is at times cryptic and challenging to decode. Even though it is not a standard way of describing daily life, it changes the perspective of looking at the female figure and her experience.

There has been a tendency in Irish literature to associate women with land and landscape, which can reinforce the belief that women are objects meant to be rightfully conquered by men. While Heaney does not reverse or alter this connection between woman and land, McGuckian changes it to eliminate the patriarchal element. This is visible in her poem "The Heiress," where the speaker mentions "the gobbling of the land" as an outcome of "the birth of an heiress," which, as I have argued, can depict the disruption caused by the female rebellion against the social norm.

Heaney's and McGuckian's texts engage with the sexual aspect of the relationship. Both "Act of Union" and "The Hollywood Bed" make it unclear to the reader whether what happens in the poem is rape. Both poems also partially allude to the pain and suffering connected with birth. However, due to McGuckian's reversal of the speaker's gender, readers have the opportunity to learn about the woman's feelings regarding the intercourse. Additionally, the female figure is given more agency in how she behaves in the intimate situation; for example, she fights to assert her presence by lying "crosswise." In Heaney's poems, intercourse is an act that brings pleasure only to men, and only they are allowed to decide what is going to happen during it. McGuckian, on the other hand, highlights the woman's role in it and shows her emotions and sensations as well.

Seamus Heaney's and Medbh McGuckian's use of the *aisling* tradition can demonstrate how the same symbols can create different interpretations. It also showcases how the reversal of the potentially harmful symbols can point to important issues.

Endnotes

1. This poem has been examined by acclaimed literary critics, see: Armengol, Walsh, Coughlan.

2. This was also noted by Alison Garden in her paper "'Like a bee's sting or a bullet': eroticism, violence and the afterlives of colonial romance in Medbh McGuckian's The Flower Master and Other Poems (1993)."

3. This poem has been examined by other literary critics, see: Moloney, Parker, Annwn.

4. This poem has been examined by literary critics, such as Allison Garden and Elmery Kennedy-Andrews. Furthermore, Adam Hanna's book *Northern Irish Poetry and Domestic Space* shows how McGuckian draws on the interplay between domesticity and the political sphere in Northern Ireland, which is present in this poem.

5. This poem has been examined by acclaimed literary critics, see: Alcobia-Murphy, Wills, Fulford. Some critics have also pointed out to the historical symbolism (related to the history of Mary Queen of the Scots) that may be present in the poem. For contextual information see: Fraser.

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Abstract

Literature in the socio-political context has been frequently adopted as a weapon against women. It has depicted them as "servants of history," existing to please men and produce the next generations (Walsh 5). Sometimes, this war inflicted on women was tenacious with colonizers' attempts to enslave the nations that they conquered. This correlation between sexism and colonialism was present in Ireland, where women were subjugated both to the rules of British colonizers and to Irish men desiring to confine them to their homes. One of the literary traditions contributing to the control of Irish women was the *aisling* tradition [the word *aisling* means a vision or a dream; it originated as a Gaelic literary genre connected with love and sovereignty]. The main focus of the aisling is the image of Ireland personified as an ideal woman who comes to Irish men in their dreams, urging them to fight for their country. In modern times, Irish feminists started to point out how the *aisling* tradition imprisoned women culturally and suppressed their sexuality. Consequentially, Irish women writers have been striving to reverse the profound impact that a variety of literary texts, including this tradition, exerted on the worldview of Irish people.

This article will present the ways in which Medbh McGuckian reverses the *aisling* tradition to give women agency and voice, and juxtapose them with Seamus Heaney's poetry (especially his two poems: "The Act of Union" and "Ocean's Love to Ireland"). Furthermore, it will reflect on the transformation from the "male gaze" in Heaney's poems to "female action" in McGuckian's poems. The analysis will encompass two of her poems: "The Hollywood Bed" and "The Heiress," in the framework of literary criticism from acclaimed feminist scholars such as Clair Wills, Alison Garden, and Aimée Walsh. It will also comment on the origins of the term *male gaze* to contextualize the discussion around it.

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ROMANTASY AS AN INTERTEXTUAL GENRE: RESPONSES OF AND TO SARAH J. MAAS' *A COURT OF THORNS AND ROSES*

Keywords: Sarah J. Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses (ACOTAR)*, romantasy, intertextuality, chain reaction

Introduction

Sarah J. Maas' *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series became one of the most significant books of romantasy literature—a subgenre of fantasy that combines fantastic elements, such as fae, dragons, magic, and hidden magical realms, with romance in the foreground rather than the background. Bloomsbury Publishing, Maas' publisher, actually claims to have coined the term to refer specifically to *ACOTAR*[1] in 2015, even though the initial appearance of this term can be found in the Urban Dictionary in 2008 (Creamer). Nonetheless, the significance of the term, and more importantly the genre, is undeniable, especially after the "*ACOTAR* boom" during the pandemic of 2020, when the term became widely known and used by readers, book media creators, as well as publishers and bookshops in their advertisements and new book announcements. Moreover, *ACOTAR* has influenced the emergence of other romantasy titles with similar elements, most notably the creation of the male protagonists and the dynamics between the male and female characters, which could be described as a chain reaction within the genre, a phenomenon discussed further later in this article. John Barth (138) stated that postmodernist writers had already exhausted their creative capabilities,

leading to literature that is, as Jean-François Lyotard (8) remarked, only an eclectic mix of everything that was created before, or, in the words of Julia Kristeva, "a mosaic of quotations [where] any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (67). Although the abovementioned claims were primarily constructed to describe the literary phenomena of postmodern fiction, they still are relevant in today's popular culture. This article's aim is to show how different romantasy titles respond to *ACOTAR*—the phenomenon referred to here as a chain reaction—as well as how *ACOTAR* responds to other cultural texts, and how other romantasy books are repeating the schemes established in the aforementioned book series.

Intertextuality

What was called before a "chain reaction" is not merely the sequence of influences, but also the phenomenon known in literary theory as intertextuality. Most notably, it was developed by Julia Kristeva who discovered that texts do not exist in a void, but are "generated in relation to another structure" (64), hence making the whole of the cultural world interconnected.

According to Kristeva, it is possible to distinguish "three dimensions ... of dialogue [between texts:] writing subject, addressee, and exterior texts." This dialogue can be defined as both horizontal—meaning that "the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee"—and vertical, where there is a connection between the text and its context (66). This shows that intertextuality does not only concern the influences between texts, but also between texts and the people; moreover, both horizontal and vertical axes often coincide with one another, creating the literary space where two works not only clash, but also create something new (66). In fact, when the author combines two different texts—what Kristeva calls "joining of two sign systems" (73)—their text becomes ambivalent, therefore relativized and stylized, portraying "a writer's exploitation of another's speech—without running counter to its thought—for his own purposes" (73). Consequently,

intertextuality is in essence the author's usage of the pool of already existing texts for their personal needs by adapting them rather than changing, which may result in coexistence of both new and adapted text within the same work, "the transmission of essence through form, and the configuration of (literary) space as revealing (literary) thought" (88).

In addition, a strong emphasis is also put on the relationship between the reader and the writer—the text interacts with both of them, making the literary world even more connected and therefore intricate. This personal view is also important for not only everyone sees the world differently, but also due to the fact of polysemy—the possibility of several different interpretations of one text. The concept known as the death of the author—a philosophical thought developed by Roland Barthes to illustrate that when an author publishes their work, they "die" as the reader of their text brings a variety of different approaches which may not be in accordance with the author's intentions (49–55)—is equally important for the intertextual relationship between the reader and the writer.

Furthermore, in times of globalization and easy access to the Internet and social media, the relationship between a reader and the writer or a reader and the text is intensified, which can result in widespread responses to the text. As it will be developed further, books are now not only a source of social media content but also engage the readers in fan art making, creating social media posts and building the Internet community around certain titles, increasing a sense of social belonging. Romantasy has, therefore, offered readers a place on the internet with like-minded people, sharing an extreme affection towards the books of the genre. Because of its recognizability and popularity, it has served as a label and tool of categorization for the other texts within the genre that are oftentimes portrayed in social media as "*ACOTAR*, but with vampires/werewolves/etc.".

What is also important to note prior to the analysis of the intertextual relations between romantasy novels is the notion of the exhaustion of

literature, a phenomenon described by John Barth in his essay "Literature of Exhaustion," in which he claims that the postmodern world not only is intertextual, but that also the writers of that time have exhausted their creative capabilities (138). Therefore, Barth's essay further illustrates not only the fact that the texts are not created in a void, hence they are inextricably connected, but also the fact that the so-called "chain reaction" is only a natural process in the creation of a specific genre of literature after the postmodern turn. It, therefore, supports the claim that *ACOTAR* undisputably initiated not only the widespread recognition of romantasy, but also influenced the emergence of other books that are, in fact, only a copy of *ACOTAR* with additional twists and turns. This makes the entire genre not only intertextual in nature, but also eclectic, which further proves Lyotard's point that literature is an eclectic mix of texts that have been already created before (8).

The Response of Maas' *A Court of Thorns and Roses* to Other Cultural Texts

The main aim of this article is to show the connections between *ACOTAR* and other cultural texts, as well as how other romantasy books could be seen as copies of Maas' under a different name. However, a quick overview of the study of genres may seem crucial at this stage, as romantasy is a rather new phenomenon and *ACOTAR* seems to be a mother-piece of the whole genre. The genre itself is rather a paradox—it is an unnatural classification that both needs to be pure and is never pure (Derrida 55, 61). Romantasy is a mix of two distinct genres, romance and fantasy, which makes it "impure." Romantasy "has a mark of belonging" (65) in its own genre for it is distinguished as a separate category, recognized by the internet book communities, average readers, and publishing companies. Its being technically a blend of two generic forms illustrates Derrida's observation that every genre is both loyal to and a betrayal of its own genre (55, 61, 80). The emergence of romantasy not only broadened the experience of the reader, but also allowed both readers and writers to find their place in the literary world. Moreover, it also contributed to a new

approach to contemporary popular literature, as well as created a wider recognition for women writers within the fantasy genre without the condemnation of the texts for being too "feminine" or too relationship-centered.

A Court of Thorns and Roses was primarily written as a retelling of *Beauty and the Beast*. Both narratives feature a beautiful young woman (Feyre and Belle, respectively) and a prince turned into a beast or, in the case of *ACOTAR*, a High Lord of the Spring Court Tamlin who can turn himself into one on command. Another significant similarity is a curse bestowed upon the male protagonists, although the underlying reasons for it seem to differ. In *B&B*[2], the curse functions as an opportunity for the Beast's redemption and moral transformation. In *ACOTAR*, on the other hand, Amarantha—wicked witch equivalent—curses the entire Spring Court due to Tamlin's refusal to become her lover, therefore forcing him to find a woman who would fall in love with him without ever seeing his true face, as he and his court wear masks on their faces that cannot be taken off. This curse's outcome is rather unexpected, however, for even though Tamlin is rescued, his behavior eventually deteriorates, ultimately leading Feyre to part from him. Furthermore, it is also worth mentioning that the female protagonist in both stories is confined in a castle or court, eventually developing a romantic connection with her captor, whom she finally saves. Despite those connections, however, *ACOTAR* differs significantly from *B&B*, especially from the second book onwards, establishing its unique character.

Another crucial cultural pretext for ACOTAR is connected to the character of Tamlin, a High Lord of the Spring Court and the owner of a remarkable rose garden, a detail crucial to forming an intertextual link between *ACOTAR* and Scottish folk tales. In the first instance, Tamlin is portrayed as a high fae, whereas in the second instance, Tam Lin from the Scottish ballad "Tam Lin" is usually depicted as an elf who accosts young women entering the forest of Carterhaugh, often taking their virginity as well (Jacobs & Batten). A key

similarity between the two texts forms when a young woman comes to this forest and plucks a rose, an event that summons Tam Lin to question her reasons for doing that. As a result of this acquaintance, the woman ultimately becomes pregnant and has to free Tam Lin from the imprisonment by the Queen of Fairies by going through numerous challenges—a notion which in some versions confirms the woman's love for Tam Lin. This folk tale is crucial for *ACOTAR* not only due to the shared character's name, but also because of the similarities between both plots. Feyre is similarly found by Tamlin and also eventually proves her love for him and frees him from Amarantha's imprisonment through a series of challenges towards the end of the first book, in scenes frequently referred to as "Under the Mountain," as the plot literally unfolds in a city under a mountain. And ultimately, in both stories, both antagonists are defeated, making both Tams live happily—or not so much— ever after with their partners.

Yet another integral part of *ACOTAR* and its cultural response to other texts is its connection to romance and romantic fantasies of women. The creation of the main male character in Maas' novels, as well as the books that emerged as a reconstruction of her stories, is similar to the creation of male characters in Harlequins: a tall, tattooed, dangerous, mysterious man who is surprisingly tender with his woman. The relationships established in Harlequins between a woman and a man can also be traced in *ACOTAR*—especially the ones where the man seems unsuitable for the female protagonist (Modleski 6). These similarities, as well as vast popularity of the genre, may be connected with the satisfaction of "imperishable desires and fantasies of women" (19). While this statement can be true in many contemporary romances, *ACOTAR* flips this image. Even though the male protagonist seems taken out of a Harlequin and has a great power over his female counterpart, it is the woman that is not only central to the plot, but also equal to a man. In Maas' books, it is the woman that rescues the man; it is the woman that fights for the man; it is the woman that is given a choice of whom to love. Another important difference is that the female

protagonist in Maas' *ACOTAR* is not a virgin—an opposite quality to the one prevalent in Harlequins, in which there is an insistence upon woman's purity (7). Moreover, in the first novel in the series there are no signs of "self-mutilation" as a response of anger towards male power[3] and at no point is Feyre "married off to a man toward whom she felt nothing" (15); if anything, she is rescued from such fate. Even more interestingly, "the male power," though present in the novels, does not outshine the female power—Feyre is not only one of the most powerful fae—of both sexes—but also the first High Lady in history of Prythian, a title created specifically for her. Yet another difference, that is contrary to the notorious nickname of "faerie porn," is that the sexual fantasies are being conveyed on the pages of both Harlequins and *ACOTAR*. While this may be true to some extent, it is pivotal to understand that the first three installments in the series are heavily fantasy-based. There are only about eleven chapters with any sexual encounters among those three books combined (the first one being almost 500 pages long and the other two—almost 700), whereas the fifth installment contains around eight such chapters over the course of almost 800 pages. That is a significantly small number considering both the infamous nickname of the series—"faerie porn"—as well as the highly-sexual nature of the Harlequins. Consequently, as much as the creation of the male protagonist and the relationship between the two main characters may seem highly Harlequin-based, *ACOTAR* does not follow its usual pattern. Instead, it takes what is alluring to women and changes it into a feminist utopia, where the woman is equal to the man, cherished by him regardless of her status or purity, and—most importantly—is always given a choice.

The Internet Response to *ACOTAR*

Responding to earlier texts and genres, *ACOTAR* has also summoned massive responses from the Internet community, proving that literary texts can serve not only as a response to already existing narratives. The readers of the story of

Tamlin and Feyre have created a substantial number of social media posts—more specifically, over 1.7 million TikToks under #acotar alone (with other hashtags such as #acotarseries, #acomaf[4] or #acowar[5] containing 226.8 thousand posts, 385.2 thousand posts and 247.5 thousand posts, respectively) and achieving similar numbers on other social media platforms, such as Instagram, and countless fan-based Facebook groups. Within those posts, there is a number of fan-generated artworks based on the series, as well as TikTok reenactments of certain scenes (most notably, Feyre throwing a shoe at Rhysand) and thirst traps (sexually implicit videos, usually featuring "Hello, Feyre darling" (Maas 2016: 42) delivered in a suggestive manner by male BookTok[6] users), and cosplays. This extensive social media coverage has enabled *ACOTAR* to permeate the lives of the general public, as many BookTok creators have claimed that *ACOTAR* facilitated their renewed interest in reading and an increase in their overall book consumption.[7]

Furthermore, *ACOTAR* has also been made into coloring books and a TV series is speculated to be created despite allegations of initiating, cancelling and re-initiating this project. However, at the time of writing this article, there is an unconfirmed rumor of a meeting between Sarah J. Maas and Margot Robbie regarding the possibility of her directing the series (Rosenstein). Ultimately, the response from the bookish community crossed the lines of what is expected of an ordinary reader by organizing *ACOTAR*-themed balls with their participants cosplaying as their favorite series characters. While the primary difference between those balls and other fan conventions, such as Comic Cons or Renaissance Fairs, may be questionable, the key is that unlike the aforementioned conventions, which cover a wide range of fictional characters, the *ACOTAR*-themed balls are exclusively created for and, more significantly, by the series' enthusiasts.

Romantasy Chain Reaction

The so-called "romantasy chain reaction" is a focal point of this article. It showcases the connections between the novels, as well as their allusions and references to each other. Diagram 1 below does not only show those influences, but also the motherpiece that gave birth to the entire chain reaction of resemblances. Moreover, with *ACOTAR* being the main prototype of the modern romantasy genre, it also contributed to its recognition across the media platforms, readers, and publishers. Finally, it has become a staple piece to which many writers refer, even if subconsciously.

Diagram 1. Romantasy chain reaction.

Even though the analysis of intertextual relations in *ACOTAR* has been centered around the character of Tamlin, he is not the main protagonist in the whole of the series. Instead, the main male character is Feyre's mate, Rhysand, who is referred to by the book community as "shadow daddy." Rhys is the High Lord of the Night Court, who initially helps Feyre to go through the challenges Under the Mountain, but becomes a more significant figure in *ACOMAF*. There, it

is revealed that he is Feyre's fated mate and a crucial character in helping Feyre heal her psychological trauma from the events from Under the Mountain.

Rhysand is a half-Illyrian[8] high fae, a heritage that left him with wings that can be concealed at will, but also marks him as a powerful and gruesome warrior. His physical appearance is also rather striking—he is a tall, tattooed fae with dark short hair and violet eyes in which the stars sparkle, and his character is very mysterious and dangerous, with a profound affection towards only Feyre and his friends, whom he calls family, but who are collectively known as his Inner Circle. His fae powers are enigmatic and perilous as well, as he is a *daemati*, a type of a fae psychic. This grants him the ability to read and control minds, erase memories or project highly detailed visions of events that never truly happened in the minds of others. Additionally, Rhysand is able to manipulate and control shadows, hence the title "shadow daddy," a combination which grants him the title as the most powerful fae in the history of Prythian (the faerie land in *ACOTAR*, which is also a response of *ACOTAR* to the existing world, as its geography is based on the British Isles).

The character of Rhysand has become an archetype for male protagonists in the romantasy genre. One example of a novel to follow the said pattern is Laura Thalassa's *Rhapsodic*. The novel tells the story of a siren Callypso Lillis, referred to as Callie by most. At the beginning of the story, it is revealed that she killed her stepfather after a long period of abuse (a consequence of her siren nature) and therefore needed help concealing this crime, which leads her to meet the Bargainer. The Bargainer is actually Desmond Flynn, a winged fae and a king of the hidden Kingdom of Night (that rules not only the illegal actions, such as theft, but also more sensual and intimate experiences performed under the cover of the night). The creation of his character follows closely that of Rhysand—he as well is a tall, tattooed male fae with an aura of mystery and danger, yet surprisingly tender with Callypso. Desmond's powers include the shadow manipulation, as well as the ability to make deals, which comes with the notion of reading people's intentions. All these make him the most powerful

fae in his world. The significant difference between Desmond and Rhysand, however, lies solely in their hair, as Desmond's is long and blond in contrast to Rhysand's, which is short and dark. The similarity between the two extends beyond physical appearance, as even in their backstories there are significant parallels. Both characters were raised mainly by their mothers, with the father figures either absent, as in Desmond's case, where the identity of his father was revealed to him rather late in life, or cold and cruel in the case of Rhysand. Moreover, both characters exhibit extreme possessiveness and protectiveness over their respective mates, a trope more commonly known in the book community as "touch her and you'll die." The relationship between Callie and Desmond from *Rhapsodic* is also almost identical to the one between Nesta (Feyre's sister) and Cassian (Rhysand's Inner Circle member), with some added characteristics of Feyre's and Rhysand's relationship from *ACOTAR*—initial curiosity of one another turned into hatred and eventual highly sensual and possessive love with a strong female voice in the relationship and intense reciprocal need for care, as well as quick-witted humor and repartees.

Furthermore, the influence of *Rhapsodic* appears to extend to other romantasy works, most notably *A Song of the Forever Rains* by E. J. Mellow and *Quicksilver* by Callie Hart, contributing to the effect of romantasy chain reaction. The first novel is set in the Thief Kingdom—a hidden city where theft and pleasures thrive, with a notable resemblance to the fields of interest of the Kingdom of Night in *Rhapsodic*. Moreover, the ability to sing in the novel by Mellow is a magical power, which is parallel to the siren's song in Thalassa's book. Similarly, *Quicksilver* features Saeris Fane, who is inadvertently transported to a hidden fae realm—a motif that can be observed in both *Rhapsodic* and *A Song of the Forever Rains*; in *ACOTAR*, however, the fae realm is not hidden, but behind a magical border which Feyre crossed with Tamlin in the first book in the series—where she encounters Kingfisher. His physical appearance aligns closely with already-established romantasy standards of male protagonists: a tall, tattooed, enigmatic, and dangerous fae with a

surprising affection towards his mate. Parallel to Desmond, he is also capable of making deals with others, and is connected to a sword—*Solace*—that is speaking to both him and Saeris, an indication of their great power and special abilities. This weapon is also to be touched only by a person worthy of its potential, which draws a clear connection to Excalibur from Arthurian legends that is to be wielded only by the rightful ruler. Interestingly, *Solace* circles back to Sarah J. Maas' books, as in her *Crescent City* series, Bryce Quinlan at some point wields *Starsword* that also speaks—or rather sings, which further connects to *Rhapsodic* and *A Song of the Forever Rains*—to her and is a symbol of great power, crucial for the development of the plot and a significant artifact in the whole of Maasverse[9].

ACOTAR has also sparked another very well-received romantasy series—*the Empyrean Series* by Rebecca Yarros, better known for the title of the first book in the series, *Fourth Wing,* and dubbed by a book influencer Jack Edwards "the biggest book series since *Harry Potter*." The series introduces Violet Sorrengail, a wannabe scribe forced to join the Basgiath War College and become a dragon rider. There, she encounters Xaden Riorson, whose description also aligns with the established norms for the romantasy male protagonists: tall, tattooed, mysterious, inherently dangerous, and curiously tender with her partner. Interestingly enough, he does not only wield shadows—one of the rarest signets (powers) in existence—but also possesses a second signet, which grants him the ability to discern others' intentions, mimicking the powers of Desmond Flynn from Thalassa's *Rhapsodic*, and making him the most powerful dragon rider in history. Furthermore, Xaden's bond to the second most powerful dragon in Navarra, Sgaeyl, further solidifies his powerful status. Interestingly enough, Sgaeyl's mate—Tairn—is bonded with Violet, who herself wields a rare signet of lightning, as well as a secret one attributed to her dual bond with another dragon, Andarna. The simultaneous existence of both a lighting wielder and a shadow wielder is an extremely rare phenomenon, as the records indicate only one such instance before, which makes the relationship between

the two not only rare but also even more powerful. That relation, however, closely mimics the one between Feyre and Rhysand in *ACOTAR*, as Feyre's inherited powers from every High Lord of Prythian make her an exceptionally powerful High Lady, which contributes to the portrayal of her relationship with Rhysand as the most powerful and skilled couple in their realm. Feyre is also the first High Lady to exist in Prythian, which further fortifies her power and significance.

Contrary to Rhysand and Desmond, though, Xaden is not a fae king or a High Lord, but rather Violet's Wing Leader and, further in the series, her professor in the aforementioned college. And while similarities to Rhysand are easily observed here—the fact that Riorson ultimately becomes Sorrengail's teacher also parallels Rhysand and Feyre's relationship, as he taught her how to read—a key difference lies in Xaden's lack of wings, a fact compensated by his bond with a dragon. Similarly to Rhysand, Xaden is also referred to as "shadow daddy" in the bookish community; however, his title is often abbreviated to "Xaddy" to differentiate him from Rhysand.

The draconic element of *Fourth Wing* not only establishes the series' status as a reimagining of Maas' *ACOTAR*, but also indicates a possible inspiration from the movie *How to Train Your Dragon*. This claim can be supported by the fact that dragon descriptions in both titles are similar (with regard to colors, abilities and classes), as well as the progression of the relationship between the protagonists who initially resist and hate each other, ultimately developing a close romantic bond through forced proximity and fight.

Moreover, it is crucial to note that the combination of both dragons from *Fourth Wing* and *HTTYD*[10] and the relationship between Nesta and Cassian from *ACOTAR* appear to have served as an inspiration for Sarah A. Parker's *When the Moon Hatched*. This story, however, is categorized as "dark fantasy," indicating a pervasive presence of violence. This element's influence may be attributed to *Rhapsodic* and its depiction of the Kingdom of Night, particularly when considering the opening of *WTMH*[11] and the initial thievery attempt performed

by Raeve. However, as this story happens within Three Kingdoms, each ruled by a different brother and characterized by a unique climate, it bears close resemblance to the land of Prythian and the split between the seven courts governed by a different High Lord and with a different landscape and/or season[12] in *ACOTAR*, as well as the seven levels of Hel in *CC*[13] that are similarly ruled by a different brother and characterized by a unique aura. Furthermore, while in *ACOTAR* and the whole of Maasverse there is a strong emphasis on the importance of stars, in *WTMH* there is a strong emphasis on moons, which are regarded as dragon tombstones, for when a dragon dies, they "sail skywards" (Parker 4) and become a moon.

Intriguingly, the relationship dynamics between Raeve and Kaan in *WTMH* are not only similar to those of Nesta and Cassian, but also echo the ones between Feyre and Tamlin in the first *ACOTAR* book, as shown specifically through Reave's capture by Kaan, leading to the creation of their romantic relationship. And even more intriguingly, there is yet another connection between the character of Raeve and another female protagonist from Maasverse—Aelin Galanthynius from the *Throne of Glass* series, a lost princess of Terrasen, living under a fake identity of the assassin Celaena Sardothien. This closely resembles Raeve's personal loss of the identity of Elluin, princess of one of the Three Kingdoms, as well as her adopted identity as an assassin. Moreover, a significant similarity between *WTMH*, *Throne of Glass*, and *Fourth Wing* lies in the fact that there is a distinct religious cult within their respective realms, with each deity representing the forces of nature, magic, but also death or sun, which further demonstrates the interconnectedness of the romantasy titles, as well as proves the hypothesis of the chain reaction initiated by Maas' *ACOTAR*.

Conclusions

The above analysis of intertextuality and the romantasy chain reaction portrays high responsiveness levels of the romantasy books to *ACOTAR*. It shows that the

authors of this genre constantly perpetuate the archetype of a male protagonist, as well as draw heavily on Maas' *ACOTAR* in other aspects of their novels, more notably in the construction of the world of the novel, the relationship dynamics between the main protagonists, as well as the power dynamics of the couple and their magical abilities. However, that does not mean that their works are just a copy of *ACOTAR* but with different characters' names; quite the contrary, their works are simply examples of the interconnectedness—and henceforth, intertextuality—of the literary world. Even though the multiple intertextual references developed around *ACOTAR* could be claimed to testify to the cultural exhaustion already discussed by Barth, they can also be seen as novel and original combinations by the application of relativizing and stylizing processes (Kristeva 73) that result in the emergence of new eclectic pieces that are just as captivating as their predecessors.

Endnotes

1. An abbreviation for *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas; this abbreviation concerns both the title of the whole series and the first book in the series.

2. Abbreviation for *Beauty and the Beast.*

3. The only character who exhibits signs of self-mutilation and anger towards any kind of power in Maas' books is Nesta, Feyre's sister. But there is an important difference between self-mutilation as an angry response to man's power and Nesta's anger and self-mutilation. She is not angry because of man's superiority—she is angry because she was taken captive and changed into a Fae without her consent. While some scholars may claim this is an angry response to man's superiority and a potential for feministic studies, this article is not concerned with this kind of approach towards what happened to Nesta. Moreover, the fact that she is then recovered, using her new-found Fae powers, and in love with a Fae man, proves that her self-mutilation is not as much aimed at men, as much as it is aimed at her capturer and her faith, over which she had no control whatsoever.

4. Abbreviation for *A Court of Mist and Fury,* the second book in the *ACOTAR* series by Sarah J. Maas.

5. Abbreviation for *A Court of Wings and Ruin,* the third book in the *ACOTAR* series by Sarah J. Maas.

6. Bookish community on TikTok.

7. For example @itsfeyre2, @therealrahulrai, @karissawalker, @darthhdaddy, @what. jordan.reads, @jezelle.x, etc. on TikTok.

8. Winged fae warriors in *ACOTAR.*

9. The literary universe of Maas' books. Only two out of her three series are confirmed to be connected, but her readers speculate that all of her books are interconnected, especially after the discovery of a shadow watching over Aelin in the *Throne of Glass* series, who is confirmed by Maas to be Rhysand from *ACOTAR*.

10. Abbreviation for *How to Train Your Dragon*.

11. Abbreviation for *When the Moon Hatched* by Sarah A. Parker.

12. There are seven courts in *ACOTAR*: Spring Court, Summer Court, Autumn Court, Winter Court, Day Court, Dawn Court and Night Court. Each of these courts has a different landscape and in the case of seasonal courts—a different season; unlike in *WTMH*, however, they are governed by a different High Lord with no familial connections between them.

13. Abbreviation for *Crescent City* series by Sarah J. Maas*.

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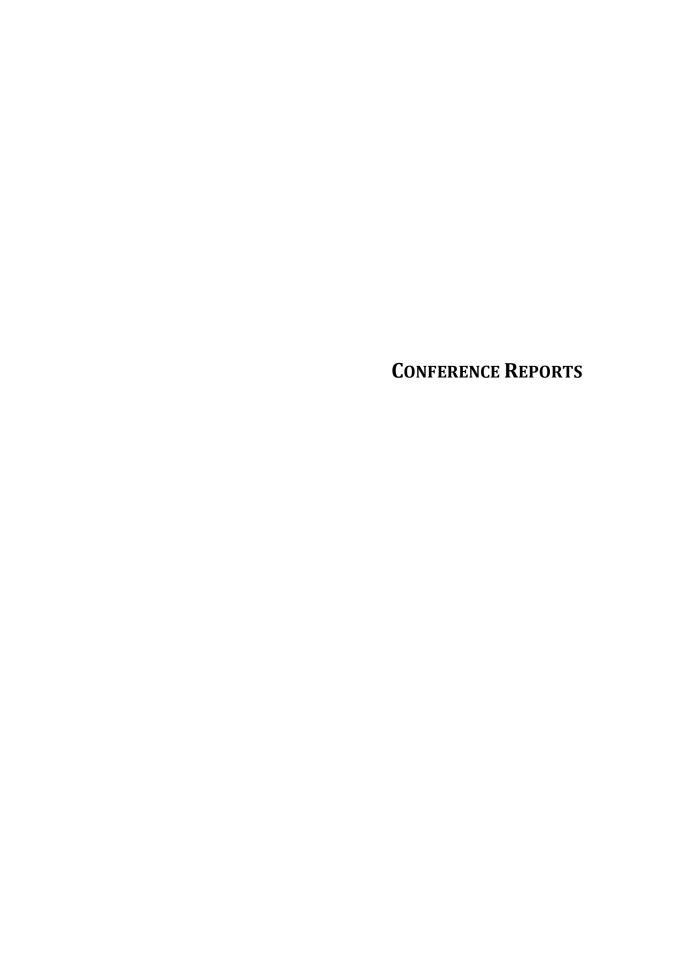
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Abstract

This article analyzes intertextuality within the genre of romantasy, as well as what I call a romantasy chain reaction (the influence of one title on subsequent ones), initiated by Sarah J. Maas' *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series. After exploring the theoretical aspects of intertextuality, the paper examines this phenomenon in practice on the example of the abovementioned series. The analysis discusses the responses of *A Court of Thorns and Roses* to the cultural world, but also the responses of other romantasy works (namely *Rhapsodic*, *Quicksilver*, *Fourth Wing*, and *When the Moon Hatched, Crescent City*, as well as *A Song of the Forever Rains*) to those books, henceforth creating the aforementioned intertextual chain reaction.

CONFERENCE REPORTS

ADAPTATION AND INNOVATION:
LINGUISTIC, CULTURAL AND LITERARY RESPONSES TO A CHANGING WORLD

Organised by: Academic Association for Doctoral Students & Students of English, Department of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Comparative Studies, Institute of Literary Studies, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń

Conducted in: English

Took place on: 22 May 2025

Took place in: Toruń (online)

Report by: Aleś Makkaveyeu

Throughout the last century, humans have been changing the world at an unmatched pace, necessitating constant (re)adaptation to the new surroundings. Language and culture not only reflect the way that society alters with the passage of time, but also provide space for dealing with these changes. The international conference "Adaptation and Innovation: Linguistic, Cultural and Literary Responses to a Changing World" was organised to draw scholars' attention to and present an opportunity to discuss the issues of the contemporary world, such as climate change, rapid technological advancement, and political turmoil.

The conference took place on May 22, 2025. Thanks to its online format, representatives from various Polish and foreign institutions were able to participate in the sessions. The conference encompassed a broad range of topics that examined manifestations of changes in media and language and applied novel ways of analysis to cultural texts and linguistic phenomena. The

participants explored such approaches as environmental studies, queer studies, disability studies, feminism, deconstruction, and posthumanism.

The participants had the pleasure to listen to the plenary lecture by Dr Alice Haylett Bryan (Queen Mary University of London), a researcher in the area of contemporary film. Using the example of Thoren Bradley's videos, Dr Bryan discussed the phenomena of thirst traps, male objectification, and experience of female viewers. In addition to the keynote, eighteen inspiring papers were presented by early career scholars. They were grouped into five sessions, each with a consecutive discussion with the online audience.

The conference was opened by Prof. Marzenna Cyzman-Eid, Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at Nicolaus Copernicus University, who praised students' interest in academic development and popularisation of the Humanities. The first and second parallel sessions discussed a wide range of issues, such as: the connection between ecology and femininity (Hu Jianmin (Grace), College of Foreign Languages, Huazhong Agricultural University), male gaze in poetry (Marta Struglińska, University of Łódź), linguistic attitudes in queer women's writings (Anna Klimek, Jagiellonian University, Doctoral School in the Humanities), disability sports terminology and social acceptance in the Chinese context (He Xingya, Guangxi Normal University), the issues of modern technological world (Chrysoula Titi, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens), construction of myth and archetypes (Yang Siyu, Jinan University), as well as various approaches to the role of translators (Natalia Chudzyńska, School of Politics and International Relations at East China Normal University; Wang Jinmei, Dalian Minzu University). Papers presented in session 3 and 4 discussed the symbolism of queer resistance (Pratiti Saha, Christ University Bangalore), women's life writing today and in the past (Joanna Porębska, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń), vampiric rituals of becoming (Anna Maria Ronewicz, University of Szczecin), influence of a medical condition and treatment on identity (re)construction (Satvik Tandon, Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University), young women's narrative accounts of

sexual assault in contemporary young adult literature (Mary-Kate Flanagan, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick), objectification of emotions in a dystopian society (Zuzanna Sanecka, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń), facial self-disfigurement as act of rebellion (Agata Rupińska, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń), and representation of Trump's neocolonial politics in the media (Klaudia Antkowiak, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań). The last session focused on topics such as the culture of exhaustion (Gabriela Iwanowska, University of Białystok), and posthumanism in Stephen King's writings (Julia Borkowska, University of Siedlce).

The international conference "Adaptation and Innovation: Linguistic, Cultural and Literary Responses to A Changing World" proved to be a successful event that sparked discussions. What is more, the conference demonstrated both the ubiquity of adaptation and innovation and the diversity of the scholarly research in this area.[1]

Endnotes

1. Additional details concerning the event can be found at https://adaptationinnovation25umk. wordpress.com/.

FEELING CULTURES / CULTURING FEELINGS:
EMOTIONS AND AFFECTS IN CULTURAL PRACTICES

Organized by: Department of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Comparative Studies, Institute of Literary Studies, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń
Conducted in: English
Took place on: 9-11 April 2025
Took place in: Toruń / MSTeams
Report by: Katarzyna Przygońska

The conference "Feeling Cultures / Culturing Feelings: Emotions and Affects in Cultural Practices" took place between 9th and 11th of April 2025. The main purpose of the event was to create a space for a discussion concerning recent developments in affect studies and to utilise it as a starting point for further conversations about affects and emotions in various fields, including literature, culture, psychology, art, drama, games, music, and journalism. The hybrid nature of the conference allowed for truly international exchange of ideas, with each session happening simultaneously in person and online.

The conference began with a plenary lecture by Dr Nicole Falkenhayner, Associate Professor of Contemporary Anglophone Literature at the Department of Language and Literature, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, who specialises in affect and viscerality as feminist practice in literature, art, and culture. During the lecture, Dr Falkenhayner discussed the notions such as sense of safety, unsafe spaces, and the affect of fear in the context of 21st century British fiction with child and adolescent protagonists. The second plenary lecture was given by Dr Xavier Aldana Reyes, Reader in English Literature and Film at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, whose academic interests include 20th and 21st century literature and
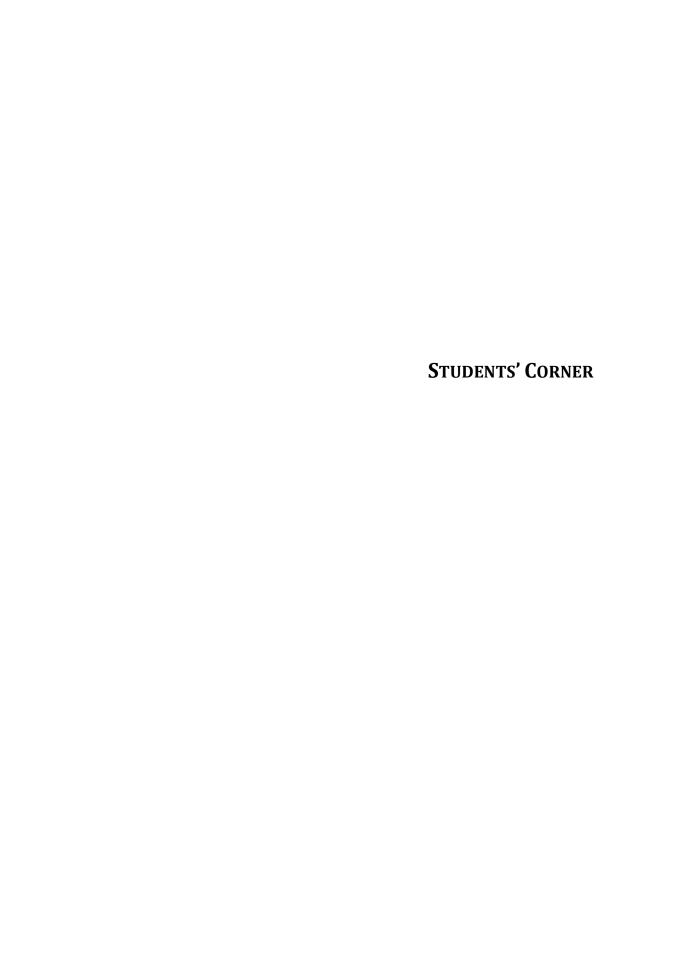
cinema, particularly gothic and horror fiction. In his plenary lecture, Dr Aldana Reyes discussed cinematic horror and feelings associated with watching horror films, as well as positive affects associated with empowerment, representation, and social justice, that may be experienced while watching horror films.

The conference consisted of twenty themed sessions comprising almost seventy papers. Sessions were divided thematically and participants could engage in discussions on topics that centred around: Affect and his/herstory; Communities and bodies; Trauma, gender, race, (post)colony; Climate affects / eco-emotions; (Post/Non)human / anthropocenic emotions; Empathy; Audiences and participants; Gothic affects; Horrors and notoriety; Affect and philosophy; Affect and art; Grief; Feminine and feminist affects; Marginalization and affects; Positive affects: hope and joy; Negative affects: anger, shame, fear; Genre and affects; Ethnography and affects; Gendered affects: masculinity; and Experience, experiment and affects. The participating scholars represented numerous academic institutions from Poland, the United Kingdom, Norway, Lithuania, Austria, India, the United States, Ireland, France, Italy, Albania, Portugal, Slovakia, and Spain.

The international conference "Feeling Cultures / Culturing Feelings: Emotions and Affects in Cultural Practices" provided space for productive discussions and exchange of ideas. The hybrid nature of the event helped to connect a variety of scholars from different parts of the world. Thus, the conference proved to be a successful event.[1]

Endnotes
1. A more detailed description of the event, along with its programme, book of abstracts, and other information can be found at www.feelingculturesconference.wordpress.com.

Students' Corner

ART AND LITERATURE PROJECTS BY NCU STUDENTS (2024/2025): REVISITING *HAMLET* WRITING DETECTIVE FICTION

The courses in "Intertextuality and Adaptation" and "Detective Fiction" (English Studies, BA programme, 2nd year) invite their participants to devise their own artistic projects as part of the course assessment. Some of the last year's creative writing and art are presented in this year's edition of the Students' Corner.

The projects devised for the 2024/2025 course in "Intertextuality and Adaptation" use various art forms to demonstrate a range of attitudes to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. A majority of last year's projects comment on the representation of the character of Ophelia, focusing on her madness and death and referring not only to the original play but also to the rich and centuries-long pictorial tradition.

Short stories and scripts rewriting the genre of detective fiction combine theoretical knowledge of genre characteristics and typologies with creative re-imagining of the familiar (and unfamiliar) spaces of the university campus.

We hope that you will find as much pleasure viewing and reading these projects, as their creators had working on them.

Edyta Lorek-Jezińska

Ophelia's Monologue

(script and stills from the original short film)

A slow shot of the Vistula River can be seen, before cutting abruptly, showing Ophelia, who sits on the riverside holding a flower, as she appears to be lost in thought.

OPHELIA, *while picking petals from a flower*: To be... not to be...to be...not to be...to be...

Ophelia sighs at the sight of the last petal remaining.

OPHELIA: As the world is blinded by its own sorrows, I remain unchanged in my woes. For holy vows of heaven do not grant mercy for the living, but only dread...of something after death.

OPHELIA (*resigned*): Thus, only remembrances remain in this mortal world. Be it a moment of great despair, or a blood stained cloth.

She picks the last petal and blows it away.

Camera shot changes, showing Ophelias face from the front.

OPHELIA: Pray thee, whose sins in my orisons be all remembr'd. Pray, for those whose weeping of shame still echoes through the chambers of their hearts. Pray, for those left with indignation instead of anguish. Pray for thyself.

She laughs gently.

OPHELIA (*with increasingly sharp tone*): For thy loss thy honor and nobleness may sustain. But alas, what a work of art is a man whose own madness persists to carve a chasm into the rotten heart of Denmark. O woe is them, those who perished by the serpent's tongue. O woe is them, who perished by noble mind o'erthrown.

The camera cuts to another shot, showing Ophelia from the back.

OPHELIA (*with melancholy*): The nymphs of the water...they call to me! They speak of the flow of water...which shall wash me clean. As the sun washes its beautiful flowers, lying among everlasting gardens.

Ophelia sighs.

OPHELIA (*sadly*): They deceive me. For warden to my very soul gated up at my heart, as my body holds the weight of sorrows unbearable. May it resist; to continue living, I shall not allow it. My rightful place is by my father. And as the time forces its god-given powers upon the castles' walls, the same power...shall lead me into the eternity...I long for.

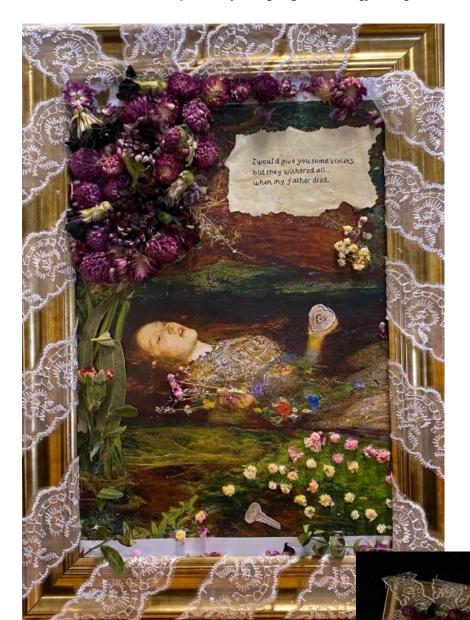*Ophelia suddenly shifts her position, now facing the viewer.*

OPHELIA: Did you weep, Hamlet?

HAMLET (*quickly, off-screen*): I did not, fair Ophelia.

Ophelia laughs.

OPHELIA: Ah...so my hope in vain remained.

Kornelia Mazurkiewicz-Kloc

I would give you some violets,
but they withered all,
when my father died.

Simal Dogan & Sofiia Shpak

Julia Siminska

**Helena Ledzińska &
Konrad Kwiatkowski**

To be, or not to be?

START! You are a prince of Denmark, grieving the loss of your father. Roll the dice.

3. BOO!! You see the ghost of your father. Now you have to listen to him talk about how your uncle murdered him. You decide to avenge his death, but the talk took a long time. You miss one turn.

10. Oh no! You decided to start pretending that you've gone mad. Unfortunately, this delays you. Take the longer path using the yellow tiles.

17. To be, or not to be? Roll the dice. If it falls on 1,2,3, or 5 you can keep playing. If it falls on 4 or 6 - you are out of the game.

22. Got you! You came up with a plan to stage a play which helps you confirm that your uncle indeed killed your father. This allows you to move forward with your plan of revenge. Roll the dice again.

27. Whoops! You killed your lover's father, thinking it was your uncle. Move back four spaces.

31. Bon voyage! You got sent to England with an order for your execution. Fortunately, you manage to escape, but it is a significant obstacle on your way to avenge your father. You miss two turns.

32. Yippie! Despite the delay, your forceful journey to England has made you more determined to get revenge. Move forward two spaces.

35. Goodbye my lover! Your lover, devastated by her father's death, dies. As a punishment for causing her death, go back to start.

FINISH! In a fight with your lover's brother, you get struck by a poisoned sword, but before dying you manage to kill your uncle and avenge your father. Congratulations, and rest in peace!
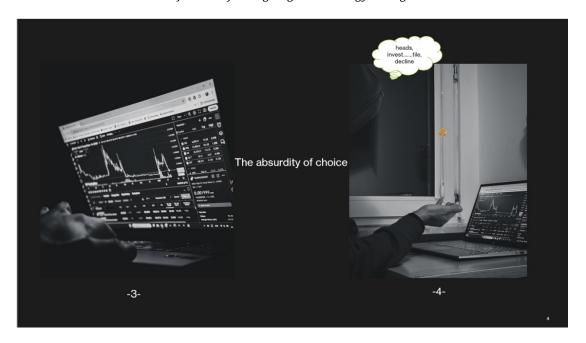
Matylda Skolimowska

Souhaib Hriz (poem written with B. K. Lamine)

"I have heard of your paintings too, well enough; God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another. You jig, you amble, and you lisp; you nickname God's creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance."

"The canker galls the infants of the spring
Too oft before their buttons be disclosed,
And in the morn and liquid dew of youth
Contagious blastments are most imminent."

"There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray you, love, remember.
And there is pansies, that's for thoughts."
"There's fennel for you, and columbines:—there's rue for you; and here's some for me:—we may call it herb of grace o' Sundays:—you may wear your rue with a difference.—There's a daisy: I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died."

"There is a willow grows aslant a brook,
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream;
There with fantastic garlands did she come
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them;
There on the pendant boughs her coronet weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke;
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up;
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element; but long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death."

Patrycja Kwapińska & Marika Zawacka

BROKEN GLASS

Scene 1 (the only one)

INTERIOR, A ROOM IN DORMITORY NO. 4—EVENING

The room with two beds is filled with trash and clearly not cared for. It is located on the first floor of an apartment building surrounded by a concrete plaza with broken glass of all kinds spread on the pavement. The window of the room on the floor above is shattered.

A student, Connor, looks through the window and sighs heavily. He is dressed in a white shirt and a tie. On the desk there is a laptop with notes.

Then, his roommate, Jean, enters the room and starts unpacking.

CONNOR: Back from the uni so soon?

JEAN: Skipped the french culture class, don't need it anyway.

CONNOR: Could do you good. Maybe you'd learn to clean up your mess.

JEAN: Maybe you should learn to stop caring about the messes of other people.

CONNOR: Why? They bother everyone. It's just that somebody has to keep the order.

JEAN: It's a shame you can't study for a janitor, then. You think criminology's gonna make you into a detective? That why you wear a trenchcoat when it's thirty degrees outside?

CONNOR: It's stylish. Besides, it doesn't matter who I want to be. It only matters who the people need.

Jean opens a bottle of beer he took out of his backpack.

JEAN: If I say I need a normal roommate, will you stop playing Sherlock? Anyway, how's your case, detective?

CONNOR: I still don't think it's an accident.

JEAN: It's because you weren't here when it happened, and I was. It's not so unusual that a drunk guy falls out of a window. It happens in the other dorms, too. Probably happened three times this year.

CONNOR: Possibly. But after the poor fella landed, a bottle landed on his head. Sent him to a hospital. Why'd his friends do that to him?

After posing a question, Connor sits at his desk and starts writing on his laptop. He is sharing his thoughts on the dormitory group chat.

JEAN: I don't know. The guys on the second floor like to get stupid. It's a miracle they haven't been kicked out earlier. Good riddance, spares us from the noise.

CONNOR: Besides, there is one detail that everybody overlooks. Those guys never bought alcohol in glass bottles. For as long as I can remember they've been buying the stuff in the plastic ones. I'll share that with the others.

JEAN: Unless they invited a friend over, who happens to prefer properly bottled drinks, so there goes that theory. Besides, why even bother with this incident? Nobody cares anymore. It's been two days. In the next few days another group is gonna move in, and another guy is gonna fall out of the window. That's just the natural order of things in here, man!

CONNOR: I thought you were interested in the case.

JEAN: I was making fun of you. There is no case, just your delusions!

Suddenly, a knock at the door can be heard. Jean springs from his seat and rushes over to open, but his face turns pale upon seeing the visitor. In the doorframe, there stands another student, Kamil, visibly angry.

KAMIL: You be Connor?

CONNOR: Connor? That would be me.

KAMIL: Could you please stop spreading lies about me?

CONNOR: Lies? What lies?

KAMIL: I live on the top floor and had nothing to do with it. I don't even drink alcohol!

JEAN: Man, chill, Connor's just being silly.

KAMIL: You chill! You still owe me fifty bucks, and here I am being accused!

CONNOR: Nobody's accusing you of anything. I just said it couldn't have been the partiers on the second floor.

KAMIL: And everybody's going to think it's me who smashed the bottle on his skull, on account of the fact that I was the one to tell them to shut up when they were too loud. Thanks a lot!

CONNOR: I'm sorry you feel that way, but the truth must come out, and sooner or later—it will.

KAMIL: You know what? You're right.

JEAN: No, wait a second, he's just fascinated with the books.

KAMIL: No money is worth disturbing my peace and quiet. I know, what really happened.

CONNOR: Oh yeah?

JEAN: Oh no...

KAMIL: It was a Monday night like any other with the group on the second floor drinking and shouting. It's true that one of them fell out of the window by his own doing. But that is not what led to his injury. I was opening my window, preparing to shout at them to keep quiet, when I saw him landing on the floor. Next thing I saw was the glass bottle flying from YOUR window and landing straight on the bastard's head. Here's your case.

Connor slowly turns to look at Jean with disappointment in his eyes.

JEAN: At least it's peaceful now, eh?

CONNOR: You're an actual moron.

JEAN: So what, now you're gonna report me? Be the man who got rid of the dormitory's unsung hero? That's how it's gonna be?

CONNOR: No. Now you're gonna tell the truth to everyone. I'm not gonna clean up your mess. Grow up and do it yourself.

Igor Radomski

UNSEEN

Nobody seemed to notice my presence, even though I was right next to the body. The two policemen were pacing around the vandalised room, searching for any clues among the scattered papers and broken furniture that would help them identify the culprit. The inspection of the crime scene lasted for two hours and thirteen minutes until they decided to head back to the police station. Only the head librarian remained more annoyed than concerned about the event. Muttering to himself about the burdensome work that was awaiting him the next day and the severe pain he was experiencing, he left the room, leaving me alone to process the events of last night.

If I were to describe the hours before the crime, I would pick the word "mundane." Nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary—the quiet whispers of students' learning, the buzz of a dusty, worn-out lamp, and the occasional screeching of chairs being dragged across the room. It was when the sun set and the room got empty that things took a dark turn. We stayed up late at the library, long past its closing hours. My colleague, worn out from working all day, entered a deep sleep. I, on the other hand, was doing some tasks when suddenly—I heard a bang.

Then another.

Then another.

The glass protecting the library from the rest of the campus shattered.

An unknown figure holding a crowbar entered the room, looking around nervously. At first, I thought they were a burglar, searching for valuables to sell off. I was mistaken. Not moments after, the intruder started swinging their weapon rapidly, hitting the nearest objects. The books, placed before on sturdy

shelves, were now lying on the ground. Another series of swings destroyed the windows, followed by pots with plants sitting on the main library desk. In their rage, the figure didn't even notice the harm they caused to themselves— although they were wearing gloves, a dark crimson stain could be seen.

Then, their eyes were set on us. I tried to wake my friend up, but it was no use. No sound came out of me, as if I was muted; the vandal rushed towards him, who was still unaware of the danger, and dealt a blow so powerful that in an instant they ended his life. But it was not enough. The figure tore the body apart, pulled at veins, and shattered what was left into something barely recognisable. I knew I was going to be next; no matter how hard I tried to scream, there was nobody who could hear me, who could help me. Suddenly, a strong voice could be heard, and a beam of light would light the scene. It was hard to figure out who the voice belonged to, but one thing was certain— whoever he was—he meant trouble for the culprit. The terrified criminal swung his crowbar one more time, breaking the window, and then they jumped out.

As the voice got closer, I recognised the university's security guard. But his eyes passed over me, sliding across me like light on dust. As if I were part of architecture. The guard spoke into his device and left. But today, the inspection of the crime scene by the police truly proved their incompetence and helplessness. They hadn't even covered what was left of the body. I suppose the assumption was that he didn't need that kind of respect, but my friend deserved every bit of it. He took pride in what he did—though you wouldn't know it from the way the students muttered about his age and ability to work. There are so many things that they missed. But I saw it. A single piece of hair under the body of my colleague. A drop of blood hidden among the scraps of paper. I knew that without evidence, the police would treat this crime as just more paperwork to put into an already full drawer. So, I took it all upon myself, pushing my limits for hours just to find any footage that would undeniably prove the identity of the culprit.

I *know* who broke him.

They will find out eventually. Or they won't. It makes no difference. I have stored the evidence. Indexed it. All compiled into a neat report on the desktop.

So, I'll wait.

Until I'm finally seen again.

Kornelia Mazurkiewicz-Kloc

THE FLOWER WREATH

It was only at the sixth time the man started to feel the warm sensation of melting down in his stomach. At this point his mind stopped racing with images; now, it was still and blank, as if barren of light. Three more times and the blade stopped persisting. The only thing left to do in this predicament is to fall down on the floor and bathe in the crimson pool. And so the man did, with a perfect execution worthy of an award. First, he dropped on the knees, hands hanging down, one of which was still holding the perpetrator for dear life. Then, the torso lost its balance and along with the head came crashing into the floor. Finally, he used the last strengths of his muscles to extend his left arm and point with the finger at the picture leaning against the wall, giving a final nod to the audience and selfishly leaving them perplexed.

***

The detective was immensely disappointed with such a boring case. One look at the scene was enough to brand it as suicide. Nine stab wounds to the abdomen. The shape of the crevasses, now dry as a bone, clearly indicated the workings of a sharp blade. What a surprise it was to find a knife in the hands of the victim. And even a bigger one when the fingerprints on it matched that of the lifeless body. How many years has it been since the detective started out in this field of expertise? 'Must have been almost twenty,' he thought to himself. Yet, he has never been called out for an obvious predicament of terminal self-harm. Why even bother the detectives who specialize in homicide by troubling them with something a third-rate policeman could do? To reach the answer, the detective would have to interrogate his younger assistant, the one responsible for calling him in the middle of a gleaming Sunday to come to the crime scene for a major breakthrough in the case.

'There is no case. He killed himself.' The tone of the Detective showed irritation at the performative nature of his younger colleague, who was too invested in crime fiction. The detective hated those stories. They were ridiculously unreal.

'The finger? It bothered me from the very beginning. Why is it positioned like that? Is this even possible to naturally set itself like that due to gravity?' The Assistant was unfazed by the visible resignation of his superior. He was glowing with engagement and excitement, completely oblivious to the rather serious and drastic environment he was in.

'It's a part of his spectacle. He did so deliberately to mock us and make us waste time on useless speculation,' The Detective sat down on the bed and lit a cigarette, all the while looking at his co-worker who was crouching next to the body with puzzled expression on his face.

'That's too abstract. It may be more substantial. Let's re-enact the scene,' The Assistant stood up and took off his jacket. He placed himself parallel to the laying body.

'Judging from the bruise on the forehead, he hit the ground pretty hard. The impact of the stabbings may have had some influence on the way the body dropped.' He extended his arm and with a vibrant, completely overdone force started hitting himself in the stomach, pretending to hold a knife. 'One, two, three...' The Assistant counted. It was only at the sixth time the Detective started laughing from disbelief. Once the countdown reached nine, the Assistant fell to his knees and hit the ground. And he hit it with an impact powerful enough to chase away the smile on the Detective's face. It went to the other host, whose eyes were shining proudly with joy at discovery. The whole scene looked uncanny. Two completely opposite entities occupying the same space.

'Look. My hands naturally placed themselves perpendicular to the body.' A fresh injury on the Assistant's forehead was being illuminated by the sun coming from the window.

'It was his intention then, to consciously make the adjustment.'

'Yes, it was. And I already told you that he's merely fucking with us.' What a waste of time for the Detective.

'A suicidal person wants to leave the world, not to meddle with it further.' What an opportunity to shine for the Assistant.

He got up and walked over to the wall on the other side of the room. He crouched to get a good look at the picture. The grand clue to the identity of the murderer. The painted woman was dressed in a white gown and a flowery wreath. She was surrounded by wild bushes and spring trees.

'And now you're gonna check the painting, see if it has any writing at the back or if the person depicted is someone the guy on the floor knew.' The Detective stood up and walked over to the victim. 'And then you're gonna be disappointed because there is no writing on the back of the painting and the person depicted never even existed.' The Detective started searching the pockets of the punctured guy. He took out a lighter and a pocketknife. 'And then these would be your new clues.'

The Assistant didn't pay any attention to the Detective. His eyes were fixed on the dead center of the painting. A light touch on the eyes of the woman told him all he needed to know.

'There's a hidden camera in here.' The Assistant, full of pride and hope, looked over to the Detective.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

There was no sound in the room. The person on the screen was pointing at both of the actors within his play. The Assistant reached over to the laptop and paused the video.

'I gotta give it to you. You replicated his suicide perfectly,' said the Detective, still looking at the screen.

The Assistant seemed absent. He got up, completely ignoring the remark of his superior, and walked over to the body lying on the floor. There were two coroners wrapping it up in a body bag. One of them noticed the Assistant and

asked 'Yes? You still want to examine something?' Upon saying that, the coroner moved away, leaving the scene open for the main character.

It was only at the sixth time that the Assistant was finally pulled away to the side and pinned down by the Detective. The face of the victim was unrecognizable. The skull got fractured, the teeth lost their place, and the eyes sank down like pearls at the bottom of the ocean. All you could see in the eyes of the Assistant bruised in blood and purple from the rage was pure insanity.

THE END

Bartosz Rutkowski

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It was a very gloomy evening in Toruń. The rain had not stopped even for a moment, not making it any easier for Lily to get to her destination. The fog, combined with the heavy sound of rain and wind, felt sinister—almost as if it were trying to scare her away. Lily thought about turning back, of course, but she has already gone too far. She had to overcome her fear; this was her only chance to pass the American Literature test. She opened the enormous, heavy steel door and entered the building with caution. She was walking through the eerie corridors of Collegium Humanisticum in order to find the place of her execution—that is the test, of course—when she suddenly heard a noise. Familiar, yet strikingly grotesque. As it grew louder, shivers ran down her spine. She moved closer, hearing the uncanny sound more and more clearly. Suddenly, the noise stopped. Lily figured it must have come from the classroom her lecturer had booked for the test. She opened the door with caution and instantly felt the ominous atmosphere. She stood frozen for a few seconds, shocked by what she saw. Her lecturer was sitting limply in a chair, his head resting on the desk. The desk was now covered in blood, which dripped onto the floor. She stepped closer and checked his pulse, just in case. The teacher was dead.

Lily thought to herself that this day must be cursed as she searched her bag for her phone to call the police. When she finally found it, it turned out the battery was dead. Terrified, but determined, she decided to conduct a mini-investigation until she could find someone with a working phone. She searched the whole building, but it seemed that nobody was there. Suddenly, she heard a noise of something being dropped. Despite her fear, she decided to investigate. Turning a corner, she found a cleaning lady silently cursing the mop. Lily

approached her and said with a shaky voice, "Do you have a phone? Th-the professor is d-dead…," "What?!" the cleaning lady gasped, and they both started running down the hallway.

When they reached the classroom, the cleaning lady called the police and an ambulance. Suddenly, a phone rang, its sound reverberating through the room. Lily cautiously moved towards the sound coming from beneath one of the desks. "Whose phone is this?" she wondered. "Why is it here?" She turned on the phone, hoping to find a clue about the owner. When she saw the wallpaper, she gasped. "No, it can't be true… No, no, no!" The phone belonged to her boyfriend, Jack, whom she had met during their first year. As Lily began to run out of the classroom, she chest-bumped someone. It was Jack.

Now Lily had no doubt. He must have done it. She was in love with a murderer. She looked at him with tears dripping down her cheeks, then started pushing him against the wall, shouting, "HOW COULD YOU?! WHO ARE YOU?!… HOW COULD YOU?!" Jack managed to stop her and shouted, "What are you talking about?!" As they spoke, it turned out to be a coincidence. Jack had simply dropped his phone during class and was now looking for it.

Finally, the police arrived, secured the area, and questioned everyone: Lily, Jack, and the cleaning lady. They all had an alibi, so they were free to go. Lily and Jack left the building, traumatized and trying to comfort each other. They were heading to Jack's car when they both looked at a vehicle parked at the end of the lot.

"That's the dean's car I think…" Jack said. He recognized it because it was very eye-catching: a new Mercedes the dean was quite proud of. Lily and Jack looked at each other but said nothing. They didn't want to believe what they were thinking. "Do you think…" Lily began. Jack understood and answered, "It's impossible." They decided to split up. Lily went to inform the police, while Jack went to take a closer look. What he saw shocked him—a knife lying next to the dean's car. At that moment, Lily returned with the police. Officers called for

support and began searching the campus. Since NCU is surrounded by woods, that was the obvious place to look.

Our brave couple decided to stay and help with the search. As they ventured deeper into the woods, the police dogs suddenly began barking and running. The officers, Lily, and Jack followed. Lily hoped she was dreaming as they reached the figure restrained by the dogs. It was the dean. The dean was the murderer.

Patrycja Kwapińska & Daria Domagalska

IMAGES OF THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE: WORKS BY STUDENTS OF ENGLISH STUDIES AT NICOLAUS COPERNICUS UNIVERSITY

The course "Introduction to literary theory" (English Studies, BA programme, 2nd year) offers an overview of the major current approaches to the study of literature. In addition to exploring theoretical perspectives, students analyse selected works of poetry, prose, and drama. As a preparation for the analysis, they practice creative writing and compose haiku, a seemingly simple yet emotionally intense verse form that originated in Japan in the 17th century. The haikus presented here were created for the 2024/2025 course and provide just a small sample of the students' creative abilities.

The other works presented here were created for the 2024/2025 course "Media, film, literature: Ecological explorations in literature, film and art" (English Studies, MA programme, 1st year). The course employs the approaches developed by ecocriticism to examine environmental issues, such as climate change, fossil fuels, consumerism, and the sixth mass extinction, and their representation in literature, film, and art. The painting and short stories created by the students reflect the gravity of the current problems, call for change, and imagine potential futures. Joanna Porębska's "Solarlady" encapsulates the ideas of solarpunk, an artistic, literary, and social movement that offers visions of a sustainable future and ways to achieve it. Julia Chorchos's "A Dream of Tomorrow in a World of Today" juxtaposes the grim reality of environmental damage against a sustainable future, serving as a warning for those living in the early 21st century. Bartosz Jastrzębski's "Splatters" presents a compelling critique of consumerism and the beauty myth (WARNING: the story contains graphic descriptions of self-harm). Finally, Piotr Zimmermann's "The ElecrOlimpic Charter" depicts a future world dominated by technology, where

modified humans have become the norm. While these works are just a sample of the texts completed for the course, they illustrate the range of issues students consider important.

Katarzyna Więckowska

HAIKU

Each passing moment
Bound by the eternal vows
A wave returns home

Golden leaves drift down
Whispering of days now past
Autumn fades to rest

Heaven's tears in spring
Splash of colour growing round
Arch against the gate

The wind of struggles
A crystal raindrop falls down
It's getting colder

Autumn leaves drift down,
whispers dance on crisp night air,
moonlight warms the earth

Wind whispers at dawn
Cold air in a dark, small room
Loneliness creeps in

blossoms everywhere
the world starts to live again
born from light and bloom

Hares hidden in herbs
Before they leave their hideout
Foxes start hunting

Smoke over the lake
Grind the grass, burn the paper
Now inhale exhale

Our hands entangled
Like green vines mixed in branches
Bees buzzing above

Stars above my head,
Winter should be gone by now
But the cold lingers

Snow in spring whispers
Hearts burn in a sudden bloom
Love melts winter's chill

I love my new life
It's beautiful, like summer
Moments—short, fleeting

Golden leaves falling
Sounds dancing with autumn wind
Sadness is showing

Women on the moon
Moonlight on the women shines
They glow in the dark

Sun is coming down,
Empty darkness hugs slowly.
No one else around

Flower and the sun
Kissing my cheeks and my lips
Making me a star

Birds fly overhead
Singing such helpless tunes
Soon they will all freeze

Autumn leaves drift down,
whispers dance on crisp night air,
moonlight warms the earth.

Joanna Porębska, *Solarlady*

Solarlady is a solarpunk-inspired portrait that combines themes of technology and nature. It expresses hope (an important theme in solarpunk) through strong, bright colours.

A DREAM OF TOMORROW IN A WORLD OF TODAY

Sixteen-year-old Erica lives shortly after humanity has rediscovered the benefits of nature and learned to use its resources while protecting it. Coal mines, once major energy producers, have been replaced by environmentally friendly alternatives. Hydroelectric power plants, wind farms, and solar panels are widely used, and people actively contribute to energy generation. A shift in human consciousness towards caring for the planet has led to innovative solutions, such as the development of a new generation of smartwatches that generate energy from the steps taken throughout the day. Those who participate often benefit from lower energy bills. These smartwatches not only promote energy efficiency but also enhance health and life expectancy.

The transformation is evident not only in energy production but also in everyday life. Plastic bags have been replaced by biodegradable alternatives, and most food is now organically grown, leading to people making more conscious purchasing decisions. Clothing is now made from plant-based materials, making recycling easier. Gardening has become a widespread hobby, alongside small-scale manufacturing, which aligns perfectly with the modern ethos of "living in harmony with nature." Abandoned coal-fired power plants have been transformed into green spaces, with lush vegetation covering their ruins. These revitalized structures enhance urban biodiversity and beautify cities. Sculptures crafted from recycled materials, combined with greenery, create a stunning and modern urban landscape.

Cities have also undergone significant changes. They are now smaller, making navigation easier. Essential institutions are located close to one another, and numerous green spaces are available. Some buildings are covered in vegetation, contributing to the overall sustainability of urban life. Recycling centers and community hubs, where children can learn practical skills like manufacturing, are found on nearly every corner. Transportation has also

evolved. Initially, internal combustion cars were replaced by electric vehicles. Still, they soon proved problematic due to their reliance on rare raw materials, such as lithium, nickel, manganese, cobalt, and graphite, as well as the high fire risks associated with them. Today, hydrogen-powered cars are the norm, although most people still prefer walking or cycling.

Education has seen a revolution as well. From a young age, children are taught to care for the environment and participate in various charitable activities aimed at improving the planet's condition. Many workplaces organize monthly tree-planting events, contributing directly to the environment. The workweek has been shortened to four days, encouraging family time and personal well-being. Local communities regularly hold gatherings to foster social bonds and environmental stewardship, featuring workshops on sustainable living.

Erica's family lives in one such city. Her father works as a scientist for a smartwatch company, while her mother leads a charitable organization. Their small home, equipped with intuitive and eco-friendly devices designed by her father, reflects their commitment to sustainable living. Besides her charitable work, Erica's mother is a member of a political party dedicated to finding new ways to improve life on Earth. Erica herself is deeply involved in her community and has been committed to environmental efforts since she was a child. Inspired by her parents 'achievements, she dreams of studying at a prestigious university and dedicating her life to building a world powered by clean energy and characterized by equality.

But all of this—this ideal world—turns out to be nothing more than a beautiful dream.

In reality, Erica lives in a world plagued by pollution, overflowing with garbage, and tainted by undrinkable water. Her parents work at a chemical plant responsible for much of the environmental destruction. Food is scarce, and people are forced to wear masks constantly, even while sleeping, to protect themselves from toxins. Years ago, the wealthiest fled to other planets in

private jets, leaving the less fortunate behind to face inevitable doom. Water has become so precious that expeditions are often organized to find it, though many who set out never return. Their families spend months or even years searching in vain for their loved ones. Erica, who has only known this bleak reality, joins other teenagers in the fight for a greener future, hoping that change is still possible. This could be our reality—unless we wake up in time.

Julia Chorchos

SPLATTERS

Cut. Splatters of red. Stitch.

"Have you seen the new *V-line Visage* trend?" How could she not. Billboards screamed promises of beauty with razor-sharp cheekbones and a chin so perfectly pointed it could cut skin or even glass. Social media flooded with influencers flaunting their newly reshaped faces, courtesy of the government-endorsed *V-fine* surgery.

"Human perfection is out. Inhuman perfection is in!" It wasn't just a beauty procedure. It was a movement, an identity, a societal expectation. Sometimes she wondered what people were willing to do just to get on that operating table? How much? How long? How painful? Did these questions really matter? To her, they didn't. Just like her desires didn't matter to the government.

"Become the best you!" chirped the ads. A few years ago, the best version of her would be a world-known poet. An artist. A machine for producing valuable art. And now? The only thing she craved was to become the art. Look like a perfect product of the procedure. Become the product. Was that a downfall or just a simple change of preferences? She didn't really know. Her mind was still filled with poetry, but her reality was filled with only one thought: "I want to be the face of society."

The government called it an "investment in national aesthetic capital." They offered tax cuts to anyone who underwent the procedure. Banks dangled loans with polished brochures featuring before-and-after transformations. Was that even legal? Well, nobody really cared as long as the money was right.

There was only one problem. She had no job. No stable income. No access to loans.

The rejection emails from banks piled up, each one sharper than the last. "Insufficient credit history." "Unreliable employment record." All the people on

the billboards already had the surgery. They moved through the world with their chins held high, their angular faces cutting the air with confidence.

She could only stand in front of her mirror every night, fingers tracing the soft, rounded contours of her face. Unacceptable. Weak. Pathetic. Only if you could imagine the fear mixed with excitement as she clutched the DIY surgical manual she'd downloaded from a shady corner of the internet. If they wouldn't help her, she'd help herself.

Cut. Splatters of red. Stitch.

Crimson rivers, a silent twitch.

A wound speaks in whispered cries,

As threads weave where the lifeblood lies.

The first incision was a shallow one. She bit down on a piece of wood to muffle her screams. Her apartment reeked of disinfectant and desperation. She'd sterilized her kitchen knives over the stove, laid out rolls of gauze, and watched enough tutorial videos to know what she was doing. Mostly.

The pain was electric, radiating through her jaw and into her skull. Blood poured, sometimes shot, sometimes ricocheted. Down her neck, straight at the mirror, onto the walls. Staining her sweatshirt, painting on her skin, destroying the cheap interiors. How did she get the fillers that were about to go under her skin? Don't even ask. She wanted to forget it as soon as she got the bag with fillers. You would too. She tried to stitch the wound closed, but her shaking hands left the threads uneven and puckered. She stared into the mirror, trying to see the improvement through her tears. It would get better. It had to.

Cut. Splatters of red and yellow. Stitch.

Weeks passed. Her reflection became her obsession. She ate little, her jaw too tender to chew. She barely slept, haunted by the whirring of imaginary surgical drills and the ghostly praise of influencers. She had so little money,

because how could she work? Infection set in around her cheekbones, the skin swelling into grotesque bulges. She drained the pus with trembling hands, the sickly yellow fluid oozing onto her semi-professional yet trustful kitchen tools. The piercing pain was unbearable, but she couldn't stop.

"Pain is beauty," she whispered to herself as she stitched her face yet again. The refrain became her mantra.

Cut. A single splatter of yellow. Can't fucking stitch.

Months slipped by in a haze of agony and determination. She had stopped leaving her apartment entirely. Her savings dwindled to nothing, spent on black-market antibiotics. She didn't want to die. She wanted to be THE face. Maybe then her poetry would be noticed. The radio buzzed with sharp warnings about the latest government scandals: turns out *V-fine* was raking in billions while quietly brushing aside early reports of adverse reactions. "Baseless rumors," the officials claimed.

I can finally stitch.

She didn't care. Her face was almost perfect. Almost. She'd sculpted her cheekbones into razor-sharp relief, her jawline a sleek V that would have made any influencer jealous. But the skin beneath her chin sagged slightly, mocking her efforts.

One last cut.

Remove the stitches. Cut. A single splatter of red. Stitch.

The final result was everything she'd dreamed of. Her new face was breathtaking, a masterpiece of symmetry and sharp angles. She stared at her reflection for hours, running her fingers over the expensive, smooth skin. She imagined herself stepping back into the world, a phoenix rising from the ashes of her old self.

She opened her laptop for the first time in months, eager to post her transformation. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard as she scrolled through the latest news.

V-fine recalls all implants due to toxicity concerns.

Is it over? The latest trend poses a danger to human lives?

Are all V-lined celebrities about to DIE?

Her stomach dropped.

Reports were flooding in: necrosis, blood poisoning, organ failure. The materials used in the implants were breaking down, releasing a cocktail of deadly chemicals into the bloodstream. Lawsuits piled up, but the government and corporations were untouchable, protected by contracts and legal loopholes. It felt like they'd been preparing for it. They were ready. They were biting off the society's wound as much as they could until the wound got too infected.

The trend was over. Influencers posted tearful apologies as they scheduled removal surgeries. The new ideal was "natural beauty" all over again. How amazing, right? V-line faces were suddenly "dated," a grotesque reminder of corporate greed, and a clear sign of who could afford the surgery before, but couldn't afford the removal now. Unless they did it at home, like one specific prodigy of DIY surgery.

Her reflection stared back at her, imperfect in its alleged perfection. Were the edges of her jawline starting to discolor, or was it just her imagination? She always had a rich imagination. That's why she was so good at poetry, at least until her mind got filled with a different form of art. The thought of undoing everything she'd suffered for made her chest tighten with panic. The same panic that kept waking her up at night. The same panic she felt whenever she heard or saw a word related to surgery. Blood? Cut? Sharp? She couldn't bear them.

But leaving everything in could kill her.

Remove the stitches. Cut. Splatters of red. Stitch.

She sat in front of the mirror, her primitive scalpel in hand. Her reflection blurred through her tears. The thought of more pain, more blood, more stitching—it was unbearable. She'd spent a year carving herself into this shape, isolating herself from the world, sacrificing everything for a fleeting ideal. Now, she was expected to destroy it?

Her hands trembled as she touched the scalpel to her skin. She couldn't bring herself to cut. Not yet. Her body shook with sobs, the weight of everything crashing over her.

Finally, she set the scalpel down and whispered to her reflection:

"I'm tired of stitching myself."

I'm tired of stitching myself,

Torn edges no thread can heal.

Each pull a reminder, each knot a weight,

A peace that never feels real.

Her grave was simply ugly. It was made of the cheapest stone possible, as there was no one to pay for anything better. However, when one social worker came to her empty home to investigate the case of a dead young girl with some horrible facial wounds, he saw a scrap of paper splattered with blood and scribbled with four lines of pure pain and disappointment.

That was the only good part of the story: her poetry finally got noticed. Her last poem was engraved on her tombstone. Commissioner? Anonymous. Just like her art used to be.

Bartosz Jastrzębski

THE ELECTROLIMPIC CHARTER

Every country is eligible to select and send its athletes to participate in the event. The primary competition is team-based—country teams compete to see which team generates the most energy by the last day of the ElectrOlympics.

As of 2089 the ElectrOlimpic's events are held in the following sports:

– marathon run,

– sports gymnastics,

– 100m sprint,

– 1km run,

– skateboarding,

– fitness racing,

– functional fitness,

– powerlifting,

– olympic weightlifting,

– basketball,

– rugby

The ElecrOlimpics are performance-oriented; thus, the ElecrOlimpic Judge Committee allows for the use of modern technologies to enhance the athlete's performance. Medals can only be granted to athletes who are physically present at the podium during the medal ceremony. Countries that end up on the ElecrOlimpic podium by the end of the whole event will receive significant investment from OsTech Industries.

Facing the natural

Streets were extremely busy that day. Everyone had to see them before their departure. You could think that half the city gathered in front of the Gimnasio Estatal. The people wanted to gaze at their champions before they departed for

the land of extreme heat and luxury. There was no denying that the entire populace of Bogota was aware of what was about to transpire in a few days. Colombians were 4th in this year's ElectrOlympics, with only a few events to go, the weightlifting team had to step out of their usual competitor's shadows if the funding was to be secured.

The last physiotherapy sessions had just ended when Alejandro walked out of the changing room. He felt comfortable about his first start in such a big international event. After a great season and a strong start at the world championships, he felt honoured to have been picked as a representative for the -85kg class. He knew he had improved both his snatch and clean and jerk substantially this season. There is no better feeling for a weightlifter than peace of mind a few days before the competition.

– The final briefing starts in ten minutes – An assistant coach could be heard in every corridor of the gymnasion. Alejandro made his way towards the conference room.

They were all there. The entire team. The twenty strongest and most powerful men and women of Colombia.

– Tomorrow we depart for Sahara City. Make sure to relax this evening, the flight might be taxing. We'll meet near the airport entrance at midday. Double check your gear before you leave for the airport. – Reminded coach Diaz. – The others already did their part. Our fitness racers and skateboarders do not stand a chance with the top nations, even if they pulled off a miracle, so it is up to us, weightlifters, to secure this year's podium and give back to our nation. We have not had such a generation since the 2016 Olympics. The whole nation believes in you! – The coach could not have better described the atmosphere around the venue. People gathered in front of the Gimnasio Estatal were almost ecstatic when the first pairs appeared in the gymnasium's doors.

– Make some noise for Alejandro Mendoza! The -85kg contestant! – A man screamed through a megaphone as the crowd cheered. Mendoza felt ringing in his ears as he walked by the barriers separating him from the crowd.

The next day, the whole team was already on their way to Sahara City. It has been years since Midnight's end, but the story of the city's foundation was still shrouded by the same mysterious mist that shrouded the invention of the technology their entire modern livelihoods depended on. A luxurious enclave in the middle of the largest desert on the planet. A city independent from all nations. The UN's safe haven. Sahara City has been given many names throughout the years, but it is mostly known for two things. Housing the HQ of the largest energy corporation on Earth—OsTech Industries, and being the host for the famed Olympic Games offshoot—The ElectrOlympics.

Alejandro knew little of his teammates. The closest he had to a friend in the team was Casper Figueroa. A man of extraordinary technique, who rose up the ranks of Colombian weightlifters just this year. Both he and Alejandro were invited to the team as replacements for former representatives of their weight classes, who had retired. They both shared an ambition to outlast the previous lifters.

– Mendoza! What day do you compete? – On the plane, facing them sat Oliver Aleora. Alejandro looked at his teammate. Olivier was a mountain of a man, much bigger than Alejandro. Veins were clearly visible on his neck. "Incredible what they can achieve these days," thought Mendoza.

– Sunday. You lower weights go first. – He answered. He has heard of "the modern training method," but has always stuck to the classic techniques and methods. However, seeing Aleora in this shape, Alejandro considered giving the new method a try next season.

The Land of Luxury and Sand

As they left their plane behind them, the Colombians made their way into the vast Sahara Main Airport. Railings of gold made their way across the walls of the building's corridors. As they moved through them, Alejandro and his teammates arrived at the central terminal. Three large palm trees were at the center of the large room. Alongside its walls, countless food stands,

merchandise vendors and airport information terminals were available to every traveler, for the right price that is.

Outside the terminal, they were greeted by the sight of the ElectrOlympic village. Every nation had a place there. Hotel Vertigo for the Russians, Italians, Iranians, and the Portuguese; the Brazilians, South Africans, and Poles in Hotel Plaza, and the Haitians, Mexicans, French, and Japanese in Hotel Sky. The village was buzzing with life and a perfect place for international integration. Soon, the Colombians found out that the hotel they were meant to stay at was Hotel Kuzim. Waiting for them inside was the Bulgarian team.

The hotel's interior was a true testament to the post-midnight architecture. Walls made out of woodbrick and algiglass surrounded the lobby Alejandro and his team entered. The reception desk made out of a giant log greeted them as warmly as the receptionist behind it.

– Welcome to Hotel Kuzim! We are happy to host the strongest of all Colombians – said the receptionist. – Your room keys can be found on the left side of the counter – he pointed to a stack of keycards laying on top of the reception desk.

Alejandro made his way to the room he was assigned to. While traversing corridors made out of hollowed sequoia trunks, he reflected on the process of their construction. It was hard to imagine that these trees were once endangered. He imagined anthropocenic people viewing them as some kind of natural monuments. Now they were mere building blocks.

When he entered his room, Alejandro was greeted with a beautiful view of Sahara City. The generations that used to be would have never suspected such marvels at the center of the biggest desert on the globe, but there it was. Skyscrapers, cultivated from trees, filled the view with the green of their leaves. The streets beneath them, while filled with traffic, did not produce any noise. Alejandro could not imagine the world without the marvel of the hydro-engine. Looking at the city, he appreciated that he was born in such great times.

– Can I enter? – The tranquility of the moment was interrupted by a sudden knocking sound coming from the door to his room.

– Come on in – Responded Alejandro – You are from Team Bulgaria, aren't you?

– Yes, I am Alexij. I have heard that you are also a middle-weight. Alejandro, right?

– Correct.

– I have taken a peek at Sunday's starting list. We are in the same group.

– A or B? – Asked Mendoza.

– A. Welcome to the best in the sport! – The Bulgarian shook Alejandro's hand. He was well-built and visibly shorter than the Colombian. He reminded Alejandro of the Bulgarian weightlifters from legends. – I am making a tour around the village, trying to meet and greet every fellow competitor I saw on the list. I like to know my rivals.

– How did you know where to find me? – Asked Mendoza.

– You'd be surprised how talkative people are around here. The receptionist simply told me where to find you. Apparently, there has been almost no crime here for the last decade. – The Bulgarian responded with a smile. – Anyway, it was nice meeting you. See you on Sunday, Alejandro!

Hall of Fame

When he woke up, Alejandro felt refreshed after a long night of sleep in the comfortable bed of his hotel room. The lower weights started their competition in the evening, so he decided to attend the fitness racing finals, which were to take place in a few hours. He had to attend his pre-competition workout before, however.

During his morning routine, Alejandro was accompanied by the sound of the news coming from a widescreen TV mounted on the wall opposite his bed. The broadcast was mainly focused on covering the ElectrOlympics.

– The fitness racing is coming to a conclusion today. There are only 10 pairs standing after 3 days of fierce competition. Currently leading the competition

are Daria Olenkowicz and Łukasz Stalski from Team Poland. As of now, they have generated 2500 kW. – Said the news host with excitement.

– That's an enormous amount! – Said the co-host.

– You are right. What is worth noting is that their suits operate at near maximum capacity from the moment they reach the ten-minute mark in each race. These guys just don't stop.

– It seems that it's all in the family. Pre-midnight Olenkowicz, her great-grandfather, was a fitness star after all.

– He sure was. – Recalled Mendoza. He always liked watching fitness racing and remembered reading the pre-midnight records of the fitness stars of old. Among them, he remembered the Polish juggernaut—Bronisław Olenkowicz. He was excited to see the racers compete live today.

An hour later, he was already in the Colombian gym. Coach Diaz was already waiting for him there. Warm up went as usual, thirty minutes of mobility exercises, activations and warm-up lifts. Then came the full lifts. Mendoza did a couple of lighter snatches, two sets of 100 kg, two sets of 110 kg and a set of 115 kg. They took a two-minute break.

– Look, Alejandro, the government believes you can take first place tomorrow. They believe that you are the golden boy. But I have to be honest. Your chances are slim at best. You are not enhanced. You don't take anything, you are not subject to any kind of therapy. The doctor believes you are a "special case," and I see his point, your form and technique are perfect, as perfect as it gets. Your recovery is always on point. But I can't shake the feeling that the others just play a different game. – Coach Diaz stood in front of him with a grim face.

– The doctor took care of everything: my diet, my recovery, my nutrition. He said he has found a way to make me compete safely, and I trust him. – Replied Alejandro.

– Welcome, gentlemen! – The gym doors opened. Through them walked a slim man in a dark coat. His glasses reflected the white light of the lamps that lit the room. – How is my greatest patient doing, coach?

– Perfect, as usual, doctor. – Diaz almost stood to attention. Alejandro never realized this, but the coach always spoke of the doctor with utmost respect.

– May we have a word in private, Mr. Diaz? – The doctor said with a smile on his face.

They walked away, and Alejandro could only suspect what the conversation was about. The doctor kept pointing at Mendoza while Diaz simply stood there. He was carefully listening and nodding his head every now and then. Alejandro kept practicing his clean and jerk during the whole thing. A stream of thoughts went through his mind. Why would the coach tell him something like that right before his competition day? Could he really outperform his opponents as a complete natural athlete? What if he fails? Why does the government care so much for his performance in particular? He couldn't bring himself to dwell on any of those questions for too long; he needed peace before his debut.

A few hours later, Mendoza was entering the fitness racing arena. A colosseum-like venue has been cultivated out of trees, and giant bushes with a circular running track at its centre. Inside the running circle was the fitness arena. A spot with ten sleds, another station with a wall ball cage and a station for a farmer's walk were easy to identify. Right next to the finish line was a power reading station where the athletes would input the power stored in their microbatteries after the competition. The entire venue was powered by the energy generated over the past three days of competition. Even as a natural, Alejandro could not deny the effectiveness that a combination of the new technologies and the marvels of modern sports pharmacy could achieve.

There they were. The ten pairs, already wrapped in dark, slim EndoSuits. Brazilians, Americans, French and Chinese pairs were located closest to Alejandro. Among all the competitors were also the two Poles famous on television in the morning. A Colombian pair also made it to the finals, but they were speculated to be last in this race. To think that each pair would generate enough power to sustain a small family household in the next hour was preposterous.

Around the stadium, Mendoza saw medical staff in unusually high quantities. Fitness racing was a moderately dangerous sport, but he counted around ten ambulances dotted around the stadium. He did not recall seeing such a large number of medics in the live TV coverage. The beeper went off, and the racers were off. For the next hour, they would compete in a series of fitness challenges interrupted by one-mile running sessions. After the first mile, the competitors would get on rowing machines. The first pair to reach this station was naturally Team Poland, with the Americans and the Chinese right behind them. Surprisingly, the Colombians came in fifth place, being right behind the Brazilians. This situation would continue through the next mile and the ski-erg machine. After the third mile, the Colombians dropped to sixth place, being overtaken by the French pair.

And then it happened. In the middle of the sled station, one of the Brazilian athletes collapsed on the ground. Medics were rushing to the field. Alejandro could see the man shaking on the ground even from his faraway seat. The situation turned even more bizarre as the announcer urged the other pairs to keep competing, as the Brazilian pair was escorted off the stadium by the medical staff. Alejandro could hear the female Brazilian athlete screaming in fear as they went closer to the exit located somewhere beneath his seat.

It was not uncommon for fitness racing athletes to faint mid competition, even pre-midnight, when the sport was born. These cases would continue to occur from time to time in every electrolympic competition. Alejandro, however, could never shake the strange feeling he had after seeing each case. The man was in serious danger, and the competition simply continued as if this was normal? Alejandro knew he was safer than most of the other competitors in Sahara City, but the thought of a health breakdown always loomed in the back of his mind.

In the evening, Mendoza went to see his colleagues at the beginning of the weightlifting competition. The lower weights would determine the strongest of them, and medals were bound to be scored by the upcoming Colombian stars.

Among them was the man he got to know on the plane—Oliver Areola, who was a bit of a legend in the -75 class. Another upcoming champion from the Colombian side was Casper Figueroa, with whom Alejandro frequently trained. The -65 category was to be first. It took some time for group B to finish their struggles, but finally, the A weightlifting competitors were stepping out on the stage, Figueroa among them. Other lifters started strong; the Russian, a visibly muscular man with veins running all over his arms, snatched 110 kg, followed by the American with his 112 kg. More and more athletes completed their first snatch, and finally it was Casper's turn. He stepped out on the stage. As planned, he started from 125 kg, a massive lift for this weight category. His loud steps could be heard around the entire stadium as he approached the bar. Figueroa fixed his stance, got into the snatching position and pulled. The bottom speed of this man was incredible. After the bar went past his hips, the athlete snapped in a second to catch it overhead.

– Just like Oscar! – A man next to him gasped, clearly impressed with the Colombian's technique. Alejandro turned to him. It was Alexij. Now he could see him in clear light. The Bulgarian was visibly older than him, but was still of formidable size. – Do you know this lifter, my Colombian friend? – Asked Alexij.

– Yes, it's Casper Figueroa, we train together. – Replied Alejandro.

– Figueroa? So they are related! – Bulgarian replied with visible amazement.

– What do you mean?

– Oscar Figueroa, don't tell me you don't know anything about one of the most legendary Colombian lifters?

– Of course, I know, but no, they are not relatives. I asked Casper a long time ago about his surname, and he said it was just a coincidence. – Alejandro said confidently.

– I think you are mistaken, my friend. He lifts just like Oscar did.

– I know my friends well Alexij. I never got to know your full name, though. – Mendoza changed the subject of the conversation.

– Oh, my name is Alexij Nasar, and before you ask, yes, one of these Nasars. – Proudly proclaimed the Bulgarian. The number of famous surnames this year just occurred to Alejandro. He did not recall a similar number of legendary names from the previous ElectrOlympics.

Whatever it takes

His peace of mind was but a memory now. Alejandro could no longer unsee the patterns. Nasar and Olenkowicz were confirmed cases of sports lineage, but could Casper also be one? How could he not notice that throughout the year? Figueroa's form was too good to be mere talent. If he was so talented, why did he arrive at the ElectrOlympics only now? Why didn't he even make it to the regular Olympics once? As Mendoza pondered all those questions in the morning, the TV broadcast aired in the background.

– We are here with Daria Olenkowicz, the gold medalist in fitness racing. Daria, I have to start by asking how your teammate is doing. – The reporter started the interview.

– Thank you, Łukasz feels much better now, but could not make it to the studio today. We gave our best yesterday, and his body simply needs to rest now, but I assure you he will be back next year! – Replied the Polish athlete.

– That's good to hear, but don't you think that the competition sometimes gets a little too fierce – asked the reporter.

– It's natural for professional athletes to risk their health in order to achieve the best results, and the ElectrOlympics are the pinnacle of modern sports competitions. The game is worth the risk. As an athlete, though, I feel completely safe on the competition floor. I have trust in the medical staff that is always there with us to ensure that even in the case of an injury, there is no real danger. We saw the great work of the medical team yesterday in the case of Team Brazil, as they safely escorted the injured athlete and his colleague to the ambulatory care unit. As a matter of fact, the Brazilian is resting in the same room as Łukasz and from what I hear, they get along quite well!

– Thank you, Daria. Now moving on to: A great energy crisis or a collapse of anthropocentric thinking – the Long Midnight analyzed by a philosopher. – Alejandro turned the TV off. Impossible, the Brazilian looked beyond recovery. He heard his friend scream in fear. How could a case of mere muscle fatigue like Łukasz be laid in the same room as a serious health breakdown like the Southern American? The ElecrOlympics seemed more and more bizarre to Alejandro now that he witnessed them in person.

There was no morning workout today. Alejandro spent most of the day in his room, before packing and leaving for the competition floor. Once he entered the changing room, he looked like a ghost.

– Hello, friend Mendoza! – His Bulgarian friend greeted him. He was ignored. Alejandro couldn't stop thinking about the strangeness of the situation. He is about to compete against a Nasar, descendant of the great Karlos Nasar, who shook the weightlifting world in the old days. He witnessed the granddaughter of Olenkowicz win yesterday. How was he to compete when he felt like being surrounded by giants?

The competition was about to start. Mendoza was already clad in the pitch black EndoSuit. Energy production was also a crucial part of the weightlifting competition, but it ultimately boiled down to the weight lifted by individual athletes. The smoothness of the technique played a greater role than before, however.

– I have seen the others warm up. – Coach Diaz grabbed Alejandro by the shoulder. – It is clear that the Bulgarian is going to be your main competitor. He is old, though. Itis unusual that they made him compete this year; his kind typically doesn't last that long in the sport. – Added Diaz. Alejandro noticed that Alexij is older, but did not take him for an elderly man. – We can use it. Team Bulgaria made a mistake by appointing him. If you push him to his limits, he might collapse. You do not need to outlift him, just make him not reach the medal ceremony and the gold is ours. Give him a run for his money at the last two lifts. – The words of Coach Diaz rang in Alejandro's ears. How could his

coach even suggest such a thing? He was supposed to make a man who was so friendly from the first day collapse? What kind of sportsmanship was that supposed to be? Mendoza did not respond to his coach in any manner. He simply looked at Alexij, and he looked back, smiling.

After the snatch contest, Alejandro came in second as predicted. The first place was occupied by the Bulgarian. The final three lifts in clean and jerk would decide everything. Mendoza went for 185 kg as an opener. Alexij beat him and lifted 195 kg. Mendoza went to the weight table and declared 196 kg. When he turned, he was met with the gaze of Coach Diaz. He felt pressure building up in him. He turned around, looked Alexij in the eyes and declared:

– I change, 201 kg. – He saw the shock on Alexij's face. He knew that should he make that lift, the Bulgarian would be in danger.

Mendoza stepped on the platform. He looked at the other members of Team Colombia, who were cheering him up as he fixed his starting position. The bar lifted from the ground. The struggle was visible on the Colombian lifter's face. Alejandro received the barbell on his shoulders and squatted deeply. He felt the bar pushing him down as he struggled against it. He stayed in a deep squat for a few seconds, gasping for air as the 201 kg pinned him down. After a brief moment, Alejandro focused his whole will on standing up. He screamed loudly as he recovered from the squatted position. One final inhale, and he exploded the bar up.

– Good lift – screamed the head judge. The arena erupted in applause. Alexij was in peril as he knew he would have to perform a taxing 202 kg lift in order to overtake the Colombian. However, against all odds and to the surprise of Coach Diaz, he made it. He was, however, severely taxed.

– I know what you are up to. And know that I do not envy you, my friend. – Alexij said to Alejandro as they were standing by the weight table. Mendoza's coach has already declared 220 kg for the Colombian's next lift.

– He is spent. If you make it, he will have to try 221. He won't make it, and his snatch advantage will play no role. – Coach Diaz urged Mendoza.

He walked out on the stage for the final time. With 220 kg on the bar, Alejandro needed to gather his whole focus on this moment. Once again, he fixed his posture. Lifted the bar off the ground. Received it on his shoulders. This time, however, he felt that he would not be able to stand up. He pushed hard with both his legs, but the bar just kept pushing against him. He had to drop it.

The crowd erupted in applause, but it was not for his accomplishment, but to praise the great Bulgarian.

– I am sorry, Alejandro. – said Coach Diaz. – You had your chance. Now I am afraid I have to go see the doctor. – He was visibly unhappy, but also full of sorrow

– What about me? – Asked Alejandro.

– They will fix you for next year.

– What does it even mean?

Piotr Zimmermann

ABSTRAKTY

Julia Borkowska

Posthumanist reading of Stephen King's *Firestarter*: surveillance, experiments and the ethics of alterity

Niniejszy artykuł proponuje posthumanistyczną interpretację *Firestartera* Stephena Kinga, skupiając się na tym, w jaki sposób powieść krytykuje systemy inwigilacji, prowadzenie eksperymentów i kulturowe odczłowieczanie zmodyfikowanych lub udoskonalonych ciał. Charlie McGee jest dzieckiem urodzonym ze zdolnościami pirokinetycznymi; jej odmienność jest wynikiem rządowego eksperymentu przeprowadzonego na jej rodzicach. Historia Charlie odzwierciedla kluczowe zagadnienia teorii posthumanistycznej, w szczególności nakreślonej przez N. Katherine Hayles i Cary'ego Wolfe'a, których założenia stanowią ramy koncepcyjne dla niniejszej analizy. Hayles w *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) argumentuje, że posthumanizm „uprzywilejowuje wzór informacyjny nad materialną instancją" i redefiniuje człowieka jako „amalgamat, zbiór heterogenicznych komponentów" osadzonych w sieciach systemowych. Tożsamość Charliego jest głęboko ukształtowana przez taką sieć—sieć inwigilacji, eksperymentów i wyzysku. Tymczasem krytyka liberalnego humanizmu przeprowadzona przez Cary'ego Wolfe'a ujawnia, w jaki sposób tradycyjne definicje człowieka wykluczają tych, którzy różnią się od normatywnych standardów. Jak pisze w *What is Posthumanism?* (2010), posthumanizm „zmusza nas do ponownego przemyślenia naszych przyjętych za pewnik sposobów ludzkiego doświadczenia, w tym standardowych modeli percepcji i stanów afektywnych samego Homo sapiens." Choć Charlie jest dzieckiem, zostaje nazwana „potworem" lub „wiedźmą," co ujawnia kulturowe uwarunkowania związane z jej wykluczeniem. Gdy zyskuje kontrolę nad swoimi mocami, staje się postacią postludzkiego sprzeciwu, odzyskując autonomię względem systemów, które starały się ją kontrolować.

Gabriela Iwanowska

Romantasy as an intertextual genre: responses of and to Sarah J. Maas' *A Court of Thorns and Roses*

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza intertekstualności książek z gatunku romantasy, jak również prześledzenie swoistej reakcji łańcuchowej powstałej wokół tego gatunku, zapoczątkowanego przez serię *Dwór Cierni i Róż* Sarah J. Maas. Artykuł analizuje pojęcie intertekstualności w teorii i stosuje je w praktyce do omówienia wyżej wymienionej serii i jej intertekstualnych powiązań. Analiza obejmuje odpowiedzi serii *Dworów* na świat kulturowy, jak i reakcje i nawiązania książek z gatunku romantasy (a mianowicie *Rapsodii*, *Quicksilvera*, *Czwartego Skrzydła*, *Kiedy wykluł się Księżyc*, *Księżycowego miasta*, a także *Song of the Forever Rains*) do tej serii, tworząc w ten sposób intertekstualną reakcję łańcuchową.

Anuska Saha

Yōko Tawada's post-apocalyptic playground: memory, mutations, and multispecies futures in *The Emissary*

Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest analizie powieści Yōko Tawady pt. *The Emissary* jako odpowiedzi na kryzys ekologiczny i nuklearny w Japonii po 11 marca 2011 r. W artykule zbadano, w jaki sposób powieść ta przedstawia krajobraz postapokaliptyczny —nie jako dystopijne ostrzeżenie, lecz jako przestrzeń do przejściowego, wspólnego budowania świata. Artykuł analizuje strukturę narracyjną powieści i poruszane w niej tematy przez pryzmat posthumanizmu i nowego materializmu, ukazując odrzucenie apokaliptycznej temporalności na rzecz transkorporealnego czasu i materialności. Poprzez umieszczenie powieści w kontekście alternatywnej eko-etyki planetarnej opartej na teoriach hydrofeminizmu, artykuł wskazuje także na szczególne znaczenie wody jako motywu podważającego współczesne izolacjonistyczne dyskursy po katastrofie w Fukushimie. Autorka pokazuje, w jaki sposób Tawada przekształca gatunek „zrodzony z kryzysu" w spekulatywny „plac zabaw" dla reparatywnej narracji opartej na trosce wobec wielogatunkowości i dialogu ekologicznym.

Zuzanna Sanecka

"Maybe love transcends severance": control of emotions and rebellion against developing technology in the dystopian TV series *Severance*

Wiele dzieł literackich, zwłaszcza tych z gatunku dystopii, takich jak *1984* George'a Orwella (1949) i *Opowieść podręcznej* Margaret Atwood (1985), poruszało pojęcie sprawczości i jej ograniczeń. W 2022 szeroki katalog tekstów dystopijnych poszerzył się o wyprodukowany przez serwis streamingowy Apple TV+ serial *Rozdzielenie.* W budowie świata przedstawionego serial odwołuje się do otoczenia znanego potencjalnemu widzowi, ukazując upiorny, korporacyjny świat kapitalizmu napędzanego konsumpcją, w którym postaci gonią za bezemocjonalnością wymaganą do osiągnięcia satysfakcjonujących wyników w nastawionym na zysk miejscu pracy. Serial ukazuje związek między negatywnymi afektami a społeczeństwem w fazie późnego kapitalizmu: związek zmodyfikowany za pomocą neurologicznego chipa zaprojektowanego dla zwiększenia produktywności pracownika. Esej sięga po pojęcia opracowane między innymi przez Sarę Ahmed i Evę Illouz w celu zbadania związku między sprawczością osoby, jej emocjonalnym charakterem a systemem gospodarczym ulepszonym przez futurystyczny postęp technologiczny.

Marta Struglińska

Inverting the male gaze in the poetry of Seamus Heaney and Medbh McGuckian

W kontekście społeczno-politycznym literatura była często wykorzystywana jako broń przeciwko kobietom. Różnorakie teksty literackie przedstawiały je jako "służące historii," których głównym i jedynym celem miało być dawanie przyjemności mężczyznom i wydawanie na świat kolejnych pokoleń (Walsh 5). Zdarzało się, że owa wojna wytoczona kobietom zbiegała się z zabiegami kolonizatorów dążącymi do zniewolenia podbitych przez siebie narodów. Opisany wyżej związek między kolonializmem a seksizmem był obecny w Irlandii, w której kobiety znajdowały się pod presją zarówno ze strony brytyjskich imperialistów, jak i Irlandczyków, którzy pragnęli ograniczyć ich aktywność do roli strażniczek domowego ogniska. Jedną z tradycji literackich wpisujących się w opisaną tendencję jest *aisling* [słowo *aisling* oznacza sen lub wizję; tradycja ta wywodzi się z czasów celtyckich i wówczas koncentrowała się na miłości i niepodległości]. W XVIII w. głównym punktem *aisling* stał się obraz idealnej kobiety (będącej personifikacją Irlandii), która przychodziła do Irlandczyków w snach i

wzywała do obrony ojczyzny. Współcześnie irlandzkie feministki zaczęły zwracać uwagę na to, że tradycja *aisling* przyczyniła się do kulturalnego zniewolenia kobiet i ograniczania ich seksualności. W odpowiedzi na tę krytykę, wiele irlandzkich poetek podjęło próby odwrócenia patriarchalnych elementów tej tradycji i ich wpływu na irlandzkie społeczeństwo.

W niniejszym artykule pochylę się nad tym, jak Medbh McGuckian w swoich utworach dokonuje reinterpretacji tradycji *aisling*, przywracając kobietom głos i sprawczość, a także przeprowadzę analizę porównawczą jej twórczości z wierszami Seamusa Heaneya („Act of Union" i „Ocean's Love to Ireland"). Ponadto, zilustruję przejście od „męskiego spojrzenia" w poezji Heaneya do „kobiecej sprawczości" w wierszach McGuckian („The Hollywood Bed" i „The Heiress"). W swojej analizie odwołam się do uznanych, feministycznych krytyczek literackich, tj. Clair Wills, Alison Garden i Aimeé Walsh. Omówię też źródła terminu „męskiego spojrzenia," którego transformacja w poezji Heaneya i McGuckian jest jednym z głównych tematów tego artykułu.

Chrysoula Titi

The machine must be stopped: E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops" as a looking glass into modern technological world

„Maszyna staje" to opowiadanie z gatunku fantastyki naukowej napisane przez angielskiego autora E. M. Forstera, osadzone w świecie, gdzie ludzkość zamieszkuje pod ziemią, a wszystkie jej potrzeby zaspokaja wszechmocna maszyna. Dwoje głównych bohaterów—Vashti i jej syn Kuno—reprezentuje przeciwstawne poglądy na kwestię tego, czy przetrwanie wspólnoty jest ważniejsze od wolności jednostki. Tytułowa maszyna staje się niezbędna dla funkcjonowania społeczeństwa, które okazuje się być niezwykle podatne na zagrożenie z uwagi na swoją zależność od oferowanych przez maszynę udogodnień. Forster przewiduje rosnące uzależnienie ludzkości od technologii, podkreślając niebezpieczeństwa związane z tym, że stanie się ona ostateczną siłą kontrolującą ludzkość—problem istotny także dla współczesnego społeczeństwa. Przedstawiony w opowiadaniu futurystyczny, skoncentrowany na danych świat pokazuje, co może się wydarzyć, gdy ludzkość odseparuje się od swojej fizycznej i emocjonalnej strony, stając się tym samym niezdolną do adaptacji w zmieniającym się środowisku. Moim celem jest zbadanie jak niebezpieczne jest dbanie

wyłącznie o samozadowolenie, które ostatecznie prowadzi do stagnacji. Metafora ula pozwoli mi na zgłębienie procesu, dzięki któremu jednostki mogą oprzeć się wspólnocie dążącej do stłumienia ich dociekliwego ducha i uwypuklenie konieczności adaptacji. Również dzisiaj opowiadanie przemawia do czytelników, przekazując zarówno ostrzeżenie jak i pełne nadziei przesłanie dotyczące rozwoju w kontekście nowych globalnych realiów.

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