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FROM THE VICTORIAN ERA TO THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT:

Mythic Foundational Narratives in Video Games



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GUALTER CUNHA

General Director

JOANA CAETANO

Executive Editor

TERESA PEREIRA

JÉSSICA BISPO

Guest Editors

Porto

CETAPS - Universidade do Porto – Faculdade de Letras

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JOANA CAETANO

Executive Editor

Video games could be a powerful didactic tool to boost engagement through immersive narratives. They may be effective teaching instruments for subjects such as History, Science and Math, enhancing digital literacy and general knowledge. However, in times such as these, when children and young people are increasingly enmeshed and dependent on technology and virtual reality, it has become paramount to provide critical tools to analyse what kind of video games are available to us and, especially, what they are intentionally (or not) disclosing. Thenceforth, video games have become a serious object of research in Academia.

THEMATIC SECTION

The thematic section of this issue is dedicated to this research area, and due to its popularity and urgency, we will publish a second thematic section in our next issue to complement it. Following CETAPS' International Conference on *Victorian and American Myths in Videogames*, promoted by Teresa Pereira and Jéssica Bispo, earlier this year, this section is the first proof of how critical thinking is absolutely essential to examine highly-popular videogames, such as *GUN*, *80 Days*, and *Assassin's Creed* and others, to decode prejudicial worldviews or to highlight potentialities.

Curating this thematic section are Teresa Pereira and Jéssica Bispo, as Guest-Editors, who graciously accepted our invitation to co-edit this issue of VIA PANORAMICA and have agreed to share with us all the extra content from the conference (reports and photographs).

In the second part of this issue, we present four articles that span a broad scope, ranging from Shakespeare to Ocean Vuong, H.G. Wells, and E.M. Forster.

In “A ‘Convenient Euthanasia’: o papel da eutanásia na obra de H. G. Wells”, Miguel Oliveira offers us an overview of this still controversial theme in two stories by Wells, inviting us to ponder over not only the arguments in its favour, but also the reasons their promoters had. As Oliveira states, the debate about euthanasia has roots “in Victorian society in the late 19th century, where many arguments used today, both for and against assisted dying, were already anticipated [and] its genesis was marked by the eugenic theories and social Darwinism prevalent in the late Victorian and early Edwardian periods”.

Michał Filipczuk’s “The Narcissistic Skeptic and the Human Community: Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* as Read by Stanley Cavell” reconstructs Cavellian reading of Shakespeare’s well-known play, *Coriolanus*. According to Filipczuk, Stanley Cavell’s reading stands out because he studies the text and the title character through the lens of “narcissistic scepticism”, a concept heavily rooted in the observation of language and speech.

In “The road to Marabar: The caves episode in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924)”, Miguel Alarcão revisits the famous episode through a psychoanalytic lens. Focusing especially on Adela’s inner journey of desire and unrequited love, this article reads as a journey towards the symbolic and the unknown.

Closing this issue, Inês Santos introduces us to Ocean Vuong’s debut novel, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). In ““Are you going to wear a dress now?: Nonhegemonic Masculinities”, Santos analyses how constraining culture can be when expressing self-identities, especially queer identities within immigrant communities. The article demonstrates “how Vuong articulates multiple forms of masculinity and how, ultimately, Little Dog and Trevor—characters who embody nonhegemonic masculinities—endure the violence imposed by those surrounding them”. As violence not only towards queer and trans people, but also towards women, increases every day, understanding how masculinities are construed and performed is an urgent subject matter. Hence, I highly recommend this article.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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As the Executive Editor of VIA PANORAMICA, I would like to thank Professor Gualter Cunha (General Director) for his continuous vote of confidence in my judgment in selecting themes and guest editors for each issue, and for his constant support. To my Guest Editors (Teresa Pereira and Jéssica Bispo), my gratitude, not only for co-editing this (and the next) issue of VIA PANORAMICA, but also for promoting such an interesting area of research and CETAPS' events, such as myths in video games. Also, I would like to thank our team of peer reviewers. Your feedback is invaluable. It enriches every single article we publish.

My special thanks go to the authors who have entrusted us with their work. Every issue has grown larger and larger in both size and scope, with authors affiliated with international institutions submitting high-quality scholarly works. Thank you.

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THEMATIC SECTION

From the Victorian Era to the American Experiment: Mythic Foundational Narratives in Video Games

TERESA PEREIRA

FCSH-NOVA University of Lisbon/CETAPS

*In the historical blink of an eye,
video games have colonized our minds and invaded our screens.*

Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca

Between April 9 and 11, 2025, the invited editors of this thematic issue of *VIA PANORAMICA* convened the International Conference on *Victorian and American Myths in Videogames*, while simultaneously teaching an undergraduate course with the same title at NOVA FCSH. Both Teresa Pereira and Jéssica Bispo dedicated their PhDs to exploring video games within the context of literary and cultural studies. Pereira, fully funded by FCT, wrote the first PhD dissertation on the topic defended at NOVA FCSH, which has now been published in book format under the title *Para um Estudo do Mundo Transmediático Neovitoriano: As Guerras Anglo-Zulu e Anglo-Bóere através da Literatura e dos Jogos Digitais* (2025), introducing the study of the subject in CETAPS at a PhD level. Bispo soon followed, writing a FCT-funded PhD dissertation entitled *Por Entre Espelhos, Covas e Ecrãs: a Criança Transgressiva de Lewis Carroll e suas Reinterpretações no Videojogo* (2025).

From Pereira's and Bispo's shared interest arose the desire to join efforts and organize not only an academic event of international scope, but also an undergraduate course entirely designed by the two invited editors. The conference and the course became part of a collaborative endeavor

between CETAPS's research strands "Culture, Science, and the Media" (which has since been dismantled) and "American Intersections", both included in CETAPS's research area *Anglophone Cultures and History*. These two initiatives proved extremely successful, bringing together scholars and students who shared the passion for video games, as Pereira and Bispo did in an intimate setting that encouraged the fruitful exchange of ideas. While the conference took place in mid-April 2025, with the leading scholars Dom Ford, Heike Paul, and Barbara Braid as keynote speakers, the course lasted for the entire second semester of the 2024/2025 school year.

The conference, the course, and the work developed by Pereira and Bispo in their PhDs can be subsumed under the label of game studies, an academic discipline that emerged in the late 1990s (Wills 2019, 14). Some of the foundational works of game studies include Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997), Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins's *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (1998), and Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997) (Wills 2019, 14). With an initial focus on how to interpret games and what differentiates them from other media formats, early game studies scholars engaged in the ludology versus narratology debate, encouraging Gonzalo Frasca and Jesper Juul to defend "player-centered interpretation[s]" of games (Wills 2019, 14-15). However, current research has broadened game studies' scope, engaging with different aspects, including the cultural dimension of gaming (Wills 2019, 15), with works such as *Victorians and Videogames* (2025), edited by Lin Young and Brooke Cameron, and *Gamer Nation: Video Games & American Culture* (2019), by John Wills, as notable examples.

Myths and their ludic representations are just one of the ways game studies intersect with cultural elements. Chris Baldick in the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2015) describes myths as "[a] kind of story or rudimentary narrative sequence, normally traditional and anonymous, through which a given culture ratifies its social customs or accounts for the origins of human and natural phenomena, usually in supernatural or boldly imaginative terms" (2015, 235). Such a definition is closely related to the one presented by Richard Slotkin, who states in "Mythogenesis" (2007) that "[m]yths are stories drawn from a society's history, which have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology, and explicating the meaning and direction of its history" (2007, 1). These conceptualizations relate to myth criticism, prominent during the 1950s and 1960s and characterized by Baldick as a form of literary interpretation that

perceives literary works as expressions of overarching mythic patterns and structures (2015, 236). In *The Myths that Made America* (2014), Paul, one of the conference's keynote speakers, stresses that myths, one of the components of the "biography" of a nation-state (Anderson 2006, 204), and their criticism are relevant to the study of literary texts (2014, 26). This thematic section contends that myth criticism is equally useful for understanding other cultural artifacts, namely, video games set in Victorian or American contexts.

As Essaka Joshua explains in "Myth and Victorian Literature" (2018), myths played a decisive role in the Victorian era, which roughly corresponds to Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901), although scholars vary in the precise time boundaries. Myths were a primordial means through which Victorians engaged with both the past and the present and conceptualized themselves (Joshua 2018), repeatedly referring to mythic constructions such as the angel in the house and the gentleman, analyzed by Filipe Furtado and Maria de Teresa Malafaia in *O Pensamento Vitoriano: Uma Antologia de Textos* (1992). Victorian studies and the examination of Victorian myths exhibit a continued relevance, partially due to the rapid development of neo-Victorianism, defined by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn in *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (2010) as incorporating texts that are "self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians" (2010, 4). Many games fall into the neo-Victorian category, engaging with Victorian myths, such as *80 Days* (2014), *Bloodborne* (2015), and *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (2015), all of which are objects of study by articles featured in this issue.

American myths are also often remediated through a plethora of video games of different genres, which clearly reference, in various ways, some of America's foundational mythic narratives tied to the project of American nation-building and the discursive construction of a homogeneous American national identity (Paul 2014, 12). Among these narratives are the myth surrounding Christopher Columbus (1451-1506), and the supposed "discovery" of the American continent by the Europeans in 1492, the myth of the Promised Land, inaugurated by the Pilgrims and the Puritans, the myth of the American West, with agrarianism and expansionism as its two basic tenets (Paul 2014, 314), and the myth of the self-made man, indissociable from the expression "from rags-to-riches". All of them are subsumed under the umbrella myth of the American dream, as argued by Paul, besides appearing under the arc of the dominant ideological paradigm in the history and

18 practice of the field of American studies, namely American exceptionalism, which can be traced back to Alexis de Tocqueville's (1805-1859) assertion that "the position of Americans was quite exceptional" (Paul 2014, 16, 13-14). Digital games, however, often establish a not so unproblematic relationship with the myths they refashion, and may celebrate them, validating the exceptionalist discourse and portraying the United States as a "predestined entity and (still) unfinished utopian project" (Paul 2014, 12), or even contest them, highlighting the voices of those excluded from the American foundational mythology (Paul 2014, 12) or debunking that same mythology entirely. Yet, in most cases, they do so simultaneously.

This thematic issue, the first of two, emerges from the creative conjunction of game studies and myth criticism in relation to Victorian Britain and North America, including articles written by participants of the conference held at NOVA FCSH and by students of the course taught at the same institution, even though it also features works by other scholars. Cátia Ferreira's article, entitled "Victorian Times Reimagined: The case of *80 Days*", is a good example, presenting an analysis of the video game adaptation of Phileas Fogg's epic journey, originally depicted by Jules Verne (1828-1905) in *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* (1872). Slaven Lendić and Ines Munker, who both attended the conference, explore *Bloodborne* and *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* in "The Subversion of Victorian Morality in *Bloodborne* (2015)" and "Gentlewomen, Fallen Men and Caged Birds: Playing with Victorian Myths in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*", respectively. *80 Days*, *Bloodborne*, and *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* exhibit a neo-Victorian nature, and their analysis engages with Victorian culture and its myths in different but complementary ways. Angel Todorov, author of "GUN: Representations of North American Myths and Stereotypes in the Controversial 2005 Western" and a former student of Pereira and Bispo, focuses on the Western video game *GUN* (2005), while also establishing parallels with *Assassin's Creed III* (2012) and *Red Dead Redemption* (2010). Mariano Falzone, who wrote "'Death Is a Mercy': The American Monomyth of the Superhero in 2005's *The Punisher* Video Game" and who participated in the conference, delves into the vigilante superhero myth, again from an American standpoint, just like Todorov's text. Finally, Catarina Ricardo's "Reimagining Western Femininity Through Ellie in *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us: Left Behind*", originally developed in the context of the course taught by Pereira and Bispo, combines American studies, myth criticism, and gender studies. Together, these six articles testify to the pervasiveness of Victorian and American myths in video games, ludic artifacts which virtually

occupy the most intimate spaces we inhabit, as Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca so eloquently put it in the epigraph to this introduction (2024, 2). 19

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Victorian Times Reimagined: The case of *80 Days*

CÁTIA FERREIRA

Universidade Católica Portuguesa/CECC/CETAPS

ABSTRACT: Digital games have emerged as a viable medium for reimagining historical myths and narratives through interactive storytelling. As Heilmann and Llewellyn (2010) argue, neo-Victorian media often engage critically with the past, blending historical memory with postcolonial and gendered critique. This article explores how the critically acclaimed digital game *80 Days* (2014) reimagines Victorian tales through its branching narrative and distinctive steampunk aesthetics, promoting a critical reinterpretation of Victorian values. Departing from a traditional retelling of Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873), the game presents an alternate history shaped by speculative technology and global perspectives.

Drawing on Fraser's (1998) analysis of the Victorian quest romance and Campbell's (1949) concept of the monomyth, the study examines how *80 Days* both adopts and subverts classical narrative structures. The game's thematic richness is further explored through semiotic and thematic analysis, revealing how recurrent motifs, such as

RESUMO: Os jogos digitais emergiram como um meio eficaz para reimaginar mitos e narrativas históricas através das suas narrativas interativas. Tal como argumentam Heilmann e Llewellyn (2010), os *media* neo-vitorianos envolvem-se frequentemente numa leitura crítica do passado, combinando memória histórica com crítica pós-colonial e de género. Este artigo explora de que forma o aclamado jogo digital *80 Days* (2014) reimagina narrativas vitorianas por meio de uma narrativa ramificada e de uma estética *steampunk* distintiva, promovendo uma reinterpretação crítica dos valores vitorianos. Ao afastar-se da recontagem tradicional de *A Volta ao Mundo em Oitenta Dias* (1873), o jogo apresenta uma história alternativa moldada por tecnologia especulativa e perspectivas globais.

Recorrendo à análise de Fraser (1998) sobre o romance de aventura vitoriano e ao conceito de monomito de Campbell (1949), este estudo examina como *80 Days* adota e subverte estruturas narrativas clássicas. A riqueza temática do jogo é explorada através de análise semiótica

social hierarchy, innovation, and exploration are embedded in player choices and narrative outcomes. These are interpreted through the lens of game studies frameworks, including Aarseth's (1997) ergodic literature, Juul's (2005) half-real systems, and Bogost's (2007) procedural rhetoric.

The findings demonstrate how *80 Days* reimagines Victorian culture by combining creative technology with historical authenticity, emphasizing intersections of gender, colonial, and class hierarchies through interactive engagement. This study contributes to game studies, digital humanities, and Victorian studies by demonstrating how digital games can retell historical myths while fostering critical thinking about the past and its continued relevance today.

KEYWORDS: digital games, Victorian narratives, *80 Days*, steampunk, interactive storytelling, thematic analysis, semiotic analysis, neo-Victorianism.

e temática, revelando como motivos recorrentes, como hierarquia social, inovação e exploração, estão incorporados nas escolhas do jogador e nos desfechos narrativos. Estes são interpretados à luz de quadros teóricos dos estudos de jogos, incluindo a literatura ergódica de Aarseth (1997), os sistemas semi-reais de Juul (2005) e a retórica procedimental de Bogost (2007).

Os resultados demonstram como *80 Days* reimagina a cultura vitoriana ao combinar tecnologia criativa com autenticidade histórica, enfatizando as interseções entre gênero, colonialismo e hierarquias de classe através da interação do jogador. Este estudo contribui para os campos dos estudos de jogos, das humanidades digitais e dos estudos vitorianos, ao mostrar como os jogos digitais podem recontar mitos históricos e promover uma reflexão crítica sobre o passado e a sua relevância atual.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: jogos digitais, narrativas Vitorianas, *80 Days*, *steampunk*, storytelling interativo, análise temática, análise semiótica, neo-victorianismo.

INTRODUCTION

Digital games have become a dynamic means of reinterpreting historical myths and legends through interactive storytelling (Pfister 2020; Chapman 2016). Among history-based games, *80 Days* (inkle, 2014) stands out as a singular example of how Victorian narratives can be retold and reimagined through steampunk aesthetics and player-driven narrative design. Based on Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873), the game allows players to traverse a speculative 19th-century world, encountering diverse cultures and confronting the moral and ideological legacies of Victorian imperialism.

This article examines how *80 Days* reconfigures Victorian narratives not only through its branching storytelling and speculative aesthetics, but also through its capacity to engage players in ideological critique. The study is grounded in a dual theoretical framework that combines Campbell's (1949) monomyth – used to trace the structural arc of the player's journey – with Fraser's (1998) analysis of the Victorian quest romance, which provides a genre-specific lens for interrogating imperialist adventure narratives. These are complemented by neo-Victorian theory (Heilmann & Llewellyn, 2010), steampunk aesthetics (Gibson & Sterling 1990; Dinello 2005), and key concepts from game studies, including ergodic literature (Aarseth 1997), half-real systems (Juul 2005), and procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007).

Methodologically, the study employs thematic and semiotic analysis to examine how *80 Days* represents and critiques Victorian values. Thematic analysis identifies recurring motifs, particularly exploration, innovation, social hierarchy, and the hero's journey and the Victorian quest romance. Meanwhile, semiotic analysis interprets signs and symbols in character design, environments, and dialogue to uncover their ideological significance. This dual approach enables a nuanced reading of how narrative structure, aesthetic choices, and player agency intersect to produce a layered critique of Victorian culture.

By situating *80 Days* within the broader context of neo-Victorian media and digital humanities, this article contributes to ongoing debates about how games can function as cultural memory and cultural critique. It argues that digital games are not only capable of retelling historical myths but also of transforming them, inviting players to question dominant ideologies, inhabit alternative perspectives, and co-author new understandings of the past.

1. VICTORIAN NARRATIVES ACROSS MEDIA

The term “Victorian” has long transcended its historical boundaries, evolving into a cultural shorthand for a set of values, aesthetics, and ideologies associated with the British Empire’s apex. While Queen Victoria’s reign (1837-1901) was marked by industrial progress, imperial expansion, and rigid social hierarchies, contemporary uses of “Victorian” often reflect a selective and stylized memory of that period, as Hillard (2020) and Ho (2012) observe. In media and literature, this memory is frequently filtered through nostalgia, critique, or speculative reimagining.

In contemporary media, the term “Victorian” is often deployed in ways that detach it from its historical specificity. The rise of neo-Victorianism has led to a proliferation of works that reimagine the 19th century in light of current concerns about gender, race, empire, and technology. As Maier, Ayres, and Dove (2022) and Primorac (2017) argue, this genre engages with Victorian themes through a postmodern lens. This includes not only literature and film, but also digital games, which offer interactive spaces for negotiating Victorian myths and ideologies (Kapell & Elliott 2013; Reinboth 2023).

Digital games such as *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, *The Order: 1886*, and *BioShock Infinite* exemplify how Victorian aesthetics are repurposed to explore moral ambiguity, technological anxiety, and social critique. Esser (2021) and Sigoillot (2020) demonstrate how these games frequently employ steampunk and retrofuturist aesthetics, genres that blend 19th-century design with speculative technology to create worlds that are both familiar and estranged. Steampunk, in particular, has become a visual and narrative language for interrogating the promises and perils of industrial modernity (Esser 2024).

One of the most enduring literary sources for Victorian-era values is Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873). Although Verne was French, his novel reflects and amplifies British imperial ideologies, particularly through the character of Phileas Fogg, who embodies the rational, punctual, and emotionally detached English gentleman. As Sinnema (2000) notes, the narrative’s emphasis on global mobility, time discipline, and technological mastery aligns with Victorian ideals of progress and control. Verne’s work has thus become a touchstone for later reinterpretations of Victorian narratives, including in digital games that both draw from and critique these imperialist foundations (Rughiniş & Matei 2016).

The use of “Victorian” in global and non-English contexts raises important questions about cultural framing and historical memory. For instance, the digital game *80 Days* reimagines Verne’s narrative across 150 cities and diverse cultural perspectives. Can such a game still be called “Victorian”, or does the term risk reinforcing a Eurocentric frame that the game itself seeks to dismantle? Llewellyn (2009) and Ho (2012) argue that neo-Victorian works must engage “knowingly” with the period, rather than merely using it as an aesthetic backdrop. In this sense, *80 Days* participates in neo-Victorian discourse while also challenging its boundaries (Whitney 2021).

The contemporary fascination with the Victorian era, whether nostalgic, critical, or speculative, reveals its persistent relevance as a site of cultural negotiation. Digital games, with their capacity for interactivity and multiplicity, offer unique opportunities to reimagine Victorian narratives not as fixed historical accounts but as dynamic, contested terrains.

2. STEAMPUNK, RETROFUTURISM, AND PLAYER AGENCY IN VICTORIAN-THEMED DIGITAL GAMES

Building on the cultural and narrative contexts outlined above, this section develops a theoretical framework for analyzing how digital games engage with and reinterpret Victorian narratives. Unlike literature, film, or television, which typically present fixed narrative structures, digital games offer a distinctive mode of historical and cultural engagement. They combine storytelling with rule-based systems that invite players to actively participate in the construction and transformation of narrative worlds, enabling a more immersive and participatory reimagining of the past.

Victorian-themed digital games often draw on the genres of steampunk and retrofuturism, both of which blend nineteenth-century aesthetics with speculative technological imaginaries. Steampunk, inspired by authors such as Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, is characterized by steam-powered machinery, brass fittings, intricate gears, and Victorian fashion fused with industrial design (Gibson & Sterling 1990; Dinello 2005). Retrofuturism, closely related, imagines futures as envisioned from the past, combining nostalgia with futuristic speculation to interrogate the promises and anxieties of modernity (Guffey 2006).

However, steampunk is more than an aesthetic. As Nally (2021) and Danahay (2024) argue, the “punk” in steampunk signals a countercultural critique of industrial capitalism, consumerism, and imperial nostalgia. Emerging as a subcultural movement, steampunk embraces DIY ethics, recycling, and anti-corporate values, echoing the ethos of the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement. This ideological dimension is particularly relevant for understanding how digital games use steampunk not only to evoke a retrofuturist world but also to question the imperialist and capitalist assumptions embedded in Victorian narratives.

To analyze the narrative structures of these games, it is useful to consider Campbell’s (1949) monomyth, or hero’s journey, which outlines a cyclical pattern of departure, initiation, and return. This model has been widely adopted in literature, film, and digital games, where it is often reconfigured to accommodate branching narratives and player agency (Delmas *et al.* 2007). In games, the monomyth provides a flexible template for character development and thematic progression, allowing players to inhabit the hero’s role and shape the journey through their choices. Titles such as *Journey*, *The Witcher 3*, and *Mass Effect* illustrate how the monomyth can be adapted into nonlinear, recursive, or fragmented experiences.

Yet, while the monomyth offers valuable insights into narrative structure, it is not ideologically specific to the Victorian period. To address the historical and cultural specificity of Victorian-themed games, it is necessary to consider the Victorian quest romance as a complementary framework for understanding these games. Fraser (1998) and Caserio (2012) describe this genre as one centered on white, upper-class English male protagonists who journey through colonized territories, asserting dominance and “civilizing” the Other. These narratives reinforce British imperial ideologies, presenting exploration as conquest and moral superiority.

By juxtaposing the structural flexibility of the monomyth with the ideological critique embedded in the quest romance, it is possible to better understand how digital games both inherit and subvert Victorian narrative traditions. Games may adopt the formal structure of the hero’s journey while simultaneously undermining its ideological underpinnings through character inversion, ethical dilemmas, and alternative perspectives.

Foundational game studies theories further illuminate how games function as hybrid systems of rules and fiction. Aarseth (1997) describes games as ergodic literature, requiring non-trivial effort from players to traverse and interpret. Juul (2005) characterizes games as half-real systems, combining real rules with fictional worlds, while Bogost (2007) introduces procedural rhetoric, emphasizing how game mechanics simulate and critique real-world systems. These frameworks underscore the capacity of games to engage players in meaning-making processes that are both narrative and systemic.

Steampunk and retrofuturist games, in particular, leverage these affordances to encourage critical engagement with Victorian myths. Games such as *BioShock Infinite* and *Dishonored* incorporate ethical dilemmas, technological speculation, and social hierarchies into their mechanics and world-building. Pérez-Latorre and Oliva (2017) and Esser (2021) show how these elements allow players to explore and sometimes subvert nineteenth-century ideologies through interactive engagement. In *Dishonored*, for instance, players navigate a Victorian-inspired city rife with political intrigue and fantastical inventions, where moral decisions impact both social order and narrative outcomes. Similarly, *BioShock Infinite* uses its steampunk setting to interrogate utopian ideals and the contradictions of progress.

Player agency, in the sense of the capacity to make meaningful choices that affect the game world, is central to this ludic reinterpretation. Recent research emphasizes that agency involves not only the ability to influence outcomes but also the alignment of player motivations with character objectives, fostering immersion and protagonism (Bódi 2023; Stang 2019). This alignment enables players to experience Victorian myths as dynamic systems open to examination, critique, and transformation. Moreover, the interactive nature of games encourages players to engage critically with nineteenth-century ideologies, often revealing their entanglement with contemporary concerns (Pereira 2022; Reinboth 2023).

This participatory model of historical engagement distinguishes digital games from other media. Through procedurality and player choice, Victorian myths are transformed from static narratives into dynamic experiences shaped by individual and collective agency.

3. THE CASE OF *80 DAYS*

Building on the theoretical and critical frameworks established earlier, this section presents *80 Days* as an empirical case study. The game exemplifies how interactive media can reimagine and critique nineteenth-century narratives through steampunk aesthetics, branching storytelling, and meaningful player agency. Drawing on Campbell's (1949) monomyth as a structural tool and Fraser's (1998) Victorian quest romance as an ideological lens, the analysis explores how *80 Days* both inherits and subverts traditional narrative conventions to interrogate Victorian values.

3.1 Methods

This study employs a dual analytical approach combining thematic and semiotic analysis. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006), identifies recurrent patterns in narrative content that reflect cultural values and player experiences. The game's dialogue, descriptions, and narrative outcomes were closely read and replayed across multiple sessions, with data coded into clusters representing key thematic concerns.

Semiotic analysis complements this by examining signs and symbols in the game's textual and visual components. Drawing on Barthes (1967) and Chandler (2007), this method explores how character design, environmental details, and dialogue encode ideological meaning. In *80 Days*, visual elements such as attire, architecture, and technology serve as markers of social status, cultural identity, and historical critique.

Importantly, the analysis is grounded in the dual narrative framework introduced earlier. Campbell's monomyth provides a structural lens for understanding the player's journey, while Fraser's quest romance framework enables a critique of the imperialist logic embedded in traditional Victorian adventure narratives. This combination enables a nuanced reading of how *80 Days* both adopts and subverts genre conventions.

3.2 *80 Days*

Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873) is reimaged in multiple layers in the 2014 interactive fiction game *80 Days* by inkle Studios. The game incorporates steampunk aesthetics, a strong emphasis on player agency, and branching narrative design (Rughiniş &

Matei 2016). Players take on the role of Passepartout, Phileas Fogg's valet, and must travel the world. Every playthrough offers a different narrative experience due to the game's network of potential paths and outcomes.

The game's speculative 19th-century world blends historical authenticity with creative speculation. Its steampunk-inspired setting offers different viewpoints on identity, empire, and technology by reimagining historical narratives. Academic research highlights how the game's speculative setting subverts dominant historical narratives and gives voice to underrepresented groups. According to Rughiniş and Matei (2016), the game combines history and biography, enabling players to experience world events while encountering characters rooted in their own political and cultural contexts.

A key component of the game's design philosophy is player choice. It invites players to critically interact with themes of exploration, cultural encounter, and social hierarchy through its nearly 150 cities and innumerable branching encounters. The narrative richness of the game, which encourages players to investigate various ethical, cultural, and geopolitical facets of the 19th-century world, is just as important to its replayability as its mechanical complexity.

3.3 Thematic Analysis

The game's narrative and interactive design engage with and reinterpret important aspects of Victorian culture and narratives. This section identifies and examines recurrent themes that influence the player's experience. Four major themes are covered: exploration, innovation, social hierarchy, and the reimagining of the hero's journey through the lens of Victorian quest romance. Each theme is examined in terms of its role within the narrative, its portrayal in the game world, and its influence on the player's engagement with Victorian myths and ideals.

3.3.1 Exploration

Exploration is a major thematic and structural axis in *80 Days*, shaping the player's experience through branching narrative architecture. Moral decisions and personal choices influence each journey across the steampunk-infused world.

The game decentralizes the European perspective, undermining the colonial gaze. Characters such as Behiye bint Kasim, a female Ottoman pirate, and Aodha, a female Indian

mercenary leader, subvert dominant narratives of empire and progress. These interactions elevate historically marginalized voices and encourage players to critically analyze the ethics of exploration and the power dynamics inherent in travel.

This decentralization is further illustrated in a route where *Passepartout* uncovers a secretive resistance network in Istanbul, an underground society that actively subverts imperial control. Rather than serving as an exotic backdrop, the city becomes a site of ideological contestation, inviting players to engage with alternative historical narratives. Similarly, a detour to the Arctic city of Qausuittuq reveals a democratically governed haven for Indigenous peoples, prompting reflection on alternative models of governance and autonomy and challenging the notion of European superiority.

The 80-day time limit reflects Victorian preoccupation with productivity and technological progress, yet detours and curiosity are rewarded. Richer narrative experiences often result from staying in cities, engaging in dialogue, or taking alternate routes, subtly challenging the imperial logic of utilitarianism.

3.3.2 Innovation

80 Days recontextualizes Victorian optimism regarding technology by employing innovation as both a narrative driver and a thematic lens. Steam-powered trains, mechanical elephants, and submersible ships are not merely decorative; they influence gameplay, narrative progression, and ethical decision-making.

For example, choosing to travel on a mechanical elephant in India or the *Waterlily* submersible across the Pacific affects speed, cost, and narrative outcomes. These choices reflect the Victorian obsession with mobility and progress, while also inviting reflection on how innovation intersects with ethics and cultural specificity.

A journey aboard the *Waterlily*, a hybrid ship and submersible, between Yokohama and San Francisco, not only showcases steampunk aesthetics but also forces players to weigh the risks of underwater travel against the speed it offers. The decision is not merely logistical but also symbolic, as it foregrounds the tension between technological ambition and human vulnerability. Similarly, choosing a mechanical camel in the Arabian Desert introduces ethical

dilemmas surrounding the exploitation of local resources for technological gain, reframing innovation as a site of cultural negotiation.

The steampunk aesthetic blends futuristic machinery with Victorian design, prompting players to question linear narratives of progress. Player agency further complicates this theme, as choices between speed and experience, or efficiency and ethics, mirror tensions between industrial ambition and moral responsibility.

3.3.3 Social Hierarchy

Social hierarchy is a structural and thematic undercurrent in *80 Days*. As Passepartout, a working-class valet, players navigate a world shaped by class, race, gender, and colonial hierarchies. His liminal position allows access to diverse social groups but also exposes him to exclusion and prejudice.

This dynamic is reflected in how certain travel routes or accommodations are restricted based on attire or reputation. For example, in Vienna, Passepartout may be denied access to a luxury train unless dressed in refined clothing such as a tailcoat or monocle. In St. Petersburg, wearing a Russian Gentleman's outfit allows negotiation of train schedules, illustrating how class performance affects mobility.

The game also challenges gender norms through encounters with female characters who occupy roles traditionally denied to them in the 19th century. Isabella Asisara, a Mutsun airship captain, leads a technologically advanced vessel and speaks of reclaiming autonomy from colonial powers. Aodha, a mercenary leader in India, defies patriarchal expectations by commanding a group of fighters after surviving a near-death experience.

Colonial hierarchies are similarly interrogated. In Dakar, Passepartout may witness local resistance against colonial officers who treat Indigenous characters with suspicion. In Haiti, players encounter a flourishing superpower led by Black revolutionaries, which subverts imperial narratives and repositions technological and political agency.

Mechanically, social hierarchy is embedded in the game's branching structure. Passepartout's reputation stat affects dialogue options and access to routes. For instance, being perceived as dependable or stylish opens up cooperative interactions with locals and

officials. In Timbuktu, players may confront slavers and choose to intervene or remain complicit, highlighting moral agency within oppressive systems.

These examples illustrate how *80 Days* employs both narrative and mechanics to critique Victorian assumptions about class, gender, and empire, transforming the social hierarchy from a static backdrop into a dynamic system of negotiation and resistance.

3.3.4 The Hero's Journey and the Victorian Quest Romance

The hero's journey in *80 Days* is reimagined through interactive storytelling and reframed through the ideological lens of the Victorian quest romance. Drawing on Campbell's monomyth, the game presents a cyclical journey of departure, trials, transformation, and return, shaped by player agency.

Passepartout's role as a valet subverts traditional heroic archetypes, questioning whose stories are told and who gets to be the hero. This inversion aligns with Fraser's critique of imperialist narratives, where the protagonist is typically a white, upper-class English male asserting dominance through exploration.

Players face logistical, moral, and emotional challenges; choosing between saving time or helping others, engaging in romance, or supporting uprisings. In one path, Passepartout is invited to join a rebellion in Manila, where he must choose between aiding local resistance or preserving his master's schedule. In another, he may fall in love with a revolutionary or be forced to choose between personal loyalty and political conviction. These branching paths complicate the notion of heroic progress and introduce ethical ambiguity.

The game's mechanics reinforce this reimagining. Time pressure and resource management (balancing money, health, and reputation) force players to make difficult decisions that reflect Victorian ideals of efficiency and control, while also exposing their limitations. For example, choosing a slower but safer route may allow for deeper cultural engagement, but it risks missing the deadline and failing the journey. These trade-offs foreground the tension between imperial ambition and human empathy.

Passepartout's internal reflections, recorded in journal entries and dialogue, reveal a growing awareness of the world's complexity. In some routes, he expresses doubt about the morality of their mission or admiration for the people they meet. These moments of

introspection mark a departure from Fogg's detached rationalism and signal a transformation rooted in experience and empathy.

The return to London, if achieved, is not merely a triumph of speed but a culmination of ethical and emotional growth. The game thus transforms a classical narrative structure into a dynamic, player-driven experience that invites critical engagement with Victorian ideals and their imperialist underpinnings.

3.4 Semiotic Analysis' Results

This section presents the results of the semiotic analysis, focusing on how *80 Days* uses signs and symbols in character design, environments, and dialogue to reflect or subvert Victorian ideologies. These semiotic elements are not merely aesthetic choices; they shape the player's understanding of the game world and its cultural dynamics.

3.4.1 Character Design

Character design in *80 Days* operates primarily through minimalist illustrations and rich textual descriptions, rather than detailed visual modeling. The game uses attire, naming, and narrative framing to signal social status, cultural identity, and ideological positioning. Upper-class characters are described wearing elaborate Victorian attire: tailcoats, corsets, and top hats, signaling wealth and conformity to social norms. Working-class characters are often introduced with references to utilitarian garments and practical accessories, emphasizing labor and mobility.

Passepartout's attire can be customized by the player, and these choices influence how he is perceived in different cities. For example, wearing a monocle and tailcoat in Vienna grants access to elite spaces, while simpler clothing may lead to exclusion or suspicion. Isabella Asisara, the Mutsun airship captain, is described as wearing a blend of Indigenous and steampunk elements, symbolizing resistance and technological agency. In New Orleans, the character of Death is personified as a woman whose gothic and surreal narrative presence challenges Victorian binaries of morality and rationality.

These character portrayals rely on symbolic cues embedded in the game's text and stylized visuals, inviting players to interpret identity and ideology through a combination of aesthetic suggestion and narrative context.

3.4.2 Environments

The environments in *80 Days* are rendered in a stylized, minimalist visual style, supported by rich textual descriptions that convey atmosphere, cultural context, and ideological framing. Cities are introduced with brief illustrations and narrative cues that evoke their geopolitical significance and aesthetic character. For example, the domed skyline of Istanbul or the mechanical cranes of Hong Kong are not intricately visualized but described in ways that suggest industrial ambition and imperial reach.

Qausuittuq, the floating Arctic city governed by Indigenous peoples, is framed through narrative as a symbol of autonomy and postcolonial futurism. The mechanical city in India, which moves on massive wheels, is described as a self-sufficient entity, critiquing colonial extraction and reimagining mobility. The Zulu Federation, with its robotic war animals and fortified cities, employs steampunk motifs to invert colonial narratives of technological superiority.

Environmental symbols such as steam vents, brass fittings, and airship docks are referenced in text and stylized visuals, functioning as markers of industrial progress and ideological tension. These elements invite players to interpret space as a site of negotiation between empire, innovation, and resistance. The juxtaposition of historical and speculative elements encourages reflection on the linear narratives of progress often associated with the Victorian era.

3.4.3 Dialogue

Dialogue in *80 Days* is a central semiotic tool, crafted with period-appropriate rhetorical nuance. It reveals character ideologies, social hierarchies, and cultural tensions through branching conversations and embedded choices. Rather than relying on voice acting or detailed animations, the game uses written exchanges to convey tone, status, and worldview.

In Manila, players can engage with revolutionaries who contest imperial control and invite Passepartout to join their cause. In Serbia, a local engineer expresses resentment toward Western exploitation and pride in regional innovation. In Peru, a merchant discusses the impact of British trade policies, offering a nuanced view of economic imperialism. In the Zulu Federation, dialogue with a local commander reveals pride in technological autonomy and resistance to colonial incursion. In New Orleans, conversations with the personified figure of Death challenge Victorian moral binaries and introduce surreal philosophical reflection.

Characters speak in ways that reflect their social position: colonial officers use formal, authoritative language, while resistance leaders and laborers speak with urgency and conviction. These exchanges are not didactic but dialogic, offering space for reflection and choice. The player's responses shape the narrative trajectory, reinforcing the game's commitment to interactive meaning-making.

Together, these semiotic dimensions – linguistic interaction and ideological framing – underscore how *80 Days* constructs a layered critique of Victorian ideology. By embedding meaning in carefully written dialogue, the game transforms its textual aesthetic into a vehicle for cultural interrogation.

3.5 Discussion

The empirical findings from *80 Days* reveal how interactive storytelling, thematic complexity, and semiotic design converge to produce a critical reimagining of Victorian ideologies. When interpreted through the theoretical lenses of neo-Victorianism, narrative theory, and game studies, the game emerges not merely as a historical simulation but as a dynamic medium for ideological critique and cultural negotiation. The thematic and semiotic analyses demonstrate how player agency, branching narrative structures, and symbolic environments work together to interrogate dominant narratives of empire, progress, and social hierarchy.

This interpretive process is anchored in the dual narrative framework, which combines Campbell's monomyth and Fraser's Victorian quest romance. While *80 Days* draws on the structural arc of the hero's journey (departure, trials, transformation, and return), it deliberately subverts its ideological foundations by casting Passepartout, a working-class valet, as the protagonist. This inversion destabilizes the conventions of the quest romance, which

traditionally centers on elite English male explorers asserting dominance over colonized territories. Instead, the game foregrounds ethical complexity, cross-cultural empathy, and moral agency, aligning with Fraser's critique of imperial adventure narratives and Delmas *et al.*'s (2007) insights into the fragmentation and personalization of interactive storytelling.

The thematic analysis reinforces this ideological shift. Exploration, typically framed as conquest in Victorian literature, is reimagined as a process of cultural encounter and resistance. Routes through Istanbul, Qausuittuq, and Manila reveal alternative models of governance, autonomy, and rebellion, decentralizing the European gaze and amplifying historically marginalized voices. Innovation, while visually expressed through steampunk aesthetics, becomes a site of ethical negotiation. Technologies such as mechanical elephants and submersible ships are not merely fantastical devices but narrative tools that prompt reflection on the costs and consequences of progress. These speculative elements function as retrofuturist provocations (Guffey 2006), exposing the contradictions of Victorian modernity.

Social hierarchy, another core theme, is rendered as a dynamic system rather than a static backdrop. *Passepartout*'s shifting reputation, access to routes, and interactions with characters of varying status illustrate how class, race, and gender hierarchies are embedded in both narrative and mechanics. Encounters with figures like Isabella Asisara and Aodha challenge patriarchal and colonial norms, while the player's decisions – whether to intervene in oppression or remain complicit – highlight the game's procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007). These mechanics simulate real-world systems of power and resistance, transforming gameplay into a form of ideological critique.

The semiotic analysis further supports these findings by showing how character design, environmental cues, and dialogue encode cultural identity, resistance, and historical memory. Stylized depictions of cities, hybrid attire of revolutionary figures, and rhetorically nuanced conversations all contribute to a layered critique of Victorian values. As Barthes (1967) and Chandler (2007) suggest, these signs are culturally loaded; in *80 Days*, they are mobilized to foreground hybridity, contestation, and alternative modernities.

Finally, the game's procedural structure (its rule-based systems, branching paths, and time constraints) embodies Juul's (2005) concept of half-real systems. The tension between speed and experience, efficiency and empathy, mirrors the ideological conflicts of the

Victorian era. Players are invited not only to navigate a speculative world but to co-author its meaning, embodying Aarseth's (1997) notion of ergodic literature, where narrative emerges through effort and choice.

In sum, *80 Days* exemplifies how digital games can function as critical media. By integrating interactive storytelling with steampunk aesthetics and thematic depth, the game reimagines Victorian myths in ways that are politically resonant and historically reflective. It invites players to engage with the past not as a fixed narrative but as a contested terrain open to reinterpretation, resistance, and transformation.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated how *80 Days* reimagines Victorian narratives through the affordances of digital games, offering a participatory model of historical engagement that is both critical and creative. By integrating steampunk aesthetics, branching narrative structures, and meaningful player agency, the game transcends conventional historical representation to become a site of ideological negotiation and cultural critique.

The dual narrative framework based on Campbell's monomyth and Fraser's Victorian quest romance has proven essential for interpreting how *80 Days* simultaneously adopts and subverts classical narrative conventions. Passepartout's role as a working-class protagonist reframes the hero's journey, foregrounding ethical dilemmas, emotional growth, and cross-cultural encounters in place of imperial conquest. This narrative inversion challenges the ideological assumptions embedded in traditional Victorian adventure stories and aligns with broader neo-Victorian strategies of reappropriation and critique.

Thematic and semiotic analyses reveal how the game engages with Victorian ideals of exploration, innovation, and social hierarchy, not to reinforce them, but to expose their contradictions and reimagine their legacy. Through stylized environments, symbolic character design, and dialogic interactions, *80 Days* encodes resistance, hybridity, and alternative modernities. Its procedural systems composed of time management, branching paths, and reputation mechanics, function as rhetorical devices that simulate and interrogate the moral and political tensions of the 19th century.

By situating *80 Days* within the broader context of neo-Victorian media and digital humanities, this study affirms the capacity of games to act as both cultural memory and cultural critique. It contributes to ongoing conversations about how interactive media can reframe historical narratives, challenge dominant ideologies, and invite players to co-author new understandings of the past. In this way, *80 Days* is not simply a game about the Victorian era; it is a reflection on how history itself can be retold, contested, and transformed through play.

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CÁTIA FERREIRA

Cátia Ferreira holds a PhD in Communication Studies from Universidade Católica Portuguesa. Currently, she is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Human Sciences, at Universidade Católica Portuguesa. She is a main researcher at CECC (Research Centre for Communication and Culture) and collaborating researcher at CETAPS (Centre for English, Translation, and Anglo-Portuguese Studies). Her research and teaching areas focus on media studies, in particular digital media: digital games, audiovisual and multimedia communication, and emerging strategies for content production, such as transmedia and cross-media.

Ciência Vitae: 3E16-900B-E941 | ORCID: 0000-0002-0113-6634

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The Subversion of Victorian Morality in *Bloodborne* (2015)

SLAVEN LENDIĆ

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Osijek

ABSTRACT: This article examines how the Japanese gothic video game *Bloodborne*, consciously and intentionally, subverts the historical, ethical, and philosophical concept of Victorian morality. The article takes into account that the Victorian Compromise is an integral part of Victorian morality, and as such, it partly originates from deeply influential and far-reaching utilitarian philosophy (and politics) of English social reformer, jurist and philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832). *Bloodborne* subverts Victorian morality by presenting it as a stagnant, hypocritical, and plainly ineffective moral system that fails when the community faces a crisis or a state of exception. For further explanation on the state of exception, this article uses the framework presented by a relevant contemporary thinker of ethics and politics Giorgio Agamben (1942). Within *Bloodborne* and its setting, the gothic city of Yharnam, the state of exception is the Hunt. The Hunt is shown to be pushing the citizens and their views on civic responsibility, ethics, solidarity and critical reasoning to its breaking point. Instead of *Bloodborne* citizens being

RESUMO: Este artigo analisa como o videogame gótico japonês *Bloodborne* subverte, de forma consciente e intencional, o conceito histórico, ético e filosófico da moralidade vitoriana. Neste artigo, considera-se que o Compromisso Vitoriano é parte integrante da moralidade vitoriana e, como tal, origina-se parcialmente da filosofia (e da política) utilitarista, profundamente influente e de longo alcance, do reformador social, jurista e filósofo inglês Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832). *Bloodborne* subverte a moralidade vitoriana, apresentando-a como um sistema moral estagnado, hipócrita e claramente ineficaz que falha quando a comunidade enfrenta uma crise ou um estado de exceção. Para uma explicação mais aprofundada do estado de exceção, este artigo utiliza concepções de um relevante pensador contemporâneo em ética e política, Giorgio Agamben (1942). Dentro de *Bloodborne* e do seu cenário, a cidade gótica de Yharnam, o estado de exceção é a Caçada. A Caçada demonstra estar a levar os cidadãos e as suas opiniões sobre responsabilidade cívica, ética, solidariedade e raciocínio crítico ao seu

dismissed as simply cruel, selfish or ignorant, it should be recognized that their views are deeply influenced by the ideology of Victorian morality. The evidence for Victorian morality being a consciously present and significant underlying factor in the game is further reinforced by the omnipresent Victorian aesthetics and architecture, soundtrack, British accents in the English dub of the game, as well as numerous other factors. *Bloodborne* is therefore a Japanese interpretation and subversion of a deeply Western morality tradition.

KEYWORDS: Victorian morality, Victorian Compromise, *Bloodborne*, utilitarian, ethics.

ponto de rutura. Em vez de os cidadãos de *Bloodborne* serem considerados simplesmente cruéis, egoístas ou ignorantes, deveria ser reconhecido que os seus pontos de vista são profundamente influenciados pela ideologia da moralidade vitoriana. A evidência de que a moralidade vitoriana é um fator subjacente conscientemente presente e significativo no jogo é ainda reforçada pela omnipresente estética e arquitetura vitorianas, a banda sonora, os sotaques britânicos na dobragem inglesa do jogo, bem como vários outros fatores. *Bloodborne* é, portanto, uma interpretação e uma subversão japonesas de uma tradição moral profundamente ocidental.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Moralidade Vitoriana, Compromisso Vitoriano, *Bloodborne*, utilitário, ética.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how FromSoftware's *Bloodborne* (2015) action role-playing video game title presents and subverts Victorian morality as a utilitarian, stagnant and ineffective ethical tradition which thoroughly fails when the community that practices it faces a crisis or a state of exception. Topically and within the realm of the humanities, this paper presents an ethical and philosophical analysis of a video game, incorporating elements of legal history. Relevant sources will include British theologian and philosopher Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874–1936), contemporary political and ethics theorist Giorgio Agamben (1942), as well as Lawrence Friedman (1930), a leading contemporary legal expert from Stanford University. There will also be mention of how the utilitarian works and philosophies of Jeremy Bentham (1747–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) influenced Victorian morality and Compromise. The article will also mention contemporary scholarship and studies of neo-Victorian and Gothic literature, alongside a few references to the King James Bible.

Bloodborne presents Victorian morality as a moral framework which breeds strong class prejudice, mutual citizen distrust and the inability to challenge authority in crisis. Therefore, *Bloodborne* is explicitly a critique of the utilitarian ethical tradition and framework. It is also implicitly a critique of Kantian (deontological)¹ and Christian (Anglican due to historical context) ethical frameworks. This paper will therefore delve deeper into the philosophical underpinnings of utilitarian ethics, which were primarily pioneered politically and socially by Jeremy Bentham and, to an extent, John Stuart Mill. Utilitarian ethics also underlies the often-mentioned but seldom fully understood concept of the Victorian Compromise, which is intimately tied to the concept of Victorian morality as a whole. Finally, *Bloodborne* openly suggests that the community which practices this type of morality is inevitably slowly tearing itself apart. Since FromSoftware is a Japanese studio, with the tradition of game design and production over several decades (starting in 1994), *Bloodborne* can be considered a Japanese view and interpretation of deeply Western morality tradition(s). The article will also explain what exactly, in a contemporary political sense, the state of exception is, which a community may face and what it may demand from a community, by resorting to Giorgio Agamben's framework.

This will all be contextualized within the narrative of *Bloodborne*. This will also include mentions of certain plot elements and a few (potential) fates of certain characters, which may be considered spoilers to the game's plot. Nevertheless, the article will not go into details of the game's endings or conclusions.

2. YHARNAM AS A VICTORIAN SETTING

2.1. Victorian Elements in Environmental and Character Design

When analyzing any title made by FromSoftware in the last decade and a half, one needs to be aware that FromSoftware's game titles usually intentionally contain a significant amount of contextual and environmental storytelling. In other words, the environment, architecture and flavor text² used to describe found items play a significant part in storytelling instead of more expository and explanatory dialogue, title crawls or even cutscenes.

The setting where almost the entire game takes place (exceptions being the brief visits to other realms and dimension that exist parallel to the one most of the game takes place in) is a city called Yharnam. The city of Yharnam is a famous place in the world of *Bloodborne*, with other developed and established places and cities, which are not explicitly shown or explained in detail. This is especially evident as the player's custom-made character (can be male or female) always inevitably remains an "outsider" in Yharnam. The world of *Bloodborne* is both quite Victorian and gothic, in several important ways. First of all, there is the architecture – exemplifying the connection between Victorian and gothic. Victorian architecture, historically speaking, encompassed several different styles and was nominally eclectic in its approach, with the catalogue of Victorian architecture including the Gothic Revival style. Therefore, Yharnam's architecture often features rib vaults and pointed Gothic arches, typical of Gothic architecture, alongside stained glass and religious imagery that depicts martyrdom, piety, and sainthood. Historically, the first mention of the word "Gothic" is considered to be in the writings of Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), an Italian painter and architect, as an expression mocking a new kind of architecture.³ Furthermore, the game's soundtrack makes abundant use of classical violins and piano keyboards. Victorian fashion is omnipresent throughout the world, featuring elements such as cylinders and top hats, sumptuous dresses, and long coats. Interestingly enough, and worth mentioning, audio design also hints at a strong British (that is, Victorian) influence, considering that the English language dub is almost entirely done in British English, with appropriate accents and cadences that suit the more classical sound of the language. Most weapons have a more elaborate mechanical design in comparison to their real-world counterparts, while still remaining rooted in steel and gunpowder, dominant in the Victorian era.

The game consciously and intentionally borrows from many influences besides the Victorian and Gothic ones. There is a very obvious influence of H.P. Lovecraft's literary mythos

and style, alongside influences from European cinematography, such as the film *Le Pacte des loups* (2001), a French period action drama directed by Christophe Gans. The influence of the mentioned film is evident in the game's aesthetics, including clothing and certain outfits, as well as weaponry. Thematically, at the core of both works of fiction is a theocratic conspiracy inspired by historical events from the 18th and 19th centuries of European history. One should also mention Northern European folklore influences, which can be seen in the runes typical of Scandinavia, Germany and other European countries to the north.

2.2. Local Yharnam Customs

At the heart of *Bloodborne*'s story is a custom that is called “blood ministration”. This custom is what made Yharnam a special, and somewhat notorious place in the established world of the game. Once, it was a revolutionary medicinal technique and technology that was used to extend life, cure illnesses, which was also supposed to lead to higher planes of consciousness. By the time the player visits Yharnam, blood ministration has become overused, corrupted and has brought forth the disease known as Blood Scourge. This disease is responsible for the mutation of Yharnamite citizens into beasts during the Lunar Hunt. The entire blood ministration procedure and process is based on the blood of the “Great Ones”, celestial otherworldly beings not entirely knowable to humans of the world of *Bloodborne*. Throughout the game, it is shown that the Great Ones can communicate with humans to some extent, although not through words – the communication seems to occur more through physical contact, visions, and something akin to telepathy.⁴ *Bloodborne* can be considered neo-Victorian fiction, based on contemporary scholarship of neo-Victorian literature. For instance, Sally Shuttleworth has described (while quoting Hilary Schor) neo-Victorian fiction in general as something to a surprising degree concerned with both the material and immaterial worlds (Shuttleworth 2014, 8), and this type of relationship between the material and the cosmic is something that lies at the narrative and thematic core of *Bloodborne*.

Another custom directly linked to the mentioned blood ministration is the so-called Lunar Hunt. It has become a semi-regular, periodic event that has most of the citizens locked up inside. During that time, strange creatures and monstrous beasts roam the streets, with the citizens who have been the heaviest blood users (basically addicted to the Yharnam blood) turned into highly aggressive, primitive hostiles that hunt down and burn anything in sight. By the time the player begins to participate in the story within Yharnam, the Hunt has become a

48 relatively routine occurrence – it takes place when the Moon is closest to the Earth. During the Hunt, certain psychic energies become more apparent and stronger, as the borders between dimensions become blurry. All of this is the work of Yharnam's theocratic Healing Church elite. It is revealed that many of the city's elite actually desire to become the Great Ones themselves, which means leaving behind (or, from a different view, completely transcending) their humanity.

3. CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY IN YHARNAM

3.1. Yharnam as a Morally Bankrupt Place Where Victorian Morality and Compromise Rule

At first sight, civic responsibility and ethics might be a strange concept to study and dissect in what is regarded as a horror or, at the very least, a dark gothic fantasy role-playing game. However, it is a key element to understand *what* is actually happening in Yharnam and *why* Yharnam citizens behave the way they do throughout the whole game. Also, it should be noted that existing and contemporary scholarship is aware that “Gothic fiction, since its inception, has incorporated political anxieties related to social order and the individual”, as Mukherjee describes it (2024, 95). Even though nearly all Yharnam citizens (or Yharnamites, as they are collectively called) are locked up inside their houses, you can still knock on many doors in Yharnam. In fact, that is the introductory premise of the game. You wake up in a dark, Victorian-era-looking transfusion clinic with a cryptic note next to you. You venture out in the streets while the Hunt is underway. What you find is a city in chaos, with beasts roaming the streets, monstrous looking creatures being burned at the stake, and angry mobs of strange looking people armed with pitchforks, axes, knives and torches all around. One of the first instincts of a newcomer in Yharnam would be to (literally) knock on some doors, ask what is going on, and potentially seek help, shelter or clarification of some kind. Which, of course, is our instinct for basic solidarity, empathy, and some kind of civic conscience in an emergency. The player inevitably has very little luck with that, as knocking on the vast majority of citizens’ doors results in the player hearing insults, mockery, and being shooed away. Voices and dialogue one hears through the door sometimes indicate seething anger, astonishing arrogance, or deeply entrenched fear. Sometimes, all that the player can hear is the crazed and desperate laughter, and some citizens speaking nonsensically. Nearly all citizens continue to refer to the player as an “outsider” – one who is unwelcome in Yharnam and is regularly blamed by Yharnamites for

the grim situation in which Yhamam finds itself. One is at first tempted to think that the citizens of Yhamam are oblivious, scared or simply evil. However, this superficial explanation lacks depth and true understanding. Most citizens are simply responding and behaving according to a moral ideology, a variant of what is historically known to us as Victorian morality, which was underpinned by a theory of society known as the Victorian Compromise.

One cannot understand Victorian morality without understanding the Victorian Compromise, which permeated the class-based British society of that time. The Victorian era is, as is generally accepted historiographically, the period between 1837 and 1901, which is the period of Queen Victoria's reign in United Kingdom. Victorian morality and Compromise have become ubiquitous in the United Kingdom, although they were also spread well beyond its borders. Historically, it was a period of significant technological progress, the further expansion of the British Empire, and class turmoil, marked by the strong class divisions typical of the United Kingdom. The Victorian Compromise was based on values that unified potentially opposing class tendencies, but with all classes remaining inevitably intertwined, bound by British society and an expanding British nation. The most influential upper class adhered to values such as physical restraint, good manners, morality in display, charity, and religiousness. There was also a growing middle class, which was accumulating wealth through trade and commerce. The lower and working classes were intertwined with the rising middle class through acts of philanthropy, improved working conditions, and political support. Both lower and middle classes still mostly had no access to the highest social circles, nor to the true parliamentary and political influence, which was mostly still the domain of the upper class.⁵ All other classes were dependent on upper classes for true political influence. With the mentioned political influence and hereditary access to wealth and power, the upper class had the most stringent value-based expectations placed upon them, followed by the middle class. Respect for authority meant respecting the individuals with authority, namely, upper-class individuals with high societal titles and functions (Friedman 2007, 114). The Victorian Compromise was all about influential people displaying values externally, while, if needed, indulging in "sin" quietly and privately.

Judging from the written materials left behind by intellectuals of the time, there were plenty of deviations committed across the classes, especially amongst the uppermost class. A notable source of the time is theologian, philosopher, and writer G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936), who explicitly comments on the Victorian Compromise and Morality in several of his prominent pieces, most notably in his essay "Three Main Trends of Victorian Thought: Utilitarianism, The

Oxford Movement, and Romantic Protestantism” (1913). He describes the societal atmosphere of the time: “The middle classes were emerging in a state of damaged Puritanism. The upper classes were utterly pagan” (Chesterton 1913).

Related to how Victorian customs co-existed with the laws, *Guarding Life's Dark Secrets: Legal and Social Controls over Reputation, Propriety and Privacy* (2007) by Stanford legal scholar Lawrence Friedman provides ample information. Prostitution was labelled as a “great social evil” – while, of course, brothels and red-light districts remained numerous (Friedman 2007, 931). Women were, above all, expected to be dedicated to marriage and family, facing more severe consequences for losing their reputation of chastity or virtue (Friedman 2007, 106). A good literary example of the ideal wife of the time can be found in Coventry Patmore’s narrative poem, *The Angel in the House*. A certain degree of pretense was always at play within this type of social compromise. Friedman further states the following:

Victorian surface was simply that; a surface. There was always of course, the dark underside, even in the high Victorian era. Not all men (or even women) lived up to the stern ideals of the code. Men drank, gambled, broke the Sabbath and consorted with prostitutes. Not all women were chaste and obedient. Some of the sinning – probably most of it – was done in secret. Open violation of the code could have terrible consequences, especially for women. (Friedman 2007, loc. 963)

3.2. Utilitarian Origins of Victorian Compromise and Morality

The Victorian Compromise was a social theory, with the primary interest being the well-being of the community, specifically the English community, both at home and abroad. Utilitarianism and utilitarian philosophy form the intellectual and social basis on which Victorian morality and Compromise were built. This is confirmed by G. K. Chesterton, who states: “Now for the great part of the Victorian era the utilitarian tradition which reached its highest in Mill held the centre of the field; it was the philosophy in office, so to speak” (1913). With John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) being a vocal proponent of it as a distinguished member of parliament, utilitarianism was first introduced by Mill’s teacher, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832). The philosophy of utilitarianism is, above all, one of practicality. The main maxim of utilitarianism can be summed up as *the greatest happiness of the greatest number* (Bentham 1789, 8). Utilitarian ethics, therefore, value consequence and effect; motivation is not the primary focus. This is quite evident in Jeremy Bentham’s philosophy, which also highly valued a form of individual and

collective hedonism, going so far as to define pleasure and pain as the two ultimate, perennial, natural driving forces that govern all humanity's decisions and actions.

John Stuart Mill followed Bentham's theories, defining "utility" as the creed which is the foundation of morals, and that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, and wrong if they promote the reverse of happiness. On the other hand, other relevant morality traditions, such as Kantian, place much more value on motivation and good will.⁶ Kant's ethics are grounded in the categorical imperative, which aims to be universal, summarised in the maxim "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant 1793 or 2017, 24). While Mill explicitly mentions Kant as remarkable, he criticizes Kant's universalist theory and categorical imperative as being contradictory in itself, considering it lacks mention of reasonable self-interest (Mill 2009, 94-95). Both Bentham and Mill emphasize the nature and importance of pleasure. Kant, on the other hand, refers to happiness as highly noteworthy and important (Kant 1793, 1), although subjective to the point that it does not need to be codified in detailed regulations (Kant 2017, 22). Interestingly, the entire setting of *Bloodborne* is oppressive, decrepit, and lacks most of what we would call pleasure or even basic comfort, considering the uncanny atmosphere of Gothic horror that is present throughout the game. Both the deontological and utilitarian concepts are challenged in *Bloodborne*, although the utilitarian one to a much larger extent. Christian symbolism, and therefore, Christian morality, can also be considered present in *Bloodborne*. It is subverted to a lesser degree than utilitarian and deontological philosophy, though it can be considered as examined through the failings of Yharnam's ruling theocratic elite, which mostly contributed to the bestial overpopulation and danger in Yharnam. Historically, Victorian morality is closely connected to utilitarian philosophy, as well as the Anglican Church, whose involvement with Victorianism is well-documented (Altholz).

Lawrence Friedman also argues that Victorian Compromise should not be dismissed as mere hypocrisy, as the double standard in the law had at least an implicit purpose. The utilitarian principle is based on the notion that it is useless to try to stamp out vice. However, there must be some way to keep a lid on it, while maintaining the image of utmost dignity, posture, chastity and restraint in public as much as possible, for the best of the community (Friedman 2007, 169). When we push this type of social contract to its limits, we can safely say that within Victorian morality, it is possible to be guaranteed the status of a good husband and father, a conscientious citizen and a respectable businessman while gambling away your profits or inheritance, visiting

brothels and ignoring the cries of a wounded servant⁷ of your neighbor who is bleeding in an alleyway – as long as no one of importance saw you perform any of those misdeeds.

3.3. State of Exception as Ultimate Challenge to the Communal Morality System

After immersing ourselves in the world of *Bloodborne* and getting to know Yharnam, its customs, politics and citizens, we can safely say that Yharnam is a place that is under a semi-constant state of exception. A state of exception (or state of emergency) is a political, ethical, and to an extent, legal concept that has a significant tradition in both the 20th and 21st Centuries. A state of exception is any kind of severe economic or political disturbance that requires the application of extraordinary measures. The expression itself was first introduced by the controversial German jurist Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) and was subsequently further elaborated, reinterpreted, and made relevant again by the contemporary legal and political theorist Giorgio Agamben (1942). The concept of the state of exception is naturally associated with the legality and legitimacy of dictatorship and the enforcement of extraordinary measures upon citizens. In his influential book *State of Exception* (2005), Agamben argues that states of exception can be *simulated*. The aim of the mentioned simulated emergency is to make an exception a permanent rule (Agamben 2005, 22). For example, a severe and sudden earthquake can be an authentic state of exception – a true, unforeseen emergency which probably justifies political and judicial deviations of some kind, depending on the situation. However, states of exceptions can also be faked or intentionally provoked – e.g. a bomb placed within a civilian structure by government services with the sole purpose of triggering unrest or blaming a certain political party, minority or ethnic group.

In *Bloodborne*, the state of exception is the Hunt. The true state of exception, as Agamben states, is something that is *per se* beyond the legal sphere and interpretation. The simulated state of exception is something that is *produced* so it can be codified into law, and new emergency laws (which usually involve some type of government overreach) can be created. Considering that the Hunt has started due to the Blood Scourge disease, as a means to maintain some form of societal control over the bestial population, which has now become routine and ritualized, we can say that the Hunt is now a *simulated* state of exception. The mentioned state of exception primarily benefits the ruling ranks of Yharnam's Healing Church, or what remains of it.

Agamben's theory posits that the state of exception presents both an ethical and a political challenge, prior to any interaction with the law or its codification. In other words, we could say that the state of exception is a test of a community's ethical and moral fiber. Through the Hunt and the events in Yharnam that the player participates in, we see a specific ethical ideology being tested. That ideology is Victorian morality – and alongside it, the Victorian Compromise, as a theory of societal relations that underlies it.

4. CITIZENS AT OEDON'S CHAPEL

4.1. Saved Citizens Displaying Symptoms of Victorian Morality

During the course of the game, the player can interact with a few relatively reasonable sounding individuals from Yharnam, who will ask the player for help in finding a safe place during the Hunt. All of this is highly typical of the RPG (Role Playing Game) genre, and something that would normally be considered a side-quest, at the end of which the protagonist would normally receive something helpful if the task was completed successfully. This concept is subverted in *Bloodborne*, as the effort and the intention go thankless in most cases, with the addition of “saveable” NPC characters beginning to act in very strange, erratic and (self) destructive ways, sometimes leading to potential confusion or regret from the player.

The safe haven in Yharnam is located at Oedon's Chapel, where citizens seeking help can be sent. The mentioned chapel has plenty of incense, which keeps the Blood Scourge beasts and crazed mobs at bay. Oedon's Chapel is run by a person known only as Oedon Chapel Dweller, a strange, slightly disfigured man dressed in modest robes. Nevertheless, he is one of the greatest humanists and benefactors in Yharnam, who opens the doors of the haven to citizens, regardless of their past and social status.

A total of five citizens can be brought to the safe haven of Oedon's Chapel. The following list displays the character descriptions and how they exhibit (or resist) symptoms of Victorian Compromise and morality. The list will not encompass all possible outcomes for the characters, although some of them will be mentioned. As is also customary in FromSoftware games, all of the mentioned NPCs (including the Chapel Dweller) can be killed by the protagonist at any time. *Bloodborne* has no manual “save” function, so the mentioned characters remain dead even

after reloading the game. This, as such, also creates a greater awareness of the consequences from the player's perspective.⁸ The following table includes the Chapel Dweller, for consistency.

- Oedon's Chapel Dweller – A slightly deformed-looking man in rags. Non-violent and friendly character, wants to save as many Yharnam citizens as possible. Does not exhibit any Victorian Compromise/morality symptoms. In fact, he is the very opposite of a Victorian-looking person and does not display almost any of the Victorian prejudices or mannerisms. He is charitable *per se* without any utilitarian cause, with no desire to climb up the social ladder or hierarchy.
- Arianna, a Yharnamite Prostitute – the only adult NPC survivor that (besides the Chapel Dweller, who is already at the chapel by default) is never openly hostile, maliciously manipulative, scheming or overtly or covertly violent towards the protagonist or any other NPC at the safe haven. She is helpful to the player/protagonist in the sense that she provides her healing blood to the protagonist. A woman from the fringes of society, dressed in a fine dress from Castle Cainhurst, which might imply that she is an impoverished noblewoman (although this is not confirmed). In Victorian mentality, she is a representation of “great social evil”, yet displays a kind heart and practical reason through most of the game.
- Elderly Lady – Rude, foul-mouthed woman of ill temper. Detests outsiders and foreigners such as the protagonist (which is symptomatic of Victorian mentality), thus holding them responsible for the fate of supreme Yharnam. She starts to exhibit signs of mental illness, potentially similar to dementia. Eventually, she starts to hallucinate that the protagonist is her child. She can provide her sedatives to the player, which are useful items – though in the context of her story, it is not out of her good will or intent, but as a result of mental illness.
- Sister Adella – A nun, in service of the Healing Church. Her purpose is to provide her special, healing blood to those in need. On a path to becoming a saint, she is a pious and zealous believer in her purity. If she were not a nun, she would be a true “angel in the house”. Historically, this character can also be considered representative of the Victorian era's obsessions with spiritualist and supernatural themes. The paradox of Sister Adella is also a challenge of religiously based Christian (strictly speaking, Anglican) ethics. Adella is pious, yet incredibly proud. She is devout and seemingly humble, yet she is also

jealous and envious. Appears to be calm and wise, yet hides a neurotic and volatile side. Narratively speaking, she can be considered the opposite of Arianna. Both have blood with healing properties, though they come from opposite sides of the social spectrum. Adella can turn violent and kill Arianna in a fit of jealousy *if* the player uses Arianna's healing blood too many times, and if Adella is present to witness it. This character again raises the discussion of criticism and subversion of the Christian (precisely speaking, Anglican) tradition of peaceful coexistence with neighbours, as well as the usual reverence for religious and pious figures.

- Narrow-Minded Man – Arianna's neighbor, highly suspicious and paranoid of *everyone*, especially outsiders and those who appear to be of a lower social class. This all fits a typical Victorian world outlook. If he is brought to safe haven, he is ungrateful, rude and condescending towards the player. Afterwards, all he does is conspire antagonistically against the Chapel Dweller, claiming that he is simply a "beggar with a murky past", subtly goading the player to beware (and potentially go against) the Chapel Dweller. He seems to have conflicting feelings towards his neighbor Arianna; he cynically berates her, confirming his deeply Victorian disposition towards prostitutes, yet decides to leave his house only after she does. If both Sister Adella and Arianna are present at the chapel, he will express admiration for the "young saint" Adella, cryptically suggesting that Arianna is jealous of Adella, having something she does not. In reality, it is the other way around. This way, the Victorian Compromise, morality, and worldview are shown to be in direct opposition to situational awareness and practical reasoning.
- Suspicious Beggar – an NPC found scavenging and seemingly drinking blood from human remains. He turns out to be an abhorrent demonic beast in disguise, who is out for the citizens' blood. If he is brought back to the haven, he starts picking off other survivors one by one. He can also be engaged in combat by the player, after which he changes form and counter attacks immediately. This character can be considered a challenge to deontological, Kantian ethics. In the Kantian context, with the best good-will imaginable, should we tell a fellow citizen who is found drinking blood from human remains of our safe haven, as the environment strongly implies that the truth could cause much harm to others and ourselves? Kant's definition of lying mentions that a lie is always harmful and technically "unethical", as it hurts a human being or, at the very least, humanity in general. This is also interesting from an ontological perspective in the

Kantian context, considering that while the mentioned NPC is definitely humanoid, he is not strictly speaking “human”. It is worth mentioning that he can still talk, even while transformed, which confirms an intelligent life form, while still bending and stretching our definition of humanity significantly. Regardless of the status, the mentioned NPC can be considered a challenge to Christian (Anglican) morality, as both Old (*The Bible, Authorized King James Version*, Le, 19:18) and New Testament (*The Bible, Authorized King James Version*, Mk, 12:31) speak of loving thy neighbor as thyself, and a significant aspect of practical Christianity is communal life in the company of fellow citizens and neighbors. However, if a communal life is affected by a state of emergency, do other principles, such as situational judgment and protection of self and others, take precedence?

Amongst the mentioned characters, the following part of the article will focus specifically on Arianna, to display how she remains immune to the ideology of Victorian morality.

4.2. Arianna, a Prostitute from the Fringes of Society Immune to Victorian Morality

Bloodborne seems to reinforce the notion that individuals from the fringes of society fare better in unprecedented or exceptional circumstances than those who are firmly dependent on society and are eager to be seen as law-abiding citizens at all times. Additionally, *Bloodborne* is not the first video game to subtly convey such viewpoints.⁹

Naturally, this comes into conflict with the core concept of Victorian public morality, which emphasises morality on display and behaving *properly*, especially in public. Arianna is a woman who is accustomed to being shunned by society, and during the Hunt, she becomes a beacon of hope for the player and the entire safe haven, beside the Chapel Dweller. It is worth mentioning that Arianna’s house is located at the end of Cathedral Ward, which is actually an administrative center of the government. This positioning of Arianna’s house hints at who the main part of Arianna’s clientele was, and it would be reasonable to assume that the customers were mostly higher-ranking members of the city government, specifically those associated with the Healing Church.

Bloodborne’s Arianna is, at first glance, an antithesis of the perfect Victorian woman and everything that an “angel in the house” should not be. She is highly self-aware, does not pretend at all, has a good situational judgment and intelligence, and is not afraid to show it. She is generous to the extent that she wants to repay the player with her healing blood. She is just

looking to survive, without harming anyone in the process. Ironically, despite her profession, due to her disposition and character, she can be considered an “innocent bystander”, unlike the majority of other Yharnamites, including those at the safe haven. Innocence in FromSoftware games and other gothic tales in general is quite vulnerable and often in danger of being devoured by the cruel surroundings and an unforgiving world. Arianna can also be ignored or missed by the player while in her house (which leaves her fate quite ambiguous), killed by the player, killed by Sister Adella in a jealous frenzy, or die near the end of the game, when to her and the player’s horror, a small creature loosely resembling a baby comes out of her – which could be a product of psychic energies of certain Great Ones or their wrath brought about by experiments of Healing Church. This understandably places her under a great psychological strain, and she begins mumbling incoherently and laughing hysterically, most likely in shock. In order for Arianna to survive, the “baby-looking creature” must not be harmed by the player – even though the opposite might be the player’s first instinct.¹⁰

The supernatural Hunt ends in all of *Bloodborne*’s available conclusions, and it is possible to speculate that the mentioned strange creature (as many others) simply disappears, and Arianna comes to her senses. Arianna’s quest can end with some hope. Of course, even if she survives the entire ordeal of the Hunt, her final fate is still open and unresolved – though in the harsh, gothic and Victorian world of *Bloodborne*, this is often the best outcome one can get, even with all the noblest intentions in mind. This is partly due to the omnipresent Victorian Compromise and morality that have long since dominated the city of Yharnam in *Bloodborne*, which is fiercely criticised in the game through its narrative design, environmental storytelling, dialogue and characters.

5. CONCLUSION

The fictional world of *Bloodborne* is an example of a gothic, macabre fantasy tale done by Japanese authors. What has been discussed so far illustrates how *Bloodborne* is also a conscious, deliberate and detailed dissection and criticism of what is historically known as Victorian morality and Victorian Compromise. The game suggests that Victorian morality, when practiced in a community, produces insular, elitist and paranoid individuals, solely obsessed with their position in society and scoring “morality points” to be seen and valued by the public. Citizens of a community that practices this type of morality often seem to consider themselves above occasional debauchery, vice, lies, incitement to violence, and other misdeeds, which are evident

throughout Yharnam. Citizens of Yharnam, who are mostly shown to be under severe influence of Victorian morality, are also shown as unable to think critically about authority, remaining fearfully reverent of the theocratic Healing Church, and believers in the supremacy of Yharnam, with outsiders and anyone from outside being *a priori* at fault for Yharnam's deeply rooted issues. Moreover, as is seen in the haven, they seem to remain obsessed with and convinced of their own moral and communal superiority. Victorian morality is portrayed as a force that dangerously clouds situational judgment and critical thinking. A community that practices this type of morality is inevitably tearing itself apart, as *Bloodborne* demonstrates how such a community is completely unable to deal with any kind of exceptional or unprecedented states, due to the lack of true social cohesion, non-existent transparency and easy breaking of shallow and superficial connections amongst citizens.

As a narrative and a story, with its emphasis on environmental storytelling and scraps of information offered to the player, *Bloodborne* inquires and asks more questions than it provides answers. However, across the gaming world and various cultures, the criticism and reinterpretation of the Victorian Compromise and morality in *Bloodborne* remains fairly obvious. In fact, it is one of the more obvious aspects of the narrative, regarding the ethical and aesthetic essence. This article has, as much as possible, displayed how *Bloodborne* is also explicitly a critique of utilitarian-based Victorian ethical tradition and framework, with some reference and mention of Kantian (deontological) and Christian (notably Anglican) ethical framework(s). As mentioned, an additional layer of significance is that *Bloodborne* is a Japanese game, which interprets European intellectual tendencies and history with care and precision. For the future of the discussion on gothic fantasy games, such as *Bloodborne*, one must not lose sight of European intellectual, religious and spiritual history. Understanding of philosophical underpinnings and nuances becomes ever more relevant for understanding gothic stories in various media, as well as the many questions they pose.

¹ Kantian morality is one of the schools of normative ethics, which is concerned with how one should act in a moral sense. Named after its well-known representative and founder, the highly influential German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), the school is also known as deontological ethics, which is primarily concerned with the nobility of intent itself, rather than the consequences of actions. Consequences are the primary focus of utilitarian ethics, pioneered by the highly influential British philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832).

² Text used to describe found items during the game. This text is also found on playing cards in card-based narrative games.

³ The expression “Gothic” also denotes the Goths, northern Germanic tribes that were historically in contact with the Roman Empire.

⁴ To casual observers, the Great Ones appear like large, looming and monstrous creatures. It is also worth noting that the Great Ones are not necessarily evil nor good. The game’s lore explains that the Great Ones are unable to reproduce physically and yearn for children, and that human beings can become a kind of surrogate.

⁵ The question of whether the mentioned power division is fundamentally different in the 21st century is highly debatable, but it was likely even more pronounced during the Victorian era.

⁶ Immanuel Kant’s ethical viewpoint is based on his writings and lifelong research of pure reason, something that Kant claims is inherent to every physiologically and psychologically fully functioning individual.

⁷ Who is, obviously, a person of the lower class.

⁸ The mentioned characters can also be left to their own fate if the player is unable to find their houses or simply chooses the conversation option to withhold any information. It is debatable what happens to the characters if the player withholds information; however, the fact is that they become unresponsive after a certain event in the game. It can be presumed that the mentioned characters are killed in their houses. Arianna, for instance, mentions that she has very little protective incense left. However, their fates are not revealed in the case of ignoring or withholding information, and other outcomes can also be presumed for the mentioned characters.

⁹ This viewpoint in video games is also mentioned by Deacon St John, the biker protagonist of the post-apocalyptic stealth action game *Days Gone*. In the world of *Days Gone* (2019), after a deadly, rage-inducing virus breaks out, the most efficient survivalists are often those from the fringes of the former society or individuals who have previously navigated the line between illegal and legal domains with success. E.g., Copeland, a survivalist, gun rights activist and podcaster who lived in his van and was considered an extremist, and of course Deacon himself, who, after military service in Afghanistan, joined a motorcycle club and performed actions that sometimes crossed into illegality.

¹⁰ FromSoftware’s games also often make a point in their narrative design that human beings tend to quickly fear everything that does not look “human” enough to them. This is mentioned verbatim by a potential ally and a helpful character from *Dark Souls 2* named Weaponsmith Omifex, who is a part woman, part bird. She says the following lines: “Do you find me strange? You humans are always this way. You glare at any unfamiliar creature. That mix of curiosity, fear and revulsion...” (03:15 – 03:33).

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SLAVEN LENDIĆ

Slaven Lendić is a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek, Croatia. He holds a Master's and Bachelor's Degree in English Language and Literature and Philosophy. As a translator, he has translated literary works of Veronica Roth, Lorna Byrne and Ajahn Brahm, among others. His main research interests include digital humanities, ethics, the philosophy of law, the philosophy of politics, and game design.

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Gentlewomen, Fallen Men and Caged Birds:

Playing with Victorian Myths in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*

INES MUNKER

Department of English and American Studies

University of Vienna

ABSTRACT: Emphasizing the “interplay between self-reflexivity and immersion”, the neo-Victorian project allows us to consider a diverse array of creative works that (re)construct Victorian myths (Boehm-Schnittker and Gruss 2011, 15). *Assassin's Creed Syndicate's* approach to immersion through a multi-layered player embodiment renders the “critical interface between the past and present” central to neo-Victorian media tangible for its audience (Kohlke 2008, 1). The game creates a self-reflexive in-between space by implementing an “implied character” as a vessel for a critical re-evaluation of Victorian myths (Aarseth and Karhulahti 2022, 269). Employing a multimodal perspective, this paper analyzes how *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* extends beyond popular myths of private and public spheres, the Angel in the House, the fallen woman, the gentleman, the dandy, and Carlyle's Captains of Industry. Through an

RESUMO: Enfatizando a “interação entre autorreflexividade e imersão”, o projeto neo-vitoriano permite-nos considerar uma sucessão diversificada de trabalhos criativos que (re)constroem mitos vitorianos (Boehm-Schnittker e Gruss 2011, 15). A abordagem de *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* à imersão, por meio da incorporação do jogador em múltiplas camadas, torna a “interface crítica entre o passado e o presente” central na mídia neo-vitoriana tangível para o seu público (Kohlke 2008, 1). O jogo cria um espaço intermediário autorreflexivo ao implementar um “personagem implícito” como veículo de uma reavaliação crítica dos mitos vitorianos (Aarseth e Karhulahti 2022, 269). Empregando uma perspectiva multimodal, este artigo analisa como *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* se estende além dos mitos populares das esferas pública e privada, do Anjo da Casa, da mulher caída, do cavalheiro, do dândi e dos Capitães da Indústria



alternating gendered perspective, the player co-constructs a neo-Victorian narrative that comments on a range of issues connected to these myths, including women's education, marriage and motherhood, male rivalries, queer identities, and father-son relationships during the Industrial Revolution. Ultimately, persisting myths of Victorian femininity and masculinity are displaced and re-emerge as imaginings of self-sufficient gentlewomen and fallen men, which, in the neo-Victorian fashion, are colored by contemporary ideas and thus reveal just as much about the Victorians as they do about their lingering influence on our twenty-first-century identities.

KEYWORDS: neo-Victorianism, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, Victorian gender myths, Angel in the House, Gentleman.

de Carlyle. Através de uma perspectiva alternada de gênero, o jogador co-constrói uma narrativa neo-vitoriana que comenta questões ligadas a estes mitos, tais como a educação das mulheres, o casamento e a maternidade, as rivalidades masculinas, as identidades *queere* e as relações pai-filho durante a Revolução Industrial. Em última instância, os mitos persistentes da feminilidade e da masculinidade vitoriana são deslocados e ressurgem como imaginações de mulheres autossuficientes e de homens caídos, que, à moda neo-vitoriana, são coloridos por ideias contemporâneas e, portanto, revelam tanto sobre os vitorianos como sobre a sua influência persistente nas nossas identidades do século XXI.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: neo-vitorianismo, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, mitos de gênero vitorianos, Angel in the House, Gentleman.

INTRODUCTION

Drawing on people's desire to engage with fictional worlds, especially in a time marked by uncertainty and unrest (Bowman 2024, 162), video games as interactive narrative spaces allow players not only to observe stories but also to inhabit them. As Janet Murray enthuses in her pivotal book *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1998), digital media has the “ability to transport us to virtual places”, which marks a profound shift in how narratives are experienced (2). The act of play creates a participatory form of storytelling, constituting what Roig *et al.* describe as a shift “far beyond the ‘spectatorship’ position” – a position the audience occupies in traditional media, such as literature and film – into a “playful relationship with images” (89).

Among the most prominent game franchises of the last two decades, the *Assassin's Creed* franchise (2007-present) explores this narrative potential by blending historical fiction with interactivity. *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (2015) situates the player in Victorian London through the Animus, which, in-game, allows users to view genetic memories as simulations and integrates the game's interface into the logic of the game world. Through “synchronization”, the user follows the memories of an ancestor as if they were experiencing them themselves, which binds them to the ancestor's choices. Further, the user has access to historical information regarding the simulation, as well as environmental assets such as maps. Thus, the Animus interface naturalizes the game's interface as intradiegetic to the game's narrative by establishing the player character as the Animus user (“Animus”). *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (2014) introduced the figure of the nameless Initiate as the present-day frame narrative's Animus user, who, in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, is tasked with investigating the genetic memories of twin assassins Evie and Jacob Frye to uncover a fictional conspiracy involving historical figures and events during the Industrial Revolution.

By including Evie, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* is the first installment of the main franchise to feature a playable female protagonist. However, Evie remains noticeably absent from *Assassin's Creed Syndicate's* promotional material, which almost entirely centers on her brother Jacob (“Assassin's Creed Syndicate”). This, whether intentionally or not, fictionally reflects the erasure of an important aspect of history, as Victorian women often “had been left out of the great novels of the era” (Murray 1998, 4). Working through such erasure, the field of neo-Victorian studies focuses on the analysis of media that

engage with, rediscover, and rewrite the Victorian age (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 4). This article approaches *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* as a neo-Victorian text that utilises interactivity, player embodiment, and procedural storytelling in conjunction with its narrative to engage critically with gendered cultural memory and myths. By examining the links between the Victorians and contemporary society, neo-Victorian media constructs a “critical interface between the present and past” (Kohlke 2008, 1), foregrounding both what we remember and how we remember. Through a multi-layered player embodiment created by the Animus, the game actualizes this critical interface ludically. I argue that *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* provides a space where dominant gender myths of the Victorian age, such as the Angel in the House and the fallen woman, or the gentleman and the dandy, can be problematized, and suggests imaginations of self-sufficient gentlewomen and fallen men. To demonstrate this, I will first provide an overview of my theoretical framework, discussing a neo-Victorian approach to video games, as well as Victorian gender mythology. Following this, I will examine how *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* represents and subverts norms and values through the playable characters Evie and Jacob. For this analysis, I conducted a full playthrough of the game and created a comprehensive video recording of my gameplay, allowing for re-viewing of specific scenes without relying solely on first impressions. Focusing on the multiple modes through which Evie and Jacob's characterization is mediated, I examined the gameplay mechanics offered for each character, employed a close reading of the cutscenes to analyze character interactions and narrative framing, and reviewed the in-game database entries for contextualization.

As interactive media, video games offer a valuable and underexplored opportunity for neo-Victorian studies by inviting players to co-construct playful recreations of historical environments. Therefore, games like *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* offer new ways of engaging with and reinterpreting the past. As Murray once predicted, the computer has not replaced the novel or film, but rather expanded the field of narrative possibility “by continuing their timeless bardic work within another framework” (1998, 9-10), and in doing so, has given players a role in shaping the ongoing fictions of history.

NEO-VICTORIANISM AND GAME SPACES AS ALLEGORIES OF HISTORY

Before approaching a characterization of neo-Victorian video games, the term Victorian itself must be critically evaluated. Used “non-chronologically”, the term exceeds the

temporal or “chronological” meaning and describes specific cultural and aesthetic characteristics as well as a stereotyped set of values and myths associated with the Victorian age. For instance, while postmodern scholarship has revised “the Victorians’ supposed sexual repression” as a particularly persistent stereotype, the term Victorian is still often used as a synonym for prudishness (Kirchknopf 2008, 55-56). Specifically, the gender roles of the period, such as the popular image of the Victorian woman as the “Angel in the House,” should also be problematized, as few women could afford to devote themselves entirely to marriage and the domestic sphere. Thus, the “Angel” is best understood as “a myth, an illusory ideal, and a far-reaching fantasy” (Chouari 2022, 2). Consequently, it is not historical accuracy that makes media that reimagine, rework, and recontextualize the Victorian age so compelling, but their ability to reflect our relationship with this past. Moreover, how representations of the Victorian age build on each other in what Bolter and Grusin describe as “remediation” adds another layer of reimaginings of the past. Especially relevant for digital new media such as video games, remediation “ensures that the older medium cannot be entirely effaced” (2000, 45, 47). Thus, reimaginings of the Victorians not only build on historical fact but also on other media representations of history, such as literature, art, or film. As Kirchknopf suggests, the diverse portrayals of the Victorians found in such media “can be read together, rather than against each other” to uncover what they reveal about our present-day notion of the Victorian age (2008, 59).

In the late 2000s and throughout the 2010s, this reflection on both the Victorian age and contemporary narratives related to the Victorians has given rise to its own field of research within Victorian studies. At its core, the “neo-Victorian project” aims to “analyse the manifold overlaps and intersections, the continuities and the breaches between ‘us’ and ‘them’”. Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss describe these works as “cultural doppelgängers of the Victorian age”, simultaneously mimicking and interrogating the period’s dominant discourse (2014, 1-2). Moreover, neo-Victorian narratives can function as vessels for “liberating lost voices and repressed histories of minorities left out of the public record”. Their overt fictionalization of the past makes these “liberatory repetitions” easier to engage with than the “potentially debilitating and crushing” reality of the historical past, which was tinged by traumatic issues such as disease, sexual exploitation, social unrest, and war (Kohlke 2008, 9-10, 7).

As the field developed, definitions of what qualifies as neo-Victorian have expanded to include a broader range of media. While the genre initially emphasized postmodern features like “intertextuality, self-reflexivity or metafiction”, recent scholarship has increasingly recognized the importance of “immersive strategies”, encouraging an “interplay between immersion and self-reflexivity” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2014, 2, 5; 2011, 15). Despite this expansion, video games have remained largely overlooked within the field of neo-Victorian studies. Yet, their interactive structure makes them especially well-suited for the kind of immersive and reflective engagement the field values. While immersion, as the “sensation of inhabiting the space represented on-screen”, is a rather basic understanding of the term (Calleja 2011, 2), it still holds value in the neo-Victorian context, which is predominantly concerned with traditional media, such as film and literature. In contrast to these, games “anchor” and “acknowledge” the player in their space through the playable character (*idem*, 23), thus the immersive strategies of neo-Victorian games may be better understood as what Calleja defines as “incorporation”. He describes the concept as “the absorption of a virtual environment into consciousness, yielding a sense of habitation, which is supported by the systemically upheld embodiment of the player in a single location, as represented by the avatar” (*idem*, 69). Thus, video games can offer new insights into neo-Victorian themes. Given their increasing mainstream popularity, it is timely for neo-Victorian studies to include them within its scope, fulfilling the initial aim to “extend [its] theoretical enquiries to other literary genres, arts and performances” (Kohlke 2008, 5).

A distinguishing feature of video games is their interactive engagement with the player, which becomes visible through incorporation. In *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, the critical interface between past and present essential to neo-Victorianism finds a literal manifestation through the game’s mechanics of player embodiment. The framing narrative introduces the Initiate, an “implied character” that “shows very few signs of being represented” and “comes into existence by being imagined by the player” (Aarseth and Karhulahti 2022, 269, 276). This lack of signifying properties constitutes the Initiate as a vessel for reflection, as they add an additional level of distance to the reimagined past. Brendan Keogh describes embodiment as a relation between body and world in which players “engage with a virtual world *through* [the avatar’s] body” while they simultaneously “look *at* [the avatar’s] body as an object in that world (2018, 16). In *Assassin’s Creed*

Syndicate, this embodiment is doubled through the Initiate, as the player engages with the Victorian game world through them as an implied character, who in turn experiences the simulation of Evie and Jacob’s lives. The Animus interface – including the databank that offers historical information, maps, and synchronization mechanics – functions as a space between the present-day Initiate narrative and the fictionalized Victorian past, merging interactive gameplay with a curated historical archive. This multilayered embodiment enables the player to inhabit the Victorian setting while maintaining the reflective distance central to neo-Victorian media, facilitating a critical engagement with the stereotypes and myths associated with the Victorian age.

As the first installment in *Assassin’s Creed’s* main franchise to include a female playable character alongside a male protagonist, *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* offers two distinct perspectives on Victorian society. Following Helena Esser’s analysis of *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate’s* game space as an “interactive heterotopia” (2021, 3), I examine the game with Doreen Massey’s notion of space as a “simultaneity of stories-so-far” in mind. The game world offers players an access point to these stories and, consequently, to the values and myths associated with the time-space of the Victorian age. *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* offers the player the opportunity to engage with the two protagonists and their gendered roles in society, both from an internal and external perspective. The player’s traversal of the game space becomes an exploration of the “essential multiplicity” of space in a time they would otherwise not have access to, where they can not only learn about but also co-create the stories-so-far that are simulated in-game (Massey 2005, 12, 71). Thus, in a broad sense, video games are not only “allegories of space”, but they can also be allegories of history (Aarseth 2001, 169).

PLAYING WITH VICTORIAN VALUES

As mentioned earlier, it is challenging to formulate a clear definition of the Victorian, which consequently complicates the notion of Victorian gender roles. In addition to the temporal span of the long nineteenth century, intersectional factors, including differences upheld by social class, race, or geographic conditions, make it impossible to speak of the Victorian woman or man in absolute terms. Still, the Victorians are frequently used as a reference point when discussing questions of “individual identity, specifically in relation to sexuality and gender”. As “multiply ‘Othered’ subjects”, which can be observed and studied from a

comfortable distance in neo-Victorian creative works, they “offer the potential space for working through ideas and concerns that still dominate social discourses today” (Llewellyn 2008, 175). Jeannette King similarly states that “[g]ender is as politically charged an issue now as it was at the end of the nineteenth century”. The sentiment that issues such as gender permeate both contemporary and Victorian society still resonates two decades later. *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* draws on this continuity by using the Victorian past as an allegorical lens to “challenge (...) the images of women”, men, and the broader concept of gender that emerged from Victorian culture, while also examining “the values inscribed in those images, and their enduring power”. Consequently, the reevaluation of those images “can add to the modern reader’s understanding of gender” by exposing the historical influences on contemporary views on the subject (2005, 6). As these images “express some kind of cultural truth”, they align with Dom Ford’s paraphrasing of David Leeming’s notion of myth (2025, 12). Further synthesizing conceptualizations of myth by scholars such as Roland Barthes, Alan Dundes, and Frog, he discusses how modern myth(s) “undergird our society” as naturalized discourse (*idem*, 21, 29). Through intentional or unintentional cyclical repetition, then, myths permeate society – and, by extension, media – “as a way of understanding the world asserted as natural” (*idem*, 30-32, 61). Neo-Victorian remediations participate in this repetition, reproducing and reworking the myths that constitute contemporary understandings of the Victorian past.

Victorian gender mythology rests heavily on the image of a separation between private and public spheres. The household constitutes the private sphere and “is considered to be the proper place for the ideal Victorian woman” (Yildirim 2015, 2). Accordingly, the public sphere encompasses “[t]he world outside home”, specifically the workplace, which is deemed the “ideal environment for men” (*idem*, 2-3). This binary only provides a vague approximation to the actuality of Victorian society, which by now “has been challenged [...] by historians who contested the distinction” (King 2005, 11). Besides this separation, the stereotypes of the Angel in the House, the fallen woman, the gentleman, and the dandy are strongly associated with the Victorian age. The Angel in the House relates to the image of the ideal Victorian woman, who is “devoted to her family, submissive, self-sacrificing and passive by nature”. Opposing this “notion of feminine purity”, the fallen woman is described as someone “who lost her innocence or fell from the grace of God through the practice of [...] inappropriate acts, particularly sexual ones” (Yildirim 2015, 2, xii, 12-14).

The ideal Victorian man, characterized by “energetic self-discipline” and “self-mastery” that equipped him to thrive in England’s “increasingly [...] industrialized society”, is mythologized as Carlyle’s “Captains of Industry” and the figure of the gentleman (Adams 1995, 5, 9, 6). While “all masculine self-fashioning (...) inevitably makes appeal to an audience, real or imagined”, the figure of the dandy who presents himself as a “spectacle” in the “theater of the world”, remains one of the most exaggerated stereotypes of Victorian masculinity (*idem*, 10-11). Yet, these images are not accurate reflections of historical reality, but rather operate as “a tool, a set of mechanics and dynamics attributing gender-biased social roles (...) to reinforce the politics of gender that privileges men and subjugates women (...) in the industrial society” (Chouari 2022, 10). Still, these myths remain useful for how gender continues to be visualized in neo-Victorian fiction. By framing femininity and masculinity through recognizable stereotypes, neo-Victorian media allow audiences to critically engage with the cultural legacy of the nineteenth century and offer insights into the ongoing influence of Victorian myths in shaping contemporary gender discourse. While *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* “largely succeeds in upending gendered stereotypes commonly associated with video games” (Gilbert 2016, 149), a neo-Victorian reading reveals how the game employs Victorian stereotypes and thus remediates associated gendered myths about the time. However, the following analysis of the game’s protagonists discusses how they are used in a nuanced manner.

“GUNSLINGER” VS “CHAMELEON”: POWER DYNAMICS AND GAMEPLAY

The growing belief in scientific knowledge during the mid-nineteenth century appeared as “the ‘magic key’ to the understanding of gender”, which saw women as a “homogeneous group differentiated far more from men than from each other” based on “natural” rules. This was used to justify assigning men and women vastly “different educational needs and different social functions” (King 2005, 12-13). Likewise, the rise of Positivism “urg[ed] women to renounce their wealth, their property, and their place in public life”, as their “place in society was the ‘moral authority’ of the home”. This reinforced perceived gender differences, creating a “patriarchal ‘eutopia’ for men, and a dystopia for women” (Wilson 2023, 12, 14, 21). John Ruskin’s lecture “Of Queens’ Gardens”, published in 1865, describes these different “natural” characters vividly:

The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest (...). But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle,—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. (...) Her great function is Praise; (...) By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial;—to him, therefore, must be the failure, the offence, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded, or subdued; often misled; and always hardened. But he guards the woman from all this. (Ruskin 2010, 121-122)

Assassin's Creed Syndicate draws on similar binaries in its construction of the Frye twins, as their opposing characters become apparent in their introductory sequence. Evie, methodical and composed, declares that she has “studied the plans of the laboratory and [has] every route covered” before telling her brother not to die, while Jacob, flashing his hidden blade, claims that he has “got all [he needs] right here” and reminds Evie to “[h]ave fun” (*Syndicate*). Their respective attitudes align closely with Ruskin's ideals, as Jacob embodies a confrontational energy for war and conquest, while Evie, though more self-reliant than the ideal, still echoes the traits of careful planning and moral responsibility.

This division is further reinforced through gameplay, as the Animus interface suggests how to play each character, stating that “Evie favors a stealth approach, whereas Jacob is more confrontational” (*Syndicate*). While many games, including later *Assassin's Creed* titles such as *Odyssey* and *Valhalla*, equalize their protagonists in gameplay regardless of gender, *Syndicate* differentiates between Evie and Jacob's skill sets. The player can unlock three exclusive skills for Jacob, which enhance his close combat abilities, while Evie's exclusive skills increase her stealth abilities (Figure 1).

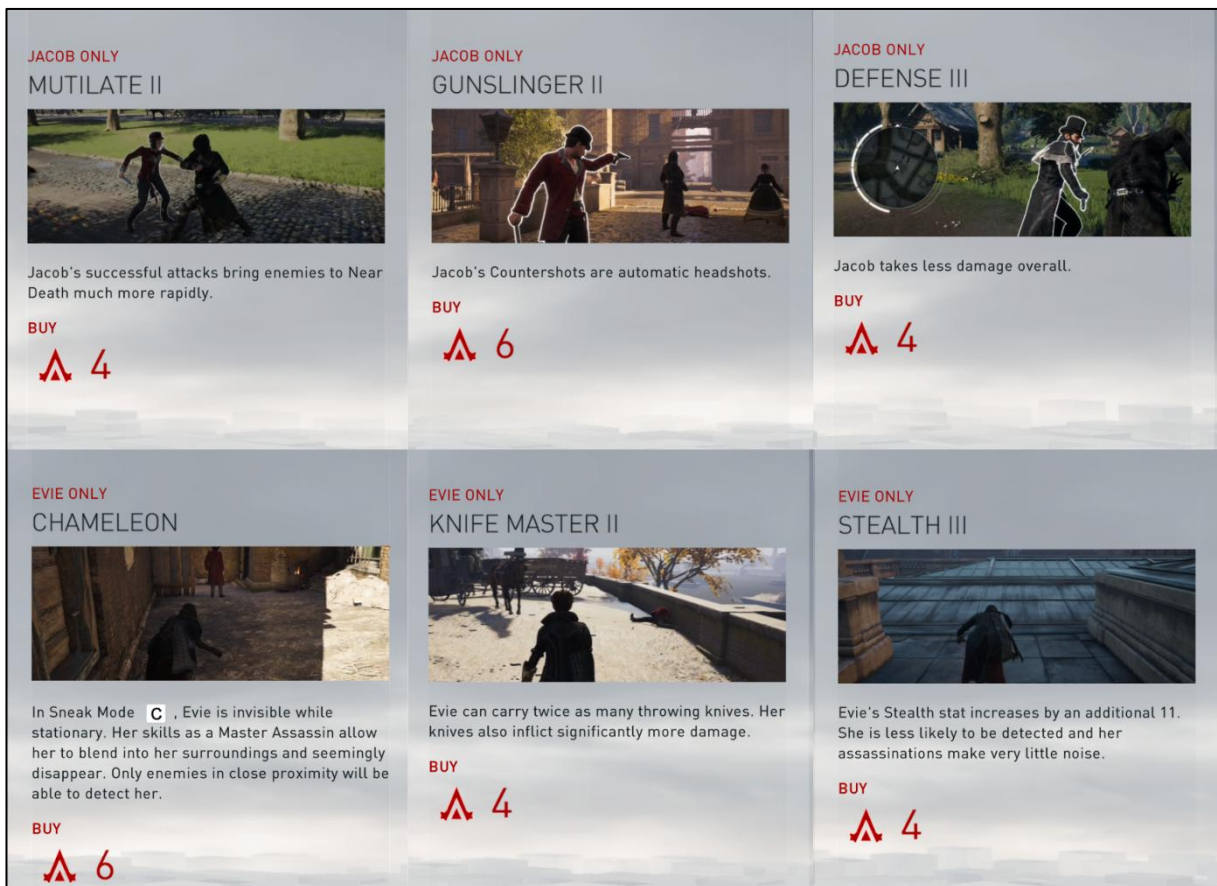


Figure 1: Comparison of Evie and Jacob's exclusive skills. (Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*)

Consequently, Jacob's confrontational character is emphasized, which reflects the traditional ideals of masculinity tied to war and conquest. Evie's preference to remain in the shadows, while congruent with her role as an assassin, also recalls the social invisibility imposed on Victorian women. Beth Newman describes how "feminine display (...) was socially devalued", and women were to be "properly self-effacing, 'invisible' [and] domestic" (2004, 5). Thus, Evie's skills illustrate that, beyond the layer of her identity as an Assassin, she is still affected by the societal bounds Victorian feminine ideals imposed on women.

Narratively, Evie aims to strategically further the mission, while Jacob's actions are motivated by his desire to fight for fighting's sake, which eventually leads him to "destroy modern medicine [and] the London transportation network" among other things. Yet, he continues to deflect blame and relies on Evie to repair his mistakes, while her singular misstep of letting a Templar "walk away" is given much more weight (*Syndicate*). In contrast, despite Evie's more significant mental labor, Jacob's efforts are more overtly acknowledged. The distribution of playable content further highlights this imbalance, as

out of the game's 37 memory sequences, 11 are exclusively playable as Evie and 23 as Jacob. Similarly, Jacob assassinates seven of the ten main targets, and while the final mission is shared between both characters, Jacob's arc receives significantly more attention. Narratively, Starrick and his henchmen discuss the consequences of Jacob's actions in a dismissive but detailed manner, yet Evie is merely mentioned as "this sister" Starrick has "heard of" (*Syndicate*). Intentional or not, the game thus comments not only on the gendered power imbalance within its own narrative but also echoes broader issues of historical representation. *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* makes visible how, just as Evie's achievements are constantly overshadowed by her brother's, women's voices have been lost across history in favor of their male contemporaries' point of view. Through both narrative and gameplay, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* constructs a gendered dichotomy that draws on Victorian myths of ideal masculinity and femininity, setting the stage for a deeper analysis of how Evie and Jacob's portrayals reinforce or challenge historical gender roles.

BEYOND THE LIBERATED WOMAN: EVIE AS AN AGENT BETWEEN EQUALITY AND TRADITION

A closer look at Evie's characterization reveals a portrayal of agency that subverts myths of Victorian femininity. As Jeannette King argues, neo-Victorian reimaginations, specifically women's writing centralizing the "female experience", can "[give] back women their place in history, not just as victims but as agents" (2005, 3). *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* mirrors this by using the Animus databank to provide access to Evie's notebook, which allows her to reflect and express opinions without her brother's interference. This echoes the life writing tradition popular during the Victorian age, which marks "[t]he 'origins' of women's autobiography [as] distinctly Victorian" and the research on such intends to "(re)discover a tradition of women's own" focusing on "the revival of lost or forgotten women's texts [and on] women's self-representation" (Peterson 1999, 3, 1). Evie's entries overtly comment on political realities as she writes in her last entry that "[w]omen are still denied education, suffrage, and property rights" (*Syndicate*). As we will see, having Evie voice this highlights the meaningful involvement of women in social reform during that time, defying the stereotype of the reserved Victorian woman. Importantly, Evie's role opposite her brother positions her as an agent rather than a victim. King continues to argue that during the Victorian age, "[w]omen were expected to fill the



vacuum left by the death of religious certainty, revered not only as the embodiment of virtue themselves, but as the guardians of male virtue” (2005, 11). Jacob’s impulsiveness repeatedly puts Evie in the position of the agent who must repair his mistakes and thus guard his reputation. For example, after he destroys the “production of Starrick’s Soothing Syrup”, Evie handles the resulting public health crisis by rescuing children, eliminating profiteers, and investing Brotherhood resources into Florence Nightingale’s sanitation reforms. In her notebook, she underscores the imbalance of labor, noting that during these efforts, “Jacob was nowhere to be found” (*Syndicate*). Yet, instead of abandoning her brother or seeking credit, she takes responsibility, which echoes the image of the woman as guardian of male virtue. However, rather than reinforcing patriarchy, this framing can be read as subtly critiquing it by portraying Evie as the one in control, who is operating with foresight, agency, and the masculine self-discipline of a gentle(wo)man.

Herself commenting on how women are still denied formal education, Evie’s scholarly endeavors reflect on the systemic exclusion of women from education during the Victorian age. Based on the assumption that “the female system could not cope with both the demands of education and the demands of the reproductive cycle”, schooling was “thought delirious to female health” (King 2005, 18). These regressive beliefs are reflected in how Evie’s intelligence is treated by her male peers, as Jacob repeatedly remarks dismissively on his sister’s research. For instance, after asking what she will be doing while he embarks on his first mission, he mockingly tells her to “[e]njoy [her] studies” while he is “out killing Templars”, evidently devaluing her research compared to his actions. Moreover, through his carelessness, Jacob complicates Evie’s research as “his interference” causes “a wealth of information” concerning the Piece of Eden to be partially destroyed (*Syndicate*). Overall, Jacob’s attitude is emblematic of the stereotype that a woman’s intellect is suited only for “ordering” and “praise”, not “invention or creation” (Ruskin 2010, 122). This is further mirrored during an interaction Evie has with Alexander Graham Bell, where he dismisses her suggestion to “just call [his new invention] a telephone” and immediately changes the subject to something “[he] was saying earlier” (*Syndicate*). This scene subtly critiques how women’s contributions to science have historically been ignored or credited to men.

Evie’s relationship with Henry Green presents a nuanced reimagining of Victorian marriage and the subsequent dependence on men. Their introduction mirrors a hierarchy,

as Evie is portrayed as standing below both her brother and Henry and thus has to look up at them. This image alludes to the traditional roles in Victorian marriages, which for women was advertised as a “means of survival” and remained “dominated by the man”, meaning that “all property, money and (...) [any] children (...) belonged” to him (Yildirim 2015, 5). This included the expectations of motherhood, which was considered “woman’s natural destiny” and ensured the continuation of the husband’s legacy, further manifesting women’s “subordination to men” (King 2005, 19, 26). Yet, despite their initial meeting covertly implying this subordination, the progression of Evie and Henry’s relationship subverts this dynamic. In the following cutscene, they are positioned at an equal height, establishing equality as a theme in their subsequent encounters. Henry supports Evie’s research by sharing his books and helping her investigation. As she records in her notebook, they “are often together” and he actively “assist[s]” in repairing the medical system, occupying the supporting role in their relationship. Evie begins to care deeply for Henry and allows herself to rely on his plan instead of her own. However, after Henry’s plan goes awry and she again finds herself in the position of the savior, this time rectifying Henry’s mistakes, she denies herself the opportunity to embrace these feelings. This caution towards emotional dependence threatening her autonomy can be read as Evie resisting the Victorian marriage ideal and positions her eventual acceptance of Henry after he regained her trust by saving their last mission as a conscious choice rather than an obligation. Moreover, their romance culminates in an optional marriage proposal unlocked only by completing a side quest, which preserves Evie’s agency and choice in the matter. Her declaration that Henry “belong[s] in the field *with* [her]” and their marriage remaining childless ultimately solidifies the reversal of the traditional dynamic of male dominance, allowing Evie to maintain her commitment to the Brotherhood without surrendering to the expectations of fulfilling her “female destiny” as a mother (*Syndicate*).

Evie’s strong sense of agency, educated nature, and equality with her partner depict her as a nuanced representation, emphasizing Amanda Vickery’s description of “Victorian women (...) as no less spirited, capable, and, most importantly, diverse a crew as in any other century” (1993, 390). Unlike many stereotypical reimaginings of the Victorian woman as Angel in the House or fallen woman, Evie’s portrayal exceeds these myths. Still, while many of the ideals of Victorian femininity are subverted by her characterization, aspects such as her responsibility for Jacob’s virtue and her eventual, if optional, marriage

to Henry suggest the limits imposed by the patriarchal structures of nineteenth-century England. These restrictions overtly manifest in the game's last memory sequence. Before infiltrating Buckingham Palace, Evie appears in an ornate red dress, and her movement is visibly altered by its restrictive silhouette, signaling discomfort and self-consciousness. This aligns with the portrayal of the "tightly-laced, corseted female figure" as "an accepted visual shorthand for the notion of the literally and metaphorically repressed Victorian woman". While it has long been debunked, the myth of the corset is still frequently used as a cultural metaphor in neo-Victorian media, likening the woman to a "caged bird", whose "sexuality and agency are imprisoned" (Primorac 2018, 97-103). What sets *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* apart, however, is how this repression is enacted through gameplay itself by employing Bogost's "procedural rhetoric", which he defines as the "practice of using processes persuasively" or "making arguments with computational systems" such as video games (2000, 3). The Animus alerts that "Evie's movements are restricted by her dress", and despite the player pressing the same buttons as before, standard mechanics are now suspended, as Evie can no longer run, jump, or climb. When she is faced with an obstacle she cannot overcome "on [her] own", Evie adapts by kidnapping a guard to continue her mission, which shows that while she is still capable, her autonomy is obstructed. Eventually, she removes the dress and lays it to rest with the Assassin's blessing "Requiescat in pace" (*Syndicate*). This symbolic killing of the repressive ideal shows Evie defying the limitations of the metaphorical cage, only to rush to her brother's aid once again in the final confrontation with Starrick and ultimately be saved herself by Henry's intervention. Overall, this portrayal of one of the most common stereotypes of the Victorian woman solidifies Evie's nuanced characterization as she is able to enact her agency in ways that subvert traditional gender norms, while the overarching limitations of the patriarchal Victorian society remain ever-present.

THE CAGED BIRD: JACOB'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY BETWEEN SELF-MASTERY AND PERFORMANCE

Portrayed as Evie's counterpart in methods and motivation, Jacob embodies what Ruskin described as the masculine "energy for adventure, (...) war, and (...) conquest". Still, he also experiences the inevitable failure concomitant with masculinity, which Ruskin acknowledges by noting that a man "must be wounded, or subdued (or) often misled".

However, by relying on Evie to compensate for this failure, he fails to “guard the woman from all this” and instead forces her to engage with his “inevitable error[s]” (2010, 121-122). He causes problems, such as disrupting London’s medical supply, ignores Evie’s warnings, and retreats from responsibility. Yet, his continuous discrediting of Evie’s achievements in comparison to his actions bolsters his brutish behavior imposed on the player by the suggested play style for Jacob. He feigns superiority that portrays him as the stereotypical “doer” Ruskin describes as the ideal Victorian man (*idem*, 121). Behind this mask, however, his rash actions paired with his unawareness of their consequences depict him as lacking “the energetic self-discipline that distinguished [a] manly ‘character’”. Rooted in the economic sector of England’s “increasingly secular and industrialized society”, the ideals of self-discipline and self-mastery spread the “prominence of male rivalries” from the world of business to the private sector of male identity (Adams 1995, 5, 15). Thus, Jacob’s subversive performance of Victorian masculinity is most evident in his rivalry with Starrick, who strongly embodies Carlyle’s “Captains of Industry”, representing the self-made, economically dominant Victorian gentleman. Jacob tries to match this image by assuming the role of the Rooks’ gang leader and attempting to overthrow Starrick’s empire, which is emphasized in gameplay by the option to invest money in the Rooks’ advancements. This frames the Rooks as a business through which Jacob attempts to attain the role of a “[master] of capital” (Adams 1995, 6). Ultimately, unable to best Starrick on his own, he is metaphorically and literally made to look up to the Grandmaster, as he forces Jacob to his knees during their final confrontation. Combined with his loss of control over the Rooks in the DLC as a business and “surrogate family structure”, this solidifies Jacob’s inability to adopt the role of a successful leader, either in the industrial or the familial setting (*idem*, 5). Thus, while Evie’s narrative allows her to subvert the feminine ideal, Jacob’s character reflects the unraveling of Victorian masculinity from within. His failure to internalize the necessary self-discipline and self-mastery illustrates the fragility of the gentleman myth when stripped of its economic and social functions.

Jacob’s brief partnership with Maxwell Roth echoes another myth of masculine identity in the dandy. As the proprietor of the Alhambra Music Hall, Roth embodies the innate “theatricality” of the dandy. He embodies this “straightforward speech and action, shorn of any hint of subtlety” covertly through his manner of speaking and overly expressive body language (Adams 1995, 10, 14), and overtly declares that “theatricality is

something of a Roth specialty” (*Syndicate*). Roth quite literally offers Jacob an opportunity to prove himself in the “theater of the world” by welcoming Jacob onto the stage of the Alhambra (*idem*, 10), where he suggests a partnership to “bring [Starrick] down” together, further highlighting the performative aspect of Jacob’s rivalry with the Grandmaster. In contrast to Evie, Roth praises Jacob’s methods and encourages him to “[t]ake the reins”, presenting an exaggerated mirror image of the destructive aspects of Jacob’s character (*Syndicate*). After initially embracing this anarchistic partnership, however, Jacob soon recognizes the implications of these parallels, and the sequence’s ending mirrors its beginning, as Jacob rejects Roth’s offer to prove himself in the theater of the world by killing him on the Alhambra’s stage, this time in front of a real audience. While Roth portrays the straightforward and active manliness achieved through theatrical self-fashioning, Jacob’s rejection of this path echoes Adams’ equation of the dandy with the image of “a fallen man”, who “[willfully abrogates his] masculine self-sufficiency” resulting in a “compromised autonomy” (1995, 54). His performed rejection of an unchallenged masculine autonomy, as represented by his public assassination of Roth, combined with his overall struggle to achieve a sense of self-sufficiency and his dependence on Evie, characterizes Jacob as a fallen man. Just as the metaphor of the caged bird is often used as a shorthand for the social constraints put on Victorian women (Primorac 2018, 97), Roth’s pet bird, which he keeps in a cage, is suggested to represent Jacob. When he ends their partnership, he receives the dead bird in a box, further solidifying his failure to fulfil the expectations of the self-fashioning performance of Victorian masculinity.

Likening Jacob to the metaphor of the caged bird recalls the previously mentioned metaphorical cage represented by the corset, “within which a woman’s sexuality and agency are imprisoned”, emphasizing “the suppressed erotic feelings and restricted social avenues available for the expression of one’s desire” (*idem*, 103). This relates to another layer of Jacob’s identity struggles, as the nature of their relationship is deliberately kept “ambiguous” yet suggests romantic undertones from Roth’s side (Loomer 01:15:30-01:18:20). He repeatedly addresses Jacob as “my dear”, is “charmed” by him according to his database entry and even after their partnership ends, regards him as “the person he cared for the most” and “very near and dear to [his] heart” (*Syndicate*). During their final encounter, Roth kisses Jacob just before dying, punctuating his feelings with a tender yet transgressive gesture. Paired with the lack of a female love interest and never overtly



80 denying Roth's advances before his final moments, this leaves Jacob's sexuality open to the player's interpretation. As lead writer Jeffrey Yohalem confirmed, Roth's sequence replaces the "love interest sequence", stating that "[Roth] is in love with Jacob, [who] may have reciprocated" (Loomer 01:15:30-01:18:20). This reading is further reinforced by the reward item Jacob receives after their falling out; brass knuckles with the description "All you need is LOVE" (*Syndicate*). Moreover, he actively denies meeting with Roth when questioned by Evie, who never learns the truth, even when encountering a troubled Jacob after Roth's assassination. This reflects the notion that "[o]ver the course of the Victorian Era (...) secrecy among men becomes the sign less of potential insurrection than of sexual deviance" (Adams 1995, 62). While their power imbalance and considerable age difference imply a questionable relationship, they remain a useful tool for reflecting on the underlying theme of Jacob's internal conflict. It underlines the difficulties of a man who, in many ways, is unable to conform to the masculine ideal of the period.

The time he spent with Roth put their father on Jacob's mind, who, as Evie reminds her brother, "never approved of [Jacob's] methods", while Roth initially embodies an anarchistic masculinity Jacob can identify with. The ambivalence of their relationship thus leaves room for also reading Roth as an idealized father figure, who, unlike Ethan Frye, supports Jacob's methods. Evie exhibits the traits their father valued, which reveals Jacob's hostile attitude towards her as a manifestation of the emotional weight he carries in failing to live up to their father's expectations on the one hand. On the other hand, it reveals Jacob's fear of becoming like their father, a fate he deems "worse than death". Beyond Ethan's disapproval of Jacob's methods, this resentment stems from being more of a teacher than a father, as he "raised his children steeped in Assassin heritage" (*Syndicate*). This echoes the "growing isolation of middle-class fathers from their sons" during the Victorian age. Moreover, this didactic rather than paternal relationship also mirrors how "men increasingly bequeathed their sons education (...) rather than property", which "[undermined] [l]ong-standing associations of manhood with independence" (Adams 1995, 5). Rejecting his father's teachings and thus never gaining his approval, Jacob was left without a male role model to shape the foundations of his identity. He is neither able to achieve the self-discipline his father stood for, nor manage the self-mastery this discipline entails. Paradoxically, Jacob deeply depends on the one person who embodies both of these traits, simultaneously resenting Evie for "[t]reating [him] like a child" while

also relying on her to amend his mistakes. This paradox also illustrates how such traits have different connotations depending on who performs them. While Ethan portrays masculine authority akin to idealized self-discipline, Evie's methodical thinking can be read as in line with the feminine ideal of the planner. Depicting Evie as a mirror to their father within Jacob's arc highlights how such qualities are not inherently gendered but gain their meaning in relation to social contexts, such as family structures, norms, and ideals. Inevitably leading to another downfall portrayed in the DLC after Evie leaves, Jacob's dependence on his sister is apparent, as she is the person to finally express his father's approval by telling Jacob that their "[f]ather would be proud of [him]" at the very end of the game. Thus, the initial lack of paternal approval in Jacob's life is at the root of his inability to form a stable identity that conforms with the masculine ideal and causes his failing attempts to assert himself in relation to others, such as Evie as his paradoxical opposition and guardian, Starrick as his rival, and Roth as a father figure and role model gone awry.

CONCLUSION: "THEM VS. US"- REMNANTS OF VICTORIAN VALUES

This paper explored *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* as a ludic allegory of the Victorian age, which offers an interactive space to reassess nineteenth-century society. Creating an "interface between past and present" (Kohlke 2008, 1), the game embodies the core element of neo-Victorianism and thus offers a valuable addition to the pool of neo-Victorian narratives, which still predominantly focuses on traditional media such as literature or film. Gender is a particularly compelling theme for neo-Victorian creative practices, as myths about Victorian gender roles are deeply ingrained in contemporary understandings of the period. Through Evie and Jacob, the player has a dual perspective on how gender is represented, while the implied character of the Initiate creates a reflexive distance from which they can reevaluate this representation. On the surface, the characterization of Evie and Jacob portrays them as stereotypes to some degree, which contributes to the nostalgic value of the game. While Evie neither resembles the Angel in House nor a fallen woman, the premise of a female master assassin with the opportunity of conquering London suggests her as a stereotypical representation of the liberated woman who overcomes her struggles, despite this being rather unrealistic for the time. However, she represents more than "the essentially modern heroine's desire to assert her

82 own agency [which] is made more dramatic by the frame of restrictive Victorian rules and limited gender roles” often present in neo-Victorian media (Primorac 2018, 141). The detailed analysis showed both Evie and Jacob to be nuanced characters that address a multitude of issues relating to the experience of Victorian gender norms and ideals. Evie represents the hardships Victorian women endured but also offers a subversive perspective on the feminine ideal of the period, which is portrayed in a liberatory manner. In contrast to these positive connotations, Jacob’s subversion of Victorian gender roles is rooted in his inability to conform to these models and highlights the pressure that accompanies the performance-focused masculinity of the nineteenth century.

As mentioned before, neo-Victorian retellings not only function as tools to critically evaluate the past but also as an encouragement for their audience to critically engage with these themes in a contemporary context. These observations highlight both the value of applying a neo-Victorian lens to interactive media and the inclusion of popular media, such as video games, in the neo-Victorian canon. Interactive media, such as *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, offer valuable possibilities not only to render the Victorian age visible but also to create a tangible experience for the player, as exemplified by the restrictive experience of Evie’s dress. Limited by its focus on a single game and specific theme, this analysis only scratches the surface of the potential of video games for neo-Victorian studies. Further research could also expand this analysis by studying “transmedia storytelling” to explore how gendered myths are portrayed across various media formats (Jenkins 2006, 96). Moreover, a queer studies perspective could expand on the theme of gender explored here and offer an in-depth analysis of the possibly queer aspects of Jacob’s narrative, as well as include other characters present in the game world or expand even further by establishing a queer reading of neo-Victorian games at large. To conclude, *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* offers an allegorical experience of space as well as history, which not only engages its players as participants in the nineteenth century but simultaneously encourages them to learn about, rethink, and reflect on the Victorian age and its remnants in our own, contemporary identities.

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INES MUNKER

Ines Munker is a PhD student at the University of Vienna whose research focuses on the intersections of gender, queer, and disability studies within contemporary video games. Her doctoral project analyzes queer and disabled embodiment and mythmaking in RPGs and adventure games. She holds a master's degree in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures, for which she received the Department of English and American Studies' student award for her thesis, which applied a neo-Victorian framework to the analysis of gender in video games. She has presented this research at two international conferences. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1701-6687> | Ciência ID: 6313-5EF6-7ABE | ines.munker@t-online.de

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GUN: Representations of North American Myths and Stereotypes in the Controversial 2005 Western

ANGEL TODOROV

Plovdiv University "Paisiy Hilendarski" | Bulgaria

ABSTRACT: This article explores the intersections between video games and American myths and minority stereotypes. It specifically focuses on the 2005 game *GUN* and its relation with co-representatives of the western genre, *Assassin's Creed III* and the *Red Dead Redemption* series. It analyses and compares the narratives of the games in question, as well as key gameplay elements within. The study reveals a myriad of similarities in the stereotypical topics covered, as well as crucial differences in how certain aspects of Native American portrayal were handled by the developer teams. *GUN* included an orphaned, mixed-ethnicity protagonist prior to *Assassin's Creed III*, a gunslinger who looks and shoots very similarly to the main character of *Red Dead Redemption*, among other notable correlations. Crucially distinctive was the inclusion of player-controlled scalping as the pinnacle of Native American dehumanization in *GUN*, in addition to other violent tropes limiting the identity of those characters to one that is only associated with combat. This study shows how *GUN*

RESUMO: Neste artigo, exploram-se as interseções entre os videojogos e os mitos e estereótipos das minorias americanas. Centra-se especificamente no jogo *GUN* de 2005 e na sua relação com os co-representantes do género western, *Assassin's Creed III* e a série *Red Dead Redemption*. Analisam-se e comparam-se as narrativas dos jogos em questão, bem como os principais elementos de jogabilidade contidos neles. O estudo revela uma infinidade de semelhanças nos tópicos estereotipados abordados, bem como diferenças cruciais na forma como certos aspectos da representação dos nativos americanos foram tratados pelas equipas de desenvolvimento. *GUN*, com um protagonista órfão e de etnia mista, antecedeu *Assassin's Creed III*, um pistoleiro que se parece e dispara de forma muito semelhante ao personagem principal de *Red Dead Redemption*, entre outras correlações notáveis. Um elemento diferenciador foi, contudo, a inclusão da remoção de escalpes controlada pelo jogador como o auge da desumanização dos nativos americanos em *GUN*, além de outros

88 featured potential-laden ideas, yet its conclusion is that the game ultimately perpetuates the common fallacies of the western genre, rather than make a genuine attempt at deconstructing them.

KEYWORDS: Western, Myth, Native American, Stereotype, Video Games.

motivos violentos que limitam a identidade desses personagens a uma identidade associada apenas ao combate. Este estudo mostra como *GUN* apresentava ideias carregadas de potencial, mas chega à conclusão de que o jogo acaba por perpetuar as falácias comuns do género ocidental, em vez de tentar desconstruí-las.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Western, Mito, Povos Nativos Americanos, Estereótipo, Videojogos.

INTRODUCTION

In the world of North American media, westerns have traditionally played a pivotal role in shaping the entertainment landscape, as evidenced by the many different “garments” they embody. Those include the spaghetti western (*A Fistful of Dollars*, 1965, being the most famous example in film), the space western (such as the *Star Wars* franchise), or the post-apocalyptic western (*Mad Max*, *The Walking Dead*), to name only a few (Pfeiffer 2025; Pohorski 2025; Holtz 2023; Keeler 2018). As in film, video games have exhibited similar trends as relates to the proverbial “branching out” of the western genre, yet there is still ample space for the traditional western to occupy its worthwhile place at the center stage of creations of the ludic persuasion. Throughout the 21st century, several studios have attempted to create a successful game set in the Wild West. In particular, Ubisoft’s highly rated *Assassin’s Creed* series, and the acclaimed reception and popularity of Rockstar’s *Red Dead Redemption 2*, have signalled that the interest in the genre has far from diminished, as the latter highlighted title has cemented its spot in the top 10 best-selling video games of all time, ranking in at number 7 per IGN (Sirani 2025). Both games mentioned above have been the subject of multiple analyses and dissections related to their portrayal of the Wild West and pervasive North American myths and Native American stereotypes. However, very little attention has been devoted to a title that, upon its release, was the subject of solid reviews, admirable popularity, and also some intense notoriety: 2005’s winner of GameSpy’s Xbox 360 Action Game of the Year award, *GUN*, developed by Neversoft and published by Activision (Dopefish). The topic of this article is to assess how *GUN*’s depiction of myths and stereotypes related to the frontier and Native Americans can be compared to those other esteemed co-contributors to the genre, thus highlighting key commonalities and attempting to illuminate significant differences.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Since their emergence in the latter half of the 20th century, video games have garnered increasing attention from both the general public and academic circles alike. Video game theory has developed through the years with the recognition of the new medium’s importance. Despite controversy surrounding how they should be viewed, video games are generally seen as containing several elements: an algorithm, player activity, interface, and graphics (Wolf and Perron 2004, 14). The algorithm involves a predefined set of rules and

responses that build the game's core (*idem*, 15-16). Player activity denotes "the heart of the video game experience" (*idem*, 15) and the uniquely direct involvement of the player in the medium. Interface relates to the means participants use to affect play, while graphics are the visual representation, or essentially what adds the "video" in video game (*ibidem*). Similarly, Murray refers to games as digital environments that possess several characteristics: procedural, participatory, spatial, and encyclopaedic (2016, 72). Video games are both interactive and immersive. Narratology primarily observes video games through the lens of narrative, specifically the story the game presents to the player. This approach employs tools commonly used in media such as literature and film to analyse the meaning contained within video games. Archetypes, plot devices and other concepts, such as Bakhtin's chronotope – the time-space encapsulated within the narrative and its relation to the consumer of the work of fiction, are involved in narrative studies (Barbosa Lima 2016, 47). The perception of fictionalized time and space is generated by the individual's engagement with the narrative's representation, which is achieved through its representation in language, images, sounds, and interactivity (*idem*, 48). Ludology focuses its attention on video games as processes that are played out. The specific rules the game system allows serve to create "a possibility space" (Bogost 2007, 121), which can be used to explore topics and processes from the material world in a new and fascinating way. It is through the means of player participation within these spaces that video games obtain their meaning, express ideas and make persuasive arguments on what is right and wrong (*idem*, 125-6). Procedural rhetoric, Bogost attests, is thus used by video games to intentionally or unintentionally present claims on real-world ideology (*idem*, 137). Another concept of interest is the ambient operation. It constitutes an in-game-generated occurrence that is peripheral to the player's attention, but either carries the potential to become central to it or conveys meaning in other ways (Schoppmeier 2013, 33-36). Video games are clearly complex cultural artefacts that would benefit from utilizing a variety of available tools in their interpretation.

Reproduction of culture is vital to its preservation and continued existence, and video games play a pivotal role in this (*idem*, 3). They not only reflect ideas, habits, dispositions, and other structures circulating in a culture; they actively participate in it and are thus inseparable from it (*idem*, 1-3). The establishment of a shared culture is a crucial step in the formation of a national identity. As Europeans settled the North American

continent, they were united under an ideological framework built around their (supposedly) inherent superiority. Preeminent scholar on the topic of the myth of the frontier, Richard Slotkin stresses the interconnectivity of “two themes as the basis for spiritual and secular regeneration, taking up the ‘free’ or ‘virgin land’ of the wilderness, and defeating the savage natives in a war of races” (1998a, 32). The lands not occupied by white European settlers are considered, for all intents and purposes, uninhabited, at least by “civilized” men, and thus open to colonization. Slotkin adds that the “Myth of the Frontier had always linked the battlefield triumph of white society with the secular progress of civilization and an increasing perfection of moral character” (1998b, 283). Overcoming the hardships of not only the rough lands but also the battles against the Indigenous people living in those lands became representative of the white settlers’ moral superiority – an inherent quality they believed they possessed a priori, and which they further developed through their “Social Darwinian survival of the fittest” (Slotkin 1998a, 15). White settlers continually defeated Native Americans, thus re-establishing their moral transcendence above the “primitives”, pushing the boundary of the frontier farther and farther westwards. By acquiring territory during the conquest, they also fulfilled “the promise of abundant freeland and resources for the great mass of the population” (Slotkin 1998a, 100-138). Wide expanses of land, available to be conquered, and battling “savages” are characteristic representations of the American West. Through this “continual engagement in the ‘hardships and privations’ of frontier life and Indian warfare” (Slotkin 1998a, 125) emerges the figure of the western hero: a frontiersman, or a self-made cowboy who embodies rough and rugged individualism, entrepreneurship, and a strong capability of accomplishing tremendous feats and vanquishing formidable foes (*idem*, 64-67). The white man is superior based on his gender and race, and he is thus able to dominate over minorities, who are presented as not as capable or virtuous. He is able to defeat enemies and solve conflicts that others cannot, and, by doing so, he reaffirms his position as the rightful sovereign over the North American land.

Native American stereotypes center around two main premises, the first being that of the bloodthirsty, or ignoble savage. Through this stereotypical image, the Indigenous are murderers, kidnappers, and scalpers of white settlers, often driven by animalistic desires. Their representation is dehumanized; they are portrayed as godless and dangerous creatures, living “like beasts” (Pearce 1988, 5), and purely antagonistic towards civilized

life. The second stereotype is that of the “noble savage”: “an individual living in a ‘pure state of nature’—gentle, wise, uncorrupted by the vices of civilization”, “selfless, noble, in accordance and balance with nature”. This interpretation basically strips indigenous Americans of any human concerns and characteristics, depicting them instead as some sort of fairytale characters” (Ellingson 2001, 1; Krystyník 2018, 11). Author Ondřej Krystyník also discusses another important stereotype in his work “Representation of Native Americans in Video Games” (2018), which is the white saviour trope. The white man is presented as a saviour, both to his race and Native Americans as well. He is represented as a “brave ally” (Krystyník 2018, 13) who takes agency from the helpless savages and restores equilibrium to the realm through his superior abilities, further perpetuating the stereotypical dehumanization and inferiorization of Native Americans (*ibidem*).

WESTERN VIDEO GAMES AND AMERICAN MYTHS

Just as westerns in the medium of film, video game versions typically represent the “cowboy [as] a man on a horse with [a] six-shooter and no home who travels around the West solving problems” (O’Sullivan 2024, 8). The hero exists on the precipice of two worlds, that of civilization and the wilderness. The influence and inspiration of the frontier and frontiersman are evident through visiting archetypal Western locales as well — canyons, frontier outposts, homesteads, and plains, while Mexican land and reservations exist merely as othered, exotic spaces for the white male hero to prove his mettle, the mythic lone gunslinger (Wills and Wright 2023, 16-45). In *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth and Violence in the Video Game West* (2023), the authors contest that “the occasionally Native-friendly narrative that this game dispatches (...) disguises a deeply colonial mode of play in RDR2 that involves the player in an all-too-familiar narrative of Western conquest” (Wills and Wright *idem*, 113). Furthermore, the myth of the frontier, and its racial war of extermination, is promulgated, according to Wills and Wright, by the Native American-centered storyline that is part of *Red Dead Redemption 2*’s plot:

Not only do the game developers want the Wapiti around long enough to include this storyline—wherein Native peoples cannot manage for themselves, and thus have to be rescued by the player to simultaneously save the “vanishing race” and also stop them from being “bloodthirsty savages”—but they want them around long enough to wipe them off the map

themselves, when it's appropriate for their timeline and the world that they wish to cultivate for their players. (2023, 123)

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Clearly, the myth of the white saviour is also at play here with the stereotypical depiction of Native Americans as requiring the assistance of the white male protagonist. Native American stereotypes surrounding the myth of the noble savage are also present in *Red Dead Redemption*. However, one such portrayal features an inventive attempt at deconstructing the stereotype through the character of Harold McDougal, who plays on that trope and refers to it on numerous occasions. He is an anthropology professor who is addicted to cocaine, and whose reasoning is passed judgment upon as absurd. Author Phill Alexander has referred to this deconstruction as a “solid step in the right direction, an attempt to see the Native American as part of an organic world and not a historical relic or decoration” (Alexander 2014).

Another popular title in this new age classic western video game genre is *Assassin's Creed III*, which, as noted by John R. Ess, “contains all of the essential elements of a Western, though some are in a modified form” (2019, 33). According to Krystyník, a subversion of the white saviour trope is used to great effect in *Assassin's Creed III's* prologue:

The game starts by serving the player a run-of-the-mill White Savior story, using familiar motives of a white hero helping the indigenous people against other, more vicious white characters. It is safe to say that the narrative counts with the fact this sort of story is well integrated in the Western culture and the players will recognize its basic characteristics. By utilising the impact of a shocking revelation, the narrative creates a powerful emotional association of the White Savior story and a villainous character. It is more or less impossible to consider this anything else than a conscious decision to subvert a well-known stereotype – and to use a very smart and creative way to do so. (2018, 39-40)

In “The Tyranny of Realism: Historical accuracy and politics of representation in *Assassin's Creed III*”, Adrienne Shaw discusses the efforts put by Ubisoft in “ensuring a sensitive, accurate representation of Mohawk/Kahnawake language and culture” (2015, 11), with the Native American characters crucially speaking in their own mother tongue, with subtitles available for the audience (*idem*, 12). The protagonist Ratonhnhaké:ton, or Connor, despite his mixed Native American heritage, embodies typical white saviour trope

characteristics as well. He is portrayed as hypermasculine, superheroic, self-sufficient, independent, slow-talking, which can also be viewed as a Native American stereotype, even during dramatic and adrenaline-induced episodes. Ess further elaborates that another layer of explanation regarding the white saviour reality of *Assassin's Creed III's* protagonist is “the submersion of a Native American identity into a white identity: Desmond Miles, accessing Ratonhnhaké:ton’s genetic memories of the time period surrounding the Revolutionary War, is portrayed as a white man technologically putting on an American Indian ancestor’s persona” (2019, 35). Connor also shares characteristics with stereotypical depictions of Native Americans; in addition to the speech pattern previously outlined, Ess adds: “Native American characters ‘often simultaneously’ embody the noble savage and ignoble savage stereotypes. Ratonhnhaké:ton embodies these tropes through his frequent acts of violence while also playing the role of the hero by saving colonists who are in trouble” (*idem*, 34).

Despite bemoaning the game’s “missed opportunities”, Ess also emphasizes the revolutionary nature of the game, praising the themes it dares to explore and the uncomfortable mental journeys into historical realities it provokes, by bringing “issues of the history of American Indians to the foreground” (*idem*, 38). Furthermore, he quotes a review of *Assassin's Creed III* that compares the game to the multiple award winning musical *Hamilton*, calling it “a fascinating take on a morally intriguing philosophical idea”, while referencing a “Native American assassin with a Black mentor, caught in a war between Americans and British with no good outcome for his people either way” (Ess 2019, 36).

AMERICAN MYTHS IN *GUN*

GUN is also set in the Wild West and takes place in the late 19th century. Players take on the role of young Colton White, whose father is murdered during a raid on a steamboat, and whose quest for retribution puts him through a fast-paced, blood-and-guns-fuelled rampage across the American frontier. The first encounter between settlers and Natives in *GUN* begins with the protagonist committing the mass murder of a group of Apache. However, revelations of the identities of those responsible for the events on the steamboat, and of Colton’s ancestry, cause the narrative to take a twist, and for him to ally with the Apache tribe whom he had previously been slaughtering. The game shares a lot

of similarities with other open-world video games in the Western genre — it features vast, beautiful, traditional natural landscapes outside of some urbanized areas, which in turn include typical locales like the sheriff's office, jail or saloon. For its time, it offers plenty of exploration, significantly more than contemporary competitor *Red Dead Revolver*, progenitor of the *Red Dead Redemption* games (Dopefish). The expansive swathes of plains that can be roamed freely strengthen the ties to the myth of the frontier and “‘free’ or ‘virgin land’ of the wilderness” (Slotkin 1998a, 32). *GUN* also presents typical western activities—hunting, gambling, herding cattle, bounty hunting—, conflicts between “homesteaders” (*idem*, 275) and “American Indians” (*idem*, 112), the concept of vigilante justice often embodied by a strong reclusive character with innate abilities and knowledge related to hunting and understanding natives, as well as a stereotypically fetishized selection of weapons. The depiction of the saloon as a seedy gambling den filled with prostitutes, and often violence, is promoted by very similar portrayals of the classic western institution by both the *Red Dead* series and *GUN*, with both featuring poker and bar fight content. Furthermore, the romanticized endless opportunities of the frontier that Simelane describes in his article regarding *Red Dead Redemption* can also be ascribed to *GUN*, one specific instance thereof being the trope where “farmers and cattle wranglers lived off the land, and miners dug the ground for precious minerals” (Simelane 2023). Whilst exploring the natural beauty of the landscapes in *GUN*, players encounter deposits of shiny, gleaming gold ore that are out in the open, available for anyone with a pickaxe and an action key on the keyboard to “mine” for a quick 10\$ payout. These actions constitute clear allusions to the time of the “gold rush” and “living off the land”. The player can quickly accumulate funds through mining due to the simplicity of the game mechanic. In addition to turning in bounties or performing other tasks, this straightforward method of earning in-game currency serves to perpetuate the American ideal of meritocracy and self-sufficiency.

The myth of the self-made man is expressed from the onset of the action through the player's introduction to the world by learning how to hunt, and thus how Colton would be able to make a living for himself, evoking also the myth of the hunter, a “progenitor to the frontiersman” (Slotkin 1998b, 70). This is further amplified by the protagonist's orphaning, which is seen “as [a] symbol of the self-made man” (*idem*, 200). Rugged in character and appearance, the video game frontiersman is typically portrayed with brown leather attire — a traditional cowboy hat — ammunition slung across the shoulder, and



with slightly longer than average, and somewhat messy hair, as is the case for the protagonist of *Red Dead Redemption*, John Marston, and the *GUN* hero, Colton White. Conflicts regarding the industrialization of the frontier have been depicted as well, albeit without receiving significant focus. As Slotkin highlights, the reality of the changing American landscape of the late 19th century embodies “the yeoman farmer who represents the vanishing American, and the railroad man who will be the new lord of the earth” (Slotkin 1998b, 216). In *GUN*, the players complete side missions for an NPC (or non-player character), dubbed simply “The Rancher”, who teaches Colton the ropes of cattle herding. The protagonist assists the quest-giver with various tasks until the latter eventually takes his cattle for sale on the train to the big city, leaving behind “life on the land”. Through their participation in the missions, the players also experience the agrarian myth and the idea of the righteousness of those who earn their living off the “vast and untamed” land. The Rancher’s move out of the country and into the city also signifies a reflection on the age of technological advancement, which is further developed through the Pony Express side quests. In this context, one competes on horseback to deliver messages faster than the set target time, thereby winning over delivery routes. The culmination of this storyline is a race to deliver railroad plans to workers, only for Colton to discover upon its completion that the construction of the railroads has caused the profession of horse-riding delivery messenger to become obsolete. This is one of the more intriguing ways *GUN* employs procedurality to convey meaning. By succeeding in their work for the Pony Express, players effectively contribute to the loss of their own jobs through the technological advancement of the Industrial Revolution. The idea that people participate in their own exclusion from the workforce and thus decline in social standing is a poignant one, not only in the 19th century, but also relevant in the current era.

The in-game portrayal of the railroad is somewhat nuanced. One facet of its depiction is the association it carries with the main antagonist of the title. He is a confederate major named Thomas Magruder, who is described in *GUN*’s game manual as “a railroad and mining magnate [... who] roams his holdings in the New Mexico territory in the custom cars of his gilded ‘Black Train’” (Activision 2005, 15). The hero Colton is even tasked with derailing one of those trains in order to disrupt the machinations of the evil Magruder as part of the story campaign. Nevertheless, the protagonist is also frequently called upon to protect the construction of the railroads, inflicting serious

casualties on the opponents of their expansion – the Native American tribes. Despite its connection to Magruder, the railroad is predominantly depicted as a vehicle for progress, and those opposing it are consequently depicted as uncivilised.

NATIVE AMERICANS IN *GUN*

The portrayal of Native Americans in the game could be seen as problematic even from their very first graphic depiction, prior to any playable content, where a travelling group of European colonialists is killed by an indigenous tribe in a gruesome cutscene, especially memorable through the splattering of blood across a golden cross. In the scene, a party of conquistadors led by a priest is ambushed and bloodily murdered by a group of Indigenous people. During the assault, the sky darkens as the Native Americans attack; their faces are markedly obscured by shadows, and they are portrayed as merely wearing a loincloth, thus evoking imagery of the animalistic and barbaric. Both for the duration of this video introduction to the plot, as well as during in-game combat, Native Americans only engage in non-verbal communication – battle cries, screams, grunts, ululation. All mentioned tropes are consistent with the stereotypical dehumanization of Native Americans prevalent within the Western genre. A further example of the dismissive attitude toward Native Americans' humanity can be observed through the names such characters have been granted. While aiding the sheriff of Dodge, the first settlement Colton encounters during the game, in rebuilding a bridge, Colton struggles against a group of Apache. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin in *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies* (2021) outline the stereotypical blending of different Native American tribes and their customs into one umbrella “Indian” trope, and when a specific group was invoked, it was usually the “Apache tribes [who] became synonymous in Hollywood films with the bloodthirsty savage stereotype” (116). In line with that trope, *GUN* frames the Apache at the bridge as merciless murderers out to disrupt the righteous lives of the settlers. Their leader, whom the protagonist is forced to exterminate, is called “Quick Killer”. Other named Native American characters also share that same dehumanizing trait: their names only contain references to combat, as for instance “Many Wounds” and “Fights-at-Dawn”. Their identities are thus confined to fighters, nothing more than a part of the mythical frontier war of extermination.



Although the game ostensibly features multiple Native American tribes, the Apache and the Blackfoot are not permitted to occupy unique spaces in the narrative chronotope. They are simply portrayed as “other” to the white settlers, but lacking their own identity in the possibility space of the game world. As intriguing and perhaps even monumental as featuring interactions between two different Native American tribes in *GUN* could have been, the fact that they were both included in the game is, in itself, a source of controversy. The Apache and the Blackfoot live in lands separated by over 1000 miles of distance, in the Southern state of Oklahoma and the Northern state of Montana, respectively (Field 2023; R. Graetz and S. Graetz 2017). This is but one instance of the lack of attention to detail and care provided to the depiction of Indigenous people within *GUN*. Especially offensive are the insinuated accusations of sexual assault on white women on the part of the Apache. Prior to travelling through the wilderness beyond the town of Dodge, one of the few female characters is quoted as saying to the protagonist: “Promise you’ll put a bullet in my head before they have their fun”, referring to the Apache (Neversoft 2005). Research by author Edwin Sweeney on the history of the tribe indicates the allegation is historically inaccurate, in addition to a perpetuation of stereotypical fearmongering against the “othered” Native Americans (qtd. in Trimble 2014).

The issues within the representation of Native Americans in *GUN* are not exhausted by those examples. In fact, the offenses were considered so grievous by The Association for American Indian Development that they started an online campaign to demand the game be edited and re-released, or else recalled:

Citing the charge as to how the game is “damaging, socially harmful and insensitive,” the boycott lists how the myth of the “savage Indian” is perpetuated — including the practice of scalping human heads and killing sacred white animals. AAID Treasurer Litefoot pointed out how in neither the game nor the manual instructions provide historical details or references to attempt to explain the westward expansion of 150 years ago. (Ross 2006)

Although the AAID as an organization and their website “BoycottGun”¹ have since ceased to function, the full text of the call to boycott can still be read on the internet.² In it, game producer Activision is targeted for whitewashing and presenting in an acceptable light the genocide of Native Americans, while the company’s response simply states that the game “was designed to reflect the harshness of life on the American frontier at that

time” (Reid 2012). It certainly succeeds in bringing the brutal nature of the frontier to the forefront — the player character can shoot the heads and limbs off enemies, use NPCs as human shields, then execute them with a knife, and scalp downed foes. Side quests, especially those of the Pony Express, feature belligerent Native Americans who shoot flaming arrows at the galloping protagonist. This differs from *Red Dead Redemption*, where enemies are typically gun-toting criminal outlaws who are not Native American. The missions related to message delivery are accompanied by hordes of antagonistic Apache, the protagonist can indiscriminately gun down or trample on horseback along the way, regardless of whether those tasks are completed before or after the primary quest. While not strictly necessary for the game’s completion, the use of ambient operations and the game’s insistent and repeated suggestions to take on additional jobs contribute to what Schoppmeier refers to as increased cultural resonance (2013, 33). The visual depiction of angry, aggressive, and “ignobly savage” natives incessantly assaulting the protagonist, even after a truce and alliance between his faction and the tribe have been established during the main quest, is not only a test of the players’ abilities to perform tasks under pressure. This also further affirms the notion of the war of extermination between the civilized settlers and the bloodthirsty savages.

In *GUN*, the main character, similarly to that of *Assassin’s Creed III*, is half-white, half Native American, a fact that is not apparent to the player from the onset of the narrative. While both games share a mixed-race protagonist and a shocking revelation that supposedly alters the perception of the classic white saviour trope, *GUN* does more to promote stereotypes, rather than to deconstruct them. The violence perpetrated by Colton is also attributable to his Native American heritage. He exhibits characteristics exemplary of the bloodthirsty savage trope that become apparent through the implementation of the scalping mechanic. The game allows and even encourages players to scalp downed foes using procedural prompts that appear on screen every time Colton is in close proximity to an appropriate target. Scalping is depicted as gratuitous violence — there is no reason given for its existence in the game’s possibility space, and no quest or character interaction explains or even refers to it in any way. It is brutality for its own sake, befitting a “bloodthirsty savage”. This highlights a major difference between *GUN* and *Assassin’s Creed III*, where developers had made the decision to exclude the practice from the gameplay after receiving feedback from cultural consultants (Ess 2019, 39).

Another difference between *GUN* and the other video games discussed, such as *Assassin's Creed III*, is that the former has been the subject of much more criticism, including for its “over-the-top brutality, language and alcohol use” (Smelov 2006). Columnist Elijah Smelov opined in his review that it “glorifies the experience of slaughtering Indians and attempts to make it permissible by having a main character with hidden indigenous heritage”, a view shared by the Association for American Indian Development in their boycott statement. (Smelov 2006; Reid 2012). Regarding alcohol use, both *GUN* and *Red Dead Redemption* utilize whiskey or moonshine as sources of replenishment. In *GUN*, it serves to refill the main character's health, while in *Red Dead Redemption*, it does the same to his Deadeye meter, thus exploiting a trope that could be referred to as “regeneration through alcohol” in an homage to Slotkin's 1973 book *Regeneration through violence*. Wills and Wright dissect *Red Dead Redemption 2*'s protagonist Arthur Morgan's “consumption (...) as a result of a life lived (...) on the social margins”, highlighting the everyday alcohol use as a relevant “risk factor” (2023, 103). Colton White's propensity for drinking may be rooted in social stereotypes regarding his mixed ancestry, and thus may include a racial component. As a Native American descendant, he is also subject to what Julia Boyd describes in her article “An Examination of Native Americans in Film and Rise of Native Filmmakers” (2015) as the “modern stereotype of rampant alcoholism on Native American reservations” (2).

Colton's mixed family heritage and his upbringing as a frontiersman both contribute to him standing on the precipice of two worlds – that of acceptable society, and the one beyond it; between civilization and wilderness. As such, he is perfectly poised to take on the mantle of the white savior, uniting the factions of both the cowboys and the Indigenous against their common foe. Native Americans have been part of an ongoing conflict with the villainous Magruder without any significant degree of success, as they have a resistance group comprised of white settlers. The hero Colton then intervenes in the conflict, using his superior knowledge and abilities to combine their forces against the villain, emulating the white saviour trope perfectly. Colton is better at planning, organizing, and dispatching enemies, a trope which, in ludologic terms, has typically been achieved through a game mechanic which allows the players to slow down time, thus ensuring themselves an advantage over their foes. Players can place their shots, which allows the white hero to mow down a staggering number of enemies in a short amount of real time.

This mechanic, called Quickdraw in *GUN*, is almost identical to *Red Dead Redemption's* Deadeye.

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Native Americans working together with white settlers against the common Confederate enemy are depicted through the camaraderie between “Many Wounds” and Colton, as it is possible to see from their dialogue where the Native American states: “Your father and mine learned much from each other. Their kinship was honored by our people” (Neversoft 2005). The apparent bond between the elevated representatives of their respective racial groups is reminiscent of the tropes employed by “The Lone Ranger” analysed in *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies* (2021):

Like the black and white buddy formula (...) The Lone Ranger attempted to draw the white man and the Indian together as a team that fought injustice. Yet Tonto, the Native American half of the team, was always clearly subservient to the Lone Ranger (...) Tonto is a good example of the Indian as noble savage stereotype, playing helpful sidekick to white men and white culture. (Benshoff and Griffin 2021, 117)

The “noble savage” Native American stereotype is also represented through the character of the Indian Hunter, who features as a quest-giver in *GUN*. He appears as a calm, dignified native who speaks of staying true to the land, but whose tasks represent yet another inaccurate and offensive representation of Native American culture. The AAID criticizes the wrongful depictions of Apache traditions in *GUN* for including the killing of sacred animals for a reward of 5-20\$ (Reid 2012; Smelov 2006). The game once again falls short of achieving both historical accuracy and a deconstruction of pervasive stereotypes.

“OTHERS” IN *GUN*

Racial representations have been problematic topics for the western genre, with video games depicting the period typically shying away from any portrayal of slavery, and with very limited portrayals of its effects. *GUN* takes this approach of avoiding such issues to the next level and does not even feature a single African American character, nor any mention thereof. African Americans have essentially been erased from existence, which leaves ample room for interpretation as to the reasoning behind it. With no data to analyse, however, this article will refrain from unfounded speculation. Nevertheless, a racial

component does appear evident in the surname of the protagonist Colton White, which can certainly be interpreted as symbolic of the core message of the western. Conversely, one of the game's antagonists is called Mayor Hoodoo Brown, who is depicted as a Caucasian male. The word “hoodoo” per Merriam Webster is defined as a form of traditional magic practiced among African Americans in the American South (“Hoodoo”, def. 1). The surname Brown’s racial undertone is self-evident, thus prompting a conclusion that the opposition between White and Brown is no mere coincidence, but another allusion to the white-centric narrative of the American frontier.

Female representations have also been a troubling topic for the western genre, with complex characters being few and far between. In *GUN*, female characters are predominantly featured in the role of sex workers. Such is the case with Sadie and Jenny, both of whom embody the kind-hearted prostitute stereotype, which, according to Glenda Riley, perpetuates the negative depiction of the profession by portraying atypical representatives as a deviation from the accepted norm (Riley 1988, 10). That is to say, by showing sex workers in a positive light, but implying they are in the minority of their social class, a negative image of the majority is perpetuated. That would be consistent with the popular direction westerns typically take, as well as with *GUN*'s line when depicting controversial topics. While both characters display honesty, charity, reliability, and a sound moral compass, they are also both cynically murdered by preacher Josiah Reed, a deviant representative of the clergy, and of the perverse morality in the West. The clergy is instrumental in the promulgation of the concept of “Manifest Destiny” as a vehicle for American Imperialism and American Exceptionalism sanctioned by God (Scott 2009). Preachers are often portrayed in westerns as religious zealots, unhinged lunatics, vigilantes or even conmen, especially in the sub-genre of the spaghetti western (Arnold 2020). In Josiah Reed, the tradition of deconstructing the perceived holiness of the priestly figure finds its worthy successor. The sadistic reverend effectively applies frontier justice to the sinful characters of the sex workers, embodying the Puritan principle of predestination. Regardless of their attempts at personal development, the female characters from the brothel must inevitably face death in the western genre.

Another case of denigration of women involves a bounty mission that features a specific special requirement for its fulfilment. It necessitates that the target be brought in dead, not alive. This happens to be the only female bounty target, whilst all but one other

such missions provide the player with a choice in the matter of whether the bounty target is to be executed or incapacitated. The sole other instance where the vintage “dead or alive” mechanic is not adhered to is when a horse needs to be returned alive for Colton to receive his reward. The notion that a horse’s life carries more value in the American frontier is implied again through the use of procedural rhetoric. The game mechanic and the inconsistency in its use bring the attention of the player to that particular aspect of moral judgment contained within the game’s persuasive relation of meaning.

Other minorities are also featured in *GUN*, albeit not prominently. Racist attitudes in the American West are depicted through a combination of casual racism in dialogue and ambient acts occurring around the player. The sheriff of Dodge succeeds in encapsulating the frontier opinions of two minority groups in a single sentence. When discussing the Apache attacks on the bridge’s structure, he attests that: “Even the Irish won’t work, only the coolies will” (Neversoft 2005). Low-wage indentured workers are treated dismissively, and Asian Americans especially are dealt a tough hand. When traversing the streets of the larger game town, players occasionally witness ambient acts, wherein a group of white townspeople accost an Asian worker in an uneven gunfight. Those shootouts inevitably end with the indentured worker being slain, which embodies the predominant societal attitude towards minorities as depicted within *GUN*’s portrayal of the Wild West.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The possibility space *GUN* has created for players to explore is a universe of brutal Social Darwinism that perpetuates the myth of the white colonial settler’s prevalence. The game paints a horrific picture of the ordeal that women and ethnic minorities are forced to encounter in the American frontier, yet it seems to lack the compassion that the subsequent titles of the genre exhibit, such as the *Red Dead Redemption* series and *Assassin’s Creed III*. *GUN* presents canonical representations associated with the West, mainly reproducing it as a brutal battleground where Native Americans are faced with “erasure and what could be considered a genocide” (O’Sullivan 2024, 25). *GUN* does not shy away from littering the ground with dead bodies. The player must, at least to some extent, partake in this all too real depiction of the harsh reality that Native Americans and other minority groups face, and thus aid in the perpetuation of the myth of the frontier.

During the course of this article, many commonalities were established between *GUN* and other westerns. Those include both standardized frontier tropes and also specific instances of story and character similarities, especially between Colton and Connor, whose names even sound similar. The increased attention to detail in subsequent releases, focusing on visually accurate and traditional depictions of specific Native American tribes, their language, and customs, is a major difference compared to the Activision title and a serious contributing factor to the differing receptions that *GUN* received when compared to later disseminated AAA features by other companies. Despite starring an ensemble cast of voice actors, including household Hollywood names such as Thomas Jane and Kris Kristofferson, as well as Native American voices, *GUN* was never able to truly stand out as a representative of the western genre (Activision 2005, 16). It had the potential to become an innovative brand in the space allocated to westerns, but ultimately did not succeed in establishing a storytelling brand that significantly exceeds the stereotypically constructed tropes and characters of traditional media. Despite that particular failure, it has nonetheless earned more attention than it has garnered heretofore through its richly inhabited Western game world. A similar case can be argued for another title of the mid-2000s, *Call of Juarez* (2006), which also never reached the heights of the *Red Dead Redemption* franchise, yet would provide ample material for research into the depiction of American myths and stereotypes in the medium of video games.

END NOTES

¹ www.boycottgun.com

² Please refer to the bibliographical entry for Dr. Reid to read the AAID's full statement.

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ANGEL TODOROV

Angel Todorov is an undergraduate student at Plovdiv University "Paisiy Hilendarski" in Bulgaria, majoring in English and North American Studies. He completed the course "Victorian and North American Myths in Video Games" during his bachelor's degree studies at NOVA FCSH during the 2024/2025 school year. His main research interests include Game Studies, Literary Studies, Film Studies, Foreign Language Education, and Language Patterns in Mathematics.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3704-2761>

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“Death Is a Mercy”:
The American Monomyth of the Superhero
in 2005’s *The Punisher* Video Game

MARIANO FALZONE
University of Lincoln (UK)

ABSTRACT: Debuting in 1974, the creation of Marvel Comics’ character of the Punisher was influenced by vigilante violence fiction, such as Don Pendleton’s *The Executioner* book series (1969 onwards). In the early 2000s, the character had a resurgence in popularity, kickstarted by the critically acclaimed comic book run from Garth Ennis, Steve Dillon and other collaborators. This popularity reached its peak in 2004 with the release of *The Punisher*, a film directed by Jonathan Hensleigh and starring Thomas Jane. The following year, a video game of the same name was released by the studio Volition, which saw Jane reprising the title role and Ennis being credited as co-writer. After a brief history of the character’s creation and its first high point of transmedia popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this article analyses the media texts of the Punisher between 2000

RESUMO: Estreando em 1974, a criação da personagem *The Punisher*, da Marvel Comics, foi influenciada pela ficção de violência vigilante, como a série de livros *O Carrasco*, de Don Pendleton (publicada a partir de 1969). No início dos anos 2000, a popularidade da personagem ressurgiu, impulsionada pela série gráfica aclamada pela crítica, de Garth Ennis, Steve Dillon e outros colaboradores. Essa popularidade atingiu o seu auge em 2004 com o lançamento de *The Punisher*, filme realizado por Jonathan Hensleigh e interpretado por Thomas Jane. No ano seguinte, o lançamento de um videogame homónimo pelo estúdio Volition, que viu Jane assumir o papel principal e Ennis creditado como coargumentista. Após uma nota breve sobre a criação da personagem e o seu primeiro momento de grande popularidade transmedia no final dos anos

and 2005, culminating in Volition's video game. To do so, I will draw on the conceptual framework developed by John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett in *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002), specifically the urban vigilante variant of that myth, as well as the transmedia interplay between the Punisher texts. While Garth Ennis' comics from the early 2000s comment on the mythic paradigm in a postmodern way and may even criticise the processes on which it operates, the 2004 film and the 2005 video game reinforce it.

KEYWORDS: The Punisher, Transmedia, Shooter video games, American Monomyth, Superheroes.

1980 e início dos anos 1990, este artigo analisa os textos transmediáticos de *The Punisher* entre 2000 e 2005, culminando no videogame Volition. Para tal, recorrer-se-á ao aparato conceptual desenvolvido por John Shelton Lawrence e Robert Jewett em *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002), à variante vigilante urbana desse mito e à interação transmedia dos textos de *The Punisher*. Enquanto romances gráficos de Garth Ennis do início dos anos 2000 comentam o paradigma mítico de forma pós-moderna e até criticam os processos por meio dos quais ele opera, o filme de 2004 e o videogame de 2005 parecem reforçá-lo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: The Punisher, Transmedia, Jogos de tiro, Monomito Americano, Super-heróis.

The narratives of the Marvel Comics character the Punisher are inscribed within the tradition of the urban vigilante subgenre of crime fiction, which itself is part of what John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett called the American Monomyth (2002, 107). The third-person shooter video game *The Punisher* (Volition, 2005) has become the most favoured video game incarnation of the character among fans.¹ How are the American Monomyth's characteristics represented in Volition's *The Punisher* in terms of their reinforcement or subversion? To answer this question, I first explain Lawrence and Jewett's theoretical framework and their application of it to urban vigilante fictions. Following this, I provide a brief history of the Punisher's publication and transmedia presence until the early 2000s, when the character's second production cycle begins. Finally, I analyse Punisher products of the 2000-2005 period in relation to their transmedia interplay and their representations of the American Monomyth, with a particular focus on Volition's video game.

THE AMERICAN MONOMYTH, *DEATH WISH* AND GOLDEN VIOLENCE

In *The American Monomyth* (1977), Jewett and Lawrence introduced the eponymous concept as a mythic structure which they saw as particular to the narratives and idiosyncrasies of the United States, differentiating it from Joseph Campbell's classic and universal Monomyth from *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949/2004). Campbell's Monomyth is one of initiation: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (Campbell 1949/2004, 28).

Alternatively, the American Monomyth is one of redemption, where the hero saves an Edenic community from outside evil forces:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 6)

With *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002), Lawrence and Jewett expanded upon their concept of the American Monomyth, applying it to the analysis of various pop culture texts and historical events of the U.S. and offering different variants of the myth. One of the versions they analyse is that of the vigilante in the urban wilderness who brings justice with violence that the official institutions are either unwilling or unable to. This “golden violence”, a term they coin in reference to a quote from a *Dick Tracy* comic strip from the day following Robert Kennedy’s assassination, which reads “VIOLENCE IS GOLDEN WHEN IT’S USED TO PUT DOWN EVIL” (2002, 106), is key in the urban vigilante trope, of which they find its archetypal manifestation in the film *Death Wish* (1974), directed by Michael Winner. In it, a middle-aged architect by the name of Paul Kersey, played by Charles Bronson, begins a killing spree of street criminals after his wife is murdered and his daughter is raped by stereotypical lowlifes in his upper-class apartment. This urban vigilante story trope takes the narrative of the mythical Old West and updates it to the modern setting of the big city, a place of danger similar to the wilderness of Old Frontier stories.

This variant of the American hero myth has its roots in the Puritan colonists’ time and their view of the United States. For them, the wilderness was a source of danger and evil, temptation and threat, stemming both from nature’s menaces as well as the violent conflicts they had with the native Americans. Evil was omnipresent, and they were wary that it might lie within themselves if they were not disciplined and vigilant enough. The struggle was fought constantly both externally and internally. While they may have had faith that they were in the Promised Land, they were pessimistic that they could ever see for themselves the fulfilled promise of that Eden. As Jewett and Lawrence suggest, this is the basis of Old West and frontier narratives. The only way to regenerate the community, as referenced in the work of Richard Slotkin (1973), is through violence (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 111-112).

As the American Monomyth evolved, the Enlightenment in the U.S. brought a different vision to the post-Puritan climate. Now, there was optimism for reaching the utopia they were looking for. Their country was undoubtedly Eden; they just had to acknowledge it and preserve it through education and hard work. In this new vision of the United States, the hero of the wilderness evolved into the saint superhero, who through superior virtue and superhuman power can not only eradicate the intruding evil Other, but also do it while

maintaining purity and a moral high ground: “All one needs to escape the ambiguity of violent power is more power” (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 40). This is the quintessential comic book superhero, whose tradition evolved from the first appearance of Superman in 1938’s *Action Comics* #1 (Gavaler 2017, 2). The Punisher, on the other hand, is a character that harkens back to the Puritan mentality, which is why he is always at odds with post-Puritan superheroes like Spider-Man and Daredevil. In this regard, the Punisher has the potential to work as a satire and critique of the comic book superhero genre, as he brings its underlying and uncomfortable authoritarian characteristics to the surface, crossing the line (the frontier, as it may) and killing, something most superheroes are averse to doing. Richard Slotkin has linked his concept of “regeneration through violence” to Trump rallies and the MAGA movement (2024, 290-307). When viewed within this framework, it is clear why the Punisher skull logo has been appropriated by U.S. military personnel (since at least the Iraq War), police officers, and MAGA supporters.

Table 1 summarises the core differences between the Puritan and post-Puritan worldviews from which each particular kind of hero emerges:

PURITAN	POST-PURITAN
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dangerous wilderness ● Omnipresent evil ● Pessimism ● Regeneration through violence ● The vigilante (anti)hero, less virtuous and non-powered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enlightenment and Utopianism ● The U.S. as mythic Eden ● Optimism through education ● Heroic defence of civilisation ● The saint superhero, with superior virtue and superhuman powers

Table 1: Key aspects of the Puritan and post-Puritan American societies.

Lastly, Lawrence and Jewett detect three processes in this mythic paradigm “that allow the audience’s encounter with urban hell to be mythically productive, offering appealing patterns for thought and action” (2002, 113). These components provide a productive lens through which the narratives of the Punisher can be analysed.

The first process they mention is *mythic selectivity*, whereby the story “defines the factual realities in a given situation” (2002, 113). The supposed “realism” of the storyworld selectively presents so-called facts that are, in reality, distorted. In *Death Wish* (1974), New York is nothing more than an urban hell full of thugs who “fit their evil mold in a way that makes it easy to cheer when they lose their lives” (2002, 114), whereas Hawaii and Tucson are presented as Edenic and completely safe. Likewise, law enforcement officials, as well as politicians, are often either incompetent or corrupt. In this scenario, Charles Bronson’s hero is larger than life, a once-pacifist who, destined by fate, becomes an “unwilling vigilante, stoically accepting his duty” (2002, 115).

Secondly, in the process of *mythic massage*, the audience is assured that the differences between myth and reality can be overcome. In *Death Wish* (1974), we are told that within a month of Kersey’s vigilante career, mugging cases have dropped by half. Justice can really be attained by vigilante violence; the community (and the world) can be morally redeemed if only everyone followed the hero’s (and the United States’) example (2002, 116-117).

Finally, with the process of *invitation to emulate*, a text seems to invite its audience to internalise and follow the behaviour patterns of the story’s hero in what Lawrence and Jewett refer to as a “call to discipleship”. This component can also be part of the plot, as seen in *Death Wish* (1974), where Paul Kersey solidifies his decision to embark on his vigilante pursuits after witnessing a classic Old West showdown between good and bad cowboys at a tourist-filled attraction in Tucson, Arizona. Just as Kersey is impelled to emulate the justice dealt by Old West heroes in his modern urban setting, so can viewers follow Kersey’s example and apply it in their own lives (2002, 117-118).

THE PUNISHER 101

Created by writer Gerry Conway and artists John Romita and Ross Andru, the Punisher, a.k.a. Frank Castle, debuted in issue #129 of *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1973). In his first appearance, the character’s basic ethos is presented: criminals must be punished by death. As Dolph Lundgren succinctly puts it when incarnating the first live-action iteration of the character in the film *The Punisher*, directed by Mark Goldblatt: “You’re guilty, you’re dead”

(1989). In the story of his debut, the Punisher's objective is to kill Spider-Man as he believes the "wall-crawler" to be guilty of murder. Here, we already see the groundwork of the Puritan vs. post-Puritan tension that Frank Castle will have with most of Marvel's superheroes.

Conway has stated that he was inspired by *The Executioner* series of novels by Don Pendleton, where a Vietnam War veteran becomes a serial killer of criminals after his family is murdered (Mougin 1985, 8). This basic premise would also be part of Frank Castle's backstory and the Punisher mythos as he evolved in subsequent appearances, becoming a one man's never-ending war on criminals.

The peak of the Punisher's first production cycle, as Kent Worcester points out in *Cultural History of The Punisher* (2023), was between 1985 and the early to mid-1990s, when the character was immensely popular. While during most of the first decade of his existence the character was portrayed mainly as a trigger-happy, dangerous man, the 1980s saw the character's stories and world evolve into the grim and gritty template (Worcester 2023, 64). This period is also one of brand and transmedia expansion. The year 1985 saw the character getting his first solo comic book title in the form of a five-issue miniseries, which, due to its success, led to a long-running ongoing comic series starting in 1987. At some point in the early 1990s, five different Punisher comic book series were being published simultaneously, including one called *The Punisher Armory* (Brown *et al.* 1990-1994), which would only consist of images of his arsenal accompanied by caption boxes with the Punisher's narrations giving details and anecdotes of each weapon. The first live-action version was the already mentioned *The Punisher* (1989), a direct-to-video release (in the U.S.) famous for eschewing the iconic skull logo from the Punisher's costume for being too cartoony, a decision the director Mark Goldblatt regretted many years later, as he expressed in the audio commentary of the 2013 Blu-ray and DVD release. The transmedia expansion continued with the release of five different video games between 1990 and 1993, in which players could now play as the titular anti-hero and deliver his particular brand of murderous justice. Of interest for this article is a note from writer and editor Carl Potts within the user manual for *The Punisher* (Paragon Software, 1990), an action-adventure video game. Potts worked on the character both in the comics and on one of his guest appearances on *Spider-Man: The Animated Series* (Richardson 1995). In his note, he writes:

The urge to see harsh, swift justice brought to those who flaunt the law is a strong one in most of us. On moral and practical grounds, we obviously can't really go out and do the things a character like the Punisher does – but, for a while at least, we can have a great time immersed in a cathartic fantasy where we can see to it that bad guys don't get away. (Potts 1990, 4-5)

This disclaimer warns against the dangers of accepting the invitation to emulate, a thorny issue embedded in urban vigilante stories, which at the same time is an important aspect of its appeal as a cathartic fantasy. There might have been an inclination to stress this point as, after all, one could now not only read Frank Castle's adventures but also *become* him in a video game setting. The invitation to emulate and the “Werther effect”² with regard to video games became an important issue within the medium's history (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 203-204), and a warning of this sort within a Punisher game as early as 1990 is noteworthy.

Another notable video game from this period is the arcade beat 'em up *The Punisher* (Capcom 1993). The beat 'em up genre had been strongly influenced by American films of the 1970s and 1980s that depicted street violence and urban vigilantism, including *Death Wish* (1974), *The Warriors* (Walter Hill 1979), and *Streets of Fire* (Walter Hill 1984) (Zanotti 2018), so it was perfectly suited for a character like the Punisher.

The peak of the Punisher's popularity coincided with a period of high crime and social unrest in New York (Allen 2014, 40-45). His popularity declined in the mid-1990s, which coincided with New York's crime rates beginning to decrease and with the crisis the U.S. comics industry was facing at the time, leading to what has been termed the Great Comics Crash of 1996 (TV Tropes 2024).

THE PUNISHER'S SECOND PRODUCTION CYCLE

Worcester marks the year 2000 as the beginning of the Punisher's second production cycle, when changing paradigms of the tone and type of stories of the character led to a newfound success and transmedia presence. Between 2000 and 2005, a transmedia interplay emerged between Punisher products in comics, film, and video games. To analyse the American

Monomyth in the video game *The Punisher* (Volition 2005), we need to take a closer look at other media incarnations of the character during this brief period. In a history-repeating-itself twist of fate, this second transmedia expansion echoed the first in its order of media release: 1) limited comic series and ongoing comic series; 2) film; and, finally, 3) video game.

1) Limited comic series and ongoing comic series

This was kickstarted by a 12-issue limited series by Northern Irish writer Garth Ennis and English artist Steve Dillon (and other collaborators). Their Punisher was a fusion of the trigger-happy and grim-and-gritty versions of the character, with an emphasis on “cheeky jokes, glossy visuals, and postmodern bombast” (Worcester 2023, 207). Ennis himself stated that what he was going for was “[e]ntertainment. Plain and simple. No complex analysis of the causes of crime, not a portrait of one man’s tragic descent into murderous psychosis, not an in-depth examination of the vigilante down the ages” (Ennis *et al.* 2001a, 6). With regards to his relationship to the U.S., Ennis said that he “grew up with American films in general, and Westerns in particular”, and, having moved to the U.S. “fairly early on” in his career, his “love for the place, the people, its culture and its history is deep and abiding” (Grady 2012). A previous Ennis-Dillon collaboration, the long-running creator-owned comic book series *Preacher* (1995-2000), published by DC Comics under its Vertigo imprint, had already explored tropes from Western films and other typically American fictions. Similarly to what they had done in that series, by employing elements of satire and meta-commentary in *The Punisher* vol. 5 (2000) and its subsequent ongoing series, vol. 6 (2001-2004), Ennis and his collaborators explored the American mythic paradigm and the urban vigilante tropes. Worcester suggests that “[t]he first production cycle has an earnest quality; the second exhibits a cynical undertow” (Worcester 2023, 211).

Ennis and Dillon’s very first issue undermines the Puritan Christian aspects of the American Monomyth. In an internal monologue at the end of the issue, while a member of the Italian mob is falling to his death from the Empire State building, Frank Castle references a previous story where he died, and the angels made him an offer: “The idea was I’d kill for them. Clean up their mistakes on Earth. Eventually redeem myself. Tried it. Didn’t like it. Told them where to stick it”. The angels then showed him that his family was finally at peace in

Heaven and “cast him down. Back to a world of killers, rapists, psychos, perverts. (...) The angels thought it would be hell for me. **But they were wrong**” (Ennis *et al.* 2001a, 26-27; emphasis in the original). This embodiment of the American Monomyth turns his back on Heaven, does not see himself as a deliverer of God’s Vengeance, and feels at peace when killing criminals. The city might be an urban hell for others, but, in a twisted reversal of the mythic paradigm, it is Eden for him. This disdain for his role as any kind of redeemer is further stressed in a conversation he has with his neighbour, Joan, while he is lying in bed and recovering from serious wounds. After she asks him why he kills bad people, his short answer is “I hate them”, to which she responds: “Oh. I thought it might be because you wanted to make the world safe for good people” (2001a, 159).

The tension between the Puritan hero and the post-Puritan hero, or the antihero and the superhero, is explored in one of the first issues of the series. On a rooftop, the Punisher is preparing to snipe a mobster when he is confronted by Daredevil, who tells him that the mobster must be apprehended and brought to justice. After a struggle between the two, the Punisher chains Daredevil up, leaving only a revolver in his hand, and gives him a choice: either kill the Punisher before he shoots the mobster, or the mobster dies: “If you don’t shoot, you’ve got a death on your conscience. A death you could have prevented. If you shoot, you’re a killer” (2001a, 68). This is, he tells Daredevil, the kind of choice he makes every time he pulls the trigger. After trying in vain to convince Frank that no one needs to die, Daredevil decides to shoot him, but the shot does not go off because there is no firing pin. “You can leave the killing to me” (2001a, 71), the Punisher says to Daredevil before knocking him out with a punch. The objective of this scene is to show two variants of the mythic paradigm criticising each other for failing to address the moral dilemmas of crimefighting.

In addition, an ironic reversal of the process of the invitation to emulate is present in the twelve issues of the limited series. An important subplot involves three other vigilantes who are inspired by the Punisher to go about their own murdering sprees: the Holy, a Latino Catholic father who kills people with an axe whenever they confess to him their sins, and who, while ridden with guilt at the beginning, feels validated when he discovers the existence of the Punisher, taking it as a sign from God that he is on the right path; Elite, a blonde upper-class man who murders anyone who dares to disturb his “nice neighborhood”; and Payback,

an Afro-American man who executes complete big corporation boardrooms who he believes are responsible for many ills. Eventually, they get together and form the self-labelled “Vigilante Squad”, “[b]ut they squabble over the root cause of crime. Is it the lazy poor, the greedy rich, or our fallen nature?” (Worcester 2023, 209). They see the Punisher as their role model and want to find him so he can be their leader. Instead, the Punisher tracks and confronts them: “Lead **you**. You’re a lunatic. You’re a nazi. And you—does the name Maria Lopez mean anything to you?” (Ennis *et al.* 2001a, 264; emphasis in the original). This last question to Payback, Frank continues, is in reference to a woman who worked as a cleaner in one of the corporate buildings attacked by Payback: “She’s one of four innocent people who’ve been cut down in the crossfire of your little crusade, just because you couldn’t be bothered to plan properly” (2001a, 264). In these words, we also see mythic selectivity at play: the Punisher never kills innocent people, either by mistake or as collateral damage, because he “plans properly”. The three men are surprised; they thought this was what he wanted, and the Holy pleads: “Together we can **punish the guilty!** We can clean up this city once and for all! In Heaven’s name, man! **Isn’t this exactly what you want?!**” (2001a, 265; emphasis in the original). To this, the Punisher just answers “No.” (2001a, 266) and kills them. This is the complete opposite reaction to Paul Kersey’s pleasure at seeing on TV that his vigilante actions are inspiring people to do the same in *Death Wish* (1974).

A last point regards the process of mythic massage. The never-ending seriality nature of the Punisher’s comics means there can never really be any resolution to the overarching conflict. In this way, the comforting idea that vigilantism can bring justice and peace is instantly undermined, at least at the social macro-level. While the Punisher can help innocent individuals, his war on criminals is eternal. This infinite loop of violence that never reaches any meaningful solutions and the fact that maybe Frank Castle is not helping but worsening the situation have always been part of Punisher comics, to a lesser or greater extent, depending on the writer exploring those themes. His first solo series, written by Steven Grant, was titled *The Punisher: Circle of Blood* (1985), a reference to this concept, for example. Garth Ennis’ twist on this theme is that Frank Castle not only knows that he is part of a never-ending cycle of violence, but he actually craves it.

2) The 2004 Film

This renewed interest in the franchise led to the production of a film. *The Punisher* (2004), directed by Jonathan Heinsleigh and starring Thomas Jane in the titular role and John Travolta as the main villain, was the first theatrical release in the U.S. for the character. This time, the iconic skull logo is part of the Punisher's costume. The film adapts some of the setting and characters of Ennis and Dillon's first comic run, like Frank's neighbours, Joan, Spacker Dave and Mr. Bumpo, his relationship with them, and the goofy villain simply known as the Russian.

Scholar Lorrie Palmer has characterised the film as "revisionist superhero Western", one of the reasons being that Jane's Frank Castle "experiences both the intimacy of family and the violence of solitary vigilantism", in contrast with "the Western archetype who can only observe hearth and home from the outside" (2013, 293). Ennis and Dillon's Castle has a cold and emotionless relationship with his neighbours, with the subtext that he may care about them, as evidenced by the (economic) rewards he offers them for their assistance, for example. In the 2004 film, Frank Castle is portrayed as a more sympathetic character. We see him grieving, emotionally suffering, and open somewhat to the warm treatment of his neighbours. There is even sexual tension with Joan, played by Rebbeca Romijn, but he refuses her advances. In this regard, we can see the trope of the American Monomythic hero as sexually pure at play. Furthermore, while this Punisher kills evildoers, the film never shows him doing anything extremely questionable that could be anything but righteous vengeance. The film's rendition of the American Monomyth makes it so that the audience wants these criminals punished. In this version of the Punisher's origin story, Eden is represented as a family reunion one fine summer day on a beach. This time, it is not just him, his wife and children on a picnic, but the whole extended family, including other children and elders. More than twenty people, except for Frank, are massacred. The final scene features a voiceover by Thomas Jane, stating that Frank Castle is dead, referring to him, warning "those who do evil to others" that he will come for them. Worcester suggests that while the revenge plot seems plausible for Jane's Punisher, "[t]he suggestion that the Three-quarter-inch hcharacter would then wage war against criminals everywhere does not" (Worcester 2023, 227). While there may be revisionism of Western tropes, especially with regard to themes of family, and some of the absurd elements from Ennis and Dillon's comics get their due on screen (e.g., the

Russian), the 2004 film reinforces the American Monomyth by playing it straight and harkening back to the Western and urban vigilante films of the 1970s and before.

3) “The Best Punisher Video Game”

In 2005, the video game *The Punisher* was released, developed and published by Volition for Xbox, PlayStation 2 and Windows. From all the video games featuring the character, the 2005 title is, as Blair Farrell from the long-running blog *Comic Book Video Games* suggests, “above all else The Punisher game to end all Punisher games and has sadly yet to be followed-up or topped” (2016).³ The game follows the transmedia path of the character’s second production cycle, where the 2004 film left off. It credits Garth Ennis among the game’s writers, as well as Jimmy Palmiotti (who worked as inker during Ennis and Dillon’s run) and Michael Breault (a game designer with a long career in the fields of board and video games), and Thomas Jane lends his voice to reprise the titular character. The game begins with Frank Castle narrating that after killing Howard Saint, he is now going against other criminals. However, the storyworld presented and the character designs could not be further removed from the film’s, opting instead to base them on Garth Ennis’ Punisher run from 2000 to 2004. In his commentaries on the game, Farrell points out that “[w]hen telling a Punisher story, it seems the best way you can go is one of two ways: you take things seriously and play the angle of Frank as a broken man, or you embrace the carnage of a character who straps a skull on his chest who carries around large-caliber weapons and takes no prisoners” (2016). While the 2004 film strives for the former, the video game goes for the latter. One would think that, by going the Ennis route and having him on the writing credits, the game would also comment on the mythic paradigm. Instead, the game prioritises extreme violence that disregards the subtleties found in the comics, even when it incorporates humorous and absurd elements.

The video game is of the shooter genre, in this case, 3D and third-person. Lawrence and Jewett devote a chapter to video games in *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002), and focus on this genre in particular:

The firmly established traditions of [the shooter games] genre presume that your finger must always be on the trigger, that you must be ready to kill easily defined enemies, and that you will hesitate only for tactical reasons. It is a world that is completely militarized, but without command structure or any accountability to political authority. It is a true aristocracy of violence that even the Virginian would find repellent. (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 217)

The game's intro cutscenes set the tone for the Punisher's storyworld by incurring in a process of mythic selectivity taken from the character's post-2000 comics. As the crime rates in New York were significantly lower than in the previous three decades, for the Punisher's stories to continue working, authors needed to address this. Walking through the night streets of the city, Castle urges us in a voiceover narration to "[f]orget the things you've heard about (...) the new New York", assuring us that "it's not real" and that "the old New York is waiting, just below the surface". Then he refers to the policies of the city governments of previous years: "Just because the mayor chased away the monsters (...) to Brooklyn and the Bronx. Don't think this place has changed" (Volition 2005). This monologue is adapted from the first pages of *The Punisher* vol. 6 #6 (Ennis *et al.* 2001b). Beyond the political commentary, whether there is any truth to it or not, with this monologue, the game conveys to the player, through mythic selectivity, that there is a "true" New York, thereby eliminating any doubt that the Punisher's crusade is righteous.

As soon as that cutscene ends, the game gives the player control of the Punisher avatar. In a dark alley, a young African-American man wearing a hoodie attempts to steal a woman's purse. As part of the game's tutorial, the player is told to grab the thug from behind and use a specific key for a "quick kill". While it is possible to simply knock him out, the tutorial omits this information and instead urges the player to perform an execution. The message here is not to have moral doubts about the actions taken in the game, as the gameplay mechanics not only encourage the player to do this but also reward them. Here, any criminal can be brutally murdered, regardless of the severity of the crime. After taking down the thug, the woman calmly thanks the player. Throughout this scene, we can see the process of mythic message at work. The negative consequences of a man brutally killing another man in front of a defenceless woman in a dark alley are nil.

Mythic selectivity is also present in the game mechanics, in that the player cannot shoot or attack innocent people. When aiming at an innocent person, usually a hostage, the game changes the graphic of the targeting point and blocks the player from shooting. Thus, the avatarisation (Navarro-Remesal 2015) of the Punisher character in this game incorporates one of his quintessential mythical aspects into its gameplay: Frank Castle never kills innocent people, whether intentionally, accidentally, or through collateral damage.

Between missions, the player can view their progress, select their weapons, and choose the missions to play in the “Apartment” area of the menus and settings. This area also includes two boards: a criminal chart and a news clippings board. The criminal chart features photos of the various game bosses to be eliminated, and the news clippings board displays newspaper excerpts of the Punisher’s achievements in eliminating crime in the city, using images from the Ennis and Dillon comics and other sources. These two features allude to mythic selectivity: official law enforcement authorities are failing in their fight against crime, with only the Punisher achieving newsworthy results (the game’s framing story involving detectives Molly Von Richthofen and Martin Soap interrogating Frank Castle also emphasises this point). Additionally, there is a hint of mythic message: simply completing the killings on the criminal chart in a succession of game objectives will save the city from crime. However, it is also true that the game ends with a setup for a sequel that was never developed, implying that the cycle of crime and violence always continues, a recurrent theme in Punisher stories.

As mentioned previously, the invitation to emulate and the “Werther effect” were important issues regarding the influence of violent video games on young people, especially after the Columbine High School massacre, in which two teenage boys, fans of first-person shooter games, “slaughtered twelve classmates and a teacher before killing themselves” (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 202). However, Lawrence and Jewett point out that trying to find the cause-and-effect correlation of media and real-world occurrences “burdens every effort to assess the influence of a culture’s icons and symbolic stories” (2002, 204). Instead, they suggest viewing video games as another form of mythic socialisation that “now allows the participant to be a saviour and to viscerally feel the pleasures of redeeming a situation from threat” (2002, 200). Whether or not the invitation to emulate is implicit in the player’s experience of being the Punisher, the 2005 video game does not incorporate this theme into

its story explicitly, as *Death Wish* (1974) does by constructing and reinforcing the mythic process, and the Ennis and Dillon comics do by deconstructing it. Thus, the game's avoidance of the issue is a lost opportunity to comment on it, given how heated the debate over violence in video games was at the time and the character and genre's tradition of dealing with the trope.

The tension between the Puritan and post-Puritan hero paradigms is similarly not explored. Unlike the 2004 film, this game puts the Punisher within the wider Marvel universe. In this context, there are guest appearances by other four heroes: Black Widow, Nick Fury, Iron Man, and Daredevil. Black Widow and Nick Fury appear in a "team-up" capacity, showing up each in a different mission and fighting alongside the player. These two characters are particularly suited to this role because they, too, engage with the Puritan model of the antihero and have historically been in tension with traditional modes of superheroism. It is not difficult to imagine either of them embodying the concept of "regeneration through violence" in some capacity. Still, the suspension of disbelief is stretched when we see both characters say or do nothing while the Punisher constantly tortures and executes men in front of them. In the case of Iron Man and Daredevil, being characters who fit the post-Puritan model, they only appear as cameos in cutscenes. Iron Man appears at the end of a mission that takes place in the Stark Industries building, after the Punisher has already left and the place has been destroyed, leaving it filled with casualties. The scene conveys some information that advances the narrative and concludes with a tongue-in-cheek line from Iron Man, referencing his struggle with alcoholism in the comics: "I need a drink" (Volition, 2005). Daredevil appears as his civilian persona, the blind lawyer Matt Murdock. He enters the room where detectives Soap and Von Richthofen are interrogating Frank Castle, and states that Castle is his client and that no more questions will be answered. Punisher says he does not need his help and fires him. This is the closest the game goes to illustrating the antihero and superhero tension, as Castle rejects Murdock's help and, by extension, his methods and what he represents. While an interesting reference to the history of both characters, the game does not delve further into its exploration of the theme.

Finally, the game was famous for its unique gameplay elements involving torture and its detailed graphic depiction of violence, having been slightly censored to have the execution

scenes be black and white and blurred, thus avoiding the “Adults Only” rating to meet the “Mature” rating. The game was marketed to highlight this feature, as one promotional poster reads, “Guns don’t kill people. Three-quarter-inch holes in the head kill people”, while showing the Punisher about to kill a man with a big industrial drill. The slogan is misleading, though, because, while it is true that the player can kill people in creative and absurd ways in the game, lots of guns are also involved in the killing. It would not be a Punisher fiction if it did not involve his armoury.

The torture elements are part of the interrogation mechanics. The Punisher can catch almost any criminal and subject them to an interrogation, where he puts the enemy in a torture situation that can range from beatings and chokings in their simpler forms to a wood chipper and piranhas in the “special interrogations”. The objective is to “break” the enemy without killing them in order to extract information; however, they can also be killed, regardless of whether the information has been obtained or not. Sometimes, the execution moments trigger flashbacks to traumatic moments in Frank’s life, depicted with brief images from the comics and a few lines of dialogue. In one of them, a man being tortured yells: “Have mercy!”, to which the Punisher responds, “Death is a mercy” (Volition 2005), before executing him. In this brief moment, we see the reinforcement of the Puritan era’s moral values. If faith is regenerated through violence, mercy, both a consequence and a vehicle of faith, must do so as well.

As Peter E. Rauch indicates, the points system and rules of the game make it so that “killing is rewarded, torture is rewarded, but accidental killing *during* torture is punished”. The information obtained from the interrogations is not indispensable to advancing the game. He concludes that the “ethics of torture” work at a mechanical level but not at the narrative one, “and thus the narrative and ethics cannot be integrated into a moral argument” (2007, 75). Some of the special interrogation death scenes are adapted straight from the Ennis and Dillon comics. Their comedic effect worked in the context of the postmodern and cynical deconstruction of the urban vigilante tropes, but the video game, by eschewing those explorations, reduces their narrative impact. Rauch sums it up with a reference to George Orwell’s *1984*: “The purpose of torture is torture” (2007, 74).

This “torture engine” is one of the game’s defining features, setting it apart from other shooters of the era. The cult status of the game is evident in the fact that the fan community developed a software patch for the Windows version, which removes the censoring filter and displays these scenes in all their vivid, detailed gore (PCGamingWiki 2021).

CONCLUSION

Lawrence and Jewett’s theories of the American Monomyth and their application to urban vigilante fictions provide a fertile framework for analysing the Punisher’s stories and media depictions. The acknowledgement of the problematic moral characteristics of the character has had its place since his first appearance in 1973, but the ways in which the American Monomyth has been represented in the Punisher’s texts have been different depending on the context and the authors working on them. Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon’s comic book run of the early 2000s engages with the processes on which the myth operates (mythic selectivity, mythic massage, and the invitation to emulate) and comments on them in a postmodern, playful, and cynical way. By doing so, certain aspects of the American Monomyth are thus critiqued and subverted.

The popularity of the Ennis-Dillon comics led to a larger transmedia presence for the Punisher, with the release of a film directed by Jonathan Hensleigh in 2004 and a video game developed by the studio Volition in 2005, both of which drew inspiration from and had an intertextual connection to the Ennis-Dillon run. The 2004 film reinforces the American mythic paradigm, rather than subverting it, by making the character of Frank Castle a more sympathetic figure and by harkening back to the tropes of Western and urban vigilante films of the 1960s and 1970s. The 2005 video game by Volition, although it features Garth Ennis as a co-writer, also misses several opportunities to engage critically with the American Monomyth, focusing instead on the violent, cathartic fantasy of vigilantism. Through its gameplay mechanics, Volition’s *The Punisher* reinforces the processes on which the myth operates.

¹ A simple browse through the r/thepunisher community on Reddit, which has 41,000 members as of November 2025, shows the preference for this game. It is consistently recommended as the best Punisher video game, and posts suggesting a remaster of it should be developed are popular.

² Lawrence and Jewett define the Werther effect as the process where “an audience member (a) experiences a work of fantasy within a secular context that (b) helps to shape the reader/viewer’s sense of what is real and desirable, in such a way that, (c) the reader/viewer takes actions consistent with the vision inspired by the interaction between his own fantasy and that popular entertainment” (2002, 10).

³ The game received mixed reviews among general video game critics, though. On the review aggregator site Metacritic, it has a score of 69/100 based on 47 critic reviews, while video game database Mobygames shows an average score of 70% with 39 critic reviews.

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MARIANO FALZONE

Mariano Falzone holds a degree in Filmmaking and Audiovisual Arts from the Universidad del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires (Argentina) and is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Lincoln (UK), where his dissertation focuses on the history of video games based on superhero comics from the United States. Within the video game industry, he works on the localisation of AAA titles. As a game designer and writer, he is part of the indie project Orbis Tertius Games.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5752-4766>

Ciência ID: 8F1A-0BE8-1457

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Reimagining Western Femininity Through Ellie in *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us: Left Behind*

CATARINA RICARDO

FCSH – NOVA University of Lisbon

ABSTRACT: Women in the Western genre have conventionally been assigned roles in which they are subordinated to the male hero's journey, acting as civilizers, love interests, or sexual objects. This article argues that Ellie in *The Last of Us* (2013) and its subsequent DLC *The Last of Us: Left Behind* (2014), stands out as a remarkably transgressive character when compared to the archetypal representations of women in Westerns. Acknowledging the video game as a *Weird Western*, this article analyzes several aspects of its narrative and gameplay in which subversion becomes evident, focusing in particular on the plot, game mechanics, and character design. Firstly, the overturning of the classical female role is made possible through the masculinization of Ellie, who temporarily becomes a playable protagonist, assuming the place of the cowboy in all his autonomous resilience: hunting animals and killing enemies who endanger Joel. Ellie's killing of David sets her apart from the expected female behavior by

RESUMO: Os papéis convencionalmente atribuídos a mulheres no *Western* tornam-nas subordinadas à jornada do herói masculino, atuando como civilizadoras, interesses amorosos, ou objetos sexuais. Este artigo defende que Ellie, em *The Last of Us* (2013) e no seu DLC *The Last of Us: Left Behind* (2014), se destaca como uma personagem excepcionalmente transgressiva quando contrastada com as representações arquetípicas associadas às mulheres nos *Westerns*. Reconhecendo o videogame como um *Weird Western*, este artigo analisa diversos aspectos em que a subversão se torna evidente, nomeadamente o enredo, as mecânicas do jogo e o *design* de personagem. Primeiramente, a subversão do papel feminino clássico é possibilitada através da masculinização de Ellie, que temporariamente, se torna uma protagonista jogável, assumindo o lugar do *cowboy* e a sua resiliência autónoma, caçando animais e eliminando os inimigos que colocam

demonstrating her self-sufficiency and the futility of relying on a savior. Furthermore, her queerness is presented to the player as an inherent trait, challenging the virtually compulsory heterosexuality of the Western. Nonetheless, this portrayal is not without its limitations. As this paper argues, the ending of the game empowers Joel at Ellie's expense, ultimately upholding familiar tropes that glorify patriarchal authority. Thus, while Ellie is unquestionably a revolutionary female character, traces of tradition still seep into the contemporary (*Weird*) Western.

KEYWORDS: *The Last of Us*, *Weird Western*, Female representation, Queerness, Feminine masculinity.

Joel em perigo. A morte de David, às mãos de Ellie, distancia-a ainda mais do comportamento esperado, demonstrando a sua autossuficiência e a ausência de necessidade de um salvador. Além disso, a sua *queerness* é apresentada ao jogador como uma característica inerente, desafiando a heterossexualidade praticamente compulsória do *Western*. Todavia, esta representação tem limitações. Como o artigo demonstra, o final do jogo empodera Joel em detrimento de Ellie, preservando tropes recorrentes que glorificam a autoridade patriarcal. Assim, embora Ellie seja inquestionavelmente uma personagem feminina revolucionária, certas tradições continuam a infiltrar-se no (*Weird*) *Western* contemporâneo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *The Last of Us*, *Weird Western*, Representação feminina, *Queerness*, Masculinidade feminina.

INTRODUCTION

The Western genre's obsession with masculinity has stood at the heart of its productions since its genesis, relegating women to secondary positions. A later reimagination of the genre, the Weird Western, has eagerly attempted to decentralize this narrative, creating active female characters who defy gender roles in various ways. Recognizing *The Last of Us* as a Weird Western, I argue that Ellie mostly subverts traditional Western archetypes and tropes in several ways, contributing to the reinvention of female characters in an otherwise restrictive and structurally heteronormative genre.

The central purpose of this article is then to analyze Ellie's gender performance throughout *The Last of Us* and its extension. With this goal in mind, this article adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on various areas of knowledge, including game studies, gender studies, and genre studies. The analysis inspects Ellie's character design, behavior and speech across *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us: Left Behind* with the objective of assessing her transgression of female archetypes in the Western.

To understand the ways in which *The Last of Us* configures as a Weird Western, it is first necessary to outline its narrative as well as essential gameplay aspects, which will be alluded to later in the article in relation to Ellie's transgressive features and behaviors.

The Last of Us is a survival horror video game set in the ravaged scenery of post-apocalyptic America, following the widespread outbreak of the Cordyceps fungal infection. This event transformed billions into hostile beings who viciously attack unaffected humans in their eagerness to spread the disease. The player incarnates Joel, a middle-aged survivor who was hardened by the loss of his daughter, Sarah, at the hands of a military officer in the first days of the panic. Twenty years later, Joel is a callous smuggler operating in the Boston Quarantine Zone (QZ) alongside Tess, his partner and possible love interest. Upon encountering Marlene, the leader of the Fireflies, a paramilitary group combating FEDRA, the authoritarian military force terrorizing and confining the members of the QZ, she tasks him with the delivery of a 14-year-old girl, Ellie. While initially unaware of the reason for the unusual "cargo", Joel rapidly discovers that she is immune to the Cordyceps infection.

Their initial drop point fails, resulting in Tess's death and Joel's promise to fulfill their objective, which will take Joel and Ellie on a long journey westward through the wastelands in search of the Fireflies in order to develop a vaccine. During this time, the pair slowly grow close, bonding as father and daughter throughout the seasons as they struggle against

enemies, injuries, and the loss of dear friends. As the protagonists approach their destination, St. Mary's Hospital in Salt Lake City, Joel is knocked unconscious by Fireflies, and both are taken inside the hospital. There, the player is reunited with Marlene, who informs Joel that Ellie is being prepared for brain surgery, inevitably resulting in her demise. In a desperate effort to save the life of his surrogate daughter, Joel goes on a rampage, ruthlessly murdering Fireflies, hospital staff, and Marlene. Acknowledging the selfishness of his actions, Joel swears to Ellie that their journey had ended fruitlessly, as the Fireflies had ceased their search for a cure.¹

In the DLC, the player's attention is divided between segments of Ellie's time caring for an injured Joel, and her experiences before the events of the first game took place. As such, the expansion provides substantial context on Ellie's background and motivations, introducing her Firefly best friend and love interest, Riley. While most of their interactions are lighthearted, their meeting turns disastrous as they are chased down by infected in the abandoned mall they had been exploring, leading to their mutual infection. Though not explicitly stated in the game, Ellie is presumed to have put down her (then zombified) companion. Her resulting survivor's guilt becomes a powerful driving factor for her decision to submit to the Fireflies' attempts at a vaccine.

Regarding the ludological aspects of *The Last of Us*, game mechanics play a crucial role in immersing the player in the game's post-apocalyptic reality. Primarily, the scarcity of resources in the game makes it necessary for the player to scavenge and explore the surrounding areas, which in turn influences the desired approach to combat situations (stealth or overt). Secondly, the game offers a "Listen Mode" mechanic, which allows players to detect movement through walls while crouching. The player is also reliant on a crafting system whose items are updated throughout the game, including throwables (Molotov cocktails, Nail Bombs, Smoke Bombs) as well as healing items and melee weapons. Finding certain collectables, such as Instruction Manuals and Tool Upgrades, grants the player upgrades on their craftables and weapons, which must be enhanced at a workbench. The DLC maintains these mechanics, innovating only with the addition of a few dialogue choices between Ellie and Riley.

The Weird Western is a contemporary instalment of the Western which explores its themes through the lens of the strange, using "horror, supernatural, or fantasy elements and themes" (Paul Green 2016, 2), and has thrived in the different media forms it is

adapted to. It explores the main genre's reliance on certain tropes and recognizable iconography whilst simultaneously warping the boundaries of the Western, namely through gender.

The Last of Us can be ascribed to the Weird Western genre as it reconfigures various aspects of the Western, such as placing the identifiable white male hero (Joel) against a post-apocalyptic backdrop, and having the main characters cross a populated frontier into uncivilized territory rife with hostiles. Furthermore, the nature of this frontier is paradoxical, as it concomitantly stands for the civilized world and a place of oppression by the military forces in power. Thus, departing from it would certainly be liberating, but it would also entail serious dangers beyond the scope of the protection these agents offer.

1.1. An overview of the portrayal of gender in the Western

To fully grasp the ways in which *The Last of Us* innovates with its portrayal of Ellie, it becomes vital to situate the woman's role in the Western throughout its many eras. John Cawelti's foundational work on the Western has effectively outlined two major feminine archetypes in the genre: the schoolmarm and the saloon-hall girl, which he claims to "[have] been almost as stable a feature of the Western formula as the horse and the gun" (Cawelti 1999, 122). These two figures stand in stark opposition to each other since they constitute antithetical expressions of morality, with the virginal schoolmarm acting as a civilizing force that tames the male hero. Conversely, the saloon-hall girl stands as a raw representation of the West on account of her morally ambiguous character and eroticized figure.

While Cawelti's work is highly influential, other Western female archetypes were also put forward, namely, the "sturdy helpmate of the frontier" and the "weary and forlorn wife" (Paul 2014, 327). According to theorists, these figures fit into the broader umbrella terms of the "good woman" and "bad woman", in which the good woman encompasses all roles that promote purity, peace, and domesticity, and the bad woman represents immorality, sexual expression, and, to a certain degree, even masculinity.

However, even when considering the representation of the "sturdy helpmate of the frontier", it is imperative to note that their action is circumscribed to domestic boundaries. Moreover, the existence of feminine characters is often secondary to that of their male

counterparts, frequently lacking narrative agency while also serving as plot-driving points for the (male) hero (Tompkins 1992; Underwood 1985).

As revisionist and eventually Weird Western representation evolved, women began benefitting from a greater liberty of gender expression and were increasingly more able to escape the fixed gender binary. Following this trend, formerly marginalized female characters were promoted to lead roles and began to challenge the previously normative behaviors. A major aspect of transgression in this sense was the adoption of a “female masculinity” (Hockenhull 2020). This personality blurred the gender barriers originally set by the classic Western, granting a female protagonist the same set of skills as the male hero—such as marksmanship and horse riding—and even donning the same leather chaps.

Nevertheless, other authors such as Minz defended that women in the Western have exhibited an innate masculinity since the primordial times of the genre. Drawing on classic Westerns such as *Johnny Guitar* (1954), Minz advocates that saloon girl characters have long freely alternated between performances of gender, from a theatrical performance of femininity to one of masculinity by simply wielding a rifle (Minz 2020, 111). In fact, these women, enabled by their masculine (and, by association, phallic) presence, are fully capable of dominating and emasculating male characters, even in such a seemingly limiting genre for women.

1.2. The video game Western

The timeless popularity of the Western stems from its ability to shift and adapt thematically, whilst still preserving archetypal aspects that are familiar to the viewer and evoke the same American myths. This unique versatility is not only applied to the reinvention of the genre in film or literature, but also to the entirely interactive medium of video games.

The transportation of the Western genre into the early video game industry prompted the emergence of many products that promised to incorporate its iconic elements for the player: cowboys, shootouts, and Indians. Protagonism was unquestionably reserved for a white, male hero, resulting in the marginalization of other ethnicities and genders. Cowboys ran the show, while “digital women behaved as petticoated lovers,

gartered prostitutes, or sassy gun-fighters in the image of Calamity Jane” (Wills 2008, 277) in 80s games such as *Cheyenne* (1984).

A review of contemporary games engaging with the Western’s iconography and motifs is a valuable task in the process of understanding how the genre continues to be understood. *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) is relevant in this regard, as a video game rendering the Western through revisionist eyes.

Despite its “attempt to present itself as a moralizing, revisionist-style Western” (Bird 2023, 117), *Red Dead Redemption 2* has suffered criticism for its seeming virtue signaling and glorification of the white male West. The abundance of multicultural characters is deceiving to the player seeking a progressive portrayal of the genre. The lack of screentime provided to these minority groups has been criticized by theorists such as Bird, finding the protagonism provided to white male heroes far too overwhelming, as well as limiting for a supposedly critical view of the classic Western.

This virtue signaling is also visible in the character of Sadie, an outwardly transgressive woman who rejects domesticity and embraces violence in the true cowboy way. Nevertheless, her transformation occurs on account of her connection to a nominal male character, and functions as Sadie’s drive for action in the remaining duration of the game. Ultimately, she does not become more than a sidekick, a set-piece, furnishing Rockstar’s Western, as “the women are only useful and able to exist in reference and service to an androcentric narrative of ‘progress’” (Wright 2023, 141).

As the article contends, the same description is not applicable to Ellie, who embodies masculinity physically and in gameplay, surpassing the expectation of a sidekick to become a strong, playable protagonist with a unique personality.

2. CLOTHING AND CHARACTER DESIGN

A necessary first step in understanding Ellie’s portrayal in the game is a close analysis of her physical depiction. The Western genre is “a deeply body-conscious and body-obsessed genre” (Fine *et al.* 2025, xiv). Thus, the portrayal of its various feminine characters is also necessarily done on a physical level, and different clothing styles are used to reinforce gender expectations and behaviors, further cementing gender stereotypes. The

aforementioned archetypes for women, namely the saloon hall girl and the schoolmarm, are thus not only distinct in their conduct but also in their appearance.

Schwarz explains that “ranch and farm women wear practical working clothes with aprons, while prostitutes and saloon girls wear bright-colored Victorian lingerie, and schoolmarms and townswomen wear form-fitted dresses with high collars and tight waists” (2013, 54-55).

Therefore, clothing holds the power to convey ideas of morality, specifically those related to notions of purity and promiscuity, or the reinforcement of domesticity tropes (through, for example, the use of the apron). These feminine figures can be considered a part of a “male spectacle”, placed in these narratives to reinforce traditional roles or to serve the male gaze, such as in the case of saloon-girls, who were the regular victims of objectification.

A study of Ellie’s character design in *The Last of Us* and *Left Behind* reveals a clear deviation from this norm. Her outfits of choice provide full coverage of her body and always include a pair of pants, rather than quintessentially feminine garments like skirts or dresses. She is not compliant with gender expectations, as her wardrobe is purely utilitarian, allowing for practicality in the post-apocalyptic environment she faces and granting her the ability to run, jump, and crawl, if needed. It does not transmit the ideological messages regarding sexuality or domesticity that are typically present in the Western.

Furthermore, Ellie’s body itself is steered clear of objectification. Her character design reveals a realistic body type for a 14-year-old girl, without any radical changes to her proportions, in order to appeal to male player demographics. As Atrio mentions, no attempt was made to emphasize her figure through camera shots; her screentime is as sexually neutral as Joel’s or any other male character’s (2018).

Thus, Ellie is visually depicted on the same plane as the male hero, in the sense that she does not represent a commodity solely because she is a woman.

3. FEMININE MASCULINITY IN THE WINTER CHAPTER

Beyond her fitting character design, Ellie is not a simple helpmate to Joel, diligently following his steps as NPC.² Indeed, in the Winter Chapter of the first game, as well as sections of the DLC, Ellie is obligated to assume the role of the protector, which had

formerly been reserved for Joel. Following Joel's grave injury at the University of Colorado, Ellie must simultaneously nurse her surrogate father back to health and guard him from external harm from the threats that lie in the West (the infected and David's group of cannibals).

Ellie, a young girl, faces an absolutely unforgiving frontier in total solitude, braving the cold, barren wilderness whilst facing enemies significantly larger than her and in greater numbers. In this sense, she is akin to the westering woman in that she must face a relentless frontier. However, she is the one breaking a path through the wilderness, not confining herself to the models of domesticity.

Ellie's enhanced sense of autonomy during these sequences can be matched to the concept of feminine masculinity, as coined by Halberstam (1998) and further developed by Hockenull (2020). Drawing on Hockenull's analysis of the Western heroine, we might find that Ellie too "becomes masculinized in order to succeed (...). Forced to adopt traits and expertise normally associated with traditional male iconography in the Western" (2020, 272). This iconography is primarily represented through specific symbols, notably horse riding and the use of firearms. Furthermore, she displays an acute hunting ability, showcasing the type of resourcefulness typically associated with a frontiersman.

In terms of game mechanics, it is essential to note her ability to craft items, especially throwables such as nail bombs or Molotov cocktails. This not only speaks of her craftsmanship, but broadens the divide between her and the stereotypical defenseless woman of the Western by placing her directly in the front lines of a confrontation in which she actively participates.

When engaging in combat, her takedowns can also be noted to be particularly brutal. Whilst Joel quietly smothers his victims, Ellie's inferior strength obligates her to jump on her target, gruesomely stabbing him to death amidst sprays of blood. Her willingness to be lethal essentially contradicts the trope of the "good woman" who is a moral symbol and necessarily pacifist in nature. As Baker and Zuvella explain, "male violence in the Western requires a female audience, since in order for Western violence to be morally acceptable, the feminine, a 'pacifist' force, must yield and publicly give her imprimatur to the very violence she resists" (2013, 5).

Ellie does not subscribe to a greater narrative of peace but rather engages in the violence that said women are expected to abhor. Furthermore, her proficient

marksmanship also serves as a signifier of masculinity and promotes her agency. Her confidence in this skill is demonstrated when she first encounters David and James. Despite being outnumbered and outgunned, her threats of violence are enough to subdue them, demonstrating her assertive power.

4. DEFEATING DAVID

At the very end of the season, Ellie must escape David and his sadistic plans inside a restaurant. In the cutscene that ensues, David attempts to sexually assault her. Both characters struggle, and Ellie is eventually able to overpower her attacker, brutally slashing him with a machete numerous times, continuing even after the threat is neutralized. This narrative sequence is particularly valuable for critical analysis and comparison with the Western, as it subverts several behaviors stereotypically expected of women in the genre.

Firstly, Ellie's resilience and sheer power in this scene set her as diametrically opposed to the Western women. As Tompkins explains, "the message (...) in the case of women in Westerns generally, is that there's nothing to them. They may seem strong and resilient, fiery and resourceful at first, but when push comes to shove, as it always does, they crumble" (1992, 76).

However, it is imperative to note that this was not a singular occurrence, and that this character has risen to the occasion several times throughout the game, namely by gunning down Joel's attackers both in cutscene and in gameplay (in her behavior as an NPC).

Secondly, the game deliberately constructs this sequence to suggest that salvation will come at the hands of the male hero. The player is forced to alternate between the two playable characters in a few short sequences until the dire cutscene at the restaurant takes place.

As Benkert states, "this builds up the false expectation that Joel will arrive in the vital moment to save Ellie. Ellie turns a stereotype on its head by showing she does not need rescuing, and the game helps show this by portraying her as equal to Joel" (2018, 49).

Thus, Ellie's triumph against David's predatory attacks further subverts the trope of helplessness generally surrounding women of this genre, as she is the one who ultimately (and successfully) defeats her aggressor.

5. ELLIE'S QUEERNESS AS A TRANSGRESSIVE FEATURE

Whereas the previous sections emphasized Ellie's resilience amid a hostile frontier, the DLC foregrounds matters of identity, complementing the player's previous knowledge with an exclusive insight into her relationships prior to meeting Joel, as well as her queer sexuality.

The revelation of Ellie's queerness in the DLC and the romantic relationship she establishes with Riley is extremely important in analyzing this game under the genre's light, as it completely shatters the "hyper-heterosexual, hypermasculine confines of the Western" (Symmonds 2018, 3). Additionally, it further places Ellie away from the role of women as "wife and mother, effectively taming the native wilderness and the male hero", assigning her a level of masculinity that accompanies her non-heteronormative sexuality.

The representation of queer love in *Left Behind* is intentional and does not exist for shock value, nor is it an optional quest left to the decision of the (potentially biased) player. Players that expected the heteronormative framework of most media were, in this case, "unable to avert Ellie's *queer* love and must therefore roleplay as a *queer* character to complete the narrative" (Funk 2022, 79).

This is a romance that evolves organically throughout the DLC, and that is gradually hinted at with increasing intensity until it culminates in a kiss scene. Before this scene takes place, players are given unprecedented dialogue options, also enjoying some ludic moments (such as the water-gun fight) between the two girls. This demonstrates the amount of intimacy between the characters and negates any deliberate commodification of queerness for a simple sensation.

However, Ellie and Riley's short-lived romance, though impactful, has been subject to criticism due to its tragic nature, potentially aligning it with the contemporary "Bury your Gays" trope.³ While their relationship is a hallmark of representation due to its queer and interracial nature, some argue that it falls victim to this disposal of LGBTQ+ characters, which is not only present in the Western, but also common throughout film and game genres. A reviewer in TheGamer regretfully writes:

Aside from a fleeting kiss, there is never a chance to appreciate their sudden confession, or to bask in the delightful confusion and unexpected euphoria that comes from pouring your heart out as a teenager. (...) They promise to lose their minds together, but we all know that doesn't happen, and our heroine is forced to watch her first love perish right in front of her. I

understand *The Last of Us* is a miserable game in a miserable world with miserable characters, but when the most pronounced tragedy is placed on an otherwise groundbreaking queer character I can't help but feel bitter about things. (King 2022)

Nevertheless, it aids in building an increasingly more individualized character with emotional depth and a backstory, further placing Ellie in the role of the protagonist and presenting a clear justification for her drive to fulfill her fate with the Fireflies. In this sense, it not only pushes her out of the usual position women are supposed to serve in the genre, but also works towards her agency as a character.

6. SUBVERSIVE DISCOURSE IN *LEFT BEHIND*

Establishing a comparison between Ellie in the DLC and images of the woman in the Western reveals significant differences in their social behavior representation. In the sections in which she is with Riley, the two exhibit a rowdiness that is not present in the original game. Ellie does not follow the expected feminine conduct present in the Western, a genre where “the true woman was supposed to be submissive, pure (sexually innocent or sexually faithful), pious, and domestic” (Underwood 1985, 95). Conversely, her rebellious nature shines through in her exploration of an abandoned mall—an urban frontier riddled with its own perils—with her companion, Riley. The two curse freely around each other and engage in stereotypical teenage behavior, vandalizing cars and engaging in substance use (with a bottle of whiskey).

Gonzalez highlights the uniqueness of her behavior in *Left Behind*: “There are no male figures around policing her behavior, so Ellie feels like she can be her true self around Riley” (2018, 61). The same cannot be said in the original game, as Joel constantly censors her language, especially when Ellie tries to convey her feelings, which he finds overwhelming and offensive. These dynamic takes place on various occasions throughout *The Last of Us*. An example of this is Joel’s policing of Ellie’s language after the death of Tess, for whom he potentially harbored romantic feelings. He declares: “Here’s how this thing’s gonna play out. You don’t bring up Tess. Ever. Matter of fact, why don’t we just keep our histories to ourselves?” (*The Last of Us*). This linguistic hierarchy over women’s discourse is a prevalent occurrence in the Western, as mentioned by Heba and Murphy:

“[The male lead] simply responds with something like ‘Get to the point, woman.’ Here, the language hierarchy is reinforced” (2010, 315).

The male hero thus establishes a dynamic that dignifies male characters’ speech or their silence over women’s input, placing the man in a dominant position whilst framing the woman’s verbalizations as hysterical and undesirable.

Considering this, it becomes evident that Ellie’s discourse is markedly more subversive in the DLC. The character adamantly refuses to be censored, dismissing any hint of submissiveness with the loudness and explicitness of her words. This rings especially true in a certain part of the game, as explored by Gonzalez:

Both male and female players are fascinated by Ellie as a character since she does not adhere to traditional feminine norms. For example, when Ellie was in a Halloween store and encountered Skeleseer, a skeleton-shaped magic eight ball, and started asking it questions, it gave a response that Ellie did not like which prompted her to respond, ‘Well Skeleseer can suck my dick’. This line demonstrates Ellie’s rejection of feminine norms of being passive and quiet by joking about having male genitalia, which places her in a position of agency. (2018, 61)

Once more, Ellie gains agency by associating herself with masculine imagery (as seen earlier with her gun ownership, another symbol often conflated with the phallus). She is, thus, bringing herself closer to the feminine masculinity that is more prevalent in contemporary Westerns and Weird Westerns.

7. THE WITHDRAWAL OF AGENCY

Although Ellie’s consistent subversion of gender roles is a significant point for analysis, this article argues that this subversion is incomplete. Joel’s authority looms over her throughout the game, restricting her access to potentially life-saving weapons, as well as suppressing her discourse. After the brief moment of complete autonomy afforded to her by Joel’s injury, Ellie is reigned in once more upon arriving at their destination: St. Mary’s Hospital. Thus, the greatest obstacle standing in the way of subversion is the denial of full agency by the male hero; a trope that is consistent with major plots in this genre, and described in detail by Tompkins in her work:

In this story, as in many Westerns, women are the motive for male activity (it's women who are being avenged, it's a woman the men are trying to rescue) (...). Time after time, the Western hero commits murder, usually multiple murders, in the name of making his town/ranch/mining claim safe for women and children. But the discourse of love and peace which women articulate is never listened to. Indeed, the viewpoint women represent is introduced in order to be swept aside, crushed, or dramatically invalidated. (...) The genre's revenge plot depends on an antithetical world of love and reconciliation both as a source of meaning—it defines the male code of violent heroism by opposition—and as a source of legitimation. (1992, 41)

Consequently, the inescapable nature of this scene and the absence of choice for the player cast Ellie in a more passive tone, as her powerful motive is overridden by her male counterpart. This section of the game remains as a pinnacle, reinforcing the tropes of classic Westerns, and as an obstacle to Ellie's complete subversion of gender expectations.

Ultimately, this decision leads to Joel's downfall (and, arguably, Ellie's as well) in *The Last of Us Part II*. After the events of the first game, their relationship dynamics are increasingly strained by Ellie's lingering doubt about Joel's promise to her. The consequences of his actions at the hospital culminate in a patrol assignment in Jackson, as the final blow is delivered by the golf club in Abby's hands. A mere witness to this, Ellie takes on a mission of vengeance against her adoptive father's murderers, unaware of the real reason that drove Abby's attack. Thus, Ellie undergoes a painful transformation that directly results from the initial moment in which she is denied agency. The purpose that she was destined to serve is stolen from her by her male counterpart, leaving her with a persistent feeling of unfulfillment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Ellie mostly subverts classic feminine archetypes of the Western by finding her character's agency, adopting masculine traits and skills and fulfilling her queerness. These are her most valuable transgressive points. Her character is a product of the mission set out by Weird Westerns, to provide a stage for marginalized groups, dismantling its typical white male authority. However, as in many Weird Westerns of today, representation

is not yet entirely transgressive, and the male hero still holds considerable power over his feminine counterparts.

END NOTES

¹ See in The Last of Us Wiki.

² Non-player character. An NPC is not controlled by the player but by the computer system, so its actions are limited and oriented in a specific way. Ellie's NPC form plays a support role to Joel in the ways mentioned above.

³ The "Bury Your Gays" literary trope was first noticed around the end of the 19th century and persists in the 21st century. It was initially created as a form of protection for LGBTQ writers who would inevitably face backlash for representing gay characters in their work. The solution was then to condemn these characters to miserable endings to curb the impression that homosexuality was being promoted. Contemporary uses of this trope include various purposes: to advance the narrative in some way, to induce shock, or as a way of punishment from its homophobic straight authors- (Hulan 2017). Furthermore, these deaths often take place immediately after a confirmation of queer love, namely a kiss scene (as is the case with Ellie and Riley).

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CATARINA RICARDO

Catarina Ricardo holds a Bachelor's degree in Languages, Literatures and Cultures from NOVA University of Lisbon – School of Social Sciences and Humanities. She is currently a Master's student in the same faculty. Catarina is interested in the fields of game studies, American studies and gender studies.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-4378-2624>

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The International Conference on Victorian and American Myths in Video Games

TERESA PEREIRA

FCSH-NOVA University of Lisbon/CETAPS

Between April 9 and 11, 2025, NOVA FCSH hosted the International Conference on *Victorian and American Myths in Video Games*, organized within the context of CETAPS's former strand "Culture, Science, and the Media" and also the "American Intersections" strand, both part of the research area Anglophone Cultures and History. The conference took place in the intimate setting of the Salão Nobre at Colégio Almada Negreiros, formerly known as Colégio dos Jesuítas. This historical building was gradually constructed during the second half of the nineteenth century and was overseen by the Companhia de Jesus, before being later occupied by the Portuguese army and subsequently transferred to NOVA University Lisbon (NOVA FCSH). Throughout the three days of the conference, CETAPS's secretary, Cristina Carinhas, and the organizing committee, namely Rui Mateus, Alice Carletto, Mariana Cruz, and Beatriz de Almeida Santos, as well as Tânia Cerqueira, despite being in Porto, provided unwavering assistance and ensured everything ran as smoothly as possible.

With twenty-five participants from different corners of the world presenting individual or joint papers and three keynote speakers specializing in the topics addressed by the conference, the event was divided into 8 panels. "Panel 1: Revisiting the American West and the American Dream" and "Panel 8: Perspectives on Colonization and American Warfare" focused on American studies, examining video games such as *The Oregon Trail* (2021), *When Rivers Were Trails* (2019), *American Arcadia* (2023), the *Pokémon* franchise, *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010), and *The Punisher* (2004), among others. "Panel 3: Narratives of Contagion and Religion", "Panel 5: (Neo)Victorian Masculinities and Feminities", and "Panel 7: Moral Ambiguities and Remarkable Victorians", in turn, approached video games engaged with Victorian and neo-Victorian topics, specifically *Vampyr*

150 (2018) and *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (2015), to name but a few. Other panels, such as “Panel 2: (De)Mythifying Digital Spaces”, “Panel 4: Heroic Archetypes”, and “Panel 6: Ludic Cinema and Playful Characters”, broadened the scope of video games addressed by the participants, discussing *The Lord of the Rings Online* (2007), H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) and *The Sinking City* (2019), *Layers of Fear* (2016), *L.A. Noire* (2011), *Disco Elysium* (2019), and ludic narratives featuring Sherlock Holmes and his associates.

Throughout the conference, members of the executive committee, besides Teresa Pereira and Jéssica Bispo, attended and moderated the panels, contributing to an atmosphere open to the active exchange of ideas, as exemplified by Gabriela Gândara Terenas, Iolanda Ramos, Isabel Oliveira, and Fátima Vieira, the latter of whom travelled all the way from Porto just for the event. Finally, the conference concluded with a guided visit to the National Museum of Contemporary Art, organized by Pereira with the assistance of Terenas and of NOVA FCSH staff, allowing participants from different countries to connect Victorian and American mythic discourses with nineteenth and twentieth-century Portuguese art.

KEYNOTE LECTURES: DOM FORD, HEIKE PAUL, AND BARBARA BRAID

The International Conference on *Victorian and American Myths in Video Games* featured three keynote lecturers, Dom Ford, Heike Paul, and Barbara Braid, who kindly accepted Teresa Pereira's and Jéssica Bispo's invitation to visit NOVA FCSH and share their expertise at the event.

Dom Ford was the first to speak, opening the conference with a paper entitled “Mytholudics: Games and Myth”. Ford, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Bremen, where he conducts work in the Media and Religion lab at the ZeMKI Centre for Media, Communication, and Information Research, has recently published *Mytholudics: Games and Myth* (2025), which is largely linked to the paper he presented at the conference. The keynote lecture explored mytholudics, a framework for understanding how games make meaning as myth and through it, drawing on Roland Barthes' conceptualization of myth as a means through which meaning is expressed and on Frog's mythic discourse analysis, “a modern folklore approach” that positions myths as “models for understanding the world and things in it” (Ford 2025, 6). Through mytholudics, mythic discourse analysis was adapted to the study of games connected to Victorian and American myths, taking into

account the games' specificities, particularly in relation to virtuality, nonlinearity, and performativity (*ibidem*), as explained by Ford.

Chair of American Studies at Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nürnberg and director of the Bavarian American Academy in Munich, Heike Paul, author of acclaimed theoretical works such as *The Myths that Made America* (2014), was the second keynote lecturer, presenting "American Myths in Times of Crisis". In it, Paul, who has held fellowships at Harvard University, the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin, and the Thomas Mann House in Los Angeles, and who has twice served as Visiting Harris Professor at Dartmouth College, explored foundational mythic narratives. According to Paul, myth criticism has long attempted to do more than simply celebrate and heroize American myths of origin, instead engaging in revisiting the flaws and blind spots of mythic stock characters and stories (Paul 2025, 3). However, as the recipient of the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize contended in her lecture, this revisionist engagement with celebrated mythic narratives has in recent times come under attack by those pursuing "agendas of restoration, revanchism, and destruction" (*ibidem*).

Finally, Barbara Braid, Assistant Professor of English at the Institute of Literature and New Media, University of Szczecin, Poland, presented "Rewriting Victorian Biomyths in neo-Victorian Biofiction", a topic she also explored in "Biofiction and the Neo-Victorian Crime Novel: The Case of the Brontës" (2024), "Queering the Female Writer in Screen Biofictions: *Daphne* (2007) and *Shirley* (2020)" (2024), and "Queer Heritage and Strategic Humour in Recent Screen Biofictions of Emily Dickinson" (2024), among others. As Braid argued, biofiction, "a type of literary or audiovisual text that offers a new version of a historical persona" (4), specifically when neo-Victorian in nature, reimagines Victorian figures, both the most famous and those that have been largely forgotten. In doing so, biofiction frequently highlights the most scandalous aspects of its subjects' lives or reinterprets their biographies in relation to contemporary understandings of identity and society (Braid 2025, 4). As a result, biofiction is highly revisionist, engaging in "the process of mythologization and de- or re-mythologization" and employing emblemization, revision, anachronism, metafiction, and parody to reconfigure what Braid terms Victorian biomyths within the context of neo-Victorian texts, including video games (*ibidem*).

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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON

VICTORIAN AND
AMERICAN MYTHS IN
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9-11 APRIL 2025

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Colégio Almada Negreiros

Lisbon, Portugal

victorian.american.myths@gmail.com

GALLERY







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VARIA SECTION

A “Convenient Euthanasia”:

O papel da eutanásia na obra de H. G. Wells¹

MIGUEL OLIVEIRA

FCSH - Universidade Nova de Lisboa

RESUMO: Nas últimas décadas, a morte assistida tornou-se num dos temas mais fraturantes das sociedades contemporâneas, dividindo a opinião de especialistas e configurando-se como uma questão sem consenso social. Contudo, o debate em torno da eutanásia tem raízes na sociedade vitoriana da segunda metade do século XIX, antecipando muitos dos argumentos que ainda hoje são apresentados, tanto a favor como contra, a morte assistida. Embora, sobretudo após as atrocidades da Segunda Guerra Mundial, a discussão se tenha deslocado para os campos da bioética, do direito e da medicina, a sua génese foi marcada pelas teorias eugénicas e pelo darwinismo social em voga na Era Vitoriana tardia e no início do período Eduardiano.

As principais ideias em circulação na época exerceram influência não apenas na sociedade, mas também na produção literária de autores proeminentes, em particular no domínio da

ABSTRACT: In recent decades, assisted dying has become one of the most divisive issues in contemporary society. It continues to divide expert opinion and remains an issue for which no social consensus has yet emerged. However, this debate has roots in Victorian society in the late 19th century, where many arguments used today, both for and against assisted dying, were already anticipated. After World War II, the discussion shifted to the fields of bioethics, law, and medicine. Nevertheless, its genesis was marked by the eugenic theories and social Darwinism prevalent in the late Victorian and early Edwardian periods.

The prevailing ideas of the time had a profound influence on both society and the literary works of prominent authors. In speculative fiction, futuristic and alternative universes already incorporated assisted dying as an established practice. This study analyses the impact of the euthanasia debate in the novel *When The*



ficção especulativa, onde alguns universos futuristas e alternativos já incorporavam a morte assistida como prática instituída. O presente estudo procura analisar o impacto do debate sobre a eutanásia no romance *When The Sleeper Wakes* e na novela “A Story of the Days to Come”, ambos publicados por H. G. Wells em 1899.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Eutanásia, H. G. Wells, Eugenia, Darwinismo social, Utopia/Distopia.

Sleeper Wakes and the novella “A Story of the Days to Come”, both published by H. G. Wells in 1899.

KEYWORDS: Euthanasia, H. G. Wells, Eugenics, Social Darwinism, Utopia/Dystopia.

O debate sobre a morte assistida conheceu desenvolvimentos importantes na segunda metade do século XIX, quando o termo “eutanásia” adquiriu o seu sentido moderno, após a publicação do ensaio “Euthanasia”, de Samuel D. Williams, em 1870. Os avanços científicos, tecnológicos e médicos, bem como diversos fatores de ordem social, transformaram a forma como a sociedade vitoriana encarava a vida e a morte, bem como a intervenção dos profissionais de saúde em ambas. As propostas que emergem neste período e, posteriormente, no período eduardiano, articulam-se com outros discursos igualmente influentes, como a eugenia de Francis Galton, o darwinismo social de Herbert Spencer, as teorias económicas de Thomas Malthus, o anseio por progresso social e os receios relativos à sobrepopulação e à degeneração física e moral da espécie humana. Desta forma, o debate adquiriu uma feição marcadamente biopolítica e a eutanásia surge, em simultâneo, como ideia humanista e como instrumento para resolver ou mitigar problemas sociais. Estes debates suscitaram ainda reflexões mais amplas sobre o papel do Estado, da medicina e da tecnologia na gestão da vida e da morte.

Ao analisar obras como o romance *When the Sleeper Wakes* e a novela “A Story of the Days to Come”, ambas publicadas por H. G. Wells em 1899, é importante considerar o impacto que estas discussões tiveram na sociedade da época e compreender de que forma foram transpostas para a ficção. Embora nenhuma das obras tenha a eutanásia como tema central do enredo e esta desempenhe nelas um papel secundário, é fundamental conhecer os argumentos utilizados no debate sobre a morte assistida para perceber a função narrativa da eutanásia e as suas implicações sociais, morais e políticas. O presente artigo procura, assim, analisar como Wells incorpora o debate sobre a eutanásia em *When the Sleeper Wakes* e “A Story of the Days to Come”, revelando a influência de problemas sociais característicos da época, como a tensão entre classes, nas reflexões do autor. Nestas narrativas, a morte assistida surge ora como mecanismo de controlo populacional e de higienização social, ora como privilégio reservado às classes mais favorecidas.

Este artigo insere-se no âmbito dos Estudos Culturais, combinando a análise textual com o enquadramento histórico, social e político. Ao longo do estudo, recorre-se aos conceitos de biopolítica e biopoder de Michel Foucault,² bem como aos discursos que moldaram o debate na sociedade vitoriana tardia e no período eduardiano, com especial atenção à eugenia, ao darwinismo social e às obsessões destas épocas com as noções de

progresso e de degeneração das populações. Partindo deste quadro teórico, examina-se a forma como Wells transpõe para a ficção alguns dos argumentos centrais do debate sobre a morte assistida e a função da eutanásia nas narrativas em estudo.

O artigo organiza-se em duas secções principais. A primeira apresenta o enquadramento histórico e teórico necessário à compreensão do debate sobre a eutanásia na segunda metade do século XIX, articulando-o com outros discursos emergentes no período. A segunda secção é dedicada à análise das obras de H. G. Wells, explorando o impacto do debate sobre a morte assistida nas narrativas e o modo como estas o utilizam para problematizar questões como a tensão entre classes e o controlo nas sociedades alternativas imaginadas pelo autor.

2. DE UM SENTIDO CLÁSSICO AO INÍCIO DO DEBATE MODERNO

Na Grécia Antiga, com exceção dos profissionais que seguissem o juramento de Hipócrates, a morte assistida era uma prática aceite e o suicídio não era condenável nos casos de doenças incuráveis. Segundo N. D. A. Kemp, a palavra eutanásia não era utilizada com frequência na época e o seu significado clássico remete para uma morte sem sofrimento, não estando necessariamente relacionada com um ato médico ou assistido (Kemp 2002, 4).³ Deste modo, o envolvimento de um profissional de saúde que interviesse de forma ativa no fim da vida de um paciente equiparava-se à assistência ao suicídio para providenciar uma morte sem sofrimento. A condenação do suicídio por parte das autoridades cristãs durante a Antiguidade Tardia — em especial na doutrina de Santo Agostinho — interfere com a morte assistida que é, por extensão, também rejeitada. Na sua *Suma Teológica* (1265 – 1274), S. Tomás de Aquino mantém-se contundente em relação ao suicídio e só no Renascimento se torna possível interpretar alguma tolerância quanto à possibilidade de intervenção perante um doente em sofrimento e com uma doença incurável.

Na ilha imaginária retratada por Thomas More em *Utopia*, as autoridades eclesiásticas não condenam o suicídio ou a morte assistida nos casos de doenças incuráveis. Pelo contrário, More descreve a forma como os padres e os funcionários públicos apoiam estas práticas quando o paciente sente que:

now that life is simply torture he [o utente] should not hesitate to die but should rely on hope for something better; and since his life is a prison where he is bitterly tormented, he should



escape from it on his own or allow others to rescue him from it (...) death would put an end not to pleasure but to agony. (More 2003, 78)

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Apesar de manter a condenação do suicídio, nos casos em que este é aprovado pelas autoridades estatais e eclesiásticas, a morte passa a ser considerada honrada e legítima. Dado o pendor satírico da obra e a possibilidade de interpretar na ilha Utopia uma crítica aos comportamentos da época em vez de uma sociedade ideal, não devemos assumir que o autor era defensor da morte assistida. No entanto, a perspectiva de More remete para uma visão mais tolerante em relação ao sofrimento de pacientes com doenças incuráveis, e a obra viria a ser citada na Câmara dos Lordes do Parlamento Britânico aquando da primeira tentativa de legalizar a eutanásia voluntária no Reino Unido, em 1936.

Ao pronunciar-se sobre a deontologia da profissão médica, em *The Advancement of Learning*, Francis Bacon utiliza o termo “eutanásia” associado à medicina. Para o filósofo, o papel do médico não se limitava a tratar as doenças, cumpria também atenuar o sofrimento do paciente no momento da morte:

I esteem it the office of a physician not only to restore health, but to mitigate pain and dolors; and not only when such mitigation may conduce to recovery, but when it may serve to make a fair and easy passage: for it is no small felicity which Augustus Caesar was wont to wish to himself, that same Euthanasia. (Bacon 2011, 375)

Ainda que a assistência médica seja estendida aos momentos finais do doente, não é claro que Francis Bacon esteja a utilizar o conceito moderno de eutanásia. Em sintonia com o artigo de António Lourenço Marques, “A ‘Boa Morte’ de Bacon”, considera-se mais plausível que o autor recorra ao conceito clássico do termo e se refira antes à responsabilidade médica de providenciar cuidados paliativos e de acompanhar os pacientes até nos momentos finais. No seguimento do texto, Bacon lamenta que os médicos abandonem os doentes ao sofrimento quando se apercebem que a morte é inevitável e apela a que mudem a sua prática: “in my judgement, they ought both to enquire the skill and to give the attendances for the facilitating and assuaging of the pains and agonies of death” (Bacon 2011, 376).⁴

O conceito moderno de eutanásia surge em 1870, com a publicação do artigo “Euthanasia”, de Samuel D. Williams, incluído na compilação *Essays by Members of the Birmingham Speculative Club*. O autor começa por destacar os desenvolvimentos no campo da cirurgia e a descoberta das propriedades anestésicas do clorofórmio feita por James Young Simpson, em 1847.⁵ Antecipando a controvérsia que a sua própria proposta poderia desencadear e utilizando a popularização do uso de clorofórmio como exemplo, Williams sugere que o progresso científico tende a ser inicialmente recebido com resistência e objeções, as quais acabam por se dissipar diante das evidências dos benefícios trazidos pelas inovações ao ser humano. De seguida, o autor apresenta de forma clara o objetivo do seu artigo e propõe a utilização de anestésicos e analgésicos para precipitar a morte, quando tal é solicitado por doentes em sofrimento. Segundo Williams, os médicos teriam o dever profissional e moral de cumprir esta última vontade do paciente:

That in all cases of hopeless and painful illness, it should be the recognized duty of the medical attendant, whenever so desired by the patient, to administer chloroform or such other anaesthetic (...) so as to destroy consciousness at once, and put the sufferer to a quick and painless death. (Williams 1870, 212)

O artigo de Williams parte de princípios humanistas e é inegável que o seu objetivo principal é o de evitar o sofrimento que considera desnecessário, bem como a angústia que acompanha a doença prolongada e os momentos finais dos pacientes. Ao longo do texto, Williams opõe a fragilidade humana à indiferença quase cruel da natureza — descrita maioritariamente como uma entidade inclemente — e salienta o sofrimento inerente à morte e à doença como torturas que a humanidade se vê obrigada a enfrentar de modo injustificável. Perante este conflito, o intelecto humano e os desenvolvimentos científicos surgem como meios para contrariar ou atenuar a supremacia da natureza: “the patient about to suffer at the hands of nature the worst she has to inflict — and her resources in this line are terribly great — be left without help or hope of help?” (Williams 1870, 212). Se a morte é inevitável e faz parte da condição humana, o autor sugere que não há necessidade de sofrer os tormentos da doença e a agonia dos momentos finais da vida caso se torne legítimo recorrer à ciência, passando a eutanásia a ser um direito fundamental do paciente e um dever dos profissionais médicos. Deste modo, Williams apresenta a eutanásia como uma conquista sobre a natureza, podendo ser vista, em parte, como uma

forma científica de morrer, condição necessária ao progresso na luta contra o sofrimento da humanidade.

Ainda que o principal enfoque do artigo de Williams seja o de diminuir a agonia humana, a retórica que utiliza para descrever a oposição entre o homem e a natureza — tal como alguns dos argumentos empregues para defender a eutanásia voluntária — põe em evidência a influência do darwinismo social e da eugenia, destaca o impacto da filosofia utilitarista em voga na época e realça a obsessão vitoriana pelo dever individual e pelo constante progresso social e científico. Após rebater as objeções de cariz religioso que julga virem a surgir com a publicação do seu artigo, mais concretamente o princípio de sacralidade da vida humana e o dever de absoluta submissão à vontade divina, o autor defende que os pacientes devem ter a possibilidade de escolher a forma e o momento da sua morte, assumindo-se como detentores das suas próprias vidas e não estando dependentes da autoridade do Estado ou da Igreja.

Ao argumentar a favor da sua proposta, Williams enaltece os possíveis benefícios da eutanásia em situações em que o paciente não quer continuar a viver e se sente um peso, tanto para si como para familiares, amigos e para a sociedade, dado sentir que a sua vida perdeu o sentido e a utilidade: “there can be no violation of the sacredness of life, (...) when, with the consent of the sufferer, a life is taken away that has ceased to be useful to others, and has become an unbearable infliction to its possessor” (Williams 1870, 216). Assim, a eutanásia deixa de ser apenas uma escolha inteiramente pessoal, pois o paciente, ao requerer o procedimento, assume a obrigação de ponderar o valor que representa para a sociedade e, em paralelo, o sofrimento que provoca aos que lhe são próximos. Neste contexto, os argumentos utilizados pelo autor põem em relevo a filosofia utilitarista da época e evidenciam a influência dos valores vitorianos de dever social e de altruísmo. O compromisso de considerar o seu contributo para a sociedade sugere que o valor da vida humana não é intrínseco e deve ser calculado em função da utilidade do indivíduo para o coletivo — o que, paradoxalmente, põe em causa o seu direito de recorrer livremente à eutanásia.

No mesmo sentido, ao defender que o paciente tem a responsabilidade de considerar o sofrimento causado aos que lhe são próximos, Williams quase induz à escolha da eutanásia como forma de pôr termo à vida, já que descreve a dor, a frustração e o tormento daqueles que assistem ao definhar e à morte de um ente querido:

it is questionable if it be not a man's duty to consider others' feelings, and to weigh others as well as his own; and to bethink himself whether he ought to condemn those nearest him to witness sufferings which they would find it almost as easy to bear themselves as to see another bear. (Williams 1870, 220)

Uma vez mais, Williams apela ao altruísmo e ao sentido de responsabilidade do paciente que, em vez de colocar a sua vontade pessoal e a falta de qualidade de vida como elementos principais para a tomada de uma resolução, deve ponderar a escolha à luz do impacto que o processo de degradação biológica e a morte têm sobre os outros. Assim, sugere-se que a morte sem sofrimento, por meio da eutanásia, é um alívio não só para o doente, mas também para os que lhe são próximos.

Por sua vez, ao descrever a relação de oposição que estabelece entre a humanidade e a natureza, Williams deixa transparecer a pesada influência do darwinismo social e dos princípios eugênicos da sua proposta. Apesar de manter o enfoque do artigo no sofrimento intrínseco à doença, o autor sugere que o único benefício retirado da atuação da natureza consiste na manutenção do vigor da espécie, ou seja, na preservação das “hardiest races, and of the hardiest individuals of each race” (*idem*, 228). Deste modo, a seleção natural asseguraria a prevalência dos mais fortes nas sociedades, sentenciando os mais fracos “to go to the wall” (*idem*, 229). Na ótica de Williams, ainda que não seja possível contrariar a seleção natural na totalidade — o que mantém a primazia dos mais aptos — os desenvolvimentos científicos, especialmente quando aplicados à medicina, tendem a proteger e favorecer os elementos mais vulneráveis da sociedade e a permitir a sua sobrevivência em condições adversas. Neste sentido, do mesmo modo que a ciência e a tecnologia são empregues para beneficiar os mais frágeis, o autor defende que devem ser empregues para mitigar o sofrimento humano em geral e, quando o paciente assim o deseje, abreviar a vida, evitando os tormentos da doença.

O artigo de Samuel D. Williams inaugurou o debate moderno sobre a morte assistida e recebeu ampla atenção por parte da sociedade da época, sendo discutido em periódicos britânicos como *The Spectator*, *The Fortnightly Review* e *Saturday Review* e republicado isoladamente quatro vezes no espaço de três anos. Tal como previsto pelo autor, a sua proposta foi recebida com desconfiança e surgiram objeções baseadas em princípios religiosos, como o da sacralidade da vida humana e o dever de respeitar a vontade divina. Contudo, emergiram igualmente novos argumentos contra a eutanásia, muitos dos



quais se mantêm pertinentes para o debate contemporâneo — como a pressão que é colocada nos pacientes e nos profissionais de saúde, a possibilidade de desenvolvimentos na medicina que levem à cura de doenças até então terminais e a hipótese de abusos da prática, bem como de instrumentalização oportunista da morte assistida por motivos não relacionados com a saúde.

Por outro lado, surgiram também publicações que não se limitaram a acolher a iniciativa de Williams e que a desenvolveram para abranger secções mais vastas da população, consideradas indesejadas e improdutivas para o coletivo. Neste contexto, importa salientar a perspetiva de Lionel Tollemache, explanada no artigo “The New Cure for Incurables”, publicado em 1873 no *The Fortnightly Review*. O autor reforça os argumentos de Williams, salientando a responsabilidade do paciente de considerar o sofrimento e o peso que gera aos que lhe são próximos e à sociedade. Tal como Williams, Tollemache procura refutar os argumentos religiosos e sustenta que nem o Estado nem a Igreja devem ter o poder de prolongar o sofrimento humano quando o indivíduo deseja morrer. O autor vê na proposta de Williams o equivalente ao suicídio assistido e é perentório ao reivindicar a legalização deste ato. Contudo, ao argumentar a favor da eutanásia voluntária, não se limita aos casos de pacientes com doenças terminais ou dolorosas, estendendo a legitimidade do suicídio aos elementos que considera dispensáveis e menos produtivos na sociedade, personificados nos “prolonged idlers” e nos “drunkards” (Tollemache 1873, 225). Utilizando uma retórica utilitarista extrema — que revela uma hierarquização do valor da vida humana entre os que contribuem para sociedade e os que não o fazem, além de expor a influência das teorias malthusianas e da paranoia vitoriana com a degeneração social e biológica da espécie — Tollemache defende que o suicídio dos elementos não produtivos é benéfico para a coletividade por reduzir o consumo de recursos por parte destes indivíduos e por conter o retrocesso civilizacional:

But the idle or frivolous man or woman is allowed to spread the infection of idleness or frivolity all around. The drunkard wears out his own constitution, and is of but doubtful profit to his neighbours (...). Who then has a right to coerce that less objectionable member of society, the would be suicide? If we may not interfere with the do-nothing-eat-all (or even drink all), how can we meddle with the do-nothing-eat-nothing? (*ibidem*)



É importante esclarecer que o debate que teve lugar nos periódicos britânicos não envolveu intervenientes diretamente relacionados com a medicina, tratando apenas da eutanásia voluntária.⁶ Tal só aconteceria em 1901, quando o médico C. E. Goddard se pronunciou sobre a temática, indo mais longe ao propor a eutanásia involuntária para pacientes com incapacidades mentais profundas. Com base na hereditariedade genética, que se julgava inerente aos casos de doenças mentais, Goddard utilizou argumentos eugénicos para se justificar, salientou a noção de degeneração biológica e social e apontou para o aumento do número de pessoas a cargo de asilos, bem como para a falta de soluções no campo da psiquiatria. Em simultâneo, apoiou a eutanásia voluntária de pacientes terminais e de doentes mentais capazes de expressar consentimento. Para além da base eugénica da argumentação, Goddard teceu considerações humanistas sobre o sofrimento físico e mental dos pacientes nestas condições, mesmo nos casos em que os doentes não eram capazes de expressar a sua perturbação. A posição de Goddard foi também considerada extrema e não recebeu o apoio da comunidade médica, nem da esmagadora maioria dos eugenistas que viriam a integrar a Eugenics Education Society, formada em 1907 no Reino Unido e que promovia propostas mais conservadoras.

Já nos Estados Unidos da América, onde a eugenia e o darwinismo social também se tornaram populares no fim do século XIX e nas primeiras décadas do século XX, o envolvimento de profissionais médicos no debate ocorreu mais cedo. O artigo de Samuel D. Williams recebeu resenhas positivas no *Popular Science Monthly* em 1873, mas encontrou forte resistência por parte da comunidade médica. Após debates de várias comissões de ética, iniciados em 1879 na Carolina do Sul, surgiu o consenso de que a eutanásia ativa punha em causa os princípios da medicina e descredibilizava a profissão. Em 1885, a American Medical Association pronunciou-se contrariamente em relação à prática, e o tema só voltou a ser debatido a partir de 1890, quando os advogados Albert Bach e Simeone Baldwin — ambos a favor da eutanásia — contestaram a posição e a autoridade da comunidade médica. Em 1905 e 1906, surgiram no Ohio as primeiras propostas para legalizar a morte assistida no caso de adultos com doenças terminais e de crianças com deformidades e deficiências mentais profundas.⁷

Sobre o debate que se seguiu à publicação de “Euthanasia”, de Samuel D. Williams, é possível extrair algumas conclusões que terão fortes implicações para o seguimento do presente estudo. Tal como no artigo de Williams, os autores que escreveram em defesa da

morte assistida tenderam a fundir argumentos humanistas com a filosofia utilitarista, articulando estas perspectivas com as teorias dominantes da época — em especial o evolucionismo, o darwinismo social, a eugenia e as análises económicas draconianas de Thomas Malthus, bem como com os valores e ansiedades que marcaram o vitorianismo tardio e o início do período eduardiano.

Apesar da preocupação declarada com o alívio do sofrimento humano, os textos estão imersos numa retórica centrada na produtividade individual, na gestão de recursos, no progresso social e nos receios de degeneração da espécie e de sobrepopulação. A influência destes fatores é de tal ordem que, em determinadas passagens, torna-se possível inferir que os desenvolvimentos médicos contrariavam os princípios da seleção natural, resultando num entrave ao bem-estar das sociedades e ao progresso da humanidade no geral.⁸ Neste cenário, a eutanásia voluntária poderia servir como um instrumento potencial para mitigar tais perdas e restaurar um paradigma supostamente mais equilibrado. Assim, o debate espelha igualmente a tendência vitoriana e eduardiana para marginalizar os elementos mais vulneráveis da sociedade — como os idosos e os doentes mentais — e, à semelhança de medidas como a *New Poor Law* de 1834⁹ e da vasta implementação das *workhouses* ao longo do século XIX, promover uma lógica de desresponsabilização social face àqueles que não eram considerados autossuficientes.

É também assinalável que, conforme defende N. D. A. Kemp (2002, 17), as propostas a favor da eutanásia mantiveram-se vagas e em muitos casos, incluindo os de Williams e Tollemache, mais do que sugestões concretas, representaram o prolongar do debate filosófico com vista a defender a despenalização do suicídio, seguindo as pisadas de David Hume e de outros filósofos iluministas como Voltaire. O fascínio pela tecnologia e pela ciência levou a que a eutanásia fosse apresentada como uma alternativa progressista à morte natural, podendo ser vista, de certo modo, como a forma científica de morrer, que prometia desenvolvimentos no futuro. No entanto, esta perspectiva foi considerada radical pela maioria da sociedade e desconsiderada pela comunidade médica no Reino Unido.

Por fim, ainda que não concordemos inteiramente com a perspectiva de Ezekiel J. Emanuel — que sustenta que o desenvolvimento científico e tecnológico teve pouca relação com as propostas a favor da descriminalização da eutanásia voluntária que surgiram tanto na segunda metade do século XIX como na contemporaneidade — é inegável que muitos dos argumentos usados no primeiro debate sobre a morte assistida se mantiveram



pertinentes e são semelhantes aos que são apresentados na discussão em torno da temática que ocorre atualmente.

2. A EUTANÁSIA E A LITERATURA ESPECULATIVA¹⁰

Ainda que não tenha provocado alterações na prática médica da sociedade britânica da época, o debate sobre a eutanásia voluntária influenciou a produção literária de autores proeminentes — como Anthony Trollope, H. G. Wells, E. M. Forster e Robert Hugh Benson — que, de forma direta ou indireta, abordaram e retrataram a morte assistida nas suas obras.¹¹ Em parte, como sugerido anteriormente, em relação próxima ao evolucionismo e à obsessão vitoriana pelo progresso, a eutanásia foi percebida como a “morte do futuro”¹², científica e tecnológica, o que contribuiu para a sua presença marcada nas obras de ficção especulativa da época. As narrativas deste registo literário tendem a projetar o enredo das histórias num futuro distante ou em universos alternativos, permitindo aos autores comentar as problemáticas, ideologias e ansiedades dos seus tempos ao abrigo de um espaço diegético que lhes conferia maior liberdade de expressão para tratar temáticas controversas. Paralelamente, a divergência estética e ideológica quanto o papel da literatura, entre Henry James e H. G. Wells, no início do século XX, reforça a ideia de que, em larga medida, os escritores de ficção especulativa se aproximavam da figura do reformador social, perspetivando as suas obras como instrumentos de reflexão crítica sobre a sociedade e de promoção do progresso civilizacional.¹³

Deste ponto de vista, a ficção especulativa da época orientou-se para a construção de enredos projetados no futuro ou em universos alternativos, nos quais as civilizações enfrentam, maioritariamente através da inovação científica ou de reformas sociais, as principais inquietações das sociedades vitoriana e eduardiana. Contudo, se os temas abordados por este tipo de narrativas tendem a apresentar convergências, dado serem produzidos no mesmo contexto histórico e cultural, os meios de resolução destas problemáticas revelam-se frequentemente divergentes, variando de autor para autor. Esta dissensão deu origem a uma vasta produção literária inter-relacionada, em que as obras estabelecem um equilíbrio ambíguo, podendo ser lidas simultaneamente como utópicas e distópicas.



Embora a obra de H. G. Wells se preste a este tipo de leitura ambivalente — onde a ciência e o progresso tecnológico são representados como soluções plausíveis para lidar com problemas como a superpopulação ou o conflito de classes — subsiste sempre uma margem de incerteza quanto aos reais benefícios trazidos pelas transformações, nem sempre retratadas de forma inequívoca como positivas. Por contraste, em obras como *The Machine Stops* (1909) de E. M. Forster, e *Lord of the World* (1909) de Robert Hugh Benson, o registo narrativo é claramente pessimista, não permitindo interpretações que valorizem os avanços sociais e científicos enquanto forças benéficas. Assim, a eutanásia, como forma privilegiada de morrer no futuro, cumpre diferentes funções nas narrativas especulativas, mas nem sempre é apresentada como uma solução benigna para a humanidade.

2.1 A eutanásia em *When The Sleeper Wakes* e “A Story of the Days to Come” de H. G. Wells

Na obra de H. G. Wells, o conceito moderno de eutanásia revela-se particularmente pertinente para a análise do romance *When The Sleeper Wakes* (1899) e da novela “A Story of the Days to Come”, incluída na coletânea *Tales of Space and Time* (1899), ambos ambientados numa sociedade londrina futura, situada entre o final do século XXI e o início do século XXII. Embora a eutanásia não constitua o motivo central de nenhuma das narrativas, a morte assistida está presente em ambas e desempenha um papel significativo, essencial ao desenvolvimento dos enredos e à compreensão da dinâmica das sociedades futuristas retratadas por Wells.

Em “A Story of the Days to Come”, o autor aproxima-se, em larga medida, das ideias apresentadas por Samuel D. Williams em “Euthanasia”, ao distanciar-se dos ideais românticos e retratar a natureza não pela sua harmonia ou pelo sublime, mas como uma força hostil, perigosa e indiferente à existência humana. Com efeito, Wells privilegia o ambiente urbano e cosmopolita, civilizado, onde, apesar das adversidades e tensões inerentes à vida em sociedade, as personagens usufruem de uma comodidade e segurança características da classe média, ausentes no meio rural e natural. Esta posição torna-se mais explícita quando o autor quase parodia a possibilidade de alcançar a felicidade no vazio do meio rural: Elizabeth e Denton, o casal que protagoniza a história, tentam escapar da Londres cosmopolita — que impõe dificuldades à sua união — para viverem livremente



num ambiente campestre, onde a natureza permanece indômita. Apesar do seu amor fervoroso, as personagens não conseguem adaptar-se a um mundo não civilizado, no qual têm de confrontar a constante hostilidade e o desconforto, o que os leva a pôr em causa a viabilidade da sua relação. Até à morte de Bindon, o antagonista do enredo, que permite a resolução dos conflitos e a união do casal, Elizabeth e Denton veem-se obrigados a regressar a Londres e a enfrentar os sacrifícios e dificuldades desumanas impostas à classe baixa no ambiente urbano.

A morte de Bindon assume contornos de *deus ex machina*, uma vez que resolve, de forma inesperada, externa e abrupta, os obstáculos à união de Elizabeth e Denton. É neste episódio decisivo da narrativa que a eutanásia é introduzida na intriga e que um médico exalta a visão de uma sociedade inteiramente regida pela ciência, quase ao ponto de um culto ou de uma religião. Neste momento da história, também estão presentes a obsessão vitoriana pela eugenia, o evolucionismo e os receios de degeneração da espécie humana.

Após sentir uma dor aguda, Bindon decide consultar um médico, descrito pela sua boa reputação e, em simultâneo, por ter uma franqueza desagradável. Depois de analisar o paciente, o profissional questiona-o de imediato se alguma vez se reproduziu, ficando visivelmente aliviado ao saber que não. A recomendação do médico é clara: “better go right away, (...) and make the Euthanasia. The sooner the better” (Wells 1889, 308). Perante este parecer, Bindon justifica-se, referindo que os seus excessos ocorreram apenas na juventude, e solicita uma alternativa à eutanásia. Contudo, o pedido é praticamente ignorado e o médico insiste na sua posição, desta vez utilizando argumentos claramente eugénicos:

But you come of a bad stock. Even if you'd have taken precautions you'd have had bad times to wind up with. The mistake was getting born. The indiscretions of the parents (...) You've lived. We can't start you again. You ought never to have started at all. Frankly — the Euthanasia! (*idem*, 309)

As passagens citadas ilustram como a eutanásia surge na história diretamente relacionada com os receios de degenerescência, com as teorias evolucionistas e eugénicas e com a necessidade de controlo populacional. É explícito que Bindon é visto como um elemento indesejável, cuja existência representa um erro genético e social, devendo ser eliminado

antes que possa reproduzir-se e transmitir a sua hereditariedade. A natureza da doença do antagonista nunca é revelada e permanece ambígua, assim como os “excessos” a que se refere no início da consulta. No entanto, a insistência do médico leva a intuir que o problema de Bindon está relacionado com o seu perfil psicológico: “You see — from one point of view — people with imaginations and passions like yours have to go — they have to go” (*idem*, 312).

Antes de abandonar o consultório médico, Bindon mostra-se contrariado face ao parecer do especialista e frustrado pelo facto de a ciência não ter evoluído ao ponto de oferecer um tratamento ou cura para a sua condição. É neste contexto que o profissional recorre à expressão “take over the management” (Wells 312) para descrever a sua visão de uma sociedade utópica, totalmente regida pelo progresso científico:

Science is young yet. It's got to keep on growing for a few generations. We know enough now to know we don't know enough yet... But, between ourselves, you rich men and party bosses, with your natural play of passions and patriotism and religion and so forth, have made rather a mess of things; haven't you? (...) Some of us have a sort of fancy that in time we may know enough to take over a little more than the ventilation and drains. Knowledge keeps on piling up, you know. (...) Some day – some day, men will live in a different way.” He looked at Bindon and meditated. “There'll be a lot of dying out before that day can come.” (*idem*, 312-313)

Esta passagem evidencia o extremismo das perspetivas eugénicas presentes na narrativa, remetendo para a ideia de que seria necessário sacrificar parte da população para alcançar o ideal vitoriano e eduardiano de progresso social e científico. De acordo com esta visão, a sociedade encontra-se sob o domínio das elites — levianas, hedonistas e alheias ao bem comum, que são representadas como parte do problema por não contribuírem para o avanço do coletivo. Assim, a sociedade utópica descrita pelo médico só se tornaria viável depois de eliminada e reformulada a classe dominante. A ausência de referência às classes mais desfavorecidas sugere que, neste universo, a eutanásia é retratada como um privilégio reservado aos mais ricos e, em simultâneo, como instrumento de controlo populacional. Importa também sublinhar que, neste cenário futurista concebido por Wells, em tudo semelhante ao de *When The Sleeper Wakes*, já existem instituições especializadas na



morte assistida, uma vez que Bindon acaba por acatar a recomendação médica e abrevia a sua vida recorrendo à “Euthanasia Company” (*idem*, 319).

As diferentes vertentes dos argumentos utilizados no debate sobre a morte assistida manifestam-se de forma clara em “A Story of the Days to Come”, onde as posições das personagens revelam conceções distintas, ainda que não necessariamente inconciliáveis, sobre a sociedade e sobre a gestão da vida. Embora Bindon sinta inicialmente revolta perante a ausência de opções terapêuticas, o seu recurso à eutanásia não decorre da motivação eugénica que molda a opinião do médico, mas da decisão de evitar o sofrimento físico e psicológico inerente à sua patologia. Neste contexto, a morte assistida aproxima-se dos argumentos humanistas presentes na proposta de Samuel D. Williams, que defendem a eutanásia como meio de evitar o sofrimento desnecessário associado à doença e à morte.

Por outro lado, a visão do médico centra-se no progresso científico e civilizacional, defendendo que a evolução social só é possível quando cessam de existir os indivíduos considerados obstáculos ao desenvolvimento coletivo. Esta perspetiva abrange tanto aqueles que não contribuem para o bem comum devido aos seus vícios ou modo de vida leviano, como aqueles cujas crenças religiosas e motivações ideológicas contrariam a racionalidade científica e o ideal de progresso. Os conceitos de biopolítica e biopoder revelam-se particularmente pertinentes para analisar a sua perspetiva e a sua posição social: ao propor a eutanásia, o médico intervém diretamente num processo biológico — a continuidade da vida — e fá-lo não apenas em nome da saúde individual, mas sobretudo com base em motivações políticas e sociais, enquadradas nos discursos da eugenia e do darwinismo social.

Assim, na sociedade futurista imaginada por Wells, ainda que a eutanásia seja voluntária, funciona como um mecanismo de controlo social destinado a limitar a transmissão hereditária dos elementos considerados degenerados. O médico assume o papel de autoridade biopolítica, determinando a quem deve ser recomendada a eutanásia e quais vidas são consideradas dispensáveis ao progresso da sociedade. A frieza e a falta de empatia que demonstra perante a doença de Bindon reforçam a leitura de que, nesta obra, a medicina não tem como objetivo prioritário o bem-estar do indivíduo, mas, antes, a implementação de uma agenda política de aperfeiçoamento social.

No romance *When The Sleeper Wakes*, a eutanásia é retratada de forma coerente com algumas das interpretações elaboradas sobre o tema em “A Story of the Days to Come”. Depois de entrar num estado semelhante ao coma no final do século XIX, o protagonista, Graham, desperta duzentos e três anos mais tarde, numa sociedade londrina tecnologicamente avançada do século XXII. Durante este intervalo temporal, devido à especulação financeira e à convicção de que o protagonista não voltaria a recuperar a consciência, grande parte da riqueza global foi transferida para o seu nome. Ao despertar, Graham descobre não só ser o proprietário de uma fortuna inigualável, mas também ser venerado como uma figura messiânica por possuir poder sobre vastas áreas do mundo.

Após uma revolução levada a cabo em seu nome, organizada e liderada por Ostrog — um demagogo e principal antagonista do romance, que depõe o Conselho responsável pelo governo do Reino Unido, Graham apercebe-se de que, apesar dos avanços científicos, a nação enfrenta graves problemas sociais, resultantes, em grande medida, das profundas desigualdades entre as elites e as camadas mais desfavorecidas. Tal como na novela analisada anteriormente, a aristocracia e os membros de uma classe alta ociosa governam a sociedade de forma incompetente e ineficaz, dedicando o seu tempo, poder e atenção a questões frívolas e hedonistas. Em contraste, os mais desfavorecidos são retratados como uma população degenerada, física e intelectualmente, descrita como escravizada — obrigada a realizar trabalhos pesados para sobreviver e a viver em condições sub-humanas — e tendo perdido aptidões fundamentais, como a capacidade de se expressar corretamente na língua inglesa.

A primeira alusão à eutanásia no romance surge quando Helen Wotton — personagem fundamental para que Graham compreenda a dinâmica injusta e opressora da sociedade, bem como para despertar a sua empatia pelos mais marginalizados — descreve como as antigas instituições de caridade, como o *Salvation Army*, foram convertidas em entidades lucrativas que colhem os benefícios da exploração vitalícia e impiedosa dos indivíduos que não conseguem ser autossuficientes.¹⁴ Ao referir-se a esta camada da população, Wotton confirma as condições desumanas em que vivem os desfavorecidos, que não têm meios alternativos de subsistência e, por outro lado, não dispõem da riqueza necessária para aceder ao “luxo” da eutanásia: “And any man, woman or child who comes to be hungry and weary and with neither home nor friend nor resort, must go to the Company in the end — or seek some way of death. The Euthanasia is beyond their means

— for the poor there is no easy death” (Wells 2003, 164). Segundo Wotton, mais de um terço da população vive nestas condições e a *Labour Company*, que transformou as *workhouses* do século XIX em instituições ainda mais precárias, aplica uma lógica biopolítica para subjugar os indivíduos e tirar partido da sua miséria, regulando, por exemplo, o fornecimento de comida e as horas mínimas de descanso necessárias à manutenção da vida. Sem condições para recorrer à eutanásia, “the rich man’s refuge from life” (*idem*, 166), a população mais pobre resigna-se a uma deterioração lenta e contínua.

Por sua vez, ao explorar Londres por conta própria, Graham entra em contacto com o que resta da antiga classe média — trabalhadora, mas empobrecida, que também já revela sinais de degeneração física, moral e intelectual, ainda que de forma mais atenuada. Se a camada mais desfavorecida da população não tem acesso ao entretenimento, estando limitada ao trabalho e sonhando com a possibilidade de um dia frequentar as *Pleasure Cities*, a classe média autossuficiente consome-se nestes espaços de ambiguidade moral como forma de se evadir da vida quotidiana. Neste contexto, as *Pleasure Cities* funcionam como o entretenimento descrito por Guy Debord em *La Société du Spectacle*: mecanismos concebidos pelas elites oligárquicas para iludir e alienar as massas por meio do lazer e do vício, contribuindo para a degradação moral e social e, em simultâneo, para conter o descontentamento e a revolta popular. Assim, Wells retrata criticamente como os indivíduos são anulados pelas elites, consumindo os seus recursos nas *Pleasure Cities* e acabando por solicitar a eutanásia como forma de terminar a vida sem sofrimento: “The easy death. It is the last pleasure. The Euthanasy Company does it well. People will pay the sum — it is a costly thing — long beforehand, go off to some pleasure city and return impoverished and weary, very weary” (*idem*, 188).

Ainda neste paradigma, durante a deambulação de Graham pela cidade, o protagonista é também confrontado com a situação dos idosos, uma inquietação recorrente nos períodos vitoriano e eduardiano, agravada pelo aumento da longevidade e pela sobrecarga das *workhouses*, onde muitos dependiam do sustento estatal. As vidas dos mais velhos são descritas como “not so pleasant as they used to be, unless they are rich to hire lovers and helpers” (*ibidem*), o que evidencia o abandono e a completa desresponsabilização por parte da estrutura governativa. A solução que é apresentada a Graham para os que atingem uma idade avançada, já não são produtivos e possuem algum capital, ainda que insuficiente para garantir ajuda e prazer, volta a ser a morte assistida.



Deste modo, ao longo do romance, a eutanásia é apresentada sobretudo como um instrumento de controlo social e populacional, em vez de cumprir uma função humanista. Embora o parecer de Helen Wotton sugira implicitamente que recorrer à morte assistida seria uma opção mais digna e humana do que sobreviver nas condições de quase-escravatura impostas à classe baixa, o acesso efetivo à eutanásia permanece inalcançável para a maioria. Esta inacessibilidade contribui para evidenciar as tensões entre classes e a profunda disparidade entre os ricos e os pobres. O acesso à morte assistida é comercializado, assegurando que os trabalhos pesados — igualmente indispensáveis para o progresso social — continuem a ser desempenhados pelos que são explorados e que nunca terão meios de aceder à eutanásia. Em simultâneo, quando os membros da classe média começam a manifestar sinais de degeneração moral e física, seja por se entregarem ao ócio e aos vícios das *Pleasure Cities*, seja por envelhecerem e deixarem de desempenhar um papel ativo e útil na sociedade, a eutanásia voluntária volta a ser apontada como a forma privilegiada de morrer sem sofrimento. Neste contexto, tal como em “A Story of the Days to Come”, a prioridade da morte assistida não é contribuir para o bem-estar dos indivíduos em particular, mas preservar um *status quo* que acentua o isolamento e a desigualdade sociais.

A eutanásia cumpre uma última função no romance, ligada aos planos de Ostrog para reconfigurar a aristocracia e as elites. Ainda que detenha uma autoridade distinta da do médico que recomenda a eutanásia a Bindon em “A Story of the Days to Come”, o antagonista também ambiciona concretizar a sua própria utopia e reestruturar a sociedade. Após tomar o poder e apresentar a Graham os membros da elite — vazios de ideias e indiferentes ao sofrimento da população —, Ostrog revela-se um déspota, traidor da revolução que liderou, sem qualquer intenção real de instaurar um sistema democrático ou que beneficie as massas. Pelo contrário, o novo governante pretende instituir um regime totalitário, sustentado por uma nova aristocracia e fundado no princípio da “prevalence of the best — the suffering and extinction of the unfit, and so to better things” (Wells 2003, 171).

Ostrog expõe a Graham a sua visão do futuro da sociedade e, ao descrever a elite anterior ao seu golpe de Estado, que o protagonista acabara de conhecer, antecipa o seu desaparecimento: “Vice and pleasure! They have no children. That sort of stuff will die out. If the world keeps to one road, that is, if there is no turning back. An easy road to excess,



convenient Euthanasia for the pleasure seekers singed in the flame, that is the way to improve the race!” (*idem*, 171). Deste modo, tal como o médico da novela, Ostrog fundamenta-se no darwinismo social e nas teorias eugénicas para justificar o caminho rumo à sua sociedade ideal, reconhecendo a necessidade de eliminar os elementos considerados indesejáveis e mais fracos em nome do progresso da espécie. No entanto, se no discurso do médico a instrumentalização da eutanásia para alcançar os fins que julga superiores permanece implícita, no caso de Ostrog, é explícita a intenção de recorrer à morte assistida, conveniente, para concretizar as suas ambições políticas.

3. CONSIDERAÇÕES FINAIS

Tanto a novela “A Story of the Days to Come” como o romance *When The Sleeper Wakes* recorrem ao conceito moderno de eutanásia e permitem refletir criticamente sobre os argumentos e receios que marcaram o debate vitoriano em torno do tema, destacando a sua relação com a eugenia e o darwinismo social, bem como com as inquietações emergentes no final do século XIX e início do século XX, como a sobrepopulação e a degeneração moral e biológica da espécie.

As visões de Ostrog e do médico da novela evidenciam a obsessão vitoriana pelo progresso e assumem contornos particularmente extremos ao defenderem a eliminação dos indivíduos considerados fracos, degenerados ou inúteis como condição para transformar a sociedade e alcançar as suas utopias. A eutanásia é apresentada como um privilégio reservado aos mais ricos e como um mecanismo de “higienização” social aplicado tanto às elites em decadência como à classe média empobrecida, que já não contribui para a prosperidade coletiva. Por outro lado, os mais pobres são privados do acesso à eutanásia, obrigados a manter trabalhos duros e a sobreviver em condições sub-humanas, em benefício da estabilidade social e da produtividade.

Em “A Story of the Days to Come”, não é completamente explícito quem tem acesso à eutanásia ou não, uma vez que a única personagem confrontada com a possibilidade de morte assistida pertence a um meio favorecido. A perspetiva do médico — agente de controlo social por meio da biopolítica — sugere a eutanásia voluntária como forma de mitigar a degeneração e de implementar os princípios eugénicos que, na sua visão, favoreceriam o desenvolvimento civilizacional. Por outro lado, em *When the Sleeper Wakes*, a tensão entre classes é mais evidente e o acesso à morte assistida é um dos



marcadores sociais que delimitam a fronteira entre privilegiados e marginalizados. No romance, a discrepância entre as condições de vida acentua o isolamento e a alienação das várias classes: os mais desprivilegiados limitam-se a sobreviver e podem apenas sonhar com a vida dos mais favorecidos, a classe média entrega-se ao entretenimento abdicando de participar ativa e politicamente na sociedade e as elites permanecem indiferentes ao sofrimento generalizado. Deste modo, todas as classes sociais aparentam revelar sinais de degeneração, seja a nível moral, seja a nível biológico. A eutanásia funciona, em simultâneo, como instrumento de manutenção do *status quo* — ao permitir o manter deste isolamento e da discrepância entre classes — e de transformação social, já que tanto o médico da novela como Ostrog pretendem usar o biopoder para alcançar o que consideram ser o progresso social.

Sobretudo no romance, a narrativa é marcada por um pessimismo que molda o papel político da morte assistida e recupera algumas das objeções levantadas à proposta pioneira de Samuel D. Williams: a possibilidade de abuso, a desvalorização da vida humana e a instrumentalização oportunista da prática em nome de interesses ideológicos. Ainda assim, importa sublinhar que H. G. Wells apoiou declaradamente a legalização da eutanásia voluntária e se tornou membro de sociedades criadas com esse objetivo, nomeadamente a Voluntary Euthanasia Legalisation Society, fundada em 1935 no Reino Unido, e a sua equivalente norte-americana, a Euthanasia Society of America, criada em 1938.

NOTAS FINAIS

¹ O presente artigo insere-se num estudo mais amplo, ainda em desenvolvimento, sobre o papel da eutanásia na ficção, no âmbito do projeto de Doutoramento do autor, financiado pela Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT).

² Os termos “biopolítica” e “biopoder” são utilizados recorrentemente na obra de Michel Foucault e vão sendo progressivamente definidos pelo autor ao longo da década de 1970. Para Foucault, estes conceitos descrevem os mecanismos através dos quais o poder moderno passa a gerir a vida das populações, articulando processos biológicos, como natalidade, mortalidade, higiene, longevidade e reprodução, com medidas políticas e económicas próprias do liberalismo. A relação entre o corpo e a política é enfatizada, já que o primeiro é socializado e passa a ser, em simultâneo, alvo e meio de controlo por parte das autoridades. Neste sentido, são institucionalizadas e desenvolvidas técnicas para gerir

recursos e regular processos biológicos. Assim, a biopolítica remete para a exploração exercida pelas autoridades ao nível existencial, corporal e da vida biológica. A reflexão do autor sobre o biopoder surge inicialmente no primeiro volume de *Histoire de la sexualité* enquanto a noção de biopolítica é desenvolvida posteriormente ao longo dos cursos que lecionou entre 1978 e 1979 no Collège de France. As suas aulas seriam compiladas e publicadas em *Sécurité, territoire, population* e *Naissance de la biopolitique*.

³ Segundo o verbete de eutanásia enquanto conceito no *Dictionary of Global Bioethics*: “The word “euthanasia” derives etymologically from the Greek *eu* (good) and *thanatos* (death) and thus literally means “good death”. Euthanasia refers to the act of putting someone to a “good death” in the absence of any legal sanctions to do so to end a state of suffering considered by the patient as worse than death. This is the reason it is also called mercy killing” (Neves e Ten Have 2011, 491).

⁴ Importante salientar que a interpretação de Bacon não é consensual. O verbete sobre a História da eutanásia no *Dictionary of Global Bioethics*, por exemplo, contempla o seguinte: “Francis Bacon is commonly credited as the first to refer to euthanasia as a “good death” physicians could give patients for whom medicine could no longer offer any more assistance. It is widely believed that physicians have since then secretly practiced euthanasia as mercy killing to relieve patients from the suffering that physicians could not otherwise alleviate” (Neves e Ten Have 2011, 495).

⁵ Com efeito, os progressos na medicina ao longo do século XIX foram essenciais para os procedimentos cirúrgicos e para a mudança de certas práticas. O uso do clorofórmio como anestésico, por exemplo, passou a ser comum para aliviar as dores do parto. A sintetização da morfina a partir do ópio, em 1816, a proposta de John C. Warren, em 1848, para a utilização do éter no sentido de aliviar a agonia da morte, e a invenção da seringa hipodérmica, em 1853, constituem outras invenções e descobertas pertinentes de assinalar (Emanuel 1994, 794-795).

⁶ Apesar de se debruçar sobre a temática da morte assistida e de a relacionar com a medicina, sugerindo mudanças na atuação dos profissionais da área, Samuel D. Williams não era médico nem tinha qualquer ligação ao campo da saúde. Do mesmo modo, nenhum dos restantes intervenientes no debate tinha habilitações médicas.

⁷ Para um estudo do impacto do debate sobre a eutanásia nos Estados Unidos da América, remete-se à obra de Ian Dowbiggin: *A Merciful End: The Euthanasia Movement in Modern America* (2003).

⁸ Veja-se, a título de exemplo, a seguinte passagem do artigo de Lionel Tollemache: “And, in a somewhat similar spirit, modern science informs us that in an overcrowded population there is a sharp struggle for existence; so that an unhealthy, unhappy and useless man is in a manner hustling out of being, or at least out of the means of enjoyment, some one who would probably be happier, healthier, and more useful than himself” (Tollemache 1873, 227).

⁹ A *New Poor Law*, também conhecida como a *Poor Law Amendment Act*, foi aprovada pelo Parlamento britânico em 1834 e visava reformular a assistência às camadas empobrecidas da população. A nova lei privilegiava a assistência centralizada, uniformizada

e predominantemente institucional, em detrimento do modelo anterior de apoios comunitários locais. Com esta legislação, as condições de vida nas *workhouses* tornaram-se mais precárias, desencorajando os indivíduos mais pobres de recorrer a assistência pública.

¹⁰ Para uma introdução mais abrangente à ficção especulativa e às possibilidades abertas por este registo para comentar a sociedade e a política, através de projeções no futuro ou em universos alternativos, veja-se *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (1977), de Darko Suvin, e *A Short History of Fantasy* (2009), de Farah Mendlesohn e Peter Nicholls. Veja-se também os estudos sobre utopia compilados no volume 14, número 1, da *VIA PANORAMICA: Revista de Estudos Anglo-Americanos*.

¹¹ No seu artigo “Euthanasia and (D)evolution in Speculative Fiction” (2017), Nancee Reeves desenvolve um estudo sobre várias obras dos períodos vitoriano e eduardiano que foram influenciadas pelo debate sobre a eutanásia. Ainda que se foque principalmente em *The Fixed Period* (1882), de Anthony Trollope, Reeves destaca também a perspetiva de H. G. Wells e de outros autores da época.

¹² Note-se que para o debate sobre a eutanásia ter sido tão amplamente discutido, foi necessário que o fervor do revivalismo evangélico do século XVIII desvanecesse no Reino Unido. Só deste modo poderiam surgir mudanças e uma nova forma de contemplar a morte como a eutanásia. Para um estudo mais aprofundado das perspetivas sobre a morte na Era Vitoriana, remetemos para a obra *Death in the Victorian Family* (1996), de Patricia Jalland.

¹³ Para melhor compreender o papel da literatura em H. G. Wells, veja-se o ensaio “The Contemporary Novel”, publicado originalmente pelo autor no *The Fortnightly Review* em 1910.

¹⁴ A perspetiva de que as instituições de caridade são negativas para a manutenção da sociedade e que agravam os confrontos entre classes e outras questões que inquietavam a sociedade vitoriana, como a sobrepopulação, faz parte da retórica de Thomas Malthus, estando também presente no debate sobre a eutanásia voluntária. Neste sentido, importa salientar que é outro dos temas recorrentes nas obras de ficção especulativa da época.

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MIGUEL OLIVEIRA

é aluno de Doutoramento de Literaturas e Culturas Modernas na Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas da Universidade Nova de Lisboa. O seu campo de estudos envolve a interligação entre as Ciências, a Literatura e as Humanidades, em particular as Humanidades Médicas, aprofundando as questões filosóficas, éticas e deontológicas intrínsecas a esta área. É membro do Centre for English, Translation, and Anglo-Portuguese Studies (CETAPS).
Ciência ID: 491F-703A-866D | ORCID iD: 0000-0003-1446-4052

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The Narcissistic Skeptic and the Human Community: Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* as Read by Stanley Cavell¹

MICHAŁ FILIPCZUK

University of the National Education Commission, Krakow

ABSTRACT: In this paper, I reconstruct Cavellian reading of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. Stanley Cavell stands out as an original interpreter of *Coriolanus* due to his perspective on its specific themes and motifs. While they have been explored in earlier – mostly psychoanalytical and political – interpretations of the play, Cavell studies them through the lens of his concept of narcissistic skepticism. Framing the question of the narcissistic skeptic versus the human community highlights the particular value of Cavell's perspective. It incorporates a political theme within the context of a psychoanalytical approach, while simultaneously going beyond it and leading to a unique synthesis of both areas. As a result, it allows for conclusions to be drawn about the political nature of the human community and its defining characteristic, which Cavell identifies as being rooted in language.

KEYWORDS: *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare, Cavell, Narcissistic Skepticism, Language, Psychoanalysis.

RESUMO: Neste artigo, reconstruo a leitura cavelliana de *Coriolano* de Shakespeare. Stanley Cavell destaca-se como um intérprete original de *Coriolano* pela sua perspectiva sobre os temas e motivos específicos da peça. Embora tenham sido explorados em interpretações anteriores da obra — principalmente psicanalíticas e políticas —, Cavell estuda esses temas através das lentes de seu conceito de ceticismo narcisista. Enquadrar a questão do cético narcisista versus a comunidade humana destaca, pois, o valor particular da perspectiva de Cavell, uma vez que incorpora um tema político no contexto de uma abordagem psicanalítica, enquanto vai além deles e nos conduz a uma síntese única de ambos. Como resultado, permite-nos tirar conclusões sobre a natureza política da comunidade humana e a sua característica definidora, que Cavell identifica como estando enraizada na linguagem.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Coriolano*, Shakespeare, Cavell, Ceticismo narcisista, Linguagem, Psicoanálise.

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Commentators of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* have tended to focus on two issues. One group, including critics like Burke and Rabkin, has examined the play's political content, while another group, represented by Stoller, Hoffling, Barron, and Adelman, has been looking at its psychoanalytic issues, especially Coriolanus' dysfunctional relationship with his mother Volumnia.² It is this aspect that occupies Stanley Cavell's attention in his comments on *Coriolanus* and seems to have come closest to his own reading of the play.

The psychopathological mother-son relationship has often been discussed partly in tandem with Coriolanus' narcissism. Somewhat less attention has been paid to Coriolanus' extremely or even compulsively self-adulatory demeanor, which must certainly have been founded on a psychopathological substrate as well,³ but which may be interpreted in a slightly different context, as Cavell reads it.

He sees Coriolanus' actions reflecting his aspiration for some form of superhuman status or, at the very least, his desire to become completely independent of the conditions associated with being a member of the human community.⁴

What makes Cavell stand out as an original interpreter of *Coriolanus* is his unique perspective on its themes and motifs, which, of course, were addressed by earlier critics. However, Cavell looks at them from the vantage-point of his concept of narcissistic skepticism, one of the potential sources of which (though not the only one) may be linked to the psychopathological features of Coriolanus' character.⁵ A particularly notable aspect is the motif of feeding, eating, and ingestion, which is connected with the theme of cannibalism. This aligns with one of the key ideas in Cavell's concept, where he suggests that such an attitude reflects a desire to absorb the Other in order to avoid being absorbed by them. Cavell considers this one of the defining characteristics of the narcissistic skeptic. In this sense, the psychoanalytic interpretation of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* resonates with his own reading of the play.⁶

But he takes this interpretation further, adding new elements. One of them is Coriolanus' attitude to language, human speech, and acts of communication, as well as to human society as such. From this perspective, Cavell draws insightful conclusions regarding Coriolanus's relations with the political sphere and, more broadly, the potential for a narcissistic skeptic like him to engage with the political community. Framing the question

of the narcissistic skeptic versus the human community highlights the particular value and originality of Cavell's perspective, which also incorporates a political theme.

Therefore, the aim of this article is not only to present the Cavellian reading of *Coriolanus* in the context of the psychoanalytical approach to this play, even if it seems the most useful point of departure for my remarks. My aim is to present the originality of Cavell's approach as a unique synthesis of the aforementioned psychoanalytic and political perspectives, which helps him surmount the one-sidedness in each of them within the framework of his concept of *narcissistic skepticism* considered in the context of politics.

As a result, Cavell is able to draw conclusions about the political nature of human society and its defining characteristic, which he sees as rooted in language. Cavell is able to reach these conclusions by carrying out a case-study, so to speak, of the psychopathological traits in the main character of Shakespeare's play.⁷

But since all these issues stem from a common source, Coriolanus's relationship with his mother, I will use this relationship as the starting point for my discussion.⁸

2. CORIOLANUS AND THE MOTIF OF CANNIBALISM

Cavell writes that cannibalism is the leitmotif of *Coriolanus*. It comes to light on both the sociopolitical and psychological levels and is the result of a specific narcissistic attitude. He makes the following observation: "The circle of cannibalism, of the eater eaten by what he or she eats, keeps being sketched out, from the first to the last. You might call this identification of narcissism as cannibalism" (152).

I will not dwell on cannibalism that relates to the social sphere. Instead, my primary focus is on Coriolanus's pathological relationship with his mother, which generates his narcissism. This can be taken as a starting point for Cavell's considerations, which also encompass the social sphere. Specifically, I will examine the connection between the narcissistic skeptic Coriolanus and the outside world that arises from his relationship with his mother.

However, I will also mention cannibalism in the social context, because it provides a broader interpretive framework for the play's plot, which refers to eating and being consumed from the opening lines of Act One, Scene One,⁹ allowing Shakespeare to set

the tone for all the subsequent events of Coriolanus's life and his personal drama that will be played out later.

At the beginning of the play, Coriolanus addresses the citizens of Rome with the following accusation:

You cry against the noble senate, who,
Under the gods, keep you in awe, which else
Would feed on one another?¹⁰

It is only the disciplining role of the Senate that prevents society from degenerating into a Hobbesian state of nature, a situation of universal struggle punctuated by acts of violence and consumption. The fighting between patricians and plebeians is depicted as a conflict well-nigh of two different species devouring each other, the individual links in a great food chain. Crucially for Cavell, Shakespeare avails himself of the complex and eloquent metaphor of the belly, the skeptical motif of eating and ingesting others (or the Other) right from the opening scene. He reproduces the traditional body metaphor of the state, with its viscera serving as the site where various vital processes occur, much like in the digestive system. The plebeians and patricians are engaged in a dispute over who should assume the role of the storehouse represented by the stomach, responsible for distributing food—specifically, the grain stocked in the granaries by the patricians—to different parts of the body-politic.¹¹

3. VOLUMNIA THE PHALLIC MOTHER: BLOOD AS MILK

Coriolanus subscribes to the idea that public life is a continuous process in which individuals metaphorically ingest one another. This concept tallies with Cavell's notion of the behavior of a narcissistic skeptic, who ingests the Other so as not to be ingested by them. Most importantly, love, especially maternal love, is depicted in *Coriolanus* as a metaphor for mutual devouring. Cavell describes Coriolanus' relationship with his mother in the following way:

To be fed by Volumnia is to be fed to her. But since the right bleeding depends upon its being a form of feeding, of giving food, providing blood identifies him with his mother. His mother's fantasy

suggests here that the appropriate reciprocation for having nourished her son is for him to become her, as if to remove the arbitrariness in her having been born a woman; and since it is a way of putting her into the world, it is a way of giving birth to her. (Cavell 1987, 155)

The mother's feeling of being eaten by the child she nurses (here, the child in question is Coriolanus) triggers a converse situation, a kind of "expected reciprocation" once the suckling reaches adulthood. Now it is the mother who expects to lead a surrogate life through her child, essentially "consuming it" (absorbing it into herself). Now that Coriolanus has reached manhood, it is Volumnia who, in a form of retribution, "consumes" him, annihilating his independence and autonomy as he obsessively tries to break free from her influence (Cavell 1987, 155). This is because for Volumnia, the fact that she is a woman seems incidental, not something that would define her identity, as her words to Coriolanus seem to express:

Thy valiantness was mine; thou suck'st it from me,
But owe thy pride thyself.
(III, ii, 157–158)

It is to his warrior-mother that the future conqueror of Corioles owes his bravery on the field of glory. In this light, the declaration she makes in the following lines assumes a key significance:

The breasts of Hecuba,
When she did suckle Hector, looked not lovelier
Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood
At Grecian sword, contemning. . . .
(I, iii, 43–46)¹²

Cavell comments:

The suckling mother is presented as being slashed by the son-hero, eaten by the one she feeds . . . the lines set up an equation between a mother's milk and a man's blood, suggesting that we must understand the man's spitting blood in *battle not simply as attacking, but equally, somehow, as providing food in a male's fashion*. (Cavell 1987, 154)

Thus, the act of nursing a child seems to involve a form of struggle, the launching of an attack (by the newborn at the mother's breast). This would make the mother feeding her boy-child perform an act of initiation, turning him already at this stage into the future warrior.¹³

The psychoanalytic interpretations of the text, including those by Adelman and other authors, highlight the motif of Volumnia as a mother who views her son Coriolanus' career as a way to pursue her own unfulfilled ambitions and expectations. She views his social role as the outcome of a script that she is the author of. Volumnia subordinates her son's life and career to the accomplishment of this script, or rather, Coriolanus is essentially programmed by Volumnia to implement this plan.¹⁴

Therefore, if Coriolanus aspires to full independence, he must, as it were, declare war on his mother, nullifying the act of his biological birth. He must become the "Author of Oneself".¹⁵ In other words, he must stand up to and contend with his mother in order to become independent of her. This is possible only through associating the milk with which Volumnia fed him with the blood shed on the battlefield. As Cavell puts it, "providing blood is becoming her" (1987, 155).

Only by equating the blood shed on the battlefield with the milk, the nourishment he owes to Volumnia, can Coriolanus symbolically settle his score with his mother, making himself independent of her. Only in this way can he attempt to wrest himself free of his mother, defy her within himself (155).¹⁶ The identification of the milk with which Volumnia nursed Coriolanus with the blood he shed on the battlefield during his fight against the enemies of Rome creates a symbolic connection, equating Volumnia, his biological mother, with Rome herself a symbolic maternal figure.¹⁷

The motif of Coriolanus being consumed by Volumnia corresponds with Cavell's interpretation of their relationship as a prime example of the skeptic's tendency to metaphorically incorporate, absorb, and devour the Other or Others (in this case, the ingestion is done by Volumnia, although for Cavell, Coriolanus is the chief embodiment of the skeptic). It is a metaphor for the external world, which the skeptic wants to internalize and make part of himself for fear of being absorbed by the Other. That is the essence of Coriolanus' relationship with Volumnia.¹⁸

4. SKEPTICISM AND LANGUAGE: *CORIOLANUS* AND THE REPUGNANT COMMONPLACE OF COMMUNICATION

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One of the most important motifs inherent in cannibalistic imagery is that of words as food (mutual partaking of their comprehension), as well as the metaphor of comprehension as in- and digestion, etc.) (Cavell 1987, 163). In this sense, too, communication is depicted in *Coriolanus* as a form of cannibalism. Representative of this process of mutual ingestion and devouring is the use of the same language in everyday acts of communication. One of the reasons why Coriolanus the skeptic disdains and spits out words is precisely because they are our common food. They exist, so to speak, within the body of language or the realm of speech and are something we all share and have in common (*idem*, 170).

This concept, in Cavell's view, is linked to Wittgenstein's critique of the notion of private language, which can be seen as a legacy of skepticism. What makes the skeptic privatize his language is the word's inevitable defilement—the fact that words are a common good, partaken of by all users of speech. The universality of words, words “being for all,” is something unacceptable to the skeptic, something that arouses his revulsion (the mistake he makes in this view is that, for a word to have meaning at all, it must hold this status, i.e. be available to all, Cavell notes) (*idem*, 163-167). Words derive their meaning through repetition. According to Cavell, this is also the foundational aspect of language, which serves as an anchor for consciousness and acts as its sole medium of expression. In this perspective, consciousness has a strictly linguistic character.¹⁹

Describing the use of language (its circulation in communication) as the skeptic sees it, Cavell employs the metaphor of the circulation of organic matter (Cavell 1987, 169-ff). The stock of words publicly available to us in daily communication resembles a waste tip. This metaphor seems somewhat risqué, but it is consistent with Cavell's observations in the Postscript to his essay on *Coriolanus*, in which he uses the metaphor of the circulation of organic matter, including feces, to explain the organic cycle:

What alarms him [Coriolanus] is simply being part, one member among others of the same organism . . . [Coriolanus'] disgust is a function of imagining that in incorporating one another we are asked to incorporate one another's leavings, the results of waste of what has already been incorporated. (169)

The point is that “[w]hat the mouth receives as food is normally mediated by passing it through nature, so to purify the contribution made to the process by other, let us say, human beings” (170).

Thus, in the mind of the skeptic (and therefore of Coriolanus), two images intertwine: the organic circulation of matter in nature (of which humans are a part) and the circulation of verbal matter, which is the language we share in everyday communication. In this context, there is a metaphorical image of the circulation of words as something analogous to the circulation of matter, consisting of the “circulation from mouth to mouth of language” (*ibidem*). In this metaphor, words become something tangible, almost physical, like particles and elements found in nature. This tangibility of words, as it might seem, enhances their value and intrinsic weight, but it can also serve as a degrading factor.

A new component of this extended metaphor is the theme of the material artifacts of language. The materialization of language, Cavell writes, is made possible by the suggestion that “language is at the same time something retained, which perhaps means hoarded, for expulsion, or banishment, a way of conceiving of writing, physically altering the world” (*ibidem*).

Words put on record and the methods used to record them serve as instruments to transform the world in an absolutely tangible, purely physical way (170). At the same time, as Cavell points out, *Coriolanus* also presents the image of the circulation of money, which acts as a means of exchange similar to words as regards commodities, serving as the material counterpart of words:

Finding the words/food representation so compelling, I am ignoring here the path along which the circulation of words also registers the circulation of money (as in “So shall my lungs/coin words” [III, i, 99–100]; and in “The price is to ask it kindly” [II, iii, 83]). The sense of consuming as expending would relate to Coriolanus’ frantic efforts to deny that his actions can be recompensed (“better to starve than crave the hire” – for example for receiving voices in return). (166)

Money, which in the human world has the power to relativize (reduce) everything to its own value, seems to function in Shakespeare, too, as a universally accepted proxy for the value of all things. The link and common denominator connecting words (and their cultural avatars), the transformation of matter, and the circulation of money is the symbolic

nature of the material carriers/substrates that enable their mutual symbolic association (money = words = the circulation of organic matter).²⁰

However, Coriolanus refuses to participate in a system based on the equivalence of these components and the measurability of all things as potential goods whose value is quantifiable both in terms of language as an ordered system of words (a value system) and the measurability of goods (a system for the exchange of commodities for money): “Money depends upon the equating of values, Coriolanus, on their lack of equation, on measurelessness, pricelessness”(Cavell 1987, 166).

Therefore, also in this sense, Coriolanus’ skepticism challenges prevailing social relations.²¹ According to Cavell, Coriolanus, a skeptic who is repulsed by the commonness and vulgarity of language, harbors a unique fantasy: he wants to communicate with others—only when it is absolutely necessary—using means of expression other than language. He does not intend to participate in the circulation of words, goods, values, and the matter signified by them at the symbolic level. In a word, Coriolanus does not intend to take part in the processes of social exchange and all that it inevitably entails. And since language is a fundamental component and requisite of this, Coriolanus refuses to participate in speech, in conversation with others, thereby attempting to free himself from the cannibalistic cycle (*idem*, 160-ff).

In constructing and contesting with a hero for whom the circulation of language is an expression of cannibalism, Coriolanus takes cannibalism as symbolic of the most human of activities, the most distinctive, or distinguished, of human activities. (*idem*, 165)

To put it yet another way, since communication involves the symbolic absorption of one by the other as part of an all-encompassing food chain, with language as a crucial ingredient of this process, Coriolanus seeks rescue and a way out of this cannibalistic cycle by attempting to escape from language itself.

5. CORIOLANUS’ NARCISSISTIC DESIRE

This escape from language can be interpreted as an expression of the skeptic’s yearning for liberation from the influence of the community, which in psychoanalytic terms can also

be symbolized by the mother, which brings us back to the dialectic of narcissistic desire and thus a paradoxical form of desire as non-desire.

In his book *Looking Awry*, Slavoj Žižek considers Shakespeare's anaphora in *Richard II* and presents a dialectic of desire that undergoes an autonomous process of self-enhancement and intensification. The paradox of this kind of desire, as Žižek observes, is that it generates its own objects of desire, continuously producing more and more of them but never achieving satisfaction or fulfillment (1992, 6-10). According to Žižek, in the dynamic of desire, the conclusion drawn by Lear in Act I, Scene 1 of *King Lear*, that "nothing will come of nothing" is challenged by psychological findings, which suggest that something *does come* of nothing (*idem*, 99). Although the object which is the cause of desire is a mere semblance, this kind of desire has significant consequences for human psychology. It is no coincidence that Shakespeare was so preoccupied with the paradox of generating something out of nothing and, more broadly, with the dialectic of being and nothingness.²²

In fact, according to Žižek, that is precisely what Lacan has in mind with his concept of the *objet petit a*, which is the element that generates desire and is also created retrospectively by this same desire. Emphatically, the paradox of this desire is that it subsequently defines or posits the object which is both the source and cause of that desire, generating an object that can only be perceived through the distortion created by that very desire. The gaze of a person not subject to such a distortion is unable to perceive this object. In other words, by its very definition, the *objet petit a* does not exist in itself. It is merely an embodiment and materialization or function of a distorted perception, an "extra" entity arising from the cognitive confusion generated by desire in the area of so-called "objectively existing reality". In other words, the *objet petit a* is simply a construct of desire, and only from a specific perspective does it appear to be "something". While in *King Lear*, we are dealing with the consequences of the "nothing will come of nothing" formula, as Lear tells Cordelia in Act I, Scene 1, in *Coriolanus*, we have the opposite situation.

It is precisely the negation of desire that we encounter in *Coriolanus*. Like Žižek, Cavell observes that desire has an "infinite structure" (1987, 149). Perhaps we should say that it has an infinity of structures, and therefore infinite, inexhaustible power to generate

objects of desire (Žižek 1992, 8). However, Coriolanus wants to become someone who desires not to desire; he wants to be free of all desire:

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Coriolanus and Volumnia are, I am taking it, starvers, hungerers. They manifest this condition as a name or a definition of the human, like being mortal. And they manifest this as a condition of insatiability (starving by feeding, feeding as deprivation). It is a condition sometimes described as the infiniteness of desire, imposing upon the finiteness of the body. But starving for Volumnia and her son suggests that this infiniteness is not the cause of human insatiability but is rather its effect. It is the effect not of an endless quantity, as though the self had, or is, endless reserves of desire; but of an endless structure, as though desire has a structure of endlessness Starving by feeding presents itself to Coriolanus as being consumed by hunger, and his words for hungering are desiring and craving. And what he incessantly hungers for is ... not to hunger, not to desire, that is, not to be mortal. (Cavel 1987, 149)²³

And yet, desire is an inherent part of human nature. Therefore, Coriolanus wants to transcend it; he desires a completeness that negates desire as a manifestation of want: “He hungers to lack nothing, to be complete, like a sword . . . not to hunger, not to desire, not to be mortal” (*ibidem*).

In other words, Coriolanus desires to transcend his own humanity, to become complete (“complete like a sword”), so that he can finally be able to not desire—therefore he wants to become a divine being. In one of his confrontations with the citizens, we encounter the following dialogue:

CORIOLANUS

You know the cause, sir, of my standing here.

. . .

Mine own desert.

SECOND CITIZEN

Your own desert?

CORIOLANUS

Ay, but not mine own desire.

(III, ii, 71–75)

Elsewhere, Coriolanus observes:



Better it is to die, better to starve,
Than crave the hire which first we do deserve.

(III, ii, 123–124)

and

. . . pent to linger
But with a grain a day, I would not buy
Their mercy at the price of one fair word

(III, iii, 115–117)

The desert is put in contrast with desire; it can invalidate and negate it. It is also associated with hunger, which corresponds with the portrayal of Coriolanus as a “starver”. Coriolanus seeks a situation where the honors and privileges owed to him are granted solely on the grounds of his own merit.²⁴ Cavell’s notion of Coriolanus being “perfectly deserving” supports this perspective: “If you desire to be desireless, is there something you desire? . . . Coriolanus’ answer to this paradox is to become *perfectly deserving* . . . He hungers to lack nothing” (Cavell 1987, 149).

This motif is linked to the skeptic’s logic of inverted cannibalism, the ingestion of all by all, an image that fills Coriolanus with revulsion. Although in this case, there is something more, Coriolanus’ disgust for common speech and ordinary forms of communication. He sees language as something unspeakably vulgar, as Cavell writes, something that passes “from mouth to mouth” (*idem*, 170). Coriolanus’ voluntary self-condemnation to a “famine of words”, and thus his rejection of/disdain for words of praise is an attempt to reassert the primacy of the logic of merit over the logic of desire/need (who does not desire, lacks nothing).²⁵

Suicide would be an extreme instance of a desire for non-desire. In this case, however, it would be the inverse of narcissism, self-love replaced by the highest intensity of self-hatred, finding its extreme expression in an act of self-destruction: “The openest case in which doing a deed and suffering the deed are inseparable. The logic is that of narcissism, and the sense is that there is a narcissism under a negative sign, with love replaced by hatred” (Cavell 2010, 537).

Understood in this way, consistent narcissistic desire would in fact be a desire for death, and only in death would it find its final satiation.²⁶

6. SELF-DIRECTION OF NARCISSISTIC DESIRE

Coriolanus's situation as a narcissistic skeptic is further complicated by the fact that the desire he nurtures is self-directed; it is the narcissist himself who is its object: "One picture of this structure is given by Narcissus, for whom what is longed for is someone longing, who figures beauty as longing" (Cavell 1987, 149).

As I have already said, Coriolanus's narcissistic desire is a desire for non-desire, and at the same time, he is a narcissistic character, so he becomes the object of his own desire, which makes it self-directed, intrinsic, and self-targeted. The architect of this enterprise is simultaneously the addressee, subject, and object of his own deeds:

Narcissus's fate is mirrored in the figure of Coriolanus, a figure whose *every act is, by that act, done to him so perfectly that the distinction between action and passion seems to lose its sense, a condition in which human existence becomes precarious, if perhaps transcendable. (Idem, 144)*²⁷

Jean Laplanche, whom Cavell cites, speaks of narcissism in the same vein, as a phenomenon accompanying perversion, particularly sexual perversion. The narcissist's sexual self-direction does not send him outside of himself; he remains in a closed, unbroken circle of desires of which he himself is the sole object.²⁸ Such a desire is dysfunctional because the object of its satisfaction is itself, or rather an endless sequence or spiral of (by definition) futile acts and vain attempts to achieve satisfaction. In psychiatric terms, we could speak of a fixation or a series of compulsive acts which, by definition, cannot bring satisfaction.

In this view, Coriolanus is no longer merely caught up in the logic of his conflict with the Other from which there is no way out and positioned at the mercy of the Other (here this role is played by the plebeians, as I will show below). He is trapped in the dead-end logic of narcissistic desire, which involves a paradoxical self-negation that renders it self-contradictory and therefore inexhaustible. Paradoxically, his desire begins to resemble Žižek's *désir petit a*, which, in Cavell's interpretation, Coriolanus' narcissistic desire was intended to bring to an end. This shows the inevitable and hopeless entanglement of the narcissistic skeptic in the contradictory logic of his own desire and its ultimate insolubility.

7. CORIOLANUS VERSUS THE PLEBEIANS

Like Shakespeare's other skeptical characters, Othello or Lear, Coriolanus believes that his own merit should be the sole reason for the admiration and respect due to him, thus treating desire for love and acknowledgement from others as an inessential. He faces a similar challenge: he is destined to rely on others to be able to indulge in his narcissism and maintain his self-esteem. Consequently, he experiences the same conflict other Shakespearean protagonists face: he strives for narcissistic autarky (as I will show below), yet remains unable to attain it. This struggle is particularly pronounced for Coriolanus because his source of validation comes from the plebeians, whom he holds in utter contempt.

Coriolanus harbors a deep contempt for the plebeians, yet their existence is essential for him to assert his own superiority in contrast to them. This ambivalence, this unavoidable contradiction, fuels the hatred he has of them. Moreover, perhaps this hatred is also directed inward, towards himself, which could further intensify his narcissistic urge for self-destruction.

His insufferable position is best illustrated by the situation in which he must seek the votes of the people to obtain the title of consul. To do so, as custom prescribes, he should lay bare in public the wounds he received during the wars fought in defense of Rome. And while he is initially inclined to submit to custom, in the end he does not display his wounds to the people.²⁹

BRUTUS

I heard him swear,
Were he to stand for consul, never would he
Appear i' th' marketplace nor on him put
The napless vesture of humility,
Nor showing, as the manner is, his wounds
To th' people, beg their stinking breaths.

(II, i, 257–262)

MENENIUS

It then remains
That you do speak to the people.



crowd to bolster his own identity: he accuses them of being exactly what he wishes not to be. (Adelman 1992, 153)

The plebeians are exclusively a negative reference point for Coriolanus. He reasserts his own identity by ostentatiously *distancing himself* from the crowd.

The people's lack of desert entails his lack of desert, entails that he cannot do the thing that acquires love; he is logically debarred from reciprocating. The fact that he both has absolute contempt for the people and yet has an absolute need for them is part of what maddens him . . . (Cavell 1987, 155)

The logic of Coriolanus's position and his ambivalent relationship with the plebs require him to establish a distinct separation from them and highlight the contrast between the ordinariness of the commoners and his uniqueness. For this reason—as well as to free himself from the influence of Volumnia—he must become “The Author of Oneself/Me Alone”. At the same time, as Cavell points out, Coriolanus is also motivated by a desire for self-creation that is difficult to fully articulate or comprehend.

8. CORIOLANUS' ATTEMPT TO ACHIEVE SUPERHUMAN STATUS AND ITS UTTER FAILURE

The key difference between Shakespeare's other skeptics, Othello and Lear, on the one hand, and Coriolanus on the other, lies in the fact that, as Cavell suggests, Coriolanus takes his narcissistic desires even further. He yearns for non-desire and seeks liberation from the cycle of human desires, thus aspiring to become a kind of superhuman being.³¹

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the mechanism behind such desires seems quite straightforward: the unsatisfied needs of Coriolanus' early life manifest later redoubled and rebound as a vicarious, insatiable longing to perform heroic deeds bringing him glory. Over time, these unfulfilled childhood desires transform into a perpetual yearning. His response to this longing is a desire not to desire, which intertwines with the aspiration to achieve the status of a non-desiring, and thus, as Cavell argues, superhuman being (Act IV, sc. 5; Act III, Scene 1; Act I, Scene VI; Act V, Scene III).³²

One aspect of Coriolanus’s quest for superhuman status, according to Cavell, is his attempt to make a self-sacrifice; however, his endeavor ultimately fails. Let’s consider this problem in detail.

In Part One of this article, I discussed Coriolanus’s desire for self-creation—his aspiration to become “The Author of Oneself.” This desire can be seen as a longing for rebirth on the battlefield, effectively erasing the fact of his own biological birth from his mother’s womb. However, the more Coriolanus attempts to free himself from Volumnia’s influence, the more he realizes he is following her script. When he tries to break away by turning against Rome—a symbolic act of turning against his mother—he ultimately fails.

In the pivotal scene of the play, when Coriolanus attempts to force his way through the gates of Rome, Volumnia addresses him, once again equating herself, the biological mother, with the symbolic mother that is Rome:

VOLUMNIA

thou shalt no sooner

March to assault thy country than to tread—
Trust to ’t, thou shalt not—on thy mother’s womb
That brought thee to this world.

(V, iii, 140–143)

In response, Coriolanus holds her by the hand and says:

CORIOLANUS

O mother, mother!

What have you done? Behold, the heavens do ope,
The gods look down, and this unnatural scene
They laugh at. O, my mother, mother, O!
You have won a happy victory to Rome,
But, for your son—believe it, O, believe it!—
Most dangerously you have with him prevailed,
If not most mortal to him. But let it come.

(V, iii, 205–212)

This raises the following question: how can Coriolanus’ gesture and his decision to abandon the plan to burn Rome be interpreted, considering Cavell’s perspective?

Cavell's reading of these lines invokes another sacrificer, Jesus Christ, noting that Coriolanus is not simply imitating, but competing against him (*idem*, 161). Like Christ, Coriolanus attempts to make a self-sacrifice in a redemptive mission; however, ultimately his mission fails.

Coriolanus' inability to achieve redemption and the failure of his mission stem from the fact that it is Volumnia who tells him that he is not superhuman. When he plans to burn Rome, she manages to stir his human emotions, demonstrating that he is not an avenging or punishing deity. By exposing his intentions, Coriolanus' mother foreshadows his ultimate defeat (*idem*, 163). In the Christian narrative, Jesus' mother realized that he was divine, whereas with Coriolanus', the success of Volumnia's plea announces the opposite— that he is merely a man made of flesh and blood (*ibidem*).³³

Coriolanus' death ultimately saves Rome, moreover, it is something inevitable, necessary. By leading the Volscians up to Rome, only to call off the expedition at the last moment, Coriolanus effectively signs his own death warrant, laying down his life for the values of the community (symbolically saving Rome, the mother figure). Yet he cannot make a sacrifice of himself, he does not become a sacrificer, the savior of Rome (in the way that Jesus is seen as the savior of the Christian communion). This is because, unlike Jesus' death, the death of Coriolanus does not act as a catalyst for a new life or a rebirth of the community. Although his actions enable Rome to be saved, they do not lead to its renewal.

At this stage in Cavell's interpretation, the central theme of cannibalism reemerges, connecting all the other themes. As we have seen, there is a recurring motif in *Coriolanus* that equates words with food. In this context, words transform into food, serving as the symbolic foundation for the exchange of organic matter.

However, while Coriolanus can become a provider of food, he cannot become the food itself; unlike Christ, he cannot say, "I am the Bread of Life". His sacrifice and death to save Rome do not carry the same redemptive value as Christ's death. In other words, while Coriolanus' actions ultimately make for the salvation of Rome, this is only because they stop a threat, not because they serve as a source of life.

Cavell comments:

He has from the early lines of the play been identified as the people's chief enemy, here in particular as chief of those who withhold food; and his opening main speech to them, after expressing his

disgust by them, is to affirm that he does withhold and will go on withholding “good words” from them. Accordingly, every word he speaks will mean the withholding of good words. He will, as it were, have a sword in his mouth. There are other suggestions of the equation of words and food in the play (for example, the enlivening of the familiar idea that understanding is a matter of digesting) but this is enough for me, in view of my previous suggestions, to take the equation as part of the invocation of the major figure of our civilization for whom words are food. The word made flesh is to be eaten, since this is the living bread. (*idem*, 163)

So, here we have two forms of cannibalism: the life-giving one, the body of Jesus fulfilling the role of food, the eating and partaking of which enables those in communion with him to strengthen their mutual bonds; and the cannibalism that has a more problematic meaning and serves as a metaphor for the social system and human relations, evoking the image of mutual devouring of its partakers.

As I said at the beginning of this article, the opening scene of the play, which introduces the metaphor of the belly, the most important component of the digestive system responsible for the distribution of food to all the parts of the body, prefigures the latter type of cannibalism. In my opinion, Coriolanus’ death, too, aligns with the latter cannibalism and lacks a transcendental quality. Although Coriolanus strives to surpass the human condition, he suffers a symbolic defeat. The fundamental reason for his inability to assume the role of a religious symbol in the play’s final scene lies in his attitude towards words and human speech, which he rejects and denies their role as a source of spiritual nourishment.

9. THE NARCISSISTIC SKEPTIC AND THE COMMUNITY

Coriolanus cannot claim to be “the Bread of Life” or “live food”. He is unable to do so because words and interpersonal communication provoke his disgust and revulsion. Consequently, he cannot engage in any form of communal participation that involves words as a source of spiritual nourishment. As an enemy of the people and the plebeians, he has no “good words” to offer them, Cavell tells us.

Cavell argues that sacrifice, particularly redemptive sacrifice, is meant to unite and strengthen the community. However, what we have here is an incomplete sacrifice—a kind of hypo-sacrifice. The essential aspect of such a sacrifice lies in the community of its participants, who are united as partakers in the body of the sacrificed victim. This could be

“the Lamb of God”, who holds redemptive power, or some other figure with a symbolic meaning. However, with Coriolanus, we are caught in a cycle of mutual participation in an altogether different process.

As we have seen, mutual ingestion and devouring form a leitmotif in *Coriolanus*. According to Cavell, Coriolanus “spits out” words rather than taking them in and nourishing himself with them. This action represents a reversal—a parody of the communal experience of treating words as sustenance and feeding on them. In this context, cannibalism serves as a mockery of a shared verbal communion:

. . . the formation of a society depends on there being, on our achieving, a partaking of one another that is beneficial, creative, not annihilating, as if our mutual cannibalism is a parody of what we might be, that we are standing jokes on ourselves, wishing to transcend what would no longer deserve to be transcended . . . (*idem*, 173)

Coriolanus’ desire for transcendence, to rise above the human community, is destined to fail because it involves a skeptical rejection of the human condition, which is characterized by limitation and uncertainty. Humanity is engrossed with language as a way of life, and our experience is shaped by the linguistic nature of existence. This is associated with the Cavellian notion of “ordinariness,” which is revealed to us through the language of everyday life. I would venture to say that in a broad sense, *Coriolanus* captures the emergence and formation of the political, presenting it as participation in conversation, as an endless exchange, as a rationality with conversation and discussion as its most obvious, tangible expressions.³⁴

Read in this way, Shakespeare appears to recognize our capacity to form a human community by means of overcoming the cannibalistic narcissism of language, which can lead to the kind of insularity Coriolanus falls prey to. Its symbol or figure is the mutual absorption of participants in speech (communication), conceived as the sum of inescapable acts of cannibalism.

Cavell contrasts this vision or diagnosis of Coriolanus’ narcissism with the ability to engage in language, which he sees as the only form of transcendence available to humans. By reaching out to the Other through communication, we can move beyond our solipsistic ego and the confines of self-absorption. In Cavell’s interpretation of Shakespeare, this is the only way to achieve self-transcendence.

As Cavell writes, that is why Coriolanus' vision of the world may be considered a parody of authentic communication understood as participation in the living sustenance of human speech. People like Coriolanus, who challenge this, perceive speech acts as just another form of cannibalism, ingesting others so as not to be ingested by them, situate themselves beyond the community and condemn themselves to inevitable death, failure both in the symbolic dimension and in the very literal sense.

10. CONCLUSION

I think we can concur with Cavell that *Coriolanus* presents a unique perspective on the problem of skepticism, particularly in the version that is of paramount importance to Cavell, the skepticism that questions the existence of other minds and assumes a narcissistic form. We may also agree with Cavell on his point regarding Coriolanus' narcissistic intuitions, in contrast to what he says about the narcissistic skepticism in some of Shakespeare's other tragedies, such as *Othello* or *King Lear*. Cavell's observations on *Coriolanus* seem quite self-evident, and we could even go as far as to say that the main character of this play is a textbook example of the narcissistic personality of the kind described in the work of Reich or Freud (even though Freud never mentioned *Coriolanus*, albeit Shakespeare was one of his major sources of inspiration).³⁵

However, while some of Cavell's remarks may be reduced to a reiteration of earlier psychoanalytical pronouncements on *Coriolanus*, he discerns and introduces some new points. One is his observation of language and speech, an absolutely innovative note. Another of his novel interpretative approaches is his reading of Coriolanus' attempt to achieve autarky and superhuman status. Here, too, he goes beyond the earlier presentations, such as the sociologically or politically oriented ones offered by critics like Marshall or Rabkin, and even beyond the psychoanalytical readings, which are the most interesting and probing endeavors. Finally, Cavell stuns us with his detection of the motif of self-sacrifice and redemptive mission in Coriolanus' mindset. All these absolutely original features in Cavell's reading of Coriolanus as the paragon of narcissistic skepticism, which is his signal contribution to the studies on this play, take the criticism beyond the sphere of sociological and political discourse, offering a supplement and inviting discussion.



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² See esp. Kenneth Burke, “‘Coriolanus’: And the Delights of Faction”, *The Hudson Review* 19 (Summer 1966) 2, pp. 185-202; Norman Rabkin, “Coriolanus: The Tragedy of Politics”, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 17 (Summer 1966) 3, pp. 195-212, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2867716>; Robert J. Stoller, (“Shakespearean Tragedy: Coriolanus”, *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 35 (1966) 2, pp. 263–274., doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21674086.1966.11926386>; Charles K. Hofling, “An Interpretation of Shakespeare’s Coriolanus”, *American Imago* 14 (Winter 1957) 4, pp. 407-435; David B. Barron, “Portrait of the Artist as Infant”, *American Imago* 19 (Summer 1962) 2, pp. 171-193. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26301862> (accessed on 26 March 2025); Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers. Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest*, Routledge, New York 1992.

³ Coriolanus’ act of self-worship and his ambition to achieve superhuman status become clearer when we treat them (at least partly) as a result of his psychopathological relationship with his mother Volumnia. His struggle to break free from her influence partially fuels his desire to be “the Author of Oneself”.

⁴ For an analysis of Coriolanus’ unsuccessful attempt to achieve autarky and attain independence of the human community, see Sarah Marshall, “‘O’me alone?: Aristotle and the failure of autarky in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*” (2020). Senior Capstone Projects. 970. Available at: https://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone/970 (accessed on 26 March 2025). This study, though in-depth, focuses mainly on the sociopolitical aspect of Coriolanus’ failed quest for autarky, which does not overlap with Cavell’s interpretation.

⁵ At the same time giving to narcissism some specifically Cavellian shade of meaning, and characterising it – in the context of his essay on *Othello* - as “a kind of denial of an existence as shared with others” (Stanley Cavell, *Themes out of School*, North Point Press, San Francisco 1984, p. 61). Cf. M. Filipczuk, “Shakespeare and Skepticism. Stanley Cavell’s Interpretation of Skepticism in *Othello*”, *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* 61 (2018) 1, doi: <https://doi.org/10.26485/ZRL/2018/61.1/2>.

⁶ “I bring *denial by the mother* [my italics – M.F.] here in juxtaposition with the denial of the world in order to mark the possibility of a direct psychoanalytic interpretation from skepticism, one that would not exact what may seem the detour through literature. The interpretation would be to the effect that what philosophy registers as uncertainty in our knowledge of the existence of the world is a function of, say, an intellectualization of the child’s sense of loss in separating from the mother’s body.” Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Six Plays of Shakespeare*, C.U.P., New York & Cambridge (UK) 1987, p.

13. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/disowningknowled0000cave> (accessed on 17 March 2025).

⁷ As Barron aptly states, “it is important to note that the additions and emphases by Shakespeare provide unity to the play by converging on themes relating to the infantile origins of Coriolanus centering on his relation to his mother. *Shakespeare's contributions to the character of Coriolanus are thus quite comparable to a psychoanalytic interpretation and construction of a patient's infantile past.* The embellishments which provide thematic unity to the dramatic material pertain to the emotional life of the infant”. (D. B. Barron, “Portrait of the Artist as Infant”, p. 182)

⁸ Cf. Stoller’s observation regarding the critical significance of the psychoanalytic underpinnings of this play: “Coriolanus. Certainly Shakespeare was not consciously aware of these dynamics. We know that the great writers did not discover the unconscious; it made itself known through them by their genius. Freud freely acknowledged this debt. It is probable, judging by much of the modern American stage, that a conscious knowledge of psychoanalysis is an insuperable barrier to great creativity. It produces at best beautifully described case reports from which the ambiguity and mystery of man’s nature have been removed. In *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare has created a relationship between a mother and her son which reveals with direct clarity the antecedents of the development of the play and the inevitability of the tragedy” (R. J. Stoller, “Shakespearean Tragedy: Coriolanus”, p. 265).

⁹ While in the sociopolitical realm, cannibalism represents the hunger of the plebeians, who create unrest in response to the patricians’ closure of the granaries, in the psychoanalytic context, this act of “eating”, along with mutual absorption, symbolizes the inescapable interdependence between Volumnia and Coriolanus. This dynamic continues to affect Coriolanus in his adult life and ultimately contributes to his downfall.

¹⁰ *Coriolanus* (I, i, 198–200) Quotations from “Coriolanus” used in this text come from the Folger online edition available at <https://shakespeare.folger.edu/>

¹¹ As Adelman writes, “In this hungry world, everyone seems in danger of being eaten. The crowd suspects the senators of cannibalistic intentions: ‘If the war does not eat us, they will’” Act I, Scene 1. (J. Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, p. 154).

¹² Cf. Barron’s remarks on this passage: “This surprising juxtaposition of nursing infant and warlike combat along with her preceding description of her rushing her son to war suggests the tremendous strain put on the young Coriolanus to mature precipitously and to renounce the dependent gratifications of childhood. The wounds of Hector suggest that the weaning process was conceived as a physical trauma, and the transition from mother’s breast to battlefield suggests the displacement of his feelings onto other external objects. (D. B. Barron, “Portrait of the Artist as Infant”, p. 173).

¹³ “In her image feeding, incorporating, is transformed into spitting out, an aggressive expelling . . . the wound spitting blood thus becomes not a sign of vulnerability but an instrument of attack” (J. Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, p. 154).

¹⁴ Cf. Act 1, Sc. iv.

¹⁵ It is no coincidence that in the scene just before the impending attack on Rome – an event that signifies Coriolanus’ liberation both from his biological mother and the symbolic mother of the city – he utters these words: “(...) let the Volsces/ Plow Rome, and harrow Italy, I’ll never/ Be such a gosling to obey instinct; but stand/As if a man were *Author of Himself* And knew no other kin.” Such self-creation represents a symbolic rebirth, becoming “the Author of Oneself,” [V, iii, 3437-3440] which overturns the reality of one’s biological birth from the womb.

¹⁶ At the same time, not only Volumnia herself, but also the city of Rome appears in the metaphor of the play as a cannibalistic mother devouring her offspring, an “unnatural dam,” a mother eating her own child and herself: “Being devoured = being loved unconditionally” (Cavell 1987, 154). Cf. the following lines: “Now the good gods forbid / That our renowned Rome, whose gratitude / Towards her deserved children is enrolled / In Jove’s own book, like an unnatural dam / Should now eat up her own” (II, i, 373–376).

¹⁷ As Stoller notes, “Shakespeare’s language understandably conveys the universal consensus of the transitional equivalence of city, home, and mother.” (R. J. Stoller, “Shakespearean Tragedy: Coriolanus”, p. 267). Following the same logic, in his intention to plunder Rome, Coriolanus seeks to exact symbolic revenge on Volumnia.

¹⁸ One might even claim that not only Coriolanus but also Volumnia demonstrates the skeptical attitude as understood by Cavell, even if he himself does not pursue this notion.

¹⁹ Cavell, “Macbeth Appalled” in: Garry L. Hagberg, Walter Jost (eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature*, Blackwell Publishing 2010, p. 528-529. The same intuition, Cavell notes, was observed by Wittgenstein, who identified the human form of life with language (Ibid.). But if this is the case, then Coriolanus’ desire to free himself from language, for this is how his disgust with speech is to be understood, is in fact a desire to free himself from the human condition.

²⁰ Hence, usury, defined as generating unauthorized profit, is tantamount to control of the granaries. This issue is the bone of contention in the conflict between the plebeians and patricians in the opening scene of *Coriolanus*.

²¹ Importantly, the desire for liberation from the cycle of organic matter – the wish to transcend this aspect of human destiny – also appears in other Shakespeare plays. “Kingdoms are clay; our dungy earth alike / Feeds beast as man: the nobleness of life / is to do thus . . . And it is great / To do that thing that ends all other deeds . . . / Which sleeps and never palates more the dung/The beggar’s nurse and Caesar’s . . .” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, I, i, 40–42; V, ii, 4–8). As Cavell writes, “these imaginings of the earth as feeding its inhabitants . . . are . . . expressions of minds in a mood that seeks transcendence of the common lot of humanity” (Cavell 1987, 170).

²² Cf. David Willbern, “Shakespeare’s Nothing” in: Murray M. Schwartz, and Coppélia Kahn (eds.), *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London 1980, pp. 244-264.

²³ The first sentence of the quote highlights a significant theme concerning Coriolanus and Volumnia, referred to by Cavell as “starvers” and “hungerers.” This notion suggests that they abstain from eating and refuse to engage in consumption, which is presented as a



defining aspect of the human experience. This, too, could be a manifestation of their aspiration – typical of the skeptic – to superhuman status, as they seek to rise above being mere “bread eaters” and ordinary members of the human community, with all of its basic needs, including the need to satisfy hunger. Similarly, Volumnia expresses this idea in another passage, when she says, “Anger’s my meat: I sup upon myself / And so shall starve with feeding” (IV, ii, 68–69). She seems to convey a sense of skeptical insularity and a reluctance to participate in the community.

²⁴ A similar situation occurs in Act I, Scene i of *King Lear*, in which Lear demands unconditional love from his daughters.

²⁵ Cf. *idem*, 148–ff.

²⁶ As Shuli Barzilai persuasively argues, Coriolanus’ behavior reveals “a death-wish ‘silently pressing for dissolution of the self’” (Shuli Barzilai, “Coriolanus and the Compulsion to Repeat”, *Hebrew University Studies in Literature* 19, pp. 126–53).

²⁷ “Transcendable” means something which can be transcended. Thus, for Coriolanus, the possibility of transcending the limitations imposed by the conditional nature of human existence is an opportunity. This is evident in his desire to elevate himself to a superhuman state, a topic I will examine in more detail below.

²⁸ Cf. Jean Laplanche’s remarks about how narcissism accompanies perversion and is one of its manifestations. In *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, he observes that “What counts, in this first sketch, in the rare – though exemplary – cases of ‘narcissism-perversion,’ is the resemblance which is affirmed between the subject’s own body and the ‘body of a sexual object,’ treated as a whole and cajoled, contemplated and caressed; contemplation, care, and caresses are the process constituting and confirming the total form, the limit, the closed envelope of the cutaneous covering” (J. Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London 1976, p. 68).

²⁹ The scene has received numerous interpretations in the psychoanalytic literature. Cf. Adelman’s commentary, which is especially insightful; she points out that “His reluctance to show his wounds to win the consulship depends partly, I think, on the complex of ideas that stands behind his characterization of the crowd. In Plutarch, Coriolanus shows his wounds; in Shakespeare, the thought is intolerable to him and, despite many promises that he will, he never does. *For the display of his wounds would reveal his kinship with the plebeians in several ways: by revealing that he has worked for hire (2.2.149) as they have (that is, that he and his deeds are not sui generis after all); by revealing that he is vulnerable, as they are; and by revealing, through the persistent identification of wound and mouth, that he too has a mouth, that he is a dependent creature*” (Adelman 1992, 155).

³⁰ “The fact that he both has absolute contempt for the people and yet has an abject need for them is part of what maddens him” (Cavell 1987, 155). Perhaps repulsion, disgust, and fear are also triggered by his submission to the mercy of the Other and their gaze. When we surrender to their mercy, we become objectified.

³¹ Cf. *idem*, 157. Martius’s speech, when he rejects the help of his comrades-in-arms and successfully launches an attack on Corioles, later earning the cognomen Coriolanus, which symbolizes rebirth on the field of glory, resonates with the following lines: “O, me alone!



Make you a sword of me / If these shows be not outward, which of you / But is four
Volsces? None of you but is / Able to bear against the great Aufidius / A shield as hard as
his” (I, vi, 95–99).

³² *Idem*, 146: “[desire] not to be mortal . . . , to be complete, like a sword”.

³³ Divinity is a closed path for Coriolanus. Cavell writes that if the father in the patriarchal framework of Christian mythology had sacrificed Coriolanus to save the city, which is a common motif in many religions, the situation might have been different. But in the story of Coriolanus, the one who offers the sacrifice is not the father, but the mother, and moreover, she is convinced of Coriolanus’s humanity.

³⁴ Plato and Aristotle, the key figures of the classical tradition viewed it similarly and defined man as the ζῷον λόγος ἔχων, the animal capable of *logos*, and therefore, primarily, capable of conversation.

³⁵ Cf. Chin-jung Chiu, “Freud on Shakespeare. An Approach to Psychopathic Characters”, *Chang Gung Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 5 (April 2012) 1, pp. 33–56.

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MICHAŁ FILIPCZUK

Michał Filipczuk is a graduate in philosophy at the Jagiellonian University (1999). At the Philosophy Department of the University of the National Education Commission in Krakow he is currently completing his doctoral thesis entitled „The Problem of Narcissistic Skepticism in Stanley Cavell’s Reading of the Selected Dramas of William Shakespeare”.

He is not only dealing with language theoretically, being an author of a few articles on Cavell’s interpretation of skepticism in literature and other philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre or Plato, but also practically. As a professional philosophical and literary translator he rendered into Polish over sixty books. Many of them are academic monographs in philosophy, as well as works by David Hume, George Berkeley, Judith Butler, Selma Benhabib, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Iris Murdoch and novelists like Joseph Conrad and Jane Austen. ORCID ID 0000-0001-6617-8256

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The road to Marabar:
The caves episode in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924)¹

MIGUEL ALARCÃO

FCSH – NOVA University of Lisbon / CETAPS

ABSTRACT: Just over one hundred years after the publication of E. M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India* (1924) and forty years after the production of David Lean's eponymous film (1984), besides Santha Rama Rau's play in the interim (1960), this article focuses on the episode of the trip to the Marabar hills and caves, and, particularly, on the metaphorical or inner "trip" (in)to Adela's mind, one that invites psychoanalytic approaches and readings. In fact, the coeval connection between the writings of E. M. Forster (1879-1970), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and C. G. Jung (1875-1961), set and seen in the larger context of the epistemological relationship(s) between literature and psychoanalysis, has not been, in my view, sufficiently emphasized and explored hitherto.

KEYWORDS: E. M. Forster (1879-1970), *A Passage to India*, Marabar caves, Literature and psychoanalysis, Orientalism.

RESUMO: Cerca de cem anos após a publicação do romance de E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (1924) e quarenta anos após a realização do filme epónimo de David Lean (1984), para além, intercalarmente (1960), da peça de Santha Rama Rau (1923-2009), este artigo centra-se no episódio da excursão às montanhas e grutas de Marabar e, especificamente, na "viagem" metafórica ou interior à mente de Adela, convidando a abordagens e leituras psicanalíticas. Na verdade, a relação coetânea entre as obras de E. M. Forster (1879-1970), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) e C. G. Jung (1875-1961), integrada e lida no quadro mais vasto das relações epistemológicas entre literatura e psicanálise, não tem sido, a meu ver, suficientemente enfatizada e explorada.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: E. M. Forster (1879-1970), *Passagem para a Índia*, Grutas de Marabar, Literatura e psicanálise, Orientalismo.

To Dr. Daniela Morbey
(Clínica Filipa Maló Franco)

“At the centre of *A Passage to India* are the caves.”

(Stone 1985, 16)

In 1984, sixty years after the publication of E. M. Forster’s novel, David Lean’s eponymous film depicts Adela’s first visual contact with the Taj Mahal, that iconic cenotaph to (lost) love(s), and the Marabar hills in the travel agency in London. Let us briefly recall the scene and the relevant part of the dialogue between agent and client:

“First time in India, Miss Quested?”

“First time out of England.”

“I envy you. New horizons.”

[After Adela’s thoughtful look at another poster on the wall]

“And those are the Marabar caves. About twenty miles from your Chandrapore.”

“I see.”²

Although, in this day and age of globalization, technological progress, and instant electronic communication, fewer people actually visit travel agencies in person, it is interesting to note how customers, potential and effective, still respond to the visual allure of images of places and possible destinations, often tinged with the glamour of picturesqueness, sublimity, exoticism, fantasy, adventure, and/or romance.

The fact that this scene in the film, among others,³ is simply absent from the book might inspire theoretical debates on the rights, duties, liberties, limits, and constraints of intermedial/intersemiotic “translation”, especially as this “translation” has itself been (inter)mediated by Santha Rama Rau’s play in three acts, also entitled *A Passage to India* (1960) (Landy 2007, 235). In the Introduction to her Portuguese translation of Rau’s play, Maria Isabel Barbudo considers this “[a]. good example (...) of intertextuality and the

transversality of adaptation processes that (...) presuppose the use of specific codes, in accordance with the adopted means of communication” (in Rau 2012, 11; my translation).⁴

In Forster’s novel, Adela’s surname (*Quested*; my emphasis) is a significant one, materializing her curiosity and recurrent desire to know, against all odds, the “real” India (1947, 20 and 22, for example).⁵ One of those odds is Ronny Heaslop, Adela’s fiancé, who, as City Magistrate for Chandrapore, stands officially for the British colonial/imperial presence, supremacy, and rule of law, with all attending concepts, codes, and practices of administrative power (see, for general background, Gilmour 2019). The prospective marriage of Ronny and Adela will not go ahead, given their very different views on the natives and on the desirable amount of social or personal interaction with the British, the court trial blatantly opposing and exposing, at racial, civilizational, cultural, and political levels, the “hegemonic” British bureaucratic caste and the “subaltern(ized)” Indians (Forster 1947, 30, 42).

Unlike Ronny, however, his mother, the elderly Mrs. Moore, shows, throughout the novel, a remarkable openness towards different and foreign cultures (the Indian Other), as attested in her early visit to the mosque (Chapter II) and the friendly relationship that grows, from then on, between herself and Dr. Aziz, culminating, during the trial, in the distorted appropriation and adoption of her name as a political, quasi-religious slogan.⁶ The local uprisings and the first stirrings of Indian nationalism, as well as Dr. Aziz’s later rejection of all things British, can hardly be dissociated from these “othering” and alienating processes that often cause natives to feel foreign in their own land. Despite these oppositions, Sara Suleri argues that “the narratives of English India are fraught with the idiom of dubiety, or a mode of cultural tale-telling (...) *neurotically conscious of its own self-censoring apparatus*” (1992, 3; my emphasis). These tensions, ambiguities, and hybridities run through the entire novel, which Suleri considers “one of English India’s most troubling engagements in the fiction of cultural self-examination” (1992, 132).⁷

Notwithstanding thus *A Passage to India*’s obvious relevance and potential as a primary source for (post-)colonial/imperial studies,⁸ a field which has claimed the critical attention of distinguished oriental(ist) scholars, like Edward Said (1935-2003),⁹ Gayatri Spivak (b. 1942), and Homi K. Bhabha (b. 1949), I will just focus on the episode of the trip to the Marabar hills and caves,¹⁰ and, particularly, on the metaphorical or inner “trip” (in)to Adela’s mind, one that invites psychoanalytic approaches and readings. For instance, can it

be a coincidence that, early in the novel, Adela's distant view of the Marabar hills, mentioned in the very first and last sentences of Chapter I,¹¹ triggers a glimpse of what her married life would be?

"Yes, Ronny is always hard-worked," she [Adela] replied, contemplating the hills. How lovely they suddenly were! But she couldn't touch them. In front, like a shutter, fell a vision of her married life. She and Ronny would look into the club (...) every evening, then drive home to dress; they would see the Lesleys and the Callendars and the Turtons and the Burtons, and invite them and be invited by them, *while the true India slid by unnoticed*. Colour would remain – the pageant of birds in the early morning, brown bodies, white turbans, idols whose flesh was scarlet or blue – and movement would remain as long as there were crowds in the bazaar and bathers in the tanks. (...) But the force that lies behind colour and movement would escape her even more effectually than it did now. *She would see India always as a frieze, never as a spirit*, and she assumed that it was a spirit of which Mrs. Moore had had a glimpse. (Forster 1947, 41-42; my emphasis)¹²

As Maria Isabel Barbudo points out, another example is provided by an episode filmed by David Lean (c.47:14-52:23), though absent from both Forster's and Rau's texts:

[Lean] adds a scene in which Adela rides her bicycle through the countryside, ending up discovering a set of erotic sculptures in the ruins of a temple associated with fertility rites.

Preceding and preparing the sequence (...) in the Marabar caves, this scene contains an obvious symbolic charge, due to the suggestion of the awakening of sexuality and desire in the female character. An awakening (...) wrapped in the fear of the irrationality of such drives, previously unknown, and symbolized (...) in the sudden and noisy appearance of countless monkeys that slide through the sculptures. Adela's hasty escape, in its analogy with the reaction she would have in the caves, presents itself as an anticipation and suggestive explanation for the enigmatic attitude whose consequences would prove disastrous.

In an unequivocal way, David Lean's film reinforces (...) Rama Rau's veiled suggestion, highlighting the fact that Adela was a victim of her own sexual fantasies triggered by her semi-unconscious physical attraction to Aziz. (in Rau 2012, 18; my translation)¹³

In his essay "A Passage of Rape in India", A. D. Thomas recalls:

Roger Ebbatson and Catherine Neale suggest that a lot of the British prejudices derived from "a fear of Indian sensuality and a simultaneous, lascivious pre-occupation with polygamy (...). Herz (...) adds that Forster (...) employed "the motif of the East as unknowable" and "sexually

threatening”. Consequently it becomes apparent that the British sustain their power in India by repressing these fears. (2017, 248-249)

In David Lean’s epic film, before Adela actually sees the erotic statues and reaches the pagan temple, she has to pass through a small tunnel under a viaduct, which, like the entrance to the caves later on, can be symbolically interpreted as a doorway, heralding some sort of vision and/or revelation. This ride away from Anglo-Indian “civilization” and the incursion into pagan and “primitive” Indian nature, followed by Adela’s frightening encounter with the wild monkeys, may act as a reminder of the physical, or “animal”, part of human love.

The excursion to the Marabar hills, an idea first voiced by Dr. Aziz over tea at Mr. Fielding’s apartment, is narrated in Part II, entitled “Caves” (Forster 1947, Chapter XII onwards).¹⁴ In fact, Aziz had never visited the area himself, but he is only too eager to be hospitable to and impress his English acquaintances; furthermore, he is clearly regarded by Adela as the man who can show her that “real” India she longs so much to know (Forster 1947, 67).¹⁵ Adela’s unreciprocated attraction towards Dr. Aziz, a young and handsome widower, enhanced by the way he masterminds and supervises the whole trip, leads her to question him on personal matters:

“Are you married, Dr. Aziz?”

...

“And have you children?”

...

“Are they a great pleasure to you?”

...

“Have you one wife or more than one?” (Forster 1947, 139-140)

The unconventional (and very “unEnglish”) intrusiveness of all these questions speaks for itself, baffling and irritating the Indian doctor.

In an interview conducted by P. N. Furbank and F. J. H. Haskell at King’s College, Cambridge, in June 1952, Forster confesses: “When I began *A Passage to India* I knew that something important happened in the Marabar Caves, and that it would have a central place in the novel – but I didn’t know what it would be” (Bradbury 1975, 28). Later in that same interview, he adds: “I couldn’t read Freud or Jung myself; it had to be filtered to me”



(*idem*, 30). Based on these two statements, I believe that the emergence of psychoanalysis at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries, and its practical connections with myths, symbols, images, and archetypes in literary texts, is indeed crucial to the interpretation of the Marabar Caves episode. Like Chevalier and Gheerbrant point out in *Dictionnaire des Symboles*:

Sous le terme générique de caverne, nous comprenons également les grottes et les antres, bien qu'il n'y ait pas synonymie parfaite entre ces mots. (...) L'antre, cavité sombre, région souterraine aux limites invisibles, abîme redoutable (...) est un symbole de l'inconscient et de ses dangers, souvent inattendus. (1982, 181-182)

Wilfred Stone adds an oriental viewpoint, bordering on anthropology:

In Hindu mythology the caves represent the “womb of the universe”, from which (...) emanated all the forms of created life (...). There are many varieties of the myth, but basic to them all is the identification of caves with some primordial, prehistoric nothingness from which life emerged. If we seek a psychological explanation of the “womb of the universe” idea, we can find a corollary in the (...) notion of the subconscious – or “unconscious” as Freud always termed it. (...) The caves represent the unconscious in two senses – the repressed elements in the individual life and the survivals (...) of the pre-historic and the pre-human, those elements that Freud termed the id. (1985, 20-22 passim)¹⁶

To start with, Adela’s intrusive questions to Aziz are preceded by an epiphany:

(...) as she toiled over a rock (...), she thought, “What about love?” The rock was nicked by a double row of footholds, and *somehow the question was suggested by them*. Where had she seen footholds before? (...) She and Ronny – no, they did not love each other.

“Do I take you too fast?” inquired Aziz, for she had paused, a doubtful expression on her face. The discovery had come so suddenly that she felt like a mountaineer whose rope had broken. Not to love the man one’s going to marry! Not to find it out till this moment! Not even to have asked oneself the question until now! (...) Vexed rather than appalled, she stood still, her eyes on the sparkling rock. (...) Ought she to break her engagement off? She was inclined to think not – *it would cause so much trouble to others*; besides, she wasn’t convinced that love is necessary to a successful union. If love is everything, few marriages would survive the honeymoon. “No, I’m all right, thanks,” she said, and, *her emotions well under control*, resumed the climb, *though she felt a bit dashed*. (Forster 1947, 138-139; my emphasis)¹⁷



At this stage, Adela's "pro-Indian id", so to speak, is clearly kept under check, or repressed, by a "British (super)ego"¹⁸ made up of social norms, family expectations, and stiff upper lips. In fact, as Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) wrote, in "A dissecação da personalidade psíquica [Lecture XXXI The Dissection of the Psychological Personality]" (1933), "[w]ithout the light provided by the quality of consciousness, we would be lost in the darkness of depth psychology" (2001b, III, 84; my translation), whereas Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) argues "de même que la conscience étend ses ramifications jusque dans nos nuits, l'inconscient (...) émerge dans notre vie diurne" (n.d., 71).¹⁹

Adela's temporary disappearance from sight, after visiting a dark cave on her own²⁰ and battling with its disturbing echoes and shadows, will lead to Aziz's detention, imprisonment, and trial on the party's return to Chandrapore (Forster 1947, 147-ff). Later on, when Adela is interrogated under oath by Mr. McBryde, the District Superintendent, truth and moral rectitude prevail at last, and Adela withdraws the accusation of assault, much to the frustration, anger, and dismay of the British subjects, Mr. Fielding, the liberal and humane College's Principal, excepted. Interestingly enough, shortly after the trial and Adela's honourable and brave recantation, she admits to Mr. Fielding that the echo in her head has disappeared.²¹ One is somehow reminded of "The Scream" (or "The Cry"), the famous oil painting created in 1893 by Edvard Munch (1863-1944).

As the victim of a false accusation,²² Aziz is acquitted, released, and converted into a local hero and a proto-national symbol of the Indian revolt against the British. In this sense, Forster's novel fictionally echoes the "springs of discontent" patent in the Mutiny of 1857 and the Amritsar massacre (1919); similarly, it reflects the historical drive towards independence associated with the National Indian Congress, as well as the religious divide between Hindus and Muslims, embodied, respectively, by Professor Godbole and Dr. Aziz, and leading to the creation of two separate and independent states, India and Pakistan (1947).

Gertrude M. White sums it all up thus:

It [the trip to the Marabar caves] is a shattering experience, calamitous to everyone: it destroys Mrs Moore both spiritually and physically; it drives Adela to the brink of madness; it threatens ruin to Aziz, and actually alters his entire future; it imperils all relations between English and Indians; and it destroys all constructive relationships between individuals. Yet it is never

satisfactorily explained by the author. The nature and meaning of Adela's and Mrs Moore's experience is left in darkness, dealt with only in highly oblique and allusive language. (1975, 139)

Now, considering that, according to the novel, Adela and Aziz were *never together* in the same cave, how should one interpret the whole episode? As a plain and deliberate lie on Adela's part? As a pretext to break off her unsteady engagement to Ronny? As an illusion/delusion, a hallucination,²³ or even a bout of madness, possibilities raised by Mr. Fielding?²⁴ As a result of cultural shock, racial prejudice, and indoctrination orchestrated by members of the British community immediately after Adela's return from Marabar in an unsettled state of mind? As a reverie,²⁵ an expression or a projection of Adela's libido or sexual drive/impulse?²⁶ This is hard to say, especially as, even *before* the trial, Adela herself admits to Aziz's innocence,²⁷ not least in a conversation with Ronny:

"Aziz (...) have I made a mistake?"

"You're over-tired," he [Ronny] cried, not much surprised.

"Ronny, he's innocent; I made an awful mistake."

"(...) Perhaps there oughtn't to be any trial."

"(...) Aziz is good."

"He's good; I have been so wrong to accuse him." (Forster 1947, 185-186)

In Jung's words, "in addition to memories from a long-distant conscious past, completely new thoughts and (...) ideas can also present themselves from the unconscious – thoughts and ideas that have never been conscious before. They grow up from the dark depths of the mind (...) and form a most important part of the subliminal psyche" (1968, 25). All these unspoken feelings, fantasies, emotions, dreams, and desires – oppressed and repressed, rather than suppressed – would have to be "unearthed" from the ground, and brought to the light of discourse and critical analysis. Likewise, in a lecture published posthumously ("Algumas lições elementares de psicanálise [Lectures on Psycho-Analysis]", 1940), Freud acknowledges:

The concept of the unconscious has been knocking on the door of psychology for a long time and asking to be let in. Philosophy and literature have often toyed with the idea, but science could not see any use in it. Psychoanalysis took hold of the concept, took it seriously and gave it new content. (2001a, I, 201; my translation)

To A. D. Thomas, “the ‘imagined, attempted rape’ is a metaphor for how Britain governs, how India reacts, and (...) how India can mysteriously affect the *supposedly rational/English* mind” (2017, 245; my emphasis). Indeed, while Forster was twice visiting India (1912-1913 and 1921) and writing *A Passage*, Freud and Jung were trying to untangle the knots, unravel the mysteries, and explain the muddles²⁸ of the complex, and often contradictory, human mind. This coeval connection between the writings of the three men, set and seen in the larger context of the epistemological relationship(s) between literature and psychoanalysis, has not been, in my view, sufficiently emphasized and explored hitherto, even though, as Peter Childs has noted, “Forster’s novel offers fertile ground for the broadest range of analytical and theoretical perspectives. This (...) is precisely because of the narrative’s (...) breadth of reference and radical indeterminacy” (2007, 188). Whether one considers Forster’s novel, Rau’s play, Lean’s film or all of them, may the episode of the Marabar caves help boost communication and cooperation between the “two cultures” of sciences and humanities.²⁹ Only connect.

END NOTES

¹ I am grateful and deeply indebted to Dr. Cláudia Coimbra (CETAPS/Porto) whose friendship and generosity gained me access to David Bradshaw (ed.), 2007.

²<https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?&q=A+Passage+to+India+1984+Full+Movie&&mid=91590D4FEED38753F30D91590D4FEED38753F30D&&FORM=VRD GAR; c.2:17-3:29>.

³ See, for instance, Adela’s bicycle ride to the ruined temple, with its statues of Indian lovers (c.47:14-52:23), as well as Marcia Landy 2007, especially 238-240.

⁴ A comparison between these three pieces (novel, play, and film), with all it takes in terms of “faithfulness”, structural and artistic representation, adaptation, and compression, lies beyond my present purposes, but see, for instance, Santos (2013, 25), as well as Maria Isabel Barbudo’s own Introduction (Rau 2012, 9-20 passim).



⁵ As she puts it, “I’m tired of seeing picturesque figures pass before me as a frieze, (...). It was wonderful when we landed, but that superficial glamour soon goes” (Forster 1947, 24).

⁶ “The tumult increased, the invocation of Mrs. Moore continued, and people who did not know what the syllables meant repeated them like a charm. They became Indianized into Esmis Esmoor, they were taken up in the street outside. In vain the Magistrate threatened and expelled. Until the magic exhausted itself, he was powerless. (...) But he disliked it more than he showed. It was revolting to hear his mother travestied into Esmis Esmoor, a Hindu goddess” (Forster 1947, 205-206).

⁷ Suleri’s chapter on E. M. Forster (“Forster’s Imperial Erotic”, 132-148) dwells mostly on the viability of friendship between the Indians and the British (an issue debated by Aziz and his friends in chapter 2) and, specifically, on the nature of the relationship between Aziz and Mr. Fielding, therefore shedding little light on Adela and the Marabar caves.

⁸ See, for instance, Peter Morey 2007, 254-273.

⁹ “I have always felt that the most interesting thing about *A Passage to India* is Forster’s using India to represent material that according to the canons of the novel form cannot in fact be represented – vastness, incomprehensible creeds, secret motions, histories, and social forms” (Said 1994, 256; for further comments, see 256-263). Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, originally published in 1978, focuses more on the Near and Middle East than on the Indian subcontinent itself.

¹⁰ Chandrapore and Marabar are Forster’s fictional names for Chandrapur and Barabar, respectively.

¹¹ “Except for the Marabar Caves – and they are twenty miles off – the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary” (Forster 1947, 5) and “Only in the south, where a group of fists and fingers are thrust up through the soil, is the endless expanse interrupted. These fists and fingers are the Marabar Hills, containing the extraordinary caves” (Forster 1947, 7).

¹² “These hills look romantic in certain lights and at suitable distances, and seen of an evening from the upper veranda of the club they caused Miss Quested to say conversationally to Miss Derek that she would like to have gone” (Forster 1947, 114-115).

¹³ “Nesta nova sequência, (...) rejeitada por Santha Rama Rau, Lean desejava representar o despertar do desejo sexual em Adela, de maneira a preparar o espectador para a sequência que terá lugar nas grutas de Marabar [In this new sequence, (...) rejected by Santha Rama Rau, Lean wanted to represent the awakening of sexual desire in Adela, in order to prepare the viewer for the sequence that will take place in the caves of Marabar]” (Santos 2013, 34).

¹⁴ For the description of the caves, see Forster 1947, 113-114; as far as Lean’s film is concerned, see especially c.1:20:40-1:28:45. The idea of the excursion constitutes the starting point (Act I) in Rau’s play, whereas the trip itself is performed in Act II, scene 1.

¹⁵ “She [Adela] (...) liked Aziz, and believed that when she knew him better he would unlock his country for her” (Forster 1947, 62) and “she accepted everything Aziz said as



true verbally. In her ignorance, she regarded him as “India”, and never surmised that his outlook was limited (...) and that no one is India” (Forster 1947, 64-65).

¹⁶ To John Beer, “the British characters find the caves horrifying (...) because they have not been initiated into the larger sense of the universe that a fuller acquaintance with Hinduism would have given them. For a Hindu the cave would not be horrifying: it would rather be the retiring-place of the individual which he enters in order to comune with God” (1985, 115).

¹⁷ “Did she [Adela] love him [Ronny]? This question was somehow draggled up with the Marabar, *it had been in her mind as she entered the fatal cave*. Was she capable of loving anyone?” (Forster 1947, 193-194; my emphasis).

¹⁸ See excerpts from “O Ego e o Id [The Ego and the Id]” (1923) *in* Freud 2001b, III, 10-68.

¹⁹ To Denis Godfrey, “we are concerned in Forster’s novels and stories with two distinct levels of consciousness. A modern ‘daylight consciousness’ through which man seeks to understand himself and the world (...) logically and consciously and an ancient ‘twilight consciousness’ accessible only to those who have not advanced into self-consciousness or who, by reverting to instinct and cultivating the feelings (...) would deliberately hearken back to a pre-self-conscious past” (Qtd in Ganguly 1990, 231).

²⁰ “not seeing him [Aziz], she also went into a cave, thinking with half her mind ‘sightseeing bores me’, and wondering with the other half about marriage” (Forster 1947, 140).

²¹ “My echo has gone – I call the buzzing sound in my ears an echo. You see, I have been unwell ever since that expedition to the caves, and possibly before it” (Forster 1947, 218).

²² In the Collector’s words to Mr. Fielding, “‘Miss Quested has been insulted in one of the Marabar caves.’ (...) ‘She escaped – by God’s grace’” (Forster 1947, 149). Later on, Fielding’s question “‘What is the charge, precisely?’” is answered thus: “‘That he followed her into the cave and made insulting advances. She hit at him with her field-glasses; he pulled at them and the strap broke, and that is how she got away. When we searched him just now, they were in his pocket’” (Forster 1947, 153).

²³ In the course of a conversation with Mr. Fielding, Adela says: “you suggest that I had an hallucination there, the sort of thing (...) that makes some women think they’ve had an offer of marriage when none was made” (Forster 1947, 219).

²⁴ “I believe she’s under some hideous delusion, and that that wretched boy is innocent” (Forster 1947, 154) and “‘Then she’s mad’” (Forster 1947, 149).

²⁵ “como os psicólogos correm ao mais característico, estudam primeiro o sonho, (...) e dão pouca atenção aos devaneios, (...) que para eles não passam de sonhos confusos, sem estrutura, sem história, sem enigmas. O devaneio é então um pouco de matéria noturna esquecida na claridade do dia. Se a matéria onírica se condensa (...), o devaneio cai no sonho; (...) Mas existem outros devaneios que não pertencem a esse estado crepuscular onde se mesclam vida diurna e vida noturna. E o devaneio diurno merece, em muitos aspectos, um estudo direto. [as psychologists rush to the most characteristic, they study the dream first, (...) and pay little attention to daydreams, (...) which for them are nothing more than confused dreams, without structure, without history, without enigmas. The



daydream is then a bit of nocturnal matter forgotten in the light of day. If the dream matter condenses..., the reverie falls into the dream; (...) But there are other daydreams that do not belong to this twilight state where day life and night life mix. And daydreaming deserves, in many respects, direct study.]” (Bachelard 1988, 10-11).

²⁶ To Frederick C. Crews, “Adela’s experience in the Cave (...) lends itself more readily to analysis in psychological terms. This agrees with the Caves’ function of echoing only what is brought to them, for Adela’s yearnings are sexual, not mystical. (...) the Marabar Caves thrust to the surface a conflict between conventional and suppressed feelings. The echo that is metaphorically sounded in Adela’s hallucination (if it is a hallucination) of sexual attack is that of her unvoiced desire for physical love” (Bradbury 1975, 180-181).

²⁷ “‘I went into this detestable cave,’ she would say dryly, ‘and I remember scratching the wall with my finger-nail, to start the usual echo, and then (...) there was this shadow, or sort of shadow, down the entrance tunnel, bottling me up. It seemed like an age, but I suppose the whole thing can’t have lasted thirty seconds really. I hit at him with the glasses, he pulled me round the cave by the strap, it broke, I escaped, that’s all. He never actually touched me once. It all seems such nonsense.’ Then her eyes would fill with tears. ‘Naturally I’m upset, but I shall get over it’” (Forster 1947, 177).

²⁸ Mysteries and/vs. muddles are debated by Fielding, Mrs. Moore and Adela on chapter VII, 62.

²⁹ “It has been clear for many years that the problematics of interpretation cut across disciplinary boundaries, not obliterating them but providing a basis for marking similarities and differences and a ground for cross-disciplinary critique” (Nelson 1990, 10).

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MIGUEL ALARCÃO

BA in Portuguese and English Studies (1981), MA in Anglo-Portuguese Studies (1986) and PhD in English Culture (1996), awarded by NOVA University, Lisbon, where he held the post of Associate Professor (Retired). Director of the Central Library (2001-09) and Co-Coordinator of the Faculty's earliest research group on Medieval Studies (1999-2004).

Colloquial Assistant in Portuguese at the University of Birmingham, UK (Late 1980s).

He has published two books, five co-editions and c. 100 articles in Festschrifts, proceedings and academic journals on English/British Culture(s), Medieval English Studies and Anglo-Portuguese Studies.

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“Are you going to wear a dress now?”:

Nonhegemonic Masculinities in Ocean Vuong’s

On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous

INÊS SANTOS

University of Porto

ABSTRACT: This article analyses the work of Ocean Vuong, specifically his engagement with queerness and its impact on individuals. In *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong constructs a world marked by both beauty and pain, centered on the transformative relationship between Little Dog and Trevor. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of sociologist Raewyn Connell, as well as the ongoing debate within the interdisciplinary field of Masculinities, I demonstrate how Vuong articulates multiple forms of masculinity and how, ultimately, Little Dog and Trevor—characters who embody nonhegemonic masculinities—endure the violence imposed by those surrounding them. This research deepens the critical understanding of this contemporary novel and situates it within a broader scholarly context; through a close reading of the masculinities embedded in the narrative, we can discern how queer and feminist studies are inevitably intertwined with masculinity and the societal pressures that

RESUMO: Este artigo analisa a obra de Ocean Vuong, em particular o seu envolvimento com *queerness* e os seus efeitos sobre os indivíduos. Em *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong constrói um mundo marcado simultaneamente pela beleza e pela dor, centrado na relação transformadora entre Little Dog e Trevor. A partir das contribuições teóricas da socióloga Raewyn Connell, bem como do debate em curso no campo interdisciplinar das Masculinidades, demonstro como Vuong articula múltiplas formas de masculinidade e como, em última instância, Little Dog e Trevor — figuras que incorporam masculinidades não hegemónicas — sobrevivem à violência imposta por aqueles que os rodeiam. Este estudo aprofunda a compreensão crítica deste romance contemporâneo e situa-o num contexto académico mais amplo; através de uma leitura atenta das masculinidades integradas na narrativa, podemos discernir de que forma os estudos *queer* e feministas estão



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compel men to perform constructed alter egos. In a novel defined by grief, cultural displacement, and numerous structural and interpersonal obstacles, the persona into which Little Dog is coerced reflects the broader social forces shaping his existence. In a world populated by men who imagine themselves as natural-born leaders aligned with hegemonic ideals—ordained to rule, dominate, marry, and reproduce—the narrative foregrounds those who exist on the margins of hegemonic masculinity and asserts the necessity of recognising their experiences.

KEYWORDS: Ocean Vuong, Masculinities, Queer Studies, Asian American literature.

inevitavelmente entrelaçados com a masculinidade e com as pressões sociais que impulsionam os homens a agir consoante os *alter egos* construídos. Num romance marcado pelo luto, pelo desfasamento cultural e por numerosos obstáculos estruturais e interpessoais, a persona em que Little Dog é coagido a refletir sobre as forças sociais mais vastas que moldam a sua existência. Num mundo povoado por homens que se imaginam líderes natos alinhados com ideais hegemónicos — destinados a governar, dominar, casar e reproduzir-se — a narrativa dá visibilidade àqueles que existem nas margens da masculinidade hegemónica e afirma a necessidade de reconhecer as suas experiências.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ocean Vuong, Masculinidades, Estudos *Queer*, Literatura Asiático-Americana.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1988, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak concluded that the subalterns could not speak. In her in-depth postcolonial analysis, she challenges the Eurocentric intellectuals who speak for the marginalised, dismissing the power structures that differentiate them. Although Spivak focuses entirely on power and gender structures, the lack of representation, and the erasure of non-Western perspectives outside the hegemonic power, her argument seems also to fit Ocean Vuong's narrative. Vuong explores the intergenerational trauma of war, cultural dislocation, and the complexities of immigrating to the settler's nation as a queer man. In other words, Vuong is able to tell a story through a type of narrative that is not part of the dominant discourse; he acknowledges his marginalisation yet establishes his presence and voice regardless. The novel opens with "I am writing to reach you – even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are" (Vuong 2019, 3) emphasizing that Little Dog, the main character, is writing not necessarily to communicate with his mother, especially because she does not understand English, but to voice his struggles and experiences as a non-conforming subaltern person. Although Spivak maintains that the subaltern cannot be heard within hegemonic Western frameworks, Vuong's narrative suggests a possibility for marginalised voices—such as Little Dog's—to articulate themselves and challenge heteronormative, hypermasculine Western narratives. And as Vuong says in an interview, "If I write for whiteness, even to prove it wrong, then I've lost myself already" (*in* Vaid-Menon 2022), which stresses the idea that as a marginalised person, he feels tempted to prove himself to the white literary world; however, in doing so, he would lose his purpose to navigate the experience of immigrant populations—especially his experience as a Vietnamese American non-conforming gay man.

Vuong's debut novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), explores the complex story of Little Dog, a second-generation immigrant whose existence challenges the hegemonic image of a self-made man in the United States. Through his character, Vuong articulates the marginalisation experienced by minorities in contemporary society and simultaneously deconstructs prevailing conceptions of masculinity, queerness, and internalised homophobia. This article aims to demonstrate the complexity of men's studies and how it intertwines with queer theory to deconstruct societal ideals of masculinity. It

also explores how *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* challenges these concepts by including and exalting representations of non-hegemonic masculinities.

The concept of “hegemonic masculinity” was first introduced by Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell in her book *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (1987), and it has been applied and complexified ever since. Even though masculinity has been an important aspect of both queer studies and women’s studies, Connell’s theory was able to formulate a cohesive, comprehensible narrative that did not focus on perpetuating the myth that every man benefits from patriarchy and instead “celebrates a multiplicity of masculine identities over socially embedded stereotypes” (Hobbs 2013, 384). She seeks to demonstrate that even though there is a dominant type of masculinity, it does not mean that there is no space for other, equally important, expressions of masculinity to rise within the male world. As stated in *Hegemonic Masculinities: Rethinking the Concept* (2005) by Connell and Messerschmidt:

Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men. (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005, 832)

Hegemonic masculinity manifests in various ways, either through competitive sports, violence, heterosexual desire, or inherent homophobia. Connell stresses the link between hegemony and violence, daringly saying that “at both symbolic and practical levels the defense of gun ownership is a defense of hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 2005, 212). However, hegemonic masculinity is not a stable concept, due to its extensive nature, “[it] is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable” (Connell 2005, 76). The concept of hegemony originates from Gramsci’s analysis of class dynamics, wherein a dominant group assumes a leading position in society at a particular time and place. For that reason, at any given time, the leading ideal of masculinity can change. For instance, the model of hegemonic masculinity valorised before and during the Second World War differs markedly from contemporary forms, as wartime ideals were defined by violence, weapon use, and a valorisation of

irrationality. The fall of Germany in 1945 inevitably meant the defeat of the muscular German soldier ready to go to war and kill the enemy with his mastery. In *The Men and the Boys* (2000), Connell explores the connection between strength, bodies and masculinity by stating:

Exemplary masculinities in Western societies are typically defined by a specific body-reflexive practice: sport, violence, heterosexual performance, bodybuilding. The commercial promotion of the exemplars is a striking feature of how hegemony is maintained in gender relations. Yet closer examination shows bodies repeatedly breaking the bounds or failing the uses proposed for them. (Connell 2000, 86)

Later in her other pivotal work entitled *Studying Men and Masculinity* (2001), Connell adds:

For instance, some cultures make heroes of soldiers, and regard violence as the ultimate test of masculinity; others look at soldiering with disdain and regard violence as contemptible. Some cultures regard homosexual as incompatible with true masculinity; others think no-one can be a real man without having had homosexual relationships. (Connell 2001, 49)

This quote reinforces not only that hegemonic masculinity fluctuates in the ways previously discussed, but also that while homosexuality is punishable and regarded as deviant from hegemonic masculinity in certain societies, in others it is valued as an experience that contributes to the perceived fullness of a man's masculinity. Consequently, in Western societies, homosexual men are automatically marginalised for failing to conform to heteronormativity and are thus frequently associated with femininity: "gayness is easily assimilated to femininity", positioning them both at the bottom of the hierarchical order (Connell 2005, 78). Connell demonstrates the consequences of homophobic mass media, which still reinforces stereotypical ideals about gay men, writing "for instance, heroism is so tightly bound into the construct of hegemonic masculinity that it is virtually impossible, in contemporary mass culture, to represent gay men as heroic" (Connell 2005, 234).¹ Donaldson, in his study, goes even further, saying that "conformity to the demands of hegemonic masculinity, pushes heterosexual men to homophobia and rewards them for it. In other words, male heterosexual identity is sustained and affirmed by hatred for, and fear of, gay men" (Donaldson 1993, 648). Both arguments sustain the idea that hegemonic

masculinity survives from a complex hierarchy that defines what certain types of masculinity should look like and the consequences to those who do not defend and perpetuate hypermasculine beliefs.

At last, the notion of masculinity is highly debatable in men's studies, even though contemporary society focuses on systemic issues such as the patriarchy, which revolves around the oppression of women by men. Hegemonic masculinity consists of oppression by a few men towards others, less central men. Essentially, any analysis of patriarchy is incomplete without reference to men's studies, which examine how groups of men, through hegemonic structures, exert control over women, as well as over men who do not conform to hegemonic norms. These concepts are not static, however, but continually evolve and adapt to contemporary realities, with Connell revisiting and refining her initial arguments on both hegemonic and nonhegemonic masculinities over time.

Since hegemonic masculinity is embedded in challenging and affirming that there are multiple ways of being masculine and numerous ways of embodying masculinity, queer theory should not be overlooked, as it has been deconstructing numerous notions, such as masculine *versus* feminine. Judith Butler has become a key theorist regarding the topic of gender performativity, arguing that gender is constituted through repeated acts and the way someone compulsorily performs themselves repeatedly. Their view of gender disrupts the binary understanding of masculinity and femininity as fixed elements, claiming instead that it is fluid and socially fabricated. Through this understanding, Butler states that there is no natural way of being masculine, nor a singular way of being, expanding the discussion to various types of identities. To exemplify, in *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler defends:

That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very inferiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the "integrity" of the subject. (Butler 1990, 136)

In other words, as mentioned earlier, gender does not have an independent existence outside of societal construction, nor does it exist naturally within a person. It is a fabricated identity, even if it is believed to be of "interior essence"; it is a conjunction of made-up regulations that are attributed to someone based on the way they present themselves in

society, whether they are perceived as masculine or feminine. Of course, such notions are limiting for this analysis, since both masculine and feminine include subdivisions with multiple identities.

II. UNDERSTANDING *ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS*

Ocean Vuong's novel disassembles and explores the notions that have been revealed thus far. Through the characters of Little Dog, Paul, and Trevor, Vuong explores the existence of various types of masculinities in society and their varying degrees of influence, to some extent, by war. Little Dog and Trevor occupy the most important space in Vuong's book, as both attack directly at hegemonic masculinity through their attitudes, while also being victims of it at the same time.

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous explores sexuality, gender, and cultural heritage from the perspective of a Vietnamese American boy. Moreover, any analysis of masculinity within Vuong's novel requires reflection on the social construction of Asian masculinity in the United States, for example, and its influence on how Asian men come to perceive themselves. From Connell's perspective, we know that masculinity changes from location to location and from situation to situation, so hegemonic masculinity in Vietnam is not the same as in the West, and masculine ideals during the Vietnam War are not the same as today. Fatma Eren writes, "the history of Asian American men in the US is marked by systematic racism, primarily based on their effeminized manhood. Being recruited to work in feminized occupations as cooks, laundrymen or domestic service before WWII (...) they were excluded from white male privilege" (Eren 2021, 36). Asian men had to leave their countries and start anew somewhere foreign, somewhere where their university education would not guarantee them a prosperous and stable future. They saw their roles as providers and household maintainers attacked by the United States' systemic racism, reflecting on their sense of manhood, and as Eren argues "in America, where the idea of hegemonic masculinity is intricately grounded in material success, it is seen that Asian men direct their nervousness and tension, arising from failure, toward their family members, particularly their spouses" (Eren 2021, 37). This tension can be seen through Rose, who suffers from domestic violence.



The problematic effect of the Vietnam War on Asian masculinity is reflected in Little Dog, but primarily in his Mother Rose's oppressive actions. As a result of her traumatic past and her struggles trying to raise her son in a foreign country, facing the hardships of immigration, Rose projects her insecurities in Little Dog by forcing him to comply with hegemonic masculinity. She is, however, conscious that American hegemonic masculinity differs from the Vietnamese. When Rose says, "This is American milk so you're gonna grow a lot. See? (...) You already look like Superman!" (Vuong 2019, 27), she not only illustrates what is to her American masculinity—a strong, muscular man—but also emphasizes that Little Dog must consume American products to become the idealized man that will be respected among others, "hoping the whiteness vanishing into [him] would make more of a yellow boy" (*ibidem*).

When Little Dog confesses, he suffers violence from American boys, she says, "What kind of boy would let them do that?", which promotes more violence as a response to violence, as if, yet again, man's nature should be inherently violent (*idem*, 26). Additionally, to Rose, a man would not cry, because hegemony finds vulnerability an attack on manhood. After her son communicates that he suffers from bullying, Rose says, "Stop crying. You're always crying!", which reveals that she would rather perpetuate hypermasculine values rather than accept her son's hurt, scared it would make him weaker (*ibidem*). This moment contrasts with the scene in which Little Dog finds his grandfather crying, "The man's name is Paul. He is my grandfather – and he's crying" (*idem*, 46).

When Little Dog reveals his sexuality, Rose responds by asking, "Are you going to wear a dress now?", followed by the assertion, "They kill people for wearing dresses" (*idem*, 130). This exchange reveals not only Rose's perception of homosexuality but also her understanding of femininity as a position of vulnerability and weakness. Her fear of Little Dog wearing a dress is rooted in her own history of abuse as a woman; by stating that "people" are killed for wearing dresses, she broadens the threat beyond Little Dog, implicitly invoking the violence historically directed at women. While this passage also reflects the pervasive association of gay men with effeminacy and diminished masculinity, Rose's reaction emerges from her lived experience as a woman, wherein femininity is both stigmatised and weaponised as a source of violence rather than protection. As C. Slopek mentions in "Queer Masculinities" (2021), "[Rose] conflates same-sex desire and the violation of gender-specific dress codes because both infringe heteronormativity" and

“infringing gender norms beyond sexual orientation is considered more transgressive and, thus, more dangerous.” (745). Lastly, Rose says, “I gave birth to a healthy, normal boy”, asserting that queerness is considered an abnormality and a sickness, because it does not correspond with the natural form of masculine desire (Vuong 2019, 131).

Little Dog’s relationship with Trevor is equally significant within the novel, as it embodies the struggles of two boys growing up in the United States and coming from different—yet similarly abusive—backgrounds. Trevor, a white boy whom Little Dog meets while working in the tobacco fields, becomes the centre of a haunting love story that at times allows Little Dog to feel beautiful. More often, however, Little Dog internalises blame, perceiving himself as having “tainted” Trevor through his homosexuality. Trevor embodies many of the attributes traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinity; he was “raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity” (*idem*, 203). Yet, despite this positioning, he suffers at the hands of an abusive father, represses his non-heteronormative sexuality, and belongs to the lower socio-economic classes. When Little Dog meets him, he says, “Up until then I didn’t think a white boy could hate anything about his life” (*idem*, 97).

According to W.S. Pollack’s study (1998), there exists a “boy code” that must be adhered to for boys to gain respect within boyhood. This code typically dictates the repression of emotions and any behaviours perceived as feminine, promoting toughness and independence, and thereby reinforcing performances of hegemonic masculinity. Trevor suppresses his own identity, and the novel presents several moments in which he conforms to this boy code, even when such conformity is largely performative rather than authentic. There is a moment when Little Dog is describing Trevor, and he says, “Trevor sixteen; blue jeans streaked with deer blood” (Vuong 2019, 153) and “Trevor the hunter. Trevor the carnivore, the redneck” (*idem*, 155), Trevor is described as a savage, bloody hunter, “shotgunner, sharpshooter, not fruit, or fairy” (*ibidem*) which paints him as a violent, strong man who uses guns in his free time, as if part of his nature. By stating “not fruit or fairy”, Vuong draws the line between the two boys—Trevor may cry when he is in the barn—but he is not as fragile as Little Dog, he is not a fruit nor a fairy, two terms society uses to describe gay men. It is important to note that the narrative is presented through a singular, subjective viewpoint, a feature that becomes fundamental to understanding how Little Dog perceives other characters, particularly Trevor. Little Dog’s

interpretation of Trevor is deeply shaped by his own mindset, at times leading him to question Trevor's actions while obscuring the extent of the suffering and internal conflict that Trevor himself experiences. While Little Dog regards him as an embodiment of hegemonic masculinity—a white boy who represses his sexuality yet ostensibly exists unhindered within the structures of American masculinity—the critical understanding is that Trevor, despite his racial and cultural positioning, is profoundly constrained and harmed by hegemonic norms, which elicit his most destructive behaviours.

In the same context, he tells us that Trevor does not eat veal because it is the cows' children, and as a grown man he should eat the actual cow, "Trevor who, wild as he was, wouldn't eat veal, wouldn't eat the children of cows" (Vuong 2019, 216) and meat is the metaphorical symbol of manhood (Amin 2023, 272). It seems that Trevor's entire existence is haunted by his fear of being perceived as effeminate. He is also a rebel because he "fingered a freshman girl then tossed her underwear in the lake for fun" (Vuong 2019, 154). He is submitted to the pressure of heteronormativity, and even if he did not have to prove that to his peers, he owned that to himself. M.S. Kimmel (2006) in *Manhood in America* argues that heterosexuality was a defensive shield for boys; they used it to avoid the shame of not being masculine enough. Internalised homophobia is Trevor's worst enemy; he denies his sexuality throughout the entire novel, saying things like "Please tell me I am not a faggot. Am I? Am I?" (Vuong 2019, 155).

He requires the dominant position in the relationship, so he feels more male, relegating Little Dog to the submissive part. There are several moments in which we see Trevor trying to establish dominance as a shield, for instance, "I don't wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch. (...) It's not for me, it's for you. Right?" (*idem*, 120). The secrecy of their relationship offers Trevor a conditional form of safety. By remaining closeted, he avoids confrontation with the world's rigid rules around masculinity and sexuality, allowing him to pass as heterosexual and move through public spaces without attracting violence or scrutiny. However, this safety is not freedom so much as a survival strategy: it depends on constant self-monitoring and silence. Trevor's ability to "pass" protects him physically, but it also requires the erasure of his authentic self, revealing how safety in this context is granted only through concealment rather than acceptance. Applying Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's idea that binary sexuality limits human experience and self-representation (1990), Trevor was forced to hide his sexuality, for it did not respect the binary spectrum.

Therefore, because his understanding of the world was binary, he needed Little Dog to be the passive one so he could mask his dominant persona. Subsequently, Little Dog states, “The rules, they were already inside of us”, because Trevor was constantly rejecting his true self and identity, shaming Little Dog and not opening himself entirely (Vuong 2019, 120). Little Dog, by contrast, embraces his identity from the outset when he states, “I don’t like girls” (*idem*, 130). Notably, his self-definition is articulated through negation rather than affirmation, positioning his identity in opposition to heteronormative expectations. Instead of employing a positive declaration of desire or selfhood, Little Dog defines himself through what he is not, a strategy that reflects the limited discursive space available to nonhegemonic masculinities. This negative articulation underscores how queerness, within a heteronormative framework, is often rendered intelligible only in contrast to the dominant norm, rather than as an autonomous and affirmed identity. Trevor, on the other hand, denies it until the last minute, even comparing it to a sickness, “I’ll be good in a few years, you know?” (*idem*, 188). Ironically, after stating this, he dies from an overdose, demonstrating that his self-denial has killed him; his drug addiction, which he developed due to his struggle with hegemonic masculinity, inevitably ends him. Not only does this passage show the stigma around homosexuality as a disease, but it also shows that Trevor was fighting against himself all along and relying on Little Dog to feel more masculine. As Eren claims:

They both attempt to cure their wounded manhood stemming from their low socioeconomic status and dysfunctional families. However, Trevor’s internalization of the supremacy of White heterosexuality and Little Dog’s internalization of the emasculated position of Asian American men in American society influence the course of their relationship. (Eren 2021, 39)

When they meet for their final goodbye, Little Dog reflects, “the whole point of us meeting each other was to say goodbye, or rather, just to be side by side, a farewell of presence, of proximity, the way men are supposed to do” (Vuong 2019, 168). This farewell enacts a form of nonhegemonic masculinity by privileging presence, emotional intimacy, and care over performative toughness. Little Dog and Trevor, thus, resist hegemonic norms. Vuong suggests that masculinity can encompass vulnerability and connection, affirming alternative expressions of manhood that challenge and expand societal expectations of what it means to be a man.



In the end, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* explores the nuances of growing up queer and non-white in a country as intolerant as the United States, but it also delves into a narrative that exposes masculinity as a spectrum that can be performed in various ways. Both Trevor and Little Dog are masculine in their unique ways, and the way Vuong poetically exalts their identities demonstrates that nonhegemonic masculinities exist in society and are equally relevant. Moreover, the ending of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* resonates with Judith Butler's assertion that "we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right" (1990, 140). Trevor's self-destructive turn to addiction can be read as a form of self-punishment, employed to suppress what he perceives as his deviance—his homosexuality and his inability to embody the stability and authority expected within his community, as well as to fully perform hegemonic masculinity. As Butler suggests, Trevor ultimately "fails" to do his gender correctly: although he is a white American boy positioned within the privileges of American masculinity, his repressed sexuality and internal conflict lead to his tragic death, through which he is remembered and rewritten by Little Dog.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this article has drawn briefly on the concept of hegemonic masculinity to analyse how Ocean Vuong deploys and critiques it in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, illuminating the complex and often violent dynamics of queer male existence within a heteronormative social order. Vuong also explores the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality, allowing the reader to understand that Little Dog must face multiple struggles simultaneously. The fact that his family immigrated from Vietnam adds more intensity to his character. Little Dog's relationship with his mother demonstrates that, for the most part, he felt aimless while grieving an abusive past. While the story of Little Dog could easily be narrowed down to his struggle growing up homosexual in an already tormented household, and him falling in love with an all-white American boy, who fights internally to be socially accepted, Vuong gives us more. His past, which consists of intergenerational trauma created by war, revolving around grief and cultural displacement, affects Little Dog on a deeper level and creates a hostile bed for him to lie in. Through Connell's theoretical framework, Little Dog's masculinity can be understood as nonhegemonic, not because he fully rejects hegemonic ideals, but because his relationship

towards them is marked by a quiet, unspoken aspiration. Throughout the novel, Little Dog remains aware of hegemonic masculinity as a model of safety, legitimacy, and belonging, even as it remains unattainable to him. By the end of the narrative, however, he comes to accept his own nature and recognises that inhabiting the margins of hegemonic masculinity—rather than conforming to its demands—may offer a more sustainable form of survival and self-understanding. He is not the war hero who comes home to his wife and kids and wishes to be celebrated for fighting a battle he probably does not fully grasp the reasons for. Instead, he is the gay son who comes home from school and cries in his bedroom. Trevor, by contrast, is consumed by the need to perform in accordance with the hegemonic masculinity ideal into which he was born. Like Little Dog, he contends with financial hardship and familial abuse, yet unlike Little Dog, he internalises these pressures, punishing himself for his homosexuality and for his inability to transcend the constraints imposed by intergenerational trauma. His tragic death serves as a stark reminder that nonhegemonic masculinities are frequently dismissed, marginalised, and subject to both societal and self-inflicted violence.

While Rose made the decision to move abroad to flee the violence and the bleakness she faced in Vietnam, her unreceptiveness towards Little Dog's sexuality creates a multilayered narrative of mother-son plot. In the novel, Rose represents the society Connell discussed in her studies, symbolising the judgment and societal pressure to conform to a certain type of masculinity. Through homophobia, a lot of people display and perpetuate hegemonic masculinity. Trevor, himself a victim of hegemonic structures, enacts his desire to belong within dominant masculine patterns by imposing a submissive and feminised role upon Little Dog, operating under the belief that this positioning would allow him to be “cured” in the years to come. He spent most of his time hiding his true nature through sexual domination and by performing the “boycode” to prove he was not emasculated. The two boys portray some of America's darkest realities, all of which challenge the concept of the American dream and what it means to be a non-conforming male in American society. Trevor's dream was to be released from his sickness, released from his father and his drunkenness and be a normal man with a normal life; whereas, for Little Dog, his dream would probably include Rose, despite everything, and loving someone who loved him without shame. Moreover, Vuong portrays two boys situated on the margins of society, both shaped by socio-economic precarity and queerness, and exposes their



shared longing for self-acceptance and for the perceived stability promised by hegemonic masculinity. Yet, rather than offering protection, this ideal renders them victims, a reality most starkly embodied in Trevor, whose death results from his continued struggle to attain it.

At the opening of the novel, Little Dog asks, “Can you hear me yet? Can you read me?” (Vuong 2019, 62); by its conclusion, readers are positioned to answer affirmatively. Although society continues to punish those who fail to perform hegemonic masculinity, the narrative reveals that both Little Dog and Trevor inhabit nonhegemonic forms of masculinity in relation to which hegemonic masculinity is constructed. Specifically, they embody marginalised masculinities, shaped by unequal power relations rooted in gender, class, race, and ethnicity, as well as subordinate masculinities, which are positioned as inferior to hegemonic ideals. Through these characters, Vuong demonstrates that masculinity is neither singular nor hierarchical by nature, and that such forms do not warrant punishment—even when, tragically, these men internalise that violence and turn it upon themselves.

¹ It is worth noting that Connell's study is now twenty years old, and media representations have evolved over time. While heroic queer characters were once rarely seen on the big screen, by 2025, this has changed significantly.

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INÊS SANTOS

Inês Santos holds a Bachelor's Degree in History from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of Porto and a Master's Degree in Anglo-American Studies from the same institution. In her third year of her Bachelor's program, for her final research project, she studied witchcraft in the Inquisition of Lisbon – this study is titled “Feitiçaria e Superstição na Inquisição de Lisboa de 1662 a 1699”. Throughout her bachelor's, she showed interest in interdisciplinarity, and applied for various seminars from Japanese cinema to North American literature. Her Master's thesis is titled *Adapting Sally Rooney to the screen: Are the politics of sameness still relevant in Adaptation Studies?*

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