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Table of Contents

Volume 12, Fall 2015

Introduction

Carl Seiple, Acting Editor 4

From Booker to DuBois to Black Power: Accommodation vs. Action in August Wilson's *Two Trains Running*

Alireza Asadi, Islamic Azad University Karaj, Iran & Michael Downing, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

..... 5

An Absurd Trophy in an Existential Universe: A Reading of Albert Camus' *The Stranger*

Lamia Khalil Nayef Hammad, Yarmouk University

..... 20

The White Poof

Patrick Walters, Kutztown University

..... 36

Tree Slayer (poem)

Lynn Petko, Penn State University Berks

..... 48

Stopping by a Bridge on a Rainy Winter Afternoon

(Tribute to R. Frost) (poem)

Mike Downing, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

..... 50

EAPSU ONLINE/ IMPOST submission and subscription information

..... 51

Introduction

As Acting Editor, I have been caretaker of the journal as it transitions between editors and journal titles: the move from long time editors Jeffery Holtz and Kim McKay to the new editor Brent House, and the last published issue under the original journal title, *EAPSU Online: A Journal of Critical and Creative Work*.

The issue begins with two essays on American and European subjects by scholars geographically outside those regions examining how August Wilson and Albert Camus explain the self and otherness to Western Culture at-large. The first essay for example, comes out of a four-year collaborative effort between Mike Downing of Kutztown University and Alireza Asadi of Islamic Azad University in Iran. As described by Professor Downing, “in 2012, Asadi contacted Professor Downing through the August Wilson website, asking that Downing review his paper on August Wilson. After three years of pushing drafts back and forth, a solid draft emerged. Co-authorship was agreed upon at that point. After testing the paper at the EAPSU Fall Conference 2015, Downing put the finishing touches on the essay and submitted it for publication in *EAPSU Online*. The essay, therefore, effectively represents successful international collaboration in the area of August Wilson scholarship.”

I thank Jeffrey and Kim for their editorial stewardship and congratulate Brent for taking on this opportunity. I especially thank the peer reviewers for their time, experience, and judgment.

Carl Seiple, Acting Editor

Criticism

**From Booker to DuBois to Black Power:
Accommodation vs. Action in August Wilson's *Two Trains Running***

Alireza Asadi, Islamic Azad University Karaj, Iran
&
Michael Downing, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

For years, as King saw it, the masses of Negroes acquiesced in their situation of oppression because of they did not feel that they could do anything else about it, except pray to God and root for the NAACP. But with the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott...the masses of the Negroes discovered that they could do a great deal for the cause of freedom. (70)

~James H. Cone

August Wilson has been called the "American Shakespeare" (see Appendix 1) and, like Hamlet, Wilson's characters often wrestle with a recurring question of "to be or not to be?" In Wilson's Century Cycle plays, not surprisingly, the struggle typically zeroes in on a range of philosophical positions relating to the African American experience in 20th Century America, specifically, those espoused by Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), W.E.B DuBois (1868-1963), Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), Malcolm X (1925-1965) and the Black Power Movement (epitomized by the emergence of the Black Panther Party in 1966). In *Two Trains Running*, the characters reflect these positions, wrestling with the questions of whether or not to act, the nature and consequences of those actions, the timing of those actions, as well as how those actions are influenced by the historical/ socio-political period in which the plays are set.

In his 1895 “Atlanta Compromise” speech (also known as the "Cast down your bucket" speech), held at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, Mr. Booker T. Washington revealed his strategy for blacks. He called for patience, self-help and accommodation as a means of improving relations between blacks and whites. He said:

To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is their next-door neighbor, I would say: ‘Cast down your bucket where you are’— cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded.

He continued, assuring whites that they can be sure that their families will be surrounded by the most "patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen." He concludes the speech by invoking God, praising the Exposition as providing "hope and encouragement" and offering the "patient, sympathetic help" of the Negro race.

Eight years later, in 1903, W.E.B. DuBois offered an extensive critique of Washington’s program of racial accommodation. In an essay entitled “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others,” which appeared in the celebrated *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois argued that Washington represented in Negro thought "the old attitude of adjustment and submission." DuBois argued that Washington’s "programme practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races." And that essentially, Washington was prepared to withdraw many of the "high demands" of blacks as men and American citizens.

DuBois claimed that Washington was asking black people to give up political power, the continued insistence on civil rights, and opportunities for higher education in order to, instead,

concentrate on “industrial education, the accumulation of wealth, and the conciliation of the South.” The outcome? DuBois argued that, as a result of this “tender of the palm-branch,” Blacks were increasingly disfranchised, legally relegated to a "distinct status of civil inferiority" and that institutions of Black higher education faced a steady withdrawal of financial support.

As a solution to Washington’s strategy, DuBois proposed a “broad-minded criticism of the South.” In addition, he also argued that blacks must strive for rights “by every civilized and *peaceful* method” (italics ours). Ultimately, DuBois cited the Declaration of Independence, arguing that “That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” In so doing, he called upon Americans to adhere to the tenets set forth by America's founding fathers.

The nonviolent philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr. followed essentially followed the footsteps of DuBois. In his April 4, 1957 speech, "Justice Without Violence," King said, "If you succumb to the temptation of using violence in the struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and your chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos." Influenced by the "peaceful resistance" teachings of Mahatma Ghandi, King accentuated his position of nonviolence by arguing that nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence but also "internal violence of spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a man, but you refuse to hate him."

However, King also argued that breaking the law, under the right conditions, could be an effective form of protest. In his "Letter From Birmingham Jail" (April 16, 1963), King argued that a person who breaks a law "that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the

penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law."

The nonviolent positions of Washington, DuBois, and King Jr. were not, however, enough to gain equal treatment under the law for blacks in the U.S. Despite the desire to promote nonviolent resistance, police brutality against blacks continued, particularly in the city of Oakland, California, which is where the Black Panthers got its start. According to Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin in *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*:

In Oakland, California, in late 1966, community college students Bobby Seale and Huey Newton took up arms and declared themselves part of a global revolution against American imperialism. Unlike civil rights activists who advocated for full citizenship rights within the United States, their Black Panther Party rejected the legitimacy of the U.S. government. The Panthers saw black communities in the United States as a colony and the police an occupying army. (2)

Beginning in October 1966, the Black Panther Party's core practice took the form of armed citizens' patrols to monitor the behavior of police officers and challenge police brutality in Oakland. In 1969, community social programs became a core activity of party members." As such, the Black Panther/ Black Power movement, fueled by the writings of Malcolm X, is the third strand in an evolving historical pattern that grew from Washington's "accommodation and patience" to DuBois's "civilized and peaceful method[s] of striving for equal rights" to the Panther mantra of "by any means necessary."

Wilson's *Two Trains Running* reflects this evolution of thought as it pertains to black civil rights, with Memphis, West, Hambone, Risa, Holloway, and Sterling representing, in various ways, all of these philosophical approaches. For example, initially, Memphis, who owns a restaurant in Pittsburgh's Hill District, tells of a situation where he was prevented by force from claiming what was rightfully his, which forced him to follow Washington's policy of acquiescence and accommodation. He recounts a memory from 1931 about losing his land in the South:

I got a piece of farm down there [Jackson, Mississippi]. Found me some water and made me a nice little crop. Jim Stovall, who I bought the land from, told me my deed say if I found any water the sale was null and void. Went down to the court to straighten it out. He had a bunch of fellows get together to pick on me. They took and cut my mule's belly out while it standing there. Just took a knife and sliced it open. One of them reached down, grabbed hold his dick, and cut that off. I stood there looking at them. I say "Okay. I know the rules now. If you do that to something that ain't never done nothing to you... then I know what would you do to me. (Wilson, *Two Trains*, 67)

In the face of this kind of brutality, Memphis had little choice, so he left Jackson and moved to Pittsburgh's Hill District. Although Memphis lost his land in Jackson, however, he is determined not to repeat the same mistake in 1969 as it relates to his restaurant. As part of urban renewal, the city of Pittsburgh was buying property in the Hill District, and Memphis, following the philosophy espoused by DuBois and King, asking for \$25,000, saying "if they wanna tear it down they gonna have to meet my price" (Wilson 15).

West, the local undertaker, is doubtful, saying, “they ain’t gonna give you no twenty-five thousand dollars for this building” (Wilson 37) and offers \$15,000. Memphis refuses, saying he is not going to take “a penny less than twenty-five thousand dollars,” otherwise, “they ain’t getting my building” (Wilson 38). Memphis represents Civil Rights activism by insisting on his price for the restaurant and not settling or accommodating the white man. Ultimately, Memphis receives \$35,000 for his restaurant, which exceeds his expectations and validates the Dubois/King philosophy of nonviolent resistance.

Hambone also reflects this philosophy of nonviolent assertion, but, unlike Memphis, he is not rewarded. Wilson writes that “Hambone’s mental condition has deteriorated” to such a point that he can only say two phrases: “he gonna give me my ham. I want my ham” (Wilson 17). Memphis explains how, years ago, Hambone painted a fence for a white man named Lutz. As payment, Hambone was supposed to receive a ham if he did a good job. After painting the fence, Lutz told Hambone to take a chicken instead, arguing that the paint job was not good enough. Hambone refused the chicken and asked for his ham. It is important to note that Hambone’s position is verified by Sterling who says he saw the fence that Hambone painted and that Hambone had done “a good job.” “It was a big job, too,” Sterling said, adding “Hambone should have had two hams.” Unfortunately, Hambone dies without ever receiving his ham, which calls into the question the effectiveness of peaceful resistance.

Hambone represents decades of nonviolent—and largely unsuccessful—demand for civil rights. Unfortunately, Hambone’s peaceful but assertive struggle to shame Lutz and decry an unjust society does not change his situation. Instead, it makes blacks, like Memphis, grow weary of the policy of peaceful resistance:

(Memphis comes around the counter, takes the coffee from Hambone, and throws it out)

Hambone (to Memphis): He gonna give my ham.

Memphis (pushing Hambone toward the door): go on over there and get it.

Hambone: I want my ham!

Memphis (at the door): There he is. Go on over there

(Hambone exists)

Come in here running off at the mouth. I'm tired of hearing that.

This weariness becomes monotonous. In his book, *The Past as Present in The Drama of August Wilson*, Harry Elam, Jr. claims “the very monotony of Hambone, I want my ham, reflects on the need to work specifically and collectively on a local level for change” (70). It also points to the next stage in the struggle for equal rights, which brings us to the Black Power movement and the philosophy of pursuing the safety of blacks through “any means necessary.” In fact, according to Stephen Bottoms, “Set in the context of the 1960s, his simply asking for justice, instead of demanding or even taking what he believe is his, reads in part as an assimilationist acceptance of white authority—an authority which is never going to grant him his due (Bigsby 150).

It is clear that the issues under discussion by the men in the play are not the same issues facing black women at the time. If Wilson is making the point that, “by 1969, nothing has changed for the black man” (Nadel 130), then even less has changed for black women. Risa, the only female with a speaking part in the play faces discrimination on two fronts: race and gender. In fact, it is one of the great ironies of the play as we watch Memphis incessantly bossing Risa

around and making demands with no objection from the males who are, for the most part, extremely concerned about black civil rights and the fight for social justice.

Their treatment of Risa, in fact, is overtly sexual. The line that most of the male characters utter to Risa is “Give me some sugar” which is a double entendre, suggesting not only a need for a powdery substance to put into their coffee—if, indeed, they are interested in that at all—but also a suggestion for sex at nearly every turn¹. In other words, for all Holloway and the others have to say about the topic of *social* inequality in the play, he does nothing to defend Risa from *gender* inequality. An article entitled, “But Some of Us Are Brave: A History of Black Feminism in the United States,” published on *The Thistle Alternative News Collective*, called offers a trenchant discussion of the obstacles that black women faced during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s:

Black women who participated in the Black Liberation Movement and the Women's Movement were often discriminated against sexually and racially...The movement, though ostensibly for the liberation of the black race, was in word and deed for the liberation of the black male. Race was extremely sexualized in the rhetoric of the movement. Freedom was equated with manhood and the freedom of blacks with the redemption of black masculinity. Black men in the Black Liberation Movement often made sexist statements which were largely accepted without criticism.

¹ It is interesting to note that the nature of the two foods related to Risa and Hambone reflect a gender bias. Sugar is dessert; ham is meat protein. One can be viewed as superfluous; the other as essential. This brings into view the question of how foods in Wilson's plays represent certain culture attitudes, including representations of gender.

Risa is not particularly interested in the Black Power Movement. When Sterling tries to teach Hambone the phrase “Black is Beautiful,” Risa objects, asking “Why you wanna teach him that stuff for?” And when Sterling invites Risa to a Black Power rally, she shows little interest.

For his part, Holloway believes civil rights struggles are all about self-respect. Unlike Memphis, who believes that Hambone should take the chicken instead of the ham and continue his life, Holloway, “a man who all his life has voiced his outrage at injustice with little effect” (Wilson 10), argues against accepting anything less than the agreed-upon payment:

we might take a chicken. Then we gonna go home and cook that chicken. But how it gonna taste? It can't taste good to us. We gonna be eating just to be eating. How we gonna feel good about ourselves? Every time we even look at a chicken we gonna have a bad taste in our mouth. That chicken's gonna have a bad taste in our mouth. That chicken's gonna call up that taste. It's gonna make you feel ashamed ... [Hambone] say he don't want to carry it around with him. But he ain't to forget about it. He trying to put the shame on the other foot. He trying to shame Lutz to give him his ham. And if Lutz ever break down and give it to him...he gonna have a big thing. He gonna have something he be proud to tell everybody.

(Wilson 30)

Mary L. Bogumil, in *Understanding August Wilson*, argues that “Hambone’s verbal accusations are specifically to shame Lutz but generally to decry white injustice” (116).

The transition from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Civil Rights era to the Black Power Movement of Malcolm X comes through Sterling. Sterling, an ex-con, who “has been out of the penitentiary for one week” (Wilson 19) is going to act instead of talk. Sterling is ready to fight

for his rights, and, as such, follows the path set by Malcolm X. In his book, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, James H. Cone argues that Malcolm X is the “best medicine against genocide,”

because he showed that:

one does not have to stay in the mud. We can wake up; we can stand up; and we can take that long walk toward freedom. Freedom is first and foremost an inner recognition of self-respect, a knowledge that one was not put on this earth to be a nobody.

Sterling exemplifies this attitude. He wins in the lottery and learns that Old Man Albert, the white man who is in charge of the lottery, is not going to give him all of his winnings. Albert claims that too many people bet on the same number and, as a result, the disbursement has been cut in half. Sterling does not stay in the mud. Instead, he visits Old Man Albert—who is protected by bodyguards—and asks for his initial two-dollar investment back (Wilson 88).

Albert agrees and returns the money, but then asks Sterling to give back the money Sterling won. Sterling refuses and Albert, changing his tone, tells Sterling to leave.

Holloway warns Sterling that if he goes up there and “mess with the Alberts, then West gonna have to bury him” (Wilson 76), but Sterling persists and achieves some measure of success. He challenges the hegemony in ways that blacks who came before him could not. In addition, Sterling’s overt connections to the Black Power movement are obvious. He distributes flyers and asks other characters like Memphis, Hambone, and Risa to join the rallies against discrimination (39). Additionally, Sterling is trying to teach Hambone Black Power slogans:

Sterling: okay, check this out. Now....you ready? First I say it....and then you say it. You ready? (Sterling line up in front of Hambone)

Now listen. Take your time. Don't worry about getting it wrong. Black is beautiful. See? Come on no. Black....

Hambone: Black....

Sterling: Is.....

Hambone: Is....

Sterling: Beautiful.

Hambone: Beautiful.

....Hambone: Black is beautiful. (Wilson, 53)

Teaching the Black Power Movement's slogans to Hambone foreshadows how the movement is subsuming the more passive Civil Rights era. Hambone, the symbol of nonviolent struggling, dies without receiving his ham. In one way, the Death of Hambone is the death of nonviolent struggling; however, his struggling spirit will affect other characters and cause birth of a new, more assertive, way of struggling. Mary Bogumil, in support of this notion, writes that "although Hambone's body surrenders, tired from Lutz's injustice, his spirit survives. Hambone's death effects an essential change in the character of Sterling, Risa, and Memphis" (117). Hambone's death prompts Sterling to break into Lutz's store and steal a ham, which he then gives to West, for burial with Hambone:

The sound of glass breaking and a burglar alarm is heard.

.....Sterling enters, carrying a large ham. He is bleeding from his face and his hands. He grins and lays the ham on the counter.

Sterling: Say Mr. West..... that's for Hambone's casket.

Although death of Hambone is very influential in engaging Sterling and Memphis in the Black Power Movement, Aunt Ester (“ancestor”) plays a major role in the evolution of black self-identity. Ester Tyler is 349 years old (Wilson 89), which is “as old as Black experience” (Rocha 128) in America. Christopher Bigsby argues that Aunt Ester can be considered as the mother of all African Americans (184). The character takes her name from a woman who saved her people in the Old Testament. That is why, after visiting Aunt Ester, Memphis is ready to go back to Jackson and claim his forty acres land:

Memphis: she told me, “if you can’t fight the fire, don’t mess with it” only I’m ready to fight it now. ...she says, “if you drop the ball, you got to go back and pick it up. Told me “You got to go back and pick up the ball”. That’s what I’m gonna do. I’m going back to Jackson and see Stovall. (Wilson 98-99)

Moreover, after visiting Aunt Ester, Sterling confronts Albert and eventually takes the ham from Lutz’s store and presents it to West. Therefore, after visiting Aunt Ester, Memphis and Sterling are able to achieve agency and act on their own behalf, both starting a new life. In his essay “American History as ‘Loud Talking’ in *Two Trains Running*,” Mark William Rocha explains the significance of this visit:

Memphis’s announcement of the payout [when he wins the case in court to sell his restaurant with his own price] at the end of the play is far less important than his announcement that he has visited Aunt Ester, who has given him the resolve to return to Jackson to confront Stovall, the first white man to cheat him. (129).

As Holloway also explains, Aunt Ester has the power to “make you right with yourself” (Wilson 24). This power comes from her rich understanding. She has got this power as she

represents the whole black culture of African American in America. It is Aunt Ester's power that makes Memphis, who feared to confront Stovall and his gang, declare that he is prepared to return to the South and fight for what is his. She enables Sterling to fight for his lottery money and forcibly take the ham from Lutz. Thus, it is taking actions that will lead the way to creation of a respectable social standing inside the hegemonic society of America under Aunt Ester's guidance, as a symbol of African American culture.

Thus, all of the male characters of the play struggle with the decision of whether to acquiesce or act, with their actions largely determined by the situations they are in. Memphis had to acquiesce when faced with direct, physical violence, but eventually is able to stand strong and insist on his selling price; Hambone resists peacefully is eventually awarded his ham as he lay in his casket; Sterling is willing to get blood on his hands in order to achieve justice for Hambone. Each of these characters reflects, in different ways, the dominant philosophies espoused by the leading African American thinkers of the 20th Century.

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Criticism

An Absurd Trophy in an Existential Universe: A Reading of

Albert Camus' *The Stranger*

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The twentieth century witnessed a dire alteration in different realms of life. Though there was a striking growth in psychology, science, history, anthropology, and many other fields of knowledge, this era was characterized with a great sense of depression, uncertainty, and wastefulness that haunted individuals' lives. Thus, as Tarnas claims, being in anticipatory mode, philosophers and writers probed relevant issues in their writings such as the spiritual crisis in the modern life. Issues such as anxiety and alienation, spiritual nihilism, horror and frailty appeared mainly after the WWII, all of which crystallised into an what is called Existentialism which is best expressed in the writings of Soren Kierkegaard, Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus , Freidrich Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Franz Kafka (389). As Baldick claims, existentialism is centered on human existence, and it is believed that the individual is forced to choose and to be responsible without the help or the intervention of any superior power (89).

Although Existentialism started with Kierkegaard in the 1840's, it reached its peak in the 20th century. The very first works that comprehended Existentialism are Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *The Concept of the Dread* (1844), and *Sickness Unto Death* (1848). From Kierkegaard's view point, the only resolution and relief of the human beings is found in great faith which is a point that leads to "peace of mind and serenity" (qtd. in Cuddon 294).

Existentialism started to take other forms with Heidegger and Jaspers, J. DE Gautier whose perception was the source of Atheistic Existentialism. Sartre's dictum "*existence precedes essence*" postulates that identity can only be understood through analyzing, or at least, observing the committed actions. From this aspect, Mihe explicates that 'freedom' was highlighted since no one's actions can ever be seen as the outcome of others' behaviour or attitude (222). Such freedom, according to Nietzsche, creates a frightening culpability, loneliness, and nihilism because "*God is dead*". In other words, and according to Sartre, it is the action that frames the essence of the individual in a kind of void (*le néant*), and mud (*le Visqueux*) (Cuddon 295). Man resides in this mud and thus seems to be unaware either of himself or of his state of hypnotization: "The energy deriving from this awareness would enable him to drag himself from the mud" (295), and thus create a mode of existence. Sartre, in *L' Existintionalisme est un Humanisme* (1946), gives a spray of optimism to the human being living in a murky lifeless environment by becoming *engagé* (involved). However, the individual, after awakening and becoming unable to accommodate the self, experiences *angoisse* (angst), despair, and even alienation fed by the absurdity that strikes him.

Albert Camus' *The Stranger* presents a modern society where apparently every individual is isolated and acts without concern about social restraints, yet at the same time every one uses social conventions, norms, and values in order to condemn the others. *The Stranger* is, according to Hatcht and Hayes: "one of the first modern books perhaps the very first in which the absurdist awareness of the absence of any settled moral truth is worked into the details of the story" (291). This idea is clarified through the protagonist, Meursault, as an individual standing against unrighteousness in an absurd society which holds no reverence for such a value. Though

the author presents a peculiar form of honesty through the protagonist, he favors it to the fake empty society that relies on appearances and mere empty words; King postulates that “*L' étranger*, actually, presents a character that goes against these conventional beliefs, who refuses to play a usual social role, and yet who is basically likeable and honest” (37). Regrettably, Meursault could neither stand for his frankness, nor change the society's vision. Ultimately, he falls into a state of angst and despair preferring death to living in a meaningless world. The society's alienation for Meursault reached its peak with its determination to wholly exclude him through sending him to the bottom line of an absurd life. In short, he is twice alienated; he alienates himself from society and is estranged by the society itself, mainly, owing to his tenets and convictions about asserting his own individuality.

Meursault, in existentialist terms, is an individual put into a society in which individuals are free to espouse their own ethical codes, orientations, and even destinies. It is as if individuals, within such a social milieu, have to, in existential psycho-analytical terms, forge a personal method, as Sartre states, that is “destined to bring to light, in a strictly objective form, the subjective choice by each living person makes himself a person; that is, makes known and himself what he is. Since what the method seeks is a choice of being at the same time as being – which are expressed in this behavior” (81). As a matter of fact, Meursault tries to form his existence through being upright or, in better terms, frank; Solomon states that Meursault “is totally honest, but honest in a peculiar way” (173), a quality that later on leads him to his down fall. Adele King, in his book *L' étranger*, affirms this point through describing Meursault as avoiding “conventional reactions” whenever he is faced with a situation in which he has to

express his thoughts and opinions (44). As Sherman explains, Camus himself describes Meursault as a hero who:

is condemned because he does not play the game. In this respect, he is foreign to the society in which he lives; he wanders, on the fringe, in the suburbs of private, solitary, sensual life. And this is why some readers have been tempted to look upon him as a piece of social wreckage... [I]f one asks *how* Meursault doesn't play the game, the reply is a simple one: he refuses to lie. To lie is not only to say what isn't true. It is also and above all to say *more* than is true, and, as far as the human heart is concerned, to express more than one feels. This is what we all do, every day, to simply live. He says what he is, he refuses to hide his feelings, and immediately society feels threatenedFor me, therefore, Meursault is not a piece of social wreckage, but a poor naked man enamored of a sun that leaves no shadows. Far from being bereft of all feelings, he is animated by a passion that is deep because it is stubborn, a passion for the absolute and for truth. This is still a negative one, the truth of what we are and what we feel, but without it no conquest of ourselves or the world will ever be possible. (61)

From this perspective, social conventional reactions generally are related to honesty, truth, and good conducts. However, in Meursault's society the norm is to lie in order to please the society. This is clear when he refuses to go to C el este's restaurant where he is tested by receiving questions which he should answer according to the social frame. Meursault becomes a hypocrite in order to avoid being a liar. He prefers not to speak, or meet anyone so that he will not be obliged to violate his convictions.

Meursault displays either an intrinsic drive to revolt or an extrinsic conformity. In other words, he either acts out of his free will, or acts with great veneration and obedience to his society. Obviously, Meursault belongs to the second category. From the beginning, we are introduced to Meursault as the exemplar of the existentialist character of being free in making decisions, and burdened with responsibility of his own conduct in society. After his mother's death, instead of normally feeling sorrow, grievance, and culpability about leaving his mother alone, he simply decides to go to swim (18). As Mihe explains, this act shows that he wants to express his absolute freedom as an individual which can not be curbed by any superior regulation (229).

However, Meursault's freedom seems to show more of a pointless nature. He seems to be irrational, lost, lacking in ambition, and powerless. Man according to Tarnas is said to be of a futile passion (393). Meursault's actions appear to be either stagnant or passive, or rarely, framed by some frenzy moments. The first instance of his stagnant nature is his denial of any promotion in work that, obviously, stems from his passive generic orientation towards life. When his boss offered him an opportunity in Paris, he simply refused. He “had no ambition”, and he “couldn't see any reason for changing” his life (39). He is haunted by the absurdity of life that devours every sense of ambition or purpose. He falls in a state of “despair in the face of a presumed lack of meaning or purpose of life” (Wolfrey, Robbins, and Womack 52). Besides his indifference towards his mother's death, Meursault expresses no enthusiasm for the most seducing, attractive, and desired sort of relationship which is love, or in proper terms as a sexual and a conjugal liaison. When Marie, unconventionally, initiated a proposed marriage, he thought:

I didn't mind and we could if she wanted to. She then wanted to know if I loved her. I replied as I had done once already, that it didn't mean anything but that I probably didn't. "Why marry me? She said. I explained to her that it didn't matter and that if she wanted to, we could get married. Anyway, she was the one who was asking me and I was simply saying yes. She then remarked that marriage was a serious matter. I said no." (39)

It is apparent that Meursault does not even bother himself to fake some feelings; on the contrary, he stays blunt and frank. Mary is astonished by his attitude which sounds extremely bizarre. Unlike all people, Baldick claims that Meursault considers neither evolution in his career nor forming a family something of a great importance, but simply absurd (1), a point that makes him really strange and alien. In fact, this feeling of alienation is mutual; he feels himself a stranger to the social practices, and society finds him an alien through his own social conduct.

Structurally speaking, *The Stranger*, is divided into two phases of Meursault's developing character and his relationship with his society; in the first, he isolates himself from society creating his own monotonous and peaceful sphere, but this state changes because of his murder of the Arab through which society finds an opportunity to estrange him. What readers know about Meursault in the first part is that his mother died, he lived a very calm life alone, and he was not really indulged and motivated in his work, unlike in the second part where readers are conscious of the confrontation and the struggle between him and society. According to Childs and Fowler, Meursault, in the first part, acts spontaneously out of basic instincts which in the second part becomes the source of his misery as well as the proof of society's condemnation (2)

In Heidegger's terms, Meursault is like all "the individuals who are likewise doorless and windowless, but this is true not because individuals are just isolated, but because they are

outside, in direct relation with the world in the street, so to speak. Individuals are not at home because there are no homes for them” (qtd. in Wahl 16). In fact, according to Roston, Meursault isolated himself from, what he thought, a meaningless society, a world experiencing chaos, seeking collective destruction, and a world with no future orientation or destination (6). However, this state did not last for a long time. The killing of the Arab, was a turning point in Meursault's life; and “it was like giving four sharp knocks at the door of unhappiness” (55). Starting with this moment, Meursault no longer isolated himself, but it was society's turn to alienate and condemn him for his frankness. As Sherman states, Meursault is a character “who is estranged” yet “one who is inherently strange” (59).

In the first part of the novel, Meursault is seen as a mere observer not a participant, sitting in the balcony looking at people, describing thoroughly the physical surroundings, and refusing to have close contact with other people. As King explicates, Meursault intentionally ignores peoples' psychological or moral nature describing merely what they do and how they act. Paradoxically, he is perceptive and he strongly reacts to the natural world describing the heat, the sun, the weather, and the sea (43). He, apparently, appreciates the purity and innocence of nature. However, when he is confronted with society, he struggles and learns how to exteriorize his feelings and emotions. Still, he finds it difficult to interact with such an absurd milieu.

As Meursault stands rigid towards his surroundings, he does not understand what is going on and does not want to avoid any trouble. However, interestingly, he pretends to adhere to his social practices not to be a part of his society, but to fulfill his curiosity or simply to answer some of his wanderings since he is experiencing a state of estrangement, and hopes to feel what it would be like to be a part of such an obscure system. Kierkegaard wrote:

One sticks one's finger into the soil to tell by the smell in what land one is. I stick my finger into existence—it smells nothing. Where am I? Who am I? How came here? What is this thing called the world? What does this world mean? Who is that lured me into the thing, and now leads me here? Who am I? How did I come to the world? Why I was not consulted, why not made acquainted with its manners and customs? (qtd. in Spanos 331).

Apparently, these lines explain why Meursault accepts Marie's proposal for marriage and helping his friend Raymond in taking revenge against his mistress (31).

Meursault's dilemma starts not only with his community's interference in his life, but also with the emerging contact between them and his awareness of the destructiveness and hypocrisy of his associates. The course of events manifests the extent of the alteration between the two parts of the novel: society as a proactive force and Meursault as a reactive individual. He experienced a "radical alteration of the natural thesis" as William Spanos explicates that it:

requires a continuing procedure of disconnection or bracketing which transposes the naively experienced world is neither to deny its reality nor to change its reality in any way; rather it is to effect a change in my way of regarding the world, a change that turns my glance from the real object as I take it, interpret it as real. (328)

In his conversation with Salamano, Meursault acquires maturity or, at least, consciousness while talking about the change in his perception towards society moving from ignoring, avoiding, and shunning society to a state of cognizance, omniscience, and awareness. As if blaming himself for his previous dire state of marginalization, Meursault says: "I still don't know why, that I hadn't realized before that people thought badly of me" (43).

The whole motion of action was spurred not by Meursault's careless attitude towards his mother's death or the murder of the Arab, but it is most and foremost owing to the rising tension between the absurd and nonsensical social realities on one hand, and Meursault's unconventional attitudes on the other hand. It is quite clear, as Tarnas states, that “incoherence and juxtaposition constituted the new aesthetic logic” (391) for him. In this sense, society is engulfed by a state of nihilism which considers existence as a mere shadow owing to the absence of truth, values, and meaningfulness. In Meursault's society, the norm is to be a liar, a knave, and circumspect when dealing with others. When Meursault talked to his lawyer about his mother's death, he said “I probably loved mother quite a lot, but that didn't mean anything. To a certain extent, all normal people some times wished their loved ones were dead” (61). He does not dissemble his emotions, but he attests them in a lame way that shocks his lawyer as he looked “very flustered” towards Meursault and tells him to “promise not to say that at the hearing, or in front of the examining magistrate” (61). If this manifests something, it only shows the oppressive and suppressive social clutch Meursault lived in. As such is an environment characterized by lying and hiding emotions; if there is the simplest contradiction as such between the perception of the individual and the society, the individual will naturally be excluded, or rather deranged.

Relying on words rather than deep beliefs, ethos, and inherent principles bespeaks the playfulness, shallowness and superficiality of the society Meursault lived in. From an ethical viewpoint, the norm in the society surrounding Meursault is hiding the truth and being too meticulous since people build their judgments, considerations, and opinions of another on such basis. People, in Meursault's society were maniac towards others' viewpoints as well as their

judgment on the basis of their words or even their slips of the tongue. Such a society appears to be a tightly-knit society which revolves around appearances, without values.

This dire state of affairs is clearly seen in Meursault's judgments not because of killing the Arab, but rather for not disclosing any apparent grief and mourning for his mother's death. As such, he finds himself as Kellman states "a marginal figure in a decent red universe where private and immediate sensations have displaced objective norms" (1). The norm in this defaced absurd community focuses on appearances to judge the moral attributes of a person or any other phenomenon. When the warden at home was questioned about the nature of the relationship between Meursault and his mother and how Meursault conducted the day of his mother's funeral, the warden answered that he neither cried, nor manifested the simplest features of respect to his mother's corpse. Another futile question that the judge, as a representative of social power and law enforcement, asked to determine Meursault's destiny is whether he knew his mother's age or not (82). A further instance of the inconceivable nature on the basis of qualifying or convicting a person can be seen when Pérez was asked if Meursault cried on his mother death or not (85). In this sense, this society seems to waive the mere notion of rationality and sanity though it relies on such absurd standards. The lines "on the day after the death of his mother, this man was swimming in the sea, entering into an irregular liaison and laughing at a Fernandel film" (87) summarize the whole policy of Meursault's society which is based on utilizing trivial pretexts to ban and eliminate people judging them through irrational and absurd social foundations.

After a long phase of a secure self-isolation, Meursault realizes the sordid nature of the society he was lived in and for the first time he captures the hatred his surrounding specimen had against him (83). According to Mihe, Meursault recognizes the zilch of his society and existence

as one which exhibits itself as a mere shadow owing to the absence of truth (232). From this moment, he was fostered into such a gloomy, harrowing, and most importantly alien world which resulted in an utmost distress and angst.

Sartre in *Existentialism and Human Emotions* captures Meursault as caught in a “rational man in an indifferent universe” (173). The issue between Meursault and his surrounding is that of conflict, paradox, duality and obscurity. From one perspective, Meursault is condemned for being exceptionally honest and isolating himself from the accepted communal norms. The counter argument, in this case, would be that he deliberately alienated himself since he was aware that he was drifting, as Solomon states, “in a universe divested of illusions and lights. Man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of lost home or the hope of a promised land” and he continues to state that “[t]his divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity” (180).

Meursault's downfall, however, lies in the fact that he could not conform to society or, in better terms, fit himself in a subtle manner in his society. From an existentialist viewpoint, Spanos claims that self-placement resembles:

the desire of the child to find a primitive order in his world, or, perhaps to approach what transcends him by pointing to it. But the very ordering arrangement may be a clue to a still different problem: the location and realization of the primal situation of the self in reality. (329)

What Meursault faced is an incapacity to deal with current attacks of society through a discrete isolation. Meursault is, in fact, the quintessence of an upstanding character who refuses to alter his cherished values either to please his hypocrite society or, even, to secure his survival, and

thus resorting to, primarily, alienating himself. He is a man who believes that a harmful truth is better than a useful lie.

A structuralist analysis of the use of tenses is significant when alienation is the focal issue. In the French version, Albert Camus, the author, uses the *Passé composé* to indicate the total exclusion of Meursault. The equivalent of this tense in English is the present perfect; for this point Taylor states that “[e]ven the use of the French *passé composé* (present perfect) strengthens the isolation describing experiences as instant events which he refuses to exploit” (59).

Reaching a cross point, Meursault's strategy of shrinking into himself and barring himself from society becomes no longer valid or effective. Silence, in fact, no longer assented with the world. Meursault's convictions changed for he sees the irony of the society he was living in where honesty becomes a subject of sarcasm; he was described during his trial as a creature devoid of any sense of morality or value that qualified him as a human being; on the contrary, his blatant, rude, and anti-social conduct is but an alibi that condemns him and proves his guilt (93).

In fact, society represents, conventionally, a miniature of a divine power. Besides religious and judiciary regulations, society pervades life of every individual. With the banner that God is dead, society seems to gain power over people: “If God is dead, every thing would be possible” Dostoevsky said, and “indeed every thing is permissible if God does not exist, as a result man is forlorn” (qtd. in Sartre 22). However, on the other hand, if God is dead there are no values or beliefs to decriminalize our behaviors (23). Meursault's society embraced this *parti pris* (preconceived view) and acted as a god. The judge's resonant words prove this point. He uses extremely decisive and authoritative statements like: “he must be punished accordingly” (94).

With the absence of what the judge labeled “divine justice” (109), Meursault becomes the scapegoat of the perversion of the society. Society took the lead to punish Meursault who violated the current social touchstones; he isolated himself from his society, and he was ill-mannered and blunt. Society's premise was that Meursault acted from his full consciousness and willingness, a point that buttresses his guilt (92).

In fact, the act of killing the Arab was just an extenuation to society's position against Meursault to penalize him for his non-adhesion and alienation. He was keenly aware of society's plans for alienating him. He describes his position during the trial: “It seems to me that it was just another way of excluding me from the proceedings, reducing me to insignificance” (96). However, after a long suffering, Meursault realizes that he was combating a collective cosmic alienation that is fed by the absurdity of the world. Careless about society's alienation for him and refusing to infuse himself in such a surrounding, Meursault experiences the uttermost angst and despair. He recognizes, as Sprintzen states, that “the more we struggle to achieve individuality, the more desperate the effort to liberate ourselves from the sway of social conformity and ritual, and the more poignant our inevitable confrontation with death” (1). Thus, ironically, Meursault says: “I had no place in a society whose most fundamental rules I ignored, nor could I make an appeal to the heart when I knew nothing of the most basic human reactions” (95).

The only outlet for Meursault from this miserable state was death because as Solomon claims: “living is keeping the absurd alive” (180). He affirms that life was not worth living (105). Thus, he is happy for his end describing it as a future which may overcome the enormous torment and the nausea he was feeling. King explicates that Meursault is the example of an *au*

fais (well-informed) individual who "might be a conqueror, imposing his will on the world ... creating his will on the meaningless world" (34). Meursault's triumph, as Taylor puts it, was in his ability to stand for his values, refusing society's will, and favoring a "happy death" (54).

In fact, *L'étranger* is a story of a man who willingly excluded himself from an absurd society through his staggering honesty. However, Meursault's docility did not last for a long time; his society took advantage of his inability to conform to society's expectations and brought him to his fatal end as the ultimate resort of alienation; he reveres such an end considering it a trophy which stands for his bravery and determination as he said: "my last wish was that there should be a crowd of spectators at my execution and that they should greet me with cries of hatred" (133). Obviously, these cries of hatred are out of jealousy because of his virtuous nature. It is clear that Albert Camus provides an example of a fellowman residing in an absurd world defying its hypocrite nature through his sturdy position; Sprintzen states that "[c]onfronted with the theoretical problem posed by the absence of absolute values, and the historical problems posed by contemporary social movements, Camus focused on the possibility of developing guides to humane conduct in a world without transcendence" (1). As King postulates, Camus thought that he "tried to present in this character [Meursault] the only Christ that we deserve" (39).

Relying on a bleak perspective, Albert Camus, by virtue of his immaculate protagonist, excels in portraying the dilemmas of individuals suffering in the society of the modern world and struggling for a niche for their existence. Meursault found his forte, a trophy, in his own death. Eventually, death becomes meaningful and purposeful; it defeats the absurdity of life, and ends a phase of uncertainty and suffering. Through Meursault, Camus indicts false social values, and death becomes a liberating outlet and a victory.

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Creative Non-fiction

The White Poof

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Grandma Dottie's blue eyes light up and her mouth widens in a circle of surprise when I walk into her den unannounced. "PATRICK!" she trumpets, before pulling her 85-pound frame out of the chair and wrapping her tiny arms around me. I've come to distract her on this difficult day, while she is uprooted from her three-floor home of the last half century and spirited a few miles down the road to a more manageable apartment. Indeed, the smile and joy of my arrival fade quickly as she sinks back into the green upholstered rocker, which swallows her wispy frame. Only that trademark helmet of poofy white hair jumps out from the worn cloth. Her black, pink and yellow slacks are appropriately loud today, but she is uncharacteristically quiet.

Every few minutes, one of the three husky movers drags off another piece of furniture from her beloved den – the old brown lamp, the huge wooden secretary's desk and the television on which she watches her beloved Tiger Woods. The men are dismantling the room that she and her latest male companion, Rich, have dubbed "Paradise." "I'm the last to go, he says," Grandma Dottie tells me forlornly, pointing to Barry, the friendly head mover. Outside, my parents banter with the movers, negotiating which pieces are going along (they're marked with colored stickers) and which are to be left behind for recycling or trash.

With two steel hips, a creaky heart valve and frail bones deteriorated by years of osteoporosis, it seems like this very house has helped wear my grandmother down over time. She has been taking all-too-frequent spills on its carpeted green steps. The lawn and half-century-old plumbing are now far too much work for her and Rich, the mysterious man she calls

her husband these days. All of this is not to mention the frequent lapses in with-it-ness. “Aren’t you the one who came after Shifty?” she asks, in reference to my mother’s long-ago ex-boyfriend. “We didn’t like him.” I cringe inside, but try to keep the reaction from my face: She has momentarily confused me with my father. No, I assure her, I’m Kathy’s son, your grandson. “Oh, THAT’s right,” she says with an embarrassed shake of the head. (After all, my wife, Jen, is here with me today, taking a last look at the house and coming to say hello to Grandma Dottie, who long ago dubbed her “Sweet Jen.”) All this has brought us to today – the slowly eroding 87-year-old mind and the quickly crumbling home and finances – as we gently tug Grandma Dottie and Rich on to a single-floor apartment.

Grandma Dottie likes to say she has lived many lives and loved them all. After a few minutes of chatting today, it starts to look like she is getting worn out from talking, so I decide to take one last spin around the old house. I leave my grandmother sitting in Paradise, thinking back to when my younger brother, Elliot, and I would sleep on the pull-out couch there during overnight stays. It’s now a room that gives my grandmother great joy and solace. She and Rich go there when they get tired during the day and want to spend some quiet time together. “I’ll see you in Paradise, love,” Rich will say.

Wandering through all the rooms now, even as they are being torn apart, I see evidence of all of those different lives. There is the sewing room where she created clothes for my mother up through middle school. On the third floor is the bedroom where she spent hours drilling my mother on her French – many of the books are still there. The kitchen walls and cabinets look the same as they did when she stared at them for hours on the long night in 1971 when my grandfather announced he was leaving. Downstairs, the musty rec room and screened-in porch

bring back vivid memories of the hours she spent showing my brother and me how to paint with watercolors on those summer Thursdays, “Grandma Dottie days.” Through the garage door, I can see the spot where we put our fishing rods and tackle boxes after another angling adventure.

Those days always began with the words: *Get in the car. We’re going to Grandma Dottie’s.* They meant fun times were ahead. As my dad led me up those concrete steps to the front door of this home in Wilmington, Delaware, I knew that smiling face would be there to greet me, along with a long hug from those frail arms, a shrill cry of “PATRICK!” and a kiss that left behind a smear of fire engine-red lipstick. Everything we did on those summer visits, or the occasional longer stays, came to define Grandma Dottie in my eyes. It was a time for matinee movies and popcorn on rainy days. Or, we would head down to that below-ground rec room and set up the water colors palates and makeshift easels for our painting lessons. She would dab at my work with a blue tissue that often still had some lipstick on it. Grandma Dottie was no Monet, either. But she painted snowy scenes of my parents’ house in the woods, along with imagined landscapes of trees and lakes, with a quiet look of peace. She was hardly a natural angler, either, but that never stopped her from taking us on regular fishing expeditions down the road at Belleview State Park. She would clap when we caught a sunny, or get excited when one of our red bobbers plunged beneath the surface. “Woooooonnderful!” was her catchphrase for pretty much anything we did.

Those fishing trips started during the years she was married to her second husband, Paul, a fiery man she met in the years after my grandfather left. Looking out into the garage now, full of detritus that will not be coming along for the move, I can still picture his old Gremlin, the car we took on much-anticipated trips to McDonald’s. Walking up two small flights of stairs to her

bedroom, I glimpse the monstrous walk-in wardrobe that always fascinated me as a kid – I imagined getting lost in all those rows of wild-colored clothing. Into this giant closet, Grandma Dottie would disappear for what seemed like an eternity on Sundays, preparing for the only tough part of a visit to her house: church.

We knew church was important to Grandma Dottie. But it took years to figure out just how big a part it played in her life, from the day she was born to its role in her divorce from my grandfather and all through her various illnesses. After begrudgingly putting on one of my better button-down flannel shirts, a pair of nice pants and some brown shoes, I would hop into her big white Buick, “Snowball”, and trace the lines of its black-and-white-checkered upholstery for the whole ride to Immaculate Heart of Mary Roman Catholic Church. Once there, she would always manage to navigate us to a pew very near the front. Out would come the pointy-tipped, silver glasses as she flipped open the hymnal. She would tilt her head back and complete that all-too-familiar transformation into loudest singer in the whole church. “She sang loud enough for her and at least three other people,” my brother remembers. What we didn’t know then was that Grandma Dottie hadn’t always been this much fun, this assertive, this ... loud.

* * *

Looking through this house now, the evolution of her life is starting to come together in its twilight. It is a sad irony that now she is often the one who needs to be corrected about her own biography: “No Grandma, you were married to Paul for at least a decade, not just two years.” But jumping out of her crumbling black photo album, and creeping slowly out through her own words and memories, the pieces of her past come together. I can see her family home in Llysven, Pa., with the 25 stone steps she would walk up with her many dates at the end of the

night. I can picture that almost mythical, bearish figure of Pop Pop, her overbearing father who once slapped her when the choir director brought her home too late from practice. Plus, there are the pictures of my grandmother in her early 20s, lounging in a swimsuit. From even her youngest days, she was a proud person. She was, and still is, the beautiful one in her family. With her blue eyes, sleek figure and long legs, Grandma Dottie always made boys look twice.

A decade after she married my grandfather, they moved to this house at 1204 Heather Lane, a lifetime before the basement became deteriorated by water and the wallpaper became so crinkly. When they moved here with my then-5-year-old mother in 1956, she was dead-set on becoming the ideal mother and wife. She didn't learn to drive until her mid-20s, never finished college and never had a job during her married life. As a married woman, she was much more submissive in public than she'd been in her younger years. Instead, she smiled quietly in the background of family photos and sunk with ease into the shadow of her husband in public. But she ruled this house.

Grandma Dottie insisted that my mother spent hours each night doing her homework. When French classes started, Grandma Dottie would hover over her daughter – she even purchased her own copy of the textbook. When ballet and tap lessons began, she would supervise practice and ensure every step and spin was done perfectly. Before piano recitals, my mother often got sick to her stomach, for fear of reprisal if she made a mistake. Boarding the bus to go to middle school, my mother would trudge up the steps with a huge brown briefcase. Her curly brown flips of hair were perfectly done. At home, she listened obediently as Grandma Dottie made her stand straight against the living room wall, her stomach sucked in, for 20 minutes at a time, in the name of good posture.

After my mother went off to college in 1968, the balance of the house shifted forever. With her daughter gone, Grandma Dottie went to church alone. My grandfather spent more and more time reading downstairs and out walking the dog, Terry. When he left in 1971, he was driven out, he felt, by a total difference in personality and religion. He also felt that even then there were strong signs of emotional troubles on my grandmother's part, whether it was depression or some other type of emotional problem. In their family, that wasn't something you talked about. After the divorce, Grandma Dottie thought her life was over. "Since I am still in a state of shock, I can't visualize any kind of a life for myself alone in the world," she wrote to my mother at college. "I will desperately need your love to sustain me." The divorce, however, would prove to be her awakening.

Within a couple years, Dottie was dating men who loved football, men who would dance all night and men who lived life on the wild side. Riding along Interstate 95 on one outing, one boyfriend fired a loaded shotgun out the window – just to show her he could. She dove back into the working world, too, taking a job at a clothing store called Arthur's. She helped customers match blouses with slacks, pick out black pumps and piece together wardrobes. She also jumped back into her dancing shoes. Hopping into her big Buick, she popped over to the old Tally Ho Firehouse where she would dance until the wee hours. After just a few nights, she became known as Queen of the Foxtrot. Within days of meeting her future second husband, Paul, they had taken over the dance floor with endless flurries of dips, twirls and flourishes. Soon, though, she was in for the biggest change of her life.

Nothing changed Grandma Dottie more than my arrival, coupled with Elliot's five years later. Nothing else could grant her the gift that we did: that newly minted title, *Grandma Dottie*.

Gone was Dot, a woman held back by a father who gave her curfews and halted her college education. Goodbye Dorothy, the mild-mannered married mother who lingered in her husband's shadow and lived through her daughter. Hello Grandma Dottie, always with an imaginary exclamation point at the end. With this new title, she was carefree. As I'd reach up to play with that mysterious orb of silvery hair she maintained so carefully, she did not balk. This wasn't Dorothy – this was Grandma Dottie. I pause my tour of the house and poke my head back into the den for a second to mention to my grandmother all these memories I've been jogging, remembering those summer Thursdays. "Oh, I looked forward to that day of the week," she says with a broad smile. *Those* memories remain pristine.

The room now known as "Paradise" was our game room when we visited. Stretched out on the floor, we played games of checkers and days-long contests of a Monopoly knock-off called Easy Money. When we would go home and tell our mother all the fun we had, she would sigh wistfully. But I never knew why, much like someone who enters a movie halfway through. In my mind, this was how she had been her whole life: speaking loudly at the dinner table, always working her way to the front of any line and loudly proclaiming her adoration of her grandsons to anyone within the local Zip Code. Looking at her now, I see not just the evolution of a person but also that universal generational cycle where lessons are learned and unlearned, engrained and repealed. In her shot as a grandmother, she wanted to do it differently.

She traipsed out on weekly summer trips to a dirty nearby pond with my mother and me, armed with pails, shovels, folding chairs and those ham and Velveeta sandwiches, and never worried about all the sand and muck. Having spent her life as a mother engrossed in dolls,

stuffed animals and dresses, she now got lessons in GI Joe, Star Wars and bicycle parts. She learned with gusto, writing down everything in notepads to review later.

She's trekked hundreds of miles to our graduations and other ceremonies. To some, she came on a walker, to others just a cane, always with a pillow for her bony backside. And she always proved herself one of the more recognizable figures in the crowd. She'd be the one reclined on the grassy quad in a multicolored folding chair somewhat apart from everyone else, wearing a sun hat, flowered blouse and pressed slacks. Seeking out strangers, she'd navigate – or be escorted – to the front, just like at the museum and at church when we were kids. We were often embarrassed by the antics, but deep down – at some ages VERY deep down – we were proud we shared her blood.

No matter where she went, she never forgot that unmistakable outsized personality. Afterward, at the celebratory dinner, she'll always mispronounce the name of a key relative after loudly “whispering” to my mother: “Is it Maitland and Paxton?” My mother, in a real whisper, will answer: “No, Mom, it's MAY-lon and PAX-son,” but to no avail. “Hello Vicki!” she announces, upon meeting my brother's girlfriend at his college graduation. Told that she was indeed “Niki,” Grandma Dottie exclaims, “Ricki?” “NIKI!” we shout. Everyone smiles, even Niki. It's Grandma Dottie.

Grandma Dottie has always tried to follow along in some way, no matter what we've done. When I went to the University of Virginia, she became a student of its founder, Thomas Jefferson. When I chose a career as a journalist, she loaded her adult enrichment course load at “The Academy” with classes on newspapers, television reporting and the Internet. Her most

frequent reminder, though, is when she grabs me by the shoulders, pulls that exaggerated face in close and says: “When are you going to write a book about me?”

* * *

As the movers take a few more lamps out of Paradise, Rich pokes his head in the door to see how my grandmother and I are doing. They met at an art class a few years back and she marched right up to him to introduce herself. Rich, like others before him, was taken by her beauty. She was not put off by his evasiveness about his past. In some ways, they are a perfect match – both had led their share of “lives” and didn’t really like to talk much about some of them. They enjoyed painting together and listening to music. Eventually, after just a few years, they exchanged rings and “married” on their own terms. After starting life as Dorothy Sutter, becoming Dorothy Taylor, then taking on Dorothy Spano, then going back to Dorothy Taylor, she is now Dorothy Taylor-Howell.

As Rich talks, perched next to Grandma Dottie in what remains of Paradise, I notice a framed picture of my wife and me on our wedding day. Grandma Dottie would never miss a wedding. Grandma Dottie was simply beside herself with joy when, shortly after they graduated from college in 1972, my parents told her they were getting married. She dove into the project. She helped put together every last arrangement. My grandfather told my parents he could not attend: The divorce was too fresh. But there was never any question about Grandma Dottie: She would be there come flood, fire or bad hair day.

By the time our wedding rolled around more than a quarter-century later, there was again no debate over whether she would be there – even though this time my grandfather would be, too. We joked with my anxiety-riddled mother that we planned to put Grandma Dottie and

Grandpa at the same table for the reception, but of course put them on opposite coasts of the ballroom. When the day came, Grandma Dottie showed not a second's hesitation, perhaps wanting to show my grandfather just who she had become. Cane in hand, she marched right up to him after the ceremony and put her hand out, "Well, HELLO BOB, how are YOU?" This was Grandma Dottie's coming out party, too. There was plenty of talk about her afterward – about her shrill voice, her desire to be the center of attention, her off-the-cuff remarks about the good looks of my brother-in-law.

Since then, she seems to have quieted more. The change is disconcerting: Too often, she has started to seem much more ... normal. In conversations, she does more listening than talking. She pays attention for long stretches of time, rather than jumping in on a regular basis and talking about whatever she wants to discuss. Some of this surely has to do with emotional problems she has struggled with throughout her life, and the latest changes the doctors have made to her medication. Shortly before her divorce from my grandfather, she began to show signs of depression. Maybe it was all those years of burying that pent-up extrovert inside of her.

A box of bathroom stuff set to be moved now provides a stark reminder of all those years of pain and anguish. It contains a veritable pharmacy shelf of different medications she is either taking now or has taken recently to help ease anxiety and depression, among other maladies. Just a few months ago, my mom sensed something wrong and she was rushed to the hospital. The doctors ultimately concluded her body basically shut down for a while due to a poorly balanced "cocktail" of medication. There, shrunken small against the rumped hospital sheets, she exuded a shadow of herself.

This was the first time I ever even considered her as “old.” I called my 25-year-old brother in Wyoming and we discussed for the first time the possibility that Grandma Dottie could actually die. Concerned for her health, but also wanting to bring her good cheer, my wife and I told her in that hospital room that we were expecting our first child and that she would soon be a great grandmother. The build-up was thrilling for her. “You know how you’ve always been a very GOOD grandmother,” I told her, as she followed each of my words with an intense, anticipatory stare. “Yes,” she told me, anxious to get to the point, but reveling in the compliment. “Soon, you’re going to be a GREAT grandmother,” I told her, awaiting what I hoped would be her trademark ecstatic response: Bulging eyes, mouth encircled into a giant ‘O’, followed by that ear-shattering “WOOONNDERFUL!” After a moment’s hesitation, she did not disappoint. But her reaction was more sedate as she was overcome by happy tears. She shut her eyes before finally letting out, “I’ve lived long enough to be a great-grandmother!”

Now, she says she’s ready for the big move. While my mother has done most of the preparations, it has been a lot about taking inventory for Grandma Dottie, too. Love letters from my grandfather have turned up in the unearthing process. In fact, she kept every anniversary and birthday card he ever gave her, along with pages and pages of notes she’d penned to herself over the years. She had kept diaries, too, but says she burned them about 15 years ago. But for the most part, she has kept track of *everything*. She has logs of every time she talked on the phone to my mother and other relatives. There are notepads full of names and spellings, birthdays and anniversaries. My mom also found a mysterious array of lists in which she tallied the contents of each room, from kitchen to basement. In a spiral-bound notebook from 1983, labeled “House Inventory: Kathy’s Copy,” she carefully listed the items in each room: the \$64.25 “autumn

basket” in the hall, the brass bell she used to ring at Paul when she wanted his attention, even the \$12.48 mallard duck book ends that now sit on my desk at home. It’s almost as if she prepared for the day her memory failed her.

Was she keeping these little bits of her being around for the time when someone *finally* got around to chronicling what she’s been up to? She already has compiled a five-page account of the major events of her life on wrinkled yellow stationary: “I thought I needed a biography,” she says. I can’t help but wonder if she fears being forgotten. Grandma Dottie has only a high school diploma and spent 25 years married to a man with a Ph.D. in chemistry – perhaps, she wanted to document something, too, even if she didn’t have a long academic resume. That was part of why her adult enrichment courses became so important to her, just the chance to go to class. She loves pens, pencils, notepads, notebooks and binders – all the academic accoutrements. During the move now, she surely wasn’t going to let anyone forget the big secretary’s desk now being hauled out of the den. It will be getting a prominent spot at the new place. Grandma Dottie says there’s really no grand meaning to all of her record-keeping: “I just like to keep track of things.”

* * *

I take one last lap around her house, showing Jen quick glimpses of the place that for so long has defined my grandmother to me. Suddenly, it all seems very new and very old at the same time. Saying goodbye to Grandma Dottie, I tell her to behave herself during the move. She apologizes for being too beat to walk us out. She doesn’t have much pep today. As Jen and I both give her hugs, she looks ready for a nap even with a long day of moving ahead. No wonder, I think as we pull out that familiar driveway for the last time. She must be exhausted.

Poetry

Tree Slayer

Lynn Petko, Penn State University, Berks Campus

Tree Slayer

In the yard I'm working, thinking of things.

Got divorced
years ago, just wasn't it. Moved into a different
place, woodsy house with my two boys, little
men with wild-growing hair.

Just had two
trees cut down, it was a decision between me
and the boys. They hated the change but I had to do it.

One tree, half dead, bare
branches hanging over and scratching my back
porch. The other,
hollow and eaten up inside.

I'm thinking of other things.

This morning I heard about an old friend, Joe, being killed,
family man I knew back when
I was married. Coal truck ate him up on Rural Road.

Thinking of other things . . .

Had to do it, this cutting.

I remember—
He leaves two daughters and a wife. Never had many close
friends, never needed any, he said. They lived
for each other. The back of his house was all glass. He liked to
look out at the woods with his woman in the quiet
hum of morning, or the warm glow of summer
nights. Like cinnamin, it was, he could almost taste it, he said.

Kids said I destroyed
their rain forest, though,
I said there's more
over the hill, down by the creek and our waterfall.

Had to do it. Piles of leaves in the gut-
ters, eating the house, no water run-off, dangerous
roofing situation. Getting, mossy, moldy-like.

Trees can strangle too. Now the ones left
can breathe and grow. There'll be
others. I've been raking

leaves. Should have last fall. Just getting around
to it with the trees
out. Traffic from the boys carries
leaves in, tracks them and, wet, they stick to the carpet
annoyingly, like rotting slime.

Also, rolled the logs lying about like the dead
flesh of trees, pushed them off
to the side. Pulled my elbow out. Can't shake off the pain
of it. Kids can't hang on
like most kids do
to moms. It feels broken, exposed, in the air
dangling.

Now I've made mud where it all was.

The trees are gone, their leaves finally raked, but I can't forget
their shade. And the pain. Still need
the stumps chewed out. Kids might yet make a fort with it all.

It'll be better.

Thinking. Yes, well, I'm done. Got to gather
everything out here together, my stuff. Some-
time things can eat you up. My kids
remind me of things, of being
hungry. They always are.
Poetry

Poetry

Stopping by a Bridge on a Rainy Winter Afternoon
(Tribute to R. Frost)

Mike Downing, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

Whose bridge this is
I do not know
It must belong to long ago
Yet here I brace
Rain on my face
As water spills over the rocks below

I turn and watch
The river surge
And try to resist the sudden urge
To leap the rail
And join the roil
Of leaves and twigs and churning soil

So...I hold fast
And watch the rolling water blast
The twin abutments just below
And even though
I have Earthly tasks
I cannot bring myself to go

So here I stay this chilly day
Peering past
Iron bridge rail
To spy fish or snipe or snail
Or bird or worm
Or white deer tail

That's on the shore
But in the stream
All leaves and rocks and spattering drops
Of rain and mist and cloud
Push on and on and on

The sun goes down and cold moves in
It's getting late and I must go

(My neck feels a sudden bite of snow)
And I have miles and miles to go
And I have miles and miles to go

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