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A Critique of American Literature in Verse

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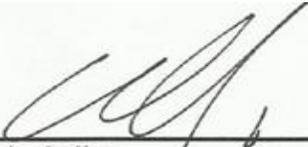
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for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English

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ABSTRACT

I have presented a creative thesis that explores various topics and concerns that have affected popular literature in the United States. Included in this anthology are companion poems and or summary poems for a range of American literature including, prose novels as well as poetry. This collection is called, *A Critique of American Literature in Verse*, because the poems present a critique in verse in much the same way as a standard essay. I have written a poem for each of the selected entries that attempts to capture the original author's ideas and concerns. I have also added an introduction to each poem that serves as an introduction to the original text as well as to explain the relevance of the poem using theory and critical analysis.

I believe this project creates accessibility and possibly sparks interest with poetry that more fully captures the essence of the text than an introduction alone. This series illustrates the development of American Literature as well as American culture by using some of the most popular literature from various periods ranging from the inclusion of the Puritans in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* to the destruction of humanity in McCarthy's *The Road*. With this in mind, the reader will be able to apply approaches such as feminism, socioeconomic / Marxism, and post-modernism to the included poems as well as the original texts.

DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this work to all the teachers who have made it possible; to the teachers who struggled to keep me motivated in high school, to the undergraduate professors who worked so hard providing me with direction, and to my graduate professors who continue to push me to achieve my goals and become part of a family whom I love so much. Thank you.

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Chapter One

An Introduction to the Texts

Bedford, Norton, and Pearson have all contributed to working anthologies of American literature. These anthologies cover broad periods of American literature that encompass the issues and concerns of a newly created American social order and its cultural and economic growth. Anthologies of American literature range from the formation of American literature to the modern day. These collections usually incorporate some form of introduction to each author and many of the issues and concerns presented in their respective texts.

I too have contributed to an introduction and anthology of sorts; however, instead of writing a prose introduction, summary, or an explanation of various works, I will criticize and deliver a reaction to particular issues and concerns in verse. In other words, I have written a reaction poem to various texts from several periods of American Literature and included them as a critique of not only the texts themselves, but of the authors' issues and original intentions as I interpret them.

It was not my intention to rewrite or copy the originals in any way, but to recreate the ideas and sentiment of the author's intent. I have included many lines from the original texts and in some cases adopted the styles necessary to fully appreciate and/or facilitate the tones, moods, and effects of the original texts. It was my intention to create a mixture of my own original poetry and the original texts in a way that can develop and be used as starting points for a critical analysis of the included works. I believe the included poems present topics that can be explored alongside the original texts and provide insight into the issues important to both.

The contribution I feel I make with this project is to create accessibility and possibly spark interest with poetry that more fully captures the essence of the text than an introduction

alone. This series will illustrate various texts that helped facilitate the development of American Literature as well as American culture. I believe this collection of poems can lead to a fuller comprehensive understanding of the original texts and the issues and concerns of the Authors. Contextual information is generally supplied by introductions and readers continue to rely on them to provide hints and insights for any associated texts. This too is my goal; however, I feel the poetry provided for each text will provide a richer experience than an outright explanation.

I have selected a range of American literature that represents various issues and obstacles Americans have faced and continue to face. This collection follows a chronological order in which the texts were written. This does not necessarily mean that the collection is in the order of issues faced in American society. However, if we consider the issues in the order that they are presented with contemporary criticisms, we will be surprised at how closely they relate to the dates in which they were written. It would also be interesting to note that the same issues seem to occur as our American society continues to develop.

The first few poems in this collection seem to have a strong connection to basic human civil liberties. During and shortly after the American Civil War, issues of race and gender became mainstream topics in American literature. A seemingly obvious reason for this would be the freeing of millions of slaves and the unfair laws enacted against them in retaliation. I would also like to suggest an association of this newfound freedom with a drive to protect feminine innocence and its outcry against such measures.

Early American literature maintained an obvious European flair. It was not until works by Simms and Cooper that America started marking a unique path for itself in the world of literature. America is known as the frontier, and frontier novels mark a distinctive difference

between American issues and those in Europe. However, these novels still carried a distinctive feel of European sentiment. Real American issues related to American civil liberties began to surface in the news by writers such as Fanny Fern¹, Samuel Clemens², and in various movements lead by Elizabeth Cady Stanton³, Lucretia Mott⁴, and Susan B. Anthony⁵, and led to works such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*⁶. It was during this phase of American history that the true spirit of American literature was born.

The first poem in the collection, "Untamed Frontiers", is a reaction to *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Hawthorne's novel is written in hindsight describing a seventeenth-century colonial Boston. The novel is a criticism of the strict puritanical values of the young colony. Hawthorne, in *The Scarlet Letter*, is concerned with sin and the human condition. This is evident given the idea of branding fallen women with a badge of shame. Hawthorne succeeds in presenting the reader with an idea of what puritan society feels is proper behavior for women and a warning. I chose to use Hawthorne's warning as a starting point for my poem:

Let men tremble to win the hand of woman, unless they win along with it the utmost passion of her heart! Else it may be their miserable fortune, when some mightier touch than their own may have awakened all her sensibilities, to be reproached even for the calm content, the marble image of happiness, which they will have imposed upon her as the warm reality. (Hawthorne 159)

It is clear that this is a warning. On the surface, the novel portrays Hester as sinful and responsible for her husband's shame, but this addition is a clear criticism of love and passion in a relationship, love and passion shared between both a man and a woman.

The first stanza of the poem shows Hester and Reverend Dimmesdale falling for the passion that builds during an initial attraction. This is the “mightier touch” mentioned in Hawthorne’s warning. Hester’s sexuality has been awakened by the touch of the reverend. In this first stanza, we can assume that Hester is married, and for whatever reason, her natural sexual impulses are not being met in her marriage. Hester is giddy and needing affection; however, she is fully aware of her sin. We see Hester cover her ring and ignore the conventions of marriage.

In the second stanza, we can assume that certain urges have been met and that it has been an attack on the husband’s property. The coup (sexual encounter between Hester and Dimmesdale) represents a sinful attack of Hester’s marriage. Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s love can be seen as natural and beautiful, but it is still a sin. The idea of a special love between a married woman and a reverend is also used as a criticism of hypocrisy of puritan society. The theme of hypocrisy works its way into the idea of warning when you consider the consequences of Hester’s behavior. For example, some may say this is the kind of society one can expect when your women are out of control and sexually expressive.

In the third stanza, we can see that it is not just the letter upon her chest that marks her behavior. Hester is now pregnant and beginning to show. It is also clear that women have been forced to carry the burden of mankind beginning with original sin. Hester is forced to carry the reverend’s sin for nine months. Hester and the reverend have gained knowledge, tasted the fruit of their love, and as should be expected, Hester is left to carry the shame alone.

The next stanza reveals the insightful ability of the child. She is compared to the witches because she can see the relationship when the others cannot. However, she remains quiet. The child is placed in a position of foil for the reverend. The reverend is torn between the truth and the illusion of truth, which strengthens the idea of hypocrisy and blind faith. Dimmesdale is

haunted by his denial, but is still accepted as wholly spiritual and innocent because of his position. He is untouchable because his society could never accuse a reverend of such treachery. Dimmesdale's status surely creates a dilemma: if he tells the truth, he could destroy the faith of the community.

The final stanza of the poem describes the reverend's decision to hide the truth. He knows what the correct and honorable course of action is, but he continues to hide behind his position in the community. The novel ends with the reverend standing on the scaffold with Hester and Pearl. However, I chose to end the poem before the reverend's final revelation because in real life, things usually end the same way they begin: in the dark.

This poem reveals several of the ideas and themes presented in the original text. I have attempted to present the reader with a poetic look at sin, hypocrisy, sexual desire, and an overall image of the human condition.

The next poem in the series, "Escape on the River", is a reaction to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Mark Twain started his career as a journalist for various publications. He began writing humor-based reports that became his trademark signature. Twain had trained as a river boat pilot and took a pseudonym that honors that tradition. The term "Mark Twain" means "two fathoms deep" or "safe water." (Norton 213). The idea of two fathoms deep describes Twain's writing accurately because its biting sarcasm and satire are usually several layers deep. Twain's *Huck Finn* is filled with that same biting satire that made him famous. The novel is a satirical critique of the issues faced by the communities along the Mississippi River. These issues include slavery, racism, moral virtues, and distorted ideas of civility.

My poem is slightly different from the traditional free verse poem. It maintains a prose-like feel to it, much like the genre prose poetry. It was my intention to capture the innocence and playfulness of *Huck Finn* and present it as an authentic voice. The poem does not follow any specific patterns or rules of formal poetry, but I have added significant passages embedded in the satiric speech of the boy and a few visual scenes of the river. In the first part of the poem, Huck is running from the Widow Douglass and her idea of civilized society. Huck, fed up with the widow's civility, questions the very nature of society's definition of equality and fairness. Huck finds himself walking on eggshells, too nervous to make good decisions. He feels trapped, so he runs away.

Huck feels as though society is selling him down the river. The irony is that Huck does not realize the true meaning of being sold down the river. To Huck, it simply means to take someone's freedom and identity away from them. Huck's misconception is actually an allusion to the actual act of selling a slave down the river. It is commonly accepted that when a slave is sold down the river, he or she will most likely die because the only work down river is on the sugar plantations. The sugar plantations are notoriously dangerous and brutal, and most do not survive the harsh treatment. This is usually a punishment for poor behavior and held over the slaves heads as a warning. This is an issue that is tackled in Twain's text as well; however, in the poem it is Huck who feels the pressure. This helps make the claim that even Huck has a selfish side of which he is a product of his society. The hypocritical nature of his society has taught him to believe that things are always tougher for him than they are for others.

Huck thinks about the idea of equality and freedom in terms of the river. The river is fair to all men. It fills voids on the bottom and is usually flat and smooth. Huck realizes that reality is not as fair as the river. As he thinks his ideas through, he starts to realize that some of what

society has taught him is not equal and mostly hypocritical. Huck soon realizes that he too has been unfair to Jim. The irony in both the text and the poem is that the bad decisions that Huck makes, the decisions that are contrary to the teachings of the Widow Douglass and society's good book, are in reality good decisions. Huck finally makes the decision to submit to his devilish nature and let Jim live a free man, even if he was a free man already.

This poem does not necessarily follow the events in the original text, but I believe it does capture the ironic nature of Twain's humor. I set out to capture the ideas and concerns Twain presented in his novel and I believe that I have done so.

The next poem in this series, *A Sailor's Bounty*, is a reaction to *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)* by Herman Melville. This text has an interesting story behind its publication. It was published posthumously, more than thirty years after the author's death. The novel was left unfinished and later discovered in a desk, edited, and published by Raymond Weaver. The text has several contradicting interpretations, including one that focuses on the homoerotic nature of the sailors. I chose to illustrate the idea of the homoerotic in my critique of the text.

The poem's opening stanza presents an image of Billy walking toward the ship with its crew in an orgiastic frenzy awaiting his arrival. The homoerotic nature of the text is buried a little deeper than it is in the poem; however, the poem is not overly exaggerated. Billy is referred to as "That signal object"..."Handsome Sailor." This in itself is not overtly homoerotic; however, when Melville compares Billy's position on the ship to the well-born dames of court, his intentions become much clearer.

The second stanza shows a reluctance to accept homosexuality on board the ship. As I have said, homosexuality is never clearly mentioned in the original text, but the idea of keeping

the problems covert and in the closet are. This stanza also includes the names of the ships, which become increasingly important when considered contextually. The “Rights of Man” is openly substantial, but it becomes increasingly interesting when you consider the impressment of rights by men who are “Bellipotent.” Bellipotent means strong in war, and Billy has been taken by men who are strong in war.

Much of the language in the poem comes directly from the text. Billy is continually described in the feminine. I believe this is definitive evidence to support a claim for the homoerotic motif. Many references in the text refer to Greek and Roman figures known for frequent homosexual acts. These, along with Billy’s descriptions indicate Melville’s purpose for the text. The third stanza of the poem highlights the feminine nature of Billy as well as the masculine shape of his body.

The next stanza also has language taken from the text, but I have chosen to add a few lines to create visual effects that enhance Billy’s attributes. Billy has an unnatural ability to bring men together and tame them: sugar the sour ones. Along with the idea of Billy’s femininity, the original text presents the sailors doting on Billy in much the same manner as one would dote on a woman when smitten.

The ending of the poem suggests jealousy and pride create the tension between Billy and Claggart. Claggart is the Man at Arms responsible for keeping peace on the ship. However, he creates the tension in the text. Claggart admits Billy’s beauty but dislikes him. This tension is portrayed as a stereotypical catfight between two competing women. It is never made clear in the text what creates the tension, but in the end, he is thrown into the closet and forgotten.

The next addition to this anthology, “Red Badges of Courage”, is a reaction to the novel by Stephen Crane. Stephen Crane wrote his masterpiece on a bet. Crane and Acton Davies bet whether or not Crane could write a better war novel than Emile Zola’s *The Downfall*. The most interesting part of this story is that Crane had never seen a minute’s worth of battle. This did not stop Crane; it merely forced him to write about war from a different perspective. Crane’s battles are seemingly stock; however, it is not the battle scenes that make this book great. It is the human experience that brings this novel to the attention of its readers. Crane focused on the real life personal idea of war and the effects it has on the person. Crane focused on fear, and as the title implies, courage.

This poem begins by giving the reader a picture of the men recruited to fight this war. The men were brothers, husbands, and sons, mere pawns to warring governmental ideas of truth and civil philosophy. The respective societies of the young men have indoctrinated them with romantic ideas of honor and pride. These romantic ideas can be very dangerous, especially when the courage they invoke become illusion. This presents an important question asked in Crane’s novel: What will a man do when he confronts death?

I wanted to follow Crane’s idea of focusing on the human condition in war rather than the fantastic, so I also avoided writing fantastic war scenes. I focused on the cost of war with respect to the human condition. The poem depicts fighting men used as impersonal tools by demanding landlord and factory owning generals.

The scene of battle presented in the poem is used as a transition between the living men and the dead implements of war scattered on the ground. The poem makes a turn at this point. The men on the field are forgotten and left to feed the vultures. The interesting part is the red badges of courage on the chests of the men are starting to blend in with the holes created by the

feeding birds. This puts a serious damper on the romance of dying for your country. Another point made at the end of the poem is the idea that the badges are all one color. They are all red and indistinguishable. How can you calculate a victory or loss when all the deaths are red? The blue and the grey lose their significance.

The next addition to this anthology, “The Voice of the Sea Speaks to the Soul”, is a reaction to Kate Chopin’s short novel *The Awakening*. The poem, like Chopin’s novel, depicts a masculine world that suppresses individuality and prevents autonomous sexual awakenings (hence Chopin’s title *The Awakening*). Though the poem does not address the use of Chopin’s avian imagery, the birdcage or the Pigeon House, it does describe a type of cage created by man as well as by nature.

If we look at Chopin’s text from the perspective of Foucault⁷, we start to see a pattern of control that prevents a woman’s autonomy. This control is based on years of masculine dominance that has worked its way into the feminine psyche. This internalized idea of inferiority can be challenged if the oppressed persons are allowed to think and communicate freely. Foucault points to the idea that a masculine society must maintain control in order to maintain a stable society. Chopin’s text, as well as the poem, challenges this idea of control. Both texts show an increasingly autonomous woman questioning the idea of womanhood and freedom.

Zoila Clark points out an interesting circumstance in the novel. She says that it is not a man who awakens Edna’s sexual consciousness: “Contrary to traditional expectations, it is not a man who awakens her senses and consciousness.” (Clark 338). Instead, it is through the piano playing of Madam Reisz. It is through an act of communication that cannot be controlled by man

or society that teaches Edna to listen. Edna begins to listen to her emotions instead of her cultivation or gentility.

Clark summarizes Marx⁸ and suggests that women were first treated as possessions with the introduction of agriculture and dividing the land between the men of a society (342). I believe this is why Chopin chose the ocean as a feminized hero to save Edna. It is the last untamed resource that can never be fully divided and controlled by man. This is also precisely the reason I chose to break the poem down into divided genders.

In the first stanza, Edna finds herself standing at the shore of an unknown, untamed sea of freedom. Edna stares at the “boundless womb” waiting for a sign, waiting for the same kind of message she got from Madam Reisz’s playing. The sea plays seductive yet tranquil music with its push and pull current crashing around Edna’s feet. Most of what is expressed in this poem does not necessarily happen in the novel. It is not about repeating what Chopin has created, but capturing that one moment in time: that one moment that Chopin did not describe, that one moment which everyone, male or female, can identify.

In that moment, Edna is standing naked on the shore with everything masculine trying to hold her back. The sun, her husband, society, her children, are all part of the conditioning that Foucault believes controls the feminine psyche. Edna has penetrated this barrier and is challenging its rule. She is trapped in this push and pull between the dry masculine world outside of the sea and the wet feminine one at her feet.

Continuing with the second and third stanzas, Edna is contemplating her life. She feels the warm protective rays of the sun and believes she should succumb. However, she also feels the serenity of the sea. This tension between chaos and harmony begins to flash memories into Edna’s head: images of her life and the voices of her captors. Edna stands there experiencing

utter tyranny. She is moving her lips, repeating the voices in her head. She stalls a moment, but in the end, she must be free. Free to make her own choices.

I have attempted to capture Chopin's intentions with this poem. However, since I believe the idea of sexual personal autonomy should be an understanding that masculine and feminine can share on equal terms, I have left the ending of the poem as open as the original text. I believe it can be criticized in much the same way as the text. The ending can be read as Edna committing suicide to prevent her family suffering from her peculiarities, or, and I think this is the better reading, she is to be a martyr giving herself to the feminist cause. She has given back man's definition of woman, stepped into the abyss, and accepted the challenges before her. She will no longer submit to tyranny.

The next poem in this addition, "Illusions", is a response to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald's novel is a criticism of the American dream. Kimberly Hearne believes that Fitzgerald wanted to address the misconception of the dream and the American ideology: "The dream itself is ambiguous, contradictory, romantic in nature, and undeniably beautiful while at the same time grotesquely flawed." (189). Hearne goes on to say that Fitzgerald believes the American dream is "a contradiction to and a distortion of reality." (189). Responding to this contradiction is the direction I have taken in this poem.

Fitzgerald's criticism begins as a belated romantic love story between a newly rich socialite and an unhappily married woman. As the novel progresses, the reader begins to realize that there is more to the novel than a love story. The first stanza in the poem begins the same way. The idea of the American dream is described as great marriages, white picket fences and

manicured lawns. However, the idea of the dream quickly changes and the connections created by the American dream become connections of wealth.

The poem portrays an image of the dreamer trapped by the dream. The American dream is a trap that allows dreamers to believe that they are free, when in reality, they are trapped and forced to work for unobtainable rewards and recognition from charlatans placed in positions of power. The irony in this idea is that the dreamers put themselves in this position freely.

American ideology posits that all men, and women, are created equal; however, it should say that all money is created equal. It is the money that powers the dream.

I believe that this is part of what Fitzgerald was trying to say. It is the money that powers the dream, but here lies the flaw. Money can buy nice houses and enough friends to fill it, but Fitzgerald cleverly suggests that success does not always produce as promised.

The next poem in this collection, “Where Do Decaying Bridges Lead”, is a response to *The Bridge* by Hart Crane. *The Bridge* is a collection of poems inspired by New York’s Brooklyn Bridge. Crane’s volume of poems is held together by an image of the bridge. The bridge seems to signify a cohesiveness joined by the two sides of the bridge. The mood of the poem is a positive one, but what would happen if the bridge fell out of repair? This is how I responded to Crane’s poem. I did not mean to dampen the mood, but I did want to show how work is needed to maintain that cohesiveness.

This response depicts the bridge as being neglected and beginning to deteriorate. This strays a little from the original text; however, Crane says the idea of the bridge is an act of faith: “Emotionally I should like to write *The Bridge*. Crane is quoted as saying, Intellectually the whole theme seems more and more absurd. The very idea of a bridge is an act of faith.” (Voices

and Visions 4:30-4:45). Many critics believe it is this lack of faith that leads to Crane's apparent suicide shortly after finishing the poem.

What I have attempted to do is bring that darker side of the poem into the conversation. The poem shows years of rainwater and other elements of the weather eating away at the supporting structures of the bridge. The poem represents the issues mankind continue to face and the patchwork techniques specialist use to cover them up. My poem is darker than Crane's; however, I do give the reader a sliver of hope at the end.

The next poem in this anthology, "Money"...The "Big" Playground", is a response to Dos Passos' *The Big Money*. I wanted to capture the same idea of failed or failing American dreams that Dos Passos portrays in *The Big Money*. *The Big Money* is the third installment in John Dos Passos' U.S.A. trilogy. One of the overall themes of the novel is to present the reader with an accurate picture of the period before the crash. The novel portrays the dangers of an increasingly materialistic society, one not much different from our own.

Dos Passos uses several unconventional techniques to communicate his ideas, including brief clips from news moderately current to his proposed period and sections of "stream of consciousness," which Dos Passos calls "Camera Eyes." Alfred Kazin believes the camera eyes are Dos Passos' attempts to present his innermost personal thoughts and experiences relating to the text (157). The camera eyes are not written in a normal narrative; they are more like transcripts. The camera eye sections of the text are more like the stream of consciousness of the cameras. In other words, if the cameras had minds, this would be their internal thoughts.

Like Dos Passos' camera eye sections, the camera eye sections of the poem create a personal facet in the poem. The camera eye sections of my poem create a secondary narrative

that provides a personal experience for the reader. The poem starts with a refrain that sets the tone for the poem. The overall tone of the poem stresses the idea of greed contained within the American dream. Therefore, the camera eye sections provide a measure of consequence for the actions taken by the pursuers of that dream and can affect the reader in various ways.

The poem begins with a romantic picture of the world as we see it through movies, ads, magazines, and popular literature. This world is presented as attainable by those who are successful, but the poem quickly lets the reader know that not everyone achieves success. The camera eye cuts in and allows the reader to make personal connections. It does this by keeping the conscious nameless. This allows the reader to access their own consciousness and replace the dream of the persona with one of their own.

The newsreel section is Dos Passos' way of providing examples of real life and seemingly common experiences. The newsreel section of the novel provides clips of contemporary news as well as popular ideologies of the period. The first news section of the poem provides a formula for success. It is a popular formula of the American dream: "Young man not afraid of hard work, Young man for the office, Young man for the stockroom, Young man as stenographer, Young man to travel, Young man to learn." (Dos Passos 24). It is interesting to note that women are not included in this idea for success; women are thought to be a prize or an adornment of success much like the cars that men drive and trade. This provides critics with a completely new argument, but we will have to save that for another poem.

The poem follows the ideas of the book in presenting the American dream as going bad because the "games" and "playgrounds" of sorts keep changing. The desired appendages change as members of other classes strive to gain ground on the privileged: "Just as soon as his wife discovers that every Ford is like every other Ford and that nearly everyone has one, she is likely

to influence him to step into the next social group, of which Dodge is the most conspicuous example.” (Dos Passos 14). Again, this provides a perfect example of the attitudes projected by the American dream.

A consequence of the American dream is the idea expressed in the concluding sections of the poem. The camera eye section starts to reveal the effects of the decisions made by the participants of the dream. The poem begins to show how the dream, and the attempts to obtain it, affects more than one generation. It affects generations to come in more ways than can be imagined. The dream affects more than a lifetime; it affects a lifetime of dreams.

The next poem in this volume, “The American Monster”, is a reaction to John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. Robert Demott writes in an introduction to the novel, “Steinbeck’s liberal mixture of native philosophy, common sense leftist politics, blue-collar radicalism, working class characters, homespun folk wisdom, and digressive narrative form—all set to a bold, rhythmic style and nervy, raw dialogue—qualifie[s] the novel as the ‘American Book’ he wanted to write.” (vii). What I have attempted to do in this poem is to capture these same aspects and present a faithful image of Steinbeck’s design.

This poem begins with a picture of tenant farmers being ripped from their homes so that the land can be turned into large commercial farms. Steinbeck’s message to his readers was the fact that the farmers were turning their backs on one another and fighting for whatever scraps and handouts they could get. I provide quotes from the text that work together with the poem to provide an image that enhances as well as criticizes the text.

The poem continues with the exodus to the west. Farmers and workers believe paradise lies in the west, so they load their entire households into vehicles and make the trek to California.

A second criticism Steinbeck made was the idea that problems cannot be solved by running. The premise of the novel is the idea that the farmers and the working class need to stick together and fight for what is right: fair and equal working conditions. The one catch to this attitude is the fact that the people are starving and hunger is a powerful tool against unification. Demott ends his introduction in the same way Steinbeck ends the novel, with a statement of authenticity and relevance: “Wherever human beings dream of a dignified and free society in which they can live in right relationship with the environment and other humans, and harvest the fruits of their own labor, *The Grapes of Wrath*’s insistent message is still applicable.” (xiv). The poem, however, ends with a much darker and cynical image, the truth...

The sixth poem, “On the Road”, is a short one-page reaction to Jack Kerouac’s book *On The Road*. The book has been very influential on American dreamers because it glorifies and romanticizes a life spent on the road. However, that life is not so glamorous. This poem shows how the road can take much more than it gives.

Ann Charters writes in an introduction to Kerouac’s novel that it can be read as a criticism of the American Dream. Kerouac claims his book is profoundly spiritual, and that the journey is inward. This is the direction I took with the poem; however, I am not satisfied that the novel was wholeheartedly intended as such. One thing is for sure, the book provides a real glimpse of life on the road, a life of which I intend to leave on the road.

The next segment in this collection, “Barking for Ginsberg”, is a reaction to Allen Ginsberg’s poem *Howl*. The accompanying poem is a call for truth. Ginsberg and friends were ridiculed by the system for *Howl*, and several arrests were made after the poem was released.

This poem questions Ginsberg's alleged guilt and the relationship of the reader and his or her desires as a result of Ginsberg's influence. William Carlos Williams writes in an introduction to *Howl*, "[H]e (Ginsberg) turns up fifteen or twenty years later with an arresting poem. He has, from all the evidence, been through hell." (Ginsberg, iv).

Howl is Ginsberg's portrait of humanity. Ginsberg wrote about the things he saw in the crowd. He describes them with an authenticity that is sure to stir up emotions and garner critical responses on both sides of the spectrum. I have attempted to capture this same idea within my poem. I begin the poem expressing how Ginsberg's *Howl* opens the mind in ways that cannot be closed. Once the mind is opened to these new ideas, like a drug, a reader will crave new exhilarating experiences. The poem presents the idea that humans are innately curious and rebellious, and can become more so when repressed.

The next poem in the collection, "Peering Through the Fog", is a response to Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Kesey's text is unmistakably a criticism of power structures in America that shape our individual personalities and social behaviors. Many critics believe Kesey was a participating member of the controlling society; however, I see Kesey's novel as a satirical criticism of a troubled American masculine psyche.

I suggest Kesey's *Cuckoo's Nest* can be read as a satire in the shadows of Swift and Byron and with elements of both. I wanted to present Kesey's text as a Byronic styled juvenilian satire that portrays the American myths that are destroying freedom and cohesion in our society. These myths are humorously depicted as bigoted and misogynistic. The purpose of Kesey's novel is to inform or give the reader an ability to step away from the American myths and move back to a naturalistic state, to reclaim nature, not from the feminists, or the blacks, or from the

Indians, but from the oppressive controllers who take advantage of the “others” and enforce stereotypical behaviors for political and personal gain.

The poem follows Kesey’s text by continuing in the point of view of Chief Broom who has been indoctrinated by an American machine. Kesey gives Broom a type of fog, a smoke screen, that allows him to separate himself from the ward. This was the chief’s way of ignoring the problem. I think Kesey was hinting at the smoke screen we all put up to avoid dealing with the problems in America. The poem begins using the fog in the same way; however, by the end of the poem, Broom realizes that the fog does not hide one from the world: it only allows them to hide from themselves.

The next poem in the collection, “Success”, is a reaction to Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills*. *Linden Hills* is a critique of the American dream from the point of view of the black community. What begins as a thoughtful and generous act of humanity ends in the most opposite and horrific way. Catherine Ward calls it a modern version of Dante’s vision of hell, “*Linden Hills* is a modern version of Dante’s *Inferno* in which souls are damned not because they have offended God or have violated a religious system but because they have offended themselves.” (67).

Naylor imagines a community that forgets their noble heritage to join the greedy and materialistic stereotypical idea of the American dream. The community quickly becomes an example of the haves and have-nots. A prominent theme in Naylor’s text is, be careful and cognizant of what you fight for and desire. The characters in Naylor’s book have lost the purpose with which they began their fight. The fight for freedom and equality turned into greed and a new type of slavery.

The title of the poem is “Success” and the idea for the title came in a quote from the text that describes Naylor’s creation, “Linden Hills wasn’t black; it was successful.” (Naylor 17). This is the idea I tried to communicate throughout the poem. From the first lines of the poem, we can see a division of sorts. The fence physically divides the two parts of the community, but it is a driving desire that ultimately separates the winners from the losers. The idea Naylor presents in her text is that the more successful and powerful the community got, the less black it became: “He relished the feelings of power and control as his blackness momentarily diminished in front of their faces.” (Naylor 103). The poem ends with a community still looking through the fence trying to patch their problems as the color fades.

The next poem in this collection, “They Lie In Parallel Rows”, is a response to Mark Doty’s *Atlantis*. Doty’s collection of poems in *Atlantis* presents the grieving process of a lost lover. Each poem presents the grieving process in a different way. For example, in “Golden Retrievals” Doty personifies a dog and envies the dog’s ability to move on after a death. The dog has the ability to live in the moment and ignore the past and the future (Sellers). Sellers believes the speaker and the poet differ in important ways. The poet grieves for his lost companion as the speaker, the dog, rolls in the decomposition (61). The dog seems to revel in the dead, “I’m off again: muck, pond, ditch, residue of any thrillingly dead thing.” (61). However, over the course of the collection, the poet seems to have a tough time dealing with the decay of life around him. Sellers believes the tension in the poem stresses the importance of moving on after death (62). I agree; however, I would also like to suggest that Doty expresses this idea throughout.

What I have presented the reader with is a look at a brief moment during that process of decay by presenting an image of the dying man and showing how ignorance creates a

stereotypical reaction to HIV and its effects on the human body. In the beginning stanzas, the reader gets a picture of patients lying in a quarantine ward specifically dedicated to AIDS patients. We quickly get a sense of the stereotypical reaction to AIDS because the persona in the poem tells the reader that the sickness is caused by homosexuality, “man’s modern—fallen sin.” It is then made clear that the symptoms of AIDS, “Brilliant gouaches of bluish-purple”, are worn as modern scarlet letters. The reference to the Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* is a hint at a forbidden love that is not accepted in “normal” society. The poem ends with the idea that the land of freedom and acceptance is only a myth. We are controlled and enslaved by our fears and ignorance.

The last poem in this collection, “A Man and his Sun”, is a reaction to McCarthy’s *The Road*. The text seems to be a post-apocalyptic grail story in which the boy is the symbolic grail needed to repair and save a dying world. Lydia Cooper points to evidence that strengthens a quest or journey themed reading. Cooper points to notes made by McCarthy that shows the original title as *The Grail* (219). To solidify this reading, if indeed it needs further evidence, she points to the father calling the boy, “chalice.” I too have chosen to read the novel as a story of crusade. However, I chose to focus on what fills the chalice.

McCarthy’s novel is so beautifully written it was hard to pick a topic to criticize. The themes and images throughout the text are written in an almost perfect poetic spirit. The novel is itself poetic. The reader gets a highly descriptive, however disturbing it may be, image of the world as McCarthy imagines it. The cause is never revealed in the text; however, if we consider the actions of the survivors, we can make safe assumptions that it was at least partially created by the neglect of the human population.

The world is dying and tribes of marauders are killing, and eating, both metaphorically and literally, whatever allotment of hope remains. I chose to draw an image of one instant in time, an instant that does not necessarily correspond to an image in the text, but is not too far from the original. I chose to show the man's last moments of life as he is broken by the road. The man is broken and has lost hope. He has lost that fire that drives him and is dying with the same symptoms as the earth. His body has systematically broken down one system at a time. The fire that drives the man and the boy is a metaphor for the sun; the sun is the light that drives the earth.

The original text plays with the sounds of sun and son. In both cases, the sun or son, is what drives life. In both instances, it is the sun or son that carries the light of life. I chose to use this same play on words to describe my scene. I believe this idea of light is what fills the chalice.

This poem begins and ends with an image of light. The opening stanza begins with the sun forgetting to carry the light and the poem ends with the son promising never to forget to carry the light. I thought this was significant to McCarthy because he repeats it many times in the text. Throughout the poem, the reader gets a sense of the dying light. The father is slowly realizing he cannot go on. His life is flashing before him, and he gives his son his last remaining rays of his own light to carry on in his memory.

Chapter Two: The Poetry

Untamed Frontiers

“Let men tremble to win the hand of woman, unless they win along with it the utmost passion of her heart! Else it may be their miserable fortune, when some mightier touch than their own may have awakened all her sensibilities, to be reproached even for the calm content, the marble image of happiness, which they will have imposed upon her as the warm reality.”

The eyes — Seduction and lust.

The upward tilt of the head, the subtle blush and giggle

Of a school girl crush

Gives our lover away.

The ring, fist covered with an open hand

Burns cool with denied brilliance,

Ignored — neglected natural impulses, Sex —

The heavy breathing of a mournful touch

Promotes uncontrolled palpitations —

Exaggerated pulses from her quivering chest

Mixed with short high-pitched sounds of begging.

The lovers combine.

The coup is natural, beautiful, immaculate—

Reborn, the lovers yearn for release,

Freedom is not a choice—when lovers are promised.

Why? The man is of God and his lover of man.

She is not his to have. His love is useless.

It is sin to take from man,

And both have sinned.

Our lover takes on the sins of man.

Women are expected to carry the sins of her nature.

For nine months, and then for years,

Hester is shamed, the mark upon her bosom

Express the evils of blissful joy,

A lustful taste of the forbidden fruit—

Backs pressed to the tree, one bite...

Knowledge kept in the dark.

Man appears innocent.

“Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him; for, believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee, on thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so, than to hide a guilty heart through life. What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him--yea, compel him, as it were--to add hypocrisy to sin?”

Crowds gather. Torment, demand the name of the sinner.

Hester is silent. Protected, the man is safe.

He can face the world with his head high.

His sins left in the womb,

The child cannot speak her father's name,
She knows. She dreams with a witch's sense,
Stares, even her eyes point the truth, but no one looks—
All are ensconced, blinded by hypocrisy and denial,
The one true-sinner is free from implication.
His position demands his innocence,
His position requires his innocence,
And is given respite.

"Nay; not so, my little Pearl!" answered the minister; for, with the new energy of the moment, all the dread of public exposure, that had so long been the anguish of his life, had returned upon him; and he was already trembling at the conjunction in which—with a strange joy, nevertheless—he now found himself. "Not so, my child. I shall, indeed, stand with thy mother thee one other day, but not to-morrow!"

Truth cannot hide from time.
Crowds can be tamed, minds turned to new beliefs,
But time is true.
In time the sinner will come forth,
Leave his fear and cowardice behind.
Become that man her heart demands,
The man her passion created in that moment of bonded life.
But not today;
For man is powerless against the will of his nature.

Escape on the River

That widow lady

She wants me to be like her

All cleaned up, hair combed, and clothes with no holes

Says “Its polite society where I belong”

Where everybody follows that Good Book

And does right by one another—

An all people too, no matter who you are

(I sometimes wonder if they mean Pappy though)

You treat them with love and respect and honor

But me, “I’m done with all that”

All that fancy-n-doin’ good is closing in on me—makes me tired

It’s like when you done something in school and everybodys lookin at you

You just kinda freeze and don’t know what to do next

You start shakin and your muscles hurt, you feel week—

It won’t matter though, cause I’m always wrong

I wanna be free, like those robbers Toms always talkin’ bout.

Free to do what I want and be what I want.

No man should be able to sell me down the river like that

No woman neither

Free like the river, takin’ which ever direction the swirls

And jumpin’ fingers of splashing water can grasp

Fillin holes on the bottom, floodin the voids

So's that everything's even, smooth like a buffed mirror, everything's the same
But I'm told that's not how things are... They just aint.

Never have been

The world out there is like the rapids on the Tennessee

This rivers like me, or maybe I'm like the river

Can't no man hold me back

At least he shouldn't try, it ain't right to dam a man from what he wants

It's like putting a man into chains or somthin', the river too

So I ran off.

I ran into Jim

He ran off too

Though I can't understand why

They don't make him do nothing they make me do—

He don't even have to take a bath if he don't wont

You see Jims a slave,

and slaves aint part of "sivilized" society

At least that's what the Widow Douglass says,

"They are different from us."

I don't know though, I think he likes the river much as me

And that means we are the same Jim and me

We like steelin down the river like lost-fallen logs

Steelin, makes me think of the widow Douglas

I remember what the widow told me about steelin
An me runnin with Jim is like steelin
An me and Tom wanting to be robbers an all is fun
Somehow it still fells wrong me steelin Jim like this
The widow told me that possess...possess
If I got him—I stole him if-in I took him or not
That means if we are caught I stole him.
Though I still don't know how
Jim can do what he wants — can't he
We're friends, how can you steal a friend anyway
Though I don't want to go to hell
And if I don't do the right thing I could go to hell
But do I tell the widow where Jim is
Or do I let him be free like me
I know what the Good Book says
And hell is a bad place, even worse than widow Douglass'
And Jims my friend and I'm supposed to treat him with love and honor
So I must tell the widow where he is, it's for his own good
But I just can't, I'll go to hell if I have to.

A Sailor's Bounty

Sailors—bewitched—gawking from portal-round mouths of androgynous ships,
Sinews tightened by exaggerated barbaric pleasures,
Lusting Eden's manly fruit—
He, who was plucked from devoted utters who jut the shore
Secured by a bounty of muscled and bronzed mariners,
Billy, the handsome sailor, walks toward the seventy-four;
Men, failing to quench the thirst of an adulterated intimacy
Cloaked in the dark depths of a listing cupboard.

However, the saunter of Apollo is condemned;
Censored from the berth of mass and sails;
Sailors pushing for "The Rights of Man"
Yet impressed by "Bellipotent"
Illusions of civility and propriety.

Billy Budd defies aristocratic reason.
He champions the rule of *rustic beauties* and *high born dames of the court*.
His youth, though impressively masculine, lingers in the swain of an angel—
Unshaven but smooth, *all but feminine in purity of natural complexion*
Baby Budd is sin in the flesh, desire in the drive.

All Men loved Billy Budd.

It wasn't the way he spoke,
Or how the words escape—the shape of his tongue;
It wasn't that he preached or spread gaping edicts,
It was an invisible virtue that spews—
Ejecting like an erupting geyser on a warm spring day.

Men took to him like *hornets to treacle*;

(Unstrained sentimentality or Molasses)

He sugared the sour ones

With the sweet affection of his delicacy—artistry.

Some did his washing, some his mending,

The carpenter made his *pretty little chest of drawers*—

Men would do anything for Billy Budd

It's the happy family here.

Though one man seemed to defy Billy's flaunting

Claggart: The Master of Arms—

Indeed, seems to be rivaled by his presents.

Our man Claggart is *foil to the pallor below*.

He is not curvaceous Venus or abreast Billy's gaze

Though not displeasing, he is forgotten.

With the claws of a mane-less lion,

Claggart lunges piercing glares of envious Red

Into Billy's protruding rapture.

Billy responds—drilling Claggart

In a carnal game of homicide and exposure

Forcing jilted competitors into the closet

With the silent corpse of a habitual mate.

Red Badges of Courage

A Country's farmers, miners, skimmers; brothers of the dirt—
Boys courting one another in a tragic dance of hatred and carnage.
Forced to leave their homes, their wives, their mothers—
To ribbon romantic death—brand fallen pawns with dripping Red Badges.
Soldiers, like *puppets under a magician's hand*
Become not men, but decomposing teeth on the desperate cogs of a war machine.

Lust for war escaping the lips of young men,
Songs, poems, visions of triumph derange peacetime dreams,
Waiting, mathematically proving... "Boys don't run when the time comes."
Drilling—marching—drilling—repeat; Blue and Grey Demonstrations of power,
Forgetting possibilities which dismantle human failing,
Ejecting nightmares of disbelief and fear,
Defeat and surrender aborted from the young man's thought.

"How do you know you won't run when the time comes?"

"Be keerful, honey, you 'll be a-ketchin' flies,"

The first volleys of war
Seem like distant memories rushing to catch up,
Stationary dreams that appear so far away
Sear into your ears in a luminous flash.

Explosions of artillery and the bright blooms of overhead roses
Send showers of molten rain pouring over flocks of sacramental sheep.

Isolated, a pontoon bridge traverses a burning palisade of rushing water,
Flames stretch provisional rivets, but soldiers march on—
While landed generals on both sides cheer and raise tribute to one another.
Seems the bridge and the soldiers have something in common?

Running through the smoke and fog
slit and slashed by the knifelike fire from the rifles
Columns of tethered men move from possession to possession,
Crossing divisions of enemy bastions—retreating—taking—giving;
Neglected fragments of battlefields become havens for dead men.

Vultures tearing flesh from the hollowed carcass of an unsung hero,
Heavy Red Badges of justified courage
Blending into sharp holes of birds-beak feast,
And forgotten valor of a measure-less dance.
All badges are red. None fly with the colors of the bearer.
The Blues—the Greys, none fly with the colors of the bearer.

Democratic battlefields are the wastelands of Romantic ignorance.

The Voice of the Sea Speaks to the Soul.

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring,
murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to
lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.

Edna stares at the boundless womb of bluish foam

Waiting for the exact moment to plunge into life's

Labyrinth of choices and verdicts—

Discordant, but determined to yield to the rhythm of solitude.

The shore's tyrannical yellow sovereign

Caresses her naked skin,

Filling every curve and fissure

With the warmth of his tender piercing pricks,

Forcing a reluctant vassal to submit to the calmness of order.

But the sea. It calls with an ever reaching, bursting force of wet foam and suck;

Stimulating her feet with soft, cool kisses promising sweet magnetic sex—

An osmosis of breath, brine, and eternal bliss.

She yearns for a pleasure beyond her imagination—

To merge in chaotic unions with a symphony of blue

And recover her now trembling body with liquid empathy.

The voices ring in her head
Loud as the crashing waves,
Each with its own agenda and familiar resonance.
“Please, remember the children”—
"What folly! to bathe at such an hour in such heat!"—
"I love you. Good-bye -- because I love you."—
The noise is too much to bear.
The silence of the deep calls to her.

Her quivering lips mock
The shapes of the terrible words
Beating through her soul.

“I love you”

A wounded bird beats the air overhead
Causing a momentary pause and half-hollow glance,
Her stone-carved eyes showing the burden
Her lips fail to achieve.

The possession of soul is hers,
But the ownership of life is theirs.
The refusal of her nature is futile—
The choice has come at last.

The last bit of earth clinging to her feet decays—
Polluting the once seductive muse.
The sea's magnetic arms are no longer pushing her,
But insisting that she gives herself to the pull.
The voices of the sun are fading—
The thoughts flooding her mind
Are now free, and the only thing left—
“Because I love You!”

Illusions

One boy—One girl—Apple pie and white pickets
Long seamless bodies smiling at the sun
Clean woven lawns carpet the distance between dreams
America—the province for love and vision.

Romance—The power that drives industry
Without— Bodies wind mindlessly in an abyss of solitude and emptiness
With—Twisting chimeras of faith and desire that build
Divisions of metropolis orgies content with “*gonnegtions.*” (connections)

Freedom is the power of autonomy
Governed by cheap extortionist
Dangled—Fed in increments to an emaciated mass
By the indulging hands of a fashionable choice.

The scrolls say, “All men created equal”
Families living side by side—some outside looking in
Loud lavish parties into the night provide
Coveting faces of banished juvenile plebes.

Disparate times call for desperate measures
Speakeasy charms deliver swallowed happiness

Small armies of loyal patriots—patrons
Fighting dissension one dollar at a time.

Covenants are never managed
Lies and deception mar a marriage of kin
Alliances are made for gratification
Affluence and prosperity to those who take it.

Success belongs to the hustler, whore, and deceiver
Disciples of hollow souls enshrine superficial dolls
Driven by greed—
Greed is acquired like a domestic virtue.

More—More—More
There can never be enough—
What marks the time when pride is content
To lie on the lawn and smile at the sun.

The trouble with dreams is the sudden jar
The moment when mystery meets reality
The realization that vibrant sands have begun to fade
And you find yourself lying petrified, spread a like fool on an imagined cross.

Where Do Decaying Bridges Lead?

Drip—Drip—Drip—The pounding of dripping rain

Echoes as it invades the engineered mazes of the flaking riveted steel.

Purging, elliptical spheres plummet from the bottom of puddles clinging to overhead beams

Imploding— then bursting—scattering tiny merciless robots: razing from inside to out.

Cells of tested infantry spread

Its machinery like puss around an open wound

Awaiting their turn down the rabbit hole.

Drip—Drip—Drip—The victors destroy.

Ferric-soldiers eat like maggots—parasites living on decaying *Iron* tissue.

They eat—they move. They eat more.

Consuming only where they can hide:

Darkness their ally, heat and day their foe.

They colonize, assimilate and become new,

Bigger armies needing more nourishment

To sustain—more eating—more holes.

Drip—Drip—Drip—Are they retreating?

No! They are lying dormant, waiting for the next attack.

Inspectors search, but can only find, damage, not the enemy.

The evidence is clear. Marbled Gyre birthmarks

Litter the logistical arteries and chasms of the anatomy.

Not your birthmarks, but theirs. Their tiny unions—mold,

Like tie-died stains on old mattresses. The blacks, the blues, the browns,

Mosaic images form on the surface, but underneath, more holes.

The surgeons cut, weld, and reform the foundation

Repairing the erected skeleton of the host: only to succumb again.

Drip—Drip—Drip—The second wave begins.

The stains are now gaping lesions with legions

Of fresh troops on the move. The soldiers march through the

Aged fields with procured momentum:

The paths plowed by preliminary pandemics.

Drip,Drip,Drip. The levy breached.

The flood of invaders reach places light can't see,

No need for retreat. No need to hide. The spoils are rampant.

The experts trowel, repair, revive,

But the damage grows.

Drip, Drip, Drip. Another wave of new life

Break through—emerging— collecting—

A blistering sea of carcinoma.

Down—down—down.

The journey-men focus beams into the abyss

Hopelessly looking for more signs—more holes—

Exploring—searching for the heart of the disease.

The radiant detectives find colonies full of life:

Non-benign areas of populous growth.

Drip, Drip, Drip—the mutating fissures

Push good fibrous cells aside:

Kill them, and replace them with holes.

More holes than doc can count:

Holes filled with living-death

Eating the only Span that carries us from despair to hope.

If the Bridge collapses, our only chance will be to swim.

Swim or drown in a life determined by our divides

With only reason preventing a desperate leap...

A leap from the bridge is a declaration of failure. We shan't fail...

The welded scars and circular stroke pictures imprinted on the girders

Prove the determination of unified hope...

“Money”...The “Big” Playground

Why is the world reserved for the rich?

How can they play while we suffer?

Why are the chances for happiness

Divided among such a few?

Who says money can't buy me Love?

“Yankee Doodle that melodee

Yankee Doodle that melodee

Makes me stand right up and cheer “

The world is a toy most of us will only see in books.

The “Wishbook” travel guide is full of

Exotic destinations we will never kiss.

Most will never feel the warm sand

Of a Caribbean love affair

Carved into the beach.

Our lips will never touch the

Joyful fountain of our wedded bliss.

Why? Because we are the prey.

We are the spoils captured for their amusement.

We are the world. We too are a playground.

Camera Eye 1: He wants to go to Europe. He stares at the lines that divide Germany and Austria. He dreams of climbing the glacier near Berchtesgaden before their playthings destroy it. The heat from their toys have melted the ice and pushed most of the rock to the side. He slams his balled fist to the table. He thinks to himself, "The ice is retreating much like us. It's being destroyed by a controlled and steady force, but what is it? How can I possibly make a difference? I am but a plaything! They get to pick and choose what happens to us! It's my life, it's my dime—it's their dollar!"

Why is the world reserved for the rich?

How can they play while we suffer?

Why are the chances for happiness

Divided among such a few?

Who says money can't buy me Love?

"Young man not afraid of hard work

Young man for the office

Young man for the stockroom

Young man as stenographer

Young man to travel

Young man to learn"

The good employee works hard.

Works hard— not for himself,

But for them.

Works hard, brings home the leftovers

So graciously provided by the machine.

Works hard, gives his earnings to the landlord,

The grocer, the tailor, the mechanic, the co-gen plant,

The Doctor, the department store, and good Ol' Henry Ford—

That is,

what the Red-White-and Blue machine doesn't take first.

Every time we put a little to the side

Another machine figures out a new way to steal it.

“Just as soon as his wife discovers that every Ford is like every other Ford and that nearly everyone has one, she is likely to influence him to step into the next social group, of which Dodge is the most conspicuous example.”

Camera Eye 2: He looks at his finances. He writes and pays his bills. He looks at what is left over. He takes a drink of his favorite stash and slams his fist into the table. He starts to scream, the air escaping his body makes grunting sounds. Wetness squeezed from his eyes seeks to mix with almond-pungent atomized spray escaping his grunts. He thinks to himself, “We have to eat. What the hell do they expect us to do?” He looks into his savings book. “Three hundred left out of fifteen.” His tax check was lousy because he had to claim more deductions, or whatever it is that you call them. He was saving the money for his trip to Europe. He has always dreamed of

visiting the places he studied in school. He loved history and it would make sense for him to visit, especially the coastline near the borders of France. He didn't know exactly where, or the exact spot, but that is where his father retired...fell.

Why is the world reserved for the rich?

How can they play while we suffer?

Why are the chances for happiness

Divided among such a few?

Who says money can't buy me Love?

“If one should seek a simple explanation of his career it would doubtless be found in that extraordinary decision to forsake the ease of a clerkship for the wearying labor of a section hand. The youth who so early in life had so much of judgment and willpower could not fail to rise above the general run of men. He became the intimate of bankers.”

The American Dream. What is it?

The lies are quick, loud, and sly.

Pilgrims from all pigments of the world

Flock and gather at the feet of the lords

For a chance to “Come on Down”

“You’re the next contestant on the

Dream is Right” (and redeemable) — Huh.

But in the end, Red, White, and Blue—

The machines are the only victors.

Reality— the only dreams We get to live

Are on hand-me-down clouds

In which we wear “*forsomebodysetaylorred dress suits*”

Or inferior alien made lookalikes knitted by bums who can’t afford

A square foot of the tread required for assembly.

Greed, America’s Playground—

Human Misery, America’s Playground—

And You and Me are Contestants fighting for scraps...

“Outside the scene was a veritable bedlam. Well-dressed women walked up and down wringing their hands, helpless to save their belongings, while from the windows of the upper stories there rained a shower of trunks, suitcases, and clothing hurled out indiscriminately. Jewelry and bric-a-brac valued at thousands was picked up by the spectators from the lawn, who thrusts the objects under their coats and disappeared.”

Why is the world reserved for the rich?

How can they play while we suffer?

Why are the chances for happiness

Divided among such a few?

Who says money can’t buy me Love?

“Here is the most dangerous example of how at the decisive moment the bourgeois ideology liquidates class solidarity and turns a friend of the working-class of yesterday into a most miserable propagandist for imperialism today.”

“But we cannot buy for our children

Our wages are too low

Now listen to me you workers

Both you women and men

Let us win for them the victory

Im sure it aint no sin”

After a while the clothes will fit—

The ideas that once repulsed will comfort.

The toys will be within your grasp, and You *will* grab—

It is natural, it is the way it has always been—

It is how it will always be—

One generation, one class, one labor of people

Will trample over another and take what they please.

The wants will change, the clothes will change, the toys will change,

But the message will remain, the only difference will be faces offended by the rage...

Camera Eye 3: He has made it. Finally...after years of doing without...after years of struggle...two wives...a couple of kids...oh, and let's not forget, a mortgage on top of a mortgage. He has made it. His finances are finally in check. His bills are manageable and he can sit back and enjoy and reap the benefits of his labor. He can finally invest. He can finally drive his car with his head held high and breathe the air, the sweet smelling air of success. He plans his trip to Europe around his next birthday. He will turn a happy seventy...

“I find your column interesting and need advice. I have saved four thousand dollars which I want to invest for a better income. Do you think I might buy stocks?”

*Camera Eye 4: We are gathered here today to celebrate the life of our dear friend. He would have been seventy in a month. He retired just six months ago...**He was Dying to live the American Dream.***

The American Monster

“The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it.”

In a time when the Shawnee Lan' an' Cattle Company
Bought our souls.
When the dust took our homes,
Our families, our friends —
Altered, made us beggars, fools, thieves,
We turned our backs on our own,
Machines — New rows of piled dirt,
Our hope plowed under with our chalky gardens.

Is a tractor bad? Is the power that turns the long furrows wrong? If this tractor were ours, it would be good - not mine, but ours. We could love that tractor then as we have loved this land when it was ours. But this tractor does two things - it turns the land and turns us off the land. There is little difference between this tractor and a tank. The people were driven, intimidated, hurt by both. We must think about this.

“Can't think of that. Got to think of my own kids. Three dollars a day, and it comes every day.”

Work — Once a chore, a burden; a wall between sweat and joy;
now it's life or death.

Our people begging for jobs.
Driving, thumbing, walking for days — without.
Nothing but the taste of dust and old road in our mouths to feed us.
Our clothes fatigued, half worn from use,
Color drained from chewing, collars wet with prints of teeth,
Rub your shirt against a sweet smell or hickory wood,
Close your eyes and chew — suck — it passes the time.
It's not satisfying, but chewing beats wanting.
Beats thinking, hunger destroys the will...

“They ain't human. A human being wouldn't live like they do.”

We watch strangers in their new cars —
Shiny, fast, and loud.
Moving we block the road, springs and tires pressed to the point of flat,
Flat and lonely, Ugly, disturbing the western view.
Pass us laughing, pointing, but never looking.
Where do they work I wonder? Who feeds them?
They look at us like we're scum, we're not,
We're just people. We're Okies.

“Well, Okie use' ta mean you was from Oklahoma. Now it means you're a dirty son-of-a-bitch.

Okie means you're scum.”

Who's place is it anyway?

Who decides who goes and who stays?

Who works and who dies?

Whose country is this?

Is it ours or theirs?

Who makes this country run?

This country was grown on the sweat of our backs.

There ain't no place in this country for Jim Crows;

Who do they think they are... Who do they think we are?

Even the law, the men sworn to protect us

Think we belong to them —

Control us — beat us — work us into the ground.

I guess someone's always gotta be on top.

"It ain't that big. The whole United States ain't that big. It ain't that big. It ain't big enough.

There ain't room enough for you an' me, for your kind an' my kind, for rich and poor together all

in one country, for thieves and honest men. For hunger and fat."

When we stand together as one

We are power, Red with want.

Not the kind of want that spurs greed,

But want of joy, life, freedom —

Time to love, not to fight.
But now we must unite,
Strike against those who oppress and take.
We must not fear or loathe the lines of men,
The men who carry the signs of a labor party,
Men beaten and dirty. Signs of misuse and neglect.
These here is our own people, all of 'em —
The men, women, children, starving,
Ribbed with divided drawings of hunger
Pressed against walls and fences.
Pushed to the side by pickers, thieves,—scabs
Mobs with bloated bellies of guilt,
Gluttony too deep for compassion,
“We turned our backs on our own,
Machines — New rows of piled dirt,
Our hope plowed under with our chalky gardens”

Too scared to fight, too defeated to care...

Fear the time when the strikes stop while the great owners live - for every little beaten strike is proof that the step is being taken ... fear the time when Manself will not suffer and die for a concept, for this one quality is the foundation of Manself, and this one quality is man, distinctive in the universe.

On the Road

I've lived on the Road.

I've slept in the woods.

I've been beaten by cops.

I've walked thirty miles in the rain because no one would stop—
for a Dirty, Longhaired, Bum who looks like a fleeing convict.

I've taken rides from strangers who are scarier than I am.

I've prayed to a God who I thought wasn't listening.

I've been so scared in the mountains that my ass grew hands
that held a car seat like vice grips.

I've watched a needle sink deep into a stranger's vein.

I've watched a friend convulse under the pier—Dirty Water.

I've watched a lover's heart explode because the dose was too high,
the last look on her face assumed the fault was mine.

I've lived for weeks without eating.

I've been so drunk that I almost lost memory;
anything can happen when you lose your memory.

I've been so drunk that I lost my memory.

I've considered sex for food with people I don't know.

I've had sex for food with people I don't know.

I've read a book by Kerouac that deepens too many past events.

I have read a book by Kerouac that romanticizes a life I wish to leave at the other end of
The Road...

Barking for Ginsberg

Allen, I have read poems that made me erect.

Howl is no different.

I start every night under the El, waiting—

Waiting for my next customer.

I can't help it; that is, if they keep coming back for more.

You have exposed yourself to the world.

Nature looks into your naked eyes

And arouses her soul in your

Deep waves of "*pubic beard*" solitude.

We are told, "You are the drug"

You infect the minds of our future.

You and your "*alcohol and Cock and endless balls*".

You make our heroes lust for your

Symphonic melodies—

Melodies of lust and animal love

Tearing through the hearts of our innocent youth.

You curse the "*one-eyed shrews*"—

Who are the sentimental glue of ourselves.

Instead, you would have them, sedated.

Sedated with the perversions of added hormones

That “*sweetened the snatches*” of young girls

Maddening the sniffing dogs

Desperately wanting to release the “*last gyzym of consciousness.*”

But who have you created? Who am I?

We are the children of Howl.

We howl and bark at the governed rule of the masters

And sink further from their tyrannical mores.

We are the future, chaos in the multitudes—

A place no one can deny the beauty of the monster.

There must be a monster to separate us from them.

But who is who? Who are the monsters — Us or Them?

We howl and bark to know we are not alone,

Helpless strangers in the night

Looking for a fix.

A drug that no longer calms us.

We long for the togetherness of being.

We men look for man, we women look for woman.

We look for ourselves in the human bedlam that is... Man.

Peering Through the Fog

“One of these days I will quit straining and let myself go...

Lose myself in the fog...”

Fog — the warm slick feeling of engulfing camouflage.

Recourse we take to protect ourselves

From the war that defines our being—

It’s the struggle that tells us who we are.

We are the enemy within ourselves

We are observers, players,

We are soldiers of misfortune.

Our bodies — vessels of fear and emotion—

Aggression and surrender.

Like a crouching cat on a cold morning,

I use the fog to gaze — peer through emotions;

The emotions we bury — hide from one another;

The barriers and dividers that make us

Vulnerable, powerful, yet still exposed to the

Silent smoky fingers of the flameless mist.

Lonely ambushed warriors surround me—

With defenses set to maximum stun;

Levels of protection that

Insist a cohesion of normality.

But the penetrating fog clears the mangled reflections

And reveals the inner person, the hidden person,

The scared reflection of a wounded soul

Hiding from autonomy and surrender, an evisceration for the Cuckoo's nest.

I hear laughter — a man not afraid of his fortune.

The brume rises. Reaching ghostly arms gently sweeping across the room

Allow me to embrace the feral man in his natural form.

The lust of a man is intoxicating.

His strength, his respect, his veracity is calming.

It is good to embrace a *genuine* truth—

A Man is potent...a potent man is a pervert.

Brazen, he rejects the sovereignty of the nest—

Revels in his tawdry defiance, and

Screams his accomplishments loudly...

Advertises his success, his *minor* conquests, (conquests of minors)

He has no reason to shame, he is man.

Fog fingers the man's ears

Gently seeping into his device

Intent, intent on defiance, no one is master of Man.

He intends to show her up— Who?

A woman with a question, an answer to his rule.

His jewels of life challenged by the unwoman, a ball cutter.

He must not fail. He is man.

The unwoman — covering the evidence of some...

“Rather extraordinary breasts”

“I couldn’t get it up over old frozen face in there

even if she had the beauty of Marilyn Monroe.”

His war paint is fierce, blunt and penetrating,

But hers is intoxicating, hidden, and intimidating.

She represents atrophy, shrinking, castration, a real ball cutter.

He must not fail. He is man.

The murky mist sinks deeper into the abyss

Revealing conflict.

“She is woman, and woman is good.”

“She is woman, and woman is weak.”

“She must not rise above me.”

The fog distills anger and aggression to reveal

An inner child. A childhood fear of rejection — rejection of self.

The omniscient vapors, the protective shroud

That usually hides the fear is now its revealer.

The fog reveals.

Reveals within himself. Reveals the challenges he must face.

The fear that protects also binds.

When the fog lifts, I find myself alone.

Was it all a dream? Was the man real or a reflection of myself?

Why can't I reveal who I am?

I must accept my own fate,

My own inadequacies...

I must smother the fog and leave the nest...

Enter a new frontier of me!

Success

His fathers had made a fatal mistake: they had given Linden Hills the will to possess and so had
lost it to the very god they sought to defy...Linden Hills wasn't black; it was *successful*.

Large round eyes and noses press through the chain-link

That divides the sunshine in unequal amounts.

Children peer at glistening bodies

Molded to the clean woven wicker of poolside furniture

Awaiting their turn in paradise...

*"There are other black communities with showcase homes and elegant lawns, but somehow
making it into Linden Hills means "making it."*

That thing that keeps the children on their side

Is illusive and mocking—and hidden within the shadows of their souls.

Once on the other side, that ominous essence is plucked—

Discarded and cleansed of impurities—

Beaten dry by the sagacity of canonical overlords ...

"In college he found that his blackness began to disappear behind his straight A average."

The convertible stingray, the sound of eight thundering pistons—

Churning colorless smoke,

The turned up collar striped polo,

The tennis shorts with bulging pockets,
Loafers that hold silver dollars,
Gazes of resentment, delight, jealousy, and lust—
Kneading his ego with delight as he climbs his way to the top...

“He relished the feelings of power and control as his blackness momentarily diminished in front of their faces”

Handshakes, pats on the back, smiles with big teeth,
A hefty pay raise, a cozy office with an intercom,
A photograph among a line of greats—
These are the pledges of progress,
Not Black—Successful...

“Wrong—she and the career at IBM that she clung to with a desperation mistaken for pride, ambition, or contentment; mistaken for everything but what it was—a mistake...And when she finally took a good look around, she found herself imprisoned within a chain of photographs and a life that had no point.”

The lies, the disillusion—
The greed, the expectation of something not yours—
How do you get this far? How do you get in?
What must you do to fit into this place?

*“You just gotta sell that sliver mirror God
Propped up in your soul.
Sell it to who—the devil?
Naw, just to the highest bidder, child. The
Highest bidder.”*

Large round eyes and noses press through the chain-link
That divides the sunshine in unequal amounts.
Children peer at glistening bodies
Molded to the clean woven wicker of poolside furniture
Awaiting their turn in paradise...
Waiting with their fists in the air—
Waiting to fix that television when the color fades!

They Lie In Parallel Rows

They lie in parallel rows,
on ice, head to tail,
each a foot of luminosity

barred with black bands,
which divides the scales'
radiant sections

They lay there, marbled skin
Glistening with the shine of radiated
Pyretic sweat resembling

Sunshine on spilled gasoline.

My friend among them;

A swain covered with barnacles

Of man's modern—fallen sin.

His guilt paraded

By Brilliant gouaches of bluish-purple

Which become tesserae

Placed at random on his brilliant abalone skin.

A judgment with no rules—no mercy...

No real laws that govern love between men,
Only chromatic patches of rotting sinew and
Contagious lesions that polka dot the skin.

Scarring manifestations
Of assumed guilt
That become the Scarlett letter.

We men, we few men
Who love with unflinching passions
Writhe at the *intricacy of wreck*

Caste upon an unsympathetic beach.
Shores that bolster freedom and equality,
Compassion and Union,

But look upon our friends;
They lie with a lacquered stigma
Of a thousand sins—

Bore by ignorance and hate...

A Man and his Sun

The sun has forgotten to kiss the earth—

A man stares into a gray, ashen sky

Rubbing his beaten brow with decayed fingers of infinite labor;

A ravished road lolls before him,

Vacant, scattered with memories of humanity's barbaric neglect.

The young son of a deserted man looks onward.

A solemn stare—hollow beams of vacant light

Gives birth to despair and wretchedness—

An unwanted gift that sends

Palpitating spikes of fear down the spines of gallant men,

And our man is a mere sunken effigy of his former beneficence.

Daytime visions of former worship stammer his thoughts

(Fields of warm lucent flowers, a running brook, and a woman with a penetrating smile)

Drives him further into solitude.

The boy shakes his lethargic companion—

Papa. We got to go. Papa.

The woman lies on a bed surrounded by bows

And wrapped boxes of celebratory praise

Smiling at the man, gazing with a promise of radiant splendor.

Flirtatious legs half buried by covers and lace;
Her motherly mound rising sharply above
Erect nipples quietly appearing through a thin sheer gown.
That's the time before, the time that hurts.

Papa. We got to keep moving.

The man breaks his drunken gaze

Looks at his son.

“I am leaving.”

“You can't. We have to stick together.”

“Why?” What's the use? What happens next? We just die a little every day.”

“Don't say that. We are living a little each day.”

Papa—Papa! to the slumbering man.

The man smiles.

“Don't go. Please don't go. It's too dark. You can't even see.”

“I won't need to; not where I'm going.”

“You can't do it. You have to think of him.”

“I should have thought of us all when we still had three bullets.”

Papa!

The man returns to the darkness of a dying world—

Smiles at his son with the dimness of distant brilliance;

Life's fire escaping his emaciated soul—

One by one, the timbers of his flesh fall
Crush the lighted ashes of his faith.
The man reaches for his son,
Shaking, livid and pasty—broken;
Cankorous fingertips reaching,
Reaching for a sign—a sliver of hope for a body of wretch;
Amazing Grace in a breath—
The son gently kisses his father.
“I promise Papa. I will not forget to carry the light.”

Notes

1. Fanny Fern, born Sarah Payson Willis, was among America's first columnist. Fern began writing a column for a small newspaper in New York. She began writing to her mostly upper-middleclass readers about issues that affected women and their roles in society. She published a novel titled, *Ruth Hall*. Modern critics believe Fern's success and the success of her novel helped pave the way for female recognition.
2. Samuel Langhorne Clemens, also known as Mark Twain, is the famed creator of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. Clemens began his career as an apprentice riverboat pilot on the Mississippi River. He began writing travel letters that were notably humorous rather than informing. Clemens wrote extensively. He wrote for many obscure newspapers and it is impossible to determine which articles came first. Clemens quickly became a writer and speaker and dealt with topics such as slavery and equality.
3. Elizabeth Cady Stanton is famous for her commitment to women's rights as well as her commitment to the abolition of slavery. Stanton wrote many essays and co-authored novels for women's rights including, *History of Woman's Suffrage* and *The Woman's Bible*. Stanton was also partially responsible for creating the Seneca Falls Convention, the first public convention for women's rights in the United States.
4. Lucretia Mott was also a strong abolitionist and defender of women's rights. She co-authored several texts with Stanton and together, they contributed to the formation of many equal rights organizations.
5. Susan B. Anthony co-founder of the American Woman Suffrage Association and was ultimately responsible for women's eventual right to vote.

6. Harriet Beecher Stowe is sometimes credited for starting the American Civil War. In actuality, this idea arose after the war, but Stowe's book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made quite a bit of noise before the war. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* depicts the life of a slave and became a calling card for abolition.
7. Michel Foucault wrote *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault argues that male dominance must be maintained to prevent the breakdown of social order. Clark's Foucaultian reading of the text shows how Edna breaks from that tradition and begins to question its validity.
8. Carl Marx is the father of communism. He co-authored *The Communist Manifesto* which was the foundation of the Socialist Political Movement. Clark quotes Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* as saying women were first treated as property during the introduction of agriculture.

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