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Pentangle's History

Pentangle is NKU's student-run journal featuring essays pertaining to all areas of literary studies, including f lm and other media."

Pentangle's name alludes to the famous image in the Middle English poem, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, where it is a symbol of truth and perfection. The journal seeks to highlight excellence in academicwriting and scholarship.

Homosexual Desire and Identity in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Kayla Belser

Oscar Wilde's nineteenth-century novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, has been widely reviewed in the world of literary academia. The presence of homosexuality is a common topic in discussing both the novel and Wilde's personal life. The focus on homosexuality surrounding the narrative has helped establish the novel as a staple in the gay literary canon. While homosexuality is never directly addressed within the novel's 210 pages, its presence is heavily implied. From the focus placed on the beauty of Dorian's character by his male friends, to the discreet nightly acts that the reader is left to wonder about, the gayness is obvious, especially to those who may share in the identity of both Wilde and his protagonists. Exploring and understanding the presence of homosexual desire is essential to comprehending Wilde's message of self-destruction and public image.

The opinions of the late-Victorian general public clearly denounced homosexuality. By the end of the nineteenth-century, in an attempt to control the ideas and behaviors accepted by society, there was a massive increase in discourse about homosexuality. Those who disapproved clung to science, which at the time condemned homosexuality from a physical and psychological standpoint. Homosexuals were inhumanely spectated. This was exemplif ed by the outpour of public attention in various trials condemning homosexuality, particularly the Wilde trials of 1895. Wilde was tried and convicted of "committing acts of gross indecency with certain male persons."

In "Silent Homosexuality in Oscar Wilde's Teleny and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," Antonio Sanna highlights this attention on sexual acts and its ref ection in the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act and the Vagrancy Act of 1898. These amendments were homophobia disguised as justice. The late-Victorian laws severely punished the practice of "gross indecency" between men, in public or private. In the argument of Dorian Gray being gay, it is appropriate that Wilde wrote him as being deathly concerned with the judgement or condemnation of contemporary society, as was the case for most homosexuals at the time. Sanna af rms that "although Dorian is never disgraced by the rumors, his terror of them pervades his life" (Sanna,

28). This is connected to his own concept of identity and sense of self. In relation to being gay/queer, this idea of a secret only you know controlling multiple variables in your life is eerily common in those who feel unsafe or ashamed of their identity. A wide belief is that Wilde explored this concept based on his own personal experience.

Wilde's inclusion of secrecy attests to the veil of lies that came with sexual awakening if it deviated from heterosexuality in the late-Victorian era. He attributes this realistic component to Dorian. Understanding that Dorian's identity troubles stem from his suppressed sexuality adds the slightest clarity to what his character values. Dorian resorts to convincing himself he isn't gay, that he would be perfectly happy marrying Sibyl Vane before he learned of her suicide. This is a common coping mechanism for individuals who fear the reality of their sexuality. Toward the end of chapter eight in the original text this becomes clear to readers. Wilde unpacks Dorian's thoughts, saying "For every sin that he committed, a stain would f eck and wreck [the portrait's] fairness. But he would not sin. The picture, changed or unchanged, would be to him the visible emblem of conscience. He would resist temptation. He would not see Lord Henry anymore—would not, at any rate, listen to those subtle poisonous theories that in Basil Hallward's garden had f rst stirred within him the passion for impossible things" (88-89). The reference of "impossible things" was his romantic desires toward men, Lord Henry specif cally. Dorian was not

alleys, and haunted by daylight that forced him to obsess over what others might think of him if they ever uncovered his truth.

The idea that Dorian wasn't the only gay character in the novel is supported by scholar and professor of English at Princeton University, Jef rey Nunokawa. In his article, "Homosexual Desire and the Ef acement of Self in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," Nunokawa begins his critical discussion of homosexuality within the novel by stating Basil Hallward's character is blatantly head-over-heels in love with Dorian from the beginning and that Dorian's "extraordinary beauty" inspires Lord Henry's interest in the main character as well. Basil Hallward's actions leave very little room to question the presence of homosexuality. His jealousy is thick when he learns of Dorian's proposal to Sibyl, and toward Dorian's blossoming friendship with Lord Henry. Nunokawa approaches Basil's homosexuality through a modern lens, writing "if we have no trouble diagnosing Basil Hallward's perturbations as the birth pangs of homosexual identity, we may have trouble diagnosing them as anything else. His attraction to Dorian Gray appears as nothing other than the f rst act of the now well-developed drama of self-realization we call coming out" (Nunokawa, 312). In recalling Basil's reaction and hesitation to the feelings Dorian's sheer presence brought upon him, Nunokawa accurately characterizes Basil's journey throughout the novel. Even if Basil only ever came out to himself, he is one of the few characters that is honest. His attractions are so strong that he prepares himself for the absorption of his soul. A toxic outlook by most standards, but also a sentiment that led to the connection of sexuality and identity. Dorian hangs onto every word of Lord Henry. The dynamic between the two was homoeroticism taking form in the exercise of inf uence. It is valid to credit Lord Henry for the initial depersonalization journey that Dorian encounters, which is rooted in their mutual sexual attraction. Nunokawa relates the twisted friendship to that of a teacher and a student set in the scandals and controversy that surrounded Oxford and Cambridge during the latter half of the nineteenth century. In connection to this, he writes, "the enduring suspicion that homosexual desire is conducted through the schools may ref ect the homoerotic ambitions exemplif

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The Ancient Qualities of Dracula as Modern Societal Fears

Alexi Kreutzjans

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is a plethora of dark and mysterious themes that prove the novel to be a product of its time, and this is inherent by the presence of bloodsucking nocturnal beings that prey on innocents in the dead of night. However, what seems to truly provoke the fear that is typically present within the gothic, 19th-century atmosphere is not so much what is seen, rather, what cannot be seen: the unknown. Throughout the entirety of the novel there is virtually no sign of the evil, ambitious vampire, barring only the immediate beginning as well as the immediate end, as he literally f ies across England in a hurry to "colonize" and create his new nation of predators. Aside from the ancient castle encased by memories of days long gone, there is little to no trace of the kind of environment from which Dracula may originate. Moreover, there is even less to support his whereabouts at any given point. The only thing that can be known for certain is that much like the ordinary gothic novel, there are monsters and other creatures of the night lurking around the churchyards or outside the windows of unsuspecting innocents. There will be blood and fangs and a loss of innocence as once harmless victims become bloodthirsty, crazed, and uncontrollable demons condemned to roam the darkest streets and corners for eternity. This much is evident upon Van Helsing's encounter with Lucy after her transition and is supported continuously throughout Stoker's novel following this event. However, what cannot truly be certain, and what must

be relied on through blind faith for the readers just as much as Van Helsing's group, is what occurs in the shadows. What takes place in the dark castle and various homes that The Count will visit in addition to what takes place and is undocumented between each character's experience is the genuine source of fright in this story, and there is much to be considered in between Dracula's first and final appearances.

Although the bleak and mysterious qualities of the gothic era play their part in invoking fear in their audience, scholars agree that Stoker seems to suggest many things in allowing the vampire's absence, and that this is the source of true fear. This seems appropriate to argue, as well as the fact that whether it be the vampire himself or the representation of modernity that he embodies through Stoker's inclusion of technology and colonization, much of the fear that is present in the novel, which is mirrored by Victorian society, is a result of the fallout from these two things. In other words,

strife for a country in his wish to irradicate the human population, especially with a focus on women.

He states, “The apocalyptic potentialities of Dracula’s “reverse colonization” (Arata 1997), and his threat to subjugate Britons and transform them into his minions by feeding of and corrupting their women, amount to a projective displacement of the history of ethnic cleansing and racial extermination… therefore, the vampire in Stoker’s *Dracula* serves as a metaphor for extreme forms of violence that humanity witnessed in the past.” (77).

He even draws terminology from Arata, who later continues in his own article to describe Dracula as a representation of the “colonized world” being overtaken by “primitive forces,” which is another angle from which one might view not only modernity, but the issues that arise in the modern world as a result of ancient or outdated practices, such as colonization.

Once more the argument is extended by writer Christopher Bundrick, who suggests that though vampires have always been seen as creations of the distant past, products of fantasy, the fact that they are now real beings in the context of the story forces each character to contend with the knowledge that ancient, historical fears have come to disturb the future. He observes, “We know that ghosts and monsters – both representative of the gothic past – should be bound in history… dangerous ideologies from the past might reconstitute themselves and, in the process, destabilize the present.” (21-22). All three of these authors seem to work together to construct the idea that, past or present, outdated or contemporary, some things such as evil are never gone. They can never be truly replaced or destroyed because although Dracula and his of spring were destroyed, it is still the ancient beings that remain in control and the ancient rules which must be followed, such as those that Van Helsing observes in order to defeat the count: the use of stakes, garlic, and especially crucif xes. And regardless of whether these ancient creatures and rules are currently in control, dead or alive, the one thing that is certain is their eventual return into the world, the “looming sense that monsters might emerge from the past” (22), whether it be the characters themselves or the writers that breathe life into them.

Throughout the course of the novel, it becomes clear that not only are the stereotypically dark, haunted, and gothic images of the Victorian period a genuine source of fear for an audience, but more so the unknown than anything else. The unknown of technological advances, to reiterate, may sometimes create order in a society. It seems f tting to remember that the evolution of once primitive or even nonexistent equipment, such as the camera, was in fact useful in developing awareness of one’s self-image as well as their environment, such as the use of photography in apprehending criminals or wrongdoers. Regardless of whether or not they escape, having

their faces captured means they are in society’s eternal grip. However, this same technology, ie. phonographs and telegraphs, and especially forms of technology that were considered scientif c, such as blood transfusions, proved to be either the cause of chaos or the inability to stop it. Phonographs, for example, were used throughout the story to document and connect evidence, but as Van Helsing noted towards the end of the novel, this would only create panic and confusion if discovered on a wide scale. He declares, “We want no proofs! We ask none to believe us!” (236). This was after he had previously stated that even if they wanted to share their discoveries, they would sound mad to the rest of the world. In regard to scientif c technology, it becomes clear after several blood transfusions for both Mina and Lucy that this is not an ef ective solution. Though it was expected that such a modern solution was sure to have outdone The Count, an ancient being, it did not take long to realize that it is the ancient ones, along with their ancient rules, that must be abided by.

An ancient problem cannot be settled with a modern solution, thus lies the fear within 19th-century society. This is emphasized by Dracula’s

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husband. She endures it for a long time, and even bears him a daughter, but eventually, she misses the black community of her youth. Clare experiencesa loss of racial identity. In order to both control this fear and maintain her current life, she impulsively renews her friendship with Irene. If Clare can be in Irene's world separately from her white world, perhaps she can satisfy both of her identities. She tells Irene, "You don't know, you can't realize how much I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh" (Larsen 51). It is this rekindled friendship with Irene in which Clare believes she will find acceptance.

Meanwhile, Irene disapproves of Clare's "passing." Irene has the opposite personality of Clare; she does not indulge in spontaneity and has rigid ideas about how life should be. This includes her views on race, or so she claims. Even though Irene "passes" from time to time when the convenience arises, she mostly finds it to be a betrayal. She comments, "It's funny about 'passing.' We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt, and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it" (Larsen 39). While Irene ignores her own hypocrisy, she is happy to police the practices of others. When she learns that Clare is deeply embedded in her false identity, it makes Irene very nervous. Irene fears for Clare's safety if she were to be outed, especially after Clare introduces her to Bellew without preparing her. The encounter shakes her to the core, angering her about "Clare's innate lack of consideration for the feelings of others" (Larsen 34). America at this time was wrought with racial tension. Lynching was common, despite the fact that the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance were simultaneously taking place. White people with racist ideals were terrified of the practice of "passing." Because of this, Irene's husband, Brian, motions to move to Brazil, a racially tolerant country, to escape the rising tension. He believes it to be foolish to remain in such a dangerous social climate.

Another common theme addressed in the novel is sexual taboos. America has come a very long way since the 1920s. It is becoming much more acceptable to have diverse gender and sexual identities at this point in time. Few people bat an eye if you tell them that you are gay. This was not the case in the Roaring Twenties. The language used to describe how Irene sees Clare is charged with sexual attraction. She is continuously describing Clare's beauty. On page 21, she describes Clare as having "a tempting mouth." A few sentences later, the narrative goes on: "Into those eyes there came a smile and over Irene the sense of being petted and caressed" (Larsen 21). The word "seductive" is repeated throughout the novel. Irene is so terrified of this desire that she vehemently suppresses it. Her fear leads her to control her desire the best she can by avoiding Clare and projecting her feelings onto her. She neglects to invite her to an important party in order

to keep her away. Unfortunately, Clare shows up at the party anyway. The evidence that the romantic spark between the Redfields is dying serves to put into motion what Irene believes happens next. She assumes that 3005B0050004D0.5s 4I

Lisa Kuhn

Mental Illness as Presented in *A Court of Thorns and Roses*

Kelsey Lee

Depression and anxiety are illnesses which, while displayed in books and media, are not typically analyzed within literature any further than a basic level. Mental illness has been displayed in a number of works of literature and f lms throughout the years; by doing so, authors and f lm makers create the sense that those struggling are not alone. In writing strong

struggles are portrayed to those around her. Feyre lost her old life and is thrown into an impossible situation that put both herself and many others at risk of death. Maas's writing is extremely ef ective in that it focuses more on the descriptions of Feyre's inner thoughts and feelings instead of using technical terms or def nitions to portray her illnesses. When diagnosed with depression or anxiety, a doctor is going to use technical jargon to explain the illness. What Maas and many other authors do through their writing is describe these illnesses in a relatable way. If someone young were to be reading a YA novel that included characters with anxiety or depression, not only could they have a better understanding about what those characters are facing but they would f nd someone they love who was able to face and overcome their struggles. Through Maas's portrayal of her characters, she is able to def ne anxiety and depression in a clearer way, which in turn makes her characters that much more real.

However, the clinical psychologist and professor Otto F. Wahl argues that the attitudes of others towards mental illness are created by portrayals in mass media. He states, "Many of the current assertions about the mass media's portrayal of mental illness and its role in maintaining stigma are based on impressions and anecdotal observations, with only occasional reference to specif c research f ndings (Wahl 343)." Wahl's opinion holds true when it comes to certain works of literature or even movies. Many are led to believe that what is produced in the mass media is the truth. In believing these portrayals, people are at risk of having distorted images of what mental illnesses are. Writers focusing on the internal feelings of their characters removes outside perspective; doing so allows for an unf ltered description of what struggling with one's mental health can be like. Maas's writing in *A Court of Thorns and Roses* helps to show that mental illness can be distorted by outside opinions, but in the end, it is up to the person to decide how that illness def nes them.

The book series *A Court of Thorns and Roses* follows the main character, Feyre, through the incredible struggles she faces. In the f rst novel, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, Feyre is ripped from her home and taken to the faerie lands where she is to live out a life sentence in the home of Tamlin, ruler of the Spring Court. Feyre eventually grows to love Tamlin and she must face the evil Amarantha in a series of deadly games to win Tamlin and his court's freedom back. Because Feyre is mortal and weak, Feyre is expected to be killed quickly, but she perseveres despite her weaknesses. Due to of the nature of the tasks she must complete and the dungeon she is locked in while awaiting said tasks, a large toll is taken on both her mental and physical health. Maas writes, "Still, fear like nothing I had ever known swallowed me whole when my cell door opened and the red-skinned guards told me that the full moon had arisen (Maas 315)." During the time that

Feyre was imprisoned, she not only had to deal with the daunting nature of her tasks, but also the depths of her mind when placed in the dungeon. The countless hours Feyre spent in a dark, dank dungeon took a huge toll on her mental well-being; she feared for her life as well as what it would mean if she failed. This trauma and deep-rooted fear follow Feyre throughout the rest of the novel and into the next book of the series becoming the main source of her failing mental health.

The second novel, *A Court of Mist and Fury*, dives even deeper into the depression and anxiety that Feyre faces after the outcomes of the games. Feyre is taken back to the Spring Court where she is expected to live like nothing ever happened, but her behavior says otherwise. Feyre loved to paint because it brought her incredible joy, but in the very beginning of the novel Maas writes, "And all those paintings, all the supplies, all that blank canvas waiting for me to pour out stories and feelings and dreams…I'd hated it (Maas 13)." Feyre's lack of enthusiasm for something she once loved so dearly is a clear sign of depression. She no longer has the motivation to do things that brought her so much joy. There are even some signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) when Feyre asks to not have red f owers at her wedding because they remind her of blood. When walking down the aisle at her wedding, Maas writes, "A cluster of red petals loomed ahead—just like that Fae youth's blood had pooled at my feet" and then further down the page, "And between my skin and bones, something thrummed and pounded, rising and pus wedding, Maas writeA0[illegible]0.5 (al)0.5 (s.5 .1 (ut)0.5 (

Rhys is willing to do whatever it takes to help Feyre and she begins to come out of her dark state of mind. This can be seen clearly when she starts to resent Tamlin and the life she had before Rhys saved her. An example of this can be seen when Tamlin uses his control to forbid Feyre from leaving the house, which leads to Feyre having another anxiety attack. Maas writes, "I wrapped that raging force around myself as if it could keep the walls from crushing me entirely, and maybe, maybe buy me the tiniest sip of air—I couldn't get out; I couldn't get out; I couldn't get out— (Maas 124)." Maas's development of Feyre's character shows the unpredictability of anxiety and depression. Feyre's situation also does not help; the high stress and scrutiny that she is placed under hinders her healing. By including this in Feyre's narrative, Maas helps to show that in order to heal, one must be in a safe, calm environment. Maas uses more extreme examples of situations in which anxiety attacks can be triggered, which places emphasis on the power of the mental disease. Feyre must face extreme circumstances, and her ability to overcome faceal Il.dens

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is spoken not by either man but by their boss, Aguirre. During the lengthy silent stretch, Jack pulls out a razor and starts shaving his face. It is an almost defiant gesture. No, I will not look at you. Do you like what you see of me?

And then, there are the women. Each man has one sex scene with his respective wife after the initial scenes between the two men on *Brokeback Mountain*. Here, too, there is a marked contrast. Ennis marries a woman named Alma (Michelle Williams) shortly after his return from the mountain. They are shown having sex after several years have passed, and they have already had two children. The scene most closely resembles the first of the two between Ennis and Jack; it is harsh, breathy, and though the lights are initially on, Ennis quickly turns them off. Ennis, without any warning, flips Alma over below him and enters her from behind. The camera cuts away from his face, focusing on Alma, who is visibly distressed, possibly in pain. Despite having fathered two children by Alma, it seems that Ennis cannot shake the desire for anal sex. This is not a form of birth control, as it is later mentioned that Alma takes the pill. It is also not a spur of the moment decision. Alma's expression is resigned, as if she has been through this many times before. It seems, then, that Ennis cannot shake his memories of Jack. When having anal sex, he can remember his first time with Jack. Perhaps after he flips Alma over and is unable to see her face, he can even imagine that it is Jack whom he is sleeping with. And yet this is not like *Brokeback Mountain*. The scenes makes an obvious callback to the earliest sex scene, in which Ennis takes the role of the top and does not kiss or make eye contact. He is trying to "be a man" with Alma, to impose himself upon her for pleasure's sake. The barrier of internalized homophobia, disassembled when he is on the mountain with Jack, comes back in full force even when he is with a woman.

Jack, on the other hand, seems to have no such qualms when he has sex with Laureen (Anne Hathaway), whom he meets at a rodeo. Where Alma and Ennis are only shown having sex in their house several years after their textbook chapel-and-minister wedding, Jack and Laureen, by contrast, are anything but this idealized vision of the opposite-sex American couple. They meet in the afternoon, and by the same night, they are having passionate sex in the back of Laureen's car. Laureen asks Jack if she is going too fast, but he gives her the go-ahead and the two strip down, barely hours after meeting each other. There is no face-averting or visible dread here. The two look into each other's faces with apparent enjoyment as they do the deed. Jack certainly enjoyed sex with Ennis, but he can also enjoy it with a woman.

There may be practical reasons for this; the film does not state either man's sexuality, and it is perfectly plausible that Jack is bisexual or pansexual while Ennis is a repressed homosexual merely affecting attraction to Alma. And yet on a thematic level, there is another reason, and this is the core of meaning in the sexual scenes in the film: the two men have radically different brands of masculinity. Jack is more self-assured. From the first scene, in which he pulls out his razor and begins to shave, he is often flippant, sometimes ridiculous, and always talking. He feels no need to prove himself to anyone. The first time the men have sex, he is comfortable taking the often-stigmatized bottom role, which has been seen as unsuitable for men in many less-tolerant cultures throughout history. And he is the one who breaks down Ennis's barriers, the first to acknowledge the homoerotic tension between them. Throughout the movie, he is implied to have sex with several other men. On the whole, Jack is far from the stoic, closed-off, heterosexual cowboy idealized by the traditional western. Ennis, on the other hand, makes an effort to fit this stereotype in every possible way. He barely speaks for the first couple of days with Jack. When he does open up, Jack remarks that this is the most he's spoken in days, and Ennis replies that it's the most he's spoken in years. When he has sex with Jack, he takes the dominant role. And it is Ennis who fulfills the traditional "American Dream," with his wedding in a small chapel to a woman he may or may not love, his small house, his two children, all by the book. When in distress, he often feels the need to lash out at others to prove his manhood, shouting at Alma, Jack, and several random passersby at various points throughout the movie to cover up his own emotional vulnerabilities. Ennis's childhood trauma and internalized homophobia cause him to affect rather than live his masculinity. He is a performer, living at the beck and call of those around him, even when he appears to be the assertive, aggressive man.

Perhaps the sequence which best epitomizes this relationship is one which is not overtly sexual at all, though it does have some downright Freudian connotations. The scene in question is a two-part parallel, in which both Jack and Ennis have dinner with their families fairly late in the film. Jack's scene begins with his father-in-law asserting that he, as opposed to Jack, should cut the turkey Laureen has prepared. There is a scuffle over whether or not the television should be on. Laureen wants her son to eat his food without the football game playing in the background, but her father insists that "boys should watch football" (Lee) and turns the set back on. Jack asserts himself at this point, turning the television off and seizing the knife so that he can cut the turkey himself. The camera then cuts to Ennis, whose turkey is being cut by the new husband of Ennis's now ex-wife Alma. The knife is mechanized, as opposed to the old-fashioned one Jack's family uses. Ennis tells a story about his time in a rodeo, and then gets into a fight with Alma in the kitchen after she implies that she knew about his affair with Jack all along. Ennis is then kicked out of the house.

These two scenes, while having very little impact on the plot overall, carry a deep thematic contrast. Jack displays his own brand of masculinity by asserting that his father-in-law's premise (that "boys should watch football") is not definitive. He rejects this standard, cookie cutter view of what defines a man. In the same instant, a Freudian would not fail to

Cruel Intentions, Sexual Immorality, and the Irredeemable Woman

Hallie Fogarty

The 1999 cult classic film *Cruel Intentions*, starring icons such as Sarah Michelle Gellar, Reese Witherspoon, and Selma Blair, offers a great opportunity to dive deeper into the discussion of sexual morality and obscenity within film. This movie boasts an R rating and follows incestuous, manipulative stepsiblings Kathryn and Sebastian who wager to take the virginity of a fellow classmate. Despite the shocking topics, the movie's lewdness is quite tame when compared to today's standards. The majority of the sexuality is contained to explicit, salacious dialogue and the occasional implicit sex scene. The most nudity found in the film is the backside of the main male character, Sebastian, while all other scenes are clothed or only show backs. The dialogue however, when used, is quite indecent and untamed. When Kathryn and Sebastian are negotiating the terms of their bet, Kathryn describes what Sebastian will gain by saying, "In English, I'll fuck your brains out" (Kumble). Later, when Kathryn attempts to take Sebastian's prized Jaguar out for a ride, Sebastian shuts her down with, "Kathryn, the only thing you'll be riding is me" (Kumble). The film's use of explicit dialogue, along with the characters' sexual decisions, clearly showcase the extreme double standards that surround female sexuality. These double standards are most prominent in the difference in treatment that Sebastian and Kathryn receive but are also highlighted through the characterization

of the other female characters and their sex lives. While other female characters have and enjoy sex, Kathryn's sexuality is the most harshly judged because of how strongly she accepts and owns her sexual decisions.

A large portion of the vulgarity of the film is rooted in the nature of the sexuality shown. Most of the sexuality within the movie is deceitful, offensive, and nihilistic. While the sex scenes were not overtly scandalous, the sexual themes of the movie are likely what incited the R rating. All the depictions of sex show blatant disregard for community standards and common societal beliefs of how sex should fit into our lives. The incestuous relationship of the main two characters, Kathryn and Sebastian, would be shocking to even some of the most uninhibited of viewers. While the stepsiblings never explicitly have sex, they do specifically discuss the intention to. There are also multiple scenes where they are clearly seducing each other, with a shocking moment that includes Kathryn sitting on Sebastian's lap as he sensually massages her torso while her hand reaches down to presumably give him a hand job. Other moments of sexuality that would be considered risqué to the community standards of the time include the clear showing of same-sex behavior. Again, while there are no explicit same-sex scenes, the relations of two gay men are clearly recounted, with one of them being described as having the mouth of a "hoover." There is also the iconic make-out scene between Sarah Michelle Gellar and Selma Blair, fit with their juxtaposed outfits and finished with the famous string of spit. Further, there is the usage of derogatory words such as "fag" and "queer," though those were considered more socially acceptable to use at the time, as same-sex relationships were more vilified in film during the nineties than they are now. Additionally, much of the sexuality shown is indecent, and at many times, criminal. The movie opens with what would now be deemed revenge porn, with Sebastian uploading naked photos of one of his "conquests" online. Later, he manipulates Cecile into letting him go down on her by threatening to call her overprotective mother. No act of sexuality goes untainted in this film—Sebastian even takes photos of two men having sex so he can blackmail one of them into helping him.

Many of the sex scenes, despite being indirect, make interesting implications about the gender relations and power dynamics between the characters in the movie. In all of the sexual scenes between Kathryn and Sebastian, she is shown as being the aggressor and is usually doing the seducing. In Sebastian's scenes with other women, he is shown as being more assertive, and at times, violent. In scenes with Cecile and Annette, he is able to reject their advances, while in most scenes with

Kathryn, he is seen as helpless against her seduction. He is also seen as being incredibly flippant towards Cecile, even throwing her off his bed in one scene. This authoritativeness in him is absent in his scenes with Kathryn, showing that in that particular relationship, she is the one with the power. This power imbalance is further enhanced in a later monologue when Kathryn boasts of her manipulation of him: "You gave up on the first person you ever loved because I threatened your reputation. Don't you get it? You're just a toy, Sebastian. A little toy I like to play with. And now you've completely blown it with her. I think it's the saddest thing I've ever heard" (Kumble). Throughout the film, Kathryn blatantly uses this power and her sexuality against him, since she knows he is haunted by the fact that she is the one girl he can't have.

The inclusion of pornography in this film is not incredibly apparent, but it is perceptible. In the beginning of the movie, Sebastian is shown as to have uploaded a young woman's nudes onto the internet, emblazoning them with the words "how to raise a slut!" (Kumble).

The vilif cation of Kathryn and her sexuality in this f lm is a perhaps exaggerated but true example of the real-world double standards that women face in regard to their sex lives. The events within Cruel Intentions are all displaying the true realities and repercussions that conf dently sexual women face in our society. Media portrayals like this serve to reinforce common beliefs that women who reclaim their sexuality are to be punished, but men who reclaim their sexuality are only doing what's natural. While this f lm may be f ctional and dramatic, it is still sharing and upholding universal truths about what it's like to be a conf dent, sexual woman in our society.

Works Cited

Cruel Intentions

revealed. For example, this could be a hidden familial relationship between characters that provides a motive for the crime.

2) Too much information: This block can take the form of red herrings or other details that lead the audience down the wrong path. An author could include details about the mysterious behaviors of a character to induce the audience into believing they are the culprit when in reality they were in no way involved with the crime.

3) Contradiction: Contradiction is a staple element in mysteries of all kinds. This occurs when the mystery is supplemented by an impossibility – a locked door with no other possible entries or exits; a photograph showing a character at a certain location at the time the crime was committed; a character's assumed lack of intelligence.

4) False gestalt: Singer notes that false gestalt is not really its own category, but rather "a result of too much information or of a contradiction that leads the reader into forming a false picture of the whole circumstances of the murder, not just of its details" (Singer 164). A false gestalt could happen when a dead body is wrongly identified; the audience will assume the dead body is who it is supposed to be and will not consider the "victim" to be the criminal.

Singer states that "it is absolutely essential to the whodunnit that there be an apparent crime, that someone seek to solve that crime, and that the reader not learn of the solution until the final epiphany" (Singer 166). This fact is true of every mystery novel or film that has ever existed, but the way it is laid out in Rian Johnson's *Knives Out* is especially intriguing.

The Plot: Seeing the Donut

Knives Out follows the events surrounding the mysterious death of Harlan Thrombey, an extremely wealthy and famous crime novelist. While the police interrogate Harlan's family – his children, Linda and Walt; their spouses, Richard and Donna; his daughter-in-law, Joni; the grandchildren, Hugh "Ransom," Meg, and Jacob; Harlan's mother, "Great Nana" Thrombey; his housekeeper, Fran; and his personal nurse, Marta – the audience is introduced to Mr. Benoit Blanc, a famous private investigator

who has taken on the case. During each character's interrogation, we learn that the Thrombey family has many potential motives for wanting Harlan dead: Harlan was threatening to tell Linda that Richard is cheating on her, Walt has just been fired from the family's publishing company, Joni has been financially cut off from Harlan after he discovered she had been stealing from him, and Ransom stormed out from the party after a mysterious altercation with Harlan.

When Blanc moves on to questioning Marta, we are taken into a flashback of the night before, depicting Marta accidentally mixing up Harlan's medications and giving him a large overdose of morphine. When Marta is unable to locate the life-saving antidote, Harlan hurriedly formulates a novel-worthy plan to allow Marta to get away with his murder to save herself and her mother, who is an undocumented immigrant. Harlan instructs Marta to leave immediately and to point out the time to someone, then secretly return to his room by climbing up the terrace to dress in his robe and hat, which would allow "Harlan" to be seen, alive, after Marta had left for the night. When Marta questions this plan and suggests they try to call an ambulance to save Harlan, he slits his own throat, forcing Marta to go through with the plan.

Blanc asks Marta to be his investigative assistant, and Marta purposely destroys any evidence that proves she was involved in Harlan's death. She is drawn back into the spotlight when Harlan's will reveals that he has cut off his entire family and has instead left everything he owned to Marta. Ransom helps her escape the family and demands to know everything that happened, then devises his own plan to help Marta avoid suspicion in exchange for a portion of the money. In the end, Blanc realizes the truth of the case: Ransom, angered that Harlan cut him out of the will, switched Harlan's medications so that Marta would give him the wrong doses and cause his death. As Marta accidentally mixed up the bottles, she actually gave Harlan the correct doses, meaning Harlan's death was, in actuality, a suicide.

Block Elements in *Knives Out*: The Many Holes in the Donut

In his article about nostalgia in detective fiction, Eric Sandberg makes the connection between *Knives Out* and great mysteries of the past. He points out that Detective Elliot makes the explicit connection of the Thrombey house to a Clue board, and that Marta's mother is watching a Spanish translation of an episode of Murder, She Wrote. However, more than anything he claims that "Johnson's film is a contemporary homage to the Christie whodunnits he read as a child," (Sandberg). Many elements of Christie's famous novels are seen in the most subtle details of the film, and Sandberg even theorizes that Harlan himself is based on her. There is a reason that *Knives Out* feels so similar to an Agatha Christie novel: many of her most famous block elements are utilized in the film. Christie is known

for her airtight plots and mind-bending twists. Similarly, Johnson achieves multiple jaw-dropping moments through the careful use of blocks.

Johnson uses the characters' own assumptions to block them from seeing the truth. This is a staple of mysteries and is a block element the audience expects. One of the first blocks noted in the film is one of contradiction. Blanc initially assumes Marta's innocence due to the timing of events: Marta left the house shortly after midnight, and Harlan was seen alive later that night by Walt. Clearly, Marta could not have been involved with Harlan's death if she had not been in the house when it happened, yet she is made the prime suspect after being the sole benefactor of Harlan's will. It is not until Blanc looks past this element of contradiction that he can begin to piece together the night's true events.

However, the true genius of *Knives Out* comes in Johnson's ability to block the audience while giving the impression that they are aware of the truth from the very beginning of the film. By using the audience's assumptions based on their preexisting knowledge of mysteries against them, Johnson is able to show viewers exactly what is going on, yet still leave them blindsided by the end reveal. The first assumption Johnson relies on is that there will be only one culprit. This assumption is formed before the film even starts; being marketed as a classic whodunnit murder mystery, the audience draws upon their knowledge of other whodunnits and assumes only one of the stellar cast members will turn out to be the bad guy. This assumption is shattered almost right out of the box: in the first half-hour, the audience is informed not only of the murderer's identity, but of the fact that Harlan was an accomplice in his own murder, resulting in double culprits. In revealing Marta's accidental murder so early in the film, Johnson also creates a block of too much information. With the knowledge of exactly how the murder occurred laid out in front of them, the audience is no longer focused on the search for clues. The new assumption formed is that the film will now follow Marta as she evades her murder charge, rather than a continued search for the true culprit.

The next audience assumption Johnson relies on is that the murder will be committed by the murderer. In traditional murder mysteries, the culprit who is caught at the end of the movie is the one who actually committed the crime; however, *Knives Out* is by no means traditional. Marta, who, through her flashbacks, tells the audience step-by-step how she committed the crime, is not the one responsible for Harlan's death. In fact, not even Ransom, the convib udm m me aú lso cre dien H ormed d hQ hQ hQ h hQ h hQ h

Works Cited

Knives Out. Directed by Rian Johnson, performances by Daniel Craig, Ana

Kelsey Lee
Kelsey Lee is in her fourth year of college and her second year at NKU. She expects to graduate in Spring 2022 with her degree in English and a minor in Women's and Gender Studies. Kelsey's dream job would be travel writing or working for Disney Publishing Worldwide. Kelsey's piece, "Mental Illness as Presented in *A Court of Thorns and Roses*," was inspired by her love of the *ACOTAR* series for Maas's discussion of important topics such as mental health, which is so often misrepresented and poorly construed in today's media.

Andrew Evans
Andrew Evans is a senior at NKU, and plans to graduate in Spring 2022 with his degree in Secondary English Education and two minors in Theatre and Honors. After graduation, Andrew hopes to get his MA and PhD in English Literature and teach at the collegiate level. His piece, titled "'You know I ain't queer': *Brokeback Mountain* on Sex and Manhood", was originally written for an Honors course on obscenity and media censorship, and was inspired by his fascination with LGBTQIA+-centered media.

Hallie Fogarty
Hallie Fogarty is in her junior year at NKU and is set to graduate in Spring 2022 with her Integrative Studies degree in studio arts, English, and psychology and with an Honors minor. After graduation, Hallie is looking forward to getting her MFA in creative writing. Her piece, titled "Cruel Intentions, Sexual Immorality, and the Irredeemable Woman," was inspired by sexual double standards against women in f lm.

Danielle Heiert
Danielle Heiert is in her senior year at NKU and is graduating this May with her degree in English with a focus in writing studies and a minor in marketing. After graduation, Danielle is excited to work in the writing f eld in editing or in social and digital media. She was inspired to write her piece, "The Donut Hole with a Hole in the Center: Examining Block Elements in *Knives Out*," after reading an essay on block elements used in Agatha Christie's works during Dr. Soliday's Literature and Film course.