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Welcome to the tenth-anniversary edition of The Forum!

We feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to study history at Cal Poly, under some of the university’s most talented, distinguished, and kind faculty. Cal Poly’s history department is unique because of its emphasis on “doing” history. The university’s “Learn by Doing” motto inspires every member of the history department, from faculty to students, to engage in non-traditional research topics and methods. This has been the guiding determinant in the essays we published in this year’s edition of The Forum.

Cal Poly currently struggles with difficult conversations about privilege, diversity, and inclusiveness. As our contribution to Cal Poly, we wanted to showcase student work that sparks discussions and helps those in and out of our department recognize historical study as an active, not passive, force in the world. We feel that now more than ever, it is important for everyone to understand the power of the liberal arts, and of history in particular. To that end, we hope that this year’s edition of The Forum will challenge its readers to look at seemingly normal objects and ideas in a new way.

The Forum would not be possible without the support of the faculty and staff of the history department, Phi Alpha Theta, our editing staff, and all of the students who submitted their papers. Thank you especially to Dr. Call, Dr. Murphy, and all of the faculty and staff who encouraged and supported our ideas. Additionally, our editors were exceptional in their commitment to The Forum, and we are so grateful to have such a wonderful staff supporting us. Finally, thank you to the students who submitted papers. It is an undeniable fact that The Forum would not be possible without each one of you. We had a high quantity and quality of submissions that made our final decisions difficult. It is heartening to see the amazing work our students do here in the Cal Poly history department, and we are proud to belong to this family. With that said, we are thrilled to finally present the tenth-anniversary edition of The Forum.

Lauren Hinkley

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Articles
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Historicizing Whiteness and White Supremacy

By Anthony Soliman

Abstract

From the end of the eighteenth century to the mid twentieth century, demographic changes reformulated the ideal American citizen to be a white landowning American man. My historiographical paper covers the works of four authors, discussing the centrality of race in their works. In my paper, I cover several themes that are present throughout these disparate works, such as the role of space, citizenship, and race on the peripheries of settlement, and the highly mutable nature of whiteness regarding labor and nationality. By critiquing some of the anachronistic tendencies and omissions of contingency by some historians, I display the ways in which historians could create more complete histories centered around whiteness and white supremacy.

From the end of the eighteenth century to the mid twentieth century, demographic changes reformulated the ideal American citizen to be a white landowning American man. Nationality alone did not determine citizenship, however, as whiteness was in many cases a prerequisite to citizenship, and they became inextricably linked together after the Civil War. By surveying works that focus on labor, race, and citizenship in western spaces of the United States, whiteness as a prerequisite for inclusion in the nation becomes evident. Though the works this paper surveys are varied, the themes of whiteness, citizenship, and the linkage of race to labor are present throughout, and thus worthy of study together. The works range in scope, period, and methodology, and taken together these create a greater picture of how scholars write about and historicize ethnicity in the United States. I will trace the themes that are present throughout these works to argue that white supremacy and racism are mutable entities which adapt to circumstances that challenge American hegemony. By reviewing books on subjects from Choctaw removal in the nineteenth century, to the twentieth century conceptions of identity for poor white agricultural laborers in Texas, this paper will argue that whiteness and white supremacy adjust to their circumstances to maintain racial hierarchy in the United States.
The role of useful space as being necessary for acting out notions of racial difference is ubiquitous in these works. In the early republic period, when the United States was expanding westward into lands that were the domain of southern native nations, space and land were necessary to fulfill Thomas Jefferson’s idea of “yeoman republicanism.” This idea stated that white citizens should be self-sufficient farmers who settled in Native American lands. Historian Donna Akers challenged the historiography of westward expansion in her book *Living in the Land of Death: The Choctaw Nation, 1830-1860*. Akers explains the centrality of land ownership for white Americans looking to establish cotton plantations: “Land was wealth in the early republic, and native claims and rights formed a barrier to white demands for land.”¹ Akers further explains that while white Americans could tolerate other white people owning land, the idea that the racialized Native person could own land was unacceptable. If land ownership translated into citizenship and whiteness, then the inverse must be true. This means that those who did not own land could not claim whiteness. Neil Foley’s *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* argues a similar line of reasoning, calling land ownership and the supplemental benefits “agrarian whiteness.”² The idea of agrarian whiteness has a gendered dimension to it as well, as Foley explains that the “agrarian ideology of Thomas Jefferson eloquently addressed the virtues of farm life for white men.”³ Foley continues to explain that the supposed independence of the white yeoman farmer also excluded women, and of course African Americans, from this identity. Akers explains that this exclusion also applied to the Choctaw, who could only find work picking cotton for white Americans without any of the legal benefits of American citizenship. Although the locations and periods these works cover span one hundred years, the persistence of agrarian whiteness throughout makes a comparison possible.

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³ Foley, 142.
Another recurring theme in the historiography on rural white identity is that it almost always takes shape in the borderlands, or on the periphery of settlement. In Akers’ study, the Choctaw lands white Americans desired for farmland happened in spaces that were far west of Anglo-American communities in the south during the early eighteenth century. For Foley, the agrarian whiteness in the central Texas cotton country existed far to the south of semi-industrial Dallas, and far to the west of Houston. In *Making the White Man’s West: Whiteness and the Creation of the American West*, Jason Pierce explains that, combined with the ideas about independent yeomen, the thinly-populated frontier served as a space to act out fantasies of whiteness. The self-sufficient farmer as ideal citizen was indeed a fantasy, a person who represented settled civilization against transient, violent frontiersmen and Native Americans. Foley also describes how reality presented a contrast to this fictive small farmer in the case of Texas cotton production: “The idea of white yeoman farmers and their families tilling the soil, depending only on themselves...was never really the reality in the cotton belt of the southern states, where owners, tenants, and sharecroppers—whites, blacks, and Mexicans...made a mockery of yeoman independence and self-reliance.”

Since the west was never homogenous, an exclusively white space had to be physically constructed. Starting in the 1850s, railroad companies actively advertised and sought out Northern Europeans to assist in their migration to western North America. The railroad companies’ policies had a profound impact in shaping the demographics of the western states, and in making the idea of a white west a reality. The aforementioned authors show how personal and larger geopolitical forces constructed the emergence of thinking about, and identifying with, whiteness. Fantasy emerging from

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5 Foley, 183.
6 Pierce, 154-5.
the reality of American incursions into the territories of Native nations was the impetus for thoughts about whiteness in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as Americans attempted to displace Native Americans through removal policies. Pierce explains how the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory in 1803 offered the possibility of relocating the native inhabitants east of the Mississippi to lands west of the river, while allowing for sparse white settlement, an attractive choice for Jefferson. This was put into practice with the signing of the Treaty of Doak’s Stand, where the United States acquired six million acres of Choctaw land in exchange for thirteen million acres in the Arkansas Territory. Akers explains how the majority of Choctaw viewed this as insurance of land if white Americans took their homes in Mississippi, a sign of the contingency that characterized this period, something that historians need to keep in mind when studying this subject. Of course, the final blow to Native American sovereignty happened with the Indian Removal Act of 1831, which solidified the segregation of white citizen space against Native otherized space.

The idea of agrarian whiteness based on mythology is an important theme in the historiography. In the periods covered it was not possible nor practical to be an independent farmer, but this fiction manifested itself across space and time. The period in which Jefferson was writing, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was arguably the only time when agrarian whiteness can be attained. Everything else after that is a hearkening back to a fictive past that may never have existed. This is especially true for central Texas, as agrarian whiteness ideals were unrealistic when considering the reality of factory farms and plantations dotting the landscape. The demographics in this part of Texas also contributed to the separation and racialization of laborers, as Foley describes how the “rhetoric of landlords suggested that white tenants were inherently flawed and

7 Pierce, 32.
8 Akers, 32.
9 Foley, 184.
lacked certain qualities of whiteness.” Laziness and vagrancy were qualities that supposedly belonged only to Mexicans. Lazy white tenants were seen as less white, a rung below in the racial hierarchy. For early opponents of Anglo-American settlement in the West, even the climate determined character, as “a salubrious climate could be detrimental to racial vigor... early Anglo-American visitors saw proof of dangers of a pleasant climate in the allegedly lazy Indians of California and the Southwest.”

This highly mutable quality of whiteness led to struggles to reaffirm white identity as reactions to external stimuli, often the threat of superiority being undermined. The reactions against the possible threat result in a reaffirmation of the core ideas of white manhood. Local events that threatened to upend the status quo during Reconstruction in Louisiana bolstered ideas about white normativity and authentic citizenship. In his book *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation*, Moon-Ho Jung alludes to the “historical fiction” of the idea of a purely white race in Louisiana, and its’ “postwar regeneration,” which “rested fundamentally on its antebellum roots and local crises.” These crises could be as varied as the crusade that Hinton Rowan Helper he engaged. The hierarchy of labor that privileged planters dashed nonslaveholding whites’ dreams of economic independence. Jung describes the mood and sentiments present at the 1864 constitutional convention in Louisiana at which anti-Chinese immigration arguments took on a purely racial tone, as movement to attract settlers and laborers came to the fore. Jung explains: “By directing their ire downward against Asian coolies more than upward against rapacious planters, however, the simultaneous movement against coolies and for immigrants ultimately justified the consolidation of capital in sugar production and prolonged the phen-

10 Foley, 70.
11 Pierce, 52.
13 Jung, 146.
In these cases, the realities of industrial capitalism and the need for multiracial labor served as the initiations for a rebranding of white supremacy in these spaces. In these cases of restoration of the fictive past for white manhood, the impetus was encounters with other ethnic groups that possibly challenged white American hegemony. Material demands were prioritized over the ideological foundations of racist logic. Jung expands on this idea as he explains how “local wartime developments, themselves shaping and shaped by events near and far, drove former American ex-slaveholders to seek coolie labor after the [Civil] war.” Expressions of reaffirmed whiteness as reactionary measures add to the understanding of how this ideology responded and reappeared when challenged.

Historical research elucidating the way that whiteness was manufactured and diffused must also stress contingency. Historians must consider the means by which the federal government facilitated the maintenance of an exclusively white citizenry. The idea of West as an exclusively white space was dependent on the outcome of wars with Native nations and the successful encouragement of whites to relocate to the West. Because of the unfair legislation that denied rights to non-white residents, it is impossible to ignore the government’s role in ensuring the white west of the popular imagination. Relationships of power between Native peoples and white Americans can be characterized by contingency, since permanent Anglo-American settlement was far from a foregone conclusion until well into the nineteenth century. Historians must acknowledge the many attempts to limit the instability intrinsic to these conflicts. Historians still present the outcome on to past events, as if an Anglo-American west was inevitable, leading to a limited understanding of historical events. For example, throughout her work even Akers consistently mentions the differences between Choctaw society in the early nineteenth century and the

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14 Jung, 147.
15 Jung, 40.
16 Akers, 92-3.
“dominant white society.”17 This term is an anachronism, since the major coercive treaties that categorized the 1830 interactions with the Choctaw were still being carried out. It would not be anachronistic to acknowledge the imperial aspirations of the United States in the early nineteenth century, and to address how the federal government attempted to facilitate the peopling of the western lands with white citizens.

Akers consistently mentions the fact that historians refuse to acknowledge the genocidal policies the US practiced against the southeastern Native nations, and the refusal to treat white supremacy as a decisive factor in policy. It would not be difficult to historicize this, as it is an important category of analysis, and if historians can identify where these ideas manifest in other places, it can make for fruitful avenues to study domestic and foreign policy. Jung argues that the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the Supreme Court’s Decision in Plessy v. Ferguson came from the shared experiences of segregation and exclusion of both African Americans and Chinese laborers in the post-emancipation years.18 Several Democrats in all levels of government ran on anti-Chinese immigration policies, mostly in opposition to the undesirable effects that they believed these immigrants would have on their society.19 Evident in this example is one common characteristic of white supremacy: its contradictory nature. The supposedly racially inferior people posed a threat to labor and society, even when competing with allegedly physically and intellectually stronger people. Racial anxiety like this was present in the exclusion of Chinese in American society in the late nineteenth century, but again, white supremacy as a fluid ideology can adapt to different circumstances contingent on specific time and place. Depictions of white supremacy stronger than an immigrant labor force was popular in the early twentieth century “shatterbelt” of Texas (an area where Anglo-American, African-American, and Mexican families resided

17 Akers, 34.
18 Jung, 219.
as cotton laborers). Foley describes how white nativist arguments that defended unchecked Mexican immigration into Texas rested on the belief of the racial inferiority of Mexicans, that there was no way that Mexicans could dominate the countryside and “colonize” the United States.\(^{20}\) On the other hand, anti-immigration nativists and especially eugenicists believed that safeguarding white women from Mexicans would preserve the purity of Nordic civilization in North America, part of the racial anxiety discussed earlier. Arguments for and against immigration among the polity reflected the popular sentiments, but the sole control of the actual legislation lay in the hands of the government, which decided that labor needs of agriculture and industry were more important than racial logic. The United States lifted restrictions of Mexican immigration in the early twentieth century. However, the United States refused to lift immigration restrictions for immigrants coming from Asia or Europe.

The current state of the field makes Akers’s declaration that historians refuse to treat white supremacy as a factor in policy seem out of touch. Certain historians have in fact treated white supremacy as central to policy formation. The expulsion of Native Americans to designated lands is an example of the ways in which the federal government actively tried to ensure white spheres of settlement separate from Native Americans. In instances where the federal government placed prohibitions on ethnic groups moving to the United States, the intellectual foundation of Anglo-American industrious whiteness preceded these policies. Pierce explores this idea as he discusses how the passage of the 1862 Homestead Act, which banned slavery in the western territories, actually ensured that these spaces would have limited African American populations. The idea was that free African Americans lacked the means to move to the western territories, so their population in the West would always be low.\(^{21}\) The Treaty of Doak’s Stand forty years earlier similarly segregated different peoples. Indigenous Americans’ rele-

\(^{20}\) Foley, 57.
\(^{21}\) Pierce, 124.
gation to "Indian Territory" acted to delineate citizens from non-citizens, or those who could be part of the American polity, and those whose interests disagreed with American policies. The intellectual framework of white settlement was becoming fixed in the popular imagination, and treaties like this only helped to bring reality to the fiction.

Race was the determining factor in deciding citizenship, but Native peoples’ distance from whiteness was not simply about complexion. Indian commissioners’ official rhetoric promised the Choctaw full citizenship and absorption into the American polity if they became educated. Historians believe the concession to whiteness was a thinly-veiled argument against racist policies and removal. Akers contends that those who believed this rhetoric “deluded” themselves into thinking that obtaining a Euro-American education and conforming to ideals of civility would lead to citizenship.22 This was the case in the Southeast during the eighteenth century. By the nineteenth century, the Native inhabitants of North America were seen as more authentic people than not, for their connection to nature. For writers Charles Lummis and Frank Linderman of the late 1880s, famous for their romanticization of the West, the threat to white civilization in the West was not Native Americans but southern and eastern European immigrants in the East.23 The authors’ romantic vision of the West was based on the notion of the frontier, a space that was preindustrial, lost in time, much like its inhabitants. The intermixing of races in eastern cities in turn formulated western values as antithetical to diversity. For Lummis and Linderman, the West was racially homogenous and romantically empty, save for a few noble, savage “Indians.” In this way, white supremacy took the form of preservation of a space that was conducive to the recreation of ideals of Anglo-American whiteness against the forces of corrupting influences of immigrants. It also served to bolster the idea that Native people posed no serious threat to white society, due to their supposed weakness and

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22 Akers, 26.
23 Pierce, 96.
infantile minds. The anti-modern West, complete with non-modern Native people, also served to facilitate the anachronistic agrarian whiteness ideal that runs throughout conceptions of the West as a white space subject to “civilizing influences.”

The labor question is another eminent theme in works about the west and American citizenship. Agricultural labor was responsible for the demographics of the South, and it determined who counted as white. Hearkening back to the agrarian ideal of Jefferson, agricultural industriousness was a fixed category of whiteness: if tenacity was lost, an individuals’ whiteness also came into question. Foley describes how labor in Texas became racialized, as a result of their multiracial society. According to Foley: “Poor whites who competed with blacks and Mexicans as sharecroppers came to be racially marked as inferior whites whose reproductive fecundity threatened the vigor of Nordic whiteness.”\(^\text{24}\) In this example, the lines between white and other are permeable, depending on the qualities associated with the type of work.

The treatment of Mexicans as historical subjects is not the only time that labor and race meet to complicate hierarchy. Jung explores the role of “coolies,” or Chinese laborers, in the South, and how their presence during Reconstruction led to the creation of the United States as a “nation of white immigrants.” Jung explains how these laborers occupied a nebulous position in society, being neither black nor white, slave nor free.\(^\text{25}\) In the case of a labor class like “coolies,” whiteness was also highly mutable, especially regarding the type and means of labor of individuals. As mentioned before, the realities of agricultural labor made race synonymous with nationality, the decisive factor in determining citizenship and degree of proximity to whiteness. According to Foley: “In rupturing the black-white polarity of southern race relations, the presence of Mexicans in central Texas raises

\(^{24}\) Foley, 35.

\(^{25}\) Jung, 6.
some interesting questions about the way in which ‘whiteness’ itself fissured along race and class lines.”26 Thinking about whiteness outside strictly biological terms is helpful for historians, since race is a socially constructed identity. By analyzing whiteness in spaces like these, historians can trace the intellectual tracks of class and race thought. In the South, the existing black-white binary has dominated popular perceptions and scholarship, but two historians have challenged this idea, as laborers defied this simplistic categorization. Foley states that within Texas existed a hybrid culture that came from its place as both a western and southern state, one in which the practice of sharecropping made populations transgress the racialized boundaries that delineated society in this space. Foley then states how Mexicans’ ethnic composition posed challenges for simple categorization and placement in the southern racial hierarchy. Foley states, “As a racially mixed group, Mexicans, like Indians and Asians, lived in a black-and-white nation that regarded them neither as black nor white.”27 This way of thinking mirrors Jung’s analysis of Chinese laborers in antebellum Louisiana, as their presence disrupted the existing rank of humanity.

Lastly, the ever-present fear of ethnic solidarity between non-white people in these spaces, and of possible revolt, led to measures that attempted to undermine any possibility of cohesion. As stated before, “whiteness” was not entirely the result of skin color, but class as well; in the case of central Texas, poor whites were among those who tried to form a coalition against predatory landlords and absentee owners. In Texas, a Socialist leader’s racist beliefs erased hopes for a unified front against landlordism and capitalist agriculture. Tom Hickey, the Irish-born Texas Socialist who founded and edited The Rebel, was a proponent of strictly economic equality between the two races. He believed that social equality for African Americans only existed under the capitalist yoke.28 In the case of post-emancipation Louisi-

26 Foley, 5.
27 Foley, 5.
28 Foley, 93.
siana, Democrats such as Daniel Dennett (also a member of the Knights of the White Camelia, a KKK affiliate) argued that land monopolies weakened white alliances against Asians and African Americans. According to Jung:

> With the consolidation of property killing old agrarian dreams in Louisiana, Dennett and his allies launched an ideological offensive against planters who would import coolies, resuscitate slavery, and thereby exacerbate class divisions among whites. The arrival of coolies, they imputed, would steer their beloved region back to antebellum relations (slavery) and forward to the industrial capitalist relations (class conflict), a singularly pernicious combination that would eviscerate their newfound struggle for racial solidarity to overthrow multiracial democracy.²⁹

The reaction of these two men against the capitalist labor structures of their respective spaces drove them to conclusions that at once needed these racial groups to create white alliance, while excluding them from any benefits of non-capitalist society. Even though it is impossible to understand Hickey’s white supremacist logic, one can surmise that it comes from a newfound Southern white identity. The strictly Anglocentric society that he experienced in Europe was nonexistent in the American South. This is not to excuse his beliefs; rather, it is an explanation based on what we know about relations between groups of white ethnicities in the modern era.

Although the works reviewed ranged in scope, period, and methodology, all of these create a greater picture of the construction and contemporary discourse surrounding whiteness. Class, race, and labor all existed as contributors to, or victims of, ideology about whiteness and white supremacy. Historicizing whiteness means that historians look at how institutions or individuals facilitated the growth of whiteness discourse. Similarly, when historicizing white supremacy, historians need to understand that it is

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²⁹ Jung, 169.
impossible to separate this from whiteness, and that the two travelled in lockstep in the United States. If historians understand the historical context of these ideologies, then we can better understand contemporary forms of whiteness and white supremacy.

Bibliography


Author Biography

Ryan is a third-year history major and city and regional planning minor. His research interests include the social history of Europe and the history of anti-imperialist movements in the Global South. He plans to graduate in June 2019.
Seventeenth-Century Foundations of the Moral Economy of the English Crowd

by Ryan Hund

Abstract

The historian E.P Thompson famously described English peasant bread riots in the 18th century as based off of a shared ideal of an economy that obeyed moral rules. But where did this idea originate? I argue that conflicts over land enclosure in the seventeenth century led to peasants viewing the old nobility as defending them according to even older moral principles, a view which carried over into the later economic conflicts about which Thompson writes.

When eighteenth-century peasants rioted over the price of bread, they were fighting against what they perceived to be an immoral system of exchange, wherein commodities could be traded on an open market to buyers outside the community. They had reason to be suspicious of this new model, because for them it echoed a similar economic upheaval in the seventeenth century. The enclosure movement took property that had previously been held in common among all the members of a community and instead “enclosed” it for the exclusive use of a single owner. This had dramatic consequences for the average peasant, transforming them from primarily subsistence farmers to wage laborers in a manner that was disruptive and mostly non-consensual. Social historian E. P. Thompson argues that the bread riots of the eighteenth century were not random reactions to impending starvation, but highly organized affairs with a strong moral foundation. Through an analysis of the enclosure movement in the seventeenth century and a comparison to similar peasant movements in Europe, I argue that the perception of a past moral economy to which eighteenth-century peasants wanted to return was only possible because of the prolonged period of suffering inflicted by the emergent English bourgeoisie during the enclosure process. This perception was an unintended consequence of a political struggle between the new landowning classes and the old nobility during the seventeenth century.
According to Thompson, when peasants in England rioted in the early eighteenth century over the prices of food, moral rules governed the economy, and that new bourgeoisie were breaking these rules with their proto-capitalist models of production and exchange. Moreover, Thompson argued that these moral beliefs came out of a strong defense of the earlier, paternalistic model of insular, self-sufficient rural communities. This traditional, paternalistic economy was strictly regulated. Farmers brought their produce to market and sold them directly to members of the community. Poor villagers had the first pick at the market, and only once their needs were fulfilled were other buyers allowed to enter. Villagers viewed trading outside the community with suspicion and hostility, and those holding on to crops in order to sell them for a higher price later in the season faced severe social penalties. Villagers justified this protectionism using the language of morality. Farmers had an ethical responsibility to sell crops within their communities, rather than trading with the outside world in hopes of attracting higher prices.

In the eighteenth century, a free-trade model supplanted the moral economy, championed by, among others, Adam Smith. Smith championed an economy in which the flow of goods was as free as possible. In practical terms, this meant the ability of farmers to hold onto their crops in order to wait for optimal prices and the ability to sell to middlemen outside of the community. In times of plenty, this system worked well; but when crops were not productive, this led to poorer people going hungry at disproportionate rates. Peasants, naturally, were unhappy with this new state of affairs, and believed they had a right to the old system. As a result, Thompson argues that their riots were highly strategic, with clear goals in mind, rather than mindless reactions to hunger.¹ John Bohstedt, writing some years later, argued that the insular, paternalistic moral economies in

Thompson’s argument likely never existed on a large scale. Yet, for some reason, this myth held enduring power with the peasantry. This myth was not based in fact, but rather came out of the perception of a political struggle between the old nobility and the “new” landowning class, in which the bourgeoisie attempted to enact policies that harmed peasants, and the nobility attempted to help them.

This perception arose from the peasants’ similar treatment during the enclosure movements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Enclosure was, at its simplest, the process of taking lands held in common and reducing them down to individual ownership. The rights attached to lands held in common included the right to graze on arable land after harvest, at which point the animals would eat the crops left behind and leave manure, which was crucial to ensuring strong harvests for the next season. However, legal enclosure of land often begat physically enclosing fields, in which the free grazing of livestock was disallowed. Holdings of individual farmers would often be scattered in small strips across the entire parish, which was time-consuming and resource-inefficient to farm. Despite this, peasants still stood to lose the most from enclosure. The earliest forms of enclosure, which involved converting arable land into permanent grazing land, led to massive depopulation in some rural areas, because the amount of labor required to graze sheep is significantly lower than that required for farming. Some peasants managed to find alternative employment, usually in the form of wage labor, which many saw as inferior because it robbed them of their independence. Later forms of enclosure involved enclosing arable land for the agricultural use of a single owner. In many cases, these peasants worked on the same fields as before, but for an inconsistent and

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unreliable wage rather than a share of the harvest. From the peasants’ points of view, enclosure also robbed them of community, not only because of depopulation but also because village-dwellers, who would in pre-enclosure times have had access to their own small allotment in the common to maintain a minor garden or small amounts of livestock, were left with nothing. Small farmers disappeared almost entirely. Local officials were deprived of their (meager) incomes and perquisites of office. Those without land no longer had the ability to obtain land, which made any form of social mobility impossible. From a social perspective, rural communities regarded enclosure as catastrophic.⁴

In England, the enclosure of land proceeded through the Long Seventeenth Century, mostly over the objections of the peasantry. W. E. Tate explains that enclosure in the Tudor period occurred mostly in the case of villages that had been abandoned or otherwise depopulated. In the seventeenth century, however, arguments for enclosure on purely economic rather than demographic grounds began to appear with greater frequency. Its proponents numbered primarily among the landowning classes who stood to benefit financially from enclosure policies.⁵

Almost every source among the bourgeoisie was in favor of enclosure. Andrew Yarranton, an engineer, argued that enclosure would make England so rich that they would be able to subdue the Dutch without fighting.⁶ In fact, according to Tate, almost every author of the late seventeenth century presupposes the desirability of enclosure, suggesting that the bourgeoisie of the day believed in its inevitability. One author argued that enclosure would bring more wealth to England than would the mines at Potosí to the King of Spain.⁷ The fact that from 1550-1700 almost 49 villages were entirely

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⁵ Ibid., 63-65.
⁷ Tate, 82.
deserted in Northamptonshire alone, compared to only 14 in the 150 years prior, is testament to the enduring power of the enclosure movement. Peasants had no reason to trust landowners because the landowners would rarely take their welfare into account when making decisions about enclosure.

Enclosure was not only justified on geopolitical grounds. From 1660, the study of agriculture as science became increasingly common, and scientific investigations primarily supported enclosure. For example, roots, which farmers used as a valuable crop to replenish soil nutrients mid-rotation, could not be grown in fields in which sheep grazed. The common pre-enclosure practice of allowing sheep to graze on unused common land therefore impeded the replenishment of that land’s soil. Furthermore, drainage could be much improved if subsurface drains were built, but it was impossible to build subsurface drainage if all of one’s land was held in narrow strips scattered all around the village. However, large, concentrated fields were much more easily drained. This and other new drainage techniques allowed for marshy lands to become productive, and for the yields of all arable land to increase. Despite these facts, peasants were still understandably opposed to enclosure; even if it meant greater productivity on a macro level, it led by definition to lost livelihood for them. The scientific justifications for enclosure therefore gave the peasant class another legitimate reason to be suspicious of modern ideas.

It was not until the mid-eighteenth century that any significant voices would show up in print arguing against the enclosure movement. Peasants, however, had opposed enclosure from the beginning. In 1604, a knight of Northamptonshire communicated to Parliament that a group of enclosure victims were close to revolt, and that every time they gathered to air their grievances, they grew closer and closer to open revolt. In their manifesto, the Levellers, who became a prominent faction in the English Civil Wars,

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8 *Ibid.*, 80-81. Neither Tate nor his primary sources specify exactly which roots were used in this process.
cited enclosure as the primary reason for their violence. Furthermore, peasants were upset that what they saw as their comfortable, independent existence had been reduced to the uncertain life of wage labor. Peasants had a surprising ally in the old nobility, who believed, either on appeals to tradition or on moral grounds, in the value of common land. The government made a few token efforts to curb enclosure, but landowners mostly ignored them. Laws passed by a royal commission of 1517 prohibiting enclosure were frequently disobeyed, and the conversion of arable land into pasture continued almost unabated through the sixteenth century. This conflict between official policy and fact continued during the reign of Elizabeth I, who largely promoted the same agricultural policy as her predecessors, with significantly less success. While on some occasions the courts did intervene to stop especially cruel acts of enclosure, this represented the vast minority of cases, and the local landowners usually got their way. William Harrison, a clergyman, wrote in his 1577 Description of England of parishes owned almost entirely by a few men, with the others reduced to begging for table scraps. While his attempted historical account doubtless takes no small amount of poetic liberty, it may be seen as representative of the overall attitudes of the peasantry towards the landowning class. This introduced a split into the minds of peasants between the clergy and nobility, who were seen as looking out for their welfare, and the emergent bourgeoisie, who were viewed as attempting to gather as much land as possible with little regard for its inhabitants. Thus, by the dawn of the eighteenth century, newly-landless peasants could draw on centuries of suspicion of science and of the new landowning class.

9 Ibid., 74-75.
11 Tate, 70-73.
12 Harrison’s Description of England is notable among its contemporaries for being written as an early history - Harrison attempted to portray England as it was, relying on firsthand observations, experience, conversations, and documentary evidence. William Harrison, Description of England, Holinshed’s Chronicles (1577), https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1577harrison-england.asp.
In order to prove that the moral economy of eighteenth-century England developed in the centuries preceding it, it is necessary to look at the protest movements of other countries as counter-examples. In the French province of Languedoc, the holding of land underwent the opposite process from that of England. Under traditional theories of early capitalism, landholding should have consolidated into fewer and fewer parcels, in theory allowing for production to increase through economies of scale. But, as Le Roy Ladurie argues in his *Peasants of Languedoc*, this rarely occurred. The population explosion of the early sixteenth century led to individual landholders owning less land on average, with total agricultural production per farmer dropping to 39 hectoliters in 1607 from 60 hectoliters in 1492. Even this average is inflated, because there were very few “average landholders,” with the vast majority clustered around the two extremes, primarily the lower.¹³

The population increase combined with decades of poor harvests made the sixteenth century a difficult time for the peasants of Languedoc. The local governments sprang into action, with some reluctance. *The Parlement* of Toulouse typified the reactions of the authorities, ordering the petty nobility under its control to sell off the excess grain they had been holding in reserve at lower-than-market prices.¹⁴ While the lives of peasants were still difficult, and multi-year famines were not uncommon, the conjuncture of sixteenth-century Languedoc was toward price-fixing and protectionism, rather than toward proto-free-market policies as in England.

Why did this take place? The increased centralization of the French monarchy as compared to the relatively decentralized English system certainly deserves at least partial credit, for providing the legal framework for active policymaking. However, Brink argues that the Estates General of Languedoc was effective in maintaining local autonomy over matters of prices and tax-

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¹⁴ Le Roy Ladurie, 104-107.
In addition, bureaucracy itself does not explain fully why peasants saw their needs met, or why bureaucrats even considered their needs in the first place. Le Roy Ladurie makes it very clear: they forced their voices to be heard. Throughout the Long Seventeenth Century, the peasants of Languedoc participated in mass protests over the excessively high costs of tithes, salt taxes, manorial taxes, and feudal taxes. Le Roy Ladurie describes their highly combative nature as being unique to this particular region. It was most likely due to their initial successes that they realized the potential of mass action and chose to act on it many more times in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Their struggles were, of course, never against the King directly, but always an appeal to the King to deal with the local bureaucracy.

Unlike in England, where protests occurred mainly against the non-noble or petty-noble landowning classes, peasants in Languedoc directed their protests squarely at the governing bureaucracy. The failures of enclosure were a direct cause of this, as without the increased profitability of enclosed land, Languedoc had very little of a landowning class to speak of. According to Bohstedt, the commonly-held view of the moral economy in England resembled that of an imaginary past wherein the nobility and peasantry enjoyed a paternalistic relationship, a view that came about only during the period of enclosure, when the ties between nobility and peasantry eroded rapidly in favor of a landlord-tenant relationship. Because there were very few non-noble landowners in Languedoc, the peasants had no imaginary past for which to advocate. Essentially, the English peasants’ desired past was the Languedocian peasants’ lived present, and they experienced it in a much more negative manner than did the English. As a result, they protested directly against the government, and were occupied with much more material concerns; namely, the excessive burden of taxation.

16 Le Roy Ladurie, 191-194.
The peasants of England and the peasants of Languedoc all had difficult lives, but the peasants of England believed, with no small measure of accuracy, that the nobility was on their side. Because of this, when the bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century instituted new economic reforms, their outrage had a moral character, in which they insisted that the traditional relationships of production should govern the economy. This line of thought was only possible because they remembered the lessons of the seventeenth century, in which the nobility had stood with the peasant class against the non-noble landowners who tried to enclose land. In being removed from a traditional manorial system, that system of production took on a near-mythological character, allowing English peasants to refer to it fondly as the moral basis for their protest. The peasants of Languedoc provide a worthy counterexample: they were more than happy to protest the government, and their protests had no moral dimension, since they never experienced a conflict between landowners and nobility, and had not supported them in the past. This moral economy is a testament to the enduring power of traditional manorial relations and is necessarily based on the large-scale social upheavals of the seventeenth century.
Bibliography


Author Biography

Rebecca is a fourth-year English major with a History minor from Dana Point, California. She is currently completing her senior project as an editor of Byzantium, Cal Poly’s literary journal. In her research, she is most interested in the history behind literature and visual art. When she isn’t working or reading, Rebecca spends her time listening to podcasts and learning piano.
The “Wonderful Episodist”: Henry James and Serialization

by Rebecca Gates

Abstract

In this essay, I argue that although the nineteenth-century writer Henry James disliked the popular format of serial publication, it actually served an unacknowledged purpose in his works: breaking up his novels into manageable chunks. This allowed readers a greater appreciation of his fresh stylistic ability and intricate descriptions. I first introduce the current scholarship on Henry James as well as serialization. Then, I provide context regarding this publication format and biographical details of the writer Henry James, and look at his literary importance. Next, I focus on one specific work called The American, evaluating the author’s motivations and viewpoint during the publication process. Finally, I turn to reviews of the novel in newspapers and magazines to ascertain the public reaction to and impression of this work specifically, as well as of his style in general.

Lost in a reverie of nostalgia, Henry James recalled the sights and sounds he took in while overlooking the Rue de Luxembourg, a popular thoroughfare in Paris at the time. He recollected how difficult it was to tear his eyes away from the window view of the bustling yet harmonious streets below in order to compose his third novel: The American. As James continued to reflect on this experience in the preface to the New York Edition of this work, he recounted how the story of this novel’s composition did not remain stationary. James actually wrote the narrative “from month to month and from place to place.”¹ He bounced around France, writing in Etretat on the Normandy coast, the southern town of Bayonne, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, and then Paris once again. The author did not disclose if he finished the novel in Paris or in London later on, declaring, “I strenuously felt the dishonor

of piecemeal composition."² This Jamesian dislike of fragmented writing carried over into his ideas on how a reader should engage with a story as well. In all things concerning novels, he valued the wholeness of the experience, trying to prevent “rather rude jolts” out of a story for himself and his readers.³

Although James was intent on creating a complete experience in his novels, the popular publication format at the time called serialization operated actively against James’s wish for an immersive experience in his novels. In his letters and writing, James demonstrated distaste for the popular trend of serialized novels—the publication of a work in sections over a series of months in popular periodical magazines. But, he continued using the form in order to publish out of economic necessity. This seemingly inconsistent relationship with his primary form of publication leads to a question: what effect did serialization have on James’s works? Additionally, what do the general critical responses to his fiction reveal about the effect of serialization on his novels? Based on a comparison between James’s own writing and reviews from both American newspapers and periodicals, I argue that although James disliked the form, serialization actually served the unacknowledged purpose of breaking up his novels into manageable chunks. The American public could read his highly detailed and often slow-moving narratives at an easily-sustained pace in an episodic form. This mode allowed for a greater appreciation of his fresh stylistic ability and intricate descriptions. The publication history and critical reaction surrounding one of James’s early novels titled The American will serve as a specific example to illustrate this general trend.

The American was just one of many novels readers found in the burgeoning periodical magazines of the time. Serialization in the nineteenth century

² Ibid., xii.
was an incredibly widespread method of publication for authors. Magazines such as Harper’s Monthly, The Galaxy, The Atlantic Monthly, and Scribner’s Magazine were at the forefront of the periodical trend. The public saw this group as the “quality” magazines, where the best of emerging American literature from various genres and styles would appear. Among the poems, essays, and reviews, publishers would typically include a couple of chapters of a novel within their magazines. This common practice of publishing full-length novels in monthly installments gained traction in America partially as a result of popular serial writers across the Atlantic. Charles Dickens was arguably the first to launch this method with his novel The Pickwick Papers, published between 1836 and 1837. Before periodicals came to the states, the primary literary resource for American readers was British and other European magazines. The growth of American periodicals seems to correspond with a flourishing movement of authors. With both seasoned novelists and fresh writers, the slow release of a novel allowed American readers to return to their favorite stories month after month. Some of America’s most beloved novelists who wrote between 1850 and 1900, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mark Twain, first published their masterworks in sections in periodicals.

It is no wonder then, that for American readers and writers of the middle to late nineteenth century, the monthly periodical magazine was at the pinnacle of literary interest. Columns in The New York Times devoted solely to these magazines demonstrated a public devotion to the format. The “New Publications” or “Current Literature” sections discussed each magazine in turn, weighing its merits and interest in comparison with the others. One assessment of The Atlantic Monthly in a “New Publications” column declared,

4 “Making of America,” Cornell University Library.
5 Lund, America’s Continuing Story, 47.
6 Lund, America’s Continuing Story, 16.
7 Ibid., 14.
“If the other magazines may be said to have caught the Atlantic napping... on the first of the year, the Atlantic has made a push for its old supremacy in the February number.” With impressive rosters of contributors, each periodical tried to keep the public’s attention each month. The magazine publishers sought to bring the best of the best to America’s reading public. A *New York Times* article commented, “It might almost be safely said that there is now no distinguished man who can write who does not write for the magazines.” The article also attested that the periodicals allowed writers to test their material on a vocal public audience. One writer called the format “the cradle, the nursery, and the training school of modern literature.” The staggering amount of American authors who published works in these periodicals clearly demonstrates the importance this mode of publication had on the literary atmosphere during the late nineteenth century.

Nineteenth-century American novels are inextricably tied with the publication method of serialization; however, most scholarship on novels published in this period leaves this piece of the puzzle missing, surprisingly. One of the few instances of a substantial overview on serialization comes in Michael Lund’s *America’s Continuing Story: An Introduction to Serial Fiction, 1850-1900*. Lund provides a compelling case on the importance of serialization. His book is divided into two sections: the first is an introduction that details all of the implications and noteworthy aspects of serialization during this time in America, and the second is a thorough catalog of works published serially from 1850 to 1900. Another vital resource for the study of serialization and periodicals is Cornell University’s *Making of America* digital library. This public resource provides a wide array of electronic cop-

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13 “Making of America”, *Cornell University Library*, http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/m/moa/.
ies of the original periodical magazines in which the novels appeared. The database lets modern readers explore the context in which some of the most iconic authors published their works, including James.

Before analyzing James’s experiences with serialization, it is first necessary to survey the wide expanse of scholarship on the works and life of this writer. One piece of evidence that illustrates the breadth of Jamesian criticism is the *Henry James Review*, an academic journal focused solely on this author’s body of work. In this journal, scholars analyze a variety of works by James, parsing through the literary output of this prolific author. Out of all the critical work surrounding this author, which could likely fill a whole library, one scholar stands out as an important figure: Leon Edel. He contributed greatly to the body of work surrounding James. Scholars often reference and utilize Edel’s biographies and edited collections of James’s letters and notebooks in a variety of articles and books. His multi-volume biography of James is thorough and useful, but for the purposes of this argument, I will be utilizing a concise pamphlet from the University of Minnesota’s series on American writers for biographical information.\(^{14}\)

Looking back at the landscape of authors in the late 1800s, most literary scholars now recognize James as an integral figure within the history of American literature. He exemplified what a Sacramento newspaper writer deemed the “New School of Fiction” that made its home in the periodicals of America during this time.\(^{15}\) Born and raised in America, James spent most of his adult life and writing career in Europe, eventually becoming a British citizen at the end of his life.\(^{16}\) Ironically however, as one review from the British standpoint put it, “Mr. Henry James, Jr., has betrayed no single purpose so clearly...as that of in some sense glorifying the Ameri-


can character.”

His astute depictions of the relations between American and European individuals represented the larger themes of cultural difference between the old world and the new. Critics often praised James for his impressionistic style of writing that focuses on raising the quotidian aspects of life to epiphanic proportions. One of his most famous works, called *Daisy Miller: A Study*, is a short story that displayed the two aforementioned artistic hallmarks. James’s writing represented the emerging American literary voice that audiences so often found in the popular periodicals of the time.

In the specialized topic of the serialization of James’s early works, however, only a small pool of scholars touch on this subject. The two books “Friction with the Market”: *Henry James and the Profession of Authorship* and *Henry James and the Mass Market* deal generally with James’s publication experiences. The authors of these two books, Michael Anesko and Marcia Ann Jacobson, attempt to demonstrate the relationship between James’s artistic side and his economically-motivated side, but mostly do not delve into specific consequences of serialization. In his 1962 article “Henry James: Serialist Early and Late,” Manfred Mackenzie analyzes The American, as well as a later novel entitled *The Ambassadors*, in the context of serialization. However, his evaluation deals largely with James’s refined ability to split his novel into multiple parts over the course of his career.

Rachel Ihara also

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19 Ibid., 17.
considers serialization in James’s works in her article, “‘Rather Rude Jolts’: Henry James, Serial Novels, and the Art of Fiction.” She demonstrates what she calls a “critical oversight” of Jamesian scholarship on this topic. She attests, “It is clear that this fact of nineteenth-century publication constituted a significant part of his experience of authorship—something to work within, struggle against, and attempt to redefine.” These two forays into analyzing James’s works in terms of serialization are integral to understanding his relationship with the form. Yet, even in these articles, the authors spend little time exploring the American public’s reaction to his work and what these reactions say about the form. By looking closely at the context of publication of and public reaction to *The American*, this critical oversight can be filled in to create a better understanding of how serialization affected James’s writing.

*The American* was James’s third full-length novel serialized in a periodical magazine. One of his earlier and less prominent works, James published the novel in twelve installments in *Atlantic Monthly* from June 1876 to May 1877. *The American* focused on a man named Christopher Newman who, while exploring Europe for the first time, fell in love with the French beauty Claire de Cintré, and eventually got mixed up in the drama of her family. Like Daisy Miller, the titular character from James’s famous short story, Newman is a caricature of the typical American, while the Bellregarde family to which his love interest belongs represents the old world of Europe. The plot of the novel has themes of cultural division and insights into the relationship between Americans and Europeans that demonstrate characteristics of James’s complexity. However, for this paper’s purpose, I will utilize *The American* less for its literary value, and more for its unique publishing circumstances.

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22 Ihara, “‘Rather Rude Jolts,’” 203.
24 Ibid.
The serial publication of *The American* provides a unique case study of how the popular form of publication at the time impacted the writing career of Henry James. As with most writers, the necessity of marketability often complicated James’s freedom to pursue his creative vision. Scholars often relegated James to the position of either a creative mastermind with an unhindered passion for the craft, or a working machine, churning out novel after novel for purely economic motives. In the circumstances surrounding the composition and publication of *The American*, James’s dual position of both writer and marketer of his works converged. This instance sheds light on his often begrudging but long-standing relationship with the form of serialization.

James capitalized on the economic benefit of publishing via serialized chapters, demonstrated through his experience publishing *The American*. Since the form was so popular at the time, it was the obvious method to distribute one’s work to the public while simultaneously making a profit. A series of letters he sent while attempting to publish *The American* best illustrate James’s economic motives. In one letter to his mother, James defended himself against her assertion that he was “living extravagantly” in Paris and promised that he would make a good sum of money by the end of the year. This assurance comes directly before a letter James sent to William Dean Howells, a fellow author as well as editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*. In it, James apologized to Howells, because he had just sent the manuscript for *The American* to the editor of a rival periodical, *The Galaxy*. He explained, “It was the money question solely that had to determine me.” In the end, *The Galaxy* was not able to publish *The American* as quickly as James needed to earn his commission, so James handed over the novel to Howells for *The Atlantic* to publish.

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27 Ibid., 22-23.
These letters may seem to cast James in an impersonal light as a writer with only a desire to increase his wealth, but his reflections in the preface to the New York Edition of *The American* tell a different story. James attempted to illustrate a pure creative ambition in his early days that overshadowed the irksome trouble of this publication format. In one line, he glossed over any financial concerns when he declared that “a special Providence...watches over anxious novelists condemned to the economy of serialisation.”28 For the rest of the preface, James gushed over his remembered artistic brilliance in the conception of this novel, and in the process dispelled any possible criticisms that he was only in it for the money. The economic need that pushed him toward the “villain” of serialization was an obstacle to overcome to produce his creative masterpiece.

The original serialized forms of his novels were nevertheless where his original audience first encountered and often judged his works. As stated earlier, periodicals were the primary source of literary content at the time, and the reviews of this initial publication in the case of *The American* showed an interesting mix of praise and criticism. One article published in the midst of the run of *The American* in the Atlantic monthly determined, “So far it bids fair to be the strongest novel he has yet published”.29 Other articles made similar assertions, but the point of contention for the majority of reviewers was the plot of the novel. Even opinions coming from periodicals themselves contained this interesting mix of praise and criticism. Two reviewers from *The Galaxy* and *Scribner’s Monthly*, popular periodicals at the time, were generally pleased with the novel, but disappointed with its conclusion. The *Galaxy* reviewer commented, “Mr. James’s book...although somewhat disappointing at the end, will richly repay rereading,” while the Scribner’s reviewer included this seemingly paradoxical comment: “[The American] is

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28 James, *Novels and Tales*, v.
so good that we regret very much that it is not better.”30 Both reviewers lamented the ending of the novel when the central character Newman did not marry his love interest, but both found redeeming qualities in the novel’s realism, style, and characterization.

It was not only the reviewers in the periodicals that took issue with James’s plots: some reviewers of James’s works in The New York Times contested that his inability to provide a compelling plot with a satisfying ending was an impediment to crafting a worthy novel. One article observed, “Mr. James has achieved such success in the way of characterization that we are curious to know what he would accomplish if his story combined a good striking plot as well.”31 Another review found in The New York Times similarly criticized the lack of depth in the plotlines of James’s work: “They are very good books indeed, very noticeable for keen insight into character, and for refined subtilty [sic]. But refinement and subtily are never enough alone to command wide suffrages.” The reviewer completed the picture with a metaphor for the perceived shallowness to James’s description-heavy narratives: “The mountain stream is clear, sparkling, and full of beauty, but it is the broad, deep sea that encompasses.”32 This article asserted that without a strong plotline that explored the truth of humanity and provided a compelling narrative for the reader, James’s sketch-like and detail-oriented stories would never reach recognition on the scale of successful British writers at the time. How is it then that, despite these criticisms, James reached such a high level of renown as an author?

While some reviewers found fault in the overall lack of plotlines in James’s work, many readers saw merit in his ability to create a compelling “sketch” through detail and characterization, which may have been a result of serialization. One reviewer remarked that James’s plot points were “hardly strong enough to supply movement and snap to novels.” But, when it seemed as though this review was on the verge of criticizing this apparent deficiency in James’s work, it morphed into a compliment, saying that James “has not to rely upon his plots. Elaboration has become, with him, a fine art.” The writer continued in this vein, supporting James’s slow but descriptive stories: “The movement of his stories is more than leisurely. With another writer it would be stagnation. But he has the art of interesting us so well in details...that an appreciative and not too hurried reader does not ask for a more stirring action.” The last sentence hinted at the benefit of serialization for James. By parsing out the density of his lightly-plotted novels, readers could fully appreciate the beauty and astuteness of his depictions. The same article that placed James in “The New School of Fiction” supported this characteristic of his work as well: “There is no plot. There is no beginning or end. The object is to paint pictures, as elaborate as microscopic views, not only of persons, but of minds.”

Whether readers fell in the camp of those who lamented James’s lack of plot or praised it, the format of the initial reading of James’s novels must have influenced their perception of his work. The serialized form broke up James’s novels into easily consumable pieces without overwhelming the reader with his detailed prose. This is supported by the fact that many authors and editors for periodicals believed serialization was an opportunity for readers to pause at opportune moments in the text to analyze the novel’s creative mastery fully. Month by month, the reader experienced

35 Lund, America’s Continuing Story, 83.
another “episode” of the unfolding narrative, which may have diminished a striking lack of strong plot points and magnified his encompassing style. In a particularly astute description of this characteristic of James’s work, one reviewer commented, “Mr. Henry James is not so much a novelist as an episodist, if such a term be allowable. But he is a wonderful episodist.”36 Compounded with the previous reviews, this article clarified how James was—for better or for worse—attached to serialization by more than just the economic necessity. With a personal disposition so against the form, James failed to see how aptly his detailed stories suited serialization. He believed the form of serialization took away from the completeness of his work, just as his piecemeal composition so frustrated him. But, by publishing his works in periodicals, James not only gained his literary fame but inadvertently gave his audience an easier format for reading his works. Although James saw serialization as a necessary evil, this exploration of the public reaction to his works demonstrates how the fragmentation of his stories may have led to a greater appreciation for his intricate style.

Mountains of underappreciated stories and novels composed by eager writers may still hide in past editions of periodical magazines. What was it that launched Henry James out of obscurity and into his seat in the literary canon of America? The serialized format of most of his works provides a piece of the answer. How the public first encountered a story greatly affected the legacy of that author. Today, serialized works, from television shows to podcasts, surround us, even if we are not always aware of it. The periodicals of the nineteenth century were some of the first movements toward this episodic way of telling stories so familiar to us now. Even if he rejected his role as an episodist, James proved himself to be a wonderful one, solidifying not only his reputation but also his role in the history of serialization. Henry James saw periodical reading as a burden on his writing process, but the public’s reaction to this serialized form told a different story.


Author Biography

Spencer is a third year History major from Martinez, California. In addition, he is perusing a minor in Religious Studies. His major research interests involve the study of the Old and New Testament, as well as military history. After graduation, he hopes to take his passion and research to seminary, where he can further his study of the field and history of Biblical criticism.
Abstract

This paper examines the antithesis between Christian scholarship and modern higher criticism of the Pentateuch during the 19th and early 20th centuries. During the 19th century, the popularization and eventual hegemony of the Documentary Hypothesis revolutionized the field of Biblical studies. Modern critical scholars claimed that Moses did not write the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) during the 15th century BC, but rather it was the product of a later redaction of at least four separate documents: J, E, P, and D. Writing hundreds of years apart and long after Moses, their authors reflect not the ancient covenantal religion of Moses, but rather various periods in the evolution of Israel’s religion. The implications of the Documentary Hypothesis bring into question the historicity and theological validity of not only the Pentateuch, but also the Christian New Testament which presupposes it. The goal of this research is to identify the foundational presuppositions, conclusions, and contextual consciousness that both the modern critics and the Reformed body of Christian scholars opposing them brought to their scholarship. These Reformed Christian scholars recognized the antithetical nature of and cultural power bolstering the modern critics’ paradigm and thus challenged its conclusions at its foundational roots.

Introduction

The Apostle Simon Peter wrote that God’s people should always be πρὸς ἀπολογίαν¹ for the hope that is within them. Such was the calling of Chris-

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¹ ΠΕΤΡΟΥ ΕΠΙΣΤΟΛΗ ΠΡΩΤΗ 3:15 (NTG). (Pros apologist) – Literally: “with (a/an) defense/answer.”
tian scholars laboring in the modern era to defend the Pentateuch against the increasingly prominent and dominant naturalistic and skeptical views of the world around them. This paper seeks to provide an historical understanding of the relationship between conservative Reformed scholars with liberal and skeptical scholars from the beginning of the 19th century until the climactic restructuring of Princeton Theological Seminary and subsequent opening of Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929. It is my goal to present these scholars in their respective contexts, noting especially their interpretations of the history and state of Old Testament higher criticism—particularly the modern critical paradigm and the conservatives opposing it.

The conception and emphasis of worldview and paradigm are not novel observations and concerns of recent times or secular philosophy, least of all in the study of the Bible, for in fact they are biblically-attested factors of the utmost relevance on one’s thought and actions. Ezekiel says that the Lord scoffs at those with idols in their hearts seeking to consult Him. Paul proclaims that God has “made foolish the wisdom of the world” and rhe-

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2 The phrase “conservative Reformed” shall be used in this paper to refer specifically to Christian authors whom hold to orthodox Reformed (colloquially Calvinist, often ecclesiastically Presbyterian) doctrines of faith, deriving their theology from sola scriptura, which they hold to be sufficient for and inerrant in historical and theological revelation. Where the word conservative is used it is to be assumed that the additional designation “fundamentalist” has been omitted for the sake of brevity and implies the inclusion of those scholars who could fall under the categorical definition of fundamentalism, unless otherwise qualified.

3 A paradigm, described and applied to scientific research by Thomas S. Kuhn, is the dominant and definitive model by which legitimate research in a particular field of study is carried out. The work within a paradigm largely focuses on an “attempt to force nature into the preformed and relatively inflexible box that the paradigm supplies ... Nor do scientists normally aim to invent new theories, and they are often intolerant of those invented by others. Instead, normal-scientific research is directed to the articulation of those phenomena and theories that the paradigm already supplies.” Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 4th Edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 11, 24.

4 Ezekiel 14:3 (ESV).
torically asks “where is the debater of this age?” Likewise, Proverbs opens by declaring that all knowledge begins with a fear of the Lord and that those whose knowledge does not do so are fools who will eat the fruit of their way. In the final analysis, there is an antithesis between a believing worldview and non-believing worldviews. This information being pertinent to a Christian historical perspective, special consideration of the relationship between such worldviews themselves, as well as their scholarly applications, methodology, and conclusions is necessary. There is precedent in historiographical use and application to this scholarly period of *paradigm* by evangelical scholars Köstenberger and Kruger, who in applying it to the radical New Testament historical perspective introduced by Walter Bauer in the early 20th century, described paradigms as being “a controlling framework for how we view the world” that (even outside of particular argumentation) exerts strong general influence over scholars sharing common predispositions.

There stands a vital contrast between the Reformed worldview with the opposing ethos of theological liberals and the skepticism and naturalism of modern critical scholars (those whom Robert Dick Wilson termed “radicals”). The work of these latter two groups stands in final analytical contrast to that of the conservative scholars responding to them, who recognized and named the common presuppositions these groups utilized in constructing their histories of Israel and its religion. Thus, they attacked the assumptions and consistency of modern scholarship, while promoting the explanatory power and Christian necessity of their own. Writing in an era marked by the development of a hegemonic liberal ethos and naturalistic paradigm of historical skepticism towards the Pentateuch and

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5 1 Corinthians 1:20 (ESV)
6 Proverbs 1:7, 22, 31 (ESV).
7 Andreas J. Köstenberger and Michael J. Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Contemporary Culture’s Fascination with Diversity has Reshaped our Understanding of Early Christianity*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 18.
history of ancient Israel in academia, Reformed scholars of the 19th and early 20th century consciously recognized these cultural and institutional developments and challenged them in their defense of the historicity of the Pentateuch.

**The Reformed Ethos**

The worldview and epistemology of the Reformed tradition is vital in beginning to understand their conservative scholarship during this period. Concerning this approach, Reformed Princeton and Westminster philosopher Cornelius Van Til wrote:

> It is impossible and useless to seek to defend Christianity as an historical religion by a discussion of facts only ... It is apparent from this that if we would really defend Christianity as a historical religion, we must at the same time defend the theism upon which Christianity is based, and this involves us in philosophical discussion. But [this] does not mean that we begin without Scripture. We do not first defend theism philosophically by an appeal to reason and experience in order, after that, to turn to Scripture ... We get our theism as well as our Christianity from the Bible.⁹

Van Til rejected the possibility of having true knowledge of Christianity or anything independent of or morally neutral in respect to the triune God revealed in Scripture. That is, if we live in God's world, then the Bible is necessarily the foundational and ultimate authority to which a Christian must appeal. Therefore, the Bible's validity is presupposed and must be defended. Van Till maintained that his views and methodology are those of “generic or historic Calvinism” and that it all “rests on Calvin and upon the classical Reformed theologians.”¹⁰ His Princeton and Westminster colleague Robert

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¹⁰ Ibid., 23.
Dick Wilson likewise argued that Christians should not ignore the testimony of the Scripture in which they believe and should assume the same inspiration for the Pentateuch as they do for the words of the prophets, and that its historicity should be assumed ‘innocent until proven guilty’ by the critics.\(^\text{11}\) Edward J. Young additionally notes that Wilson thought little of historical objections based solely upon the presuppositional denial of the possibility of miracles or prophecy.\(^\text{12}\) Reformed Princeton scholar William Henry Green also recognized the fundamental importance of the inspired authority of Scripture – which in this era was the focal point of criticism – in determining Biblical doctrines and scholarly worldviews.\(^\text{13}\) Green’s contemporary Melancthon W. Jacobus aligned with the Van Tilian view that knowledge and theories are true only so far as they correspond to Biblical truth.\(^\text{14}\) This being the case, and taking seriously his relationship and interactions with other Reformed academics in his era,\(^\text{15}\) Van Til’s beliefs here should serve as adequate grounding for the general worldview, instincts, and presuppositions of the Reformed scholars. They did not conduct their study of the Pentateuch from a presumption of neutrality or independent empirical study, but necessarily in relation to their faith in God’s revelation in Scripture for the affirmation of the Christian Church and edification of their brethren therein.

\(^{11}\) Wilson, *Scientific Investigation*, 27, 40-41.
\(^{15}\) Van Til is significant as one of the early leaders and the definitive apologetics methodologist of Westminster Theological Seminary, founded directly in response to the institutional liberalization of Princeton Theological Seminary by its estranged conservative professors in 1929. Among Westminster’s other early members are its founder J. Gresham Machen, as well as Old Testament scholars O.T. Allis and Robert Dick Wilson.
**Liberalism, the Spirit of the Age, and Wellhausen’s JEPD**

**Documentary Hypothesis**

A key theological movement within Christian academia and laity – both affecting and affected by the skeptical criticism during this period – is that which is broadly termed as (theological) liberalism. Historian Carl R. Trueman defines it in his introductory essay to Reformed scholar J. Gresham Machen’s 1923 book *Christianity and Liberalism*:

> The many varieties of modern liberal religion are rooted in naturalism – that is, in the denial of any entrance of the creative power of God in connection with the origin of Christianity. … Admitting that scientific objections may arise against the particularities of the Christian religion … the liberal theologian seeks to rescue certain of the general principles of religion … and these general principles he regards as constituting “the essence of Christianity.”

In contrast to Reformed thought, liberalism does not hold the inner testimony of the Bible as to the truth, date, and authorship of its own content as being the ultimate authority. On the contrary, while some liberals such as John William Colenso maintained the necessity of God in the attainment of knowledge, independent critical analysis nonetheless yield truth that may supersede and revise the testimony Scripture. On this note, W. Robertson Smith asserted the modern liberal school did not necessarily deny


supernatural stories and revelation. He clarified that external history cannot add to the “true religion,” but nonetheless there is a benefit to having a wider historical foundation. Total rejection of the supernatural and use of historical-critical methodology indeed appeared on the liberal spectrum, which historian Alec Ryrie identifies as an apprehensive response and concession to skeptical and pagan critics.

Liberalism was not merely a modified and reactionary perspective growing in the Christian Church, but additionally was the institutional ethos of 19th century Christian academia. Princeton’s B. B. Warfield argued that America derived its education from Germany (whose rationalism superimposed upon its Lutheran foundation) and its culture from England (“stained ... with an Anglican colouring”), both of which were antithetical and stifling to Calvinism. Thus, neither Calvinism nor general Protestant fundamentalism were the foundational principles of the 19th century American university, but rather, as George M. Marsden points out, liberal nonsectarian Protestantism was the dominant force setting educational standards. Moving outside of the theological boundaries of previous centuries of Western academia and into naturalistic science, liberalism’s goal was to promote an academic tradition of freedom and inclusiveness (opposed to Catholic authoritarianism) – so profound was this, that academia declared the use

18 Reformed conservative scholar James Orr notes here the inconsistency of Smith and other liberals whose system has no internal foundation to account for revelation, who thus are forced to borrow it from the high view of conservatives. James Orr, The Problem of the Old Testament, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1905), 20.
20 Köstenberger and Kruger, Heresy of Orthodoxy, 28.
of Scripture as evidence to be unscientific. This, combined with the lack of development of Christian schools of thought outside of theology itself, led to the abandonment of a common theistic point of reference and the marginalization of traditional Christian perspectives.

Not a word could be said about the dialectic state of scholarship during the 19th and early 20th centuries without an understanding of the paradigm of modern criticism, from which came the greatest critical challenge to belief in the historical reliability and authenticity of the Old Testament. Traditionally, Judeo-Christian beliefs and Scripture had affirmed Moses as the author of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—collectively called the Torah or Pentateuch. However, new academic attitudes, both liberal and radical, placed substantial criticism onto this belief. Green and Wilson argued this skeptical spirit of the modern criticism was born out of England’s deistical movement which, as Green argued (and Scotland’s James Orr explicitly affirmed), profoundly impacted continental thought, particularly German critical speculation and anti-supernatural prejudice, and thus modern criticism. Warfield claimed the entire age was hostile to supernaturalism and from this foundation came New Protestantism and naturalistic philosophy. Jacobus added that the zeal of modern critics came from their natural aversion to and “deep seated alienation” from God.

23 Jacobus, Notes, Book of Genesis, iv.
26 Orr, Problem, 17.
27 Green, Moses and the Prophet, 12-13. See also Orr, Problem, 58.
28 He defines this “New Protestantism” (which is liberalism) as “religious indifferentism.” Warfield, “Present Day,” 234-235.
29 Jacobus, Book of Genesis, viii.
Out of these instincts at the beginning of the 19th century came the work of German scholar Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette. De Wette profoundly influenced the field by re-dating Deuteronomy to the time of King Josiah, arguing that the Mosaic laws were a later creation unknown until long after Moses, and declaring that the books of the Pentateuch had no historical authority outside of the periods of their fraudulent composition.\textsuperscript{30} Writing retrospectively, German scholar Julius Wellhausen noted that in the decades that followed, “all who were open to critical ideas at all stood under his influence ... and started from the ground that he had conquered.”\textsuperscript{31} Wellhausen further describes De Wette being tempered by other scholars such as Heinrich Ewald, who in the 1830s mediated with a positive critical approach which, with an essential concern for Biblical Hebrew history as the foundation for the historical development of the “only eternally true religion,”\textsuperscript{32} conceded certain parts of the Pentateuch while defending Mosaic authorship and the historicity of other parts.

Meanwhile, literary criticism became effectively utilized in the developing paradigm, allowing for more precise distinguishing of the sources of the Pentateuch.\textsuperscript{33} By the latter half of the 19th century, De Wette’s students Leopold George, Wilhelm Vatke, and Eduard Reuss had developed and popularized the belief that the Pentateuch was the product of four independently written documents (J, E, P, and D) from different periods in the first millennium BC.\textsuperscript{34} This so-called Documentary Hypothesis would define the scholarly career of Wellhausen, a student of Ewald, who was first attracted to the radical criticism of De Wette’s school by way of Karl Hein-

\textsuperscript{30} Wellhausen, “Pentateuch,” 505.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 505-506.
\textsuperscript{33} Wellhausen, “Pentateuch,” 506.
rich Graf, a student of Reuss. Graf’s hypothesis that the Law was written after the Prophets so captivated Wellhausen that he candidly wrote “almost without knowing his reasons for the Hypothesis, I was prepared to accept it.”

As a giant in the field and having been commissioned by W. Robertson Smith (England’s preeminent Old Testament scholar at the time and an editor of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*), Wellhausen’s account of the field’s development reflects modern criticism’s understanding of itself, notable for both the scholars whom it regards as historically significant and those scholars it does not (such as the Reformed scholars of the time). Smith likewise contrasted the entirety of the modern school with those holding “the common faith of the Churches.” Reformed Lutheran scholar E.W. Hengstenberg, referring to the skeptical and naturalistic presuppositions of De Wette and his peers in 1847, all but names as a paradigm the radical state of modern criticism. These scholars, now consciously recognizing their power in embodying the “spirit of the age,” had thus moved to openly ignore and hold in contempt “the powerless opposition” who, in affirming the historicity of the supernatural content of Scripture, had failed to keep pace with their certain intellectual progression.

In his seminal work *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, Wellhausen himself refined and formulated the version of the Documentary Hypothesis which became the formal paradigm for the historical-critical study of the Penta-

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He argued that within the Pentateuch were four independent documents, each reflecting the historical context of their time:

- **J**, or the Jehovist Document. Written in the 9th century BC, it comprises much of the Genesis and Exodus narrative. It laws endorse a multiplicity of worship sites, reflecting Israel’s first historical period.\(^{40}\) It is marked by its use of the Hebrew word יהוה (Jehovah) to refer to God.

- **E**, or the Elohist Document. Written during the first historical period, its content is distinguished from J by its use of the Hebrew word הָאָלִים (Elohim) to refer to God.

- **P**, or the Priestly Code. Written as late as the 5th century BC, possibly by Ezra, it is concerned with laws and rituals. Its content reflects the third and final historical period.\(^ {41}\)

- **D**, or the “Deuteronomist” Document. Written in 621 BC, it reflects the second historical period of “struggle and transition” during King Josiah’s reform condemning multiple worship sites, centralizing all worship at the Temple in Jerusalem.\(^ {42}\)

These documents were all eventually compiled and edited together into the Pentateuch by a redactor – possibly Ezra – after the Babylonian Exile, no earlier than the end of the 5th century BC, about 1000 years after Moses was supposed to have lived.\(^ {43}\) Central to the Wellhausian take on the Documentary Hypothesis was the evolution of Israel’s religion over time. Read-

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41 Ibid., 35.
42 Ibid., 27, 33.
43 Clines, “Pentateuch.”, 580.
ing between the lines of the Old Testament, Wellhausen rejected the unity of the Pentateuch and the history of Israel described in Kings, claiming that each of the JEPD documents reflect the legal context of three periods in Israel’s religious history. Following De Wette, he claimed that the view of the Temple or any other place being the single legitimate sanctuary of worship was unknown to ‘JE’ or Israel in the first historical period, even in the time of Solomon. The antithesis to JE’s law, a single place of worship, appears in the second historical period, marked by Deuteronomy and King Josiah’s 7th century struggle against JE’s pluralistic worship tradition.\footnote{Wellhausen, \textit{Prolegomena}, 17-27.} 2 Kings 22 recounts the discovery of a Book of the Law which inspires Josiah’s reform movement. Wellhausen argued that this very Book of the Law was in fact Deuteronomy.\footnote{Ibid., 33.} Finally, Wellhausen believed the Priestly Code “stands outside of and above the struggle, – the end has been reached and made a secure possession.”\footnote{Ibid., 35.} Thus, P reflects the third period where the principles of Deuteronomy are normative. The Pentateuch is the final redaction of these source documents, P weaving the legal principles established by D into the JE narrative, thus conforming Israel’s past to the dominant ideals of P in the present.\footnote{Ibid., 38.} Israel’s history, preserved within the hidden documents of the Pentateuch, is that of thesis (JE), antithesis (D), and synthesis (P). It seems Hegel, not Moses, captured the imagination of modern Old Testament scholars.

Writing in 1904, liberal Anglican Bishop Herbert Edward Ryle said of the Documentary Hypothesis: “But on the main point agreement has been reached. The battle of controversy is no longer being fought over the question, whether the separate existence of these documents can be identified, but over a different question, which relates to the priority in date of the
composition of these documents.’ At the turn of the century, the Wellhausenian Documentary Hypothesis was academically and ecclesiastically established as the paradigm of modern criticism. Normative research within it progressed the field.

**Backlash against Liberal Aspersions**

A full appreciation of conservative and liberal scholarship is incomplete without bringing into focus the man serving as the central focus of many of the former group’s writings: Anglican Bishop of Natal, John William Colenso. Stemming from his personal difficulty with and practical rejection of Biblical inerrancy, a striking contrast appears between Colenso’s approach to Old Testament scholarship and that of the conservatives in his taking for granted supposed contradictions in the Pentateuch. Asserting he had grounded his study within the Pentateuch itself, Colenso made internal literary critiques and inferences about the true author and their intent in writing particular problematic passages. Explicitly rejecting the conservatives’ belief that the Pentateuch was intended to be an historical record, Colenso differs consciously from Ewald in dismissing the basic historicity of the Exodus story – denying what Ewald believed was the essential necessity for Israel’s national history. Ultimately, he radically concluded that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch and while its books contain certain revelations about the characteristics of God and doctrine, the stories largely cannot be considered historical. Alec Ryrie notes that “professional biblical scholars found Colenso’s bluntness simple-minded, but his claims were easy to understand and hard to rebut.” As such, there developed ecclesiastical fear that the attacks by the “apostate Bishop” would demote the Bible

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50 Ibid., 70.
51 Ibid., 13-15.
to the status of ordinary books.\textsuperscript{53} This fear was not without warrant and by 1923, J. Gresham Machen wrote that this exact development had taken root in the rapidly burgeoning liberal Church.\textsuperscript{54}

In one notable response to Colenso, Princeton’s William Henry Green methodologically grounded his study of the Pentateuch within the content of Scripture itself and from here he made several observations that allowed him to internally contextualize and satisfy the “absolute self-contradictions” that the practical Colenso notes.\textsuperscript{55} In one representative example of their differences, Colenso claimed Genesis errrs in stating Jacob’s party came into Egypt with 70 members, since Hezron and Hamul could not have been born at this time; any arguments counting them before birth could also apply \textit{ad infinitum} to all descendants.\textsuperscript{56} Green responded by pointing to the logic of Genesis 46:12 and Genesis 46:27. They imply and give precedent, Green argued, that the text counts Hezron and Hamul symbolically and that the author was concerned here with the “substantial truth” rather than “punctilious precision.”\textsuperscript{57} This demonstrates the differences between (and consequences of) Colenso’s rational, “practical” reading of the text and Green’s reading that prioritizes the internal logic of Scripture and coinciding facts therein to sufficiently make sense of it.\textsuperscript{58} Green observed Colenso reading \textit{eisegetically}\textsuperscript{59} towards his theory of contradiction, his perception of the incompatibility of the text being due to inappropriately literal readings and counter-contextual Hebrew translations.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{53} Ryrie, \textit{Protestants}, 249.  
\textsuperscript{55} Colenso, \textit{Pentateuch}, 10.  
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 19, 22.  
\textsuperscript{57} William Henry Green, \textit{The Pentateuch Vindicated from the Aspersions of Bishop Colenso}. (New York: John Wiley, 1863), 33-34.  
\textsuperscript{58} Colenso, \textit{Pentateuch}, xviii.  
\textsuperscript{59} That is, projecting his own views into the text.  
\textsuperscript{60} Green, \textit{Pentateuch Vindicated}, 74-79.
Conservative Response to Modern Criticism

Writing at the end of the era in focus, Princeton and Westminster scholar Robert Dick Wilson explicitly outlined the approach he and his ideological peers utilized in their polemics: that of illustrating the presuppositions and insufficiency therein of the modern scholarship paradigm, while in turn promoting his biblically-affirming model of interpretation. Contrary to the modern paradigm’s assumptions and subsequent conclusions of contradictions and minimal historicism, Wilson argued that established facts like the uniquely accurate documentation in the Bible of the ancient nations and names, order, and spelling of the names of kings provides an “indestructible basis” by which one can comfortably and legitimately assume the historical reliability of the Old Testament.\(^\text{61}\) Additionally, whereas W. Robertson Smith maintained a traditionally viable and historically attestable development over time of the Law from its principle Mosaic foundations\(^\text{62}\) and the De Wette scholars denied Mosaic roots entirely, Wilson emphasized the established outside historical precedent and intertextual Scriptural attestation of a Mosaic composition of such law.\(^\text{63}\)

There is a conscious recognition of the paradigm of modern scholarship in Wilson’s work. He compares the methods of conservative and radical scholars respectively to that of English Common Law and the Inquisitorial approach – innocent until proven guilty versus guilty until proven innocent.\(^\text{64}\) Later Westminster scholar Edward J. Young identifies Wilson’s primary contention being that the radicals utilized unscholarly methodologies.\(^\text{65}\) As with other Reformed scholars, such as Jacobus,\(^\text{66}\) Wilson emphasized that the methodology of the radicals began with the presumption that

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\(^{63}\) Wilson, *Scientific Investigation*, 39-44.

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 23-24.

\(^{65}\) Young, introduction to *Scientific Investigation* by Wilson, 20.

the Pentateuch’s supposed source documents are forgeries and not inspired by God.\(^{67}\) He argued that the conclusions of these critics\(^{68}\) are entirely subjected to the set of commitments and presuppositions compelled by their theories. He charged that “they cut up the books and doctor the documents and change the text and wrest the meaning, to suit the perverted view of their fancy.”\(^{69}\) Writing nearly 80 years prior, Hengstenberg likewise blasted the radical critics of the Pentateuch for being philosophically superficial and argued that the conclusions of their study were inevitable as a “slave of inclination and prejudice.”\(^{70}\) Responding to Wellhausen, W. L. Baxter mocked the “scientific” criticism of the German scholar, noting Wellhausen’s inconsistency in dismissing the content of Kings when it contradicts his theory, while at the same time affirming Kings whenever it agrees with his reconstruction of Israel’s history; Baxter noted this contradiction when Wellhausen takes for granted 2 Kings’ description of Josiah’s reforms and their effect, but dismisses its portrayal of Solomon’s reform as “unhistorical.”\(^{71}\)

In line with Baxter’s observations and with what Thomas Kuhn describes as normal research within a paradigm,\(^ {72}\) Wilson noted that the radical scholars ignore or throw out any textual evidence that does not align with their theory.\(^ {73}\) Additionally, under the authority of “scientific criticism,” they echoed from one national field to another their uncritical \textit{prima facie} assertions (made first by German scholars) about the impossibility of Biblical stories.\(^ {74}\)

\begin{itemize}
\item \(^{67}\) Young., 34.
\item \(^{68}\) He specifically names and criticizes the selectivity, ignorance, and “subjective views” of scholars like Heinrich Ewald, George Buchanan Gray, and Samuel Rolles Driver. Ibid., 51, 57.
\item \(^{69}\) Ibid., 61.
\item \(^{70}\) Hengstenberg, \textit{Dissertations}, 168.
\item \(^{71}\) W. L. Baxter, \textit{Sanctuary and Sacrifice}. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1895), 7-11.
\item \(^{72}\) Kuhn, \textit{Structure}, 24.
\item \(^{73}\) Wilson, \textit{Scientific Investigation}, 39, 83.
\item \(^{74}\) Ibid., 23-26.
\end{itemize}
Wilson’s recognition of the power of the radical critics eclipses Hengstenberg’s earlier observations – the German idea that the “will to power” is power had ruined scholarship by willing false power to know the Old Testament text, which in turn replaced the true power scholars once possessed.\textsuperscript{75}

Green, Wilson’s elder at Princeton, writing against Colenso and the radical theories of forgery and redaction, argued that certain details in the Pentateuch reflect expected authentic developments and records, but are peculiar to those of a deliberate, ideological forger. Green noted the originality and lack of later continuity in the families of Jacob’s house,\textsuperscript{76} which begs the question why a forger would create them in the first place. Likewise, a major line of Wilson’s argumentation follows in the mold of Green’s from half a century earlier: namely, the inclusion (or lack thereof) in the Pentateuch of details that do not fit the fraudulent and reforming purposes proposed by Wellhausen’s Documentary Hypothesis. There is deafening silence on the house of David, the city of Jerusalem, and the Temple, while there is inexplicable emphasis on the Tabernacle and legal vocabulary long obsolete by the 5th century. If the composition of the Pentateuch was a pious fraud meant to legitimize the religious reforms of Josiah in Judah and those of the priests after the Babylonian exile, then why does its historical, legal, and prophetic content not comport with this very purpose?\textsuperscript{77} Though much by way of theory was developing, the same conservative questions and tensions remained posed to the dominant theories of the modern school.

\textit{End of the Era}

At the close of the era in focus, the modern critical school had largely prevailed in academia, though not without personal grief. Julius Wellhausen in the process lost his faith as a Lutheran and expressed regret over the effect his teaching had on his theological students, ultimately deciding to

\textsuperscript{75} Wilson, \textit{Higher Criticism}, 46.
\textsuperscript{76} Green, \textit{Pentateuch Vindicated}, 38.
\textsuperscript{77} Wilson, \textit{Higher Criticism}, 39-41.
resign his professorship at Greifswald in 1882; John William Colenso and W. Robertson Smith also suffered, each undergoing a high-profile heresy trial in Britain.\textsuperscript{78} The effect on Reformed scholarship and Church in general was even more drastic. Reflecting in 1959, Edward J. Young writes that, with the influx of modernists and doctrinal indifferentists, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America had increasingly liberalized by the 1920s – with this evolving identity came strife within the Church over doctrine as well as the ethos of Princeton Theological Seminary, a long-established Presbyterian institution.\textsuperscript{79} With the liberal restructuring of both, Princeton’s conservative vanguard of J. Gresham Machen, Robert Dick Wilson, Cornelius Van Til, and others left to found Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929 and later the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.\textsuperscript{80} No longer was the modern consensus confined to the classrooms of liberal universities. Now the very culture whose spirit had encouraged the cultivation of the modern academic paradigm found itself marching in tune to the drumbeat of the academy’s progress.

\textsuperscript{78} Encyclopedia of World Biography, “Julius Wellhausen.”
\textsuperscript{79} Young, introduction to Scientific Investigation by Wilson, 19.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 19-20. See also Trueman, introduction to Christianity and Liberalism, by Machen, xv.
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The Selected Destruction of Concentration Camps: Why the Nazi Regime left Some Intact
by Cali Vance

Abstract
The Holocaust is a well-known phenomenon throughout the world. Something that is less known and less researched is the destruction of the concentration camps within the German empire. There were three main players in the aftermath of the concentration camps; the Nazi officials, the Allied forces, and the Soviets. The Nazi officials followed two paths, either destroying the camps or remaining in the camps until the liberating forces arrived. The liberators, such as the Allied forces and the Soviets, came across camps with prisoners still behind the barbed wire fences or camps that had been partially or fully abandoned and demolished. The choice the Nazis took in the fate of the concentration camps reveal that either the camp had an important function in the Final Solution and therefore had to be destroyed to lessen the retaliation from the liberating forces, or that the camp did not act as an extermination center and therefore could remain standing with people still there. Understanding the process of the Nazi officers reveals the importance of present-day tours of concentration camps and the impact that these sites presently have.

One of the most horrific places on Earth is shown as a tourist attraction where people are able to wander and explore the sites in which tens of thousands of humans died. There are thousands of papers, novels, and films elaborating on this incredibly complex subject due to the atrocities that occurred at these sites during the Holocaust. However, something that is not covered in depth is the German destruction of concentration camps, and the Soviets’ and Allied forces’ conjoined liberation of the camps. The liberation of the concentration camps provides several explanations for why the Nazi regime destroyed some camps. One is that they were ashamed that they were caught with mass execution sites; another is that they did not want the liberating forces to discover the camps and use mass extermination to further retaliate against the Nazi officials. The outcome of the con-
centration camps not only greatly impacted the prisoners, but has created lasting effects on the Nazi regime and Germany as a whole.

**Literature Review**

This topic does not have a lot of research due to the complexity of the Holocaust and the lack of evidence about the camps. There is a considerable amount of writing about the Allies’ liberation of concentration camps, but there is limited writing about why certain camps remained in operation as the liberating forces approached. Nor is there much about how the German forces deliberately destroyed parts of certain camps but allowed other camps to remain intact.

There is research about the impact that liberating forces had on prisoners’ lives and the celebration that accompanied the liberations. In Tony Judt’s book, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, he focuses on the downfall of Europe as a whole and the important economic and political changes.¹ He also discusses the treaties the belligerents signed at the end of the war. However, this book rarely mentions the concentration camps or the impact of liberating these sites. Another novel, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany*, written by Atina Grossmann, focuses on the reintegration of Jews in postwar Germany.² This is closer to the topic of destruction of concentration camps, but Grossman takes it one step further and discusses the issues that arise after the liberation and the fall of concentration camps. These are just two examples of thousands of novels written about the Holocaust. Both of these books cover vital issue to understand the Holocaust period and the consequences that ensued, however they do not touch on the actual dismantling or liberating of the concentration camps.

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Background of Camps

Before the Second World War commenced, there were German concentration camps standing. Originally made to house political prisoner, the German concentration camps were places where people died because of malnutrition and exposure to the environment, not from gas chambers and mass shootings.\(^3\) Though the Nazis did not explicitly intend these first camps to be extermination camps, they nonetheless became sites of death due to the horrible conditions. Initially the prisoners were “anyone who the Nazis declared to be an ‘enemy of the state’”.\(^4\) This list grew longer as the regime gained power and more citizens became non-German or impractical in the new Nazi regime. Originally “German Communist, Social Democrats and Socialist party members”\(^5\) comprised the list of outsiders and made up the majority of prisoners in the early concentration camps. The list grew to include “anyone thought unfit for a ‘healthy’ German society. These included homosexuals, the mentally ill, and those believed to be ‘asocial’ or ‘unnatural’ in any manner”.\(^6\) Due to “‘racial unfitness,’ many of the early camp prisoners were Jewish or Roma (called Gypsies)”.\(^7\) The beginning of the concentration camps shows the initial goal of the Nazi regime: to separate anyone unfit to be a part of the new German state. This idea continued to grow with the party and morphed into extermination camps and an increase in concentration camps.

One camp that demonstrated this shift was Dachau, which became the model for the mass killing system. It had an “estimated 41,500 prisoners murdered there.

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\(^5\) Witherbee, “Chapter Two: Concentration Camps and Mass Murder.”

\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Ibid.
Some went to the gas chambers, or were shot or beaten to death; others expired from exposure or starvation, or died subsequent to medical experiments conducted by SS doctors”.\textsuperscript{8} However Dachau was not always the well-functioning death machine that it became. Dachau was the first concentration camp the Nazis established in 1933.\textsuperscript{9} First used to house political prisoners and later a training facility for the SS, regarded as the security guards of the Nazi party, Dachau eventually became a site for executing the ‘Final Solution’.\textsuperscript{10}

The development of the concentration camps reveals that the Nazi regime was becoming paranoid about resistance and claiming that certain people threatened the superiority of the German race. The Nazi officials increased the captures and murders of unfit people, mainly Jews, as the Second World War continued and the Germans started losing more battles. This system, designed to murder millions of people, eventually caught up with the Nazis when liberating forces entered concentration camps and discovered the truly horrific methods that Germany systematically implemented. It is unclear exactly why some concentration camps remained while others perished, but it is clear that, for whatever reason, these camps created a lasting effect on Germany.

\textbf{Germany Not Destroying Camps}

The liberating forces came across concentration camps left intact by the Nazi regime as they entered Germany. It was very clear that the Nazis had abandoned the camps in order to save themselves from Soviet or Allied persecution, leaving prisoners in terrible conditions. These prisoners lived in horrendous conditions: malnutrition, fatigue, and the general living conditions in the camps produced high death counts. Another cause of mass casualties was disease, which spread rampantly throughout the camps. The prisoners continued

\textsuperscript{9} Friess, “A Liberator, But Never Free.”
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
to die long after being abandoned by the Nazi forces because the diseases present while the Nazis utilized the camps remained after the Nazis deserted. Nazi forces were able to abandon certain camps because these factors continued to kill the prisoners after the Germans left. These camps were then left fully functioning as the liberating forces approached. The Germans decided that certain camps were already destined to collapse, so going through the effort to dismantle or burn paperwork would not hide the conditions of these camps.

There were other reasons to abandon camps without destroying them. Nazi officers generally abandoned labor camps or concentration camps while prisoners awaited liberation, due to the amount of prisoners that died in these camps. The camps that retreating Nazi officials did not destroy had specific attributes. The United States liberating forces made a film about the Holzen concentration camp, which showed starving, dead, and dying prisoners still inside its fences. This camp was not as influential in the overall process of the ‘Final Solution’ and therefore could be abandoned while prisoners were still in the camp. It also was not a killing center, so there was less fear of retaliation from the liberators if they found the camp with prisoners. This trend is seen with the camps that remained standing as the Nazi forces retreated.

**Germany Destroying Camps**

Due to Nazi shame or worry, there were several camps with specific sections destroyed prior to liberating forces arriving. One example of this is

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12 “German concentration camp in Holzen; destruction in German town,” Film ID: 836, April 8, 1945, accessed at US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives & Records Administration.
the Birkenau killing center, which the Germans bombed in January 1945. A photo of this camp reveals that the killing compounds were destroyed as the camp was prepared for liquidation. This indicates that the Nazis did not want liberating forces to discover the gas chambers used to eliminate thousands of Jews. There are two lenses in which this destruction is viewed: the Nazis did not want other nations to discover the large-scale murder sites due to the shameful confrontations that would surely follow, or the Nazis did not want further reasons for persecution to exist once Germany was defeated.

It is more likely that the Nazis did not want further persecution because not all death camps were destroyed and the international community knew the extent to which the Nazis were committing mass murder, as seen in the other camps being liberated. Another indication supporting the Nazi officials’ hope to avoid further persecution was the burning of administrative records. The Soviets discovered the general layout and function of Birkenau as they entered the camp only days after the last death march left. However, specific details about the killings and daily tasks were destroyed as the Nazi’s abandoned the camp.

**Soviets Finding and Liberating Camps**

The Soviets liberated the vast majority of concentration camps in the east. The eastern side of the Nazi regime had several of the most atrocious camps because they were mostly extermination camps. There are several accounts of Soviet soldiers arriving at camps and being bewildered by what they saw

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14 “Auschwitz II-Birkenau concentration camp barracks.”
15 Ibid.
16 “Auschwitz II-Birkenau concentration camp barracks.”
because the Germans had tried to keep specific details secret. One account about the Lublin death camp mentions that “it was a true death camp, where they killed 1.5 million people.”18 This harsh realization made many Soviets angry toward the Nazis, adding to the already harsh Soviet punishments.

The liberating actions of the Soviet army are complex, with several different reactions and processes. Currently, there is not much research in this area, even by Russian historians, which makes it challenging to fully grasp the situation.19 It is still “unclear whether the Soviet government issued any orders to liberate the concentration camps” in the first place.20 However, there is significant evidence that the government influenced how the soldiers reacted to the concentration camps. The Soviet political propaganda about the extermination camps encouraged the soldiers to act out of vengeance, which resulted in harsher retaliation in the east than the west.21 For instance, there was more looting, rape, and destruction on the eastern front than the western.22 A significant amount of camps that the Soviet forces liberated still had prisoners because the camps operated until the last possible moment. This indicated that the German officials were more concerned with continuing their mass killing than escaping Soviet retaliation. The Soviets liberated Madjanek and Auschwitz, two highly efficient execution camps, with prisoners still in the camps. The Soviet liberation of the most deadly camps was swift, and a vast territory to liberate meant that they saw both abandoned and functioning camps.

20 Ibid.
Allied Forces Finding and Liberating Camps

The Allied forces liberated the majority of concentration camps on the western side, consisting of Americans, British, French, and Canadian soldiers. The discoveries of camps by the liberating forces fueled their desires to conquer the Germans, and justified killing SS officers. One personal account of the camps being liberated stated that the American troops did not falter when killing the officers because, in their view, the officers deserved it based on the atrocities they had committed at the camps. This was one of the greatest fears of the Nazi regime. They did not want to suffer under the Allied forces, so they abandoned most of the concentration camps and even destroyed parts of the camps to hide the amount of atrocities.

Another way that Allied forces reprimanded the Germans associated with prison, labor, or extermination camps was by looting and stealing from unoccupied homes. This was more indicative of the Western forces entering Germany. Leipzig was a German concentration camp which was still occupied by German officers and provides an example of the difficulties liberating an occupied camp. This was a subset labor camp in Germany that continued to fight while the liberating forces approached. Just prior to the American troops arriving, there Germans set a building on fire with two hundred prisoners inside. As the prisoners saw the Americans coming, they ran to the barbed wire fence, which was still activated, killing several of the prisoners. If the fence did not stop the fleeing prisoners, then the gunfire of the SS guards, who were still at the camp, did. This example shows that German forces did not want to abandon camps that had evi-

23 Friess, “A Liberator, But Never Free.”
26 War Crimes Commission: Leipzig and Penig Concentration Camps.”
dence of mass killings. Even though this camp was not initially a death camp, towards the end there was a spree of mass killings, and this event caused the Germans to fear the discovery of the camp.\footnote{Ibid.}

\textbf{Present view of camps}

What is truly shocking is the present day American view of the Nazi regime and the significance that the concentration camps hold. It is perplexing to hear people say that Germany’s only lasting impact on the world was the Holocaust and that this devastating event is still impacting the nation. The opinion that all Germany is good for is cars and killing is becoming too frequent. Comments like this show that the discovery of the concentration camps reflects unnecessarily negatively on all Germans.

European governments have run into challenges when considering their part in the Holocaust. Historians have found that “they want to know but at the same time they do not want to dig too deep and discover what they do not want to hear.”\footnote{Victor J. Seidler, “Before and Beyond Auschwitz: Ethics, Memory, Citizenship and Belongings,” \textit{Psychotherapy & Politics International} 9, no.3 (October 2011): 232-247, \textit{Academic Search Premier}, EBSCOhost (accessed February 20, 2018).} There are different explanations and attitudes throughout European countries which have greatly impacted the “ways in which societies have come to terms with their own traumatic histories.”\footnote{Seidler, “Before and Beyond Auschwitz: Ethics, Memory, Citizenship and Belongings.”} For example, France and Germany have very different reactions to the Holocaust: France does not allow censuses to count any distinct ethnic or religious group, and Germany has made it illegal to deny the Holocaust. These reactions stem from the creation, use, and destruction of the concentration camp system.
Conclusion

In looking at the destruction of concentration camps, the Nazi officials decided on two courses of action: to abandon camps that were not death camps, and leave the prisoners there or destroy areas in the camps that indicated that mass killings took place, such as crematoriums. Germany employed both of these options in an attempt to deter Allied and Soviet retaliation. There is ample literature on the liberation of the camps and how this impacts present-day Germany, although there is little research regarding why German soldiers destroyed some camps and left others standing. As the liberating forces came across places where thousands of people died, their views about Germany were shifted, which continues with tourists today. It is very difficult to use concentration and extermination camps for tourism without influencing the minds of the people who visit them, which can contribute to the lasting perception of Germany.


Author Biography

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“Captain America Must Die”: How a Super Soldier Became a Patriot

by Mackenna Johnson

Abstract

This paper analyzes the character of Captain America in the midst of the Cold War, and particularly asks how and to what extent the character reflects his contemporary sociopolitical atmosphere. To achieve this end, I first establish the vital role of popular culture, especially comic books, in modern historical research. I then discuss the history of Captain America, the sociopolitical situation of the 1970s, and, finally, introduce the Secret Empire and Nomad storylines of the 1970s, which form the basis of my argument. The most valuable primary source in this paper is not the comic books themselves, but an interview that I recently conducted with the former author of Captain America, Steve Englehart. Ultimately, I argue that Englehart redefined Captain America’s version of patriotism and created a character that was more effectively able to reflect on and respond to social and political events.

In bold letters: “The Death of a Hero,” next to the lifeless figure of Captain America tied to a chimney, slumped and bleeding. Two figures stood behind the slain man with bowed heads, one African American with high-tech wings strapped to his back, the other blonde-haired and clad mostly in black. This was the cover of Captain America #183, published on March 10, 1975, 34 years to the month after Steve Rogers debuted as America’s star-spangled, Hitler-punching superhero. But for Rogers, gone were the days of patrolling New York City with his trusty sidekick Bucky. Gone was his clear bad versus good mentality. In fact, it was not even Steve Rogers bound and wearing the Captain America costume he had once donned; instead, he stood in the background as Nomad: The Man Without a Country.

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1 Steve Englehart, Captain America #183, ed. Len Wein (New York: Marvel Comics, 1975), 18. See Appendix D.
This was the last issue in a saga of betrayal and disillusionment with the American government, a saga Steve Englehart wrote that stretched beyond the fictional world of comic books. In the early 1970s, America’s political climate was fraught with scandal and anxiety. Between the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, conflict loomed large in the news. Because of this, comic book readers could no longer relate to a character that blindly and unthinkingly followed the government’s command. This paper will explore how Steve Englehart utilized the Captain America comics in the 1970s as a platform for himself and for his readers to come to terms with their political and social frustrations. I will argue that Steve Englehart redefined Captain America’s brand of patriotism to fully encompass the sentiments of the American people for the first time.

Since DC Comics published the first Superman comic in the late 1930s, comic books have remained an ever-present force in American popular culture. Between Marvel and DC, the two powerhouses in comic book publication, there are at minimum five or six million pages of literature, and this increases by thousands of pages every month. Because comics scholarship is a recent field, most research focuses on comic books as a whole, leaving plenty of room for new voices to focus on smaller pieces of this monomyth. One common theme among scholars is the accurate representation of comic books as a modern mythology, giving insight into contemporary American values just as the Greek myths did in their time. It is necessary here to clarify that, though comic books exist around the world, America is by far the largest producer of comic books, meaning they are inherently a product of American culture. Scholarly works such as Marco Arnaudo’s *The Myth of the Superhero* give valuable insight into the ties between comics and society. However, such general overviews can only be superficial, for it is the individual characters and story arcs that truly reveal how thoroughly comic books and society intertwine.

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3 Ibid, 63.
There are, however, works that focus more specifically on particular characters, such as J. Richard Stevens’ book *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence*, as well as his article “Let’s Rap with Cap” from *The Journal of Popular Culture*. His works analyze the development of Captain America as a character throughout his existence, since 1941. Though Stevens is the author who focuses most notably on Captain America, his work is still broad and only briefly mentions the comic events this paper will address. Therefore, his work is necessary to understand the character and its history, but it does not sufficiently discuss Steve Englehart’s highly significant Secret Empire and Nomad storylines.

Around the time in which Englehart authored *Captain America*, there was a shift in attitude toward greater readership and increased respect for comics. In fact, statistics from 1971 showed that as many as 60% of eighteen-year-olds and 94% of eleven- to fourteen-year-olds read comics regularly. This likely resulted, at least indirectly, due to a change in the Comics Code. The Comics Code, which the Comics Magazine Association of America developed in October of 1954, mandated that comics not show excessive violence or, most significantly for this essay, represent the government unfavorably. Part A, section 3 of the Comics Code stated, “Policemen, judges, Government officials and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority.” However, in 1971, the Comics Magazine Association of America loosened this regulation by adding, “If any of these is depicted committing an illegal act, it must be declared as an exceptional case and that the culprit pay the legal price.” This revision effectively created a loophole in the code that ultimately allowed Steve Englehart to cast a critical lens on the United States government during his *Captain America* authorship.

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Initially, *Captain America* Comics found success when they debuted in 1941, the first cover boldly displaying the superhero punching Adolf Hitler.\(^7\) After World War II ended, though, the character lost his relevance as he continued to fight the Nazis. As a result, Marvel discontinued the series. Almost twenty years later, Captain America reappeared and explained that a freak accident trapped him in ice, holding him in suspended animation until 1964.\(^8\) From that point on, authors used the character as a means of juxtaposing Cap’s patriotic values with significant events such as the civil rights movement and anti-Vietnam War protests. Instead of a character with agency, Captain America became a one-dimensional tool that authors tried to mold to fit the zeitgeist. However, this approach often fell flat, until Englehart became the author of *Captain America* in 1972.

To understand the unique situation that made Steve Englehart a successful *Captain America* author, it is necessary to explain the period of time just before he took over. In the years during which sales of the comic declined, readers wrote letters to the editor to debate their views of patriotism. J. Richard Stevens wrote on this topic extensively in his article “Let’s Rap with Cap.” The Bullpen, the term for Marvel’s editors, authors, etc. working behind the scenes, published letters from readers, similar to letters to the editor in newspapers and magazines. In the late 1960s, fans began to write to the Bullpen to share their opinions regarding Captain America’s character and whether it fit with their ideas of patriotism. These letters revealed their authors’ sentiments regarding the US government in the midst of the Vietnam War and just before Watergate. Written by everyone from college students to members of the military, the letters operated in *Captain America* as a forum for readers to discuss two starkly contrasting views of patro-

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7 Jack Kirby, *Captain America Comics* #1, ed. Joe Simon (New York: Timely Publications). See Appendix A.
On the one hand, liberals argued that Captain America should involve himself in the political and social controversies of the time; on the other, conservatives maintained that the patriotic thing to do was refrain from criticizing the government.\textsuperscript{10} The vastly different views for and against the Vietnam War, one of the most controversial wars in American history, spurred on the extreme representations of either side. Seeking to please their readers, comic authors altered Captain America’s character over time, involving him in student protests and discussions on civil rights, but were unsuccessful in making the character believable. Perhaps this was because tensions were too high, or because they tried to give voice to the side that they believed had more support. Whatever the case, over the course of this debate, Captain America became one of Marvel’s worst-selling comics. Divided and floundering, this was the atmosphere in which Steve Englehart entered as the author of the comic, given the mission to make it sell.

The key to Englehart’s success with \textit{Captain America} was his ability to test the character’s beliefs in a way that spoke to contemporary American readers. In the real world, the Vietnam War was a constant source of tension, especially as it became increasingly unpopular into the 1970s. This caused many of \textit{Captain America}’s readers to question their definitions of patriotism. Though the debate in the letters to the Bullpen had subsided by the time Englehart authored the comic, there were still some readers who wrote responses to developments in the character. Minor criticism ultimately led the Bullpen in 1973 to reply, “our editorial position is really your editorial position.”\textsuperscript{11} In other words, they were willing to change the direction of the character based on fan response. Despite this, none of the letters criticized the anti-establishment attitude the comics soon adopted, and, indeed,

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid, 623.
\textsuperscript{11} Steve Englehart, \textit{Captain America} #165, ed. Roy Thomas (New York: Marvel Comics), 20.
Englehart himself cannot recall any negative reader feedback as he forced Captain America to confront the “political drama” of the time.\(^\text{12}\)

This process began in *Captain America* #163, when old enemies of Cap’s hired a crooked advertising agent to spread propaganda against Cap, calling him a rogue vigilante with an anti-American agenda.\(^\text{13}\) Steve Rogers, the man behind the Captain America costume, learned of these ads two issues later. Yet Rogers laughed them off as obvious lies that no sane person could believe, given his stellar reputation and decades of service to the country.\(^\text{14}\) Over the course of the next few issues, the character commented with increasing frequency on the lack of connection he felt with the American public. Captain America, the personification of the World War II values of the United States, felt out of touch and unable to understand a public that did not fully support its government. After all, when Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Joe Simon created the character in 1941, he was the protagonist in a war that most Americans supported. Thirty-three years later, it was significantly harder to discern a clear line between good and evil, especially as the truth about the Watergate scandal gradually came to light.

The Watergate scandal was not exclusive to the real world; in fact, it was what triggered Steve Englehart to write a series of comic books that would change the essential nature of Captain America. Englehart, watching the “political drama” of Watergate unfold during the early 1970s, could not help but recognize the necessity of Captain America during such a turbulent time. He knew that a government scandal of such huge proportions would shock Steve Rogers to his core, so he imagined the character’s response and used a fictional government scandal, the Secret Empire, to reflect on real


\(^{13}\) Steve Englehart, *Captain America* #163, ed. Roy Thomas (New York: Marvel Comics), 5.

current events.\textsuperscript{15} Englehart had already set the stage, using a propaganda campaign within the comics to discredit the hero, but it was only after the Watergate scandal went public that he incorporated the secret government element into the story. When finally, in \textit{Captain America} \textnumero 169, Steve Rogers saw the extent of the ad campaign against him, Englehart revealed that the agency behind the propaganda was the “Committee to Regain America’s Principles.”\textsuperscript{16} This name was an obvious allusion to the real life “Committee to Re-Elect the President.”

Over the course of the next several issues, the advertisements convinced more and more people that Captain America was a criminal and a vigilante working against America instead of for it. As Cap fought to restore his good name, the story unfolded, leading to the eventual revelation that a group called the Secret Empire had subversively taken over the government without anyone’s knowledge.\textsuperscript{17} The showdown that soon followed this reveal was one of the greatest and most significant in Captain America’s seventy-five year history. As one could expect from any comic book, the “good guy,” Captain America, confronted the “bad guy,” the Secret Empire. More specifically, he finally faced the group’s leader, Number One. Traditionally, and according to the Comics Code’s mandate, the hero should have triumphed over the villain.\textsuperscript{18}

However, the trend of comic books at the time was toward something parallel but significantly different. In 1973, Gwen Stacy, the longtime girlfriend of popular Marvel Comics character Spider-Man, died suddenly and shockingly at the hands of a villain. This tragic event signaled that comics were no longer

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{15} Steve Englehart, phone interview by author, May 10, 2017. \\
\textsuperscript{16} Steve Englehart, \textit{Captain America} \textnumero 169, ed. Roy Thomas (New York: Marvel Comics), 7. \\
\textsuperscript{17} Steve Englehart, \textit{Captain America} \textnumero 173, ed. Roy Thomas (New York: Marvel Comics), 7. \\
\end{flushleft}
The Forum

playing by the rules, and that “[h]appy endings were no longer guaranteed.”¹⁹ This led to a trend in which superheroes no longer defeated their villains cleanly, raising the stakes and showing that authors could bend the rules just enough to confront their characters with devastating consequences.

And so it was when Captain America finally came face to face with the man called Number One. As Cap and his friends fought the cronies of the Secret Empire on the lawn of the White House, Number One escaped and ran into the Oval Office. Captain America, stopping him, pulled off the villain’s mask. Though the readers could not see Number One’s face, Englehart strongly implied that the man was in fact the President of the United States.²⁰ This revelation shocked Cap to his very core, and he walked out of the White House feeling completely defeated and betrayed. Because comic books actually go on sale a few months before the official publishing date—which, in these comics, was July of 1974—Englehart predicted the fall of President Nixon within the fictional world of comic books months before it occurred in reality.

The storyline that followed the Secret Empire event led to the creation of a character that more fully represented the American people and that no longer subscribed to the “good versus evil” values of the past. In what Steve Englehart called his “philosophical issue,” Steve Rogers debated with himself and his friends about whether or not he could continue on as Captain America, knowing the government he represented was unjust. He ultimately decided that he could not.²¹ This issue especially recalled the letters debate of the pre-Englehart era, reemphasizing that discussion and the letter writers’ views on patriotism. Even though Cap effectively sided with the liberals

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¹⁹ Tom DeFalco et al., *Marvel Chronicle: A Year by Year History* (New York: DK Publishing, 2008), 158.
²⁰ Steve Englehart, *Captain America* #175, ed. Roy Thomas (New York: Marvel Comics), 18.
²¹ Steve Englehart, *Captain America* #176, ed. Roy Thomas (New York: Marvel Comics), 1. See Appendix B.
who argued that American citizens should not blindly follow the government, he still gave voice to conservatives coming to terms with the rise of multiculturalism. One page of the issue showed Captain America in the midst of people, Americans, of various ethnicities and backgrounds, while Cap attempted in vain to understand how he could possibly represent those millions of people.22 This debate also emphasized the overarching struggle to find an American national identity that real people encountered after the Watergate scandal. Englehart, though acknowledging that it was purely his own opinion, felt that Steve Rogers’ disillusionment with the government was a thing to which all Americans at the time could relate.23 Thus, while the fictional character could not reconcile recent events with his own values, he became a trustworthy, familiar symbol to real people attempting the same type of reconciliation. Andrew and Virginia Macdonald, writing for The Journal of Popular Culture merely two years after this storyline, called it the experience “most widely shared by the reading and non-reading public.”24 They pointed out that, regardless of the actual readership demographics of comic books, this was a story that represented Americans as a collective group.

Following the decision to take Steve Rogers out of the Captain America costume, Englehart led the character down a path of self-discovery in the wake of the destruction of his patriotic values. Though Rogers tried briefly to be a normal man without a superhero identity, he quickly learned that he was meant to “fight the good fight,” bringing to light an interesting fact about the comic’s author. Steve Englehart was in the army for sixteen months, until he received an honorable discharge as a conscientious objector.25 He maintains, though, that this history did not affect his approach to the char-

22 Steve Englehart, Captain America #176, ed. Roy Thomas (New York: Marvel Comics), 14. See Appendix C.
acter of Captain America. This was evident in the fact that Steve Rogers could not resist fighting for his beliefs, leading Rogers to create a new superhero identity for himself: Nomad.26

His time as Nomad was brief, and he constantly missed the recognition and respect he received as Captain America. During this stint, there were also minor characters who assumed the identity of Captain America to various degrees of unsuccessfulness. Red Skull, Captain America’s longtime nemesis and a remnant of Cap’s years fighting the Nazis during World War II, murdered the last Captain America impersonator.27 This murder finally forced Rogers to realize that, in the end, it was he who failed America because of his own inability to look beyond the government’s agenda and recognize the actual people whom he defended. He decided that Captain America would no longer be simply a pawn of the government, but would stand for the historical ideals of America itself, and he once more took up the mantle.28

This also effectively concluded the extent and effect of the Watergate scandal in Captain America, making the argument that America was ready to recover, both within comics and without. Ultimately, Captain America reclaiming his shield showed good triumphing over evil, pursuant to the Comics Code, but once again at a tragic cost.

In 1972, Steve Englehart had the seemingly impossible task of making a World War II-era, patriotic superhero relevant in the midst of the exceptionally unpopular Vietnam War. His unique method of adding humanity to the character quickly led to a dramatic increase in sales, making Captain America Marvel’s best-selling series.29 While Englehart’s writing style made

26 Steve Englehart, Captain America #180, ed. Roy Thomas (New York: Marvel Comics), 11.
27 Steve Englehart, Captain America #183, ed. Len Wein (New York: Marvel Comics).
28 Ibid, 18.
Captain America more relatable, it was his willingness to confront what he called the “political drama” of the time that ultimately led to the comic’s success.\textsuperscript{30} Marco Arnaudo commented that, “[f]ar from acting as a simple ‘yes man,’ Captain America has historically proven to be a sort of commentator on political fluctuations.”\textsuperscript{31} While this has remained unfailingly true since the 1970s, this fact of Cap’s character came about only as a direct result of Englehart’s authorship. Moreover, it was a direct result of the contributions of fan letters, as well as a political situation so rife with tension that Englehart could not help but destroy and rebuild Captain America’s personal definition of patriotism. Finally, Steve Rogers recognized that it was his duty to defend the rights of all Americans, not to blindly trust that the government would treat all citizens justly. His ordeal gave him the opportunity both to come to terms with his limitations, and to realize his ability to act as a voice for the voiceless. Though Cap does not exist in the world as a tangible human being, he is undoubtedly the amalgamation of the millions of people who make up America. As such, he is the face of us all, and we have Steve Englehart to thank for that.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
Appendix ‘A’

Captain America Comics #1
Appendix ‘B’

Captain America #176
"SO WHEN PEOPLE THE WORLD OVER LOOK AT ME--"

"--WHICH AMERICA AM I SUPPOSED TO SYMBOLIZE?"
Appendix ‘D’

Captain America #183
Bibliography


Kim Koltun recently graduated with a major in sociology and a minor in history. She is from Manhattan Beach, CA. Her academic interests include modern Japan, world-systems theory, and U.S. mass incarceration. She currently works for a company that connects independent, social-issue documentaries with educators.
Rick, Morty, and Absurdism: The Millennial Allure of Dark Humor

by Kim Koltun

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the millennial generation’s appeal to dark and absurdist forms of humor, using the show Rick and Morty as a primary example. I first establish my definition of Absurdism—based on Nagel and Camus—and how Rick and Morty qualifies as an Absurdist work. I then go on to outline the popularity of the show among millennial audiences and explore its allure. There are three important sociological contexts to this explanation: the contrast between upbringing and reality, expedited modernity, and rapidly changing information structures. These set the stage for a distinctive style of humor that materialized as a means of comprehending the absurdities of life. I finish the paper with a section on how Nagel and Camus posit we respond to absurdity and how Rick and Morty and its millennial viewers reflect Absurdist philosophy.

“If sub specie aeternitatis there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn’t matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair”—Thomas Nagel

“Nobody exists on purpose, nobody belongs anywhere, everybody’s going to die. Come watch TV”—Morty Smith

Humor serves as a significant tool to navigate the complexities, trends, and anxieties of American society. Judith Y. Lee, the editor of Studies in American Humor, touches on the relevance of looking at humor through an

2 Rick and Morty, Season 1, episode 8, “Rixty Minutes,” directed by Bryan Newton and Pete Michels, aired 17 March 2014 on Adult Swim, Hulu.
academic lens: “Americans’ addiction to humor and scholars’ interest have not abated in the 21st century. Indeed, the rise of cable television and the Internet, the global reach of American media, and the role of humor in contemporary politics and economics...make humor as central as ever to the study of American life.”

The Internet is now a huge part of American life, particularly within the millennial generation. According to a Pew Research Center 2013 study, social media usage for people aged 18 to 29 increased by 1,000 percent in the previous eight years. Unique approaches to humor have emerged as a large segment of this millennial media engagement, particularly with respect to absurdist, ironic, and dark brands of comedy. The generational enchantment with deprecating humor and the entertainment that reproduces it may serve as a window into the significant sociohistorical trends affecting millennials.

One television show that embodies this millennial form of dark humor and is largely impactful across digital platforms is Rick and Morty, an Adult Swim animated comedy. Justin Roiland and Dan Harmon’s Rick and Morty, once just the center of a cult following, has become a powerhouse television franchise in recent years. The Internet Movie Database (IMDB) ranked it as the 7th best show of all time as of 2017. Much of the show’s popularity can be attributed to its millennial viewers. One million people between the

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ages of 18 and 49 watched the season three premiere and many influential online media outlets have referred to it as “Millennials’ Favorite TV show” and the “No. 1 TV Comedy Among Millennials.” The purpose of my research is to examine the philosophical significance of absurdist humor in *Rick and Morty* and to explore why this brand of humor resonates so deeply within the millennial cohort.

*Rick and Morty* is an adult animated show about the adventures of Rick—a twisted, cynical, genius scientist—and Morty—his naive and insecure grandson. It explores, and often trivializes, traditional science fiction tropes using clever and dark humor, with the fundamental example being the perverse spin on *Back to the Future*’s Doc and Marty character dynamic. However, science fiction is not the only topic that this show trivializes. *Rick and Morty* is full of rich references to existential and absurdist philosophy, which are consistently used to satirize and belittle traditional social constructs such as the institutions of marriage, family, religion, and government.

There is much debate surrounding Absurdism, which began as a branch of existentialism. For the purpose of this paper, I will primarily focus on the interpretations of Albert Camus and Thomas Nagel. Camus, within the context of World War II and its pointless trauma, became the first philosopher to conceptualize absurdity in the particular meaning it has for us today. 

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Camus defines the absurd as the “divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints.” Nagel is a prominent American philosopher who explored Absurdism in the 1970s while trying to navigate the philosophical implications of modern science. Nagel describes the condition of absurdity as “the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt.” Camus and Nagel agree on the basic premise of Absurdism in most respects, in that nothing inherently matters and the search for meaning is futile. There is, however, divergence when it comes to how one should approach the absurdity that is life, which I explore at the end of the paper. Rick and Morty repeatedly mirrors these philosophical ideals through its use of situational and dialogue-based irony.

I argue that the explanation for Rick and Morty's absurdist appeal to millennials transcends the sole purpose of entertainment. There are many socio-historical phenomena that can explain why millennials would be drawn to this escapist brand of comedy. Millennials have grown up in a world that promised them everything but neglected to deliver. According to the Pew Research Center study in 2014, millennials are the “first in the modern era to have higher levels of student loan debt, poverty and unemployment, and lower levels of wealth and personal income than their two immediate predecessor generations.” On top of this economic instability, millennials also experience institutional uncertainty at unprecedented levels. Millennials have exhibited lower involvement and trust in traditional

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14 Ibid: Millennials have reached “at (or near) the highest levels of political and religious disaffiliation recorded in the quarter-century polling these topics”
institutions such as religion, marriage, and politics.\textsuperscript{15} Compound this with the chaotic and anxiety-inducing nature of the Information Era\textsuperscript{16} that they have grown up in, and one starts to see the negative psychological effects of it all, as much research has shown.\textsuperscript{17} The absurdist humor of \textit{Rick and Morty} provides the millenial generation with a much-needed trivialization of all the stressful factors in their lives. Instead of trying endlessly to find meaning in it all, \textit{Rick and Morty}'s philosophy encourages disenchanted youth to respond to that which they cannot change with irony, laughter, and a sense of absurdity.

\textit{Rick and Morty as an Absurd Work}

\textit{Devoid of meaning}

The pointlessness of the search for meaning in the context of a silent, apathetic universe is inherent to Absurdist philosophy and the works influenced by it. Camus emphasizes two certainties of the human condition, the “appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle,” both of which are irreconcilable.\textsuperscript{18} He goes on to discuss philosophical temptations that people find on their mental path to the absurd: “History is not lacking in either religions or prophets, even without gods. [Man] is asked to leap. All he

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Albert Camus: 6.
\end{itemize}
The Forum

can reply is that he doesn’t fully understand.” The condition of absurdity is omnipresent regardless of theological affiliation; however, it is all the more obvious when that leap of faith is made. *Rick and Morty* capitalizes on the incongruity of these religious gambles using satire, one of the best examples being the episode “Get Schwifty.” In this episode, an alien entity visits earth in the form of a huge head in the sky. The arrival of the head interferes with Earth’s gravity, causing global environmental disasters. The town is disheveled and as the local Pastor is attempting to retain faith, the principal of the high school interjects:

Hi, Principal Vagina. The name’s real, possibly Scandinavian. I’m just gonna come out and make this pitch. The old gods are dead. Fuck all previous existing religions. All hail the one true god, the giant head in the sky. [Pastor Bob tries to object] Bob, Bob, I get it. But unless this [holding up cross necklace] can beat that [pointing to the giant head in the sky]. What have you done for me lately? So if you wanna excuse me, I’m going out on the sidewalk and dropping my knees and pledging my eternal soul to the thing that literally controls the weather!20

The town ends up forming the cult of Headism with rules based on loose interpretations of verbal and nonverbal gestures made by the head. Meanwhile, Rick recognizes what is actually happening. The truth of the head is perhaps the most absurd part of this all: it is an intergalactic reality television show called *Planet Music* in which planets compete to make the catchiest song, and planets that are disqualified get disintegrated. Rick and Morty end up saving the day with the song “Get Schwifty,” instigating Headism’s sheepish disbanding.21 “Get Schwifty” highlights the illogical ambiguity of faith and the uncertain interpretations that accompany it. As Camus puts

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19 Albert Camus: 18.
21 Ibid.
it, the evidence of the absurd exists within “[our] nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together.”22 Rick and Morty’s use of cosmic horror, which challenges the notion that humanity is at the center of the cosmos, allows the show to play with themes of God or the universe as a looming, anonymous presence that is indifferent towards us—a central basis of Absurdism. Dan Harmon, a co-creator of the show, comments on this theme: “That is a fun thing for me, the idea that we have gods, we search for meaning, and we think of that as the highest thought we can have...Like [American mythologist Joseph] Campbell calls God an impersonal cosmic force, that’s the most terrifying thing about it, it doesn’t give a fuck about you.”23

**Trivializing What Matters Most**

In the face of this universal deafening silence, many people attempt to escape individual existential concerns by joining a larger cause—such as religion, work, or government—or placing faith in a traditional value—like love or family. Nagel does not exclude these larger purposes in his Absurdist critique:

One is supposed to behold and partake of the glory of God, for example, in a way in which chickens do not share in the glory of coq au vin. The same is true of service to a state, a movement, or a revolution. People can come to feel, when they are part of something bigger, that it is part of them too. They worry less about what is peculiar to themselves, but identify enough with the larger enterprise to find their role in it fulfilling. However, any such larger purpose can be put in doubt in the same way that the aims of an individual life can be, and for the same reasons.24

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22 Albert Camus: 17.
24 Thomas Nagel: 721.
Higher establishments and the traditions accompanying them are vulnerable to the same criticisms of individuals in an absurd world. When Morty asks Rick for help with the science-fair, Jerry (Rick’s son-in-law) objects with a twinge of insecurity, “Well, I mean, traditionally science-fairs are a father-son thing.” This prompts Rick to retort, “Well, scientifically, traditions are an idiot thing.” Traditions are comforting for what Absurdist see as philosophically weak-minded people. Rick, and the show in general, make it a point to deconstruct the conventional values that allow most people to sleep at night. In the pilot, Rick expresses his doubts about the institution of education to his son-in-law:

I’ll tell you how I feel about school, Jerry. It’s a waste of time. Bunch of people runnin’ around bumpin’ into each other, got a guy up front says “2 + 2,” and the people in the back say, “4.” Then the bell rings and they give you a carton of milk and a piece of paper that says you can go take a dump or somethin’. I mean, it’s not a place for smart people, Jerry. I know that’s not a popular opinion, but that’s my two cents on the issue.26

The education system is a fundamental element to the social construction of our society. While education provides the youth—among others—with a higher purpose, both Absurdist philosophy and Rick reject the legitimate presence of one. Since its conception, the educational establishment has functioned as a means of indoctrinating and reproducing the presence of authority. Sociologist Phillip Jackson identified this phenomenon as the hidden curriculum, “that convert pattern of socialization which prepares students to function in the existing workplace and in other social/political

26 *Rick and Morty*, Season 1, episode 1, “Pilot,” directed by Justin Roiland, aired 2 December 2013 on Adult Swim, Hulu
spheres.” In addition to the explicit content within the education curriculum, there is an overarching narrative that streamlines students into society by legitimizing “limited and partial standards of knowing as unquestioned truths,” such as the status quo power structure, capitalist economy, and U.S. political system. From this standpoint, the show’s indictment of the education system reaches much further into society’s framework.

Rick and Morty refuses to accept any of these deep-rooted bodies of power. The episode “Close Rick-counters of the Rick Kind,” introduces the Council of Ricks, a governing body of Ricks from alternate dimensions. When they bring in the original Rick, accusing him of crimes against the council, he yells to them: “I’m the Rick, and so were the rest of you before you formed this stupid alliance. You wanted to be safe from the government, so you became a stupid government. That makes every Rick here less Rick than me.” Rick holds disdain for any institution, even one consisting completely of infinite versions of himself.

On another level, there is the institution of marriage and the belief in love, both of which are deeply-embedded values that operate as substitutes for purpose. Rick holds nothing sacred:

Listen Morty, I hate to break it to you, but what people call “love” is just a chemical reaction that compels animals to breed. It hits hard, Morty, then it slowly fades, leaving you stranded in a failing marriage. I did it. Your parents are gonna do it. Break the cycle, Morty. Rise above. Focus on science.

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28 Ibid, 22.
30 Rick and Morty, Season 1, episode 9, “Rick Potion #9,” directed by Stephen Sandoval, aired 27 January 2014 on Adult Swim, Hulu.
This quote may seem hopeless, and that’s because it is. Hope is philosophical suicide to Camus, who asserts that people who make leaps of faith “deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them.” This means that holding faith in any higher purpose that materialized under the shadow that the death of God left on our society would go against Absurdist philosophy. Rick knows this and subscribes to it—well, subscribes to it loosely with little care for rhyme or reason, as any true Absurdist would. In one episode Jerry is jealous of his wife Beth’s coworker, so Rick makes a sexual joke about it to get under his skin. Summer yells out, “Grandpa, so gross! You’re talking about my mom.” Rick comes back, “Well, she’s my daughter, Summer. I outrank you—or family means nothing, in which case don’t play that card.” No matter the argumentative avenue Rick takes as he fumbles around cultural tenets, one philosophy always holds true: nothing matters either way.

**Pull the Rug Right Out From Under You**

To drive home the Absurdist point that searching for meaning is pointless, *Rick and Morty* constantly lures in the audience by flirting with the possibility of purpose, just to pull the rug right out from under them. Camus makes this human tendency clear: “But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world...This is all I can discern clearly in this measureless universe where my adventure takes place.” And within that context is where Rick and Morty’s adventures just begin. Starting in the pilot episode, Rick takes Morty to another

31 Albert Camus: 11.
32 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*: “The Parable of the Madman (1882, 1887). 125; Walter Kaufmann ed. (New York: Vintage, 1964): 181-2. “Whither is God? ...I will tell you. We have killed him -- you and I. All of us are his murderers...What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?”
33 *Rick and Morty*, Season 1, episode 9, “Rick Potion #9,” directed by Stephen Sandoval, aired 27 January 2014 on Adult Swim, Hulu.
34 Albert Camus: 7.
dimension on a mission for invaluable space seeds. When Morty becomes apprehensive, expressing, “Oh man, Rick. I’m looking around this place, and I’m starting to work up some anxiety about this whole thing.” Rick responds with a compelling and touching speech:

All right, all right, calm down. Listen to me, Morty. I know that new situations can be intimidating. You’re looking around, and it’s all scary and different, but, you know, m-meeting them head on, charging right into them like a bull, that’s how we grow as people. I’m no stranger to scary situations. I deal with them all the time. Now, if you stick with me, Morty, we’re gonna be-

And just then, a giant alien monster appears behind them and Rick screams, “HOLY CRAP, MORTY RUN!!!” As they take off in fear, Rick juxtaposes his previous pep talk, “I’ve never seen that thing before in my life. I don’t even know what the hell it is! We got to get out of here, Morty! It’s gonna kill us! We’re gonna die! We’re gonna die Morty!” And then the scene cuts to black.35

The show allows its viewers to get sentimental with a touching speech from an empathetic grandpa to grandson, just to expose the insincerity immediately thereafter. This instance lays the foundation for absurdities that later peak within the larger narrative of the series.

The broader storyline of the show mirrors this dismissal of purpose, often allowing the audience to impose their own meaning onto the events, just to make the absence of it that much more obvious. The season two finale, “The Wedding Squanchers,” shows Rick’s trademark cynicism shed away to emotional exposure when he gives a speech at his good friend Birdperson’s intergalactic wedding:

35 Rick and Morty, Season 1, episode 1, “Pilot,” directed by Justin Roiland, aired 2 December 2013 on Adult Swim, Hulu.
Listen, I’m not the nicest guy in the Universe because I’m the smartest. And being nice is something stupid people do to hedge their bets. Now, I haven’t been exactly subtle about how little I trust marriage. I couldn’t make it work, and I could turn a black hole into a sun, so at a certain point, you’ve got to ask yourself what are the odds this is legit and not just some big lie we’re all telling ourselves because we’re afraid to die alone? Because, you know, that’s exactly how we all die ... alone. But ... but ... Here’s the thing. Birdperson is my best friend, and if he loves Tammy, well, then I love Tammy, too. To friendship, to love, and to my greatest adventure yet ... opening myself up to others.\textsuperscript{36}

Following Rick’s rare vulnerability, the bride Tammy gives a speech where she reveals herself to be an undercover agent with the intergalactic federation. Chaos then ensues: the intergalactic federation raids the wedding and Tammy kills Birdperson, forcing the Smith family to go into hiding outside earth.\textsuperscript{37} The one time Rick decides to open up in the entire series, the universe punishes him for it. After this, the show no longer confines its general cynicism to Rick’s philosophy, but also allows it to play out in its multiverse.\textsuperscript{38} At the end of the finale, Rick turns himself in to the intergalactic federation, presumably sacrificing himself so that his family could return to normal(ish) lives on an Earth that had just been annexed by the intergalactic federation. This cliffhanger left its audience wondering if Rick actually acted altruistically and what that would mean for the message of the show. This sets the stage for \textit{Rick and Morty} to reinforce itself as an absurdist work using an unlikely—albeit ridiculous—symbol: Szechuan sauce.

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Rick and Morty}, Season 2, episode 10, “The Wedding Squanchers,” directed by Wes Archer, aired 4 October 2015 on Adult Swim, Hulu.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
After an almost two-year recess, *Rick and Morty* returned with a reverse April fools prank by dropping the season three premiere, “The Rickshank Redemption,” early on April 1, 2017. From the title, one might assume that Rick finds a way out of prison, makes things right on Earth, and genuinely redeems himself as a noble hero. The first two assumptions are correct. The episode begins with an intergalactic federation agent interrogating Rick for scientific secrets inside of his mind. Under the threat of them melting his brain, Rick agrees to visit the memory of the day he invented the interdimensional travel, on the condition that he drives. He makes an unannounced detour to a McDonald’s drive-thru, where Rick first introduces the now infamous Szechuan sauce: “In 1998, they had this promotion for the Disney film ‘Mulan,’ where they—they created a new sauce for the McNuggets called Szechuan sauce, and it’s delicious! And then they got rid of it, and now it’s gone. This is the only place we’re gonna be able to try it, is in my memory.” To which the agent responds, “Rick, you’re doing this while your brain is melting.” Rick then manipulates the agent by taking him to a fabricated origin story in which he invented interdimensional travel to avenge his dead wife. With the counterfeit formula, the agent eagerly reports back to his supervisors, while Rick takes control of the entire prison system and proceeds to escape space prison, topple the intergalactic federation, and return home to his family (prompting Jerry to move out) in godlike fashion. After Rick’s redemptive journey, thought to reveal an inherently meaningful character, he pulls the rug right out from under the audience once again in his now famous Szechuan sauce rant to Morty, where he exposes his grand gesture as a selfish ploy and reveals his true motivation,

I’ll go out and I’ll find some more of that Mulan Szechuan teriyaki dipping sauce, Morty. Because that’s what this is all about, Morty. That’s my one-armed man! I’m not driven by avenging my dead family, Morty! That was fake. I—I’m driven by finding that McNugget sauce. I want that Mulan McNugget sauce, Morty! That’s my series arc, Morty. If it takes nine sea-
sons, I want my McNugget dipping sauce, Szechuan sauce, Morty.39

No, the meaning of life is not Szechuan sauce—as tangy and delicious as that would be. The point is that there is no point. When you subscribe to an absurdist philosophy in an absurd world, what’s the difference between motivation by family or motivation by a McDonald’s promotional dipping sauce from ’98? Of all the absurdities on the show, this is the ultimate one. And the audience loved it, pushing the nonsense into real life. There were riots over McDonald’s Szechuan sauce, even prompting an in-depth New York Times article on the phenomenon.40 Despite the apparent ridiculousness of those riots, there is much more significance to this than a quirky hype.

The Millennial Mindset
Who Are They and Why Do They Like Szechuan Satire so Much?

Rick and Morty has become immensely popular in recent years and now enjoys cult status thanks to its dedicated fan base. Much like Szechuan sauce is to Rick, the show’s “one-armed man” driving this hype would appear to be the millennials. One online article framed this surge in engagement: “As it turns out, Rick and Morty has basically conquered pop culture in any way that you could measure for a millennial audience.”41 Internet media outlets featured headlines such as “Why Adult Swim’s ‘Rick and Morty’ is

Millennials’ Favorite TV Show” and “Rick and Morty is Now the No. 1 Comedy Among Millennials.” The numbers seem to support these claims: according to stats from Nielsion, Rick and Morty earned the title of 2017’s #1 comedy on all of TV for people aged 18-34. These are the highest ratings in the network’s history. Christina Miller, the president of Cartoon Network and Adult Swim is quoted as saying: “Rick and Morty is truly what a modern day hit looks like across multiple screens and multiple touch points. Dan and Justin have created a world, not just a show, and fans are completely engaged.” What is it about the millennial generation that makes them so receptive to the absurdist humor of Rick and Morty?

Millennials consist of American youth born between 1982 and 2000. As of 2015, the US census estimated their size at 83.1 million people, representing over one quarter of the US population. Scholars most popularly credit Neil Howe and William Strauss with coining the term ‘millennials,’ which they have used to associate with growing up in a cultural shift regarding par-

47 Ibid.
Many socio-historical factors contribute to the unique upbringing of this cohort—factors which have generated some equally unique results. I have narrowed down the explanation of millennial infatuation with *Rick and Morty* and absurdist humor to three important sociological contexts: the contrast between upbringing and reality, expedited modernity, and rapidly changing information structures. All of these set the stage for a distinctive style of humor that materialized as a means of comprehending the absurdities of life.

**High Expectations vs. Realities of Modernization and Infobesity**

The coddled upbringing of the millennials generally translates to high expectations, in stark contrast to reality. As mentioned above, the millennial generation came into the world as a parenting social experiment of sorts, with a strong emphasis on sheltering. The self-esteem movement had a large impact on this generation’s perception of the world. Jean Twenge, a widely published psychologist who specializes in intergenerational studies, described an aspect of this mentality as the “you can be anything you want to be” culture.\(^4\) One of her studies in 2002 showed that 80% of sophomores in high school expected to graduate from a four-year university, compared to just 59% in 1990, just twelve years before.\(^5\) Those expectations didn’t necessarily pan out for earlier millennials: “In 1999, teens predicted that they would be earning, on average, $75,000 a year by the time they were 30. The average income of a 30-year-old that year? —$27,000, or around a third of the teens’ aspirations.”\(^6\) As indicated in the introduction, broader statistics reflect this generational let-down: according to the Pew Research Center in 2014, “millennials are the first in modern era to have higher levels of

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\(^6\) Ibid, 78.
\(^7\) Ibid, 79.
student loan debt, poverty and unemployment, and lower levels of wealth and personal income than their two immediate predecessor generations had at the same stage of their life cycles.\textsuperscript{52} Pew Research Center attributed these economic circumstances to impact from the Great Recession of 2008 and the long-term effects of globalization and technological change on the US workforce,\textsuperscript{53} which leads to the next point: rapid modernization.

Millennials grew up in a time of rapid change like no generation had experienced before. Amy Johnson, in her honors thesis for Wellesley College on the millennial generation’s coming-of-age process, summed this idea up well:

> While all living generations in the United States are influenced by the reality of the 21st century – a fully modernized society where technology is rapidly advancing, constant communication and connection is expected, and the individual is often prioritized over the community – Millennials have the distinction of coming of age during this era of uncertainty.\textsuperscript{54}

In this time of overwhelming modernization, millennials are known to distance themselves from traditional institutions. A 2014 Pew Research Center survey revealed that approximately three in ten millennials don’t affiliate with any religion and that half of them self-describe as politically independent—at (or near) the highest levels of political and religious disaffiliation since Pew Research began polling these topics twenty-five years ago.\textsuperscript{55} They have also observed similar trends in millennials distancing themselves from the institution of marriage.\textsuperscript{56} Modernization is just one of the many dizzying social forces

\textsuperscript{53} Pew Research Center, “Millennials in Adulthood,” (2014)
\textsuperscript{55} Pew Research Center, “Millennials in Adulthood,” (2014)
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
characteristic of the twenty-first century. The rapidly growing nature of the information era has further intensified the impact of globalization.

It is difficult to picture within the context of today, but the first incidence of a documented concern with ‘information overload’ was in 1852 from the annual report of the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, which voiced concerns on the sheer quantity of information,

About twenty thousand volumes ... purporting to be additions to the sum of human knowledge, are published annually; and unless this mass be properly arranged, and the means furnished by which its contents may be ascertained, literature and science will be overwhelmed by their own unwieldy bulk.\(^{57}\)

A person from in 1852 could not even begin to truly fathom what was to come. Some fast facts to compare: more information was created in the past 30 years than in the previous 5,000 years; the number of documents on the Internet doubled from 400 million to 800 million between 1998 and 2000; and, allowing 30 minutes per document, it would take over 20,000 years to read the entire internet.\(^{58}\) However, quantity is not the only issue; it is also the diversity of media that contributes to contemporary ‘information overload.’ Information overload is such a widespread phenomenon in our society, that there are multiple concepts for it, such as information pathologies, infobesity, information avoidance, information anxiety, and library anxiety. One concept I find to be particularly relevant to millennials is infobesity, which is used to describe a situation of "information overload, particularly if caused by a diet of information, akin to feasting on fast food."\(^{59}\) The information is there and the millennials are definitely consuming it. The Pew


\(^{58}\) Ibid, 184.

\(^{59}\) Ibid, 185.
Research Center referred to millennials as “digital natives,” who are naturally the most avid users of online platforms. According to a different Pew Research Center study in 2013, social media involvement for people aged 18-29 increased by 1,000 percent in the past eight years. Also in 2013, The Wall Street Journal found that, on average, millennials spend 3 hours and 12 minutes everyday engaging with social media. And, according to Experion Simmons, up to 98 percent of college students are on social media. This digital engagement has a dark side, as Johnson puts it:

In the added complexity of the 21st century, individuals must be self-aware and engage with others both in-person and online, are constantly surrounded by excessive stimuli (such as emails, text messages, news reports, and political articles), and are presented with numerous opportunities to self-reflect through social media…. today’s society requires an ability to create and control one’s image both online and in-person.

IPhones, a fundamental part of the millennial identity, serve as an omnipresent reminder of the ever-intensifying mass of information that comes with postmodern society.

Disenchanted Youth: The Sadly Honest Cliché

Overly optimistic (though well-intended) parenting practices intersect with a pessimistic economy, modernization, and a rapidly changing information media environment, leading to anxiety, isolation, and depression. Mental

62 Lauren Heck, “A generation on edge: A look at millennials and mental health,”
63 Ibid.
64 Amy Johnson: 11.
health issues are particularly potent in modern college students, all of whom are members of the millennial cohort. Judith Green, director of the Center for Health and Campus Services at Ramapo College, stated, “This generation has grown up with instant access via the internet to everything. This has led to challenges with frustration tolerance and delaying gratification,”65 From this, millennials have developed a tendency to hold onto negative emotions, which leads to self-harming behaviors.66 A Center of Collegiate Mental Health study used data from 136 institutions in 2017 to find that, of all the students who had sought help, 26% admitted to intentionally hurting themselves and 33.2% had considered suicide—both numbers being higher than those in previous years.67 The cross-generational trends show the distinctiveness of this phenomenon: for Americans born before 1915, only 1% to 2% reported a major depressive episode in their lifetimes. As of 2006, that number was estimated between 15 and 20%, with some studies approximating the number closer to 50%.68 According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, more than 5 million college students struggle with mental health, with rates of anxiety and depression in particular skyrocketing in what many call a “crisis of mental health on college campuses.”69 It would be hard to argue against the assertion that millennials are disenchanted, which brings up the philosophical dilemma that is how to respond to the absurdities of life.

66 Ibid.
**Responding to Absurdity**

On one of Rick and Morty’s adventures, they essentially destroy the entire world. Rick finds a solution that would take things back to normal, “relatively speaking.” When Rick and Morty transport to this “solution,” Rick responds to Morty’s evident panic,

Shut up and listen to me! It’s fine. Everything is fine. There’s an infinite number of realities, Morty, and in a few dozen of those, I got lucky and turned everything back to normal. I just had to find one of those realities in which we also happen to both die around this time. Now we can just slip into the place of our dead selves in this reality and everything will be fine. We’re not skipping a beat, Morty. Now, help me with these bodies.

Morty then asks, shaking, “What about the reality we left behind?” Rick, insightful as ever, alleviates his grandson’s anxieties: “What about the reality where Hitler cured cancer, Morty? The answer is don’t think about it.” Don’t think about it. If the absurdity of life is indeed essential and inescapable, as Camus and Nagel suggest, what good would incessantly thinking about it do? Overthinking would just add more questions to a cosmically indifferent world. Morty’s character progression towards Absurdist recognition and unconcern becomes evident two episodes later, when the parents unintentionally reveal to Summer that she was a regretted prom night accident who thwarted their life dreams. Summer storms upstairs threatening to run away, and Morty follows. The dialogue starts when Morty asks if he can show her something:

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70 *Rick and Morty*, Season 1, episode 9, “Rick Potion #9,” directed by Stephen Sandoval, aired 27 January 2014 on Adult Swim, Hulu.
71 Albert Camus: 11. “I judge the notion of the absurd to be essential and consider that it can stand as the first of my truths.”
72 Thomas Nagel: 718. “The sense that life as a whole is absurd arises when we perceive, perhaps dimly, an inflated pretension or aspiration which is inseparable from the continuation of human life and which makes its absurdity inescapable, short of escape from life itself.”
**Summer:** Morty, no offense, but a drawing of me you made when you were 8 isn’t gonna make me feel like less of an accident.

**Morty:** That, out there. That’s my grave. [pointing outside the window to the backyard]...On one of our adventures, Rick and I basically destroyed the whole world. So we bailed on that reality, and we came to this one. Because in this one, the world wasn’t destroyed. And in this one, we were dead. So we came here, a-a-and we buried ourselves, and we took their place. And every morning, Summer, I eat breakfast, 20 yards away from my own rotting corpse.

**Summer:** So you’re not my brother?

**Morty:** I’m better than your brother. I’m a version of your brother you can trust when he says, “Don’t run.” Nobody exists on purpose, nobody belongs anywhere, everybody’s gonna die. Come watch TV.

*Come watch TV. Don’t think about it.* Morty adopted Rick’s tactful indifference toward the overarching absurdities and relatively petty anxieties of life. Summer directly embraces this attitude later in the episode, too. Jerry asks Summer and Morty which parent they would pick if he and Beth were to split, to which Summer responds, “Doesn’t matter.” Morty and Summer high five and go back to watching TV.73

The acceptance of absurdity is central to both Camus and Nagel, though they disagree on what comes next. While Camus maintains an alluring combination of scorn and optimism,74 Nagel forges a path for the interpretation of Absurdist comedy as a coping mechanism:

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74 Albert Camus: 23. “There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.”
It need not be a matter for agony unless we make it so. Nor need it evoke a defiant contempt of a fate that allows us to feel brave or proud. Such dramatics, even if carried on in private, betray a failure to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation. If sub specie aeternitatis there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn’t matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair.  

*Rick and Morty* embraces the cosmic unimportance of any given situation and utilizes comedic irony anytime the show’s mood swings too close to heroism or despair. While racing against time for their lives, Rick yells to Morty, “Quick, Morty, you've got to turn into a car...A long time ago, I implanted you with a subdermal chip that could call upon dormant nanobots in your bloodstream to restructure your anatomy and turn you into a car. Concentrate, Morty. Concentrate and turn into a car, Morty.” Just as the screen dramatically pans in on Morty concentrating, Rick cuts in, “Never mind. Here’s a taxi. Get in. It’s fine.”  

Although most of the analysis in this paper has focused on the more serious, societal aspects of absurdity, the true beauty of *Rick and Morty* lies in its subtle ironies, of which there are plenty. While this brand of humor comes off as irrelevant and outright dumb to many, the genuine impact of the show’s philosophy has a genuine impact on its viewers. Fans of the show and members of the millennial cohort express their feelings online:

*From Veronica Faison on The Odyssey:*

It sounds cruel and cold, but we’ve reached the point where we hear bad things happening so often that we are unable to mourn things like we should. Instead of dealing with tragedy head-on, we exploit its

75 Thomas Nagel: 727.  
76 *Rick and Morty*, Season 2, episode 6, “The Ricks Must Be Crazy,” directed by Dominic Polcino, aired 30 August 2015 on Adult Swim, Hulu.
irony... That's the way we cope with problems. We laugh. We laugh to keep from crying.”

*From Kelly Benning on Comicverse:*  
Like the post-WWI world of the Dadas (though obviously less violent), the political world doesn’t make a whole lot of sense anymore and the logic and reasoning of the past doesn’t seem to apply... Absurdism provided this outlet because it makes the real-life absurdity feel a little more bearable... Millennials identify with absurdist humor because, while teetering on the line towards escapism, the humor does offer a direct criticism of the current state of the world.

*From Sarah Gibb on Medium:*  
Not quite as angry as Nietzsche but not quite as hopeful as Camus, we experience the same purposelessness that has plagued everyone who has ever lived, but instead of fighting it with intense psychological insight or meditative reasoning we turn towards memes, Netflix, and a variety of other distractions. Comedy is the unsung hero of our age, turning shitty things into shitty jokes, and making everything terrible on the news a little more stomachable. It’s from this needed juxtaposition of humor and harsh reality that Adult Swim’s hit show, Rick and Morty, was born.

*And, lastly, from Christian Zeitler on Study Break:*  
[The show’s message is] a call to ride out the absurd waves of chaos that

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constitute life by finding things you like, things that entertain you or people that you love. It is a sentiment that finds itself right at home with today’s youth and with internet culture in general. Thus, the show has become an anthem for disillusioned young people everywhere.\(^80\)

All of these opinions vaguely mirror the past calls of Absurdism, moments in history when people feel displaced or out of control often produce absurdist expressions, such as Dadaism in response to WWI, or absurdist philosophy like Camus in the wake of WWII, both of which are historical peaks of unforgiving chaos on earth. Philosopher David Sherman wrote on the intellectual responses to historical moments like WWII: “The forms in which the malaise is expressed surely have changed, but the major breakdown in the enlightenment project’s non-negotiables (capitalism, the democratic state, and, more generally, the reconciling power of reason itself) has left many with a sense of being adrift.”\(^81\) The disorienting sociohistorical context in which millennials grew up reflects these previous institutional breakdowns and has yielded the same disenchanted reaction. The forms of expression have definitely changed, especially with new online platforms, and it is easy to argue that millennials have an overwhelming sense of being adrift. 21st century philosopher Bob Plant asserts this ironic response to absurdity: “[Not to suggest] that laughter provides a solution to – or convenient ‘escape’ from – the absurd...Acknowledging the appropriateness of laughter does, however, offer a way of living with the experience of absurdity if and when it arises. Perhaps that is as much as we can (seriously) hope for.”\(^82\) Though millennials experience feelings of looming uncertainty, they get to feel and express it together through new forms of communication—for better or for worse. When asked if he agrees with Rick that nothing means anything, co-creator Dan Harmon responded:


No I do not, because the knowledge that nothing matters, while accurate, gets you nowhere. The planet is dying, the sun is exploding, the universe is cooling, nothing’s gonna matter, the further back you pull, the more that truth will endure. But, when you zoom in on earth, when you zoom into a family, when you zoom into a human brain and a childhood and an experience, you see all these things that matter. We have this fleeting chance to participate in an illusion called, ‘I love my girlfriend’ ‘I love my dog.’ How is that not better? Knowing the truth, which is that nothing matters, can actually save you in those moments. Once you get through that terrifying threshold of accepting that, then every place is the center of the universe and every moment is the most important moment and everything is the meaning of life.\textsuperscript{83}

Though Harmon doesn’t identify with Rick’s approach to absurdity at its core, he has created through Rick a powerful character and an absurd hero. Camus was the first to conceptualize the absurd hero in his essay \textit{The Myth of Sisyphus}. Based on the Greek legend, the gods condemned Sisyphus to roll a boulder to the top of a mountain, only to have it fall back down each time, as punishment for disobeying them. To Camus, Sisyphus “is [the absurd hero], as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing.”\textsuperscript{84} Richard Boyd Hauck, author of \textit{Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and “The Absurd” in American Humorous Fiction}, explores the unique American take on absurd heroes: “The American absurdist postulates nihilism cheerfully and his cheerfulness automatically counters his nihilism. He knows that laughter is purely arbitrary. Were he to invent a Sisyphus, he would give him a colossal and cosmic sense of humor.”\textsuperscript{85}

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  \item \textsuperscript{84} Albert Camus: 23.
  \item \textsuperscript{85} Richard Boyd Hauck, \textit{A Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and “The Absurd” in American Humorous Fiction} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971).
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Once one accepts the inescapable nature of absurdity, one must move on, as Rick and Morty’s millennial audience aims to do. Streamlining with Harmon, even if life is pointless from an Absurdist perspective, that does not rob it of all other adjectives. Camus makes the point that “what counts is not the best living but the most living.” 86 This is how Rick lives his life. This fictional character’s real effect on a disenchanted generation sets an example that challenges the high expectations for life that they have grown up with. The show, through its trademark dark humor and absurdist perspective, has flourished in an environment of markedly low institutional involvement, chaotic information structures, mental health epidemics, and dizzying changes. Getting to the heart of its millennial appeal, Rick and Morty not only reflects the existential concerns of its viewers, but also provides a philosophical framework from which to interpret the disorder that is postmodern America.

86 Albert Camus: 21.
Bibliography


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Lauren is a fourth-year history major, with a minor in art history. Her research interests include feminist art studies, the 1970s and the history of prostitution. In her free time, she enjoys sipping overpriced coffee, pretending she does yoga, and watching RuPaul’s Drag Race. After graduation, she will move to Los Angeles to teach middle school history and pursue an MA in urban education with Teach for America.

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