

Protecting the Bookshelf: Reading at the Intersection of Art and Morality

by

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Abstract

The experience of learning an unanticipated truth is not an infrequent one; as a curious society, we are constantly unearthing new information about the people, places, and things surrounding us. In contemporary society, it seems, the experience of acquiring uneasy truths about people whom we revere has become increasingly commonplace. This thesis is rooted in the exploration of what we do next – what we do with the things put forth in the world by the people about whom we learn these uncomfortable truths about. Specifically, this thesis will examine authors who have been accused of sexual misconduct in recent years and make an argument for how we should read their books once we have their truths in tow. Titled “Protecting the Bookshelf,” this thesis will grapple with the difficulties inherent in questions surrounding morality, ultimately arguing in favor of continuing to read and engage with “good” art by “bad” people but developing a new and nuanced way to do so given the circumstances.

Beginning with a strong articulation of this topic’s significance in contemporary culture, this thesis foregrounds the importance of continuing to read while also being in touch with the world and the truths held by those in it – even when they are unexpected. Clarifying why this thesis focuses on the medium of literature, substantiating what the context of the current time period entails, and demarcating certain disclaimers that the subjectivity of this topic requires, the Introduction will serve as an indicator of the timeliness and necessity of doing this work. This thesis then continues with an overview of some of the ways reading has looked across time. Through exploration of New Criticism and Biographical Criticism reading methods, the first chapter seeks to not only establish understanding of the restrictions employed by these types of readings, but also to carve out the space for the new type of reading that this thesis will provide.

The second chapter will provide language to describe the Methodology hinted at in the chapter before. By explaining the method of thinking on two tracks – the tracks being that of thinking about the text on its own terms and thinking about the cultural conversation around it, the Methodology section emphasizes asking questions and lingering alongside those questions in order to protect both the bookshelf and our morality.

Following this chapter are three case studies of novels written by authors who have been accused of sexual misconduct: *Ten Little Indians* by Sherman Alexie, *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz. These case studies will serve as a schematic read – a read along of the experience of picking up a book by a person we know intolerable truths about and reading. Ultimately, once the presence of “good” art by “bad” people is established, this thesis will seek to forge a path tracking where we go next.

Keywords: art, morality, author, literature, contemporary

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Introduction

There is Hemingway on my shelf and Faulkner and Updike and Dickens, and wow, those are a lot of alcoholic and abusive male authors.

– Drew Kiser

I was halfway through reading *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* when the author, Pulitzer Prize winner Junot Diaz, was accused of sexual misconduct and misogynistic behavior.¹ I remember feeling as though I had been personally offended by this accusation; what was I supposed to do now? I was already hooked on the novel, but I couldn't possibly support this societal outlaw; I couldn't read the words that he himself had creatively expressed – could I? Faced with this dilemma and slowly starting to accept its prevalence in contemporary culture, I started my thesis project with a key question in mind: how do we evaluate and interact with “good” art by “bad” people? This led to a larger, arguably more pressing question: can we separate an artist from their art? This thesis has shifted and evolved too many times to count as it has come to fruition but has maintained these key questions. I have sought to respect and address the gravity with which these moral questions are discussed in contemporary culture.

Indeed, many before me have struggled as their favorite authors, filmmakers, musicians, and comedians have joined the ranks of sullied names. The intersection of art and morality is a huge topic, and one that many scholars and thinkers have grappled with. However, the majority of

¹ Kristine Phillips, "Pulitzer Prize-winning Author Junot Diaz Accused of Sexual Misconduct, Misogynistic Behavior" in *The Washington Post*. May 06, 2018. Accessed December 09, 2018.

scholarship dedicated to what happens when “bad” people make “good” art have stopped before posing a solution. In some cases, readers and reviewers have implicitly endorsed the principles of New Criticism (which will be discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis) as means of coping with the misdeeds of artists. Through focusing solely on the words on the page, New Criticism affords readers the ability to excuse any negative qualities of the person by means of omission. In contrast, this thesis will seek to look the artist in the face, acknowledge any moral transgressions they have carried out, and still, engage with the art – but to do so in a new way. In other words, this thesis will provide a combined method for reading, watching, listening, and altogether engaging with art by “bad” people without being out of touch with the world.

My references above to “bad” people brings up an important stipulation of this thesis; that I will be operating wholly under my own moral compass and aesthetic taste with respect to what makes a person “bad” or a work of art “good,” respectively. And though I am surely *not* the arbiter of morality, I am writing with a slew of scholarship in tow that has deemed certain actions as morally reprehensible (i.e. “bad”), and certain recognized artists and art as being “good” based on both aesthetic judgment and prestige. Of course, where the distinctions between moral and immoral, good and bad, right and wrong are far from black and white, this thesis interrogates those instances that make it seem like they could be. This thesis is rooted in examining the great deal of ambiguous implications associated with reading in the gray space. Thus, this thesis itself operates within that gray area, and in exploring the function of morality when engaging with art works in society today, rather than arguing for or against what is “bad” or “good.”

This thesis will focus primarily on Sherman Alexie, Jay Asher, and Junot Diaz, three authors who are male, and whose public indiscretions are forms of sexual misconduct. The absence of female artists mentioned is duly noted, as these commonalities are products of context. In other

words, the absence of female artists who are deemed “bad” in contemporary society was not a decision made to showcase a gendered line of inquiry, but rather, to aptly respond to the particular moment in which this thesis is being written. 2017-18 marked the year of the #MeToo movement, a viral outcry against sexual harassment and sexual assault, namely in the workplace. In October of 2017, two articles – one in *The New Yorker* and another in *The New York Times* – reported allegations of rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment against notorious film executive Harvey Weinstein. In response to these stories, actress Alyssa Milano tweeted “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” Thousands of women (and men) responded. In a matter of hours, #MeToo became the slogan for a brewing campaign against sexual harassment and abuse. Harvey Weinstein may have been the first domino to fall, but a long list of prominent men in media, politics, corporate leadership, and many other fields have fallen behind him. The artists who are being called out are largely male artists. Thus, this thesis was written within the context of this particular type of indiscretion as being at the forefront of conversation. This does not mean that this line of inquiry cannot be extended to other conversations, (and ideally in the future it will be) but in order to realistically limit the scope of subject matter within this thesis, contemporary context is key.

In the same vein, this thesis will also limit itself by primarily examining the medium of books as art and the author as artist. In addition to following my own interests, I will do this because literature as an art form is, in my mind, different from all other forms of art (i.e. movies, music, comedy, etc.) in terms of engagement. When listening to a song sung by an artist who has been indicted for sexually abusing minors (as in the case of rapper R. Kelly), it becomes understandably harder to discount the artist behind the art due to the very presence of their voice in the music. A similar difficulty may come into play when watching a TV show that stars an

actor who admitted to attempted rape, such as the case of Kevin Spacey of “House of Cards,” along with many other Hollywood names. And in comedy too – when watching Louis CK perform a stand-up routine, it becomes inarguably harder to laugh at the jokes being told without considering the inappropriate moves he has made towards women in his private office, all due to the fact that watching his show requires looking at his face. But we don’t have to do this when we read. The mediation of literature allows us to engage the work without feeling the artist’s physical presence. There is a distinct “mediatedness” of literature because it is a text on a page that permits and invites the reader to engage with it as just that. Because of this difference, I will argue that literature has long allowed a separation between author and text in a way that alters the conversation just slightly enough to let a long history of flawed authors pile up (which will be further discussed in Chapter 2). By using the methodology and archive that comes with taking a literary angle to artists versus art, this thesis will join the conversation through books written by flawed authors.

In my opening chapter I will discuss some of the arguments for and against separation of an artist from their art. The arguments themselves are often veiled by other subject matters, making this topic an exceptionally murky one. For example, a scholar will discuss the importance of examining authorial intent – this language is a way of connecting the words on the page to the person behind the pen, a way of connecting author and book. Or a reader will focus exclusively on the vocabulary used in a novel – this method of close reading insinuates a decision (whether conscious or subconscious) to disconnect the author from the text and engage with the words on the page as just that. In this chapter, I will explain why my thesis will call on fiction as a genre that allows an enhanced separation between author and fiction work, in that the genre itself often urges a feeling of escape into the fictional tale. We read characters in fiction works as imaginary

beings, and because of this, often afford them a greater level of flawedness than we do those in our nonfiction “real” lives. Further, this opening chapter will touch on how novels often seem propelled by unhappiness, which in turn means that authors need some insight into the way that things can go awry. In other words, we demand pain, heartache, and failure in our fiction, but want to believe, perhaps, that novelists themselves could write the stories we want while themselves to be suspended above such real-life difficulties. This chapter will also demonstrate that we are in a pivotal moment for such conversations and rude awakenings, and grapple with why they are showing up incessantly across contemporary culture. As a society, we tend to believe that art emerges from turmoil, and value it for that reason, we also want to be ethical people who hold our artists to moral and ethical standards. This dyad of values will ultimately turn to the instances in which readers have taken “good” books written by “bad” people and decided to keep reading, or to take the book off of the shelf.

In making this decision, the second chapter of this thesis will examine some of the ways that scholars have, in some instances performed this separation, and in others rejected it, by describing relevant types of criticism – namely New Criticism and Biographical Criticism. These opposing techniques essentially provide framework for the artist and the art’s separation and unification, respectively. Principally, New Criticism stresses engaging with art for what it is, and only what it is. The New Critics urge close reading, a method that seeks to read exclusively what is on the page, thereby excluding any outer influence upon the work. New Criticism relies on this type of focused reading and engagement in order to eliminate the author from consideration, thus, separating artist from art entirely. Biographical Criticism, on the distant other hand, necessitates understanding of the artist behind the art, underscoring the vitality of authorial intent on final output. Biographical Criticism pushes back against New Criticism, arguing that

separation of artist and art is impossible because art is an extension of self. By laying out these criticisms and objectively exploring the motivations and qualifications for each, this chapter will illuminate the need for a new way of reading in contemporary culture, which will be introduced in the third chapter.

The third chapter will briefly lay out how to combine these ways of reading and elucidate why it is necessary to do so. I will explain my methodology through a narration of my close readings of fiction texts by flawed authors. In order to showcase the importance of this work, I will do so while also paying proper, albeit seemingly subconscious attention to the nonfiction person behind the words. In essence, this will serve as a type of combination of New Criticism and Biographical Criticism in order to properly engage with each of the texts and their authorial accompaniment.

As mentioned earlier, my thesis will draw on three contemporary authors: Sherman Alexie, Junot Diaz, and Jay Asher, all of whom have faced sexual harassment allegations during the year 2018. Between the three of them they hold two PEN/Faulkner Awards for Fiction, an American Book Award, a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, a National Book Award, and a slew of other prestigious titles. By drawing on these three writers and some of their most renowned works; Alexie's *Ten Little Indians*, Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why*, this thesis will narrate the contemporary experience of reading "good" books written by "bad" authors. The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters of this work will demonstrate the methodology that I laid out in the third chapter by using the narration of each of these readings respectively. Once narrated, I will synthesize the conclusions that I have come to from these readings, before drawing on the wider implications of these syntheses.

In concluding my thesis, I will examine the implications that have come out of doing this work. I have already noted the reasoning behind choosing to examine the separation between fiction writers and their novels over other artists and their various mediums of art. In making this decision, I have conceptually placed the other genres and artistic modes of this broad topic on the back burner. However, the framework that this thesis lays is applicable to each of these facets, insofar as the separation between art and artist requires moral deliberation.

Chapter 1: The Separation of Art and Artist

Fiction is such a world of freedom, it's wonderful. If you want someone to fly, they can fly.

– Alice Walker

For me, reading is an out of body experience. It can transcend time and place. Some of my best and most intoxicating memories have taken place within the pages of a novel. For many readers of fiction, books serve as an escape of sorts; fiction is constructed upon the notion that readers can enter a new dimension and take on a new identity all by turning a page. Bruce Holland Rogers adds that “I like escapist fiction, and some of what I write is escapism. I’m with C.S. Lewis when he observes that the only person who opposes escape is, by definition, a jailer. Entertainment, release, fun...these are all good reasons to read and to write.”² The function of the escapist ability of fiction then poses a problem when considering how we engage with the writers behind the words: the problem being an understandable inability to think about fiction authors as

² Bruce Holland Rogers. "What is Magical Realism, Really." *www. writing-world.com/sf/realism.html* (2002).

being members of the nonfiction world themselves – or, perhaps, refusing to do so for the purpose of upholding the feeling of the escape. We require cathartic stories of turmoil and “badness” in our literature, but we also want and expect our authors to show us a sliver of the real world itself; a paradox of requirements. We want to escape into a written world that in some ways reflects the world around us, but also trust our ability to put the book down and say, “this not how the world really is.” However, when looking back on the literary canon, littered with problematic authors, we can see how historically readers have failed to make this distinction for certain esteemed writers over time. It may be that we find ourselves forgiving the misdeeds of those who we deem “worth” exoneration; those people who are too talented, too personable, too *important* to be punished. In this chapter, I will argue that the tendency to separate these writers from their work comes in part due to the distinct mediatedness of literature as outlined above. In other words, this chapter will discuss how the mediation of literature, and ability to use it as means of engagement or escape, is the very aspect of the genre that has enabled us to excuse morally flawed authors. The mediation of literature allows us to disregard the author, thus to excuse their behavior outside of the literary work. And with this, come repercussions that we grapple with in the real world outside of the pages.

This chapter will dip back into the historical archives of some of our most highly lauded writers and discuss the well-known moral transgressions committed by each. My goal is to represent and clarify that these authors and artists have been able to avoid public scrutiny from tainting reception of their work. Doing so will show how we, as a society, have used the mediation of literature in order to separate the personal lives of writers from their work and set the scene to question why we may not have the proclivity or even ability to do so in this present moment.

Grappling with the Tortured Artist Trope

As a society and readership, we have long extolled the “tortured artist;” the artist who is only capable of creating the genius that they do because of their dark pasts and stained headspaces.³ Many have rallied behind the idea “great art can only come out of an arduous personal struggle that then toxifies the workplace,”⁴ and that flaws in morality of character and ethical transgressions can be overlooked and even forgiven if they give way to renowned pieces of art and literature – art and literature that we can engage with without having to engage the creators themselves. In this way, we have historically been able excuse bad behavior more readily in cases in which there is good art at stake, through the mystification of the tortured artist trope.

The legend of the tortured artist has been a part of Western description for thousands of years and is widely understood as “the contradiction of the genius who creates great artwork despite (or because of) mental illness.”⁵ From a neurological standpoint, the link between mental illness (particularly manic depressive disorder and schizophrenia) and creativity is relatively supported. In a 2007 article in the *Stanford Journal of Neuroscience*, neuropsychologist Adrienne Sussman pointed out an important function of this link, writing that “Although the support is tentative, it forces us to reexamine our attitudes towards the mental states that we call “diseased”,

³ M. Kieran, *Art, Morality and Ethics: On the (Im)Moral Character of Art Works and Inter-Relations to Artistic Value*. *Philosophy Compass*, (2006). 1: 129-143.

⁴ Lindsay Anne Black, “In Place of Power,” *Canadian Theatre Review*, vol. 170, 2017, pp. 25–29.

⁵ A. Sussman, (2007). Mental illness and creativity: A neurological view of the “Tortured Artist”. *Stanford Journal of Neuroscience*, 1(1), 21-24.

and when (and if) treatment is appropriate” and conceding that “If mental illness can produce powerful and important art, then perhaps, instead of trying to eliminate them by medication, we should embrace these mental states as valuable in their own right.” Sussman’s provocation implies a unique opportunity that artists of the past may have had to dodge moral criticism based on their output. Indeed, there are cases both contemporarily and in the past in which artists who have faced morality-based accusations have not suffered from a mental illness, but the cases in which they have, have given legs to the tortured artist trope. Sussman reflects on artists in the past who have associated their creativity in pursuit of creation with compromised mental states. She points to Plato’s declaration that “Madness, provided it comes as the gift of heaven, is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings... Madness comes from God, whereas sober sense is merely human,” and later Romantic poet Lord Byron’s expression: “We of the craft are all crazy. Some are affected by gaiety, others by melancholy, but all are more or less touched” to drive this historical trend’s presence in past canonized artists. The notion that in order to be one of “the greats” an artist needed to submit to some eccentricity of the mind pervades our yearbooks of history. However, as Sussman aptly points out, “Such tricks of self-presentation are anomalies, however, compared to the genuinely sick.”⁶

I agree with the above quotation and the importance in distinguishing this commonality as an anomaly rather than a scientific trend that serves to acquit all those who fall in line. However, the legitimacy of the link between mental illness and creativity has been tested and corroborated on multiple accounts: by studies in 1987 by Nancy Andreason⁷ and 1995 by Arnold

⁶ A. Sussman, (2007). Mental illness and creativity: A neurological view of the “Tortured Artist”. *Stanford Journal of Neuroscience*, 1(1), 21.

⁷ Nancy C. Andreason, “Creativity and Mental Illness: Prevalence Rates in Writers and their First-Degree Relatives,” *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 144 (1987):1288-1292.

Ludwig,⁸ and from a 2004 meta-analysis of research by Erika Lauronen.⁹ All of these studies were limited by the wording of their measures; examining the correlation between “creativity,” “output,” and “mental illness” was too large in scope to conclude anything from. Psychologist Daniel Nettle is famously skeptical of there being any causal link between the two, highlighting that:

While a connection may exist between these two traits, it is not necessarily causal. Great creativity can exist without mental illness, and vice versa; the fact that both are likely to occur together means that they are indirectly linked, either by similar neurological mechanisms or genetically.

Though it can be argued that mental illnesses such as manic depressive disorder can lead directly to periods of great insight, inspiration, and confidence, the connection hardly accounts for all moments of creativity amongst all people. The categorical difference between those who suffer from internal experience (i.e. mental illness) and those who perform externalized behavior (i.e. sexually assaulting women) is distinct, however, it does point to the historical tendency for society to use “tortured” – whether expressed internally through self-harm, for example, or externally through abuse of others, as a characteristic intrinsic to creation: as a prerequisite to creating art, but as a prerequisite alone. In other words, the hypothetical author’s troubled background is represented as stimulus for their work, but their troubling external behavior is represented as disparate from how their art is received once put into the world. All this to say, I

⁸ Arnold M. Ludwig, *The Price of Greatness*. (New York: Guilford Press, 1995).

⁹ E. Lauronen and J. Veijola, I. Isohanni, P.B. Jones, P. Nieminen, M. Isohanni. “Links between creativity and mental disorder,” *Psychiatry* 67, no. 1 (2004):81-98.

argue that society today can recognize the value of the tortured artist him/herself in that the link between internal strife and artistic creativity is compelling but stop before glorifying the role of the “tortured artist” as an excuse to let troubled and/or unethical artists off the hook for externally hurtful and unethical behavior. Instead, we find ourselves in a time and society that recognizes the stigmas surrounding mental health and seeks to actively eliminate them, thus allowing entrance of productive conversation surrounding mental illness. With this, I argue that the use of “tortured artist” as means of overlooking an artist’s lack of ethics in order to preserve their creative mind has reached its end.

Dahl, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway: Who they were and what they Wrote

Roald Dahl, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway are among the writers that have avoided their morally reprehensible actions and/or ethically questionable values from tarnishing their work, even when their indiscretions became public knowledge. In fact, the majority of the scholarly research and biographies that have covered these major players shed light on their troubled pasts as means of bolstering the aforementioned tortured artist tropes with which they are associated. Through a combined account of the works and worlds of Dahl, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway, this chapter will overview these canonized authors as exemplars of how the tortured artist trope has historically allowed for an increased willingness to overlook bad deeds in favor of preserving good work.

To begin, Roald Dahl, beloved children’s author, has historically blurred the lines between what content is “right” and “wrong” to cover, arguably due to his own flawed moral compass. According to one of his most dedicated biographers, Jeremy Treglown:

He was famously a war hero, a connoisseur, a philanthropist, a devoted family man who had to confront an appalling succession of tragedies. He was also, as will be seen, a fantasist, an anti-Semite, a bully, and a self-publicizing troublemaker.¹⁰

The mentioned hateful attitudes were represented by Dahl himself in a 1983 interview with the British political and cultural magazine *The New Statesman*, when he suggested that Hitler “didn’t just pick on [the Jews] for no reason,” because, “there is a trait in the Jewish character that does provoke animosity.” Assuredly, Dahl had a nasty streak in him, as did many of his beloved characters. The sense that readers of Dahl cherished him due to the twisted characters that he wrote is distinct to his persona as a writer. His books are brimming with characters that embody depravity: versions of the outer world that seem perverted to the point of humor. Perhaps this arguably humorous perversion can in part inform why his books are renowned amongst children:

Adults often deplore as tasteless many of the stories, situations, and jokes that children find humorous. This conflict, however, involves more than taste; it also involves differences in the psychology of children and adults. These differences help explain why Dahl’s books are so popular with children and so disliked by [some] adults.¹¹

Psychologically, it may make sense that young readers of Dahl praise his characterization of the pimply and plump, that those who have yet to engage with the outer world are more likely to laugh in the face of discomfort. Adults, however, have no such tolerance for these perversions.

¹⁰ David Galef, "You've got to be cruel to be kind: the life of Roald Dahl." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 20, no. 2 (1996): 272-274.

¹¹ M. I. West, (1990). The grotesque and the taboo in Roald Dahl's humorous writings for children. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 15(3), 115-116.

Perhaps this is why, whether his books were read *by* parents *to* their children or by the child themselves, Dahl was primarily a children's author.¹²

When Dahl died in 1990, National Director of the Anti-Defamation League, Abraham Foxman, wrote a letter to the New York Times stating that Dahl "was a blatant and admitted anti-Semite," and that "praise for Mr. Dahl as a writer must not obscure the fact that he was also a bigot." But Dahl's admitted anti-Semitism did not serve to discredit his work or make people think of it differently. As noted earlier by Foxman, many of Dahl's misdeeds were all but ignored until he passed away, and even then, understood as part of his persona outside of the boundaries of his books, rather than as character traits that seep into his work. Because of this, attitudes towards Dahl as a writer and Dahl as a person largely diverge; we can read his fiction books as a separate entity from his nonfiction persona.

It can be argued that because Dahl was a part of a generation that "perceived no conflict between aesthetic ability and anti-Semitism,"¹³ his attitudes may have been absolved at the time in which he lived. However, this thesis argues that attitudes are different now, and that that acknowledgment of Dahl's borderline xenophobic¹⁴ ideals within *contemporary* context should elicit change in how he is read today. Largely, however, it does not. Why do many disregard this deplorable facet of his personhood? Perhaps the explanation comes from a leveling of the moral

¹² J. Culley, (1991). Roald Dahl—"It's about children and it's for children"—but is it suitable?. *Children's Literature in Education*, 22(1), 59-73.

¹³ Douglas Brode, "Anti-Semitism American-Style and a Man Named Disney." *Debating Disney: Pedagogical Perspectives on Commercial Cinema*. Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield(2016): 211-223.

¹⁴ David Galef, "You've got to be cruel to be kind: the life of Roald Dahl." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 20, no. 2 (1996): 272-274.

compasses of readers; we tell ourselves no, we wouldn't want to sit in a room with him, but we'll read his stories to our kids. This logical, albeit hypothetical thought process exemplifies the very mediation that this thesis seeks to bring to light: the mediation of the novelistic genre – the fact that we don't have to look at his face or read his voice while envisioning Willy Wonka or and the Chocolate Factory or James and the Giant Peach, allows us to read Dahl, and to enjoy him too. Books are unique in allowing us to make this integral separation between authors and their work.

Secondly, F. Scott Fitzgerald has been pinpointed historically as a writer whose ethics were questionable, at best. Biographers largely agree that Fitzgerald plagiarized his work from his wife, Zelda. Both *The Beautiful and Damned* and *Tender is the Night* are said (and largely confirmed) to be copied verbatim from letters that Zelda had sent Scott from the mental asylum where she was held. Amy J. Elias recounts Zelda herself calling Fitzgerald out for duplicating entries from her personal diary into his works:

The borrowing did not go unnoticed. In her own review of *The Beautiful and Damned* for the New York Tribune, Zelda Fitzgerald wrote, 'It seems to me that on one page I recognized a portion of an old diary of mine which mysteriously disappeared shortly after my marriage, and also scraps of letters which, though considerably edited, sound to me vaguely familiar. In fact, Mr. Fitzgerald . . . seems to believe that plagiarism begins at home.'¹⁵

In his manuscript, too, Fitzgerald himself admitted to appropriating parts of Zelda's diary entries, thus barring these accusations from being labeled as mistaken. I vividly remember learning this flawed aspect of Fitzgerald's work in my ninth grade English class. It was spoken of as fact, as a

¹⁵ Amy J. Elias, "The Composition and Revision of Fitzgerald's "The Beautiful and Damned"." *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 51, no. 3 (1990): 245-66. doi:10.2307/26403800.

historical occurrence that we, the students, were expected to take at face value and move on from. And so, we did. We made the cognitive decision to absorb Fitzgerald as a plagiarist, and then read *The Great Gatsby* as a wholly separate entity, untouched by his own moral failings.

Perhaps this comes from the idea that to some, plagiarizing is not grounds for restricting separation between author and book. Jonathan Keats argues that Scott's plagiarism should be forgiven if not forgotten entirely.¹⁶ He says:

A writer doesn't manufacture words. Rather, he chooses them: He chooses to include some and to exclude others, by those means to kidnap their implications with greater or lesser precision of phrasing. A writer gives structure to preexisting cultural associations, finding new meanings by arranging them in previously unimagined juxtapositions. So, it goes with scenes and chapters, an entire book.

Even if Keats is warranted or even right in this lengthy and well-supported provocation, it still shows his cognitive choice to accept Fitzgerald as a plagiarist. He is accepting "plagiarist" as a part of Fitzgerald's identity and moving on with his work as a separate entity; he is not reading his work as plagiarized. And he is not alone; the notion that Fitzgerald is a plagiarist has been historically accepted by many, but also set aside when reading his work. Today, plagiarism is impermissible, a fault reproached with serious consequences. Cases of plagiarism in the form of copyright infringement have reached the federal courts. In a 2004 exploration¹⁷ of effective ways

¹⁶ Jonathan Keats, "For the Love of Literature." *Salon*, Salon.com, 25 Sept. 2011, www.salon.com/2001/08/25/fitzgerald_9/.

¹⁷ David A. Thomas, "How educators can more effectively understand and combat the plagiarism epidemic." *BYU Educ. & LJ* (2004): 421.

to combat what he calls “the plagiarism epidemic,” in academic settings, David A. Thomas writes:

The word “plagiarism...” is rooted in the Latin terms *plagiarius* and *plagium*, referring to kidnapping... Legal and other types of educators regularly confront the challenges of plagiarism. Its connotation in the modern world of higher education is entirely negative, and plagiarism poses a growing threat to the integrity of contemporary education methods.

Exemplified above, plagiarism is not something that the contemporary educated world tolerates, much less celebrates. Why, then, do we continue to read Fitzgerald with the knowledge of his plagiaristic tendencies? Perhaps his work has been deemed too important, too canonical to discount. But in terms of morality and the current push to hold all artists to the same, moral standards, is this a valid method of distinction? Is it *right* to think this way?

Third, Ernest Hemingway exhibits a “bad” person whose writing has been exonerated in favor of its “goodness.” Hemingway was widely known for his terse, preposition-laden prose and classics like *For Whom The Bell Tolls* and *The Sun Also Rises*, but also is recognized as an alcoholic and perpetrator of abuse. According to one of his biographers, Mary V. Dearborn, “He deserted his Paris wife, Hadley Richardson, and in three more marriages became more demanding of women’s adulation and service, more selfish and abusive. As his third wife, the writer and journalist Martha Gellhorn, observed, ‘A man must be a very great genius to make up for being such a loathsome human being.’”¹⁸

¹⁸ M. V. Dearborn, (2017). *Ernest Hemingway: A Biography*. Knopf.

“Madame, it is always a mistake to know an author,” Hemingway writes in *Death in the Afternoon*¹⁹, but, due to his widely known works and prestige, scholars would try to anyway. Hemingway has garnered endless research and biographies written by scholars who have sought to uncover the man behind the words – to know the author. Too, Hemingway’s bipolar disorder and alcoholism has been extensively studied by biographers like Jeffrey Meyers,²⁰ Kenneth S. Lynn,²¹ and Arthur Waldhorn.²² In all of the above, Hemingway’s violence and hostility towards women has been dutifully noted as a byproduct of his internal demons. As with Fitzgerald, Hemingway’s flaws are presented as factual parts of his identity, but of his identity alone. Thus, works by Hemingway are read reliably with the same level of respect and admiration as any other canonical figure. Thus, Hemingway’s transgressions have evaded tarnishing reception of his work – his flawed personhood has been separated from his writing across time.

The purpose of this brief discussion of Dahl, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway is to highlight the existence of writers whose flaws we know, and even condemn, but whose place in our literary canon (and on our bookshelves) is secure. This thesis argues that the reason for this is large in part due to the mediation of their medium – the historical tendency of the book (as opposed to the TV screen, theater, or stage) to instigate this separation. These examples show how the space that the mediation of literature creates has been occupied in the past, in order to separate the conversation about the writer from the conversation about what they wrote. But

¹⁹ Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*. Place of Publication Not Identified: Scribner, 2015.

²⁰ Jeffrey Meyers, *Hemingway: A Biography*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1999.

²¹ Kenneth Schuyler Lynne, *Hemingway*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.

²² Arthur Waldhorn, *A Reader’s Guide to Ernest Hemingway*. Syracuse University Press, 2002.

throughout exploration of the way this space functions today, this thesis will argue that the mediation of literature is less effective contemporarily, that the conversation surrounding morally flawed authors and their work is more integrated now. But how? And why?

Shifting Away from Separation

The factors reasons behind this shift are both multifold and intertwined. This thesis argues that we still read fiction books with the idealized potential to escape in tow, but that in general, fiction is read as being an extension of the real world, rather than separate dimension of it. And in this real world, the author – and all of his or her moral misdeeds – exists as well. Thus, the shift in reading practice shows as we, as a society, become increasingly unwilling to do the separation between biographical flaws and character flaws. I will argue that the shift is not in the literature – that flawed characters are still living within many, if not most, fiction works – but in the culture. Reading fiction today is foregrounded more so by the person who wrote it, as the separation between the writer and their work shrinks in scope.

Social media is a key aspect in advancing this shrinkage of space. The expectation for art consumers to “get to know” the artist, whether that artist is a small-time music producer, or a Hollywood movie star based on their social media presence can be all-consuming. Parasocial interactions, defined as a “psychological relationship experienced by an audience in their mediated encounters with performers in the mass media,²³” run rampant between social media users everywhere, especially between those who view themselves as fans and the artist they follow. According to psychologists Rebecca Rubin and Michael McHugh:

²³ Reference to Horton and Wohl, 1956

As Horton and Wohl (1956) argued, a bond of intimacy is developed with media personalities through shared experiences existing only through viewing of the personality or persona over time. As time goes on, predictability about the character is increased. The character is reliable. The fan is loyal. As Horton and Wohl explained: "They 'know' such a persona in somewhat the same way they know their chosen friends: through direct observation and interpretation of his appearance, his gestures and voice, his conversation and conduct in a variety of situations" (p. 216).²⁴

Thus, parasocial interactions facilitate an internal feeling of intimacy between artists and social media users that often is truly contrived. Because of this, the space that has existed between author and writing has, in many ways, decreased. In other words, we are in a time when we expect to (and often do) know the author via social media and other means of technological communication. Thus, when the person falls to a moral misdeed, our knee-jerk reaction is quicker to throw them away – not only because we know about it in real time, but because the very mission of social media has succeeded in allowing us to feel semi-intimate with the artist. We are less able to disregard the author while in the midst of their novel just because, unlike with other mediums, we don't have to look at them. Rather, many authors are committed to their social media presence, allowing and arguably causing viewers to engage with them on what can feel like a face-to-face (realistically face-to-screen-to-face) level. For example, prominent feminist writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie posts regularly on her Instagram account, and often responds to the comments on her posts from loyal readers and critics alike. In this way, she, and countless others, has been able to foster a persona for herself outside of the words she prints on a

²⁴ R. B. Rubin and M. P. McHugh, (1987). Development of parasocial interaction relationships.

page. But at the same time, she has generated an intimate feeling for her readers, that they *know* her, the things she has been through, what prompts her to write, how she is inspired, and in some ways, the reasons she is writing. Adichie's engagement with her readers has led them to feel as though they do indeed know "the author's attitude toward his work, the way he felt, and what made him write," as contested by William Wimsatt in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*.²⁵ Whether this outcome is a positive or negative effect of the technological revolution is up for debate, but the difference in boundaries between author and work, output and context, reader and world, is certain. When entering the classroom in terms of studying literature, we see these boundaries shapeshift, but still, do not grow. We see this complex modification take place with the story of Thomas Pogge.

In 2016, Thomas Pogge, a political philosopher at Yale University, was accused of sexual misconduct by a group of 169 fellow philosophers.²⁶ He had faced several sexual harassment allegations throughout his time teaching at both Yale and Columbia University, namely by women of color who had been students of his. Professors who signed the letter formally accusing him also pledged to skip conferences in which Pogge was involved, and many chose to remove his work from their curricula. This may seem like a clear course of events: person does something "bad," person is punished for said action, and Pogge was absolutely punished – his reputation is tarnished beyond salvageability. But the implications of *why* academics and others chose to punish him are problematic. James Sterba, a philosopher at the University of Notre

²⁵ William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989.

²⁶ Tyler Kingkade, "Hundreds Condemn Ethics Professor Accused of Sexual Harassment" in *The Huffington Post*. June 20, 2016. Accessed November 12, 2018.

Dame, was one of the respondents who decided not to include Pogge's work in his graduate classes in the future. He stated:

You don't need him. He carries too much baggage – he doesn't have to be cited anymore... He's a negative image and we don't need that. Maybe if he was Einstein, we'd have to cite him, but he's not.²⁷

Sterba's declaration, albeit unintentionally, insinuates that those who have contributed greatly to American society are exempt from enduring blame for their actions. That only because Pogge's "baggage" outweighs his contributions to academia, is he rightfully being barred from citation. That artists whose output is valuable to society can be separated from their art, and that artists whose output is less valuable cannot. This calls all of our values and reading practices into question.

Connecting Pogge and Sterba's statement about him to the decision of deeming context as relevant, consider this: if tomorrow we were to find out that Albert Einstein had sexually abused women of color back in the early 1900's, what would we do? James Sterba would probably do nothing – he has already deemed Einstein's work as too valuable to dismiss due to any hypothetical moral misgivings; his work entrenched too far into our society and understanding of the world around us to simply write off due to his character. I would imagine that Sterba would make the argument that Einstein himself is long gone anyway, and that defamation of his character and denunciation of him as a person would not go very far as to tarnish his reputation and/or punish him, not in the way Pogge has been punished. So, is

²⁷ Brian Leiter, "Academic Ethics: Should Scholars Avoid Citing the Work of Awful People?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Accessed November 12, 2018.

separation of artist and work possible only when the artist is no longer performing for the purpose of reception – when the artist has nothing to gain, when the artist is dead?

The literal death of the author here is not to be confused with the death of the author in a literary criticism respect. However, the weight that the author being alive or dead carries is significant in this context. For the most part, we think differently about people who are living versus those who are dead. And within the realm of those who have created, literature by those who have passed is often read with a different understanding in tow. The presence of Sherman Alexie, for example, in society, walking around the streets hangs over our heads (and books) as we read, whereas Dahl does not. We can see Alexie's wealth grow as he profits off of our book buying. Not only this, but the presence of their victims and those who have accused them of wrongdoing in present day feels important too. The tendency to be less forgiving of flawed authors may have rendered the tortured artist trope as obsolete, but what about the dead artists? As touched on earlier, the idea that we want our fictional characters to be flawed (in order to use fiction as escapist literature), but not our authors (in order to feel as though we are moral and ethical people) shapes this conversation. The contemporary spotlight, and the one that this thesis seeks to elicit, is on those people who are deemed "bad," but have written things that are "good" – the Hemingways and Dahls and Fitzgeralds of today. Notably, though, the Hemingways and Dahls and Fitzgeralds of today are alive and living in the landscape of this present moment. They have the agency to make statements on their own, fight back against allegations, and seek to reshape and revamp their reputation once it has been tarnished. Not only this, but artists who are alive today are able to, in some ways, mold their own legacies in terms of what they write and digitize, unlike the canonized authors of the past, as they wrote in feather pen and ink. This is not to say that authors who are living today have any real advantage (other than being alive) over

those who are not; those who are alive are also faced with the inability to be glorified by their passing; in other words, the Hemingways and Dahls and Fitzgeralds have chiefly solidified their place in the canon. Those who want to engage with their art do not have to look their victims and those they hurt in the face or hear their testimonies, they have no agency over how they are perceived, their stories are solidified in the past. In this thesis, I seek to fight back against the solidification these names and legacies, principally by recognizing its very existence, and questioning it just as we would (and will in Chapters 4,5, and 6) of any author living today.

This chapter has reasoned that it is principally because of the social media and advent of constant and remote communication that the separation of author from work by the mediation of their medium has been curbed. This thesis will argue that contextually, both present day standards of morality – first within the era of the #MeToo movement that has undertaken the cessation of misogynistic misbehavior, and secondly within a political regime that has seen a vast increase in outwardly xenophobic attitudes – and pressure for artists to be social figures in addition to creators bolster this difficulty. The argument is made neither for the sake of excusing nor condemning, but for purpose of getting to a middle space – a space where we can still read Hemingway and Fitzgerald and Dahl without discounting their flawed personhoods – and reading within that space.

The following chapter will begin to discuss the theories of reading practice that have led to different types of reading and different types of authorial engagement across time. Through this discussion, I will set the scene for a new methodology to emerge; one that inhabits the increasingly grey area riddled with “good” art by “bad” people.

Chapter 2: New Criticism and Biographical Criticism

To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing.

– Elbert Hubbard

In order to develop a new methodology for reading, this chapter will first examine how views of the artist have changed within practices of literary reading. By determining ways that scholars and thinkers have read over time, I will develop the framework applicable to reading in this new moment. There are a variety of ways that people have thought about authorial and textual relationships; we should not discard these branches of criticism; rather, we should consider and implement them as part of our reading history. By looking back into the history of reading, we are looking at how we were trained to read and how we have understood “the purpose” of reading over time. Perhaps by looking back, we can look forward.

New Criticism, at its core, is reading for the purpose of pure textual engagement. The New Critics are not only aiding this argument as a past relic, but also as a relevant and important way of thinking to consider. The practice of New Criticism separates author and text. But why? According to Robert Dale Parker:

New Criticism was a formalist movement in literary theory that dominated American literary criticism in the middle decades of the 20th century. It emphasized close reading, particularly of poetry, to discover how a work of literature functioned as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object.²⁸

²⁸ Robert Dale Parker, *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Zooming in on “self-referential” as a key word within New Critics’ philosophy, integral too, is the idea that even the flawed characters within a text would not point outward to a complex society as means of legitimizing their actions. Rather, the upheld turn inward into the text is one that shapes the New Critics’ theory of the literary world – as distinct from the outer world around it. Coined first in the nineteenth century by those who sought to study literary interpretation as a kind of science, it was in 1941, when American critic and poet John Crowe Ransom, published his book The New Criticism, that the theory became established in common academic and literary usage. Since then, the New Critics have taken up a prominent sphere of influence in the literary world and have made become members of the canonized literary theorists. According to Tobin Siebers, “the New Critics gave [literature] an independent status, liberating it from historical, biographical, and psychological requirements. They argued that [writing] inhabits its own space, without support from either the author or the reader.”²⁹ Acknowledging the key words “independent,” “liberating,” and “own space,” the above quote distinguishes the New Critics as intentionally separating author from text – they self-referentially seek to “liberate” a text from its outer influence (including its author). Indeed, the New Critics seek to engage with text in its “own space,” in isolation, closed, hermetic circumstances. To do this, they set up a programmatic, deliberate, even scientific method for interpreting literature and wrote off all more casual approaches to reading as “impressionism.” Beyond this, the New Critics believe that biography strays from the point, that “the point” is the literature itself. They urge readers to remove any and all outer context from words on a page. Lois Tyson explains the concept of killing an author succinctly: “The death of the author” merely refers to the change in attitude

²⁹ Tobin Siebers, "The Ethics of Autonomy: Biography and the New Criticism." *The Ethics of Criticism*, 44-68. ITHACA; LONDON: Cornell University Press, 1988.

toward the role of the author in our interpretation of literary works.”³⁰ With respect to New Criticism, students of literature have been taught to read the author in contradictory ways; first as the primary concern in reading a literary work in order to discover what the author meant to communicate – his or her message, theme, or moral, and later to the reader; on the ideological, rhetorical, or aesthetic structure of the text; or on the culture in which the text was produced, usually without reference to the author. In this way, we will have “killed” the author – the author would be “dead,” for all intents and purposes of denoting meaning. On the topic of whether artists can and / or should be separated from their art, it is clear where the New Critics would stand. This thesis argues that this concept is notable because it shows how we, as readers and critical thinkers, can recognize what is lost (or cast off) when the author is taken out of the equation. We can see what space is opened up and how the text changes when we remove the author from our minds. But though we can see the value in this, it does not mean that it is the “right” way to consume art in this present moment.

One critical drawback to reading New Critically is, at first, an obscure one: when we say that we are going to go read a text, how do we determine the boundaries of that text in the first place? Does the text begin when Sherman Alexie has an idea? Or when the book is published for mass consumption? Does the text only begin when we sit down to read it? These queries pose a sort of “if a tree falls in the forest...” train of thought, but they are worth following. The New Critics themselves grappled with this nexus, and their response came in the form of *The Intentional Fallacy*.

³⁰ Lois Tyson, *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide*. Routledge, 2014.

The Intentional Fallacy describes the problem inherent in trying to judge a work of art by assuming the intent or purpose of the artist who created it.³¹ By framing intention as “the design or plan in the author’s mind, which has obvious affinities for the author’s attitude toward his work, the way he felt, and what made him write,” the New Critics highlighted the peril that they perceived comes with respect to context. The Intentional Fallacy requires the reader to assume the role of either a historian of culture and/or human form or that of a psychologist who is able to pinpoint the particular artist’s vision at the time of the works’ creation. It puts pressure on the questions inherent to this conversation: in order to read, do we even need to know about the author? Why do we really need to know about anything other than the work we are staring at, at all? The theory of the Intentional Fallacy answers these questions solidly: no. When reading a work, we are engaging with that work and that work alone; to assume it is something more is entirely fallacious. In other words, failing to separate artist from art is *wrong*. C.S. Lewis, who was one of the major proponents of the rigidity of the Intentional Fallacy, succinctly stated that “the experience of the poet is not the experience of the poem; that what the poet knew, or felt, or intended, if it is not part of the poem itself, is irrelevant to criticism of the poem; and that the introduction of biographical materials – or anything else not in the poem – in order to explain the poem is an operation that is heretical.”³² The Intentional Fallacy summarily argues that to assume the intent of the author would be to discount the intent of the book itself.

³¹ William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989.

³² R. Maier, (1970). " The Intentional Fallacy" and the Logic of Literary Criticism. *College English*, 32(2), 135-145. Page 136.

Critics of the Intentional Fallacy have pointed to the multiplicity of ways that “intent” itself can be defined – “it may denote a wish, a progress, an attitude, or merely the presence of consciousness with respect to some activity.”³³ So, to assume the presence of consciousness of the author is to discount the work entirely? Thinking this way does not work with our knowledge of the presence of consciousness of artists today. With the earlier discussion of social media and the presence of artists in daily society, it is not uncommon for an author to take the public through his or her writing process, or for a musician to show us their recording studio. Artistic intention – in terms of presence of consciousness – is too present contemporarily to be ignored. This thesis argues not only for the importance of that artist’s presence within a work, but also for the vitality of context. To think New Critically and under the terms of the Intentional Fallacy is akin to going through life with blackout shade sunglasses and noise cancelling headphones on; ignoring context is not an option. This is not to say that we *should not* aim to read within the domain of New Criticism – the literary framework is a well fleshed out product of great thinkers of the past – but that right now, in this present moment, we *cannot*.

Contemporarily, the ability to discount context is not only dangerous, but nearly impossible. As touched on earlier, as members of the technological, fast-paced 21st century, we are living in a time when the “who, what, when, where, why,” of any situation is vital to its effect. Donald Trump is the President when we watch movies, read books, and listen to music. The #MeToo movement is in full throttle, and Louis C.K.’s irreverent behavior is not going to get by without a fight. When listeners turn on the radio and hear R. Kelly’s music being played, outrage ensues. As seen by the #MeToo movement and many other social campaigns, social

³³ R. Maier, (1970). " The Intentional Fallacy" and the Logic of Literary Criticism. *College English*, 32(2), 135-145. Page 144.

agency and the desire to hold figure heads to a higher standard are changing everything. So, what do we do if we can no longer separate art from artist? Enter, the other side of the coin:

Biographical Criticism.

As detailed by William Epstein, Biographical Criticism is a form of literary criticism that is rooted in exploring the writer's biography in order to draw relationships between the author and their writings.³⁴ This form of criticism is practiced under the notion that too much is lost when context is discounted, and that the most is gained when considering authorial intent. In Stanley Fish's chapter, 'Biography and Intention,' he writes, "...I *do* think that meaning is a function of what a particular speaker in a specific set of circumstances was intending to say, and I think so because there is simply no such thing as a sentence meaning in the sense that Kempson and others require it," he clarifies, "That is, there is no such thing as a meaning that is specifiable *apart* from the contextual circumstances of its intentional production."³⁵ Thus, readers practice Biographical Criticism to denote that the inclusion of the author and the authorial context is not only additive, but integral to the reading experience. That meaning can only be derived once the speaker and the circumstances are clarified and taken into account. That "there is no such thing as a meaning that I specifiable *apart* from the contextual circumstances of its intentional production. This sentiment sounds familiar to the argument of this thesis in that it urges context as too critical to be discounted, however, Biographical Criticism disallows the type of engagement with a fictional text that is vital in getting people to read in the first place. If we are

³⁴ William H. Epstein, ed. *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*. Vol. 1. Purdue University Press, 1991.

³⁵ Epstein, William H., ed. *Contesting the Subject: essays in the postmodern theory and practice of biography and biographical criticism*. Vol. 1. Purdue University Press, 1991. Page 11.

constantly preoccupied with wondering what the author was trying to tell us, there will be little room for the empathetic engagement with the characters in the story that make reading so enticing. I argue that perhaps the most overarching flaw of Biographical Criticism is in that it does not seek to actively protect the bookshelf. If the root of reading this way is in looking at the author as a vital aspect of the narrative, the inclusion of an author who has done “bad” thing and therefore may be attempting to convey a “bad” message would not be considered – certainly, not as often as it does and has across time. I argue that this way of reading pins the author and the text too closely together, and that searching for the author within the text may likely serve to force readers and critics to condemn a book based on association with its author. This would, in theory, rid us Alexie, Asher, and Diaz in one fell swoop. In other words, there needs to be a middle ground found for separating art and artist, which is where this thesis is anchored.

In “The Burden of Personality,” Alison Booth writes that “The limitations of biographical criticism are obvious, but the tendency to conflate author and work in such criticism reveals some subtle aspects that should not be dismissed. First, there is the fact that criticism of women authors has seldom escaped being biographical.”³⁶ Indeed, the former part of this quote references the Biographical Critics’ inability to continue to read when given an author who may have been deemed morally bad. But counter to Booth’s statement, this thesis will engage the relation of author and work, rather than the conflation of them, as referenced in the above quote. This distinction is important in distinguishing the ways that the Biographical Critics too closely

³⁶ Alison Booth, “The Burden of Personality: Biographical Criticism and Narrative Strategy.” In *Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf*, 52-83. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1992. Page 53.

connected author and work and clarifies the ways that this work will seek to use the author as an informant upon the work.

Too, the use of Biographical Criticism is one that also has implications for gendered bias that are long worn out in our present moment. Above, I interpret Booth's quote as secondhandedly speaking to the idea that the "tortured artist" trope may be one that spans across genders, but that the willingness to deem someone a "tortured artist," or, attribute any of their work to a facet of their identity, is a gendered tendency. For example, readers of Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, and Sylvia Plath largely interweave their work with their personal struggles, uniting their writing with who they are and what they have been through, in a way that readers of Fitzgerald, Dahl, and Hemingway do not. Scholars like Nancy Andreasen,³⁷ Stephen Trombley,³⁸ and more often practice Biographical Criticism when delving into these female authors. To this point, it may be a male privilege that we can treat work as separate from artist. This nuance is critical in situating the necessity of a new type of reading in contemporary reading culture – both the current movement towards women's empowerment and that toward a decreasing the stigma surrounding mental health have collectively created a discourse that situates female and male writers' side by side. All this to say, the methodology used in the reading practice of this present moment would not use, for example, Virginia Woolf's struggle with mental health to *explain* her writing, but to *inform* it, just as it does with Junot Diaz and his struggle with sexual abuse.

³⁷ Nancy C. Andreasen, "Creativity and mental illness: Prevalence rates in writers and their first-degree relatives." *Eminent creativity, everyday creativity, and health* (1997): 7-18.

³⁸ Stephen Trombley, "All that summer she was mad: Virginia Woolf and her doctors." *The Society for the Social History of Medicine bulletin* 28 (1981): 21-25.

Today, as I have argued, reading practices are rooted in maintaining unbiased lens of engagement while also acknowledging the outside factors that inevitably seep in when consuming art. In trying to move forward within the realm of this reading practice, perhaps we are answering the unclear purpose and “point” of reading. Perhaps, what we “do” with the text is a way to show off how we think such texts should be read; to internally develop a methodology for reading. In the next chapter I will provide an example of a reading that lends itself to the intersection of methodologies of the past.

According to language training expert Muhammad Naeem, “A work of art has two functions; aesthetic and moral. While the older criticism erred in its over-emphasis on the moral concern of literature, the New Critics go to the other extreme in their entire neglect of it. Art cannot be divorced entirely from life.”³⁹ In this sense, Naeem argues for the simultaneous inability of humans to separate morality from literature, and necessity of putting it to the side in some instances. This simultaneity also speaks to why many us, regardless of our age or educational status, are reluctant to study theory. In her chapter titled “Everything you want to know about critical theory but were afraid to ask,” Critical Theory scholar Lois Tyson pins this reluctance as being due to two things: “(1) fear of failure, and (2) fear of losing the intimate, exciting, magical connection with literature that is our reason for reading it in the first place.”⁴⁰ In other words, we, as readers, have a tendency to avoid critical thinking due to the “real” purpose of reading, which for many, is to enjoy and experience. Here, again, I am drawn back to the previous chapter’s theme about the relationship between fiction and reality and am brought to

³⁹ "Discuss the Main Limitations of New Criticism." NEOEnglish. December 16, 2010. Accessed November 12, 2018.

⁴⁰ Lois Tyson, *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide*. Routledge, 2014.

wonder about the plethora of reasons why we pick up books in the first place. Is it to learn about the real world? About ourselves? Do we read to merely immerse ourselves into pages that depict a world unlike our own? Or for another reason entirely? I think back to my middle school and high school experiences as a reader, and the stories and novels that I loved and hated. I think about how upon re-reading some of these classics, (think, “Catcher in the Rye,” “To Kill A Mockingbird,” “Grapes of Wrath,” etc.) my reactions changed significantly. The more I experienced in life, the more I was capable of gleaning meaningful experience from literature.; the personal context within which I was reading changed everything. My lived experiences have made reading a more tangible, understandable, and thus, valuable experience. But engaging with texts with respect to our lived experiences lends itself to engaging with context, to reading for the sake of learning about the world and humanity that revolves and exists around us. When talking about contemporary literature (as opposed to Hemingway, for example) the reader’s context, in a lot of ways, *is* the writer’s context. I argue that this is a necessary measure to consider when reading contemporarily and an important reason to read in the first place. However, where we allow worldly context to inform our reading and where we draw that line is up to each individual reader.

The next chapter will outline a new methodology for reading. It will focus on the fact that reading is often rooted in enjoyment – escape, even – but that readers are increasingly reluctant to discount the “real world” around them. This methodology will respect how we have transitioned (as noted earlier by Tyson) from close readers to close-ish readers to readers that consider broader implications of a text over time. I have detailed the multiplicity of reasons behind why this shift is occurring, including the blurring of private and public, the social agency of authors leading to increased para social interactions between author and reader, the

information age, and more. In leveling New Criticism and Biographical Criticism, this methodology will seek to go one step further in the discussion of interacting with “bad” artists who make “good” art – by posing a means of solution.

Chapter 3: Methodology

There is no simple formula for the relationship of art to justice...In the end, I don't think we can separate art from overall human dignity and hope. My concern for my country is inextricable from my concerns as an artist.

– Adrienne Rich

To this point I have sought to examine how the conditions of our present moment have transformed our engagement with art of all forms. I have posed questions about possible catalysts that may have led to this shift, established the changes inherent to the era of information inundation and the social media landscape that we find ourselves in, and begun to propose ways to move forward as consumers of art while also being morally conscious – in other words, separate art and artist without being out of touch with the world. This chapter, which I am loosely titling a methodology chapter, will briefly reintroduce the medium that I have chosen to examine, then address some of the psychological theory that has foregrounded the type of thinking that this thesis employs, and finally outline the case studies that will follow. By presenting the three case studies and the methods they employ ahead of time, this chapter will track the ways that each of the following examples will overlap, diverge, and markedly stand out.

As mentioned earlier, the mediation inherent to reading as a practice has informed this thesis insofar as literature as an art form is different from all other forms of art (i.e. movies,

music, comedy, etc.) in terms of engagement. The mediation of literature allows us to engage the work without feeling the artist's physical presence, which I argue has been a key factor in allowing a historical separation between author and text. This chapter will come back to the idea of literature's mediatedness by examining ways we can productively use this mediation while also acknowledging its limited presence in contemporary reading practices. In some ways, as some will argue, this mediation has become a problem (insofar as we have canons littered with problematic authors who have dodged elimination from these canons based on their actions) – but as it functions within this thesis, the mediation foundational to literature and literary reading is also a path toward a solution, or to a new methodology. However, I will argue also that, as with our view of other artists and art forms, the trend of using the mediation of literature to separate art from artist is slowly fading away, or, perhaps simply changing its function. I will argue that this shift is a response to the shift in reading practice that has required us to read differently now than we have before. The following three chapters will seek to demonstrate the new type of reading that the mediation of literature in the wake of authorial “badness” incites.

Then, if the simultaneous difficulty and necessity of separating artist from art is agreed upon from previous discussion surrounding the various types of reading, what comes next? Notably, this thesis is not only interested in the previous chapter's ways of reading as a relic of the past, but as a contemporarily relevant and important addition to consider when reading today. By looking at the New Critics and the variety of ways that they discarded author and text relationships, and then to the Biographical Critics and their reversal of doing so, we can see that none of these ways of reading can be shed from our modern reading practice; they are an integral part of our reading history. New Criticism has led to escapist models of reading that lead people to believe that reading can be done just for enjoyment, that stories can be grasped without any

further worldly attachments. Biographical Criticism has shown readers the implications of words in the wider world around them. Thought about in tandem, these histories of reading inform how we were trained to engage with the bookshelf, teaching us the variety of what it means to pick up a book. With this theme, I am reminded of an early elementary school lesson about the first forms of storytelling, and how “tall tales” were passed down verbally across peoples of various tribes, each tongue adding its own twist or turn to the tale. We learned that eventually the story was written down, asserting its permanence in status – that once it was written down, it could no longer be changed. But now, we see that the story can still change long after the ink has dried. Books and stories can be adjusted, shifted in perception as we learn about the people who wrote them. What we do with these books next is where the methodology of this thesis comes in. This chapter will serve as a precursor to three case studies that will showcase what to do with these texts within the new space that this thesis has forged amongst existing methods of reading.

Utilizing Psychological Stimulus

The critical thinking in this thesis is shaped by psychological theory. In order to bridge the gap between psychology and literary studies, I turn to Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack’s *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*.⁴¹ As it brings together existing theories of ethical criticism and examines claims made by prominent ethical theorists of our time and the past, *Mapping the Ethical Turn* provides a cohesive and nuanced account of the ways in which reading shapes our thoughts and feelings about the books that have marked our lives. I plan to use the provocations and syntheses of previous scholars in order to

⁴¹ Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, eds. *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*. University of Virginia Press, 2001.

focus the ways that this thesis will develop a methodology for the experience of reading today. The preface of the work begins with a quote by literary theorist Ihab Hassan, and follows with a caveat about the work's title and the implications it may suggest:

This is not a time for professors of literature to ignore the judgments of human passions.

– Ihab Hassan

The title of this volume – *Mapping the Ethical Turn* – is not meant to suggest that only in recent years have we seen a shift toward the marriage of ethical thought and literary study. Rather, as with the meaning of the verb *to map*, this volume, in certain ways, seeks to tell a story that highlights a terrain that has always been there. Ethical critics, like cartographers, do not necessarily discover or make a territory but, instead, describe and give shape to what has always existed (ix).

In other words, similar to this thesis, *Mapping the Ethical Turn* is rooted in exploring the “why,” the questioning, and the intersection of different ways of thinking and considering our various roles within the world.

I plan to utilize the provocations set forth in the first chapter of the compilation titled “A Humanistic Ethics of Reading” and written by Daniel R. Schwarz in order to clarify some of the methodological choices I make later during this thesis. Schwarz, a professor of English literature and author of 15 prestigious books, has contributed largely to modern conversations about literary criticism and why we read in the first place. His mantra: “Always the text; always historicize,” favors both context and text, similarly to how this thesis will employ both facets in order to create a more holistic method of reading. In 2009, Schwarz published his book *In Defense of Reading: Teaching Literature in the Twenty First Century*, which examines many of

the questions posed throughout this thesis from a teaching standpoint.⁴² His status as a fellow protector of the bookshelf has foregrounded his involvement and solidified his place within the methodological thinking behind the work I am doing here. Too, Schwarz places emphasis on the psychoanalytic implications of looking for an author's intent or an author themselves within a text. In short, the language and terms Schwarz has coined as well as the general contributions he has made to the way we think about processes of reading and art engagement have made him an integral voice within this thesis. His inclusion is intended to illuminate what the concept behind this thesis's methodology is trying to accomplish and how. Consequently, the arguments made in this chapter will largely begin with notions by Schwarz's work, and pivot from his points in order to create a more productive claim and explanation within the grounds of protecting the bookshelf.

Pivoting from Schwarz

In Schwarz's chapter of *Mapping the Ethical Turn*, it is concluded that "the representation of the relationship between author and reader is the representation of an ethical relationship."⁴³ The case studies performed in later chapters will unpack the ethical dilemma inherent to reading as a practice while also emphasizing the notion that the stability of ethics is further tested in contemporary culture. In this same chapter, Schwarz expands on the emphases of ethical concepts present in reading culture:

⁴² D. R. Schwarz, (2009). *In Defense of Reading: Teaching Literature in the Twenty-First Century*. John Wiley & Sons.

⁴³ Daniel R. Schwarz, "A Humanistic Ethics of Reading" *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*. Page 3.

Although the emphasis varies from critic to critic, we can identify several concepts shared by [critical theory] humanists:

1. The form of a literary text – its style, structure, and narrative technique – expresses its value system. Put another way, form discovers the meaning of content.
2. A literary text is a creative gesture of the author. Understanding the process of imitating the external world gives us insight into the artistry and meaning of the text.
3. A literary text imitates a world that precedes the text, and the critic should recapture that world primarily by formal analysis of the text, although knowledge of the historical context and author is often important.
- ...
5. Human behavior is central to most literary texts and should be a major concern of analysis. Although modes of characterization differ, the psychology and morality of characters must be understood as if the characters were metaphors for real people, for understanding others helps us to understand ourselves.⁴⁴

Several of these concepts point at utilization of various methods of literary criticism and modes of reading, which in and of itself is indicative of the complexity derived from reading ethically. However, this thesis will synthesize the above points to first examine how Schwarz positions the reader, text, and author, and how this thesis adds to that positioning. Point 1, unique to the rest, lays out Schwarz's assertion that form is an active player in its ethics. Form incites meaning, which falls in line with the focus on the mediation of literature. Schwarz's second, third, and fifth points, then, advocate a mode of close reading that seeks to understand the relationship

⁴⁴ Daniel R. Schwarz, "A Humanistic Ethics of Reading" *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*. Pages 3 - 4 .

between text and world, and then author and text. The fifth point, stating that “human behavior is central to most literary texts and should be a major concern of analysis... the psychology and morality of characters must be understood as if the characters were metaphors for real people,” emphasizes the important role of the reader that this thesis emphasizes so heavily. In the same point, the nod at looking at characters in a text as metaphors for real people, and thus, their actions as indicators of how real people behave, is especially relevant when discussing the role of the fiction genre in the works that this thesis will examine more closely. Linking the second and fifth points above, Schwarz intimates the reflection of reader unto text and vice versa, and makes way for the central question of this thesis: how do we, the reader, relate to the experiences of characters within a text, and more with the author? Schwarz briefly touches these related experiences through examining the ability of fiction to create separation between real and imaginary, book and world, and thus – art and artist:

What unites ethical critics... is the premise of a strong connection between art and life.

Rather than being divorced from life, our reading experience – if we read actively and with intelligence – is central to life and contributes to the development of the mature personality.

Literature provides surrogate experiences for the reader, experiences that, because they are embodied within artistically shaped ontologies, heighten our awareness of moral

discriminations.

Indeed, the above excerpt is where Schwarz’s essay begins to touch on the intricacies of this thesis. Reading and engaging with stories about life and characters who may or may not look like us directly correlate with what we believe, how we act, and what our lives look like. This is no coincidence, posits Schwarz, and I agree. We read to learn and to become, whether we are doing so intentionally or not. The “surrogate experiences” that the reader is exposed to through reading

speaks to the mediation of literature discussed earlier. But where this thesis detaches from, or perhaps creates a subsection to Schwarz's thought process is in where the understanding of mediation and the outer world of the author comes in. This thesis is interested in a subset of the surrogate experience; I examine circumstances in which the surrogate experience is predicated on both moral flaws and the notion that based on alleged immoral behavior, the author is having the same surrogate experience. That yes, reading about these fictional flawed personas allow the surrogate experience of being flawed, but that the additional flawed background of the author in the nonfiction world is what brings reading into a new dimension contemporarily. That when we are faced with a flawed author who writes a flawed character, we cannot just dive into the book and learn how to behave through a surrogate experience – not when there is a flawed person existing in the real world too, and this person has written the very book we hold. In other words, Schwarz's work informs the ways that the reader assumes a surrogate experience while reading a text with a flawed character, and the ways in which the author themselves participate in surrogate experiences with their text and characters. I, then, am interested in the moments in which the text and author are linked (for example, when the authors themselves are flawed as well) and how that creates a surrogate experience between *the reader* and *the author*. I argue that this subset of the particular surrogate experience occurring when authors like Alexie, Asher, and Diaz are accused of sexual assault is what has landed us in this new age of reading books by flawed authors. But then, what must we consider when picking up a book? Schwarz answers:

[Narrative] ethics also depends on the intersubjectivity of that transaction. We need, also, to differentiate between the ethical responses created by a structure of effects in the process of reading and the ethics of a reader resistant to the implications of that process, and to understand how and why the second response may take place after the reading – perhaps

even years later when our retrospective view may make us realize a text's sexist or racist or homophobic implications. Literature raises ethical questions that enable us to consider not only how we would behave in certain circumstances but also whether – even as we empathetically read a text – we should maintain some stance of resistance by which to judge that text's ethical implications.⁴⁵

In other words, from a psychological standpoint, the engagement with books through reading not only forces us to absorb the text for what it is while we read it, but also to take a step away from the reading and consider our own moral judgments. Also within this essay, Schwarz draws heavily from Wayne C. Booth's 1988 *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* and his 1961 *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. He notes that "Booth has always stressed the study of what works are made to *do* rather than the study of what works are made to *be*." In line with the mission of this thesis, the idea that works of art play active roles in society as it twists and turns is one that piques my interest. The conception that art stands alone as an active element of society directly advocates for the continuation of engaging with books written by "bad" people – for protecting the bookshelf. This thesis underscores the implication inherent to allowing ourselves to become absorbed in a work that may not align with our ethical values – or, for that matter, written by an author whose actions do not align with the ethical standards of society. Schwarz's reference to narrative ethics particularly relates to this thesis in that it addresses the history of flawed artists in our world and encourages the agency of readers to resist in retrospect in order to uphold ethical standards of the current moment. This thesis seeks to provide an outline and examples of how we can perform this resistance.

⁴⁵ Daniel R. Schwarz, "A Humanistic Ethics of Reading" *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*. Page 6.

Duly emphasized by the case studies to follow is the role of the fiction genre and narrative point of view that is familiar to works that sweep the ranks of readers. From a psychological standpoint, the role of fiction enhances the reader's ability to separate artist from art, author from writing, and in turn read fiction works as functioning within their own worlds without outer influence. The role of psychology is at play here in order to emphasize the humanness of some of these responses; the reasons behind why we react differently to books that we pick up as fiction versus those we pick up as nonfiction. In fiction, we have the ability to see ourselves in characters because they are not explicitly representations of other people. Schwarz writes that:

In short, the ideal of purging oneself of responses to persons, the ideal of refusing to play the human roles offered by literature, is never realized by an actual reader who reads a compelling fiction for the sake of reading it (rather than for the sake of obtaining material for an essay, dissertation or book).

He is arguing, I believe correctly, that we respond to literary characterizations not as tropes but as representations of something anterior to the text. In other words, we are not looking at “the human roles offered by literature” as representations of the outer world, rather, as functioning solely within the confines of the fictional stratosphere. In reality, so often are these “human roles” truly representations of real thoughts, tendencies, actions, and people. This harkens back to the notion that we expect our authors to present these enticing worlds to us, worlds and stories that we want to read to pass the time, but not to engage in any of the flawed behavior they write of. Because, as Schwarz argues, this duplicity is “never realized” by the reader, they are shocked when the allegations come out.

Later, Schwarz writes of how “[Booth] emphasizes how human readers respond to human subjects presented by human authors within an imagined world that represents – even if only as an illuminating distortion – anterior reality.”⁴⁶ Here it is conceded that the reality of the world through text is often distorted – often for the purpose of pleasure within fiction works, but distorted nonetheless. All this to say that it is in these moments – when the reader is able to see the text as an “illuminating distortion” rather than an escape into a fiction world, that the reader begins again to connect art with artist, author with text. This thesis argues that the premise under which we read today is wholly occupied by these moments, that we are now consistently looking to engage art and artist for the sake of not letting “bad” people off the hook but continuing to read.

Schwarz concludes his section with an important and innovative distinction: that there is a difference between ethics *of* reading and an ethics *while* reading, and that this difference is integral to ethical reading itself:

For me, an ethics *of* reading includes acknowledging who we are and what our biases and interests are. An ethics *of* reading proposes that we interpret a given literary work by reading that text from multiple perspectives, acknowledging the differences between authorial and resistant readings, and understanding why and how the original audience might have responded and for what reasons... It understands that the essential critical mantras “Always the text” and “Always historicize” may be at a cross purposes. When what we choose to include on our syllabi has an ethical dimension, we are adhering to an

⁴⁶ Daniel R. Schwarz, “A Humanistic Ethics of Reading” *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*. Page 7.

ethics of reading. Thus, I will choose to select other Conrad works for my undergraduate lecture course than the unfortunately titled *The Nigger of the “Narcissus.”*

The key feature that Schwarz posits as depicting the ethics *of* reading is that it includes and values personal and societal context. Thus, this thesis will employ an ethics *of* reading. An ethics *while* reading differs significantly:

An ethics *while* reading is different from an ethics *of* reading in its attention to a value-oriented epistemology. An ethics *while* reading implies attention to moral issues generated by events described within an imagined world. It asks what ethical questions are involved in the act of transforming life into art...⁴⁷

This thesis will stand by consistently acknowledging who we are and why we care, the multiplicity of perspectives on any given text or work of art at large, the changes in time and attitude derived by context, the cross purposes of mantras, and the ethical dimension of teaching certain texts at certain times to certain students. It will not engage with the imagined world of fiction as functioning within a vacuum between bindings. Indeed, this thesis will argue that the ethics *of* reading is inherent to the act of reading today, and that the way these ethics look as they play out is constantly being retried, reinvented, and redefined.

The Redefinition and Practice of Method

The overall method that this thesis looks to employ is a way of always thinking on two tracks,⁴⁸ the tracks being that of thinking about the text on its own terms and thinking about the

⁴⁷ Daniel R. Schwarz, “A Humanistic Ethics of Reading” *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*. Pages 12-13.

⁴⁸ Thank you to the brilliant Adela Pinch for helping me find the words to depict this utterly indescribable concept, as you, exclusively, always seem to do.

cultural conversation around it. In a simple sense, I will be performing a close reading of the text followed by a cultural analysis of that reading given the author who penned it, thus blending the New Criticism and Biographical Criticism techniques into one. This is not to suggest that there is a one-to-one relationship between the text and the cultural conversation, but to show that the moments of moral outrage within the broader world and the moments of continued reading without respect to what the author may have done behind closed pages happen in very particular contexts. Thus, the method utilized is one of reading upon two parallel tracks and looking for points of intersection and diversion amongst them.

In a less formal sense, these case studies will seek to practice a mode of reading that is comfortable with asking questions without rushing to judgment. The basis of this thesis relies entirely upon the notion that we can ask hard questions about morality and inhabit the gray area that these questions often bring us into – and remain there. That the very wrestling with the blurred boundaries between good and bad, right and wrong, about ethics, practice, and how we move forward is part of the point of doing this work. The method that the following case studies will employ is built upon an understanding that dwelling on these complicated questions and circumstances under which we read and engage with art is as important as the work itself. In this context, it is vital.

Lastly, the method that this thesis engages is always focused on layers of mediation, and how those layers impact (or do not impact) the reading and engagement experience. Questioning why we may feel more comfortable, and perhaps even safer reading books by authors who have committed moral crimes than watching movies with actors who have been accused of the very same crimes is questioning the power of mediation. The following three chapters will put these, and countless other questions into practice.

The first case study following this chapter will focus on Sherman Alexie and his 2004 short story collection, *Ten Little Indians*. Sherman Alexie, a powerhouse of creative production and influence in the sphere of fiction writing, “has always been a master of the short story.”⁴⁹ Through examining Alexie, the sexual assault allegations he faced in early 2018, and the way that complex moral quandaries are depicted in the short story collection, this chapter will serve as a broad demonstration of the power of fiction as it immerses us in grey situations and leaves us to find our own ways out. Zeroing in on one of the short stories specifically, the Alexie chapter will delve into the complex question of whether a person who does a bad thing or thinks a bad thought equates a bad person. Notably, in *Mapping the Ethical Turn*, one of the cited essays pushes any ability for questions of morality to enter a fictional realm. The work quotes literary critic Richard Posner:

In his article “Against Ethical Criticism,” Richard Posner appears to attack James’s idea [that the aesthetic is ethical and political]. With Oscar Wilde (or at least invoking the name of Wilde), he holds that literary works of art are not “moral or immoral,” they are only “well or badly written.” Any critic who brings ethical categories to the reading of works of art is thus bound to neglect the real aesthetic values that work contains and to impose on the text an alien set of concerns (60).

The perception of aestheticism and morality as being mutually exclusive presences within a story is heavily disproved in the chapter covering Alexie and *Ten Little Indians*. By utilizing a methodology that assess conflicts of morality as being a marker of aestheticism the Alexie

⁴⁹ According to USA Today’s promotional blurb on the back cover of the 1996 publication of *Ten Little Indians*.

chapter will place a broad frame around the methodology surrounding the function of reading “good” fictional works by “bad” people and allowing it to exist as just that.

The next chapter will discuss Jay Asher and his 2007 novel, *Thirteen Reasons Why*. This chapter will veer slightly from the previous and following chapters in that it will be foregrounded largely by the notion that *Thirteen Reasons Why* is a YA novel, which, for many, serves as an indicator of its role as a moral educator to younger readers. This chapter first tackles the idea of fiction as functioning as a testing ground of sorts; that within the world of fiction, readers have the opportunity to face and take on challenges and struggles without any “real” skin in the game. What we grapple with between the book covers stays between the those covers, allowing readers to inhabit real world difficulties and navigate them under unrealistic circumstances. In other words, this chapter discusses the role of fiction works, namely YA fiction works, in teaching young readers what to do in some of life’s hardest situations, and how to answer some of the world’s unanswerable questions. Doubly, *Thirteen Reasons Why* is the only of the three works discussed that was adapted for another medium, taking the small screen as a Netflix adaptation in 2018. This additional facet allows analysis of the story’s function from another, different angle. In other words, this chapter examines how the heartbreaking story of high schooler Hannah Baker’s suicide holds up across mediums and is further complicated when the author, Jay Asher, entered morally ambiguous waters as sexual harassment allegations against him broke.

The final case study will examine Junot Diaz and his highly anticipated first novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which he published in 2007. This chapter takes the angle of reading as a college student and as a teacher in a university setting. Through methodizing a long interview with one of my own college English professors, this chapter explores the underlying decisions we are making when we continue to read works by flawed authors, and when we

choose not to. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a widely read contemporary novel, and one that many teachers include on their class syllabi. In the wake of Junot Diaz's sexual harassment and misogynistic behavior allegations, we see his spot on these syllabi increasingly challenged. This chapter argues that teachers and students alike are making explicit and implicit decisions and statements through engaging in this challenge. Notably, Diaz himself was abused as a child, which he revealed shortly before allegations against him were levied. By taking this complicating factor into account, this chapter seeks to protect both the bookshelf and *Oscar Wao* from an exceptionally convoluted angle.

The following chapters seek to demonstrate the method of contemporary reading that this chapter has outlined in order play out the thought process above while actually reading.

Chapter 4: Sherman Alexie and *Ten Little Indians*

All I owe the world is my art

– Sherman Alexie

In order to develop and demonstrate our shift in reading practice, this chapter will delve into a case study of Sherman Alexie's *Ten Little Indians*. In the 2004 short story collection, Alexie tells nine stories which reflect multiple facets of life as a modern Native American.

Quoting from the book's back cover:

[*Ten Little Indians*] offers nine poignant and emotionally resonant stories about Native Americans who, like all Americans, find themselves at personal and cultural crossroads,

faced with heart-rending, tragic, and sometimes wondrous moments of being that test their loyalties, their capacities, and their notions of who they are and who they love. Along with their complex bevy of experiences, the fictional characters presented in the stories also contain complicated world views and moral standards; we meet characters who make comments that reflect bigoted, sexist, racist, and homophobic attitudes, who reveal dark secrets about their thoughts and values, and who possess questionable views of the world in which they live. The reasons behind the values that the characters hold is only insinuated, never explicated, and the very wondering about these reasons creates a wholly gripping and highly acclaimed short story collection. The characters feel real, raw, and relatable, for they are not perfect, but flawed. Before delving into a close reading of *Ten Little Indians*, I will detail how Alexie's writing of flawed characters in his fictional works became particularly significant in 2018, when the writer's own moral failings came into the spotlight. Further, I will touch on how readers have grappled with Alexie's work post-scandal.

Several years after the publication of *Ten Little Indians*, Alexie was accused by more than 10 women of sexual harassment and assault, which led him to decline the Carnegie Medal for Literature as well as several other awards, due to the fact that, according to several interviews with Alexie, "these women [were] telling the truth."⁵⁰ The accusations towards Alexie have led readers to reconsider his work at large and prompted many to question whether the flaws of the characters that Alexie has introduced them to may have been semi-autobiographical. Essentially, when Alexie admitted to having done "bad" things, (arguably making him a "bad" person) readers began to intertwine his "badness" with the "goodness" of his writing, thus, grappling

⁵⁰ Sherman Alexie, For Immediate Release. *The Seattle Times*. Article published: Neary, L. (2018). "It just felt very wrong": Sherman Alexie's accusers go on the record. *NPR*.

with the challenge of separating the flaws of Alexie from his written words and fictional characters. This movement was bolstered by the fact that Alexie has largely marketed his writing as being semi-biographical in scope and inspired by true events and experiences that drive relatability. Alexie has long pointed at his own personal experiences as being inspiration for his work. In a 2005 interview with Ase Nygren, an English literature professor at the Blekinge Institute of Technology in Sweden, Alexie says of his earlier work, at least, that “my writing was very personal and autobiographical. I was simply finding out who I was and who I wanted to be... As an Indian, you don’t have the luxury of being called an autobiographical writer often. You end up writing for the whole race.”⁵¹ His work is lauded as transformative for all readers, and especially readers of Native American descent. In fact, the reason that I choose to look at Sherman Alexie and *Ten Little Indians* is because Alexie’s work carries a lot of weight with evolving representations of Native Americans. Due to his mission to translate the indigenous experience to a mainstream audience and his own admonitions of autobiographical stimuli, readers of Alexie have had an even harder time reading with his work in light of his revealed flawedness; repelled by the idea that some of his fictional characters thoughts are his own as well.

To me, this conception – that Alexie (flawed moral compass and all) created the fictional stories within *Ten Little Indians* from an autobiographical standpoint only bolsters the motivation to continue to read his works, and to do so with a critical eye. Perhaps this motivation is gleaned from the fact that the work put into the world by Alexie has already been absorbed; it has made waves in shifting norms and mindsets and attitudes, and in providing a voice for voiceless.

⁵¹ Ase Nygren, "A world of story-smoke: A conversation with Sherman Alexie." *Melus* 30, no. 4 (2005): 149-169.

Alexie's *Ten Little Indians* shows the urban Indian experience as being multifaceted, complex, and worth engaging with. Because of this impact of words, of stories, of books far and wide, Sherman Alexie's work has reached farther than being words on a page.

Beyond this, it is important to consider that while discussing the implications of reading *Ten Little Indians*, we are still, in a sense, discussing the book. Perhaps not through terms of character or rising action or plot or literary elements with which we are familiar, but rather through how the book itself (and the others he has written) are functioning in the shadow of the author's transgressions and flawedness. Part of my approach with this method of discussion, however, is to let the text lead the way. This type of reading will employ a method that allows the text and characters to teach us, as readers, how to wrestle with moral ambiguities without giving a straightforward moral education *or* taking a stance on what in fact is good or bad.

Indeed, the intertwining of Alexie's own life experiences and the biographies and experiences of his characters further (and, as I will argue, necessarily) complicates the attempted separation between the intended effect by Alexie when writing, and the actual effect of the work in light of his outed flawedness. For this reason, the text must lead the way. This sequence of events is not unique to Alexie as an author, and we will see it again in the following chapters that examine works by authors Junot Diaz and Jay Asher. All this to say, this thesis argues that reading *Ten Little Indians* with the understanding of not only who wrote it, but why we care who wrote it, is rightfully gaining momentum in this present moment.

Alexie in the Classroom

In the contemporary age of information, technology, and news how are we supposed to react when told that our favorite authors have done something bad? What does it look like? Jeff

Spanke, an English professor at Ball State University, reflected on the day in 2018 that the syllabus he had carefully crafted called time for discussion of Alexie's novels, a day he had long dubbed "Alexie Day".⁵² He explains how that year on Alexie Day:

Instead [of talking about *Ten Little Indians*], we spent the entirety of our three hours unexpectedly focused on Alexie himself. My students just didn't want to talk about the book. Not this time. Not when its author had shamefully joined the ranks of men who use their power to leverage personal pleasure. My students wanted to talk about silence. And choice. And voice. And what really happens when time is up for artists who taint their art.

Based on the way the class period went, it seems that his students felt that they were unable to discuss Alexie's work without first discussing Alexie himself. And, as with most spirited class discussions at the university level, the dialogue began with Alexie, but quickly spiraled into a discussion of something much bigger: the ability and unclear rectitude of separating artist from art.

As the conversation escalated in Spanke's class, he called their attention to a 2008 *New Yorker* interview⁵³ with Brat-Pack leader Molly Ringwald, who, upon watching her film *The Breakfast Club* with her young daughter, was overcome with disgust about the role she had played – the role that romanticized sexual harassment for the sake of a happy ending (and a triumphant fist in the air). In the interview, however, Ringwald pointed out a conflict that arose

⁵² Jeff Spanke, "Magnificent Things and Terrible Men: Teaching Sherman Alexie in the Age of #MeToo." *English Education* 51 (2018): N1.

⁵³ Molly Ringwald, (2008). What about *The Breakfast Club*? Revisiting the movies of my youth in the age of #MeToo. *The New Yorker*.

for her when trying to keep up with the ever-evolving moral standards of the times. She said, “Erasing history is a dangerous road when it comes to art. Change is essential, but so, too, is remembering the past, in all of its transgressions and barbarism, so that we may gauge how far we have come, and also how far we need to go.” This perspective brings an important tension to the table; that we are expected to censor art in the name of advocacy, and that only contemporary works are held to this standard. If Spanke’s students decided to expel Alexie from class discussion because of what he had done, was the work of Hemingway to be demoted as well? Are we expected to go back and reconsider every work and author we have ever engaged with? As Anna Coats, head of youth services at the Livingston (NJ) Public Library wrote in an email regarding the lack of consistency in condemning works by tainted authors, “Lewis Carroll was believed to be obsessed with two young girls, photographing them naked, and taking a picture of himself kissing an 11-year-old. Yet I never hear the question of whether or not to circulate *Alice in Wonderland*. In fact, Carroll is celebrated as an eccentric character.”⁵⁴ The call for consistency is valid, but I believe that a compromise exists in the way we read moving forward. Frankly, I find that writers and artists today are held to a different standard, due in part to changing norms and conversations surrounding workplace conduct as stressed by the #MeToo movement. Creators – no matter how successful they have been or are – are expected to be good people, whether their characters are or not. Being an “eccentric character,” having a troubled background, or struggling within oneself are no longer cogent criteria for artists. In other words, no longer does the tortured artist trope stand. In society today, bad people are largely condemned

⁵⁴ Kara Yorio, 2018. "Separating Art from the Author." *School Library Journal* 64 (6) (06): Page 10.

for their wrongdoings, regardless of what they have contributed to the space around them. If this is true of attitudes towards the artists, the question still stands: what do we do with the art?

Demonstrating the Compromise

The case of Sherman Alexie can sharpen our sense of the literary-critical debates that are implicit in contemporary discussions about the morality of the artist. As we saw in our discussion of the New Critics, to read strictly for what is said on the page risks a great deal of loss. Considering this potential loss would understandably lead into reading with the writer in mind, perhaps even reading the biography of Alexie before reading any of his works and then considering them together. This form of reading falls under the aforementioned umbrella of Biographical Criticism. With this method of criticism in tow, readers of Alexie, specifically of *Ten Little Indians*, would study his sexual transgressions within the workplace and extend these wrongdoings into their reading of the novel. They would look at his life more comprehensively and seek to attach meaning by looking into who he is as a person in the world. This would, hypothetically, create a more thorough reading of the work for those engaged with it. As postmodern theorist Stanley Fish notes in *Contesting the Subject*:

The choice, as I have said before, is not between reading biographically and reading in some other way (there is no other way) but rather between different biographical readings that have their source in different specifications of the sources of agency. The only way to read unbiographically would be to refrain from construing meaning – to refrain, that is, from regarding the marks before you as manifestations of intentional behavior; but that would be not to read at all.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ William H. Epstein, ed. *Contesting the Subject: essays in the postmodern theory and practice of biography and biographical criticism*. Vol. 1. Purdue University Press, 1991. Page 14.

This thesis argues for a middle ground between these types of reading for the purpose of protecting the bookshelf as well as maintaining our moral integrity.

However, through allowing and even inviting the biographical factors of the author to influence the way that we read their words, ethical dilemmas undeniably come into play. Does supporting the work of Alexie support Alexie himself? Can we read Alexie at all without supporting him in some way, financially or with our attention? What does support mean here? In answering these huge questions, we first need to tackle the space that exists to honor the integrity of the stories that we read while still acknowledging the flaws of those writing them. For instance, we need to read *Ten Little Indians* as a representation of Spokane Native American life, yes, but also as it is being received as being written by Sherman Alexie, and all that his name stands for contemporarily.

One of the most gripping stories within the collection comes near the middle, and is titled “Can I Get a Witness?” The narrative is set in the day of a middle-class Spokane Native American woman who survives a suicide bombing in the middle of a Seattle luncheonette – an explosion in the midst of regularity. The woman spends the day with a first responder of sorts, a man who brings her home upon finding her in a confused state outside of the luncheonette after the bombing. During her time with the man, the woman reflects on the cynical attitudes that she holds towards America, love, and life itself. The story is told from a third person omniscient point of view, an intentional literary choice that I will discuss later in this chapter. While in her head, we read the woman grappling with her thoughts: she criticizes the “grief porn” that spewed out of American media post 9/11, going so far as to say that some of those who died in the tragedy may have deserved their fate because of their own personal misgivings and flaws. In fact, throughout their time together, the man and the woman both experience a slew of “bad”

thoughts; the woman wonders about the man's sex life and whether or not she willed the bombing upon herself, the man thinks about his racist and homophobic relatives, and how he makes money off of creating video games in which terrorists shoot civilians. The inner dialogues of both the man and the woman are considerably odious. At one point, the woman reflects on her first glimpse at the falling of the Twin Towers on 9/11, and how "[she] watched with equal parts revulsion and excitement...[and] wondered why [her co-workers anguished moans] sounded so erotic."⁵⁶ Based on their thoughts and the views that both characters reveal in "Can I Get a Witness?", readers who associate one's actions with their identity would label them as "bad" – bad people who think bad thoughts and do bad things. But after reading the story, we find their thoughts and actions redeemable due to the potential accuracy of their conceptions, and the relatability of their struggle. This is not to say that the role of the reader is to judge the character, but that reading a characters' thoughts through an omniscient lens may prompt the reader to evaluate the actions and thoughts of the character as though it were themselves; not for the purpose of judgement, but for relatability. Reading a characters' inner thoughts elicits the feeling that these thoughts are our own as we read, thus, as we inhabit the discomfort that is thinking these thoughts, we may find ourselves attempting to foster positive feelings towards them through means of redemption. In other words, if the reader is reading the character as a reflection of themselves – which reading an omniscient point of view commonly evokes – then the reader will likely be more understanding or forgiving of the characters' actions. As the thoughts of the character becomes equated with our own thoughts through the point of view, we find ways to redeem them through other points (e.g. in "Can I Get a Witness?" the woman has had a hard life,

⁵⁶ Sherman Alexie, *Ten Little Indians: Stories*. Grove Press, 2004.

she is in an unhappy marriage, she is entitled to these pessimistic views of the world). But if we consider this in tandem with the ways that Alexie authoring this story may have nuanced it, this reading develops a new dimension. If Alexie was the one to think the “bad” thoughts, and do the “bad” things, can we redeem him too?

Drawing back to the concept of escapist fiction before delving into the close reading of the story, fiction as a genre is synonymous with creative, imaginative writing. Yes, works of fiction are often (and especially in the case of Alexie) informed by real life events and / or autobiographical experiences. But the core of fiction work stems from the idea that fictional stories are made up, and that the characters we meet in fictional stories, though often inspired by real people, exist only on the page, in the fictional world they were written in to. When reading fictional work by Alexie, however, this distinction feels more difficult – it would be beneficial to forget about him for a moment because the text is so good, but for that very reason, it becomes harder to do. Reading work by a flawed author has an effect that serves to, in essence, bend fiction. The fictional work loses its escape feature, because as we become aware of the potential for the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the characters to be based on the writers own, this dimension of fiction is shattered. Some scholars call this the “reality effect.” Coined by literary philosopher Roland Barthes in 1968⁵⁷, the reality effect⁵⁸ can be fostered by authorial presence, factual details, or other factors. In “Can I Get a Witness?” specifically, the inclusion of 9/11 – a very real event that carries a lot of emotional and political weight in American history – serves as

⁵⁷ Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect." *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900-2000* (1968): 229-34.

⁵⁸ The full extent of Barthes novel and the reality effect is far beyond the scope of this thesis. Rather than detailing Barthes’s findings and theories fully, here, I am primarily interested in flagging what happens to the reader when a real world event takes place in a fictional work, as seen in “Can I Get a Witness?”

a reality effect by situating readers in a nonfiction setting as they go through a fictional story. Thus, readers who remember or have been affected by the event in any way will always be toggling between the world of fiction and their own experience of/ associations with that day. But I want to show that within these gray areas lies a new type of reading, one that allows us to continue to engage art by flawed artists without being out of touch with the world.

The internal thoughts that make up the bulk of the story shift between a woman and a man, who are both arguably morally flawed. But the first omniscient thought of the work comes from the woman, who is sitting in of a local diner waiting for her credit card to be returned by her waiter – it is taking longer than she had expected.

Maybe he's banging a waitress in the pantry, she thought. Let's not be homophobic, he might be banging the handsome Guatemalan busboy. Maybe he's buying internet porn or remaindered celebrity biographies with my card; maybe he's a bitter and lazy employee; or maybe he's kind and decent and terrible at his job (69).

The woman's thoughts reflect her poor outlook on humanity at large and her cynicism towards people. She catches herself for even thinking about thinking homophobically, which at first makes me, the reader, laugh, but nervously. Laughing at a homophobic joke, or joke that references homophobia, brings on a feeling of guilt and disappointment. The reader is quickly learning that this woman is a harsh misanthropist and that her character will be one that brings pessimism and negativity to the story. This tone is curious; why would an author intentionally put his readers into this feeling of discomfort and self-consciousness? Reading with a Biographically critical eye towards Alexie, perhaps he is beginning to create a discourse that forgives flawed characters; one that exonerates "bad" thoughts and morals. His motivation in writing this way is elucidated by his own misgivings. Here, authorial intent may play an

important role in encountering “Can I Get A Witness?”. If we agree that the job of the reader is to experience the text with responsible attention paid to the world but without passing judgment based on the writer, then authorial intent must be recognized in a very specific way. Perhaps the intent in “Can I Get A Witness?” is to make the reader think about intent itself: to push the reader to wonder why this appalling person is being written and brought to life. Perhaps then, the reader is drawn to forgiveness of flaws, and to read with one eye toward the flawedness of the woman, and another toward the redemptive aspects of her character. The reader is then pushed to thinking about the character as a multifaceted human being, as more than just her flaws.

If so, discourse towards forgiveness of flaws is emphasized several times. There are multiple instances where we are let into one of the characters’ thoughts and faced with their own internal grappling of their “badness.” For example, on page 74, the woman criticizes herself for thinking about sex during a terrorist attack – and then justifies her thinking:

Why was she thinking about sex at a time like this? Worse, why was she thinking about adulterous sex? The world, or at least a small part of the world, was coming to an end, and she was thinking about another man’s naked body. How perverse! Or was it a reflexive and natural reaction? With so much death and pain around her, wouldn’t it be good to throw this man down in the middle of the rubble and make love to him?

Wouldn’t it be good to create life, to conceive it?

This justification of “bad” thoughts reads like an important point that Alexie is trying to make to his readers – that even the worst of thoughts can be well-intended, and thus, forgiven. But then, on page 75, the omniscient narrator reflects on the woman’s decision to continue to lie to the man about her whereabouts during the bombing, insisting that she was not in the restaurant when it detonated by saying “Given the opportunity to tell the truth, she kept lying.” The character has

now, in a sense, dug her own grave. She is lying to the only person beside her for no apparent reason (other than potential PTSD). This calls the reader to question the true nature of the woman: just as her redeemable side is beginning to show, the reader is slapped in the face with another misdeed. This character is complicated. Most people are.

A few paragraphs later, the narration shifts to the man out of nowhere. With the turn of a page, the reader is in the man's head as maneuvers through the mass of people with the woman, who is still a stranger to him, on his arm. The switch in narration feels like an abandonment – the reader is left in unclear territory, put in a position of awareness of both characters' and their thoughts. This narrative structure serves two purposes. In one way, Alexie makes the reader very aware of his presence as the writer. Rather than feeling inside one character's head, as omniscient point of view often elicits, Alexie has placed the reader as outside, watching them – both of them – from afar. But it also allows the characters to morph into one flawed being, perhaps representative of all of humanity. For example, the reader is first introduced to the man's inner thoughts as he grapples with his own cynicism:

What the hell was he talking about? What kind of fool was he? He walked into the kitchen to get the water. He was happy to step away from her. He wondered if his charity was not really charity at all. Perhaps he'd helped her, a smallish act of human goodness, as a way of dealing with a larger fear. What if this explosion was only the first? (77).

The man's inner thoughts bar him from thinking of his "good" deed (aiding the woman in her time of trauma) as simply "good," thus showing the blur between good and bad that persists throughout the story. He goes on to think about having sex with the woman and berating himself for bringing her back to his home, sure that his intentions are grim, doubting his goodness

entirely. Thus, the man is presented as the twin pair of the woman, they are both bad. But as the story goes on, we see how they are both good, too.

The concept of goodness being intertwined with badness and the gray area between bad and good is one that readers of Alexie have come face to face with amidst his allegations. And yet, in “Can I Get A Witness?”, the story told insists that this grappling is part of life, and that it must be done. In other words, not only Alexie through his creation of them, but the fictional characters themselves, all urge the reader to think about badness and goodness more broadly, and to consider the ways that bad actions may be perceived differently. A poignant demonstration of this theory comes a little later in the story, when the woman is explaining her views on 9/11 to the man. Essentially, when the Twin Towers fell, the woman “felt equal parts revulsion and excitement,” certain that some of the people who had died in the tragedy were “bad” people, and thus deserved to die. She explains her thought process:

So, listen to this. Let’s say twelve hundred men died that day. How many of those guys were cheating on their wives? A few hundred, probably. How many of them were beating their kids? One hundred more, right? Don’t you think one of those bastards was raping his kids? Don’t you think, somewhere in the towers, there was an evil bastard who sneaked into his daughter’s bedroom at night and raped her in the ass? (89).

She tells the man to “open [his] mind,” and to think logically. She turns one of the most horrific moments of US history into a math problem – what the man calls “moral addition and subtraction,” certain that her rationale makes sense. Is the woman bad for thinking this way? Does rationalizing the death toll of 9/11 make her a bad person? The tension grows.

“I don’t want to hear the things you’re saying,” the man says.

“That’s the problem, nobody wants to hear these things, but I’m thinking them, and I have to say them.” (90).

The woman is speaking to thoughts as a process, that if she is stuck with her own morbid thoughts, someone else might as well be stuck with them too. Perhaps this makes her feel less alone. Either way, the woman speaks to the function of reading: we read the book by Alexie so as not to be “cognitive[ly] lazy” *or* perform “cognitive dissonance,” as Spanke put it earlier. We read the book by Alexie, we do not put it down, because there are more layers to reading and art engagement. I, for one, cannot rationalize the thought spiral that the woman articulates, but I still read it, with the rationalization that it is a fictional story, and a fictional woman. If Alexie, or anyone for that matter, was writing her theories down in a memoir, I rationalize that I would put the book down in disgust – because how could someone say such things about such a devastating event? And although this way of thinking risks seeming that fiction and memoir are entirely separate, the complication of this impression is part of the point. We tell ourselves that it does not feel as though these thoughts are Alexie’s, but that they are the woman’s and man’s that the story has already labeled as delusional, suffering from PTSD, potentially concussed, and bad. For the time being, we separate invention and reality for the purpose of continuing to read. We keep reading because *they* are the ones thinking the bad thoughts, not Alexie, and they are just words on a page, characters in a story. Right?

“Can I Get a Witness?” concludes as the man carries the woman to an ambulance, and considers the people around him:

He looked at those strangers and knew each of them lived with terrible secrets. He knew that man cheated on his wife with her sister and that woman pinched her Alzheimered mother’s arms until they bled. And that teenage boy set dogs on fire and that pretty

teenage girl once knocked down a fat ugly girl and spit in her mouth. And he knew that father had two sons, one who couldn't read and one who wore dresses, and he made them punch each other because they were stupid and weak. And there was a white grandmother who hated her Mexican grandchildren and a priest who burned himself with cigarettes whenever he dreamed about sex with little boys. And that man had abandoned wife and children and didn't know they were now living in a car, and that woman hadn't talked to her father in fifteen years and didn't know he was now dying of prostate cancer. And none of these people, not one of them, had loved any of the others well enough. Failures, he thought, we're all failures. (95).

The man's cynicism towards humanity is clear, but his reasoning is not. Readers of the story have learned that the character had a failed marriage that he feels guilty about, but otherwise, his skepticism about the goodness in people is unexplained. Perhaps his interactions with the woman turned him cold to the ability of others to love, perhaps being exposed to the woman's views of 9/11 showed him that there were really bad thoughts out there, and that they ruin good lives for others. Or perhaps Alexie's world views are bleeding onto the page, and he is the one who really feels these cynicisms. In creating not one, but two compelling characters that the reader becomes attached to within the span of 15 pages, Alexie has caused us to question why the man and woman as fictional characters think this way, and who they might be meant to represent in the nonfictional world. But these authorial intentions do not matter; rather, the consideration about them does. Looking at these characters and thinking, Is this me? Do I think this way? forces the reader to look directly inside themselves and see Sherman Alexie. What I mean by this, is that to wonder about these characters and their flawedness is to wonder about Alexie and his flawedness – and to accept that flawedness is in the world, and it can be awful, and it can ruin lives – and to

still read. To still read, and to endure the difficulty and ambiguity and discomfort is to avoid succumbing to a simplification of moralizing, and to work to navigate the complicated realities of our world. To read stories about people and the world and escape into them, but then put the book down and look outside and consider what it means to escape into a world that looks just like ours, and how to keep doing it.

Reading in this way allows us to engage with *Ten Little Indians*, while also maintaining our moral compasses. In binding Biographical and New Criticism, engaging with the characters as they are but also considering who wrote them (and perhaps from an auto-biographical standpoint), the text takes on a multifaceted slew of implications. Because of this, a lack of consistency in the standards we hold our artists to does not coincide with a lack of integrity – not in this case. Ringwald’s earlier assessment, then, holds important weight in seeing the pushback against separating artist from art, but also points to the shaky status of morality in this entire conversation. Spanke’s class disagreed with her; they largely insisted that “we can [n]ever responsibly (and some said ‘morally’) distinguish artist from art.” In closing the discussion for the day, Spanke pointed to a specific sentence in the Alexie novel, one that he had specifically enjoyed reading, one that he and the class had touched on earlier as being especially well written and evocative of emotion. He asked the class if they thought this sentence was still a “good” one. The class responded “no,” and that “there [were] other good sentences, in other books, that are just as good, or better.” They then urged Spanke to remove all Alexie novels from his syllabus, to never teach his work again. The students had written Alexie off, and with it, his novels, characters, and questions went.

The discussion led by Spanke and undoubtedly in other classrooms by other upper level writers, readers, and thinkers upholds the idea that reading is different now; that we have to find

new ways to engage with “good” art by “bad” people, that is, if we want to continue to engage with them at all. There too comes the apprehension toward burdening ourselves with negotiating morality and whether an artist deserves to be thrown out (and whether this cost will be greater) and filling that space with someone who surely could go ahead and do something bad themselves. There is an argument to be made for simply accepting that people are flawed and coming to terms with the fact that, sometimes bad people make good things and that we don’t have to beat ourselves up for liking them because then we would be left with very little art left. I believe that that argument is an excuse, and as Spanke puts it, a way of using “cognitive laziness to avoid cognitive dissonance.”⁵⁹ In other words, the decision to eschew the problem altogether rather than convincing ourselves that the problem is solved is an example of laziness in favor of simplicity. Amidst the allegations towards Alexie, Collette Bancroft of the *Tampa Bay Times* writes “...what do we do as readers with the art he has created?... Women’s voices must be heard and honored. But that isn’t the end of the conversation...we have to find a way to move forward.”⁶⁰ I agree, the conversation does not end when one classroom banishes Alexie from their bookstands.

By reading with the implication (and often burden) of the world in mind, we are able to zero in on the role of language and art in our lives. By asking critical questions about books once we’ve read them: What does it represent? Why does it matter? How can I be critical, civic, and conscious? we can begin to consider both the words on the page as distinct (as do the New

⁵⁹ Jeff Spanke, "Magnificent Things and Terrible Men: Teaching Sherman Alexie in the Age of #MeToo." *English Education* 51 (2018): N1.

⁶⁰ Collette Bancroft, 2018. "Literary World Grapples With #MeToo Movement." *Tampa Bay Times*, Mar 18, 6.

Critics), the persona of the author (as do the Biographical Critics), and the general context of the writer writing the stories that they are in this time. With this synthesis of critical techniques, we can utilize the changes in reading that are happening around us to our advantage. And finally, we can engage with books in this modern era without being out of touch with the world.

Chapter 5: Jay Asher and *Thirteen Reasons Why*

If only we could see the endless string of consequences that result from our smallest actions. But we can't know better until knowing better is useless.

– Jay Asher

In 2007, Jay Asher published *Thirteen Reasons Why*, a Young adult fiction novel that follows the aftermath of high schooler Hannah Baker's suicide. The story is told through the perspective of fellow high schooler Clay Jensen, who learns that he is in possession of thirteen cassette tapes recorded by Hannah herself, each tape explaining one of the thirteen reasons why she decided to end her life. In a review by *Publisher's Weekly*, both the detail and gravity of the book's tragic plot line is discussed:

This uncommonly polished debut opens on a riveting scenario: 13 teenagers in a small town have each been designated to listen, in secret, to a box of audiotapes recorded by their classmate Hannah and mailed on the very day she commits suicide. "I'm about to

tell you the story of my life,” she says. “More specifically, why my life ended. And if you're listening to these tapes, you're one of the reasons why.” Clay, the narrator, receives the tapes a few weeks after the suicide...and his initial shock turns to horror as he hears the dead girl implicate his friends and acquaintances in various acts of callousness, cruelty or crime.⁶¹

Though Hannah’s suicide was facilitated by multiple harrowing factors, experiences, and personal struggles with her mental health, one of the tipping points was the rape she endured by a popular classmate, and her subsequent inability to be taken seriously by anyone who she told about the event – including her school’s guidance counselor. Notably, reviews of the Young adult fiction book – which is meant to target readers within the age range of 12 – 18 years old⁶² – by *The Scientific American* criticize the implication that any particular incident of suicide can be traced back to a concrete set number of reasons. The thought – provoking article concludes with the statement: “However, the message that suicide can have simple, or a simple set, of causes, or that suicide represents some type of solution, is unfortunate. There is never one reason why, or even thirteen” (Devitt, 2017). This powerful perspective emphasizes the notion that the sexual assault Hannah encountered may have only been a small part of what led her to end her life; that the simplicity of this causal explanation is offensive and likely misinformed. The sexual assault

⁶¹ Catherine Lu, "Empowering Teens Beyond the Page: The Evolution of Journalistic Coverage of the Young Adult Fiction Genre." PhD diss., Ohio University, 2018.

⁶² Michael Cart, "From insider to outsider: The evolution of young adult literature." *Voices from the Middle* 9, no. 2 (2001): 95-97.

that Hannah endured was only a part of her story – as written by Jay Asher, who, in February of 2018, was accused of sexual assault by a female co-worker.

According to an article in *Publisher's Weekly*⁶³, “News about Asher[‘s misconduct] broke on Monday afternoon, when the Associated Press published a story reporting his expulsion from the [Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators].” And though Asher responded, claiming that he had left the organization on his own and that *he* in fact was the one who had been harassed, a representative from Penguin Young Readers stated that “Penguin Young Readers does not currently have any new books scheduled for publication with Jay Asher,” (Maher, 2018). Author and longtime member of the SCBWI Martha Brockenbrough said many of the women she knows who have "had relationships" with Asher felt "victimized in many ways" and that "the power balance was [neither] equal [nor] remotely acceptable."

Brockenbrough continued:

Many of us knew Jay. He’s been to my house and was very kind to my niece. But he behaved terribly here and worse, made a habit of it. This is where we all have to think about the bigger picture and realize that someone we know as a friendly professional is also capable of harming others. And we have to protect and support those who have been harmed first, last, and always, (Maher, 2018).

The sexual assault charges levied against Asher become doubly concerning when considering the content upon which *Thirteen Reasons Why* is grounded – that rape can ruin and, in the worst of circumstances, even end lives. Noting that the story he wrote forces the reader to

⁶³ John Maher, "Sexual Harassment in Children's Publishing Reaches a Crisis Point." PublishersWeekly.com. February 13, 2018. Accessed January 15, 2019.

take seriously the gravity of sexual misconduct, and further, implies it can lead to suicide, Asher's own sexual misconduct hits uncomfortably close to home. This example of Asher and *Thirteen Reasons Why* tackles a nuanced aspect of separating authors from text; the immoral deeds of his characters and those that he himself is accused of committing align too closely to be discounted. In other words, Asher's writing insists upon the seriousness of rape and potential that it has to ruin lives, which logically places the assumption that this is something he himself either believes, or at the very least, has thought about in depth while writing the book. Then, when he commits the act that he has written off as unforgivable, how does he expect his readers to react? Even aside from how he may expect us to, how should we? And perhaps most importantly, how do we?

For the first few years after its publication, journalistic coverage of *Thirteen Reasons Why* concentrated largely on the positive impact that the book had on young readers, and its ability to stimulate conversation about the stigmas surrounding mental health. Then, following the allegations levied against Asher, Anne Ursu wrote an article titled "Sexual Harassment in the Children's Book Industry" which highlighted the plethora of incidents in which male authors and industry professionals made their female counterparts file complaints and in the worst cases, press charges. She elaborated upon how these allegations impact perceptions and understanding of authors and other workers in the Young adult fiction industry, and subsequently, of their books:

And sometimes, the stories reveal serial predators unchecked by an industry that does not want to acknowledge such things could be possible of its men. We work in children's books, and we like to think we are different, somehow... But we aren't different, and

before we can do anything about sexual harassment, we need to face that reality. And the reality is that...the people who we work alongside, whose books we care about, who we like, can be sexual harassers (Ursu, 2018).

As pertaining to this thesis, Ursu's article showcased that just because authors of Young adult fiction books may write with messages that seem to denounce and write off sexual harassment, especially rape, it does not omit these authors from committing these exact crimes themselves, no matter how highly their readers may think of them. Indeed, children's and Young adult literature is often regarded as being morally sound, written for the purpose of educating children and teens about the rights and wrongs of the adult world. Coming of age stories (think *Little Women*, *The Outsiders*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, etc.) and books written about growing up are placed on a pedestal of perfection – and thus, seemingly, their authors are as well. Their purposes are multifold, but as psychologists Todd Davis and Kenneth Womack write in *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*:

The kind of thinking a small child does when she asks, “Twinkle twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are,” has a crucial role to play in the life of a citizen. We see person like shapes all around us: but how do we relate to them? All too often, we see them as just shapes, or physical objects in motion. What storytelling in childhood teaches us to do is to ask questions about the life behind the mask, the inner world concealed by the shape. It gets us into the habit of conjecturing that this shape, so similar to our own, is a house for emotions and wishes and projects that are also in some ways similar to our own; but it also gets us into the habit of understanding that that inner world is differently shaped by

different social circumstances. These abilities, I argue, must be acquired in early childhood, by the early practice of storytelling (65).

Indeed, books and stories that we come across in childhood play pivotal roles in our young lives and initial understandings of the world. Adult fiction stories, on the other hand, are implicitly understood to be tackling the trials of adulthood – trials that do not always require a happy ending, or a moral redemption. In some adult fiction, the reliance on flawed characters to elicit a sense of community and relatability with the reader is done to create the escapist feature of reading, rather than to teach about the adult world.⁶⁴ Distinctly, adult fiction does not always seek the moral high ground or moral education that Young adult fiction seemingly does, which somehow changes the ground upon which authors of adult fiction novels stand themselves. All this to say that Asher, a writer of Young adult fiction and teller of stories that help generate understandings of right and wrong, his bad behavior stands out in a different way than Sherman Alexie's or Junot Diaz's. Touching on this in her 2018 thesis discussing the evolution of journalistic coverage of the Young adult fiction genre, Catharine Lu writes:

Much to my dismay, Asher was also accused of sexual harassment by individuals in the publishing industry. For an author whose top-selling book has a young girl raped by a

⁶⁴ It is worth noting here that the word “some” is imperative to this sentence; that this is not always the case. In other readings of adult fiction works, such as that as discussed of Sherman Alexie works. In these cases, flawed characters are posited as being reflections of the real world, put in play in order to help us engage with the complexities of nonfictional life.

fellow classmate, it is incredibly disappointing and disheartening to read that he has also been accused of engaging in similar acts (Lu, 40).⁶⁵

Thus, Asher and *Thirteen Reasons Why* exemplify a case where we, the readers, have much to gain from the work, but simultaneously carry a responsibility to be aware of who is writing; utilizing the new critical methodology of our age. This chapter will veer slightly away from the questions of morality posited in the previous chapter on Sherman Alexie, focusing instead on how novels that are tendered as giving readers a moral education necessarily become complicated when moral discrepancies like those of Asher come into play, as well as providing examples of how to keep reading alongside these complications.

Characterization and Quotation Investigation

It is unclear whether Asher's writing of sexual assault came before his own toxic attitude and inappropriate behavior towards women or vice versa. This uncertainty may lead readers to turn away from attempting to spot authorial intent and rather turn to the New Critics when reading *Thirteen Reasons Why*. In other words, some readers may opt to separate Asher's own faults from the book and engage with the story and the characters as fictional beings that only exist on the page – adhering to the common and previously mentioned “escapist” feature of fictional work. But *Thirteen Reasons Why* is grounded on being current and contemporary, and essentially exists on its relation to the real world. This contradiction makes the work itself counter to New Criticism, and wholly bound by its author and the context within which the

⁶⁵ Catharine Lu, May 2018. “Empowering Teens Beyond the Page: The Evolution of Journalistic Coverage of the Young Adult Fiction Genre.”

author was writing. Indeed, writing for the purpose of being relatable essentially eliminates the option to be read under the lens of the New Critics – this type of reading goes against the very philosophy of art/ artist separation. This chapter seeks to build upon this foundational understanding of the relationship between and text and the world by interpreting key characters, quotes, and moments in the story itself. Interpretation will be rooted in my own understanding of the author’s accused wrongdoings but complicated by the knowledge that not all readers will be attuned to Asher’s biographical background. Thus, the methodological approach consistent throughout this thesis will advocate for reading with separation between author and book in some aspects of the book (e.g. the fictional element of the storyline itself) and for the ways that we can’t or shouldn’t detach the text from the author in other ways (e.g. the consequences and perceptions of the characters who commit sexual assault, bullying, and other immoral acts).

In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Bryce Walker is the popular, handsome football player who assaults Hannah Baker in a hot tub and ultimately rapes her. Given that the novel is written for Young adult readers, this sequence of events may be one of the first encounters that young readers have with sex narratives. In Patty Campbell’s *Books and Films About Sexuality for Young Adults*, ideals about sex and youth are documented through exploration of 400 books from 1892 to the 1980s. The book includes a fascinating revelation of how books and stories about youth and sexuality unconsciously shape understandings of sexual beliefs and codes of behavior.⁶⁶ Thus, the nonconsensual, violent demeanor with which Bryce incites having sex with Hannah may not be immediately understood as alarming by younger readers – as they are just

⁶⁶ Patty Campbell, *Sex guides: Books and films about sexuality for young adults*. Routledge, 2017.

starting to develop their own perceptions of sexual beliefs and codes of behavior. In relating this point to the broader argument at stake, *Thirteen Reasons Why* is written for a younger reader, and one that inevitably reads differently than an older, more informed, more experienced reader might. Thus, if in tune with other writers of American Young adult literature, Asher's writing for a younger age group was understood to be shaping younger reader's ideals about love, relationships, and sex. If this was his authorial intent, what is the purpose of presenting an unhealthy relationship and sexual experience within *Thirteen Reasons Why*? What was Asher trying to explain by demonstrating this experience? Further, when readers learned that Asher himself allegedly committed the act that his character had, the struggle with his actions against his work became further intensified. As an older reader myself, I understand Bryce's actions to be iniquitous, as is the constant theme of violence as being inextricably linked with sex within the novel. And after learning and considering the actions of the book's author, Biographical Criticism might investigate this theme as one that Asher himself may have been grappling with on the page – or one that he came to embody through writing Bryce's character and in the tone that links sex and violence over and over again. However, this thesis is invested in complicating these types of readings by asking specific questions that require the new reading practice of our time: How do we write the villain without becoming it? How do we read the story without recreating it in our nonfictional lives? Questions like these, considered in the context of the accusations against Asher, require the reader to both utilize the escapist nature of fictional books while also keeping one foot rooted in the real world.

Diving into the novel, there are several instances within the novel where violence and sex are shown and described as being byproducts of one another. Some scenes in which this occurs include Bryce, and some do not. In order to read *Thirteen Reasons Why* as the moving piece of

literature that it is, but also uphold the precedent of remaining in touch with the world, this chapter will use the critical methodology to first analyze Bryce as a character and then the quotes that surround the theme of violence within the work as a whole.

Bryce is the eleventh person to receive a personalized tape from Hannah but is referenced many times throughout the rest of the tapes. Asher's descriptions of Bryce position him as an irredeemable antagonist. In almost every instance, he is a bully or a looming, discomfoting presence. In Bryce's tape, Hannah describes how Bryce has sex with her without her consent. She says, "For everyone listening, let me be clear. I did not say no or push his hand away. All I did was turn my head, clench my teeth, and fight back tears. And he saw that. He even told me to relax," (Asher 134).⁶⁷ Though Hannah here admits that she didn't say no or physically try to fight Bryce off, she certainly did not consent to sex. Some of Hannah's peers in the novel (and readers of *Thirteen Reasons Why* alike) do not see this as a rape, arguing under the premise that lack of consent is a separate issue. This speaks to the ambiguous and highly contested grounds that cases of sexual assault stand upon; ringing bells of similarity to the case against Asher, which he dismissed as the "hurt feelings of a group of authors with whom he had consensual relationships that ended poorly," (Cohen 2018)⁶⁸. But rather than engaging in a straightforward biographical mode of reading here, I use this knowledge to bolster the gravity of Hannah telling her story in this way. Hannah's character, troubled as she was, wanted to serve justice to herself and other survivors of sexual assault – but felt as though she only could after she was gone,

⁶⁷ Jay Asher, *13 Reasons why*. Penguin, 2017. Page 134.

⁶⁸ Patricia Cohen and Tiffany Hsu, "Children's Book Industry Has Its #MeToo Moment," *The New York Times Online*, (2018). <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/15/business/childrens-publishing-sexual-harassment.html>

which is why she made the tapes to be heard postmortem. Perhaps stepping briefly into the nonfictional context of cases (like Asher's) that zero in on the ambiguity of what constitutes consent makes room for a broader issue that *Thirteen Reasons Why* is touching. And only by analyzing Hannah's tape through the middle ground methodology, can this contextually rooted reading be done.

Later in the tape, Hannah says "I was just using you, so I could let go of me completely," (Asher 153).⁶⁹ During this time, Clay – the narrating character, who is also listening to the tapes – is figuring out that Bryce was the mystery perpetrator who Hannah's tapes revealed to have raped her unconscious friend Jessica at a party weeks earlier. Hannah was hiding in the closet while the rape took place, and displays a great deal of guilt, understandably, for failing to stop the alleged event. Now, having been assaulted by the same man who she had already failed to fight off, Hannah speaks as though this incident has led her to lose any strength she may have been holding onto. She kills herself days after. Based on this chain of events, the trauma she experienced with Bryce seemingly played a role in her impending suicide. As mentioned earlier, sexual assault is taken in the book as being one of the driving factors for Hannah towards ending her life. And as she said in the tape, the event allowed her to "let go of [herself] completely," to disassociate from any selfhood she felt inside. I read this as an indication that Hannah looked at sexual intercourse with Bryce as being the necessary final straw; that she needed this final trauma to occur in order to wholly submit to what she felt she needed to do. The word choice that Hannah was "just using [Bryce]" instigates a grossly common misconception: that victims of sexual assault "wanted it" or "asked for it." But to say, "I was just using you, so I could let go of

⁶⁹ Jay Asher, *13 Reasons why*. Penguin, 2017. Page 153.

myself completely,” certainly does not need to mean that Hannah consented to Bryce’s attack – we have already met Bryce and have come to see him as a villainous character who has raped before. But through authoring Hannah to have being “using” the assault by Bryce as motive for her impending self-harm can complicate the perception of his character. It can create confusion for readers about whether or not Hannah “wanted it,” confusion that many sexual assault victims face. With this complicated slew of insinuations in tow, why would Hannah say this in the tapes? And perhaps more significantly, why would Asher author her to? The significance of analyzing this statement is multifold: it intimates that instances of sexual assault are complicated, that victims may have an alternate agenda, and, in terms of the story alone, that Bryce’s sexual assault was the determining final straw for Hannah Baker’s life. All of this to say that Hannah’s tapes served to tell her story to her peers in the fictional story, but also, to make statements about complicated issues and how they are perceived. Again, taken with one ear to book and the other to the author’s own sexual assault allegation, Hannah’s proclamations here enter the real world conversation. We are led to wonder what Hannah’s statement may have been intimating, and why it needed to be intimated in the first place.

Thinking briefly in terms of Biographical Criticism and Authorial Intent, why did Asher create this monstrous character out of Bryce – one who mistreats women to no avail – if he himself was engaging (or, according to the timeline of when he was accused, *would* engage) in related, if not parallel, behavior? *Thirteen Reasons Why* as a whole takes a violent, painful tone as it addresses Hannah’s revelation and reiteration of the world as being a dangerous, unforgiving place. Perhaps Asher was trying to convey this message to his young readers as his own version of a warning, knowing his own demeanor. Or, perhaps writing of Hannah’s turmoil and Bryce’s victimization put Asher in a headspace that desensitized him from seeing the wrong

in his actions. On page 133, Hannah is recounting an interaction with Bryce that occurred after he touched her inappropriately during class: “Statement number one: ‘I’m only playing Hannah.’ Translation: Your ass is my play-toy. You might think you have final say over what happens to your ass, but you don’t. Not as long as ‘I’m only playing,’” (Asher 133-34).⁷⁰ Asher deliberately plays both sides of the account; he tells the reader what Bryce said, and then what Hannah thought. The reader is not pushed to agree with either of their perspectives – in fact, at many points in the story Hannah is doubted for being overdramatic and accused of extreme exaggeration. We hear the inner thoughts of women who are abused by men, the inner thoughts of the women abused by Asher – in his very own words.

‘Thirteen Reasons Why’ Takes the Small Screen

Thirteen Reasons Why took a step further into contested territory in 2017, when it was released on Netflix as a TV series. Produced by Selena Gomez after she became engrossed by the novel as a teenager, the series brought Hannah Baker’s story onto the small screen. This step can be seen as a tactic for increasing relatability of the series and story itself, which only further eliminates Asher’s ability market the novel as “just a story.” Doubly, this step onto the screen further disallows New Criticism from applying to the work. As discussed with respect to the mediation of literature as an art form, the separation of actor from character is one that takes more work than written words from writer. Further, Selena Gomez’s involvement with the series development and the way that she used her personal story to make Hannah’s relatable makes understanding of the characters as mere fictitious images even more impractical. Gomez is

⁷⁰ Jay Asher, *13 Reasons why*. Penguin, 2017. Pages 133-134.

quoted in multiple articles and interviews saying that “I see myself in Hannah so much,” recounting:

Seven years ago, I did and even more so today, which I think is funny because it’s backwards. The older I get the more insecure I get, which is odd. But that’s something a lot of people can relate to. Her personality is a quiet strength. I’ve never really been the one to be in anyone’s face. A lot of girls feel like they have to be a certain way for attention. Social media has amplified all of that. I get that she didn’t want that to be what her life was.⁷¹

Gomez constantly posted and tweeted about the show as it was being released. She also constantly referred to the show as being a “passion project” of hers, and ones that she hoped many would relate to. In this way, not only does the social media moment we are in— where actors, authors, and creators negotiate the lines between being behind the scenes and on the front lines – make it impossible to engage with this story in a vacuum, but also what the creators are saying about it. They are making the stories of the characters and the stories of the real, live people inseparable. In our present moment, this is a dangerous game to play.

Gomez’s publicized attachment to the character Hannah Baker understandably caused many viewers and readers to begin to see themselves as Hannah, too – for better or worse. In December of 2017, Gomez was sued by John Herndon, who lost his 15 year old daughter Bella

⁷¹ Brian Porreca, "'13 Reasons Why' Team Opens Up About Toughest Scenes, Possible Season 2." *The Hollywood Reporter*. April 04, 2017.

to suicide after she allegedly binge- watched the series on Netflix.⁷² Herndon called the streaming service “hypocritical” because of their decision to fire Kevin Spacey from *House of Cards* and then Danny Masterson from *The Ranch* as they faced sexual misconduct allegations, but to continue producing *Thirteen Reasons Why* when teenagers were killing themselves after watching the show. But there is another call for hypocrisy here: if the Netflix show is being pressed to be pulled from production, why is there no talk about the book that told the story in the first place? Or, for that matter, the author who wrote the book upon which the Netflix show is based? Parents who are so angry at Selena Gomez for producing a show that glorifies suicide have hardly mentioned Jay Asher, who wrote the story from scratch. This is not to say that parents *should* or *should not* be getting mad at Asher (or Gomez, for that matter) but to question the motives behind these allegations. If Gomez is being vilified for showing Hannah Baker’s story and ultimate suicide on TV for children to watch, why isn’t Asher even being mentioned for creating Hannah’s character, writing her story, and ultimately making suicide seem like a way to escape the pressures of teenage hood? To me, it is the mediated nature of literature that allows for the unparalleled separation between artist and art. We think of Asher as behind the scenes, and Gomez as on the front lines, simply because Gomez’s face is being advertised as the creator behind the Netflix show; the person who brought the story to life. Gomez has also spoke at length about why she felt so strongly about producing the show:

I think it’s an experience that ultimately is bringing light to very difficult and dark topics in a very difficult and dark time. We have the ability through fiction, through art, to tell stories

⁷² Entertainment Desk, "Selena Gomez Slapped with Lawsuit after '13 Reasons Why' Fan Kills Herself." *The Express Tribune*. December 20, 2017.

and talk about things that are very difficult to talk about in life. They are especially difficult for young people to talk about, they are especially [difficult] for people to talk about with their parents. My hope is that [the show can help people to] have these conversations about incredibly difficult and life-or-death topics without starting from the place of fear.⁷³

But the book was already written, the story already told. Gomez could have urged young readers to pick up a copy of Asher's novel from a bookstore, or to read it online in order to understand and engage with the vital messages within. But rather than doing this, a Netflix television show was produced, garnering more attention than the book ever had, and more association with Gomez than the book ever had with Asher. Thus, the mediation of literature provided a veil for Asher to exist behind, whereas when the angry parents came marching, Gomez had no such protection.

Speaking from my own experience, I read *Thirteen Reasons Why* when I was in middle school; I was thirteen years old and just beginning to discover and really take advantage of my love for books. I was reading all the time, and for that or whatever other reason, I never got caught up on the specifics of Asher's book. I never thought more into it. But now, reading it again, I am finding it all but impossible to disconnect the text from the world. Not only due to Asher's misgivings, but by the way that the series was marketed to relate to others, my own perspectives on the work have intermingled with Asher's, Gomez's, and more. This personal experience relates to the wider interests of this chapter as a whole: first, how sexual violence reads differently to different generations and ages of readers, and second, how knowledge of

⁷³ Kate Stanhope, "Selena Gomez Opens Up About "Difficult Time" While Working on Netflix's '13 Reasons Why'." *The Hollywood Reporter*. January 17, 2019

Asher's bad behavior further confounds this reading. For example, now, when I read Bryce's character, I wonder what Asher was thinking as he brought him to life, if he thought that young readers who would later sexually abuse women were relating to this character, if he thought that was okay, or if he didn't think about any of it. The thought of Asher's complicity in creating Bryce never crossed my mind before – I simply understood that most narrative plots need a villain to fall. But in wondering about his character now, and how he functions in a YA book that may serve to give young readers a beginning of moral education, I stand by the belief that this very wondering is what makes reading today different, new, and worth re-reading.

Chapter 6: Junot Diaz and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

The whole culture is telling you to hurry, while the art tells you to take your time. Always listen to the art.

– Junot Diaz

As my Introduction detailed, the initial driving factor behind writing this thesis was the experience I had reading Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* amidst emerging allegations of his sexual assault scandal. The simultaneous feelings of discomfort with continuing to read his work and desire to know how the story ended left me without a clear direction to go. How was I supposed to keep reading? And if I did, how would I talk about the book with other people? This experience is not unique to me, to readers of Junot Diaz, or to readers whatsoever – today, this grappling with the actions of the artists we love is familiar and unexceptional. We struggle with whether to protect the bookshelf with all costs, or rather protect

our perceptions of morality. Clare Dederer aptly writes in her piece “What Do We Do with the Art of Monstrous Men?”⁷⁴:

[So many artists] did or said something awful and made something great. The awful thing disrupts the great work; we can’t watch or listen or read the great work without remembering the awful thing. Flooded with knowledge of the maker’s monstrousness, we turn away, overcome by disgust. Or... we don’t. We continue watching, separating or trying to separate the artist from the art. Either way: disruption. They are monster geniuses, and I don’t know what to do about them.

We don’t know what to do with these artists or their work: where to place them metaphorically, or literally. Through analysis of Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, this chapter will examine the multiplicity of routes that contemporary readers have taken in making these decisions from yet another angle – from within the walls of the classroom.

Junot Diaz and Oscar Wao

Since joining the critical conversation with his 1996 short story collection, *Drown*, Junot Diaz has been lauded as a genius of sorts. His writing is largely described as powerful, convincing, “sentimental yet cynical,” and “mesmerizingly honest.”⁷⁵ In recent years he has quickly risen to authorial fame and has won both the PEN/Malamud Award for Short Fiction and the Rome Prize. When his long – awaited first novel came out in 2007, the work “decisively

⁷⁴ Claire Dederer, “What Do We Do with the Art of Monstrous Men?” *The Paris Review*. December 11, 2017.

⁷⁵ Diógenes Céspedes, Silvio Torres-Saillant, and Junot Díaz, “Fiction Is the Poor Man’s Cinema: An Interview with Junot Díaz,” *Callaloo* 23.3 (2000): 892–907.

establish[ed Diaz] as one of contemporary fiction's most distinctive and irresistible new voices."⁷⁶ *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* won *Time's* #1 Fiction Book of the Year Award, the John Sargent, Sr. Novel Prize, the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction, and a Pulitzer Prize. Indeed, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* gripped and held onto readers across the globe, and the esteem associated with Junot Diaz followed suit.

So, what was the story that captivated readers far and wide? The novel tells the tale of Oscar de León, a "sweet but disastrously overweight ghetto nerd" who grows up in the Dominican Republic and the United States, all the while struggling with his passion for writing and seemingly hopeless pursuit of love. The book explores the difficulties of growing up in contrary cultures, but, as many critical thinkers have noted before me, *Oscar Wao* is more than a classic bildungsroman, or template for coming of age. As aptly put by Armando Celayo and David Shook, "it's an honest and poignant narrative that looks at the overbearing weight of history as it influences generations and generations of Americans, who often don't realize the impact it has on them."⁷⁷ It examines the nature of authority and the cultural shaping of both family and history, and it actively interrogates the legitimacy of these identified truths. One of the most compelling ways that Diaz does this is through fragmented narration by Yunió – Oscar's friend and sister's lover – who is telling Oscar's story, and Oscar himself. The narration combines English and Spanish, fiction and history, street slang and academic language, and more – complicating the work into an extremely multifaceted one. Because of these narrative complexities and unique ability to bridge multiple genres into one, *The Brief Wondrous Life of*

⁷⁶ Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

⁷⁷ Armando Celayo and David Shook. "In Darkness We Meet: A Conversation with Junot Díaz."

Oscar Wao has graced many class syllabi. Students and teachers have struggled for years now about the novel itself, what it means, and how it functions in contemporary society. In and outside of the classroom, Diaz's first novel is read and contemplated and thought about and discussed.

These discussions were complicated in April of 2018, when *The New Yorker* published an essay by Diaz titled "The Silence: The Legacy of Childhood Trauma," in which he revealed his childhood as being one riddled by constant sexual abuse by someone who he trusted, and the weight that he lives with because of it. Just one month after this essay was published, sexual assault allegations were filed against Diaz himself. Multiple female authors, as well as graduate student Zinzi Clemmons came forward to accuse Diaz of inappropriate and abusive behavior. Following these events, people kept reading and contemplating and thinking about and discussing *Oscar Wao* and its brilliance – but, understandably, something was different. Not only is Diaz an author who has multiple sexual misconduct allegations against him, but he also has experienced sexual victimization himself. Thus, examination of Diaz and *Oscar Wao* brings in a new angle of analysis; one that arguably may consider biography as having an explanatory function. What I mean by this, is that Diaz's status as a victim of the very abuse he has allegedly put others through serves to further alter the relationship between reader, text, and author. Harkening back to Schwarz's concept of literature providing readers with a surrogate experience, and thinking about it with respect to Diaz, the surrogate experience for a reader and an author shifts when the author is allegedly both a victim and a perpetrator of abuse. In other words, when the reader engages with the flawed characters within works by Diaz, they are engaging with him as a surrogate of the abuser as well as the abused. This shift further complicates the experience of reading Diaz with knowledge of his alleged perpetration and victimization of abuse.

Indeed, this thesis has touched on different types of fictional literature and their roles; there is fiction that is used to escape into a world that exists only within the binds of the book, but there is also fiction that allows us to self-reflect on the complexities of the outer world in a very real way, but through a very low-stakes lens. Increasingly important is the notion that sexual assault is depicted in a few cases throughout *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Two female characters, Beli and Lola, are both implicitly and explicitly sexually assaulted throughout the course of the book. These instances serve as character development but do little else to forward the plot of the story as pertaining to Oscar or Yunió. Knowing that Diaz himself has faced these types of abuse, the inclusion of these minor plot points can be looked at as Diaz's reflection on the role of sexual assault in a larger story. The surrogate experience, then, is changed when the reader engages both Beli, Lola, and their abusers as perhaps being surrogates of Diaz's complicated lived experience. All this to say that Diaz assumes the role of a victim and a perpetrator at once, and this chapter will seek to examine how this duality of identities may show up in the work itself.

The published letter includes an epigraph by Diaz himself: "*I never got any help, any kind of therapy. I never told anyone*"⁷⁸ followed by an illustration of a photograph of Diaz as a child. The letter then recounts Diaz's memory of being asked by a reader if the sexual abuse he alluded to in his books has happened to him. He said no. He was too scared to reveal that part of himself yet. But, notably, this is an instance in which Diaz seems to acknowledge a biographical link between his own experiences and the content in his books but turns away from this

⁷⁸ Junot Diaz, "Junot Díaz: The Legacy of Childhood Trauma." *The New Yorker*. May 31, 2018.

acknowledgment due to fear. After wrestling with this fear on the page for a few paragraphs, Diaz extended what came to be understood as the truth of his past:

Yes, it happened to me. I was raped when I was eight years old. By a grownup that I truly trusted. After he raped me, he told me I had to return the next day or I would be “in trouble.” And because I was terrified, and confused, I went back the next day and was raped again. I never told anyone what happened, but today I’m telling you. And anyone else who cares to listen.

The eloquence with which Diaz writes does not make the horrific events easier to read; he writes of the incessant abuse and how it “fucked up [his] adolescence,” and then “fucked up [his] life.” He writes of his suicide attempts, morbid thoughts, impulses to hurt those around him. “More than being Dominican, more than being an immigrant, more, even than being of African descent, my rape defined me. I spent more energy running from it than I did living. ... The rape excluded me from manhood, from love, from everything,” he wrote. He admitted to it all in a devastating way – the reader can hear the hopelessness seeping through the page – how difficult this must have been to put into words, and then publish for all the world to read. But we also see the catharsis that this essay seemingly allowed Diaz. Only, we, the reader, didn’t yet know that this essay would later read as an apology for what was to come.

It was not clear that this essay was a preemptive “apology” until after the allegations against Diaz came out, how could it have been? But soon after his essay was posted in April, the series of complicating began to unfold. On May 4th of 2018, Zinzi Clemmons, the youngest of Diaz’s accusers tweeted, “As a grad student, I invited Junot Diaz to speak to a workshop on issues of representation in literature. I was an unknown wide-eyed 26 yo, and he used it as an opportunity to corner and forcibly kiss me. I’m far from the only one he’s done this 2, I refuse to

be silent anymore.” Writer Monica Burne responded to Clemmons’ tweet, “I was 32 and my first novel hadn’t come out yet. I was invited to a dinner and sat next to him. I disagreed with him on a minor point. He shouted the word ‘rape’ in my face to prove his. It was completely bizarre, disproportionate, and violent.” Multiples of women followed suit, shouting their claims against Diaz. Understandably, many were reminded of the essay that Diaz had published a month before, but few found this to be consoling. EJ Dickson, a digital editor for Men’s Health Magazine, went so far as to say that the accusations against Diaz were not a surprise: “Everyone in the literary world/the media knew this, or suspected it,” Dickson wrote on Twitter. “And yet, when Junot Diaz published his New Yorker Essay — a pre-emptive strike if there ever was one — we gave him nothing but plaudits.”⁷⁹ Again, nobody had read Diaz’s letter as an explanatory document, but as a concession of a truth that had been bottled up inside the writer. Still, readers sympathetically consider the trauma that Diaz admitting to having gone through both when judging his misconduct allegations and reading his books alike. Again, how could we not? Indeed, here lies an important difference between Diaz, Alexie, and Asher – Diaz was writing from a compromised position and acting in suit. But should this knowledge, especially when pinned against the actions he would soon be accused of, change how we read his work? This thesis argues that the setting and context in which we are reading necessarily moderates this discussion.

⁷⁹ Kristine Phillips, "Pulitzer Prize-winning Author Junot Diaz Accused of Sexual Misconduct, Misogynistic Behavior." *The Washington Post*. May 06, 2018.

We the Students

As a college student, receiving the reading syllabus for an enrolled course is a loaded moment. We, the students, expect each and every assigned reading to be carefully thought through and considered, and (in my case at least) are excited to engage with the works that our teachers have chosen for us. For this reason, I was fascinated to learn that Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* – the very book that had sent me into the spiral of inquiry and uncertainty as pertaining to the thesis I would soon begin to write – was on the syllabus for the upper level English course I had registered for in the second semester of my Senior year. Taught by Professor Lisa Makman – a professor that I had the pleasure of learning from during my Sophomore year of undergrad, and a brilliant mind in the realm of YA literature, fantasy fiction, and literary works as whole – this English course was focused on the topic of “American Adolescence,” in fictional works. I had the pleasure of sitting down with Professor Makman to discuss my thesis, the idea of complicity in relation to text selection for educational purposes, and more.

Early on, Makman asserted that she almost always focuses on “broad cultural readings from the cultural studies approach, which would include the author’s subject position and their engagements with the world.” Rather than considering reading a text in isolation, as the New Critics may, Makman’s reading largely veers toward the terms of the Biographical Critics in favor of a cultural studies approach. I asked Makman about the process of deciding to include Junot Diaz’s novel on the class syllabus this year, in light of the sexual assault allegations placed against him. Rather than the events playing a role on her inclusion of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* on the syllabus for the course, she said, “[the events have] more changed the way that I have taught the text. I have brought up the allegations and the letter as kind of a framework

for discussing any of his work.” Throughout our discussion, it became clear to me that reading good books by bad people took on an entirely new role from the perspective of a teacher.

The practice of choosing which books to bring into a classroom is one that not only requires intellect and good judgment, but also compassion and vivid loyalty to one’s students. We spoke in an interview format, with Makman answering my prepared questions thoughtfully and guiding me to think of new, follow up ones that were even more nuanced than I had expected. Overall, I took three key takeaways from my conversation with Makman: that content is powerful, that censorship is dangerous, and that agency comes in many different forms. Not all of these understandings were new or particularly surprising, but when considering them in the context of this thesis through my illuminating exchange with Makman, they each took on a fresh and enlightening meaning.

Content as Power

The power of content on its own is the first theme that ran through the conversation, especially when pertaining to a writer like Diaz and a book like *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Makman first taught Diaz’s novel in 2015, three years before allegations against his behavior had begun. Reflecting on why she had chosen to include the book on her class syllabus back then, Makman said:

His story fits perfectly into certain patterns in the class that we would look at as recurrent through all [“coming of age”] texts and has a lot of wonderfully rich material having to do with the world of fantasy and fantasy in literature. As a whole, it is very emblematic of postmodern literature and its use of pastiche and its multiplicity of references. Also, in talking about the experience of the immigrant adolescent it adds a new facet to that that

other works we are looking at don't have. It is also multilingual, which is really interesting. The use of specifically Dominican dialects is doubly fascinating... So, then the history of postcolonialism and the situation of postmodernity are both consciously referenced in the story, that provides a great and unique opportunity to talk about all of those things.

Indeed, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* allows insight into a unique multiplicity of cultures and lenses. By allowing readers to see and experience some of the trials of being an immigrant child, the novel plays an important role on any bookshelf. For this reason, Makman deemed the novel fitting for a literary course about American Adolescence. Since then Diaz and his first novel have taken the world by storm, making waves in the literary world with their impact. Makman notes how these impacts cannot be discounted just because of the author's transgressions:

Alexie, Diaz, these are people whose books have become extremely influential within the realm of their work and out into the world. They have become iconic. And that's important too – why did the Alexie novel become such a widely talked about book? We have to think about the cultural import too, it is not completely turned away because the author is morally suspect.

In other words, the stories have made their marks, whether we like it or not. And we, the readers, have the right to maintain the impacts that have touched us without being overcome with doubt.

The content being powerful, in some ways, is enough.

Censorship as Destructive

Another important idea that Makman and I confronted was the notion that censorship is dangerous, even when it may seem to be positively grounded. I asked Makman what the decision to put Diaz on her syllabus looked like this year, following the allegations of his sexual misconduct; whether it was different than it had been before. Her perspective was secure and edifying:

I thought about it a lot – I think of it as more a good thing to bring out, it’s almost like bringing out a new facet. I don’t feel like a book should be banned because its author is objectionable. That would mean that we would have to get rid of a lot – any literature written by a slaveholder, for one. And I can see an argument for doing that, but I mean, there are so many authors that I can think of off the top of my head that would be gone. It is true, countless names have been sullied at the hands of moral transgressions in the past year alone. Not only this, but the moral misgivings of writers and artists before us have increasingly come to light in our contemporary landscape. Makman wondered aloud, “What about reading, say, a letter by [slave owner] Thomas Jefferson? Where does it stop? Where do you draw the line?” Once a precedent of desertion of these artists and people is set, the slope becomes irrevocably slippery. Once we decide to get rid of any and all work written, directed, sung, performed, or created by a morally questionable person, where does it end? I continued to discuss the predicament of the slippery slope up to Makman, which lead her to bring the complicated concept into the political realm, and with it, to a whole new level of gravity. She said, “I mean, then we have the President who has been accused of [some morally irredeemable] things – and what are we going to do, look away when he makes a speech? But then what are we losing? We can’t look away because we have to try to maintain some agency in our political lives.” Agency as an increasingly intricate mode of influence is one that will come up soon

again, but in this sense, one of the most threatening dangers of censorship is the swift eradication of one's agency. Not only one's agency to choose which art to engage with, but the agency of tackling hard topics for oneself, to grow and learn from. Censorship takes this all away, which Makman related to the harshest of penalties, "[Turning a person off, taking away their voice,] it all feels like capital punishment in that way, doesn't it? You cannot elide people, say they should not be allowed to influence people with their creative expression." The broader implications about what we want to do with the perpetrators in our society and what should happen to their rights, how they should be punished, becomes part of the conversation once censorship is put into play.

Trigger warnings play an important role in the levying of agency. A trigger warning – an alert that the content following the warning contains potentially distressing people – is perhaps the most reliable way to allow students to maintain agency within a classroom when reading these texts. With a trigger warning about the material or – as in this case – the actions of the author himself, students can decide for themselves whether they want to take the time with the text or throw the reader away. I asked Makman about her thoughts on trigger warnings, and whether or not she would consider giving one to the class before teaching work by Diaz:

I think trigger warnings are important, and I gave trigger warnings before we had a word for them that was widely used in terms of warning people off of things that could be upsetting. But I do feel like for students, instead of having this model of protecting students from everything, there is an alternative which is to give students agency to reject things or to reshape them, to not read certain things. I think that is important. Nothing good comes from straight censorship. I really believe that censorship is bad.

In other words, Makman reasserts the idea that censorship takes away agency along with content and does more harm than good. Censorship takes away more than it brings to the table in terms of critical thinking.

Agency as Vital

The blurring of censorship and loss of agency foregrounds the third conclusion that I walked away from my conversation with Makman with: the notion that agency comes in many different forms, many of which intersect to create a thoroughly thinking person. Junot Diaz was accused of sexual assault in May of 2018. Nothing changed about *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* since that time, but I wondered if Makman would have reconsidered the novel's place on our syllabus. In tune with the rest of her perspective, she spoke of how it only adds to the course:

I mean, [*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*] works so well with the syllabus, and now [after the allegations against Diaz came out] it almost feels all the more important. When bringing out these kinds of controversies in the #MeToo context, I think it is essential to do it in the kind of protected environment that the classroom allows, as opposed to elsewhere. I mean you were kind of on your own trying to figure out well what do I do? It's much better, I think, and would be easier for a young adult to do that in a classroom context. That said, I don't know! If I were a high school teacher and I had been teaching Alexie, for example, which is classified as a YA book, would I continue to teach it? Is a high school classroom a proper forum to have those kinds of discussions? I don't know!

We laughed as we shrugged, and I began to realize that the conversation with Professor Makman was all part of the point – that none of my questions or her responses were stone set, that all of these concepts were rooted in the ambiguity of standards, and that this ambiguity comes from the individuality of agency – the differences in what we each assign important to and how we do it. Indeed, the multiplicity of forms when it comes to agency was becoming clear. Part of protecting the bookshelf had to be protecting the readers, and sometimes that only becomes possible once we’ve been thrown into the ring with the hounds. Makman said, “[Moral ambiguity] is everywhere. And it’s something that we can bring into scholarly discourse and into the discussions in the classroom in a very fruitful way. To talk about power, we can’t erase that these problematic power dynamics and abuses and abuses of power exist. But we can bring them into the open and I think that can be protective.” It can be productive and meaningful to examine our deliberations of complicity and how we each assign meaning through our own perspectives of importance. Agency is something that we exercise as readers with every turn of the page, and perhaps the very discussion of this complicity tempers our complicity itself. In our American Adolescence class, we read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and I reminded Professor Makman how she started the unit – by telling us that the book was going to include the N word 219 times, and that this may make readers uncomfortable, but that it was a sign of the times, and integral to understanding of the problems posited throughout the famous work. By doing this, Makman was tempering her decision to include the work, despite its inappropriate, offensive, and outdated language, by a trigger warning of sorts. Importantly, she was pointing out the moral problem to us as readers, so that we would be aware of it as we read and allow it to make the book more meaningful. The other option, of course, was to throw Mark Twain out entirely and not read the book – but Makman was not about to do that. As Makman thought out loud, “I

mean, to say I'm going to cut all these books by all these authors that are problematic from the syllabus, that also takes away agency from the student readers. Like don't we want student readers to be able to grapple with these questions and figure out their own understandings and thoughts and theories about the works?"

Agency takes many forms within this complicated realm, but out of all of its forms, comes progress. Reflecting on what Makman said about the current President's own alleged transgressions, continuing to listen to him speak and make decisions based on what he says allows citizens to maintain their political agency to rethink, reconsider, and ultimately reshape their opinions, thoughts, and actions. In a parallel thread, only by reading *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, do we maintain our full agency to grapple with the complicated questions that Diaz has laid out for his readers. As pertaining to this thesis, author, and novel, many of these questions engage the troubling role of toxic masculinity in contemporary society.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, both through its narration and content, confronts the reader with tropes of toxic masculinity. Ironically enough, allegations against the novel's author place him as a perpetrator of the very tendencies of which he writes. In the novel, the narrator refers to Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, who was the dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 – 1961. Trujillo, whose legacy includes appointing relatives and friends to important government positions, strictly censoring discourse against him, and secretly murdering his political opponents, did lead the Dominican Republic to economic and political stability, despite his horrific means of doing so. In the novel, "Trujillo" is used as a symbol for complete authority taken to the extreme. Yunior (the narrator) also uses "Trujillo" as to represent characterization associated with rampant sexual tendency and egocentric attitude; essentially to depict cultural moments centered on toxic masculinity. At one point, Yunior even goes so far as

to say that “we’re all Trujillos – we’re all participating in this culture of violent masculinity.” In some ways, the whole story deals with notion of toxic masculinity, wrestling with this question from beginning to end. Makman agreed with this thought:

Right, I mean the whole story is dealing with these themes, grappling with complex questions about manhood and personhood from beginning to end, and Oscar is a martyr to that. And he speaks with some other possible masculine voice that is this voice of love which is associated with his love of fantasy and science fiction. Through this I think one of the big lessons of the story is that the imagination remains free of this world. I mean, maybe that’s an allegory for continuing to read the book, because the imaginative world of fiction is somehow liberated from the problematic environment that produced it, you could say.

Contrary to Makman’s above provocation, I argue that perhaps, in some ways, the text itself implicates Diaz. Perhaps, rather than allowing him to be separated from the book, the fact that the narrator is learning from Oscar causes the reader to learn from the narrator, rather than from Oscar. In other words, the “problematic environment that produced [the book]” is what is informing the narrator, rather than the “imaginative world of fiction.” The liberation is then lost, and the narrative then runs against the grain of Diaz’s actions.

Speaking with Makman was a reminder of how personal art selection is; the books we choose to read, the creativity we choose to support, and the ways we choose to engage are increasingly subjective. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for what to do when our favorite authors commit a crime. But for me, and for Makman, protecting the bookshelf is the first priority.

Concluding Thoughts

The question is just as important as the answer.

– Charlie Rose

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

– Rainer Maria Rilke

In concluding this thesis, I found myself making a few critical, albeit internal, distinctions with regards to my intent for this section: I determined that the conversation surrounding separation of art and artist would not “end” with the conclusion to this particular piece of writing, nor would it be possible for me to stop learning, researching, or wondering about the questions posed and wrestled with across these pages. Protecting the bookshelf – that is, upholding an ambition to continue to read the complex, immersive, amazing books that we have without sacrificing our moral agency while doing so – would not be a semester long undertaking. Rather, I came to understand that the concluding section to this thesis would function as a means of wrapping up this chain of questions in order to make room for new ones in an open-ended manner, rather than neatly tying it up with a bow. As with most works concerning society at large, questions of morality, and answers that may easily change in a matter of moments and

based on the given reader at the time, this thesis has sought to actively inhabit the difficulties in a space with relatively little, if any, stake. In other words, this thesis has functioned, for me, as a testing ground in which the very questioning that has come out of it has been part of the point. I have been able to pose and grapple with really hard questions about really hard topics without apprehension about “the point” of it all. This is because with the boundaries between good and bad becoming increasingly blurred and complicated by works of art and people alike, I knew from the start of this process that I would not be “figuring anything out” per se, that I would rather be asking unanswerable questions about life, engagement, and what it means to exist and thrive in the world as we know it today. In other words, I knew that the questions would be just as important as the answers. And so, this thesis was born out of the very wrestling that has been born out of it. The power of fiction and reading that has immersed me and many other scholars before me in the unbound grey area has exceeded all expectations.

This thesis has argued that reading has taken a new form in this contemporary moment. And the disclaimers provided early in this thesis – that I would be operating under my own moral compass to determine what may make a person “bad” or a work of art “good,” and that the focus would remain primarily on authors of fiction who are male – have foregrounded the understanding of the limitations inherent to writing on this topic. Understanding that there are other ways to think of people, such as in terms of certain mores or in terms of character: doing right by others, being honest and transparent, being a good friend, having ones back, being present, showing support and devotion in tangible and intangible ways, sticking up for someone or their beliefs, not invalidating someone’s feelings or beliefs, taking accountability for wrong doings – these separate markers of “goodness” have been vital to grasping the scope of this thesis

and the limitations that it abides by.⁸⁰ Interestingly, noting these limitations has actually strengthened the extent to which I've considered the particular allegations against the authors discussed and how society sometimes defines certain people as "bad" and others as "okay." Reiterated too has been the speed of production in our hyper-technological society and how certain art comes into the spotlight before any allegations have even come about. What I mean by this, is that another layer to this thesis comes from the silent people, mediums, and vehicles that we as the public are not exposed to but which are involved in putting an artist's work out into our visual and audible worlds, (like publishers, producers, marketing teams, etc.) but whom we never consider or hold accountable when it comes to morality. We, as a society, and today more than ever are constantly being thrown curveballs in the realm of "badness." We are implicitly expected to write people off because of what they have allegedly done, and rarely consider the losses at stake with regards to censorship and silencing. Thus, the through line of who and what make a person, or a thing moral has become increasingly bolded and blurred along the way. And though morality has only been touched through insinuation across the work, these stipulations have guided the entire process and uphold its gravity and significance.

Thus, by utilizing a new methodology – essentially a fusing of the methods of New and Biographical Criticism – to read with respect to the complicated, and in these cases, tainted backgrounds of authors, the process of reading has assumed a new role in this present moment. First examining the ways that authors and their "badness" has been received and, often, disregarded in the past allowed the understanding that reading in this present moment is different to become clear. Then, once this clarity was explicated, examples of the difference and how it

⁸⁰ Thank you to my cousin Brooke Richman for expounding the importance of these markers.

shapeshifts alongside different types of books and stories within the fiction genre came naturally through a guided reading.

Using this methodology to examine three works by authors who have been accused of sexual misconduct in recent years, this thesis was able to take on an approach that engaged the present moment and the context of the world and the writer alongside the fictional world unfolding within the pages of the text. As engagement with Alexie, Asher, and Diaz progressed, my understanding of how and why their “badness” intertwined with their novels blurred and cleared repeatedly. There were moments where New Criticism and close reading came into play and where Biographical Criticism and authorial intent showed up as well. There were moments where the two methods fused organically and moments where I had to dig to find “the point.” Each time, however, I found myself questioning the very space in which I was reading, and the factors that led me to read in this way in the first place. Indeed, it would have been much easier to simply ignore the allegations against Diaz and continue to read *Oscar Wao* for what it was. Easier, yes, but also quite impossible.

Originally, the goal of this thesis was to form and exhibit a methodology of reading that would be able to be applied to several, if not all, realms of art; applicable to engaging with artists and their fine art, musicians and their music, producers and their movies, actors, actresses, and their television shows, comedians and their comedy, and more. I planned to create a way of thinking that pertained to all types of artists and their art, and thus, that would invent language that would span all genres of artistic engagement. Understandably, though, as this thesis progressed, the breadth with which this plethora of mediums engaged became too wide and too disparate to tackle, and I zeroed in on authors and their books. The mediation of literature and the unique ability of canonized authors (more so than singers, actors, or musicians) to separate

their biography from their work led to an enthralling investigation of these phenomena and how we talk, think, and wonder about them today.

This is not to say that this investigation ends or stalls with that of authors and their works. The concept of whether or not we separate an artist from their art as more and more artists join those deemed “flawed” is one that spans all genres of engagement and pertains to each in a unique and particular way. I hope to be able to apply the way of thinking and questioning that this thesis inhabited in order to make decisions about how I engage with and question art and artists of all genres. Doing so could not be more relevant than it is today. As I wrote this thesis, it seemed as though each day a new accusation against an artist was made, and a new movement for justice was initiated. For instance, in January 2019 (which about marks the halfway point for me in my thesis writing process) the documentary series “Surviving R. Kelly” aired on Lifetime, ultimately exposing the famous rapper’s years of abuse upon young women. The documentary was marketed as an in-depth look at R. Kelly himself, with the inclusion of new allegations made by firsthand accounts of victims. Following the documentary airing, I began to hear about a movement called “Mute R Kelly” that had been gaining traction since 2017. The movement was founded with a strong mission statement in tow:

We have come together to call for a worldwide mute on R&B singer, Robert "R" Kelly, due to his 25 year history of sexual, physical and emotional abuse allegations. While he hasn't been found guilty in a court of law, the evidence is overwhelming that he has created an uninterrupted pattern of sexual violence in the African American community that must be stopped. If the court system is unable to protect our young Black women and girls, we must step forward to do so ourselves.⁸¹

⁸¹ From the website: <https://www.muterkelly.org/about>

Since the documentary aired, the movement and petition against R Kelly has grown and grown. In bars around Ann Arbor, I have heard peers mumbling for the DJ to “Mute R Kelly” when any of his singles come on the speakers. The consensus amongst supporters of the movement is that R Kelly music should not be played, that he no longer deserves to have a voice or to creatively express himself, that he should be muted. This is just one instance that showcases the prevalence of people grappling with whether and how to separate art from artist, and what to do with the art of “bad” people; there are countless others to name.

For me, the most salient aspect of writing this thesis has been the overarching mission protect the bookshelf, which comes in part from my status as an avid reader and English major, but also in part from the understanding that bad behavior of authors and other artists alike is somewhat just an extension of the moral quandaries that we have already been practicing grappling with through engaging with art and, well, living. Protecting the bookshelf – or the boom box, the small screen, the big screen, or the museum for that matter – does not come from a calculated equation that decides the separation of art and artist comes from, say, 60% biographical features and 40% influence of the art itself. In this moment, for books, and especially the books covered in this thesis, the text themselves already contain the tools to help us navigate the relationship between bad person and good text. Then, faced with this unanswerable question, through reading and engaging with these works, we are learning how to function in the real world. Daniel Schwarz said it best in his chapter within *Mapping the Ethical Turn*:

If awareness of oneself and one’s relationship to family and community – including one’s responsibilities, commitments, and values – is part of the ethical life, then reading contributes to greater self- understanding. Reading complements our experience by

enabling us to live lives beyond those we live and to experience emotions that are not ours; it heightens our perspicacity by enabling us to watch *figures* – tropes, that is, personifications of our fellow humans – who are not ourselves, but like ourselves.⁸²

We read to engage with a life outside, but often very similar to, our own. Ironically, then, to throw these texts (or songs, movies, shows, pieces) out would be to eliminate the very tools that we are using as teachers – and pretty good ones at that. In other words, the texts have already shown us how we cannot reduce a person to their thoughts and deeds, but also how we cannot let them off the hook when the circumstances reach a reprehensible level. I think of writers as people whose job it is to challenge convention and bring something new to the table, and along with this comes the inevitability of making a statement. These statements are forever attached to the person who brought them into being, and though, as we are seeing, the person may be morally reprehensible or “bad,” the statement, lesson, moral, or story itself may be vital and integral to society and too important to be discounted entirely.

We have to continue to question these statements and the people who have made them in order to continue to progress and exist in a world unfolding. For this reason, sitting with the words and grappling with them within the new context in which they exist is vital – protecting the bookshelf is vital. And if we don’t do it, who will?

⁸² Daniel R Schwarz, “A Humanistic Ethics of Reading” *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*. Page 7.

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