

# What Does Western White Prose Fiction Teach the Woke Generation About Othering and Belonging?

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## ABSTRACT

This research explores the portrayal of otherness and non-conformity in Western literature and proves that modern phenomena such as “cancel culture” are giving contemporary authors a new relevance. Using William Faulkner’s *Light in August* and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as my foundation, I intend to demonstrate that the lessons they provide on race, gender, and extremism are often ignored by Generation Z, yet applicable to modern discourse. By referencing earlier works including Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, as well as George Orwell’s dystopian *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, I want to prove that the warnings given about the consequences of trying to eradicate otherness are multi-dimensional and deeply entrenched. Ultimately, my research illustrates that despite the societal tendency to make distinctions between normative and “other”, the line between the two is non-existent: in attempts to eliminate otherness, we become violent “others” ourselves, possessing characteristics to the “bestial” individual that we originally sought to oppress.

## Context and Background

According to Powell and Menendian, the events of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century have highlighted to us all the ways in which notions of othering and belonging undergird myriad conflicts on social and cultural, as well as political and geographical levels around the world.<sup>1</sup> Scott Haden Church has also pointed out how both cultural hegemony and resistance to it have long been located in popular music, and T. Hunter Strickland has recently argued that nowhere are audiences more encouraged to participate in confrontations with their fear of the unknown “other” than in zombie literature.<sup>2</sup> It is clear, then, that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – our own century - music and language are cathartic sites in which we can, or at least should be able to “safely” encounter, accommodate ourselves to and even ultimately embrace all manner of cultural, political and identity-based difference.

But what, we might ask, do a group of predominantly male, undisputedly Caucasian writers from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries have to contribute to this discussion? After all, comedian and writer Will Self recently denounced 20th-century novelist George Orwell as “a literary mediocrity”; Casey Cep, in his article for *The New Yorker*, points out that William Faulkner is guilty, “in his own life [of having] failed to truly acknowledge

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<sup>1</sup> Othering & Belonging Institute. 2016. “The Problem of Othering: Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging.” Accessed August 20. <https://otheringandbelonging.org/the-problem-of-othering/>.

<sup>2</sup> Haden Church, Scott. “Resistance, Race, and Myth: A Critical Survey of American Popular Music Culture in the 20th Century.” *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* volume 6, no.3 (2019): p.67-78. <http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-3/resistance-race-and-myth-a-critical-survey-of-american-popular-music-culture-in-the-20th-century/>; Strickland, Hunter T. “Zombie Literature: Analyzing the Fear of the Unknown through Popular Culture.” *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* volume 6, no.3 (2019): p.58-66. [www.journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-3/zombie-literature-analyzing-the-fear-of-the-unknown-through-popularculture/](http://www.journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-3/zombie-literature-analyzing-the-fear-of-the-unknown-through-popularculture/).

the evils of slavery and segregation,” and some modern readers might find Mary Shelley, denounced at the time as monstrous and immoral perhaps discomfiting in her closeness to Lord Byron, the man who American author Benjamin Markovits has asserted is “By our own modern standards...probably a pedophile and certainly a rapist, at least of the statutory kind.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, universities have long been challenging the “dead, white, male” characteristics of the traditional canon of Western Literature, and a call for greater diversity has now filtered down even to the high school level. This has ensured that Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and women writers, including but not exclusive to Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are included in school curricula and exam syllabuses across the world. Indeed, Achebe himself has been scathing about Josef Conrad’s 1899 novel *Heart of Darkness*, a work that is regularly taught in the classroom: Achebe describes the white European narrative as “a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril.”<sup>4</sup>

## Can These Individuals Guide Us About the “Woke” World in Which We Live?

My argument is that, contrary to appearances, these four writers have much to contribute, even posthumously, to any contemporary discussion of otherness and non-conformity. Their literature and the critical framework they provide are essential to modern discourse, used not only to assess the subjugation of otherness in the past but also to understand how this oppression has been transformed and weaponized by woke culture in the present.

### Methodology

Perhaps what is so pertinent to the portrayal of otherness in Faulkner, Conrad, Shelley, and Orwell is the sheer inevitability of their protagonists’ demise – a tragic inexorability which will resonate with all Black Lives Matter supporters after the death of George Floyd in 2020, and a string of other race-related incidents involving police violence against mainly young black men. This is primarily conveyed through the particular tropes of each novel’s form and style: Marlowe’s impressionistic narrative and symbolist tendencies, and Faulkner’s deployment of Southern Gothic tropes such as the irrational and macabre, underline the ways in which each protagonist’s violence and non-conformity result in their alienation from normative society. Conversely, Shelley’s use of multiple narrative perspectives and Orwell’s contrasting settings heighten the reader’s understanding of the “other”, allowing each protagonist to persist, not only in the consciousness of their oppressors but in the minds of readers as well. However, the subjugation of otherness, which is common to all four texts, only serves to highlight the monstrosity of normative society: in trying to repress the irrepressible, Victor Frankenstein becomes monstrous, the Inner Party an extension of the nonconformist Proles, and the line between normative and other effectively non-existent.

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<sup>3</sup> Self, Will, 2014. “A Point of View: Why Orwell was a literary mediocrity”. *BBC*, August, 31. Accessed July 17, 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-28971276>; Cep, Casey, 2020. “William Faulkner’s Demons.” *The New Yorker*, November, 23. Accessed July 25, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/11/30/william-faulkners-demons>; Feay, Suzi, 2011. “Oh Lord! What a scoundrel.” *The Independent*, October, 23. Accessed July 25, 2021. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/oh-lord-what-scoundrel-2337167.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Achebe, Chinua. “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.” *The Massachusetts Review* volume 57, no.1 (2016): p.14-27. [doi:10.1353/mar.2016.0003](https://doi.org/10.1353/mar.2016.0003).

## In What Way Do Otherness and Non-Conformity Manifest Within an Individual?

The creation of these others, or what Staszak calls “out-groups” is fundamental to both *Light in August* and *Heart of Darkness*, and is catalyzed by the “dominant in-group” in society, “stigmatizing a difference – real or imagined”, such as the color of one’s skin.<sup>5</sup> In the predominantly white town of Jefferson, this general phobia of ethnic otherness is justified in Chapter 2, specifically through Faulkner’s description of his allegedly biracial protagonist Joe Christmas, whose “level dead parchment” colored complexion is equally as unnatural as the “yellow” skin of Shelley’s monster. Moreover, Shelley amplifies the imagery of yellowness when she describes the “dull yellow eye of the creature”, the color’s connotations of disease a direct signposting of the hell he will later experience. Throughout, Christmas is surrounded by a semantic field of anatomical irregularity which emphasizes his otherness and reinforces his dangerous potency to the “dominant in-group”.<sup>6</sup> This concept is also seen in the imagery of Christmas’s physiognomy, his apparent otherness permeating and contorting his skull so that it looked like it “had been molded in a still and deadly regularity and then baked in a fierce oven.” Moreover, despite being published in 1818, almost a century earlier than *Heart of Darkness* in 1899, the gothic elements of decay that are used to racially profile Frankenstein’s monster are comparable to those used to depict Conrad’s Congolese “shadow[s]”. Unlike *Light in August*, where figures such as Christmas and Joanna Burden constitute one cohesive force of otherness, Conrad utilizes what Guldin and Scheper-Hughes articulate as the “imagery of broken corporeal unity” to establish his presentation of a visual other, and to explain why such entities are treated as commodities “that can be bartered, sold or stolen.”<sup>7</sup> Conrad’s narrative style further diverges from Faulkner’s through his inclusion of a sense of auditory otherness, his onomatopoeia in Part 2 linguistically reducing the Congolese to a disembodied and incomprehensible “whirl of black limbs[... ]mass of hands clapping [and] of feet stamping”. Similarly, this lack of physical individuation is echoed behaviorally in Orwell’s 1948 novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: during the “Two Minutes Hate” in Chapter 1, the crowd can only muster the same repeated “B-B!” in a monotonous war-cry which chillingly anticipates the varied anti-Clinton chants (“Lock her up!” etc.) at Trump rallies in 2016. The odor of demagoguery which pervades *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a reminder that eighty years later we must be mindful of our own susceptibility in challenging times to all forms of dictatorship and tyranny.

However, in all four texts, otherness extends beyond perceptions of racial identity into the realms of gender, opening up a highly topical vista onto contemporary conversations around gender identity and the danger of conforming to the demands of the traditional and patriarchal male gaze. Despite having a white and genetically normative ethnicity, Joanna Burden’s ability to invert Jefferson’s tropes of female sexuality makes her overwhelmingly other, just as Thomas Haden Church suggests that Madonna or Beyonce in the modern world are agents of resistance to a culture of oppressive masculine dominance. This is primarily expressed through the dichotomy which Faulkner establishes between Burden’s existence as a biological woman and her educated and employed status as a “business, financial and religious” advisor to “faculties[... ]of a dozen negro schools.” Here, Faulkner’s use of listing is particularly pertinent, as it highlights that the range of Burden’s professional responsibilities are essentially “manlike” and therefore counter her position as a female inhabitant of the traditional Deep South: the 1932 publication of *Light in August* coincides with the Great Depression, a

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<sup>5</sup> Staszak, Jean-François. “Otherness.” In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, edited by Kitchin & Thrift, p.1-7. Oxford: Elsevier Science, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Staszak, Jean-François. “Otherness.” In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, edited by Kitchin & Thrift, p.1-7. Oxford: Elsevier Science, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Guldin, Rainer. “The Dis-membered Body: Bodily Fragmentation as a Metaphor for Political Renewal.” *Physis* volume 12, no.2 (2002): p.221-234. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0103-73312002000200003>.

time where women were increasingly being diminished and forced out of their jobs in favor of men.<sup>8</sup> A similar resistance against gender classification is also present in Orwell's Julia, whose violent "ripping" of her "scarlet sash" in Chapter 10 is a poignant act of rebellion against the sexless Outer Party, and a cataclysmic moment in her descent into political betrayal. Moreover, while Faulkner uses the repeated adjective "wild" to emphasize that Burden is sexually non-conformist and, to the puritanical Calvinists of Jefferson, not submissive "by nature", Conrad enhances Congolese otherness by juxtaposing them with the normative Intended at the end of Part 3.<sup>9</sup> To a 20<sup>th</sup> century reader who has grown up in a patriarchal society, the poetic diction in Marlowe's observation of the "girl's[...]beautiful expression" and "delicate shade of truthfulness" suggests that she is the epitome of Western purity and fragility. Therefore, by locating such a figure immediately after the brief appearance of Kurtz's "savage and superb" Congolese lover, who as Chinua Achebe has pointed out in *An Image of Africa* is not even granted the dignity of language, Conrad is able to reaffirm the chasm between the normative paragon of beauty and what Achebe defines as the white perception of a "triumphant" and bestial other.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, there is a deep and almost tragic irony in the naivety of the Intended, who is unaware of Kurtz's distinctly qualitative exclamation "My Intended, my ivory, my station, my career, my ideas." The syntactical primacy of the Western value of love is instantly undermined by the adjacent reference to Kurtz's "ivory", a material possession in the pursuit of which he has become corrupt and sexually unfaithful. Interestingly, the Intended's failure to recognize Kurtz's sexual voracity is not replicated in *Frankenstein*, who destroys the monster's equally voracious female double to prevent them from corrupting the sanctity of fertility by creating "a race of devils [who] would be propagated upon the earth."

In addition, although a character's racial and sexual differences are invaluable in determining otherness, arguably it is their engagement in so-called transgressive conduct that consolidates their position as other in their particular contexts, just as a figure like Lady Gaga in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was hailed, pejoratively, as the "end of the sexual revolution" when she appeared at an awards ceremony in a dress made of raw meat in 2010.<sup>11</sup> Yet, where Lady Gaga chose to weaponize aesthetic and sartorial choices to express her resistance to the male gaze, In *Light in August*, Christmas's desire to resist Presbyterianism is made apparent through his behavior: from his refusal to learn the "catechism" as a child in Chapter 7, to the "lechery" that he commits as an adolescent with the "Jezebel" Bobbie in Chapter 8, Christmas uses acts of religious non-conformity to become what Slabey defines as a "negative incarnation" of God, or the image of a "man rejected as a human being."<sup>12</sup> Therefore, by embodying an Antichrist-type figure, the religious symbolism in the name Joe Christmas is made to feel all the more sinister. Faulkner's violent verbs and cyclical narrative structure imply that in rejecting Calvinist ideology, first by "sw[inging a chair] at [Mr. McEachern's] head" as a 17-year-old, and then by "cut[ting]" Joanna Burden's head "pretty near off" in adulthood, Christmas confirms his "predestination"

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<sup>8</sup> Milligan, Susan, 2017. "Stepping through History." *US News*, January, 10. Accessed March 3, 2021. <https://www.usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2017-01-20/timeline-the-womens-rights-movement-in-the-us>.

<sup>9</sup> Arts, Sam. "Calvin, Nature and Women." *Priscilla Papers* volume 27, no.2 (2013): p.20-28.

<sup>10</sup> Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness." *The Massachusetts Review* volume 57, no.1 (2016): p.14-27. doi:10.1353/mar.2016.0003.

<sup>11</sup> Hayden, Erik, 2010. "Camille Paglia: Lady Gaga Spells End of Sexual Revolution." *The Atlantic*, September, 13. Accessed September 1, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2010/09/camille-paglia-lady-gaga-spells-end-of-sexual-revolution/340098/>.

<sup>12</sup> Slabey, Robert M. "Myth and Ritual in *Light in August*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* volume 2, no.3 (1960): p.328-349. doi: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40753685>.

towards total social oblivion – and suggests his symbolic resistance to the prevailing ideologies which reside in the mind of his white oppressors.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, in *Heart of Darkness*, the disjunction between the myth of Kurtz’s virtue and the reality of his newfound savagery is demonstrated through the writer’s attack on and subsequent inversion of British architectural imagery: London’s Victorian “green[...]cast iron” gates are replaced with the disturbing imagery of the “heads of rebels” around Kurtz’s home in Part 3.<sup>14</sup> Conrad further underlines this in Marlowe’s speech, his focus on the severed heads, which were “food for thought and also for the vultures” serving as a horrifying reminder to 21st-century readers of the beheadings carried out by ISIS extremist Jihadi John. Therefore, while Chinua Achebe’s concerns about Conrad’s depiction of Africa and its peoples are legitimate, it is also clear that the novel’s rendering of cultural conflict is strikingly prescient: in presenting Kurtz’s appropriation of Congolese tribal norms, the author is issuing a warning which should resonate with modern readers. We, like Marlowe, underestimate and belittle the pervasive resistance of the outgroup at our own peril.

### **How is otherness treated by members of normative society?**

A consequence of the non-conformist behavior of out-groups, itself shaped by foregoing rejection from the “belonging” elements of society, is that they are often subjected to physical oppression and later isolation by the “dominant in-group”.<sup>15</sup> In *Light in August*, Christmas begins to experience this process in Chapter 9, the verbal abuse and casual racism of his childhood culminating in the corporal punishment of a “short, slashing blow” from Bobbie’s two white friends. It is interesting to observe that Faulkner mirrors his sense of Calvinist inevitability in his diction: the tension between the poetic sibilance and clinical language of the men, who beat Christmas to see “if his blood is black”, suggests that although he apprehends societal subjugation, escaping retribution is impossible. The fact that his fate is so inexorable is perhaps an admonition to society about the potency of modern-day institutional racism: according to the Washington Post’s database, 244 black individuals and a further 171 Hispanic people were shot by the police in the United States during 2020 alone.<sup>16</sup> Sadly, the systematic and physical elimination of the other is also a common feature in Conrad’s writing, particularly during his discussion of the brutality of Congolese forced labor in Part 1: this is conveyed by Marlowe, who juxtaposes the “unexpected elegance” of the Company with the semantic field of extreme deprivation and decay in his description of the Congolese, who having been “brought from all the recesses of the coast[...]lost in uncongenial surroundings, [and] fed on unfamiliar food” are left to sicken, “bec[ome] inefficient, and[...]crawl away.” Likewise, Shelley’s monster is also the victim of physical oppression. However, where in *Heart of Darkness* the Congolese are mistreated on account of their race, in *Frankenstein* the monster-antagonist is punished for having a normative sense of honor: the father of the girl he saves in Chapter 16 “aim[s] a gun” at him, “fire[s][...]and shatter[s his] flesh and bone.” Furthermore, after being physically diminished, the other undergoes a social annihilation, when normative society justifies their total alienation by engaging in what

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<sup>13</sup>York, Barry, 2018. “John Calvin and the ‘Awful’ Doctrine of Predestination.” *Gentle Reformation*, April 30. Accessed March 5, 2021. <https://gentlereformation.com/2018/04/30/john-calvin-and-the-awful-doctrine-of-predestination/>.

<sup>14</sup> Islington Council. 2014. “Ironwork: Gates and Railings.” Accessed February 12, 2021. <https://planning.islington.gov.uk/NorthgatePublicDocs/00392652.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Staszak, Jean-François. “Otherness.” In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, edited by Kitchin & Thrift, p.1-7. Oxford: Elsevier Science, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Washington Post. 2021. “Fatal Force.” Accessed September 3. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>.



Araújo and Dos Santos describe as the “political strategy” of “forgetting.”<sup>17</sup> In the wake of social media, this has arguably manifested itself through the phenomenon of “clicktivism”, or the act of fervently posting in favor of a cause and subsequently forgetting about it the next day. Indeed, whilst the normalization of “clicktivism” may not have been a cause for concern for Conrad, he too metaphorically disregards his othered Congolese through the repeated visual motif of the shadow. The peoples’ position as “black shadows” who are physically tethered to earth by “disease” is highly ironic, as even after being abandoned by normative society, they continue to be oppressed by their own bodily disintegration. However, while Christmas is also described through the simile as “sober and quiet as a shadow”, it is perhaps more interesting to focus on the method which society uses to remove characters, for instance, Reverend Hightower and his sexually promiscuous wife, from their social orbit. Similar to Syme in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, whose excision from historical documents such as the “printed list of the members of the Chess Committee” allows the Inner Party to claim that “he had never existed”, Hightower’s wife is simply forgotten through an unspoken agreement between society members. This is expressed first through Faulkner’s decision to leave the woman unnamed and therefore without a concrete identity, and then in his manipulation of language when he comments “soon it was as though she were not there; as though everyone had agreed that she was not there”. Here, the repeated clauses are symbolic of the totality of their social obliteration, the semi-colon acting as a bridge between mere perception and purposeful isolation.

### **In what ways can otherness persist?**

Nevertheless, the other proves to be transcendent, the physical imprints that they inflict on normative society a testament to their ability to resist oppression. In *Heart of Darkness*, the situational irony in Conrad’s anecdote about Danish Company member Fresleven is particularly telling: the man’s death over the trade of “two black hens” prior to the beginning of the novella illustrates that in trying to appropriate the violent behavioral otherness of the Congolese, the Company actually instigates its own downfall. Therefore, the image of “grass growing through [Fresleven’s] ribs” in Part 1 is freighted with symbolism: Conrad’s message to the Europeans is arguably that they are not the “dominant in-group” of the Congo, and that in trying to become so they face being overpowered by the Congolese environment and its forces of natural decay.<sup>18</sup> The ceremonial imprinting of otherness onto the fabric of normative society is equally prevalent in Chapter 5 of *Light in August*. However, whilst the Congolese challenge Western control by trapping Fresleven in the ground of a country that the colonizers fear and hate, Christmas rebels against the inhabitants of Jefferson by using “whiskey” to desecrate the soil of a place which they proudly claim as their own. Although Christmas’s act of rebellion is brief, the use of visual and olfactory imagery in the description of the alcohol “stain”, whose “scent[...]could not [be] hid[den]” anticipates the way that he will later become ingrained into the consciousness of his oppressors. As a criminal other convicted of double homicide in Mississippi, a state which was deeply Prohibitionist and one of “the last[...]to repeal” the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment, Christmas’s illegal possession and disposal of the alcohol acts as a reminder of the other’s potency: even when faced with oppression, the threat of their transgressive conduct remains very real.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the achievement of primacy through criminal means is also present in the final image of the monster in *Frankenstein*. When standing over and apostrophizing the lifeless body of his master,

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<sup>17</sup> Araújo, Maria Paula Nascimento and Myrian Sepúlveda dos Santos. “History, Memory and Forgetting: Political

Implications.” *RCCS Annual Review* volume 1, no.1 (2009). doi: <https://doi.org/10.4000/rccsar.157>.

<sup>18</sup> Staszak, Jean-François. “Otherness.” In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, edited by Kitchin & Thrift, p.1-7. Oxford: Elsevier Science, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Strazds, Rebecca. 2017. “Localities, Licenses, and Loopholes: An Analysis of Variances in Alcohol Regulation and Their Continued Effectiveness in Modern Industry.” Accessed March 7, 2021. <https://www.centerforalcoholpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Rebecca-Strazds-Essay.pdf>.

the monster's epilexis in "what does it avail that I now ask thee to pardon me?" serves as a trigger point in the reader's memory, forcing them to recollect his previous murders and to realize the extent of his physical dominance. However, as is perhaps a requirement of the dystopian genre, this concept is reversed in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: Julia's act of tearing "off her clothes" and the "whole civilisation [seeming] to be annihilated" is a hubristic, almost Gaga-esque gesture of rebellion, and yet in its futility is proof that with institutions like the "Ministry of Love", it is impossible for the other to leave a permanent mark on society. Against such a reading, Camille Paglia's derisive assertion in 2010 that Lady Gaga's symbolic meat dress signified only an erosion of her sexual power is strikingly unsettling, suggesting that even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the most defiant gesture towards female agency is ultimately useless.<sup>20</sup> After all, are we not the generation who despite our alleged woke-ness, binge on the Botox female faces of *Love Island*?

However, both Faulkner and Conrad still have a lesson to teach us. Both prove that their "other" is psychologically pervasive and indeed becomes almost immortalized in the consciousness of Western culture. Whilst Kurtz's death seems initially ignoble and marked with little ceremony, as the cabin boy reports "in a tone of scathing contempt[...] 'Mistah Kurtz—he dead', Christmas's ability to harmonize what Tabucchi defines as his "confederation of souls" and die as one racially unified "ruling ego" makes him metaphorically indestructible, thereby lending real power and indeed almost dignity to the "othered" protagonist.<sup>21</sup> Faulkner uses Christmas's death in Chapter 19, to underline his protagonist's legacy: the tricolon of somatic disintegration in his observation that "face, body, all, seemed to[...] fall in upon itself", cements the reader's understanding of Christmas's spiritual transcendence, and the weakness of his "in-group" persecutors. Despite Bleikasten's argument that having a "clear cut identity is a social imperative" and exclusive to the "dominant in-group"<sup>22</sup>, Christmas's ability to defy normative convention and conclude his trajectory as physically broken yet existentially whole is incredibly damning to white society.<sup>23</sup> This new power is reiterated in Faulkner's language of ascent, the "rising rocket" of Christmas's blood becoming integrated with the environment he previously corrupted and thus allowing him to soar "into [his murderer Percy Grimm's] memor[y] forever and ever." Contrastingly, in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlowe's compulsive need to retell his story reiterates the profound sense of mystery that surrounds Kurtz: Marlowe struggles to accept that the "best agent" and "exceptional man" could be anything but what the Russian describes as "one of the immortals." Indeed, Marlowe's obsession with decoding his experiences in the Congo is similar to that of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner: both either witness or participate in events that they simply cannot explain, and therefore feel a cathartic need to share this burden with their audience, making them "sadder and[...] wiser" because of it.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in *Frankenstein*, witness is kept to the monster's otherness by Robert Walton, whose meeting with "a being which had the shape of a man, but[...] [a] gigantic stature" leads him to writing to his sister, and telling her about an "accident" so "strange[...] that [he could not ] forbear recording it." But in chilling contrast, in Orwell's dystopian world of Oceania, no memory of Winston and Julia's otherness can exist, because all the instruments of record have been dismantled: through the weaponization of words, for instance, waste disposal as "memory holes" and exiled Party members as "unperson[s]", Orwell is able to construct a dynamic historical

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<sup>20</sup> Hayden, Erik, 2010. "Camille Paglia: Lady Gaga Spells End of Sexual Revolution." *The Atlantic*, September, 13. Accessed September 1, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2010/09/camille-paglia-lady-gaga-spells-end-of-sexual-revolution/340098/>.

<sup>21</sup> Tabucchi, Antonio. *Pereira Maintains*, trans. by Patrick Creagh. Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Staszak, Jean-François. "Otherness." In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, edited by Kitchin & Thrift, p.1-7. Oxford: Elsevier Science, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Bleikasten, André. "The Closed society and its subjects". In *New Essays on Light in August*, edited by Michael Millgate, p.81-102. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

<sup>24</sup> Poetry Foundation. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Accessed March 7, 2021.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43997/the-rime-of-the-ancient-mariner-text-of-1834>.

framework, constantly seeking to rewrite itself through the negation of old identities and the creation of new ones. Orwell may have been dubbed “a literary mediocrity” by Will Self, but arguably no other writer could have predicted the “cancel culture” of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, wherein the past is censored, covered-up, or taken down if it does not fit in with prevailing cultural orthodoxies.<sup>25</sup>

## The Irony of Otherness

Despite the fact that, in these texts, attempts to oppress otherness almost always fail, it is nevertheless interesting to note that otherness is surprisingly prominent within the normative self and that the line separating “in-group” from other is, in fact, tenuous at best.<sup>26</sup> In *Light in August*, Faulkner illustrates this through the radical and controversial preacher Mr. Hines, Christmas’s biological grandfather and the man who assaults him in Chapter 15: a white supremacist living among a “neighbourhood of negroes”, Hines symbolizes the irrational and contradictory nature of racial hierarchy, the animalistic verbs “broke”, “sprang”, and “burrowing” suggesting an equal savagery to that of Kurtz and the Congolese. Therefore, Faulkner’s presentation of two people who are tied by blood but separated due to the stigma of biracialism and the Anti-miscegenation laws that criminalized it, allows him to use Hines’s incessant cry “Kill the bastard!” to further emphasize the man’s bestiality. The same can most certainly be said about Victor Frankenstein, who, despite initially hoping that his creation would “pour a torrent of light into [his] dark world”, ends by violently seeking to undo his error, chasing the monster all the way to the Arctic to bring about “the task of his destruction.” Moreover, in *Heart of Darkness*, an underlying element of otherness is also revealed in the relationship between the Company and the Eldorado Exploring Expedition: Conrad proves that the Company’s desire to appropriate and indoctrinate is inextricably interlinked to the Expedition and their pillaging. The disturbing juxtaposition between the Expedition’s “tear[ing] treasure out of the bowels of” the Congo Free State, which killed nearly 10 million Congolese from 1886 to 1908, and the insignificant crime of “burglars breaking into a safe” serves to suggest that behind the Company’s sanitizing façade of education, lies an identical sense of violence.<sup>27</sup> In combination with the Expedition, whose destructiveness Conrad tries to mitigate through the descending tricolon of nouns in which “invasion” is softened to “infliction” and finally to “visitation”, the Europeans become one compounded force of otherness, utterly non-conformist and driven to insanity on their mission to refine the Congo. Contrastingly, in a characteristic Orwellian inversion, Mr. Charrington’s pose as an othered Prole proves to be the catalyst in Winton’s political downfall: through his visual transformation at the end of the novel from “a widower aged sixty-three” to a younger man with “black” hair instead of “white”, the established paradigm of other lurking within normative is reversed.

Conclusively, all four texts suggest that otherness is merely a social construct, generated by fear and propagated by ignorance. In Conrad’s writing, this is prominently displayed through his imagery, the eponymous “darkness” a microcosm for the nescience that perpetuates Western ideology. Marlowe’s reiteration and association of the Congo with the adjective “impenetrable” is particularly significant, as it encapsulates the normative individual’s habit of engaging in Asad’s process of “cultural translation.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, this tendency “to

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<sup>25</sup> Self, Will, 2014. “A Point of View: Why Orwell was a literary mediocrity”. *BBC*, August, 31. Accessed July 17, 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-28971276>.

<sup>26</sup> Staszak, Jean-François. “Otherness.” In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, edited by Kitchin & Thrift, p.1-7. Oxford: Elsevier Science, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Hochschild, Adam. *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1998.

<sup>28</sup> Hodgson, James, 2018. “Talal Asad on ‘Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology.’” *Cultural Translation Research Blog*, April, 30. Accessed March 2, 2021.



explain other cultures” through recognized and “hidden pattern[s]” is essential to the “dominant in-group’[s]” interpretation of behavioral otherness: the uncertainty apparent in Marlowe’s rhetorical question “The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell?” implies a desire to separate Western civilization from African “savagery.”<sup>29</sup> This anxiety is echoed in Shelley’s portrayal of village dwellers Felix and Agatha, whose incapacity to truly understand the monster and his affection, is evidenced when they, similar to Hines, “violently strike [the monster] with a stick.” Contrastingly, *Light in August*’s Percy Grimm is a perfect example of how in the 20th century Deep South, the creation of the other arose not from fear, but a deluded sense of American patriotism and an anxiety about the Calvinist doctrine of manifest destiny. In Chapter 19, Grimm is presented to the reader as a lost figure with no distinct destiny of his own because he was born too late “to have been in the European war” and therefore his father deems him “worthless” and “lazy.” This is why, when Grimm exclaims “Jesus Christ!” before brutally lynching and castrating Christmas, the reader understands that he feels he is finally emerging from his own ontological and Conradian “dark[ness]” by means of the New Civilian-Military Act. Inasmuch, the reader can perceive that Grimm has been just as alienated and culturally disorientated as Christmas himself.

## Conclusions

In summary, as Weinstein observes, the act of “becoming oneself is inseparable from becoming someone else.”<sup>30</sup> In all four texts, but perhaps most notably in *Heart of Darkness* and *Light in August*, the reader is presented with a poignant argument that there are no discrete entities named normative and other, but rather two groups who are essentially one and the same. This is implied by the authors themselves, in particular through the exploration of how both “dominant in-group” and “out-group” distort, rather than reinforce society’s boundaries, conflating the realms of fundamentally conformist and distinguishably other.<sup>31</sup> It is particularly notable when reading each text that otherness can never be totally eradicated, and that its true purpose is to provoke, challenge and imprint itself onto both the trajectory of normative history and the memory of the reader. Therefore, from this, it can be discerned that Faulkner, Conrad, Shelley, and Orwell all use their texts to warn their readers that the pillars of normative civilization can and will always be shaken, precisely because there is an element of otherness in each individual which will always seek to assert its dominance.

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<sup>30</sup> Weinstein, Arnold. “Becoming Someone Else: Oprah Winfrey and *Light in August*.” *The Mississippi Quarterly* volume 66, no. 3 (2013): p.507-523. doi:10.1353/mss.2013.0019.

<sup>31</sup> Staszak, Jean-François. “Otherness.” In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, edited by Kitchin & Thrift, p.1-7. Oxford: Elsevier Science, 2009.

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