What is *Spectrum*?

*Spectrum* is an annual competition in essay writing sponsored by the Writing Across the Curriculum Committee at Saint Mary’s College. Submissions are read by a panel of judges and cash awards are given at the end of each spring semester. All winning essays are published in *Spectrum* the following fall.

*Spectrum* seeks to publish essays from a wide range of disciplines, and all undergraduates at Saint Mary’s College are encouraged to submit essays written as a part of their coursework for consideration (maximum length: 5,000 words).

Submissions for the 2004 contest may be sent via campus mail to Chris Miller, c/o the English Department, or may be placed in the zebra-striped *Spectrum* box on the 3rd floor of Dante Hall, near the elevator. All submissions should include the name of the faculty member and course for which the paper was written. Please mark all submissions with “Attention: *Spectrum*,” and make sure they contain the author’s full name, a local phone number, and an email address.
SPECTRUM 2003

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all those who submitted their work and to the professors who encouraged students to submit their essays. Please keep those essays coming from courses across the curriculum—we can’t publish this magazine without you.

Working together, our judges have chosen four essays with enlightening insights and unexpected perspectives. To stimulate further thought, we encourage faculty and students to read and discuss these essays in class, as appropriate to the educational goals of each course.

We are especially grateful to those who volunteered to serve as judges: Philip Dow, Cathy Kwan, Caralinda Lee, Ken Parker, and Denise Witzig.

Thanks also to Carrie Brewster, Director of the Hearst Art Gallery, for scanning the cover photo, and to Gail Drexler, English Department Administrative Assistant, for all her help in coordinating the contest.

The cover photograph, “Positive/Negative,” is by Laura Timpe, from Suzanne Schumacher’s Design class and the student art exhibit.

Chris Miller
Faculty Moderator
SPECTRUM 2003

First Prize

Tiffany Fox, “The Evolution of the Femme Fatale”
Detective Fiction, Janice Doane

Second Prize

Twentieth Century American Literature, Janice Doane

Third Prize

Georgia Barker, “Why Paul Monette Won the National Book Award”
Growing Up American, Carol Lashof

Anna Gates, “Mustang”
English Composition, Carol Beran
The Evolution of the Femme Fatale

By Tiffany Fox

The femme fatale, a female stereotype still prevalent in poorly scripted action movies, originated within the context of the hard-boiled detective novel. As the beautiful seductress who used her sexuality to ensnare the detective into her elaborate deception, the femme fatale helped engender the image of the callous, manipulative female. The mystery always ended when the detective revealed her identity as the catalyst to the novel’s chaos and destruction. Despite her mysterious beauty and cunning manipulative skills, the femme fatale lacked depth and motivation. She was evil, an obvious “bad guy” in the otherwise morally ambiguous world of hard-boiled detective fiction. Whether or not justice was served depended on whether the femme fatale was punished for her guilt. Thus, this woman stood in the way of restoring the world back to some form of moral order. As the genre of hard-boiled detective fiction became more complex, portraying the world’s moral ambiguity with greater profundity, the femme fatale could no longer be the source of hatred and violence. By comparing the more contemporary works of detective fiction, namely Sara Paretsky’s Blood Shot and Walter Mosley’s Devil in a Blue Dress, to The Maltese Falcon, one of the first hard-boiled detective novels, one can see major growth in the complexity and individuality of the femme fatale characters. While The Maltese Falcon’s Brigid O’Shaughnessy is an archetypal femme fatale, her successors are increasingly more complex, defying stereotypes created by the femme fatale character and even acting as literary tools for social commentary and insight into the detective’s internal struggles.

The Maltese Falcon’s Brigid O’Shaughnessy is the quintessential femme fatale. She uses her seeming helplessness and sultry good looks to lure the detective into both protecting her and overlooking her complicity, which she does not reveal until the novel’s conclusion. When she’s first introduced into the novel, one of the characters immediately describes her as a “knockout,” and the moment the detective, Sam Spade, meets her the narrator elaborately details her flawless physical appearance:
She was tall and pliantly slender, without angularity anywhere. Her body was erect and high-breasted, her legs long, her hands and feet narrow. She wore two shades of blue that had been selected because of her eyes. The hair curling from her blue hat was darkly red, her full lips more brightly red. White teeth glistened in the crescent her timid smile made… (Hammett 4)

Already, the stereotypical physical features of the femme fatale have been introduced. Her slender body and timid smile indicate her outward vulnerability. Her dark red hair and lips suggest a seductive nature and inner darkness. The “cobalt blue” eyes and dress have become a definitive image associated with the femme fatale.

Brigid first introduces herself to Spade under the pseudonym “Miss Wonderly” and does not reveal her real name until the fourth chapter—multiple names being another classic characteristic of the femme fatale. Even though she deceives the detective from the start, she maintains her innocent appearance, softly pleading with Spade to protect her even after she admits lying about her name and luring Spade’s partner into the case under false pretenses. Through the course of their conversation, Spade asks Brigid what she wants. “I want you to save me from—from it all’ she [replies] in a thin, tremulous voice” (34). After Brigid gives Spade a long emotional speech about the danger she’s facing and how he is her only hope, Spade responds, “‘You won’t need much of anybody’s help. You’re good. You’re very good. It’s chiefly your eyes, I think, and that throb you get into your voice when you say things like ‘Be generous, Mr. Spade’” (35). Thus, Hammett establishes the classic relationship between detective and femme fatale in which the femme fatale utilizes her beauty to deceive the detective into helping her despite her suspicious nature. Even though Spade perceives that Brigid should not be trusted, he allows her to coax him into staying on the case based solely on their mutual physical attraction.

Brigid carries on with these tactics of deception until the novel’s conclusion when finally she’s revealed as the source of the death and violence that’s been occurring throughout the book. After Spade discovers she murdered his partner, Brigid attempts to emotionally manipulate Spade into not turning her in to the police.
Brigid O'Shaugnessy blinked her tears away. She took a step towards him and stood looking him in the eyes, straight and proud. "You called me a liar," she said. "Now you are lying. You're lying if you say you don't know down in your heart that, in spite of anything I've done, I love you."

(212)

Despite her apparent guilt, her relationship to the detective threatens the necessary conclusion that she will pay for her crimes. Not only is she a murderer but a threat to the sacred ideal of justice.

However, in order to ensure justice and protect his ego, Spade does not allow his emotions to impair his judgment, telling Brigid, "I won't play the sap for you" (213). Spade refuses to give in to Brigid's pleas, declaring:

"It's easy enough to be nuts about you.... But I don't know what that amounts to. Does anybody ever? But suppose I do? What of it? Maybe next month I won't. I've been through it before—when it lasted that long. Then what? Then I'll think I played the sap. And if I did it and got sent over then I'd be sure I was the sap. Well, if I send you over I'll be sorry as hell—I'll have some rotten nights—but that'll pass. (214)

Spade's resolve wins out against Brigid's declarations of love and she's taken away by the police.

Seemingly, Brigid's portrayal of the classic femme fatale is a vindictive and deceitful female image that stereotypically upholds the concept that women are innately evil. Fortunately, as the genre of hard-boiled detective fiction develops the femmes fatales become less culpable and more complex. In the case of Blood Shot, a novel by Sara Paretsky featuring a female hard-boiled detective named V.I. Warshawski, the femme fatale character is significantly less obvious but still present. While it may be difficult to picture a detective-femme fatale relationship that includes a female detective, the relationship between Warshawski and Caroline defies the typical female-female relationship.
Even though Caroline, an old family friend of Warshawski’s, embodies many of the characteristics of the quintessential annoying little sister, Warshawski responds to her not as an irritable yet loving big sister but more as a non-emotional, protective big brother. Essentially, Warshawski handles relationships in a typically masculine way. She remains professional at all times and the emotions she does display are generally aggressive. When V.I. tries to call Caroline back after they’ve had a disagreement and she refuses to answer her phone, V.I. responds, “Ah, screw you, you little brat” (Paretsky 93). At times, their relationship is reminiscent of Spade and Brigid’s. V.I. is condescending, mistrustful, and impatient towards Caroline, yet still strangely committed to working for her. Caroline acts as the mysterious femme fatale who appears to be suspiciously withholding the truth, yet is able to persuade the detective to submit to her wishes.

Like Brigid who deceives Spade the instant she meets him, when Caroline is first introduced V.I. immediately indicates that she’s untrustworthy—giving an account of how once Caroline had lured V.I. home from college under false pretenses so that she could explain to her mother why Caroline had given her pearl ring to a charity drive (10). Indeed, Caroline has drawn Vic back to her old Chicago neighborhood, purposefully omitting the fact that she wants Warshawski to find her father. When Caroline convinces Vic to take on the search for her father, she seemingly emotionally manipulates Vic into submission, claiming that once her mother dies she won’t have any family left (20). Like Brigid, she uses her relationship to the detective to influence her behavior. Warshawski remarks, “If I hadn’t known [Caroline] all her life, it would have been easier to say no...Her blue eyes still looked at me with total trust. I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t keep from responding” (20-21). Caroline’s blue eyes as well as her apparent neediness in this passage are both evocative of the scene in which Brigid begs Spade for his help.

Of course, the novel’s conclusion tells us that Caroline, while holding back information, is not the typical cruelly manipulative femme fatale—an obvious difference being that Caroline’s connection to the detective is founded not on sexual attraction but rather on a shared history between two childhood friends. This type of association gives Vic and Caroline’s relationship more complexity than Spade and Brigid’s because it explores a connection based on something other than lust.
Also, Caroline’s secret that someone had threatened to hurt her mother unless Vic dropped the case does not reveal her guilt but rather shows her concern for someone she loves. Warshawki even admitted to Caroline that she understood her need to protect Louisa, ""You're manipulative, you'll bend the rules any old way to get what you want, but you're no chicken. You'd run scared for only one reason,"" showing that even Vic knows that Caroline is essentially a good person despite her tendency to maneuver others to do her will (221). Therefore, by allowing Caroline to maintain both similarities to and differences from the traditional femme fatale, Paretsky unravels this female archetype into a multi-dimensional person.

In Mosley’s *Devil in a Blue Dress*, the femme fatale, Daphne (also known as Ruby), while more comparable to Brigid than Caroline, still has significantly more complexity than the traditional femme fatale. Her blue dress and piercing blue eyes, her multiple names, her romantic entanglement with the detective, and her hidden guilt all fit into the femme fatale archetype. However, unlike Brigid, Daphne’s most shocking secret deals with her personal identity rather than her involvement in the case. Daphne/Ruby is half black. Her inability to accept her true identity is what ultimately causes all the chaos in the novel. As Mouse explains, “She wanna be white. All them years people be tell’n her how she light-skinned and beautiful but all the time she knows that she can’t have what white people have. So she pretend and then she lose it all. She can love a white man but all he can love is the white girl he thinks she is” (Mosley 253). Throughout this novel, the theme of racism in society has occurred as a separate evil from the violent crimes taking place. However, when we find out that Daphne’s motivation for her actions is to escape her identity as a black person, racism in society becomes the evil behind the violent crimes in the novel. Thus, Daphne/Ruby is not the only “devil” in the story.

Not only does Mosley use Daphne as an example of how racism destroys personal identity, but he also utilizes her character to mirror the detective’s internal struggle with his identity as a black man. Mouse compares Daphne to Easy, saying:

That’s just like you, Easy. You learn stuff and you be thinkin’ like white men be thinkin’. You’d be thinkin’ that what’s right fo’ them is right fo’ you. She look like she white and you think like you white. But brother you don’t know that you
Throughout the novel, one of Easy’s main motivations for taking on this case was to earn the money to pay for his house. To him, that house meant comfort, security, and success—or at least the white definition of success. However, Easy could not deny that his identity as a black man was an obstacle he would have to learn to deal with in order to get his dream. Just as Daphne’s dissatisfaction with her racial identity kept her from forming intimate bonds and achieving happiness, Easy’s desire for a life outside of his world kept him from happiness. Therefore, Daphne’s character, who on the surface appears to be no more than another cardboard cutout of the traditional femme fatale, is developed enough not only to be compared to the detective but also to act as part of a social commentary on the inward destructiveness of racism.

Once the female stereotype of the femme fatale is deconstructed, one can recognize the unexplored depth and drive of a character like Brigid O'Shaugnessy. Fortunately, as the genre of detective fiction grows to include detectives of various races, genders, and social backgrounds, the femme fatale also achieves a new realm of purpose. Her vital connection to the plot goes deeper than her complicity—she’s no longer just the culprit. For example, Caroline, while maintaining nuances of the traditional femme fatale, defied the stereotype of the calculating, cold-hearted female by showing genuine kindness and compassion for her loved ones. Even though the detective describes Caroline as manipulative, she eventually recognizes her caring nature. While manipulation and nurturing are both stereotypically female characteristics, rarely are both these traits found within the same female character. This duality does not allow Caroline to become any sort of stereotype—good or bad. In the same way, Mosley’s Daphne, while essentially a “devil in a blue dress,” contributes more to the novel than simply her involvement in the case. Unlike the traditional femme fatale, Daphne is a powerful character whose presence reveals racism to be the ultimate source of the internal and external destruction within the novel. The damaging effect of the racism that Daphne represents is the perpetrator of the various wrongs committed, not Daphne herself. Thus,
as the genre of detective fiction has developed the femme fatale has evolved from a source of evil to a source of insight.

Works Cited

Prodigiously modern and progressive in his writing, William Carlos Williams liberates his words from the rigorous structure of classical poetry. Not restrained by the rules set forth by classicists, Williams uses the structure of his poetry, in collaboration with his words, to tell the story. His ability to convey added meaning and imply feeling through word placement allows the reader greater freedom in the analysis of his work. The poetry becomes more than a literary work; it becomes a visually artistic one as well. It is to be read, heard, and seen. Williams' poems, "The Wind Increases" (1930) and "The Dance" (1944), exemplify his use of unconventional structure in conveying liveliness and action. The movement in these poems does not rely on word choice alone, but placement as well. Williams, a cunning poet, not only writes his poetry, he builds it.

In "The Wind Increases," Williams' use of a loose and flowing structure underscores the words on the page. This ability to free written language from any defined structure gives the work a kinetic quality. His work is both compelling as a piece of literature and as a visual work of art. Williams writes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The harried</th>
<th>earth is swept</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The trees</td>
<td>the tulip's bright tips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sidle and toss—</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loose your love</td>
<td>to flow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blow!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Vol.1 339)

In placing "The trees" under and spaced to the right of "earth is swept," Williams illustrates his words. "The trees" are swept in the poem and on the page. As the poem
continues, the bright-tipped tulips wave back and forth in the strengthening breeze. By separating “sidle” and “toss—” not only vertically, but horizontally, Williams has effectively created a structural back and forth motion. Williams then separates “Loose your love” from “toss—” with a vertical double space and a shift to the right. On paper it literally appears as if “Loose your love” has been tossed from the previous line to its current location. Finally, the wind increases greatly, and blows. The word “Blow!” is separated from the poem indicating a forceful importance. “Blow!” shifts the poem into its next image, that of the writer.

Williams’ work flows from a descriptive outdoor scene to one of questioning, frustration, and irritation. In search of original thought and expression, Williams cries out in dissatisfaction. Are there any others like himself who strive for their own artistic identity? Williams calls to his fellow poets to be free in their verse, in hope that his craft may not fall into static cliché. He writes:

Good Christ what is
A poet—if any
exists?

a man
whose words will
bite
their way
home—being actual
having the form

of motion

(Vol.1 339)

Williams begins by questioning what defines a poet, implying there is no one way to create verse. Having “exists?” stand alone in the poem suggests a solitary life. The word is alone in the poem, much like the true poet is in the literary world. The poet exists outside of classical boundaries, living in an original world, apart from the styles of others. Williams uses strategic word placement again in centering “bite” under “whose words will.” The word “bite” appears to be doing just that to the poem, biting it. Its solitary placement emphasizes the word’s power and leads into Williams’ description of how a poem should read. He creates a structural C shape in placing “their way” at the right of the poem, “home—being actual” under and to the left, “having the form” also under and
to the left, and finally “of motion” under and to the right. Williams has described his idea of poetry in words and has created a structure that illustrates his ideas.

Williams ends “The Wind Increases” back in a natural setting. This choice of backdrop envelops the poet in nature. The questioning in the middle of the poem continues to be answered as Williams creates a sense of struggle in his conclusion. He writes:

At each twigtip
new
upon the tortured
body of thought
gripping
the ground
a way
to the last leaftip

Williams begins this concluding section with an image of a leaf-filled tree, and in particular, the tiny branches that reach out toward the world. He separates the word “new” from the image, indicating that he strives for a freshness. Williams describes the struggle to be original as trying to wring an innovative idea out of “...the tortured/body of thought.” Williams stacks the troubled poet’s problems on top of one another in the structure of the poem, giving that section a heavy “tortured” feel. Williams separates “gripping” from “the ground” as if to indicate a sense of slipping away. The elusive idea is close at hand; it is a budding leaftip at the end of a branch, if only the poet can hold on.

Williams uses structure similarly in “The Dance,” creating flow through word placement in a tighter stanza. He uses eighty-three words in two sentences, creating a whirling and gyrating tribute to a great painting. He writes:

In Brueghel’s great picture, The Kermess,
the dancers go round, they go round and
around, the squeal and the blare and the
tweedle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles
The poem is a description of a famous painting by Pieter Brueghel. The first sentence of the poem is a long and winding spin of syllables. The flowing nature of the writing gives the work the joyous feeling of dancing. It is whimsical, fast, and unthinking. The moment being written about is being lived, not analyzed. The carefree words are emphasized by the carefree structure Williams uses. Williams is becoming more than a writer.

As the poem continues, Williams creates more of the same feeling. The second and final sentence reads:

Kicking and rolling about the Fair Grounds, swinging their butts, those shanks must be sound to bear up under such rollicking measures, prance as they dance in Brueghel’s great picture, The Kermess.

William’s second sentence is filled with the same festive descriptions and frantic movement. He frames the work by starting and ending the poem with the same line, in essence, turning his poem into a visual work of art as well. Williams’ “The Dance” is Brueghel’s The Kermess, translated from oil and canvas to ink and page, an effect that Williams could not have achieved using a more conventional structure. The freedom to run his words together rapidly and structure his work in a literary frame allows Williams to paint a poem rather than write one. He becomes both author and architect.

In striving to achieve his own style of poetry, William Carlos Williams created literary works of great beauty. His unconventional word placement and sentence structure create movement in his poetry. In an art form that was once static with the superfluous use of adjectives, William Carlos Williams creates fresh, living texts. His work breathes with the vivacity of life. Words are scattered by gusts of wind or trampled on by dancing feet. His poetry is not simply read; it leads the reader’s eye, creating a secondary meaning, or simply underscoring one being expressed by the words. Whereas poets once followed a formula and tried to fit their emotions into a literary equation, William Carlos
Williams allows his words to run free on the page, taking on their own structure and meaning. Each poem is an individual work. The words on the page are fingerprints, never to be duplicated.

Works Cited

Why Paul Monette Won The National Book Award

By Georgia Barker

Paul Monette's confessional memoir, *Becoming a Man*, made literary history in 1992 as the first book by and about a gay man to win The National Book Award for Nonfiction. In this coming-of-age tale, Monette bravely tells his story of growing up gay in the rigidly conformist and homophobic 1950's. Monette's struggle to reconcile his sexuality with the learned gender construct of masculinity is one of the recurrent themes of his early life, and thus, his memoir. A close reading of the text illustrates his growing awareness that, although his very being seems an affront to all that is masculine, he too is a man. Monette deserves respect for relating his intense struggle to accept himself as a gay man; however, he rarely challenges heterosexism in a way that might make straight readers uncomfortable.

Monette's chronicle of his long, arduous journey through self-hate begins where many gay and lesbian lives begin: in the self-loathing and self-annihilation that build the walls of "the closet." For Paul, this process is a direct result of the shame and otherness he experiences from the failure to reconcile his queerness with his manhood, and his resultant inability to fit into the world of men.

"As early as the second grade," he writes, "... I clumped up and down on the hardwood floors in my mother's heels, prancing even, right in front of the grownups. And I had a thing for paper dolls"(10). And already, he senses a hint of disapproval from his parents: "I almost remember the tail end of a flareup between my parents, over the issue of my inappropriate fascinations"(10).

At nine years old, Monette has his first and most detrimental introduction to sexual shame when his mother finds him "waggling weenies" with his neighbor. She relentlessly asks him, "What were you doing with Kite?"(29). From this experience, Monette learns a destructive lesson: "No moment of my first twenty years is more indelible than the kitchen inquisition of my mother. All the ambiguity of sex reduced to a single question, the implication crystal clear that something very bad had happened—unnatural, even"(29).
Hence, from an early age, Paul is taught that his sexuality, and thus his inherent self, is an aberration, not normal, and not manly. In a culture ruled and defined by straight hegemony and a heterosexual imperative, manhood is largely defined by sexual attraction to women. As Monette witnesses in his childhood, those who deviate from this “norm” are often the target of violence and derision. In order to survive such a hostile, homophobic environment, Paul learns “to pass” as straight in the role of courtier: “…in practice this amounted to a certain desperate chattiness, just like the days when I filled the silence around my mother’s brooding judgment of me and Kite ... I learned it early, substituting my oh-so-worldly banter for the hetero rites of passage”(42-3).

The necessity for Paul to play a eunuch persona, rather than express his true person, involves a rigorous self-discipline tantamount to self-denial. He continues to censure himself at Andover, as he finds no outlet for the true Paul in the face of idealized manhood. He writes, “How else to explain the closet I built except to describe the unrelieved perception of being less than? My failure to achieve the school’s idea of manhood proved to me that I was no man at all. For there was no other kind”(64). Even among fellow queers at Andover, Monette finds no comfort: “The world in which we didn't exist as sexual beings was so in control, it succeeded in making eunuchs even among our own”(65).

Paul’s father puts the final lock on his son’s closet door when he chastises him for looking at homoerotic magazines. He reproves his son, saying, “There's nothing wrong with those girlie magazines. That's perfectly natural, you're almost a man. But the homosexual ones ... that's not good” (96).

Predictably, Monette's self-loathing persists at Yale, where he pours himself into art, poetry, and literature. Of this time, he notes, “At least I could feel for art what the laws of desire and my own self-hatred prevented me from feeling for another man” (87).

To ensure that his “walls of manhood” are in place, Paul spends the rest of his young adulthood trying to prove his manhood by repressing his queerness, and continuing the straight charade, including dating and having sex with women.

Paul spirals deeper into depression, but manages to realize that his unhappiness has everything to do with the closet, and that perhaps his healing process involves learning self-acceptance and love. As he writes, “Somewhere inside me I was clutching at
the thought of finding a place where gay was acceptable, where it didn't have to hide itself in lies and vicarious longing. To leave the world of furtiveness and go where the laughing men were, and maybe find one of my own at last” (224).

Rather than come out, or search for the laughing man, however, Paul becomes an interior decorator, in the hopes that this new persona will help him “blow the hinges on the closet door” (224). But, alas, this is just the beginning of several more years of misery and confusion, as Monette continues to hide from himself and others, even men who want to love him:

They could have everything else, but not my body. A fanatical purity that had no higher purpose than fear: it I did it with someone I cared about, I might have to give up the shame and self-hatred, which was the only place I could hide ... To experience love as claustrophobia. In such a twisted paradigm lies the sick legacy of a lifetime in the closet. (217)

It is not until Monette finally finds help with a therapist at twenty-six that he begins his journey towards self-acceptance. Yet therapy alone cannot rid Paul of his internalized homophobia. Paul only begins to truly accept himself, which includes integrating his queer identity with his masculinity, when he meets gay men who function as role models: men who are out, bent, proud, and emotionally healthy.

The first man to serve as such a mentor is Monette's friend Harold, of whom he writes, “I began to appreciate that Harold was the most fully evolved gay man I had ever met—wise and yet self-mocking; secure in his manhood…” (267). Another guide and friend is Richard, whom Paul counts on “to show him the ropes of the tribe” (276). Monette receives a vital lesson when Richard asserts, “Let go with your masculinity, Paul” (276). Through these friendships, Monette finally learns that he fits into the world of men, with those who redefine gender and sexuality and what it means to be a man.

For Paul, the road to self-love is still a long one, even after he meets Roger, his “laughing man.” But Roger's love is what helps Paul ultimately prevail over his demons:
Love turned out to be not simple at all... For it turned out there were closets within the closet, and a lingering self-hatred that even the joy of connection couldn't resolve. What love gives you is the courage to face the secrets you've kept from yourself, a reason to open the rest of the doors. (173-4)

In 1995, Monette lost his battle with AIDS, and deserves respect and admiration for his efforts to demonstrate how heterosexism crippled his sense of self, especially his manhood or masculinity. Yet the extent to which Monette effectively challenges these notions is questionable, and indicates the limits to which the literary industry, and society as a whole, is willing to abolish "the closet." Despite relating his intensely personal struggle to accept his sexuality, Monette's memoir rarely challenges heterosexism in any way that would make readers uncomfortable. Yet discomfort is the effect that a truly subversive writer elicits from his reader. It is out of this discomfort that one begins to question and examine the ways in which he might contribute to homophobia and gay oppression.

Instead of demanding such introspection from the reader, *Becoming a Man* wallows in a pathos of self-hate. While there is nothing wrong with Paul's story of his internalized homophobia, it is problematic that such a book won The National Book Award for Nonfiction, in light of its limitations.

However, the positive reception of the memoir and its award-winning status is not surprising. The mainstream literary industry is obviously not ready to bestow such honors on gay writers who unapologetically challenge white, patriarchal heterosexism. James Baldwin, Audre Lourde, Allen Ginsberg, and Adrienne Rich, for example, did not win the National Book Award, but Paul Monette did.

He is not as talented as these writers, nor does he have more important things to say. He is, however, largely palatable to straight readers, while the others are not. In our largely homophobic culture, Monette's self-hatred for being gay is not only inoffensive and non-confrontational, but, as such, it is perhaps even reassuring.

His memoir was also very timely since it was published when AIDS had become a subject of mainstream art. When AIDS was perceived as a "gay" disease, art about AIDS was relegated to obscurity. Only after movie stars and sports stars started dying
from and talking about the disease did it become a hot topic of mainstream art. This laid the groundwork for the big success of *Becoming a Man*.

Americans have an historic love affair with the tragic hero. Hence, our icons include Christ, Martin Luther King, Jr., Anne Frank, and Matthew Shepherd. By venerating them and awarding them posthumous heroic status, we easily exonerate ourselves from the injustices perpetrated against them. Thus, the dominant power structure remains, while we merely acknowledge that its past crimes merit not a call to action but passive grief. We have a harder time accepting and supporting such revolutionaries when they are alive because they ask for more than our collective sympathy. They ask that we implicate ourselves for existing oppression and hate.

Monette rarely inspires or demands such self-reflection. The few passages where he allows himself angry subversion are the most effective, as when he quotes Harry Hay:

As Harry Hay once put it, needling like a gadfly, the only thing that's the same about gay and straight people is what they do in bed. Thus what I wish for the Gay/Straight Alliance at Andover is more than a sex-positive affirmation of self, wherever they make their beds. Let them all come out, of course—bottom line. But after that I wish them the comradeship of differentness above and beyond the carnal. Or arm in arm with it anyway, as they march down the field butched up in soccer drag and accessorized to the teeth, pearls and boas rampant. Whatever works to keep them from digging a hole. Go team! (81)

If the entire book were written with such confidence and pride in gay identity, it would not have won The National Book Award, but it might have earned the status of Banned Book.

It is important to point out that Paul Monette is not at fault for failing to be more subversive. His life, just like his memoir, is a product of time and place. And so is the mainstream literary industry's unwillingness to publish books that will help eliminate the closet for good.
Work Cited

Mustang

By Anna Gates

I am tired. I'm not sleepy, only drained. There are not massive bags under my blood-shot eyes, and I am not inadvertently nodding off, so my weariness cannot be from a lack of sleep. What I feel is an exhaustion that is taking over my mind. I’m tired of airports, tired of flying. I’m tired of going back and forth, tired of trying to be in two parts of the world at the same time. I am tired of being indecisive.

This is what I’m thinking as I try to ignore the man sitting all too near to me on the flight to Los Angeles. He’s a business man. And like so many others on the plane, he’s distinguished, losing his hair, losing his marriage, and wants desperately to show off his knowledge.

“Reading anything interesting?” he says, motioning his well-manicured finger to the book in my hands. Of course it’s interesting, I think. Why else would I be reading it? I hate the false sense of friendliness on airplanes, especially the “whatcha reading” line. It’s so imposing, so fake.

I try for a minute to disregard his question, imagining that I’m so immersed in my reading that I didn’t hear him quite right. He’s reading The New York Times. As if reading another state’s newspaper makes you worldly. He’s flat; he’s predictable; he has only one home, one life, and one future.

I briefly glance up, looking long enough only to acknowledge his presence. “Wilderness Tips,” I reply, pushing my glasses up and then stuffing my nose back into the pages. But the title of the book isn’t adequate to satisfy him, he’ll want some more information. “It’s a collection of short stories by Margaret Atwood.” There, that should do. But just in case I add, “It’s very interesting.” Subtle mockery always does the trick. He’ll stay away for a while.

I skim down the page to the place where I left off. “Hairball”: it’s my favorite Atwood story; it’s the most shocking, the most interesting.

“She was terrified, but also she was curious. Curiosity has got to her a lot” (33). I read the sentence and let it sink in. Curiosity. I suppose that it is curiosity that has
placed me on this red-eye flight to the City of Angels. But more than curiosity, it is a sense of excitement that has pushed me onto this plane. Excitement. More specifically—James. James is exhilarating; he likes fast cars, rich parties, and Marilyn Monroe. He's a Mustang with custom chrome interior.

The woman in the story, Kat, has a James in her life as well. She calls him Ger, although his original, more banal, name is Gerald. Kat transforms Gerald (a boring man with a nine-to-five job and a rigid, cookie-cutter wife) into Ger (an image of adultery and seduction). "He kisses her as if he thinks someone else is watching him, judging the image they make together...He likes mirrors" (35). Mirrors, I think, and the perfect reflection. This quote forces me to halt mid-page and consider my own image with James. I chuckle to myself. Atwood's rendition of love is so real, so harshly true, that the plots of her stories are almost more believable than that of my own life. I met James on a beach in Hawaii. It was just like a movie, the perfect story to tell my all-too-jealous friends back home. He took me hiking through the rainforest and kissed me under a cascading waterfall—like one of those romanticized shampoo ads. With him I feel famous, I feel electrifying. Like Ger, I revel in the idea of becoming someone else.

The man next to me clears his throat. Thanks to my freakish peripheral vision, I analyze his appearance without making fatal eye contact. He is unusually stiff, as if someone used too much starch when putting him through the wash. He's a Gerald, I conclude. He has the silver framed portrait of his wife on his office desk, he has that precautionary plastic pen protector in his pocket, and he has stability. He doesn't have the lightning effect, but he has the stability. Permanence. Maybe if he read Wilderness Tips he'd get some thunder, but I seriously doubt it. Again, he clears his throat. He's not done; he wants to interact and try to interject some excitement into his two-dimensional life. Here he comes:

"So...that's quite an interesting cover on that book you got there." I look down at the cover. There is a white, porcelain-like face of a woman with a grotesquely brown beetle on her forehead, right where her third eye would be. She stares blankly at me; her eyes seem to be glazed over and she seems so innocent. Yet there is a glisten of mischief in those eyes and a burning hint of rouge on her cheeks. And despite her demeanor of purity, the beetle implies she sees something that I cannot. There is something daring
about her and I realize that she will not conform to the submissive role that women usually play. The beetle is a side of herself that others do not wish to recognize.

"Yeah," I reluctantly reply. "It sort of encompasses the entire premise of women in Atwood’s stories."

Oh no, now I’ve done it. After the words escape from my mouth, his entire face lights up. He decides that now I want to talk to him as much as he with me.

“And what exactly is this theme that is ‘encompassed’ in the stories,” he inquires, using his fingers to make quotes around “encompassed.” “That is...if you don’t mind telling me.”

Great—I get the impression that he wouldn’t understand if I hit him over the head with the reason. Talking through my clenched teeth, I answer, "It’s just the double sides that women have the ability to project. It’s their power...and their weakness.” That’s all I say. There’s no sense in wasting my breath on someone who could never understand the symbolism and the seriousness of a woman who talks to her benign tumor, or rather her unborn twin. He’d just call her psycho and then proceed to call me crazy for rationalizing her actions. He wouldn’t realize what Atwood is trying to illustrate. “What it tells her is everything she’s never wanted to hear about herself” (46). The hairball, I gather, is the ghastly accumulation of all Kat’s hopes and desires. It’s the ugliness inside herself that she’s never had to face before. It is her unresolved demons.

I think about Kat and how her hairball also represents the loss she feels when Ger decides he no longer wants her in his life. “There are other jobs. There are other men, or that’s the theory. Still, something’s been ripped out of her” (45). I sympathize with Kat, and for the first time I understand that sometimes the one type of person we think we want ends up to be the exact opposite of what we need. I want the excitement of a throaty black Mustang, yet I need to be safe in someone’s silver frame on their office desk. I need security. And then it hits me: Atwood is to women what the hairball is to Kat. Her stories reveal the repulsive, unwanted side of my personality. In her stories I see myself and am forced to realize that although I’d like to believe otherwise, I am no better than the sex-driven adulteress in “Hairball.”
“Wait a second,” again the man next to me interrupts my thought pattern. “How can these double sides that women ‘project’ give them strength and make them weak? It seems to me that this would just make them all too confused.”

“It’s not simply confusion,” I counter. “It’s the coming to a point of self-realization. For a while a woman might love the new, forbidden man. But at some point she might decide she wants the boring, one-sided, safe guy.”

The man blows air through his nose, shifts positions, and pats down his tie like he’s irritated, or somehow understands something that I don’t. “It’s just like women to not know what it is they want. Today it’s the stable Studebaker, tomorrow it’s the rebel.”

_Who does he think he is?_ I feel the suppressed feminist inside me rise to the surface in protest. How dare he assume; how dare he categorize; how dare he demean. And then I think about my own life and the lives of women in general. Indecisiveness seems to follow me wherever I go. But isn’t the point of life to have the ability to change one’s mind? Can’t one change lanes even amidst rush hour traffic? And in that one moment of self-discovery, everything suddenly makes perfect sense and complete chaos at the same time. All it takes is a hairball, or perhaps a well-written book, to bring our own atrocities to the surface. So what will it be—the dream of a curve-hugging automobile, or the reality and practicality of pen protectors?

**Work Cited**