The Undergraduate

The Newman Prize Essays

2005-2006

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This year's magazine is dedicated to Barry Horwitz, whose thought and muse-inspired dedication have provided the foundation for our Undergraduate for sixteen years...
A special thank you to the instructors who nominated their student writers, to the students whose fine work was submitted, to the judges who assisted in the essay selection, and to the Collegiate Seminar program and the School of Liberal Arts for supporting this publication and the Newman Awards Contest.

— Torbie Phillips
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Greek Thought
  Maura Roach
  Kristy McCants
  Lauren Tombari

19th & 20th Century Thought
  Shannon McManis
  Danielle Belli
Congratulations to ALL the Nominated Writers

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Even Better the Second Time Around
Jo-Ann Arquillano

As spring semester rolled around, I realized that *The Undergraduate* season was underway. As this was my second year to work on the publication, I was no longer the inexperienced novice having to shuffle around and attempt to reconcile the traditions set before me with the new ideas Torbie and I were coming up with. This time around I had an idea of what I was in for, and I was ready to tackle some essays. Even better, I was fully equipped with a support staff to facilitate the creation of this year’s edition.

Assistant editor Shannon Driskell, graphics editor Melanie Linney, and copy editors Jeremiah Nyberg and Danny Acosta made my task a hundred times easier with their hard work, dedication, and patience. Of course, the always-supportive Torbie was by my side yet again to guide me the whole way through. And though he may have left behind his post as editor, Barry Horwitz continues to contribute to *The Undergraduate* with his careful readings and constructive revisions.

This year’s Newman Prize winners are even more creative and thoughtful than last year’s excellent entries and I found myself becoming more and more engaged with the arguments put forth by the writers. Cassie Kocher’s “Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better: Power Struggles Between Greek Men and Women,” identifies the age-old battle of the sexes as it rears its ugly head in Greek society as seen throughout literature. “No Deal: The Lesson of Hephaestus in *The Odyssey,*” by Laura Van Slyke, discusses the similarities between hero Odysseus and Hephaestus (as told by a bard) and what Odysseus does to create the difference between himself and the hapless god. Lauren Tambir’s comparison of Greek dramas in her essay, “The Nature of Justice in *The Oresteia,* ‘Antigone,’ and ‘The Bacchae,’” reveals the unfair bias of the gods as they decide what is morally acceptable and what is not with absolutely no regard for manmade laws.
In an unprecedented event, this year’s *The Undergraduate* includes two winning essays on the poetry of Sappho. The fact that only two essays on Sappho have been included in *The Undergraduate* in the past 14 years makes the fact that this year’s entries tied for their places in the publication even more remarkable.

However, these two essays are most definitely distinctive in their own rights. Maura Roach’s “Love, Sex, and Death: Sappho’s *Ménage à Trois,*” is an intriguing discussion of Sappho’s obsession with love and pain as seen through her writings. While Roach discusses the intense suffering within the text, Kristy McCants opts to concentrate on the brighter side with her essay “Sappho: Don’t Prod the Beach Rubble,” which focuses on how Sappho achieves immortality through the survival of her writing.

In the section of 19th and 20th Century Thought, the two winning essays take thought-provoking approaches to the works of Thoreau, Whitman, and Weber, and Kafka. “Callings According to Thoreau, Weber, and Kafka,” by Shannon McManis, places the theories within their respective readings against one another and society today as McManis argues that capitalism defeats the “call of the wild.” Danielle Belli’s “Thoreau and Whitman: Advocates of Nature” shows how the two writers support the same philosophy to life within their texts.

This year’s Newman Prize essays demonstrate the level of creative and reflective thought in our seminar classrooms. So congratulations to this year’s winners, and I sincerely hope you enjoy the culmination of your hard work as it makes up the sixteenth edition of *The Undergraduate.*
Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better:
Power Struggles Between Greek
Men and Women
by Cassie Kocher

'Courage, mother. Harden your heart, and listen. Odysseus was scarcely the only one, you know, whose journey home was blotted out at Troy. Others, so many others, died there too.

So, mother,
go back to your quarters. Tend to your own tasks, the distaff and the loom, and keep the women working hard as well. As for giving orders, men will see to that, but most of all: I hold the reins of power in this house.'

(Homer 1, 406 - 14)

So speaks Prince Telemachus to his mother, Queen Penelope. Penelope has just ordered the bard, who is entertaining at their dinner party, to stop singing his song about the war because it was upsetting her, and Telemachus comes to his defense. Penelope's response to her son's words reflects the standing of men and women in Greek society and culture. Upon hearing Telemachus' words, Penelope, "astonished, /[ she] withdrew to her own room. She took to heart / the clear good sense in what her son had said" (Homer 21, 395 - 6). Telemachus is coming of age, and in his father's absence, stepping into Odysseus' shoes as the leader of the house, to rule over the women.

In defending the bard and his song about the Trojan War, Telemachus prioritizes male experience and desire
over female experience and desire. In addition to *The Odyssey*, several other texts that we have studied for this course demonstrate that Greek men often felt compelled to exert their superiority over women. In fact, Greek men think they “must” subordinate Greek women because men fear women’s competence and power.

This fact is illustrated by men’s fear of female competence and power in civic affairs (Lysistrata and Clytaemnestra of “Agamemnon”); their equal intelligence and wit (Penelope in *The Odyssey*); and in sexuality, as the women have a certain control over the men (*Lysistrata*). In “Agamemnon,” during her husband’s absence, Clytaemnestra is respected as a leader, the virtual “king” of Argos. Her husband is away at the Trojan War, so Clytaemnestra steps up and fills his shoes as the actual reigning queen of her city. In one scene, the Leader of the Chorus declares, “We’ve come, Clytaemnestra. We respect your power. / Right it is to honor a warlord’s woman / once he leaves the throne” (Aeschylus 258 - 61). The Leader later says, “Spoken like a man, my lady, loyal, full of self-command” (Aeschylus 116, 355). We can see that Clytaemnestra is indeed respected by the men of her country, but only because she speaks, behaves, and thinks like a man. Her positive public image may not have lasted through the end of the play, but until her husband returns from war, she earns and holds the respect and adoration of the citizens of her city.

Aeschylus’ depiction of Clytaemnestra is not typical of the Greek view of women we’ve seen in the texts. Euripides shows a more traditional, albeit ironic, view of women in *Lysistrata*, but in that play, the men try valiantly to conquer
the women. The women, led by Lysistrata, have banded together to make a pact that they will abstain from all sexual relations with the men unless the men agree to stop the war. A battle ensues between the sexes, and pandemonium occurs within the city as the men try to force the women back down into their previous roles as housewives. The women resist, and they show their power (both their natural sexual power and their intellectual power) to force their desired peaceful change in the city.

This play is traditional in the sense that the men still want to come out on top, but it is non-traditional in the sense that the women take control and the men actually fall under their influence. However, they consciously try to fight the women and reclaim control of the social order in their country. As early as the first page of the play, Lysistrata shows the dominant opinion that the men of Athens have of the women. When Kleonike asks what's
bothering her, she answers, “I’m positively ashamed to be a woman, a member of a sex which can’t even live up to male slanders! To hear our husbands talk, we’re sly: deceitful, always plotting, monsters of intrigue . . .” (Aristophanes 16). When the women she has called to assembly arrive late, Lysistrata becomes furious and Kleonike responds crucially: “Relax, honey. They’ll be here. You know a woman’s way is hard— mainly the way out of the house: fuss over hubby, wake the maid up, put the baby down, bathe him, feed him . . .” (Aristophanes 17). This line is key to understanding the true lives of the women, because in other texts, we mostly only hear about women from the man’s point of view.

In response to Kleonike, Lysistrata says, “Trivia. They have more fundamental business to engage in” (Aristophanes 17). The men handle all the official business of the city and the women are not let in on it. Imitating a hypothetical conversation between herself and her husband, Lysistrata says, “We’d ask brightly, ‘How was the assembly today, dear? Anything in the minutes about Peace?’ And my husband would give his stock reply. ‘What’s that to you? Shut up.’ And I did” (Aristophanes 56). An example of the men’s views on the true place of women would be after the men learn about the women’s protest, and the Koryphaios prays, “Queen Athene, let these strumpets crumble before our attack. Grant us victory, male supremacy. . . and a testimonial plaque” (Aristophanes 40).

In the texts, we have discovered that in ancient Greek culture, men were very preoccupied with the idea of honor. They sought to live with honor, fight with honor, and
especially die with honor. If men successfully did those three things, then they would live on immortally through stories that would be told of them, passed down from generation to generation. The life and death of an honorable man would also bring honor to his sons, to his sons’ sons, and so on. Telemachus says:

"I would never have grieved so much about his death if he’d gone down with comrades off in Troy or died in the arms of loved ones, once he had would down the long coil of war. Then all united Achaea would have raised his tomb and he’d have won his son great fame for years to come."

(Homer 1, 274-9)

The fight for immortal honor needs to be protected against the attacks of strong females. These attacks threaten to “unman” males by imposing a new set of values composed of family, social harmony, and gender equality. We have seen a few examples of the strong, powerful men being “unmanned” by very competent women. Clytaemnestra unmans Agamemnon in the ultimate way, by killing him. The weaker of the two kill the stronger, and after his death, Agamemnon is bitter about it. Obviously, it is natural for him to be unhappy about the fact that his own wife murdered him, but there is a very good chance that he was also suffering from a severe case of wounded male pride. After all, he finally makes it home from war and his city is delighted that he is returning, and his wife takes all of his glory by killing him, thus proving
her strength against him.

Odysseus, on his journey home, encounters two different goddesses, both of whom possess the power to "unman" him. Calypso and Circe both manage to lure him to their beds, returning to the theme of *Lysistrata* and the fact that the Greek women could almost always control men by means of sex. Calypso holds Odysseus at her home "by force," while Odysseus spends his days outside by himself, weeping (Homer 5, 93). She wants Odysseus as her husband, but he still longs for home and his loyal wife. Eventually, Zeus takes away Calypso's powers of persuasion, and sends Hermes down as a messenger to demand that she set Odysseus free.

Circe's power is a bit more substantial, because not only does she get Odysseus into her bed, but she turns every last one of his crewmen into swine. Granted, she is a goddess, so it is a given that she would have superhuman powers, but she had Odysseus' men under her spell. Of all things, she transforms them into pigs, which is a particularly uncivilized, dirty animal that would be quite offensive for a man to be reduced to. "So off they went to their pens, sobbing, squealing / as Circe flung them acorns, cornel nuts and mast, / common fodder for hogs that root and roll in mud" (Homer 10, 266 - 8). However, in typical Greek fashion, a man—Odysseus—manages to triumph over her. He demands that she restore his men to their original human condition, and in that restoration, their male identity is reestablished. Circe returns to her previous role as a subservient female, and the social gender order returns to "normal."
Lysistrata is a particularly strong example of a capable, intelligent woman, and provides a good example of men who actually fear women. In one scene, the Commissioner demands of an archer, “Arrest that woman! Better tie her hands behind her” (Aristophanes 48). Lysistrata responds, “By Artemis, goddess of the hunt, if he lays a finger on me, he’ll rue the day he joined the force” (Aristophanes 48). The Commissioner states, “What’s this—retreat? Never! Take her on the flank ... Help him! Will the two of you kindly TIE HER UP” (Aristophanes 49). Even after this order, they still refuse. It is a male official against a female, and the female is the one to be feared. Later on in the play, Lysistrata is again talking to the Commissioner and she unveils a carefully thought out plan that she thinks is the best course of action for the city, proving not only her intelligence, but her knowledge of current affairs. After all, a society combines many households, and Greek women knew how to run and operate a household.

If the women had been allowed to operate on an equal level with the men, they would have upset the balance of power in their cities and their social structure. Men would have to surrender much of their power and actually listen to women, something that they were unaccustomed to doing. When Lysistrata tells the Commissioner about her beliefs on how the city should function, the Commissioner would have to listen and not immediately disregard her statements simply because she is a woman. These men would be challenged by women, which would take a long time for them to get used to. Additionally, men are very competitive with one another, and they could easily perceive the women as even more competition.
The men fear the women's competence, because it is clear that the women demonstrate their abilities. Clytaemnestra rules single-handedly, and her subjects are pleased with the job she is doing as ruler. Lysistrata and the other Greek women have their men in the palm of their hands, and as the women of the texts show, they have the power to "unman" the Greek men. The men see Greek women's strength and intelligence, and the men, in fear, have to make sure the women stay "in their place," with the power remaining forever in the hands of the men.

Works Cited


This essay was written for Paul Flemer and Shannon Clute's Greek Thought Seminar.
No Deal: The Lesson of Hephaestus in *The Odyssey* by Laura Van Slyke

*The Odyssey* is replete with tales and events that serve as warnings and instructions for Odysseus to heed in order for him to achieve a safe and happy homecoming. During his involuntary detour to Thrinacia, Odysseus observes the value of patience and restraint when, despite deep hunger, he heeds the admonitions of Circe and Tiresias and refrains from eating the cattle of the Sungod. Of the entire crew, Odysseus alone denies himself a meal of the sun god’s cattle and he alone survives to continue the journey home. His forbearance later helps Odysseus remain in disguise and carry out his successful reconnaissance among the suitors.

Even more obvious in its instructional potential is Agamemnon’s story of betrayal and murder when he comes home. Agamemnon’s tale leads Odysseus to be wary of returning home openly, and demonstrates the benefit of subterfuge and caution. By applying the lessons he has learned along the way, Odysseus manages not only to make it home, but he survives the congregation of hostile Ithacan suitors who have invaded his palace. At Phaeacia, the bard Demodocus provides Odysseus with perhaps the most important lesson for obtaining a peaceful resolution to a tumultuous homecoming. The lyrics of Demodocus’ song, “The Love of Ares and Aphrodite Crowned with Flowers,” reveal parallels between Odysseus and Hephaestus, offering a satisfying explanation for Odysseus’ eventual slaughter of the suitors in spite of
what appears to be a reasonable offer of restitution by Erymachus.

Demodocus performs the symbolic song at Phaeacia, where Odysseus is forestalled for one more day of songs and contests before being taken back to Ithaca, at last. Just prior to the bard’s performance, Homer creates a scene that illuminates the qualities of Odysseus that allow us to perceive parallels between Odysseus and Hephaestus. Odysseus excels at throwing the discus but remarks to his hosts that “[only] at sprinting I fear you’d leave me in the dust... / My legs have lost their spring” (8, 262 - 5). Further, Broadsea disrespectfully underestimates Odysseus’ skill saying, “I never took you for someone skilled in games, / the kind that real men play” (8, 185 - 6). Odysseus’ hesitation to enter into the contests gives
Broadsea the impression that Odysseus lacks the physical grace and prowess of an athlete: “You’re no athlete. I [can] see that” (8, 189). Hephaestus, in the bard’s song, is referred to as “the glorious crippled Smith,” (8, 341) and echoes the beauty-versus-brains theme in Odysseus’ experience with the handsome yet mindless (8, 203 - 5) Broadsea. He laments his own lame legs and says that Aphrodite prefers Ares because of “his striking looks and racer’s legs” (8, 352). Yet just as Broadsea underestimates Odysseus’ abilities and is subsequently cowed, Ares and Aphrodite complacently underestimate Hephaestus’ acuity and are consequently humiliated in front of all the other gods. At the sight of Ares and Aphrodite caught in the act, “uncontrollable laughter burst from the happy gods,” and another god exclaims, “Look how limping Hephaestus conquers War . . .!” (8, 369 - 73).

Odysseus and Hephaestus share their traits of cunning and craftiness. Throughout *The Odyssey*, Homer calls Odysseus the “the man of craft” (7, 277), and the assembled gods observe Hephaestus as “[the] cripple [who] wins by craft” (8, 373). Hephaestus “spun that cunning trap” (8, 320) to ensnare Aphrodite and Ares, and in a later song by Demodocus, also in Book 8, the bard calls the wooden horse “the cunning trap that / good Odysseus brought one day to the heights of Troy” (8, 553 - 4). Like the invisible web of chains Hephaestus spins for Ares and Aphrodite, Odysseus creates a trap for the suitors whom he knows will be “caught in [a] huge net” (21, 265). The suitors are “Poor fools, blind to the fact / that all their necks were in the noose” (22, 34 - 5), just as Ares and Aphrodite are blind to the punishment created for them by Hephaestus. It is perhaps Hephaestus’ success at trapping Ares and
Aphrodite that inspires Odysseus to set a trap of his own, and that reminds him to be crafty and patient when he returns to Ithaca. However, Odysseus decides to deal differently with the fate of his captives.

Perhaps the most obvious parallel between Odysseus and the Hephaestus of Demodocus’ song is that both men have beautiful and desirable wives. Aphrodite is a famous “irresistible beauty” (8, 363), and Homer literally compares Penelope to her: “Now down from her chamber came reserved Penelope, / looking for all the world like Artemis or golden Aphrodite” (19, 56-7). Due to beauty, Penelope is desired by the suitors, “all of them lifting prayers to lie beside her, share her bed” (1, 421). Aphrodite’s beauty makes her desired by the gods, Poseidon in particular, as his entreaties for Ares’ release demonstrates. Hermes states that he would not mind being bound three times as much as Ares just to lie beside her (8, 381-4), and Poseidon urges Hephaestus to release Ares (and Aphrodite) by promising to pay Ares’ debt to Hephaestus if Ares refuses to pay it himself. It is at this point that the reader is drawn to make the comparison between the lusting gods and Penelope’s lusting suitors, and between Poseidon’s offers of monetary compensation for the wrongs done to Hephaestus and to the similar offer made by Erymachus to Odysseus in Book 22.

In spite of the parallels between Odysseus and Hephaestus, or maybe because of them, the lesson Odysseus learns from “The Love of Ares and Aphrodite Crowned With Flowers” is to not do what Hephaestus did: to not accept compensatory payment from the guilty but to continue on with his revenge, carrying it out to the fullest.
In myth, familiar to Homer and his readers, Poseidon desires Aphrodite and she later becomes his lover, briefly, to repay him for earning her release from Hephaestus’ trap. It is also important to note that upon being released, Ares does not compensate Hephaestus for the bride-price paid to Zeus, but instead “sped to Thrace” (8, 404). Although Hephaestus believes that “[a] pledge for a worthless man is a worthless pledge indeed” (8, 394), he agrees to let Ares go, because Poseidon’s offer is one he “really can’t refuse” (8, 401). But as a result of accepting this promise for money, all Hephaestus’ skill and planning, as well as his cunning trap, are rendered meaningless. Hephaestus’ short-sighted acceptance of Poseidon’s offer leaves both Ares and Aphrodite free to resume their trysts, making Aphrodite available to engage in infidelity with Poseidon, himself.
Odysseus does not make the same mistake. His revered Demodocus lays out, in song, a good reason for carrying out justice in lieu of accepting monetary compensation (8, 546). “The Love of Ares and Aphrodite Covered With Flowers” demonstrates that compensation does not truly provide restitution, does not eliminate the original problem, and does not provide peace. Unlike Hephaestus, Odysseus refuses the offer of compensation for the offenses done to him by the guilty parties. He tells Erymachus that no compensation would be great enough to right their wrongs against him: “Not if you paid me all your father’s wealth” (22, 65). Odysseus might believe that, had he let the suitors live, he would have reason to fear that faithful Penelope might yet be unfaithful, perhaps being finally won over (or worn down) by one of the suitors. After all, Odysseus knows that he has a long voyage yet to come, where he must “rove through towns and towns of men, / . . . until to a people who know nothing of the sea” (23, 305 - 7).

Further confirming Odysseus’s slaughter of the suitors as necessary and just, Homer titles the last book of The Odyssey, “Peace.” In “Peace,” Athena tells Odysseus to cease hostilities toward the suitors’ relatives and “call a halt to the great leveler, War” (24, 596). The word War is capitalized and therefore personified, allowing us to conclude that Odysseus will find peace by keeping War at bay, unlike Hephaestus, who lets War loose and does not find peace.

The parallels between Odysseus and Hephaestus in “The Love of Ares and Aphrodite Covered With Flowers” show why Odysseus must engage in the slaughter of the recalcitrant, incorrigible suitors who have little respect for
propriety or for the gods (1, 71), and who have already demonstrated their profound dishonesty in their schemes to murder Telemachus. The modern reader may object to the violence of the slaughter of the suitors, deeming it unnecessary and in fact a deterrent to peace (as even Odysseus did when he worried about the retaliation of the suitors’ families); but in Greek thought, the slaughter may have been considered justified and necessary, as evidenced in the gods’ approval.

The suitors and their behavior are roundly condemned by many characters in the epic, and Athena herself will stand beside Odysseus and be his “comrade-in-arms in battle” (13, 447) against the suitors to gain revenge in a plan that Athena “conceived it [herself]: / [that] Odysseus should return and pay the [suitors] back” (24, 529 - 30). Although other lessons in the epic, like the story of Agamemnon’s sad fate, guide Odysseus in making wise choices for a victorious homecoming, the story of Hephaestus leads directly to Odysseus’ final triumph at home. Although Agamemnon’s story inspires Odysseus to be cunning and wary, Hephaestus’ story demonstrates the importance of maintaining that cunning, and following through with a cleverly laid plan to punish the guilty. Where Hephaestus stops short of delivering his justice, Odysseus refuses to waver from the punishment the suitors deserve, winning peace for Ithaca, and securing Penelope’s fidelity.
Work Cited


*This essay was written for Ann Miller and Ben Davis’ Greek Thought Seminar.*
Love, Sex and Death: Sappho’s *Ménage à Trois*  
by Maura Roach

The sensory experience of reading the poems of Sappho is like a walk along the shore on a warm day—languid, sensuous and perilous. The poet herself cautions, “If you are squeamish / Don’t prod the / beach rubble” (# 84). If Sappho’s fragments of poetry can be likened to rubble, caution in their examination is warranted because what they reveal is neither pleasant nor comforting. Images of war and lovemaking, youth and decay, ecstasy and emptiness suffuse her poetry. In the center of her disquieting mix lies a dark secret: Sappho’s evocative imagery and language links love, sex and death, so inextricably that love becomes deadly, and death, erotic.

A prime example of Sappho’s ability to evoke a sensory environment with imagery is the “noontime” poem:

> When the earth is  
> bright with flaming  
> heat falling straight down

> the cricket sets  
> up a high-pitched  
> singing in his wings.

(# 7)

Beyond descriptive, this passage conjures the intensity of a summer afternoon, with all its lazy assaults on the senses. Not just a hot day, it is “bright” and “flaming”: one can
imagine columns of heat “falling straight down,” and the only sound is the incessant chirp of the cricket. The poem summons a new mood: “I took my lyre and said: / Come now, my heavenly / tortoise shell: become / a speaking instrument” (# 8). In these few lines, Sappho is both light and sensuous, incorporating the playfulness of both the lyre and the endearment “heavenly,” as well as the tactility of the variegated tortoise shell.

The poet’s talent for sensuous imagery gives way to sensuality in relation to her overriding subject: love. With the possible exception of the “Bridesmaid’s Carol I,” which is uncommonly hopeful, the love described in Sappho’s poetry is ravenous and hurting toward destruction. This is made clear by the repeated pairing of love and war imagery wherein war evokes campaigning and obliteration. In one selection, Sappho describes Eros, “On his way down / from heaven, he / wore a soldier’s / cloak dyed purple” (# 15). Here we have a layering effect: Eros, god of love, dressed as a soldier in the color of royalty. He is a divine, regal, and lethal emissary portrayed in post-coital terms, descending both literally and figuratively from heaven.

Strengthening this association, in the poem beginning, “To an army wife, in Sardis,” Sappho link love to instruments of war:

Some say a cavalry corps,
some infantry, some, again,
will maintain that the swift oars

of our fleet are the finest
sight on dark earth; but I say

Sappho juxtaposes images of love and war.
that whatever one loves, is.

(# 41)

By elevating one’s love above that “fine sight” of the machinery of war upon our “dark earth,” Sappho succeeds in emphasizing the military and deadly nature of attraction. Within the same poem, she illuminates her love and longing for an absent student with the force that brought Helen and Paris together. This is the love that made Helen forget “love due her own blood, her own child. . .” and empowered Paris, “who laid Troy’s honor in ruin,” a love famous for the annihilation it wrought. Only a hint of this student, Anactoria, Sappho’s “army wife,” would stir the poet’s emotions more than a glance of yet additional weaponry, “the dear sound of your footstep / would move me more than glitter / of Lydian horse or armored / tread of mainland infantry” (# 41).

If love itself is as savage as war, then its absence is no less devastating. Sappho writes of a night she watches the moon and Pleiades set, “The night is now / half - gone; youth / goes; I am / in bed alone” (# 64). Life and love’s fleetingness and an empty bed, made all the more empty
by the departure of the Pleiades, the sister constellation, the women of Sappho’s life, join to produce loneliness. This is an accelerated sense of aging, and a heightened awareness of the closing in of time and death.

Not that death is without any allure. Death and sex in Sappho, like the ambrosia of Greek poetry, form a heady mix. In the “Bridesmaid’s Carol II,” Virginity, the death of innocence, answering the question of where it will go, responds as if on its deathbed: “I’m off to / a place I shall / never come back / from” (#32). Then, like a voice from the afterlife, Virginity says, “I shall never / come back to you / Never!” Even the briefest poem, or poem fragment, at only six words is evocative and erotic: “Pain penetrates / Me drop / by drop” (#61). “Penetration” is certainly sexual, reinforced by the repeating “drop, drop,” and if pain can suggest a kind of death, even if it is only the death of pleasure, then we have a strange, seductive interplay between pain, death and arousal.

The most explicit example of the union between eroticism and death occurs in the aching poem that begins, “He is more than a hero” (#39). Sappho torments herself in this poem, imagining the ecstasy of an encounter with one she desires, but cannot have. The poem is hypersexual, filled with the private, intoxicating details of coupling: “. . . the sweet murmur of / your voice, the enticing / laughter that makes my own / heart beat fast.” It builds with the rhythm of sex, ending with literal and figurative death: the “little death” of an orgasm, the killing nature of love and desire unsatisfied. This is the height of Sappho’s evocative powers; her depiction is so facile, she turns her readers into voyeurs:

20
a thin flame runs under
my skin; seeing nothing,

hearing only my own ears
drumming, I drip with sweat;
trembling shakes my body

and I turn paler than
dry grass. At such times
death isn’t far from me.

(# 39)

The themes of love, sex and death coalesce in one final selection:

With his venom
Irresistible
and bittersweet
that loosener
of limbs, Love
reptile-like
strikes me down.

(# 53)

Here, love is poisonous, seductive, and lethal. It is phallic, seminal, and ready to strike. Sexual rapture and death wait behind its coiled, predatory pose. Ancient, like the reptilian creature of this passage, the poems of Sappho involve eternal themes. Their timelessness reflects their source, the deep, conflicted nature of human sexual desire, need for love, and fear of death. Their entanglement in Sappho’s poetry mirrors our inability to extricate love from sex, sex from mortality, yearning for, and fear of, the pain and death of love in our own lives. Sappho lays bare our messy souls, like the rubble on the beach—what she reveals may not be pretty, but it is human.

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Sappho: Don’t Prod the Beach Rubble
by Kristy McCants

Hopefully, in life, we will all one day experience love so intense it is painful. It is just such suffering that characterizes the poetry of Sappho. In Sappho’s poems, suffering is but one step on the road to immortality. It is an integral part of a passionate life, and thus lends its voice to her poetry while she aches in the throes of the love and loss that serve as the focal points in her poetry. In essence, love, to Sappho, is a kind of torture: an intense, nearly physical feeling of deep anguish and pain. Love begins with suffering, exists in suffering, and leaves behind suffering, loss, and jealousy. It is only after experiencing this passionate emotion, in its numerous forms, durations, and intensities, can Sappho look back and pinpoint the value of this pain.

Because anguish plays such a powerful role in her poetry, it leads her to prosperity and wealth, materialized in her work, as her knowledge, admiration, and reputation flourish (#86, #100). It is this prosperity, her art, which gives her the immortality she craves; thus, she can finish her life with peace and a calm acceptance of death—because she knows she will live on forever, immortalized in her words of ecstatic suffering.

The love depicted in Sappho’s verses is rife with as much suffering as it is with pleasure. The onset of love is rather violent, according to Sappho, not only does it come “as a whirlwind! swoops on an oak / Love shakes my heart,” but it is painful in its conquering: “With his venom /
Irresistible / and bittersweet / that loosener / of limbs,
Love/reptile - like / strikes me down” (#44, #53). In this
manner does love cause pain as it comes over her. Sappho
suffers in such a way that it touches the reader with its
physicality, bringing both ecstasy and agony. It is not only
the beginning of love that hurts, but the experience of it as
well. Sappho describes her reaction to a man sitting beside
the woman she loves:

If I meet
you suddenly, I can’t
speak—my tongue is broken;
a thin flame runs under
my skin; seeing nothing, hearing only my ears
drumming, I drip with sweat;
trembling shakes my body
and I turn paler than
dry grass.

(#39)

Love is not sunshine and rainbows to the afflicted
Sappho; instead, it is full of symptoms so violent, so vivid,
that its mimicry of paralyzing terror labels it as a fierce
kind of suffering. In loving someone, “Pain penetrates /
me drop / by drop” (#61). Loving is like a slow-acting
poison, dripping into her soul to alter her entire constitution.
The loss of love is another source of suffering for Sappho.
She writes, “It is clear now: / Neither honey nor / the
honey bee is / to be mine again,” indicating that she will
neither have love nor its procurer, a lover; elsewhere, she
laments, “Day in, day out / I hunger and / I struggle” (#
55, #56). The loss of love leaves a gaping hole in Sappho’s
soul, yearning to be filled. This is surely a sign of suffering.
With love comes jealousy: "I hear that Andromeda—that hayseed in her hay-seed finery—has put a torch to your heart and she without even the art of lifting her skirt over her ankles" (#74). In love, Sappho is vulnerable to injury from the one who has her heart. Love is, in all of its stages, a kind of suffering that leaves its mark on a soul—or in poetry.

Sappho also expresses intense suffering in the loss of her youth and the onset of age. Her lamentation over the loss of youth is first evident in its early stages in her epithalamia, appearing as the loss of virginity. She mourns, "Why am I crying? Am I still sad because of my lost maidenhead?" (#36). The loss of her virginity is a painful thought to her; it marks that line between childhood and adulthood, which she can never cross over again. Sappho also describes the loss of virginity "like a hyacinth in the mountains, trampled by shepherds until only a purple stain/ remains on the ground" (#34). Her virginity is only remembered in the stain of blood that she left behind.

As she ages, Sappho's laments turn more towards what she cannot do or have as an older woman. She cries, "The night is now half-gone; youth goes; I am in bed alone" (#64). Because "the night"—or her life—is halfway over, and her youth has fled, she is forced into loneliness; this, too, is a kind of suffering. In a poem addressing a young man, Sappho says, "Of course I love you. But if you love me, marry a young woman! I couldn't stand it to live with a young man, I being older" (#72). Because of her age, she is even torturing herself with loneliness and suffering, of her own volition. One wonders if this isn't a device to keep her emotions
flowing freshly and passionately, so they can be captured on paper. In poem #43, Atthis tries to convince Sappho to leave behind her sorrow. In response, Sappho tells her, "But you forget everything." Sappho must suffer—the passion evident in her poetry depends on it. The pain which so thoroughly permeates Sappho's poetry serves heavily to enrich the quality of her poetry. Its agony and ecstasy reaches out to those who know that the line between love and anguish is very blurry.

The passionate grief that is the focal point of Sappho's poems serves to make her a very prosperous woman indeed. Sappho's last poem links the art taught to her by the Muses, which has been enriched by her experience of suffering, with her personal prosperity. She says, "Prosperity that/ the golden Muses / gave me was no / delusion: / dead, I/ won't be forgotten" (#100). For Sappho, her art is her prosperity, and she is very rich in her work. Sappho shows the reader an important lesson she has learned over the years, saying, "Experience shows us / Wealth unchaperoned / by Virtue is never / an innocuous neighbor" (#86). Her wealth, which can be interpreted as her art, must be tempered by virtue—which hearkens back to an earlier poem.

"Love has his / share in the / Sun's brilliance / and virtue" (#6). If a part of virtue is love, and for Sappho there is no love without suffering, then suffering is a part of virtue as well. Therefore, one can read her poem #86 as "Wealth unchaperoned / by Virtue is never / an innocuous neighbor." Because suffering is such an integral part of love, and an important focal point in her poetry, it leads to her prosperity. Indeed, suffering seems to be necessary in
order to make her art as rich as possible.

The prosperity claimed by Sappho in her work is what guarantees her immortality. Before she comes to this conclusion, Sappho says, “Death is an evil; / we have the gods’ / word for it; they too/ would die if death / were a good thing” (#87). She fears death, knowing that it cannot be a good thing, but a cessation of her art. Later, however, she attests to the immortality of her own work: “Gold is God’s child; / neither worms nor / moths eat gold; it / is much stronger / than a man’s heart” (# 88). If wealth is her art, her poetry, then gold too would represent her work. Therefore, her words—because they are gifts from the gods and are so charged with emotional power—will outlive a man’s puny life, a man’s weak heart. After making such a conclusion, she seems to come to terms with her own bodily mortality, and even welcomes it: “I have often asked you / not to come now / Hermes, Lord, you / who lead the ghosts / home: But this time / I am not happy; I / want to die, to see / the moist lotus open / along Acheron” (#97). Sappho has secured her place in history, and because she knows her name will live on (for the Muses endowed her with this power), she welcomes death. To others though, she knows death will not bring immortality to their works. She says to someone, “Rich as you are / Death will finish / you: afterwards no/ one will remember / or want you: you / had no share in/the Pierian roses . . .” (#82). The Pierian roses indicate the gifts of the Muses; because this person is not endowed with these divine gifts, no matter how rich she is—how powerful her art or words are—she will not gain the immortality accorded to Sappho.

Sappho’s immortality is found in the passion in her
words, in the strength of her poetry, and it is the prosperity of her art that allows it to live on. Because of the security of her literary immortality, Sappho has made peace with her own physical mortality. The last poems seem to echo an inner peace that is not found in the anguish of the others. Her peace influences those around her; on her deathbed, she warns her daughter not to cry: "Must I remind you, Cleis, / That sounds of grief / are unbecoming in / a poet's household? / And that they are not / suitable in ours?" (#99). She does not want her daughter to fill the peace with mourning. Perhaps there is also an underlying desire for Cleis to avoid as much suffering as possible—whether to the benefit of Cleis or Sappho, it cannot be said. Sappho also says, "As for the exiles / I think they had / never found you, / Peace, more diffi- / cult to endure!" (#90). Sappho seems to feel sorrow that others cannot enjoy their peace;
she, however, is ready to move on. Sappho’s prosperity as an artist has ensured her immortality, lending her peace.

Because love and suffering are inextricably linked, it has influenced and tempered her poetry and her art. This influence gives it the strength it needs to survive the ages, thus becoming immortal. Her own knowledge of the endowment of her gift by the Muses assures her, before her death, of her own immortality as an artist, thus allowing her peace in her last days, freedom from the fear of leaving this world unmarked by Sappho. Sappho’s suffering leads to prosperity, immortality, and finally, peace. Certainly, such a richness of language has aided other artists as well to transcend time and hand them immortality: Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and hundreds of others. One is inclined to believe in the strength of Sappho’s poem, saying, “Although they are / Only breath, words / which I command / are immortal” (#9). Sappho has truly fulfilled this prophecy of hers, and become immortalized in literature.

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This essay was written for David DeRose and Reid Davis’ Greek Thought Seminar.
The Nature of Justice in *The Oresteia*, “Antigone,” and “The Bacchae”  
by Lauren Tombari

Justice, or treating people fairly within a society, is often an elusive goal to achieve. The people of ancient Greece were not strangers to this problem, and explored this topic extensively in their dramatic works. Many of the Greek poets, including such men as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, examined the complexity and inconsistency of justice in their plays. *The Oresteia*, “Antigone,” and “The Bacchae” are tales of murder, defiance, and revenge that have endured for thousands of years. Through these plays, one can discern the view of justice as held by the ancient Greeks. The question of what is or is not just is an important element within these dramas. The Greek concept of justice as expressed in these plays is defined by the favor of the gods rather than by laws and morality constructed by men.
In Aeschylus’ *The Oresteia*, the gods decide who is in the right in a series of murders. Agamemnon, a Greek general, begins a cycle of violence by sacrificing his daughter Iphigeneia to appease the gods at the start of the Trojan War:

‘Obey, obey, or a heavy doom will crush me!—
Oh but doom *will* crush me
once I rend my child...
Pain both ways and what is worse?
Desert the fleets, fail the alliance?
No, stop the winds with a virgin’s blood...’

(“Agamemnon” 205 - 7, 213 - 5)

Agamemnon faces a horrible dilemma, torn between sacrificing his daughter and disobeying the gods. He chooses his duty as a general and his service to the gods over his duty as a father. Agamemnon is aware that what he is doing is wrong, as evinced by his strong feelings of reluctance and grief. However, because this murder is committed at the direction of the goddess Artemis, this heinous, immoral act seems acceptable in the eyes of the gods, and Agamemnon need not be punished for it.

When Agamemnon’s wife, Clytaemnestra, acts on her own version of justice to gain vengeance for the ruthless slaughter of her daughter, she is not excused so easily by the people of her city: “Here is Agamemnon, my husband made a corpse / by this right hand... / And now you sentence me?...” (“Agamemnon” 1429 - 30; 1437). She later asks, “Didn’t the law demand you banish him? / hunt him from the land for all his guilt?” (“Agamemnon” 145-
6). To have her revenge, Clytaemnestra believes that she is justified in committing what would otherwise be an immoral, unlawful act. She believes that she has both morality and the law on her side, thereby justifying her designs to murder Agamemnon.

Her view of justice and equity is not shared by everyone around her. Although both Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra take a human life, one is considered a hero by his people and the other, a vile murderer. The only difference between them is that Agamemnon acts on the will of the gods, while Clytaemnestra decides for herself what is right and moral. The determination of justice for the ancient Greeks relies on man’s interpretation of the will of the gods.

To complete Aeschylus’ cycle of revenge, their son, Orestes, kills Clytaemnestra at the direction of the god Apollo. Orestes, under the protection of Apollo, is still hunted by vengeful demigoddesses, the Furies, who do
not believe Orestes acts justly: "The matricide, you steal him away, and you a god! / Guilt both ways, and who can call it justice?" ("The Eumenides" 154 - 5). After Orestes continues the sequence of murders, it is unclear to everyone besides the gods whether killing someone to gain revenge can truly be considered justice. Examining each act of murder individually makes one question whether killing someone in a passionate rage can be considered moral, let alone lawful and just. Each person before Orestes has committed murder and is punished for it, even if the gods do not agree. Only Apollo’s approval allows Orestes to escape the punishment his parents have received. Apollo considers Orestes’ behavior as just, and Clytaemnestra’s unjust, making the concept of justice seem largely subjective.

The Furies are at odds with Apollo, but lesser forces which have little power, cannot influence the meting out of justice. In addition to Apollo’s selective view of justice, Athena makes the concept even more ambiguous when she explains her reasons for acquitting Orestes at his trial: "I will cast my lot for you. / No mother gave me birth. / I honour the male, in all things but marriage. / Yes, with all my heart I am my father’s child... / Even if the vote is equal, Orestes wins" ("The Eumenides" 750 - 3; 756). Simply because Athena holds men in higher esteem than women, she allows Orestes’ murder of another murderer to be condoned, equating the act with the execution of a criminal.

Clytaemnestra, on the other hand, unjustly murders a murderer because she has killed a great warrior beloved of the gods. It is hypocritical and unjust that the gods can absolve certain mortals of murders and punish people for
murders that displease them. Yet, the people of ancient Greece acquiesce to these disparate definitions of justice. The gods are allowed to manipulate the scales of justice, solely based on whim and pique.

The gods continue to define the nature of justice in Sophocles’ play, “Antigone.” Antigone, a princess of Thebes, defies the law her uncle, King Creon, has created forbidding the burial of the body of Prince Polyneices. She questions whose morals and laws are more important, and decides that she is willing to die for what she considers to be morally right, even if no one shares her view of morality: “It was not Zeus that made the proclamation... /I did not believe / your proclamation had such power to enable / one who will someday die to override / God’s ordinances, unwritten and secure” (Sophocles 494; 496 - 9). Because Antigone believes she is acting on the will of the gods, in her mind justice demands that she disobey Creon. Divine law transcends the arbitrary laws of the state.
Unlike the case of Orestes, however, the fate of the accused rests not on the whims of the gods, but on those of the rash, arrogant Creon. While the gods do not take an active role in helping Antigone and preventing her death, their will is expressed through the discontent of the people of Thebes: “They think she is dying / most wrongly and most undeservedly / of all womenkind, for the most glorious acts” (Sophocles 747 - 9). Antigone, by honoring her brother, is only showing her respect for the desires of the gods, while Creon, by punishing Antigone, is violating the will of the gods. The gods are warning Creon not to sentence his niece to death, but he is too proud and stubborn to listen and change his decree, believing that his authority and manhood will be diminished should Antigone somehow appear to triumph over him.

Paralleling The Oresteia, Agamemnon and Antigone both have the approval of the gods to disobey the laws of the state, and when Clytaemnestsra and Creon punish them for their disobedience, they are in turn punished by the gods. Creon, in a position of power and feeling obligated to see that the laws of the city are obeyed, believes that he is in the right despite the fact that the gods favor Antigone. By killing Antigone, however, Creon precipitates the suicide of both his son and wife, leaving him “dissolved in an agony of misery” at their deaths (Sophocles 1386). Had Creon heeded the will of the gods and their admonitions to him concerning his anger towards Antigone, he could have avoided this terrible tragedy. The pronouncements and favoritism of the gods continually decide what is just, overriding any definition of justice crafted by humankind.

Justice is also determined by the god Dionysus in
Euripides’ “The Bacchae.” Dionysus feels slighted by the people of Thebes, as revealed by his treatment by their ruler, Pentheus. Pentheus considers the god to be nothing more than “the latest divinity, / a certain Dionysus, whoever he may be” (Euripides 220) who causes “unruliness worthy of hanging” (Euripides 248). To Pentheus, Dionysus is just a current fad, one that people will soon grow tired of, but one which is for now inconveniently disrupting the peace in his city. The ruler refuses to acknowledge the god, and tries to prevent followers from worshipping him. Dionysus is understandably insulted by this behavior, which Pentheus persists in even after seeing displays of the god’s power.

For the disrespect shown him, Dionysus eventually imposes his own justice by bringing about the murder of Pentheus, as well as punishing his entire family: “They shall be driven from this city / to other lands; there, submitting to the yoke / of slavery, they shall wear out wretched lives, / captives of war, enduring much indignity” (Euripides 216). Pentheus’ death is a direct result of his disregard for the power of Dionysus. While his disrespect
towards the god merits a punishment, Dionysus is excessively harsh and unjust to punish him and all the members of his family. Without a force to counterbalance Dionysus' actions, the laws of the city can be disregarded and the lives of its citizens put in jeopardy. Dionysus demands devotion and obedience, compelling everyone to worship him. Having suffered injuries to his pride from the disrespect of the people of Thebes, Dionysus is unable to deal fairly and impartially with Pentheus. His judgment is clouded by his rage at the insults he has endured, thereby precluding his ability to act with any semblance of justice. Nevertheless, the people passively accept their punishment because Dionysus is still a god. The gods are always believed to have the power to decide what is or is not justice, even when they are quite incapable of doing so.

In ancient Greece, the fair and just treatment of people is uncertain when it is left up to the impulses and moods of the gods. What is morally right and acceptable behavior for one person is often not the same for another, as Clytaemnestra and Creon learn to their dismay. Nor are
there definitive laws that dictate what is or is not just in Greek society, as when Antigone is honored for breaking the law, while Creon and Pentheus are destroyed for trying to uphold it. People therefore seek guidance and justification from their gods. These gods, however, use their powers arbitrarily and capriciously in determining justice and the fate of mortals. To further complicate matters, most of the judgments by the gods are based on personal feelings and whims, rather than on an impartial examination of the facts. Thus, even though the Greeks might accept the gods’ judgments as justice, such subjective decisions can never truly be described as justice.

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This essay was written for Carla Bossard and Ruth Santee’s Greek Thought Seminar.
Callings According to Thoreau, Weber, and Kafka
by Shannon McManis

What is one’s calling? Many ask themselves this very question in our world today. For Americans, one’s calling can symbolize opportunity, destiny, and a drive towards an end result that appears to be good, but arguably can be bad. During the nineteenth and twentieth century, many authors, such as Henry David Thoreau, Max Weber, and Franz Kafka took on the difficult task of attempting to determine what exactly one’s “calling” is. Although Thoreau encourages humanity to practice the art of “sauntering,” both The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka and “The Protestant Ethic and the ‘Spirit’ of Capitalism” by Max Weber demonstrate the impossibility of “walking” in the capitalist society in which we live. The call to work, whether it be good, as emphasized by Weber, or bad as implied by Kafka, is much stronger than the call of the wild.

Max Weber states, “one’s duty consists in pursuing one’s calling” (Weber 13). For Henry David Thoreau, one’s
calling stems from "a subtle magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright" (Thoreau 85). He admits that at times "we find it difficult to choose our direction, because it does not yet exist distinctly in our idea" (Thoreau 85). Our purpose, according to Thoreau, is to learn how to "walk," even though he states that he "has only met with but one or two persons in the course of his life who understood the art of Walking" (Thoreau 71). He attributes walking to "sauntering: which word is beautifully derived 'from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under the pretense of going á la Sainte Terre, 'to the Holy Land" (Thoreau 71). Yet in our busy lives, Americans simply cannot afford to venture out into the great unknown for the sheer pleasure of just being; our minds alone are simply too jumbled with everything we need to do for us to stop everything and simply enjoy life and nature.

From a young age, we are taught that not having a purpose or a knowledge of where one is going is a waste of time, Weber mirrors this sentiment condemning those who waste time to committing "the first and most serious of all sins" (Weber 106). According to Weber, this idleness when one could be working is "morally, absolutely reprehensible" (Weber 107). Encouraging that "time is money," Weber states: "work is the end and purpose of life commanded by God," and that those who do not work are "sinful sloths" (Weber 107, 110). In order to "walk" in the manner that Thoreau describes, one will be both financially unstable and in blatant denial of the will of God, according to Weber.
Thoreau argues, “all good things are wild and free” (Thoreau 106). Yet there is nothing “wild” or “free” within the life of Gregor Samsa, main character of Franz Kafka’s classic story *The Metamorphosis*. Gregor represents the majority of people in society and today that are cursed with the inability to “saunter” as Thoreau calls us to. “If you are ready to leave father and mother... and sister... and friends, and never see them again — if you have paid your debts, and made your will and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk” (Thoreau 73). Through this definition, Gregor Samsa is nowhere near ready to even think about taking a “walk.” He works day after day, at a “grueling profession” as a “traveling salesman” who “had not once been ill during his five-year employment” (Kafka 7 - 8). Gregor is a perfect example of the Puritanical asceticism displayed in Weber’s “The Protestant Ethic and the ‘Spirit’ of Capitalism” in that he works relentlessly without any prospect of personal gain except the selfless saving of money in order to pay off the debt his parents owe to his boss. His parents, their stereotypical financial roles inverted, rely on their son to be the family “breadwinner.” Due to an unexplained guilt instilled in Gregor characteristic of many people today, he continues to live a life that is rewarding to everyone but himself.

One might argue that Gregor’s unconscious desire to be able to “walk” brought about his metamorphosis. It is as if the capitalist society in which Gregor lives does not allow him to think for himself, or about anything for that matter, except money and work. Thoreau asserts, “there is something in a strain of music... which by its wildness” reminds Thoreau “of the cries emitted by wild beasts in
their native forests” (Thoreau 106). Yet even in his transformation into a wild bug, Gregor isn’t allowed a forest, but only the confines of a dusty, cluttered room. When he attempts to listen to his sister play the violin, he thinks of the guilt he feels in his inability to finance her future education at the Conservatory as opposed to contemplating his current condition. Kafka asks, “was he a beast if music could move him so?” (44).

Weber might say that Gregor is a beast for paying attention to “superfluities,” while Thoreau might accuse Gregor of not being enough of a beast to venture out into the wild on his own. In either case, after his transformation from man to “mindless and spineless” vermin, he still thinks of everyone but himself (Kafka 8). “During the daytime Gregor did not want to show himself... out of consideration for his parents... he could not lie still even at night, and eating gave him scant pleasure, so as a distraction he acquired the habit of crawling crisscross over the walls and ceiling” (Kafka 29). Through his metamorphosis, Gregor is now seemingly free of the burden of single-handedly supporting his family and the guilt in not being
able to do so. Because he is not able to venture out into the natural wild and unknown of the outdoors but only crisscross along the walls to distract himself from his condition, Gregor’s transformation does not seem to bring about much positive change. Now physically incapable of stepping outside and seizing the day, Gregor can “stay in bed” forever (Kafka 8). Gregor dies because he has both denied his calling to “walk” as well as to the “spirit of capitalism.”

Thoreau states, “At present...the walker enjoys comparative freedom” and suggests,

 Possibly the day will come when it will be partitioned off into so called pleasure grounds, in which a few will take a narrow and exclusive pleasure only, — when fences shall be multiplied, and man-traps and other engines invented to confine men to the public road, and walking over the surface of God’s earth shall be construed to mean trespassing on some gentleman’s grounds

(Thoreau 84-5)

Unfortunately in America today it appears that Thoreau’s worst fears have come true; the “evil days” have “come” (Thoreau 85). Discussing the “unexpected” playfulness and “unwieldy sport” in cows of whom we have come to recognize as meat instead of animal, Thoreau laments that “the life of cattle like that of many men is but a sort of locomotiveness” (107). Weber quotes philosopher Ferdinand Kurnburger that in life “they turn cattle into tallow and people into money” (Weber 11). Finally, one
might argue that due to incessant work and the subsequent inability to grasp control over his own life, Gregor Samsa represents the fate of all humanity in that if they don’t somehow let go of their mortal bonds to capitalism, they will all turn into "the bosses creature, mindless and spineless" (Kafka 8). All point to the bleak reality that although Thoreau’s professed method of “walking” may be the ideal, the call of the wild is too weak to drown out the power of capitalism.

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Thoreau and Whitman: Advocates of Nature

by Danielle Belli

Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman are two of the most influential writers of the nineteenth century. Their work has spanned generations and is still recognized today as extraordinary literature. Not only did they write during the same time period, but Thoreau and Whitman also shared similar outlooks on life and the way it should be lived. In *Leaves of Grass* and *Walking*, Whitman and Thoreau express corresponding views on how to live to the fullest: both authors advocate experiencing nature for oneself and living in the present.

Whitman's poem "Song of Myself" is saturated with implications of his love for nature. He finds some part of himself which yearns to be connected with the great outdoors: "I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised / and naked, / I am mad for it to be in contact with me" (Whitman 14 - 6). Nature is an important part of human lives whether or not humans are able to recognize it right away. He begins his poem by stating, "what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (Whitman 2 - 3). Through this he communicates the oneness of every living entity. Just as Whitman feels something deep within him longing for contact with natural objects, all humans are innately fused with nature and the wild. He leads into his poem with a description of himself relaxing in the grass: "I loaf and invite my soul, / I lean and loaf at my ease... observing a spear of / summer grass" (Whitman 4 - 6). Lying in the grass is where Whitman seems to believe that all is good. Through nature, humans are able to appreciate
the oneness of everything and the interrelationships between humans, animals and nature. Also, near the end of the poem he asks the reader questions in order to spur consideration of what he/she has done in order to tighten his/her bond with nature. He asks, “Have you reckoned a thousand acres much? Have you/ reckoned the earth much?” (Whitman 34 - 5). These questions motivate the reader because they are more like accusations than actual questions. Whitman challenges the reader to consider things that may be overlooked. These things that society disregards as simple and unimportant are what he finds necessary in understanding what it means to be human. Oneness with nature is often ignored by society and Whitman emphasizes its importance in order to jolt the reader into action. He hopes to get the reader thinking and push him into reconnecting with nature.

Thoreau shares this same feeling of oneness with nature and this is evident throughout Walking. One need not look past the first page of his composition to see the emphasis he places on the importance of nature: “I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil,—to regard man as an inhabitant or part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society” (Thoreau 72). In the first line of his work he makes it clear that his purpose is to bring about the idea that man is a physical part of nature rather than a part of humanity alone. According to Thoreau, nature should be man’s first loyalty. Later on Thoreau says, “In short, all good things are wild and free” (Thoreau 106). His outlook on nature is that it is the essential core of mankind. It should be lived in instead of shut out, as humans have come to do by building houses. According
to Thoreau, being civilized, in general, clouds our perception and ability to connect with nature. In order to walk, one must be ready to give up many things:

If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brothers and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again,—if you have paid your debts, and made your will and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk.

(Thoreau 73)

Everything he has listed here represents the common institutions of modern society. Institutions such as the family, work, and social bounds such as economic status, must all be forgotten if one wants consort with nature. These luxuries and social constructs are holding humans back from experiencing what is raw and visceral to their nature.

Thoreau and Whitman also agree that it is important to go out and experience things, especially nature, for one's self. They find it important to go out into the world and see every little thing with one's own eyes. Whitman expresses the importance of first hand experience in the last few lines of his poem: "You shall no longer take things at second or third hand /...nor look through the eyes of the dead. ...nor/ feed on the spectres in books, / you shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things / from me, / You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself" (Whitman 42 - 7). After Whitman has described everything he experiences in nature he tells the reader to go out and see them with his or her own eyes. He believes
it is completely different and, most importantly, more gratifying to fill one’s life with every personal experience possible. Without this first hand experience, it is difficult for someone to reach self-actualization. The best way for us to learn how to be human is by living out as many human experiences as possible. He also condemns staying inside and being hypnotized by the indoors and the industrial life: “Houses and rooms are full of perfumes...the shelves / are crowded with perfumes, / breathe the fragrance myself, and know it and like it, / The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it” (Whitman 7 - 10). He does not want to become addicted to the indoors, or as he refers to it, the “perfumes” of the indoors. These smells are industrial and artificial. They disguise the true nature of things and do not allow humans to get outside and experience nature firsthand.

Similarly, Thoreau explains his beliefs about the importance of first hand experience in Walking: “Living much out of doors, in the sun and wind, will no doubt produce a certain roughness of character,—will cause a thicker cuticle to grow over some of the finer qualities of our nature” (Thoreau 77). It is better to go out and live in the wild, to experience nature, than to sit indoors and read about it in books, etc. He is appalled at the fact that human beings have so little experience with the outside world due to the beginning of industrialization and technological advances made in his day: “It is remarkable how few events or crises there are in our histories; how little exercised we have been in our minds; how few experiences we have had” (Thoreau 114). Exactly like Whitman, he believes that it is essential for man to live out in nature and experience every possibility in life. Without doing this, we
lose what essentially makes us human.

Stemming from this idea of the importance of first hand experience is the idea that we as humans need to live in the present instead of dwelling on the past or the future. Thoreau himself says, “Above all, we cannot afford not to live in the present. He is blessed over all mortals who loses no moment of the passing life in remembering the past” (Thoreau 119). If we become preoccupied with what we have done we will truly experience the present life. He describes a rooster crowing as something to drive humans to live their lives out to the fullest. The rooster crows “the gospel according to this moment,” and keeps with his natural course of getting up early (Thoreau 120). He praises the rooster in that it keeps with a schedule and never loses sight of what it should be doing. This is how Thoreau believes humans should live their lives. We should live in the moment and cherish it. The rooster is “an expression of the health and soundness of Nature,” and should be a constant reminder to us that we all share a powerful connection with nature (Thoreau 120). This connection is what we need to focus on every minute of every day. This will keep us grounded and united with the present moment.

Whitman conveys this same idea in *Leaves of Grass* through his emphasis on noticing every single thing around you as you experience nature. He gives the details of what he sees as he lies in the grass. The fact that he notices so many small things means that he has spent time focusing on the present: “The smoke of my own breath, / Echoes, ripples, and buzzed whispers… loveroot, / silkthread, crotch and vine, / My respiration and inspiration… the beating of my heart / . . . the passing of blood and air
through my lungs” (Whitman 17-21). When he is out experiencing nature, he focuses on precisely that — the nature around him; nothing else can distract him. He is alive in the moment and keenly aware of every detail of life that is happening around him. For Thoreau, there is a thrill in being one with nature that surpasses every other sense imaginable. Whitman and Thoreau obviously have a connected view of how life should be lived and experienced by all human beings. They believe in living life through first hand experiences, being one with nature, and living in the present. These ideas are all central to their works and their genius. Whether it was the fact that they lived in a similar time period or simply coincidence that these authors share such similar views is unclear. What is important, though, is that they both share a refreshing outlook on life that still inspires readers today.

Works Cited


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