

Fascination: The Aesthetic Experience of Violence

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THE PHILOSOPHY OF *FASCINATION*

VIOLENCE AS RITUAL

Throughout human history, violence has been central to the human experience. In fact, human history is in many ways a history of violence. Whether for sheer survival, ambition, revenge, or conflict, violence has been one of the core components of human political and emotional affairs across time. Violence is also inextricably tied to ethics – while violence may be satisfying and thrilling, it often requires ethical justification and the legitimacy of its use is therefore tied to authority. Paradoxically, while society and civilization seeks to regulate and minimize violence, culture continues to celebrate it. Despite the pain and suffering that violence causes, as well as its potential violation of ethical codes, almost all cultures across time and space have glorified it in some way. It represents a release of our emotions, a physical purging of the feelings that language fails to express. Violence is often thought of in terms of this emotion, intensity, and immediacy – it is often indescribable and appeals to us on a primitive, visceral level. Many of the world's oldest and most famous texts (from the Epic of Gilgamesh to the Iliad, the Mahabharata, and even the Old Testament) not only center on themes of violence and life-or-death struggle, but also describe the action in vivid detail as though to captivate their readers in vicarious passion. Ritual hunting, gladiator matches, combat sports, cockfighting, and even art all seek to capture and celebrate a certain satisfaction that the frenzy of violence affords us. Above all, this phenomenon plays out as

an aesthetic experience. What I aim to demonstrate is that art is a unique case – not only does it absorb its audience in this instinctual, emotive, and visceral response to violence, but in some cases it can also *pivot* and provoke audiences to reflect on the meaning and value of violence itself. This second move in the two-step process therefore constitutes an extension of the aesthetic experience beyond the immediacy or duration of the art itself. This combined process of immediate absorption and its provocation to reflection is itself an aesthetic experience that I will henceforth refer to as *fascination*, and I argue here that it is a richer and fuller way to read and experience art.

Whatever the response, whether it be curiosity, lust, repulsion, or fear, violence is a powerful theme firmly embedded within both the individual and social/cultural mind. Through cultural productions from ritual to art, millennia of civilizations have sought to tap into this power both to explore it and purge it. The presence of violence in art or ritual strikes deeply, and thereby allows its audience to transcend the ordinary by becoming engrossed in an arena of power, fear, and intensity. Nevertheless, human social life seeks to regulate our actions and interactions with one another for the good of the most, attempting to prevent violence, destruction, betrayal, etc. These actions would cause society to otherwise fall apart, and are thus marginalized and regarded as “immoral” or “unethical.” Yet by pushing these harsh realities away and distancing ourselves from them, we also give them the power and attraction of mystery. Although one might reject them on moral and ethical grounds, there is an element of human interest and curiosity into these things that we fear. In fact, there seems

to be a desire for it – as Susan Sontag explains, “The iconography of suffering has a long pedigree... It seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked.”¹ From classical antiquity to religious scenes, the history of art has long produced works of violence – whether as an expression of the author or to satisfy the desire of the viewing public, the interest in violence appears to transcend time and culture. We may desire at least in part to understand them or simply to experience their intensity, but we nevertheless do not want, or hesitate to actually violate social ethics. The role of art and cultural production, therefore, is able in some ways to satisfy this yearning in us – it provides a space to manifest these themes, allow ourselves to become absorbed in them, and find meaning in them without having to suffer their real consequences. This is not to say that violence is the only theme capable of generating this experience; other powerful themes can generate similar absorption and reflection including love, justice, betrayal, despair, the grotesque, and sorrow. Nevertheless, since violence is so prevalent throughout the arts, and since it is such an immediately and instinctually evocative theme, I aim to put it in the spotlight to illustrate this process most clearly.

Cultural production, from sporting events to artworks, allows the audience to become absorbed in the manifestation of these themes. Society creates the structure of the event or art piece and designates it as a stage on which violence, struggle, destruction, and death can play out. Greek tragedy is

¹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (New York: Picador, 2003), Print, 40-41.

one example, especially because it is based on the idea of catharsis – the purging of emotions. The tension and drama of the plays absorb the viewer in a frenzy of emotion, putting them in touch with the dark reality of these situations without actually having to face any of the consequences. The audience struggles with the events just as the characters do, and the play elicits genuine pathos for the distressing situations on the stage. Aeschylus' *Persians*, for example, is a series of lamentations relating to defeat, loss of life, and destruction due to hubris. These themes are nearly universal, and the structure of the play allows the audience to face them and *feel* them without the consequences. While the play can convey anything from the collapse of society to the dark and low moments that define the human condition and more, these themes are broad enough that almost any audience can relate, and the same ideas can be shared across interpretations. Since there are a wide variety of ways to read the tragedy, individuals may connect the drama to their own lived experiences, thus adding another level of emotion (and, in fact, absorbing them further by tapping into their personal histories). While *Persians* does not show any violence onstage, it manifests its results and taps into the fear of destruction that is inextricably tied to violence. In emphasizing the suffering of the Persians, whether it be just or unjust from the Greek perspective, the play appeals to a sense of empathy for their destruction on an emotional level. By directly responding to these destructive forces, the sequence of characters may give voice to the audience's fears, thus bringing to light the fragility of society and the tension in which we live.

As we can see, cultural productions tap into the emotional depths of their

audiences. However, they also put the audience in touch with their own violent instincts. While the ethical content of art may provoke reflection, it often does so by first absorbing its audiences viscerally and putting them in touch with antisocial extremes. Clifford Geertz's account of the ritual of the Balinese cockfight positions the blood sport as a stage where the drama of violence allows spectators to transcend society and briefly become part of a primal and destructive world.² The spectators identify with one of the cocks fighting, and since the side betting raises the stakes of one's commitment to a side (and by extension engages them more), the matches come to symbolize individual struggle against an opposing force. It amplifies the everyday and creates a brief transcendent space in which spectators can indulge in and explore the extremes of danger, violence, chaos, and raw power not only in the context of the fight but also within themselves. Geertz proposes that the cockfight is actually a way to reaffirm social values by allowing spectators to view and take part in everything antithetical to social values – once purged, they return to society with a newfound appreciation and internalization of its principles. There are ways in which the absorption of the audience into the frenzy of the fight parallels the viewer of tragic drama, film, literature, and other artworks in their emotional and visceral absorption. While they may also reaffirm social values, they primarily affirm human life. The human condition is defined not only by the ideals of society, but also by the places where it descends into chaos, destruction, violence, death, sorrow, and distress. By experiencing the effects and the power

² Clifford Geertz. 1972. "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight". *Daedalus* 101 (1). The MIT Press: 1–37.

of these unwanted themes, the viewer emerges with a greater understanding of what it means to be human and with a greater affirmation of their own life. Violent film, tragic theater, transgressive literature, and offensive art therefore stimulate us and allow us to transcend the ordinary to the power and drama at the limits of the human experience. Nevertheless, while the cockfight parallels some of the values we see in *fascination* via immediate absorption, it fails to provoke this second step of reflection in its audience, which can compound the sense of *fascination* with art.

QUALIFICATIONS OF *FASCINATION*

Through the following examples, we may begin to see how art with unethical or ethically questionable content can absorb its audience by engaging it viscerally and with emotional immediacy. Yet we may also consider how art can provoke its audience to reflect ethically on its messages through this emotional engagement. To be successful in this reflective step, art must actually offer insights or suggest novel or illuminating ideas. Morally reprehensible content alone is not enough to *fascinate* us in this way. In fact, ethically depraved works without artistic touch are often the works most quickly dismissed for being exploitative or offensive. For example, during a Senatorial committee conference to effectively censor the National Endowment for the Arts in the wake of Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe's "obscene" works, the central question was not simply whether the photos were "pornographic and

shocking” in content, but rather if they were “without artistic value.”³ Narrative art, too, may be filled with immoral characters and content that will disgust its readers. After all, “we do not tend to rate highly, from the aesthetic viewpoint, novels in which all the characters are treated by the implied author simply as objects, without any inner world for which one cares.”⁴ However, if this story is beautifully written, the juxtaposition between style and content may *fascinate* us by provoking us to reflect on our enjoyment of the text compared with our distaste for the characters. But even better is if the story offers interesting perspectives, complex characters, and original notions about the topic it confronts – then our reflection will be all the more *fascinating*. In these cases, I argue that our experience of the work is incomplete without this reflection. If there is no expectation of reflection, then the work is hardly more than pornography, treating its characters as objects and offering little to no insights to contemplate. While this may be sufficient to tap into our instinctual desire to explore themes of violence, lust, and chaos, it lacks the ability to provoke the audience to reflect critically on their own beliefs – this is not an invalid aesthetic experience, but rather a missed opportunity to incite *fascination* and its complexity. What’s more, even pornography isn’t always pornographic in this 2-dimensional way: “Most garden-variety pornography lacks Sade's intellectual depth, and thus lacks the limited aesthetic interest his novels possess.”⁵ Quite simply, art that includes morally reprehensible content must be *good* art to

³ *Congressional Record – House*, October 2, 1989, H6407.

⁴ Martha Nussbaum, “Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism,” *Philosophy and Literature* 22, no. 2 (1998): 8.

⁵ Nussbaum, “Exactly and Responsibly,” 8.

fascinate us, this goodness is judged on both formal and reflective terms. On the one hand, a work should have some artistic merit in its formal qualities – attractive prose, interesting uses of line and color, etc. But for works with ethical content, they should also offer something to reflect on and think about – perspectives on the human condition, humanized characters with complex morality, etc. Together, these two standards form the total aesthetic experience and are the elements of *fascination*.

Since *fascination* hinges on these emotional and intellectual provocations, the artwork must absorb the audience. As Michael Fried has argued in *Art and Objecthood* and *Absorption and Theatricality*, certain types and styles of art are meant to challenge our experience as viewers (*theatricality*), which he distinguishes from art that engrosses the viewer completely in the scene (*absorption*). This absorption, which traditionally follows the order of attracting, arresting, and finally entralling the viewer, represents the ways in which the viewer is sucked into the scene. Although Fried applies it to the visual arts alone, I argue that this ultimate enthrallment functions equally in literature, albeit through the seduction of language or thrilling content rather than visual symbols. Absorption is therefore the visceral immediacy of the work, in which the mental activity of the audience is fully focused on the scene. Yet while Fried disparages Minimalism for its theatricality, we may for our purposes understand theatricality as this second reflective step of *fascination*. If we think of theatricality, in very simplified terms, as the self-consciousness of viewing, in which the work highlights the viewer's position, response, and experience of the

work, theatricality can describe the reflective aspect of the aesthetic experience. What's more, while Fried imagines theatricality in terms of how a viewer is physically made aware of their own movement around the artwork, I propose that theatricality can also encompass an audience's awareness of their own emotional and ethical responses to the work. This distinction and the interplay between the two is an important point I will return to later, but for now it is important to explore how absorption functions outside of the visual arts.

Let us turn first to ritual before we explore narrative. Looking again at Clifford Geertz's famous account of the Balinese cockfight, the actions surrounding the fight itself position it as a special, transcendent, and ritual experience. The sideline betting raises the stakes of the match and increases the level of identification with the cocks – the more one bets on the cock, the more it represents them. Thus, the savagery of the fight and the drama of its result impact the spectator as a participant rather than an observer – it is a manifestation of the viewer. This level of identification and participation is how the ritual of the Balinese cockfight generates absorption and thrill. As we have seen with other works, these themes are innately interesting to us; they represent the mysterious, unknown, raw, and transcendent power from which we are shielded by society. Because they are so foreign to us, we give them power, and in doing so we desire to know them and experience them. As such, we respond with deep emotional immediacy to the production, since our absorption allows us to experience it vicariously. However, we do not want to experience these themes in and of themselves. Without a structure to distance

the experience via the scapegoat (or, rather, scapecock), spectators would have to fight one another and suffer the real consequences for a similar effect. It is this perspective of involvement and participation that allows the spectator to transcend the artificiality of the cockfight and experience the raw and organic power of violence, conflict, and death.

This identification and raising of stakes can also be found in narrative as a means to absorb the audience. In doing so, violent film and literature are sometimes able to provoke new and unique perspectives on their themes for the audience. In some cases, this can be accomplished by the shocking juxtaposition of cold, distant, and meaningless violence with the beauty of its formal qualities. More often, the narrative builds up the stakes of the drama and identification with the characters to make the audience feel the drama more profoundly. By humanizing the characters or describing attributes that interest the audience, narratives can provoke identification between the audience and the story. Even if characters are seen as negative or if the audience does not identify with them, the context of the work can absorb the audience, and the arc of the plot itself can still be compelling. And what's more, when a challenge or danger is introduced, it raises the stakes, thus driving the attention of the audience. In all these cases the work must absorb its audience; unless it can engross its viewer or reader, they may choose to ignore it, or even if they don't, they will likely treat it with less attention and therefore achieve little *fascination* in it.

Yet violence is unique: the sight of violence itself also absorbs the audience by challenging them with its very content. Susan Sontag's *Regarding*

the Pain of Others explores the ways in which violence, torment, pain, and anguish strike the viewer in unique ways. She explains that art's history is filled with works of violence, in the grotesque cruelties of classical antiquity and even in religious works that seem to delight in the depictions of hell's various damnations. "No moral change attaches to the representation of these cruelties. Just the provocation: can you look at this? There is the satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching. There is the pleasure of flinching."⁶ As such, the sight of violence can appeal equally to the duality within the audience – both satisfying their desire to view the scene but also offering them the chance to exercise their ethical disgust, which brings them another sort of satisfaction. In fact, this challenge to the viewer parallels the process of *fascination* – not only is it another means of engagement for the audience, but it also begins to illuminate their potential dissonant responses and thus provoke reflection. Although I will expand on *fascination* later, this example nevertheless illustrates how it works and is thus worth bearing in mind. For now, it is worth recognizing how violence contributes to an audience's absorption by their engagement with the work, and how this experience progresses to reflection and *fascination*.

By engrossing its audience in these ways, individuals can experience new perspectives and extreme situations that may give rise to new emotional responses; all of these broaden the limits of their human experience and even confronting them with the reality of their socially imposed ethics. As such, the

⁶ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 41

effectiveness of these works is defined in large part by the perspectives they offer – they allow us to relish the senselessness of violence, to think more deeply about its implications, to feel the tragedy of loss, to work out the complexities of our pity, to question our own instincts, or to recognize the horror of senseless violence. Clearly, they can offer contradicting views, but what is important is that they offer a viewpoint on which we can reflect, draw new conclusions, and through which we can feel and participate in new experiences. *Fascination* can thus take the form of complexity, a problem or paradox that we continue to think about critically, and these conditions are able to generate it via aesthetic experience.

AGAINST AUTONOMISM

Yet despite this, since the development of avant-garde art in the 19th and 20th centuries, great emphasis has been placed on the autonomy of art, divorcing the visual, narrative, and musical components of the various media from their connection to the real world. Inventive artists changed the definitions of art and pioneered new styles, breaking from academic tradition by dissociating themselves from the everyday and even great historical moments. The 20th century saw one of the most diverse and progressive centuries of art production in history, and it was largely pushed by movements claiming aesthetic autonomy - the Vienna Secession, Russian Suprematists, Cubists, and Abstract Expressionists. Yet this autonomist discourse has existed throughout the history of art, with proponents from all artistic media. The claim boils down

to a perceived disconnect between an artwork's aesthetic value and its ethical content, whatever that may be. Noel Carroll's description in his piece, "Moderate Moralism," explains the position well: "the autonomist maintains that art is intrinsically valuable, and that it is not and should not be subservient to ulterior or external purposes, such as promoting moral education."⁷ This suggestion has its advantages – it gives art an intrinsic value that can be understood universally, and it may free the artist from fear of censorship. However, by distancing art from the realities of the human experience, I argue that this claim also makes art a more shallow experience than the wider stance of *fascination* would promote.

At their best, works of art are not simply *beautiful* objects, although they very often are, but are above all captivating. Many elements, from purely formal qualities to compelling narrative structure and more, can captivate our thought and attention, but the ability to captivate is something that all great art shares. Formal structure is one major way that aesthetic autonomists find art's value, and while this is a valid way to read art, I argue that *fascination* offers a richer and more fulfilling way to experience it. Nevertheless, in some cases I believe autonomist readings are appropriate. Art that conforms to traditional and academic formal standards (e.g. Jacques Louis David, Raphael) often compels viewers with subtlety, style, and precise execution. More avant-garde works captivate audiences with the way they challenge the audience – Picasso's cubist works from the 1910s literally confuse our perspectives, while de Kooning's

⁷ Noel Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 36, No. 3, (July 1996), 224.

Woman series challenges our notions of beauty. Some art like that of Rothko and Motherwell simply intrigues with its exploration of elements like line, color, and space, either to evoke feelings or simply study the geometry. While these artists had wider goals than formal concerns themselves, and although some of their works refer to or were inspired by real-world events (e.g. *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*), some of their canvasses nevertheless lack discernible ethical content. There are many masterpieces, in fact, that simply do not have content that engage their audiences on ethical issues at all. As such, they may be judged only by their formal qualities. As Nussbaum writes, “One can think of works of art which can be contemplated reasonably well without asking any urgent questions about how one should live. Abstract formalist paintings are sometimes of this character, and some intricate but non-programmatic works of music (though by no means all).”⁸

It is important to understand that many artworks and even entire genres function through the emotional and ethical investment of their audiences, yet this is not to say that there are not works that do not provoke ethical thought – again, many abstract works concern themselves with formal details alone, and there are many works that depict human life without much ethical questioning. Cezanne’s apples or Matisse’s bathers, for example, depict human life, but do not explicitly engage the audience on an ethical level. Instead, they may absorb us through their use of perspective and color and captivate us with their beauty. However, I believe Carroll rightly argues that “just because we value art for the

⁸ Nussbaum, “Exactly and Responsibly,” 9.

way in which it commands our undivided attention, this does not preclude that some art commands our attention in this way just because it is interesting and engaging cognitively and/or, for our purposes, morally.”⁹

By considering an artwork’s ethical content in the aesthetic evaluation, I argue that one can experience a fuller and richer experience of the art itself. Since the birth of culture and society, ethics (that is, codes of common principles, thought, and conduct) have been a fundamental part of human life. They have guided the development of society as well as the lives of the individuals that exist in it. And since ethics are intertwined with one’s beliefs and worldview, the ethical content of a work can leave a profound impact on its audience – an impact that is a major part of its aesthetic value. Aesthetic autonomists may assert that art should exist in and of itself; rather than connecting to one’s lived experience, they say art should be universal. By this logic, Picasso’s *Guernica* should not be judged by its historical context or its political meaning, nor should we consider the actual events to which he is responding. To this claim, there are two responses: on the one hand, there are many works of art that contain no ethical content whatsoever, and I would agree that such works should be judged on their formal qualities; yet as Noel Carroll explains,

...the fact that it may be a mistake to mobilize moral discourse with reference to some pure orchestral music or some abstract painting has no implications about whether it is appropriate to do so with respect to *King Lear* or *Potemkin*, since those works of art are expressly designed to elicit moral reactions, and it is part of the form of life to which they belong that audiences respond

⁹ Carroll, “Moderate Moralism,” 226.

morally to them on the basis of their recognition that that is what they are intended to do, given the relevant social practices.¹⁰

While I distance my idea from the notion that works must be read always according to the specific reactions they are designed to elicit, I also argue that some works simply *do* provoke a moral response from the viewer, although the form of that response may vary. What's more, "autonomism rides on the unexceptionable observation that art appears to aim, first and foremost, at being absorbing. The so-called aesthetic experience is centripetal."¹¹ Yet I argue that the ethical provocations of artworks form an integral part of this overall aesthetic experience, meaning that reality and the living world that inform our ethical selves actually facilitate this absorption. As a result, any attempt to standardize or universalize the moral response of the audience would be to reduce the ways in which an individual can relate to it, and thus limit the experience of art itself.

Art that *does* contain ethical content thus speaks to the audience's own individual beliefs and experiences as well as to the human condition at large. And art that can provoke this rich insight and reflection into human nature and human reality tends to *absorb* and *fascinate* us with its new perspectives. Of course, there are many ways in which this is achieved – monumental scale, the sublime (which heightens our sense of reality), and immediate, visceral imagery can all appeal to an innate emotional response in the viewer that puts them in touch with their instincts. However, the ethical content of a work of art can

¹⁰ Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," 226.

¹¹ Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," 225.

achieve a somewhat different effect. By eliciting a moral response from the audience, works with ethical content engage the audience directly with the provocation of ethical questions and paradoxes. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* taps into the audience's empathy to elicit sorrow for Macbeth's victims, but it also engages the viewers with moral questions by humanizing the villain and generating some sympathy for him. In this process, we see Fried's *theatricality* at play. Not only does this tension illuminate one's initial emotional response to the work, but it also forces the viewers to participate and interrogate their own emotions and often-contradictory feelings. As a result of this dissonance between their conflicting sympathies, the viewer is provoked to reconcile their internal contradiction. So by confronting the audience with their own absorption and excitement by the narrative, *fascinating* works provoke them to reflect ethically on their initial emotional responses, thus setting a cycle of further thought and emotional complexity in motion. In doing so, it also makes the audience more aware of their social conditioning to police their own desires in such a way. As such, I believe the ethical quality of a work is just as important as its formal qualities when evaluating its overall aesthetic value, since the full experience of our ethical responses to the art ought also comprise an essential component of the aesthetic experience.

Engaging with the ethical content of art can therefore generate an element of *fascination* that increases the depth and quality of our aesthetic experience. Let us consider this notion of the aesthetic experience of ethical content through narrative art. The effect is most often done with ethically

questionable content, so to expand on the effects of *Macbeth* with a modern example, let us turn to *Breaking Bad*. We know that meth moguls engage in a deplorable business that harms thousands of people a year, yet we still watch it and often take aesthetic pleasure in viewing it. Even when we watch the show, we condemn the drug trade because we know that it unethical, yet we still sympathize with the character of Walter White. Although this seems like a problematic defect in our morals, it is actually a sign of great art: the fact that the show humanizes someone we regard as an evildoer *fascinates* us. We are meant to sympathize with the character because the show is written as such, but when we engage in ethical reflection on the story we are forced to confront this sympathy and reassess whether we want him to succeed in the meth business – we are constantly trying to form a definitive ethical opinion of the characters to reconcile our own inner tension. This contrast between the morally outrageous and the narratively compelling/artistically composed is one way that the show generates engagement and thus absorption with the audience. In narrative art, this sympathy for morally reprehensible characters occurs through a humanizing process. Martha Nussbaum relates the idea to Dickens:

But I begin further back, with an analysis of the very basic human ability that Charles Dickens calls ‘fancy’: the ability to see one thing as another and one thing in another...It gets us into the habit of conjecturing that this shape, so similar to our own, is a house for emotions and wishes and projects that are also in some ways similar to our own.¹²

Fancy, as Dickens calls it, allows us to understand the complexity of these characters by seeing ourselves in them. Walter White is not just the meth mogul,

¹² Nussbaum, “Exactly and Responsibly,” 4.

but also a father, husband, friend, and even a victim of economic downturn. He embodies the American dream, its failure, and the consequences of sheer hubris. This character complexity is part of our *fascination* with the show; we reflect on both our sympathies for the character and our disgust at (or potentially even attraction to) his actions, and since the two are not easily reconciled, we find the series compelling.

These examples illustrate a process that applies in many works of art, especially narrative ones, where the work engages the audience ethically. Carroll, Nussbaum, and others agree that the narrative is by nature incomplete in that it requires some emotional engagement and input on the part of the audience to absorb them. As I have discussed earlier, the narrative must be compelling in order to absorb the audience, but the audience must also be in a position to be compelled. Audiences bring a basic understanding of human emotion to these works; for example, “the author need not explain why a character is saddened by her mother's death.”¹³ To do this, audiences must be compelled to put themselves in the narrative and imagine how they would feel. If not for this innate understanding and imaginative activity, the work would not be able to absorb the audience. Yet ultimately the onus is on the reader bring their own understanding and experiences to the work so that they can identify with it on a deeper, more personal level.

This emotional understanding is therefore integral to an individual's experience of the work. However, it extends beyond emotional understanding to

¹³ Carroll, “Moderate Moralism,” 227.

ethics, as well. Audiences are expected to know when a character is doing something immoral without it having to be explicitly stated. After all, “no one learns that murder is bad from *Crime and Punishment* and, indeed, knowing that murder is bad may be a presupposition that the reader must bring to *Crime and Punishment* in order to understand it.”¹⁴ As a result, this ethical understanding is necessary for how we interpret the actions of the characters and thus the characters themselves. Narrative therefore operates on the assumption that the audience will bear their ethics in mind and will exercise their ethical understanding throughout the story. By engaging with the narrative ethically, the audience is able to identify with certain characters, become attached to their fates, and invest themselves more fully in the story. While this alone does not necessarily make the narrative a compelling artwork (since it may still be poorly-written, clichéd, unoriginal, etc.), it is a necessary mechanism to absorb the audience in the first place.

However, having ethical content does not necessarily make a work *fascinating*, either. *Fascination* is only possible because the work elevates and transcends the ethical circumstances beyond reality to an arena in which these ethical issues can be explored without consequence – this act of abstraction (e.g. narrativization, fictionalization, and artistic license) is thus necessary. Without appropriate distance from reality, artworks may not be able to generate an “aesthetic” experience or transcend reality. Consider *Journey to the End of the Night*, a work which I will analyze later in this thesis, in comparison to Ernst

¹⁴ Carroll, “Moderate Moralism,” 229.

Jünger's WWI memoir, *Storm of Steel*. Without even getting into the content of the work, Céline's book is a *novel*, meaning that he has separated his audience from reality in favor of a metaphor/analogy/hypothetical of a WWI experience. Jünger's memoir, by contrast, is an autobiography detailing the facts and real experiences of the battles he faced as a German soldier. Being based in reality, the audience cannot approach the material as a narrative nor its narrator as a character; the assertion of truth and reality to Jünger's testimony prevents *Storm of Steel* from producing an aesthetic experience in the way Céline's work does. When Jünger describes the violence of the battles, the men he killed, and the dead bodies he saw, these descriptions do not function as abstract representations of war nor as narrative devices; rather, they come across as real humans who truly experienced these events. The reality of these experiences prevents audiences from becoming fully swept up in the frenzy of Jünger's battles, since each description pulls the reader out of the thrill and reminds them of the dismal truth of the war. As such, audiences may not experience absorption in Jünger's material in the same way as they do Céline's.

Another way to consider the difference between Jünger and Céline may be the context of each work. This is not to say the historical time period in which each was written, but rather the context in which each work presents itself: Céline's *Journey* is inspired by his experiences of WWI, but asserts a hypothetical and abstracted context as a work of fiction; Jünger's *Storm*, by contrast, situates itself within the realm of history, even though it is a work of literature. Céline (and other fiction writers inspired by reality) creates a false

world in which audiences can experience the work as an aesthetic narrative rather than a historical testimony. Like the Balinese cockfight, reality-based fiction creates an arena in which normal moral obligations (e.g. grief, historical learning, concern, and remembrance) are suspended in favor of frenzied absorption and exploration into ethically troubling worlds. Yet since Jünger does not establish this frame of experience, the moral obligations of historical reverence, remembrance, and mourning designate the audience's experience as personal, real, or archival rather than aesthetic. In reality and day-to-day life, ethical action is paramount; thus, one cannot become absorbed in a work based in reality, since the ethical is too present. Ultimately, when I refer to the context of *Journey to the End of Night*, it is this aesthetic context that separates it from *Storm of Steel* even though both refer to personal traumas suffered in the Great War.

Fascination therefore occupies a sweet spot between absolute abstraction and absolute truth (or at least absolute personal experience). The necessity of absorption equally precludes many purely abstracted works and works that are too steeped in a historical context. This is not to say that such works fail aesthetically or that they are bad art, but simply that the model of *fascination* is inapplicable to them. Between these, however, is a wide world of art capable of producing rich aesthetic experiences along the model that I've presented here. However, to be clear, a work of fiction is not necessarily capable of producing abstraction, and not all *fascinating* works will necessarily produce *fascination* for everyone. After all, artworks that fall within the spectrum of *fascination*, and

contain themes that may provoke profound reflection, may not absorb every reader. For example, if a novel is written with terse language, it may not captivate some readers. This is, of course, valid, and is to be expected given the wide range of tastes that individuals have. But in the end, *fascination*, like art itself, is a matter of taste – those that tend to like certain types, genres, or styles of art may be more open to finding *fascination* in them, just like those with different life experiences will be struck by different aspects of a work of art. No two individuals' experience of a work of art is necessarily the same, but within the range of artworks that I've described, I argue that *fascination* is ultimately an insightful and effective general model of those experiences.

READERSHIP OVER AUTHORSHIP

Where Carroll goes beyond the stance of *fascination* is in his suggestion that the success of a narrative is dependent on its ability to elicit *specific* emotional reactions or ethical judgments from its audience. He follows Aristotle's *Poetics* in judging the success of a work of art based on the categorical response that it is able to elicit. For example, he asserts that Tragedy is only successful when the audience pities the main character; as such, successful tragedies cannot use characters that audiences perceive to be too evil or too perfect. "If certain characters are inserted into the tragic scenario, in other words, tragedy will not secure the effects that are normatively correct for it," he

writes.¹⁵ However, this notion of the “normatively correct” seeks to impose standards on the evocative power of art, and thus limits the audience’s experience of it. “Failure to elicit the right moral response, then, is a failure in the design of the work, and, therefore, is an aesthetic failure.”¹⁶ With this position, Carroll not only overlooks the possibility that individuals may differ in their views of certain characters, but his idea would also seek to regulate the production of art in a way that stagnates innovation. Designating certain works as aesthetic “failures” because they do not elicit the reactions that he deems categorically appropriate to the genre is reductive, and cheapens the power of art by taxonomizing it rather than embracing the wide spectrum of human experience.

To explore the function of *fascination* in contrast to Carroll’s moderate moralism, let us see how the two differ in the evaluation of the same work. One of Carroll’s main examples of categorical failure is Bret Ellis’ *American Psycho*, which he perceives to be an aesthetic failure since, he asserts, audiences do not view the work through the lens of political satire. The novel, which presents a serial killer as the symbol of Reaganomics, describes the protagonist’s murders in brutal and gruesome detail so as to parody the artifice and superficiality covering up a moral decline and psychopathy of 80s culture. Carroll believes that the degree of gore in these murders turns the audience off to the novel, and as such, fails to absorb them through the appropriate lens of satire: “[Ellis] invited the audience to view the murders as political satire and that was an

¹⁵ Carroll, “Moderate Moralism,” 232.

¹⁶ Carroll, “Moderate Moralism,” 233.

invitation they could not morally abide,” Carroll says.¹⁷ As such, he deems the novel a failure. Yet I argue that Carroll makes several mistakes in this evaluation of the aesthetic experience of the novel.

First and foremost, Carroll assumes that all audiences fail to read the novel in this way. In seeking to universalize the aesthetic experience, and therefore by discounting the possibility that any audience would read into the satire, he makes an assumption that is impossible to prove, if not downright false. What’s more, he prioritizes the author’s intention over the reader’s individual experience. While it is likely that some readers may not read the text as satire due to their distaste for the gruesome murders, this *repugnance* is itself an equally valid aesthetic experience. Repugnance and revulsion are certainly powerful responses, and this distaste for the protagonist may even secure the audience’s investment and absorption in the text so that they will get to find out if such an abhorrent character meets justice. Granted, this reader may have less to reflect on than one who suspends their own moral views and indulges in the texts’ black humor, but this visceral and emotional response would also engender an aesthetic state, and is therefore successful. Even attempting to read the novel in its comically detached manner, despite one’s own disgust by it, would likely generate a strong dissonance in the reader, one that might be irritatingly tense and could thus be irresistibly *fascinating* and reflection-provoking – that is, it would be a powerful aesthetic experience. Of course, these ways of reading do not consider the real possibility that one might find

¹⁷ Carroll, “Moderate Moralism,” 232.

themselves rooting for Ellis' Bateman or succumb to the same satisfaction in his murders as he does, but are simply meant to counter the idea of Carroll's perpetually ethically high-minded audience.

Yet rejecting Carroll's emphasis on the "normatively correct" response does not amount to rejecting the role of the ethical provocations in the novel. There is no doubt that the text has content that engages with its audience ethically and carries this response towards absurdity – even Carroll acknowledges that the morally-repulsed audience would still recognize the text as satire, but that they are too disgusted to appreciate the humor. Thus it is not a question of whether an unknowing audience might take it seriously, but rather a question of the *experience* of the text's provocations. Again, even a reader that cannot get over their disgust for the text's brutality and gore may still become invested in the novel by this response; whether this be because it gives them a sense of affirmation in their moral compass to wince at the text, whether they yearn to see this main antagonist meet justice, or for any number of other reasons, both the sheer violence (in its provocative challenge to the reader) and its subsequent ethical considerations are absorbing. The main difference is that Carroll prioritizes the *author's intention* for eliciting a *specific* emotional reaction, rather than letting the text stand alone and evaluating the multitude of experiences it may create. In essence, Carroll's adherence to the concept of Authorial intention follows the assumption that it must dictate the way that one reads the book. Instead, I argue in favor of Roland Barthes' priority of the Reader over the Author in his major essay *Death of the Author*. He writes, "to

give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.”¹⁸ However, “a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author.”¹⁹ By prioritizing the act of readership rather than the study of authorship, the work can thus have a wider array of effects on its audience. Ultimately, since *fascination* centers on the experience of the reader it leaves space for interpretation other than what the author may have intended, and thus allows for more potential aesthetic experiences of the work.

We may draw further distinctions between *fascination* and moderate moralism, too. Carroll expands on this idea of aesthetic failures by considering an audience that actually adopts a defective moral perspective, unlike his audience that rejects *American Psycho* for this reason. He asks his readers to imagine “a propaganda film that treats enemy soldiers as subhuman, worthy of any amount of indignity,” and asserts that even though the original audience may have adopted this perspective, the fact that other audiences might hold different views constitutes the aesthetic failure of the film: “...as long as the moral understanding promoted by the film is defective, it remains a potential obstacle to the film's securing the response it seeks as a condition of its aesthetic

¹⁸ Roland Barthes and Stephen Heath. *Image, Music, Text*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), Print, 147.

¹⁹ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 148.

success.”²⁰ However, Carroll’s view does not consider that we *have* films that approach this level of moral repugnance while still being *fascinating* works of art. Let us briefly consider Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* as a counterexample to Carroll’s claim.

Triumph of the Will is utterly rife with Nazi propaganda, and although it does not actually feature scenes of violence against a subhuman enemy, its promotion of Nazi ideology still makes it abhorrent to most modern audiences. Nevertheless, *Triumph of the Will* is in many ways a cinematic masterpiece; it featured incredibly innovative and influential cinematography, logistical precision, monumental scale, and sublime scenery. The film’s opening scene of descent through glorious clouds above a picturesque Nuremburg, its cuts of the imperial parade through the streets surrounded by massive crowds, and the views of Hitler’s speeches to monumental legions of perfectly-organized soldiers (who respond to their leader in thunderous and precise unison) paint an overwhelming, impressive, and even seductive picture of power and beauty.

However, modern audiences will also bear in mind the atrocities that this regime committed, and this juxtaposition of beauty with the disgust towards the reality of the regime is likely to create a powerful sense of dissonance within the viewer. Yet while Carroll believes that this amounts to an aesthetic failure by eliciting the wrong reaction from what Riefenstahl intended, I argue that this dissonance actually enhances the aesthetic experience of the film. If we assume that the audience finds the Nazi regime abhorrent and evil, then viewers will

²⁰ Carroll, “Moderate Moralism,” 233.

likely be horrified by the positive light and beauty by which Riefenstahl presents Hitler's Germany. Viewers will still find the scenery and the shots formally beautiful, but will be repulsed by their own appreciation of the beauty; the aesthetic experience of *Triumph of the Will* is therefore to *be horrified by beauty itself* – this is a unique and powerful experience that should not be so easily discredited. Thus, we can be morally opposed to a work's perspective, but still find a valid and even uniquely amplified aesthetic experience in such art.

Carroll also invites us to consider a play that casts Hitler as a tragic hero, or a novel that adopts the ethical view that it is good to kill innocent people. Without going into as much detail into these suggestions, I imagine that many readers would be *fascinated* to entertain these new perspectives. Carroll's explanation of moderate autonomism (with which he disagrees) illustrates this point: "An artwork may invite an audience to entertain a defective moral perspective and this will not detract from its aesthetic value."²¹ In fact, I argue that defective moral perspectives may even enhance the aesthetic value of the work by throwing into question our firmly-held beliefs. By offering us a mirror by which to reflect on our own assumptions, works with opposing moral views can generate a unique type of *fascination* in their audiences.

Let us explore a broader example through an entire genre of art. Tragedy itself is based on the idea of catharsis, or the purging of the audience's most powerful feelings. Yet tragedy, like many other narratives with ethical content, operates twofold – catharsis, like the visceral and the sublime, taps into the

²¹ Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," 233.

audience's instincts and emotions to generate a powerful and absorbing feeling, whether that be sorrow, anxiety, despair, or horror; however, the plot also provokes unresolved ethical questions that can cause dissonance within the audience, which pushes them to reflect on their emotions and thoughts in order to reconcile the tensions. By seeing horrors and despair played out before them, especially in a context in which they are not required to act but rather to simply bear witness, the audience can feel the full effect of their own emotions. In this way, tragedy also parallels Sontag's exploration of the history of suffering in art:

In each instance, the gruesome invites us to be either spectators or cowards, unable to look. Those with the stomach to look are playing a role authorized by many glorious depictions of suffering. Torment, a canonical subject in art, is often represented in painting as spectacle, something being watched (or ignored) by other people. The implication is: no, it cannot be stopped – and the mingling of inattentive with attentive onlookers underscores this.²²

By distancing themselves from reality in this way, since reality would demand action, the play becomes not just a spectacle, but also a safe space to let their feelings loose – thus, catharsis allows for an exploration of the darker emotional world of the audience's psyche. However, tragic works also often provoke us to reflect ethically on the circumstances of this catharsis. More than just bearing witness to torment, tragedy is thus based on the idea that the audience's full ethical and emotional responses to the work are a major, if not primary constituent of the aesthetic experience as a whole.

Sophocles' *Antigone*, for example, weaves a devastating narrative of familial destruction, lost honor, and the conflict between the collective and the

²² Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 42.

individual. As readers and viewers, we identify with Antigone's desire to see her brother buried honorably, and we weep for her when she is imprisoned and ultimately kills herself when facing the conflicting political ethic of the tyrant Creon. Yet we also mourn the death of Haemon and pity Creon's own suffering despite his role as main antagonist. His actions have a political logic to them, yet his ethic is irreconcilable with Antigone's, and it thus leads them both to ruin. It is the confrontation of two valid ethics that absorbs the audience in this sorrowful paradox, and also to try to reconcile this dissonance logically – since there is no clear side that is ethically correct, it suggests that even ethically and rationally sound judgments can lead to destruction. When even the antagonist evokes pathos in the audience, there is often a provocation for reflection. This quality of feeling that the play provokes is the core component of both our aesthetic experience and our *fascination*. We may feel outraged by the injustice Antigone faces yet also feel sorrow for the divine retribution against Creon, and as such we want to reflect on the play, our responses to it, and how the two line up with our previously-held beliefs of justice and morality. Thus, the aesthetic experience of the play is based on how it brings out our emotional responses, and our reflection on the lingering questions from that experience are the foundation of our *fascination*.

VISUAL ARTS

Ethical content is present in the visual arts as well, and it must be evaluated as part of the total aesthetic experience in the same way. Take Andres

Serrano's *Piss Christ*: we are shocked when we learn that the crucifix is submerged in the artist's own urine. From an aesthetic autonomist standpoint, it would not matter if we knew that the crucifix had been placed in human urine; we might call the beautifully lit and well-composed photo of a crucifix something banal or dismiss it as religious kitsch or low art. But to know the story behind the photograph and to think critically on its content, the art suddenly takes on a deeper dimension raising questions about iconoclasm, blasphemy, and the relationship of divinity to the human body. The work is meant to be provocative and uses a kind of shock value to generate discomfort in the viewer. But this discomfort is not a cheap means of "grossing out" the audience, nor does it only hold power for offended Christians. The photo may strike the viewer with thoughts of disgust at first, but that discomfort invites the viewer to reflect more on the artists' statement; the work comments on the commercialization of religion and how it degrades true faith, as well as attempting to reestablish personal connection and bodily (and spiritual) intimacy between the individual and the divine. The religious symbol juxtaposed with the urine is shocking to some, but not without meaning. What's more, one does not need to be a believer to understand the magnitude of the artist's statement – while Christians may identify more with the message once they've reflected on it, a basic understanding of religious symbolism should be enough to make any viewer feel the power of the image. It is therefore not meant to captivate us with its formal qualities alone, but rather with its exploration of spirituality, commercialism, human corporeality, disgust, transcendence, etc.

While the colors, tones, and composition may make the photograph *beautiful*, this reflective element makes it *fascinating*.

There are numerous other examples of how ethical judgments can play a major role in our *fascination* with purely visual works. Photographer Larry Clark gained fame and notoriety for his photo series *Tulsa*, depicting the sex- and drug-filled lives of Oklahoma teens with raw accuracy. The series featured graphic adolescent nudity and a harsh look at the reality of drug culture, which the photographer himself had participated in. While the photographs themselves are beautifully composed, lit, shot, and printed, our ethical assessment of the pictures are an essential part of our *fascination* with them. These images may provoke any range of reactions from shock, to sadness, sympathy, and disgust. Our reactions to these photos are exceptionally strong because they suggest ethical questions – Is it all right to look at this? Do I approve of this? Is this exploitation? Why are these young people living such self-destructive lives? Is there any way we can help them? These reactions are an integral part of our experience of the work – the stories of these individuals *fascinate* us because they capture some of the darker aspects of the human condition: tragedy, folly, self-destructiveness, and apathy. We are compelled to look at and reflect on the images because of both their formal qualities and our feelings towards the content, which we are constantly trying to work out. Like Dickens, Clark is an “author who demands to be read ethically”²³; the aesthetic experience is founded on the formal qualities combined with some initial shock

²³ Nussbaum, “Exactly and Responsibly,” 10.

or revulsion, followed by deeper contemplation.

I argue that in order to achieve a fuller aesthetic experience of an artwork that contains ethical content, the viewer therefore ought to be engaged emotionally and ethically with the work. It is certainly possible to watch *Breaking Bad* or view Serrano's and Clark's photographs without reflecting on the moral questions they raise; one may just look at the works and marvel at the colors, lighting, or any number of formal details, or even just sit back and enjoy it. However, critical reflection on the pieces' content allows one to engage further with the art, which may create a richer and more *fascinating* experience for the contemplative viewer. This is especially true of art with morally "bad" content. Unethical content in art may provoke a greater impact than something more agreeable, and the impact may turn to *fascination* if the work raises questions worth exploring. Even the aesthetic autonomist would admit that morality is a core component to human *life*, if not to art. But as such, it makes sense that ethics should inform any assessment of art that seeks to depict a human experience – to ignore it would be to deny an integral part of human life.

As Nussbaum writes,

I do believe that ethical and political issues are non-optional, in the sense that every human being ought to reflect about them in some manner... But I certainly do not hold that there are no other issues worth worrying about, in connection with which literature may make a contribution; nor do I hold that it is always mistaken to consider literature for form alone, apart from consideration of any human issue.²⁴

She recognizes the essential component of ethics in human life, but still

²⁴ Nussbaum, "Exactly and Responsibly," 3.

concedes that there are other ways of reading art. As she explains, assessments on “form alone” are always possible, and many abstract works even demand to be read as such. But when there is ethical content in art it should be read with ethical considerations in mind in order to experience the work more fully. Though autonomists may assert that art should be regarded as a universal and complete object in itself, if art depicts something that exists or corresponds to reality, then the viewer ought at least consider this relation to the real world. According to Nussbaum, “the artist can assist us by cutting through the blur of habit and the self-deceptions habit abets; his conduct is ethical conduct because it strives to come to terms with reality in a world that shrinks from reality.”²⁵ By accepting art’s connection to reality, we can allow ourselves to explore the messages that pertain to *us*, giving us greater insight into human life.

Until now, I have presented this element of ethical reflection as purely aesthetic. Unlike Carroll, we do not say whether the art is morally right or wrong; rather, we ask whether the art has provoked reflection and whether that impact led to greater *fascination*. Since the aesthetic experience aims at *fascination*, reflection adds a new dimension to one’s ongoing experience of art. Aesthetic judgments may therefore include both judgments of formal qualities and judgments of the effectiveness of the reflection where ethically provocative content is concerned (i.e. was I captivated by the questions that the work suggests?). However, this view of reflection is also compatible with Nussbaum’s defense of the causal thesis. She claims that, “the activities of imagination and

²⁵ Nussbaum, “Exactly and Responsibly,” 1.

emotion that the involved reader performs during the time of reading are not just instrumental to moral conduct, they are also examples of moral conduct, in the sense that they are examples of the type of emotional and imaginative activity that good ethical conduct involves.”²⁶ In short, our reflection on the content of the work is literally moral conduct, since we contemplate the art’s content in terms of our own moral views. This is not to say that we judge the *aesthetic* value of works by whether or not their content is agreeable; rather, we should engage ethically with the content the story, and judge the work by how it provokes us to reflect on it – that is, not by whether story/picture itself has “morally defective” content. Ethical reflection therefore takes on a dual role, acting on the one hand as a facet of *fascination*, and on the other hand as an exercise in moral abilities. Of course, one can accept the former while rejecting the latter, but the two roles are nevertheless compatible.

Ultimately, ethical reflection on works of art enhances one’s overall experience of the piece. Art, at its fullest, is able to *absorb* and to *fascinate*, and if we are just as *fascinated* by the ethical provocations as we are by the formal qualities, then we have added another dimension to the aesthetic experience compared to the aesthetic autonomist. Ethical reflection opens art up to broader engagement on multiple fronts. Goya’s *El Trés de Mayo 1808*, for example, can shock a viewer with the terror of the scene and also morally outrage them by the injustice of the carnage depicted. The work is masterfully painted, and both the visual impression and its content leaves a lasting impact on the viewers,

²⁶ Nussbaum, “Exactly and Responsibly,” 7.

provoking them to reflect on their own moral revulsion, the nature of war, fear, and the larger reality of systematic and standardized violence that the French soldiers embody. This reflection allows for art to leave a greater impact and for the viewer to experience the work for all it is.

We may even consider the implications of the ethical circumstances around beauty. If we imagine a stunningly beautiful palace, yet hypothetically know that is built on the backs of slaves, we may still acknowledge its beauty while also reflecting on the contrast between its splendor and the depravity of its construction. It only makes the palace more *fascinating*. Reflection is the key to *fascination*, and the greatness of art lies in the power of suggestion. Great art, unlike kitsch, requires us to figure out our own feelings about the art. When art contains ethical content, we must ask, “Why did I respond this way?”, “What do I really think about this work?”, and “What else does this work invite me to consider?” It invites us to think more about the art. It makes art human. It only brings us closer to art, and thus to ourselves.

Throughout this thesis, I will be examining several of the central issues of violence that may lead to *fascination*. This is to say that the violence in these pieces provokes ideas about certain issues, and that the reflective *fascination* towards these works may center on these ideas. Although I group my analyses by these issues, I will refrain from summarizing the significance and commonalities of these works until my ultimate conclusion. While these issues are by no means exhaustive of all the considerations and ideas that violence in art can provoke, I believe they are some of the more prevalent and readily-

understandable examples, and therefore illustrative of the process by which *fascination* functions. Furthermore, I do not assert that each issue is the only one that violence provokes in each of these works; while I believe *Antigone* certainly embodies the “conflict of ethical codes,” and may likely provoke *fascination* on those grounds, it also embodies the theme of “cycles of violence” and may suggest reflection along those lines either instead or in addition to the former. In fact, none of the works I examine suggest any strict themes that must be read according to a standard; instead, there is potential to find nearly any issue within them, and the aesthetic experience will ultimately depend on how the work strikes the viewer. Since people have different life experiences, these same works may provoke people to completely different ideas and interpretations. As such, there will be thematic overlap between many of these works, and although I will attempt to account for differing interpretations along the same thematic path, I may not expressly account for all of the different provocations, interpretations, and thematic overlapping in these rich works. Ultimately, I simply aim to establish a baseline understanding of the function of *fascination* through individual paths of thematic reflection in each case.

PART 1: CONFLICTS OF ETHICS

In this section, I aim to demonstrate the *fascination* that can be produced from the conflict of mutually exclusive or equally valid ethical codes in conflict with one another. This theme can generate both emotional and ethical/intellectual dissonance in audiences by playing their emotional or ethical investments against one another, or by exposing the contradictions within one's own system of thought. I believe that this theme that would have similar effects across different cultures throughout time and space, and for this reason I will examine texts from three distinct societies and time periods: Sophocles' *Antigone* (c. 441 BCE, Athens), the *Mahabharata* (c. 400 BCE – 400 CE, India), and Marquis de Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795, France). Although these works share themes with other sections, and even further issues that I do not account for here, I will be demonstrating *fascination* according to the "conflicts of ethics" because I believe it is particularly visible in these texts. In each case, the text offers two irreconcilable systems of ethics, with each one carrying some validity. While the authors' attitudes or even their characters may ultimately fall to one side or the other, the texts play on the fact that their audiences would likely feel emotional attachment to both sides, and thus feel discomfort or even tragedy when one is ultimately chosen over the other.

In *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, libertine morality is contrasted to the common ethics of mainstream French society; nevertheless, Sade presents the libertine position with rationality and logic via the discourse of his characters.

Writing in 1795, in a moment where the revolutionary ideals of the Enlightenment were being applied to French society, Sade argues through Dolmancé and Madame Saint-Ange that his radical libertine philosophy is grounded in similarly rigorous logic rather than depravity. Emphasizing the correlations between pleasure, violence, and pain, the text asserts (and demonstrates) that violence is good because the human body is built for pleasure and violence can give pleasure to the perpetrator. As such, the text exposes to the audience that sound logic does not necessarily make for good ethics, and provokes readers to rethink their faith in Enlightenment ethics. Sade, of course, actually believed that the ethics in the story were righteous, but by playing on taboo, his work does more to expose ethical paradoxes rather than actually converting readers to libertines.

In the *Mahabharata*, divine logic is contrasted with terrestrial notions of honor in a wartime context. The *Bhagavad Gita* section of the epic, occurring just before the beginning of the climactic Kurukshetra War, details the dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna in divine form. While Krishna explains to Arjuna that the most righteous way to act is to give himself fully to Krishna and to act without regard to results, he ultimately pushes Arjuna to slay his bitterest rival dishonorably, while he is unarmed and with his back turned. At the same time, while the *Bhagavad Gita* preaches detachment from the world and devotion to Krishna's higher cosmology, the larger text nevertheless relishes in particularly graphic and brutal descriptions of the violence of the battle. The text thus tests

the limits not only of its characters, but also of its readers in their commitment to following the “highest” ethic even when it violates a more tangible morality.

Finally, in *Antigone*, Creon’s notion of public/state ethics, which forbids the burial of Polynices, is placed in direct opposition to the idea of the familial duty to honor the dead, which is supported by Antigone, the citizens of Thebes, and ultimately the gods themselves. While the play is tragic because Creon cannot see the error of his judgment (and thus sets in motion multiple unnecessary deaths), contemporary audiences might find Creon’s position logically valid. Thus, even though Creon plays the role of the villain, his ethical position is not necessarily villainous. Like many sympathetic villains, his aims for the common good are noble and just in principle, but his stubbornness and refusal to consider the personal/emotional impact of his decree are what condemn him to villainy. Thus, while the characters may be considered good and evil (or perhaps more accurately, good and tragically misguided), the tension between the two ethical codes is never fully reconciled and would leave audiences with a sense of tension and dissonance. I believe this would resonate especially with contemporary audiences, for whom the collective importance of the state as an entity may be more sympathetic.

I therefore aim to demonstrate that the violence in each of these works is bound up with the ethical issues on either side of the conflicts. While the violence represents the climax of these ethical tensions, it often contributes to a greater sense of dissonance and never fully resolves anything. When an audience identifies with or is attached to both sides of a conflict, and one side ultimately

destroys the other, it does not simply direct glory and righteousness to the victor; rather, it amplifies the sense of sympathy and sorrow for the vanquished. Thus, while violence has great expressive and emotional power as an absorbing and thrilling manifestation of conflict, it is also filled with even greater tension and further provocations to disentangle through reflection. While this general phenomenon is true of the other issues as well, like “cycles of violence” and “horror,” the context of the violence in these works suggests both reflections on the texts as well as reevaluation of one’s own ethical beliefs.

PHILOSOPHY IN THE BEDROOM

The Marquis de Sade’s *Philosophy in the Bedroom* tackles the themes of pleasure and pain, violence, and vice with pride. Rather than lead us into the darkness of this vicious and unethical world, he illuminates it and brings us on a tour of libertine philosophy. Above all, the text is a philosophical dialogue (albeit, interspersed with pornographic scenes of sadomasochism), applying the revolutionary principles of Enlightenment thought to a social sphere that remained largely unchanged from its earlier norms: the bedroom. However, beginning with sex and corruption, the dialogue in the text expands to assert a fully-formed and radically new moral philosophy of selfishness, destruction, and independence meant to shock even the most progressive sensibilities. Though Sade’s other works tapped into and depicted this philosophy in action, Sade attempts in this text to justify and make his readers understand libertinage through logic and reason, as well. Sade uses his characters to analyze human

nature and the roots of desire that give rise to human captivation, heightened sensations, and intense connection to violence, sexual extravagance, and the violation of traditional morality.

One of the first themes that the text addresses is that of corruption. Dolmancé admits early on that he will take two pleasures in the coming activities with Eugénie and Madame Saint-Ange: “that of enjoying these criminal lecheries myself, and that of giving the lessons, of inspiring fantasies in the sweet innocent I am luring into our nets.”²⁷ The role of corruption is essential here, because it sets up an idea that is repeated throughout the text – Dolmancé, Madame Saint-Ange, and the others derive a specific type of pleasure from violating the traditional and established social norms. Although they will assert a philosophy that abandons the conventions that popular society still holds so dear, part of their excitement and pleasure comes from their recognition of the taboo. This is also the hook to absorb the audiences – it suggests an upcoming extraordinary spectacle, which may be compelling precisely because it is unethical.

“What pleasure you will find in corrupting her, in stifling within this young heart every seed of virtue and of religion planted there by her tutors!”²⁸ says Madame Saint-Ange. This corruption of Eugénie represents a battleground for two opposing moral philosophies, the traditional and the libertine, and her moral compass is thus an object to be conquered and controlled in the same way

²⁷ Marquis de Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, trans. Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse, (New York: Grove Press, 1990), digitized and typeset by Supervert32 Inc., https://itp.nyu.edu/classes/germline-spring2013/files/2013/01/philosophy_in_the_bedroom.pdf, 7.

²⁸ Sade, *Philosophy*, 7-8.

as her body. Converting her to the ways of libertinage, to the unethical, is an act of rebellion against society, and through her process of conversion the text allows the audience to explore these taboo themes and understand them from a new perspective, as if it were a debate between different ethics each defending their validity. From the beginning, the text will provoke reflection on the audience's own ethics, but the intermittent scenes of sexual depravity also absorb the readers.

“It would be impossible to find a better man: irreligion, impiety, inhumanity, libertinage spill from Dolmancé's lips...”²⁹ says the Chevalier, and it is worth noting that he describes Dolmancé's merits as direct opposites to the conventional virtues. Unlike claims of inhumanity, irreligion, and impiety in other texts, these are not vices or insults that connote danger, scorn, and revulsion. Instead, the libertines illuminate these qualities and announce them proudly, because they have examined them thoroughly enough to maintain a sound moral philosophy behind them. On my reading, this would generate an immediate moral discomfort in an audience that holds different moral values and conceptions of virtue, but would also absorb them by capturing their interest in the actions of this moral code.

The use of mirrors is especially interesting to illustrate their attitude – Dolmancé demands that a series of mirrors be set up around Madame Saint-Ange and Eugénie so that he can see everything that happens. This motif, offering the ability to see every angle of the action, also reflects the total

²⁹ Sade, *Philosophy*, 8.

understanding and rationality that the libertines use to justify and support these actions. The Chevalier's comment also demonstrates that the libertines define themselves against popular morality, which suggests a paradox. This binary reinforces the strength of popular morality and the power of the taboo, since violating it gives them such intense pleasure; however, while they derive such pleasure from the secrecy of their actions, perhaps out of necessity, they still assert that the libertine pursuit of selfish pleasure would make the ideal society. As such, the text also positions the audience as a player in the debate by manifesting their moral beliefs as the norm it rallies against. In short, the work appeals to the ethical binary that has created the conditions for them to explore the taboos. Therefore, the bedroom is the secret (and thereby sanctioned) space in which libertine morality can rein freely, giving these characters permission to explore depravity.

Although they don't actually believe that their actions are taboo, the awareness of what others would think allows them to enjoy their acts not only in themselves, but also as "depraved" and therefore socially charged. This opposition of concealed bedroom morality and exterior public morality creates a binary in which these characters can play by crossing the boundaries. It establishes an abstract meta-narrative in which they are allowed to play two parts, including the role of the deceiver. Madame Saint-Ange even says, "I do not work as a whore, I always play as one. Better still, I love thus to be named when I am fucked: 'tis a vilification that fires my brain."³⁰ The bedroom is a

³⁰ Sade, *Philosophy*, 21.

space of play in which social norms may be freely violated without repercussion. The role of secrecy and concealment within the enclosed walls of the bedroom is key, and mass society still holds enough power to add a new dimension to their pleasure; it raises the stakes of their actions knowing that it would cause scandal (and criminal charges). What's more, "Tis sweet to scandalize: causing scandal flatters one's pride, and though this be a minor triumph, 'tis not to be disdained."³¹ Madame Saint-Ange acknowledges that word is a vilification, meaning that she understands and still enjoys the scandalous nature of her acts. This vilification also seems to set a narrative structure to their actions, one in which they can play at violating public morality (since a whore is a public figure) without actually revealing themselves. The narrative of transgression gives the actions their illicit charm, and the bedroom offers a safe space to explore the pleasures it brings. Not only do they do these acts because they feel good, but also because their classification as taboo makes them all the more powerful. Such discussion provokes audiences to reflect on their own moral beliefs and even to look into themselves in search of deep desires that they may share with the libertines.

The pleasure of the taboo is based in the relationship between the two moralities, and how the dominant one is subverted. "Have done with virtues!" says Dolmancé. "Among the sacrifices that can be made to those counterfeit divinities, is there one worth an instant of the pleasure one tastes in outraging

³¹ Sade, *Philosophy*, 54.

them?”³² Again, the libertines find pleasure in outraging the common sensibilities, which seem to be perpetually present, even in the bedroom where libertine morality reigns, and even as the libertines speak out in opposition. For the audience, this would also be interpreted as a personal outrage against them, assuming they share those common sensibilities. Again, this opposition of the two moralities creates a narrative of transgression, and this story allows the characters to explore their sexuality under more intense circumstances i.e. in opposition to real, dominant notions of decency. According to Dolmancé, “we fearlessly prefer the scorn of men if the actions which excite it are for us sources of even the mildest voluptuousness.”³³ In other words, the scorn of others raises the intensity of the actions and makes them that much more enticing. The violation and rebellion themselves are enticing because society relies on conformism; rebellion is therefore an act of destruction, and as such, is a powerful force that these characters yearn to feel and wield. Yet this discussion of scorn invites the audience to continue watching and to actively scorn them. It therefore absorbs by engaging them morally and requesting their investment.

Libertine moral philosophy essentially boils down to the pursuit of individual pleasure. Crime, dishonor, cruelty, and just about every moral offense turn out not to be offensive at all, but rather should be encouraged so long as they provide pleasure to whomever commits them. Dolmancé explains that humans are defined by their desires and, since Nature has built us with bodies capable of experiencing pleasure, that pleasure is the highest good. He believes

³² Sade, *Philosophy*, 21.

³³ Sade, *Philosophy*, 38.

that the excitement of the intellect and the nerves by mental or physical stimuli give way to pleasure. Thus, “imagination is the spur of delights.”³⁴ And as it turns out, “what is of the filthiest, the most infamous, the most forbidden, ‘tis that which best rouses the intellect,”³⁵ and thus cause the greatest pleasure.

By allowing this imagination to stray, by according to it the freedom to overstep those ultimate boundaries religion, decency, humaneness, virtue, in a word, all our pretended obligations would like to prescribe to it, is it not possible that the imagination’s extravagances would be prodigious?... Well, is it not by reason of the immensity of these extravagances that the imagination will be the more inflamed?... If that is so, the more we wish to be agitated, the more we desire to be moved violently, the more we must give rein to our imagination; we must bend it toward the inconceivable; our enjoyment will thereby be increased.³⁶

Imagination is the first thing to transgress and violate the social codes, which paves the way for more and more unethical ideas to flow and rouse the mind. These “unethical” or “immoral” actions are *fascinating* to us because they are charged with inherent power and intensity, which has a strong effect on our minds and bodies. Violence is one major example with its destructive power, and therefore occupies an important role in libertine sexual pleasure (which they will demonstrate as the text progresses). This also illustrates the relation of the text to its audience – the text provokes imagination of such extreme scenes in the reader’s mind and thus moves them instinctually, despite their ethical beliefs.

³⁴ Sade, *Philosophy*, 39.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Sade, *Philosophy*, 41.

Pleasure is derived from excitement and captivation, and the more intense the stimulus, the stronger the pleasure: “We wish to be roused, stirred... Taking our departure from this point, it is not a question of knowing whether our proceedings please or displease the object that serves us, it is purely a question of exposing our nervous system to the most violent possible shock.”³⁷ In moral terms, this means that we should pursue our pleasures by any means, regardless of how it may affect others, even if it causes them pain. In fact, the pain of another can contribute to one’s pleasure. Cruelty is natural according to Dolmancé, as humanity has emerged from a “primitive state of perpetual strife and destruction for which Nature’s hand created us, and within which alone it is of advantage to her that we remain.”³⁸ We are made to be cruel and cruelty inherently excites us, and in this view we should embrace this aspect of human nature. “Destruction, hence, like creation, is one of Nature’s mandates,”³⁹ and in order to explore and experience that side of nature, there must be destruction.

“It is always by way of pain one arrives at pleasure.”⁴⁰ By inflicting pain, Dolmancé is delighted. The act of flogging, screams of pain, and the sight of blood all excite his nerves with great intensity; he brings his imagination’s wildest fancies to fruition. By inflicting pain, he can come closer to it, connect with it, and understand its part in the human experience. Through the power of imagination, the same could even happen to the audience, absorbing them in

³⁷ Sade, *Philosophy*, 54.

³⁸ Sade, *Philosophy*, 55.

³⁹ Sade, *Philosophy*, 73.

⁴⁰ Sade, *Philosophy*, 77.

the extreme spectacle. But not only will Dolmancé enjoy pain in itself, but he will also experience feelings of power and control:

What is it one desires when taking one's pleasures? that everything around us be occupied with nothing but ourselves, think naught but of us, care for us only. If the objects we employ know pleasure too, you can be very sure they are less concerned for us than they are for themselves, and lo! our own pleasure consequently disturbed. There is not a living man who does not wish to play the despot when he is stiff... he would like to be the only one in the world capable of experiencing what he feels... by causing them to hurt he experiences all the charms a nervous personality relishes in putting its strength to use; 'tis then he dominates, is a tyrant; and what a difference is there for the amour propre!⁴¹

This feeling of total domination and selfishness gives rise to great pleasure, according to Dolmancé, and allows him to play at an extreme elevation of his ego. It is a transcendent experience of selfish will that is rarely explored in life, and as a result it is exciting and titillating for him. It also provokes the audience to reflection, comparing themselves to Dolmancé's sketch, and thus throwing their own morals into question. Nevertheless, Dolmancé seems to equally enjoy having pain inflicted on him. He delights in the feeling of being flogged while he himself flogs another. Again, the scene is violent and evocative, and will rouse the reader to either intense repulsion or frenzied attraction – either way, it is powerful. Like Sontag's analysis of violent works, it continues to challenge the audience to look, and whatever their response, it always provokes a strong reaction.

Dolmancé's philosophy acknowledges that pleasures are fleeting, and for that reason, humans perpetually seek them. This is the origin of desire. And

⁴¹ Sade, *Philosophy*, 126.

when one's desires are fulfilled, "the subsequent annihilation conducts them to disgust, soon to contempt."⁴² However, he also asserts that for this reason, love does not last.

What is love? One can only consider it, so it seems to me, as the effect upon us of a beautiful object's qualities; these effects distract us; they inflame us; were we to possess this object, all would be well with us; if 'tis impossible to have it, we are in despair. But what is the foundation of this sentiment? desire. What are this sentiment's consequences? madness.⁴³

While it is an intense feeling of desire, it is fleeting, since once we possess it, the desire vanishes and we desire more. It is a Goetheian definition of love, but it does not diminish the power of desire. Even if it is temporary, desire and love are the strongest forces propelling human will. The philosophy is reminiscent of Epicurus, although the conclusions are almost opposites: instead of stoically moderating pleasure to maximize comfort and minimize pain, the libertines chase after every pleasure they can and even explore the limits of pain in extreme and unnecessary acts.⁴⁴

The role of beauty is also prominent in the text, as the quote above illustrates. The qualities of a beautiful object impress exciting sensations on the mind and arouse the intellect in enticing ways. This applies to humans and bedroom behavior, too. Throughout the text, Dolmancé organizes and composes

⁴² Sade, *Philosophy*, 49.

⁴³ Sade, *Philosophy*, 81.

⁴⁴ "By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking-bouts and of revelry, not sexual lust, not the enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produce a pleasant life; it is sober reasoning, searching out the grounds of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest tumults take possession of the soul." – Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, trans. Vincent Cook, (*Epicurus.Net*, Dec. 1996), <http://www.epicurus.net/en/menoeceus.html>

scenes of libertinage with the eye of a painter or a sculptor – he stands back to appreciate the scenes before him and takes pride in the scenes he’s created even before he enters them. Although their lustful desires may be considered physical and base, the organization of bodies reflects an intellectual and formal element of pleasure in their actions. He is like a sculptor creating a frieze that pleases his mind, but who then enters the scene himself to participate in the physical pleasure. In this way, Dolmancé parallels Sade himself – the content of the text is violent and base, and therefore emotionally moving to either discomfort or frenzied attraction, yet its philosophical logic, organization, and structure are all intellectually satisfying.

Even though the libertines bear their morality openly to one another and understand it with clear, rational thought, the notion of mystery still lends intensity and attractiveness to their actions. Their philosophical understanding of pleasure and pain is one thing, but the experience of them is something wholly different. Even for all the expletives and visceral details of their sexual exploits, the experience is still best described as “sensation impossible to depict.”⁴⁵ It thus intrigues and provokes imagination on the part of the audience to feel those sensations as they read, even if they find their actions morally abhorrent. Libertine morality justifies their actions and the audience’s imagination, and philosophy can even explain the origins of their desires and sensations, but the experience of their fulfillment offers them a chance to explore the unknown. The bedroom becomes a ritual space, concealed from the

⁴⁵ Sade, *Philosophy*, 19.

public, in which individuals can explore the mysteries of the body and (literally) probe its hidden secrets. Dolmancé himself describes the anus as the “mysterious sanctuary”⁴⁶ in which the libertine seeks enjoyment.

Finally, *Philosophy in the Bedroom* acts on two levels: not only does it seek to explain and defend their infatuation with what polite society calls immoral, but the text also allows readers to explore these themes and live vicariously through the characters. As a work of philosophy, it is illuminating for our understanding of these themes, but as a work of literature, it is a space to put these themes on full display and experience them from a distance. Readers can become absorbed in the story and the actions just as much as they can analyze the philosophy it asserts, and one often gives way to the other. The end, especially, is a vicious orgy of violence, violation, and cruelty against an innocent woman, yet this is the climax that the sex and philosophy have been building to throughout the entire text. This naked cruelty confronts readers with the manifestation of the libertine’s logical philosophy, which is a major shock to readers especially given its parallels to Enlightenment thought. Yet in another way, reading these scenes of violence and cruelty may also satiate the audience’s own curiosity towards these themes, leaving them with a sobering catharsis of violent satisfaction yet doubt in their own ethical selves.

⁴⁶ Sade, *Philosophy*, 14.

BHAGHAVAD GITA

The *Bhagavad Gita* is one of the oldest and most important Hindu texts, synthesizing a tradition of varying beliefs into a unified cosmology and ethical code. Set within the larger story of the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavad Gita* is a dialogue between the highest divinity, Krishna, and one of the story's mythical protagonists, Arjuna, while the *Mahabharata* is an epic narrative of the struggle between two families of the ruling Kuru clan and their competition over the throne. The rivalry culminates in the mythical Kurukshetra War, pitting relatives, teachers, and friends against one another. As the two sides line up to begin the battle, Arjuna, the righteous warrior-prince of the Pandava family, finds himself in a crisis of self-doubt and refuses to fight. At this moment, Arjuna's divine friend, Lord Krishna, flies him up in a chariot between the two armies and tries to bolster his will to fight. The *Bhagavad Gita* is the recital of this conversation – Sanjaya, an advisor to the blind king of the opposing Kaurava side of the conflict, narrates the dialogue in real time.

Krishna attempts to show Arjuna the right way to behave in battle and to justify his responsibility to fight and kill his friends and relatives. The dialogue captures the anxiety leading up to the battle at first, but quickly shifts to higher spiritual realms as Krishna and Arjuna ascend above the battlefield. War is the clear question that sparks the conversation, but it is almost immediately sidelined. In the context of the *Mahabharata* at large, the war and the tension would be a looming specter over their dialogue, yet Krishna barely discusses the righteousness of the Pandavas' cause at all. Rather, the dialogue focuses on

higher cosmological ideas about righteousness in general and detachment from action – while readers understand that this is directly applicable to Arjuna’s circumstances, the *Bhagavad Gita* reaches beyond the violent context to establish an ethical code for human life at large. Yet Krishna’s advice to Arjuna and the revelation of his divine knowledge also functions as a reflective commentary on the ethics of the *Mahabharata* itself.

As the battle is about to begin, the text sets the stage for an intense climax to the conflict within the Kuru clan. Family and friends are lined up on the battlefield against one another and horns are blown to signal the offensives: “That sound shattered the hearts of the sons of Dhritarashtra, and indeed, the tumult caused the heaven and earth to resound.”⁴⁷ These sounds and the description of the two armies mount the tension surrounding this decisive battle. On my interpretation, readers would be absorbed into the scene and feel the same anxiety towards the coming events that the characters do. Even reading the *Bhagavad Gita* alone without the rest of the context of the *Mahabharata*, one can feel the tension and urgency of the upcoming violence. Audiences would be quickly seduced into this state of anxiety, understanding the consequences that this battle will have on the trajectory of the epic, but also nervous for the individual characters’ fates. With so much riding on the outcome, the idea of this climactic violence becomes a source of suspense and a manifestation of the conflicts that have built throughout the text.

⁴⁷ Graham Schweig, trans., *Bhagavad Gita*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007), 26.

The war is powerful because it strikes audiences at both a literary and ethical level – not only does this have massive significance for the characters they've grown attached to, but it also represents the manifestation of their own ethical beliefs towards the two sides as well as their ethical beliefs about the larger Hindu cosmology. In fact, the religious element of the text deepens the level of attachment and investment in the events of the epic. This moment where the tensions come to a head provokes the audience to cast their support for the righteousness of one side or the other, but of course, ethical feelings are not so simple as to support everything on a single side entirely without reservation. As in many wars and in most powerful works of art there are good and evil on both sides, yet people understand that even if the better side wins, it will still spell the end for some of the good individuals that just happened to be on the wrong side of the conflict. Thus, the context not only builds a literary tension, but an ethical tension as well by attaching us to characters that must oppose one another due to morally gray circumstances.

Yet this is exactly why the *Bhagavad Gita* comes at this moment – even before the battle, this philosophical and religious dialogue offers us a chance to reflect (through a Hindu lens) on this ethical discomfort. Arjuna is the one that gives voice to the readers' concerns – at this sound and at the sight of the armies, Sanjaya reports that Arjuna has nearly collapsed:

Filled with deep compassion... Seeing my own relations, O Krishna, standing nearby ready to fight, my limbs are sinking down and my mouth has become very dry... My bow, Gandiva, falls from my hand and even my skin is burning... my mind seems

to be reeling. And I perceive signs of chaos... I foresee no benefit to slaying my own relations in battle.⁴⁸

Arjuna even admits that he “do[es] not desire victory”⁴⁹ if it means destroying his loved ones. Tormented by the mounting pressure and tension, he cannot reconcile his distinct ethical duties as a warrior and as a family member/friend. While the Kaurava *cause* might be unrighteous, there are undoubtedly good and virtuous Kauravas that he must fight against. While their ethical codes command them to support opposing sides, they still recognize one another’s virtues.

This is a theme that applies throughout nearly all wars – most conflicts are often morally gray, and even if one is on the more morally unjust side, they often have good reason to be. World War II movies often depict Allied troops as defenders of righteousness and freedom against the evil Nazi regime, and while this is true in a political sense, authors and audiences seldom give much thought to humanity of the average conscripted Axis troop. The *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Mahabharata* are such powerful texts because they confront us with violence within a clan rather than between two distinct countries. It allows audiences to see the reasons for the split between the families and the virtues of the individuals on either side, so when the competition finally reaches its explosive conclusion, they will understand the moral nuances on either side – and this makes the results far more devastating, no matter what the outcome, to watch these families torn apart.

⁴⁸ Schweig, *Bhagavad Gita*, 27.

⁴⁹ Schweig, *Bhagavad Gita*, 28.

After Arjuna laments his duty to fight these loved ones and expresses his inability to even lift his bow, Krishna brings him into his chariot and ascends above the battlefield with him to dole out an ethical pep talk. Krishna literally rises above the circumstances of the battle and lays out the Hindu cosmology for Arjuna, revealing his divinity and enlightening Arjuna on ethical behavior according to this view. To paraphrase, Krishna describes the cycle of reincarnation, explaining that while Arjuna's opponents may perish, they will be re-embodied until they attain oneness with Brahman. Since life itself is impermanent, and since all lives are simply embodiments of one unchangeable universal spirit, Arjuna should not refuse to fight on the grounds that he does not want to kill these people – since no matter what he does, he cannot truly kill their essence as it is connected to the ultimate spirit. “These bodies, said to have an end, belong to the embodied, which is eternal,”⁵⁰ Krishna explains. Death is certain for all living beings, so Arjuna “ought not to grieve”⁵¹ even if this death is brought by his own hands.

What's more, Krishna counsels Arjuna to maintain a firm resolve in his actions, but explains that he must do so without attachment to the results of his actions. He should “act... the same in happiness and suffering, gain and loss, victory and defeat, then prepare for battle – thus [he] shall not suffer misfortune.”⁵² Krishna explains that actions are the results of cosmic forces that flow through people and are manifested in them, and thus Arjuna should act as

⁵⁰ Schweig, *Bhagavad Gita*, 40.

⁵¹ Schweig, *Bhagavad Gita*, 43.

⁵² Schweig, *Bhagavad Gita*, 45.

a conduit for these forces without regard for what the results may be. Detachment from the impermanent world is thus paramount in ethical action. What's more, Arjuna should forget his earthly attachments and give himself fully to Krishna in order to attain the highest spiritual form. Yoga, he explains, is the divine love between a devoted follower and Krishna himself, and it is the ultimate ethical code of action to follow Krishna without a sense of personal possession. "By me these very men have already been slain - Merely be the instrument, O Masterful Archer [Arjuna],"⁵³ Krishna says. Again, one should act the same in happiness, suffering, victory, and defeat if one is to break the cycle of reincarnation. In effect, Krishna puts the battle into a cosmological perspective, reminding audiences not to get too attached to the conflict, but perhaps also justifying the carnage that is about to occur. Ultimately, Arjuna *should* fight, and he should even do so without grief for those that he kills. Krishna's high-minded cosmology seeks to undo the personal connection with the results of one's actions, which gives Arjuna a justified pass for killing his loved ones. However, while Krishna appears to offer a solution to Arjuna's conundrum, it is unclear whether the reader can truly reconcile these ideas.

What the *Bhagavad Gita* section presents to the reader is not just a Hindu cosmology, but also a challenge to overcome one's emotional and ethical judgments of the battle. Krishna attempts to persuade Arjuna, and therefore the reader, that the upcoming violence is ethically righteous, and that we should not grieve for the loss of life. But while audiences should be able to recognize the

⁵³ Schweig, *Bhagavad Gita*, 160.

logic of Krishna's counsel, they are also forced to reflect on the narrative as we read it. It puts readers on alert against their own emotions, constantly catching themselves whenever they find themselves mourning the violence. But above all, this challenge seems to pit minds against hearts, what readers know of Krishna's counsel to be true against what they cannot help but feel for the characters. The text provokes them into putting ethical judgments on the characters, identifying with them, and investing their emotions in their well-being – in some ways they cannot help but become absorbed in the story when the text forces them to invest ethically in the characters. This absorption through emotional response constitutes a major part of the aesthetic experience of the work. However, reconciling the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* with these complex ethical dilemmas is what makes it particularly *fascinating*. There are two ethical codes at play in the work – the personal ethic of family and loving attachment, as well as the cosmological ethic of detachment and love of Krishna. While it does not make sense to distinguish them as public and private codes, they are nevertheless distinct ethical frameworks that force audiences to reconsider their own views of the story and their emotional responses to it. This tension and reflection constitute a major part of our *fascination* with the *Mahabharata*.

It is worth considering how the *Bhagavad Gita* ends and what comes next – once Arjuna is rejuvenated and willing to pick up his bow again, the books that follow detail scenes of carnage, destruction, and death as the battle rages for *weeks*. With every passing day, the books record the deaths of the major characters and their conduct in battle. The fight between Arjuna and

Karna, the bitterest rivals in the epic, is particularly tense given the context of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Their battle, to which an entire book of the *Mahabharata* is devoted, is savage, yet enticing with rich, vivid detail cataloguing their violent actions. For instance, Sanjaya narrates how,

Arjuna bored into Karna and, moving quickly, wounded him wherever he was vulnerable with many superb sharp arrows powerfully propelled with energy and care and launched from the arc of his might bow. Severely hurt... Karna was as radiant as a mountain crimson with ocher discharging crimson water over its cliffs.⁵⁴

While the language is poetic, it is also brutal and visceral, and thus appeals to the high intellectual sensibilities of the audience as well as their primal bloodlust and sense of excitement. As such, the use of language facilitates absorption in this climactic battle.

As the battle rages on, detailing each weapon and recording every volley of arrows, Krishna sees that Arjuna is in danger of losing. Although Krishna takes the position of a neutral party in the war, Krishna realizes that the only way for Arjuna to win is by dishonor, and he lays out a plan in which Arjuna must kill Karna while he is unarmed. It happens that Karna's chariot wheel becomes stuck in mud by divine intervention in the midst of their fight – Karna had just knocked Arjuna to the ground, but rather than finish him off, he goes to unstick his wheel – the honorable thing to do since Arjuna had lost his bow and was therefore unarmed. Doing so, he calls out to Arjuna, “Oh! Oh! Son of Pritha! Might Archer! Hold on for a second while I raise my swallowed wheel

⁵⁴ Adam Bowles, trans., *Mahabharata Book VIII – Karna II*, (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 485.

from the ground! You can see that the earth has swallowed my left wheel on account of divine fate, son of Pritha, so shun the deceit that's practiced by cowards!"⁵⁵ In short, he asks Arjuna for a time-out. The rules of warfare dictated that one must not fight an unarmed enemy, and Karna knows that Arjuna is aware of this. However, at this moment Krishna shouts to Arjuna to attack him while he has the opportunity: "So spoken to by the god, Arjuna then became angry. Recalling all those different things that Karna had done, [Arjuna] flew into a terrible rage. Due to his fury, king, flames of fiery energy then came forth from all his orifices. It was miraculous!"⁵⁶ This moment represents the climax of the battle, potentially the final blow, yet it violates the laws of war. Though Krishna's encouragement justifies Arjuna, it stains the incredible battle with dishonor. This violation is not simply unethical, but on my reading, would also disappoint the audience. Throughout the intense violence of the battle the two fighters have been evenly matched, yet Krishna compels Arjuna to cheat, leaving the audience without a fully satisfying end. Nevertheless, the text also glorifies the moment, ramping up Arjuna's rage and fury and exclaiming his "miraculous" image. As such, the text provokes a complex tension in the audience at this climactic moment – it provides even greater excitement, yet also disappoints. And in addition to this purely emotional tension, there is significant ethical tension in the moment, as well.

At this moment, two ethical codes once again butt heads – the code of conduct in war and the code of divine conduct – and there is an irreconcilable

⁵⁵ Bowles, *Mahabharata*, 487.

⁵⁶ Bowles, *Mahabharata*, 501.

tension between them. Krishna's teachings in the *Bhagavad Gita* justify Arjuna's battle against his friends and family by emphasizing detachment in action and a renewed focus on Brahman rather than individual lives. He tells the audience that the highest and most righteous behavior is to maintain this detachment while devoting oneself to Krishna – to act in accordance with him and to become a conduit for his will. However, in following Krishna's will, Arjuna violates the rules of war. The audience is caught between affirming Krishna's will and condemning Arjuna's behavior. Deceit is earthly, base, and dishonorable – not the kind of behavior readers expect from a hero, let alone a divinity. It creates discomfort in their opinion of the characters and adds a new moral dimension to Arjuna. While Krishna's logic affirms that he did the right thing by defeating the Kauravas according to Krishna's commands, there is still discomfort in the mutual exclusivity of Krishna's ethics with the values of the battle they are engaged in. This dissonance and tension provokes the audience to grapple with their esteem of the characters and ignite their own moral compasses – this is one of the major elements of *fascination*. Readers are awestruck by the powerful language of the climactic battle and the scenes of raw destructive power, but are also filled with angst by the outcome – they cannot wholly celebrate nor mourn, but are instead conflicted at once by their frenzied satisfaction with the battle, their disappointment with the circumstances of the end, a reevaluation of Arjuna's heroism, and the tension between Krishna's ethics and battlefield conduct. Ultimately, this moment is the key turning point in which the audience's absorption and vicarious excitement is confronted with

both an emotional and an ethical provocation for reflection – it is therefore a moment that produces *fascination*.

The result of this critical ethical moment is that Arjuna kills Karna in a particularly gruesome way. The text records that Arjuna decapitates Karna with an arrow, ending the battle suddenly and stopping both armies in their tracks. The text employs rich and violent metaphorical language again, but is more a sobering moment than a climactic and satisfying conclusion to a frenzy of bloodlust: “Lacerated by arrows and devoid of life, glorious Karna’s gigantic body collapsed with its wounds streaming like a massive mountain peak struck by lightning and flowing with red ochre tinged water.”⁵⁷ The audience’s reflection on the ethics of the battle breaks the spell of absorption and provokes them to consider the work on ethical and idealistic terms rather than viscerally relishing it. As a result, this moment that once would have been the cathartic climax becomes a moment of shock and sobering distaste – the transition from experiencing the text emotionally and evocatively to intellectually and ethically changes the interpretation of the events and thus the experience as a whole.

The *Mahabharata* offers a unique form of *fascination* due to the placement of the *Bhagavad Gita* in the plot. It comes at a tense moment in the overall story, but by no means in the heat of the action. In fact, the *Bhagavad Gita* enters the story as the stakes around the final battle are raised. The *Bhagavad Gita* therefore provides the audiences with reflective content even before it has the chance to absorb them. Yet although the order is switched, this

⁵⁷ Bowles, *Mahabharata*, 509.

actually makes the story especially compelling in a unique way. These ethical and ideas are subjects of reflection rather than absorption, yet by introducing them first (that is, re-ordering the two-step process of *fascination*) they stay in the back of the audience's mind throughout their absorption in the ensuing carnage. On this reading, the audience would thus be more receptive to ethical and reflective provocations of the violence, since they've been primed to bear these ideas in mind. In addition, these cosmological ideas amplify the reflective power of the ethical provocations by complicating the issues that arise in the heat of battle. Without the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna's violation of warrior ethics would still provoke reflection on the character and on Krishna's encouragement, but Krishna's ethical philosophy outlined in the dialogue adds greater nuance to Arjuna's actions; without the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna would have acted unethically for violating the battlefield ethics, but with the *Bhagavad Gita* he is simultaneously acting ethically and unethically – a far more difficult position to reconcile and thus one that provokes greater reflection. By including the *Bhagavad Gita* before the action rather than after, the audience is already primed to consider these issues in the moment, which adds to the immediate power of the provocation. As such, the *Mahabharata* provides a unique experience of *fascination* by highlighting the competing ethical codes even before the absorptive spectacle of destruction.

Arjuna's arc is only one of many throughout the *Mahabharata*, and while the *Bhagavad Gita* may offer us a framework to understand and come to terms with the complex ethical questions it poses, the tension is still tangible

throughout the epic. Even with this cosmic scale and the suggestion of detachment, it is unclear whether we can actually meet this challenge of separating our feelings from the characters and events. However, the philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita* actually raises the tension – by trying to bear Krishna’s teachings in mind and in our attempt to approach that ideal, we become all the more aware of our emotional and ethical responses to the rest of the epic. This complicates our ethical conundrum even more, and therefore provokes greater reflection on the work itself. This story of family rivalry, religious teachings, war, and destruction already has so much for a reader to consider, and the ethical questions raised in the *Bhagavad Gita* are only one element of *fascination* in a complex web of emotionally-moving events.

ANTIGONE

Sophocles’ great drama, *Antigone*, is driven primarily by moral tension, a tangled web of moral considerations that feed into and contradict one another. As a tragedy, it is effective in moving us to sorrow and anguish because we see the manifestation of this complex ethical maze and how actions in the gray area lead to disaster and ruin for all involved. The background to the events of the play set it up with high moral stakes that absorb the audience through their engagement in a moral dilemma, and in doing so lays a foundation of sorrow and grief that the events of the play compound.

Thebes has just faced in invading force, and while they won the battle, many lives were lost. From the beginning, the conflict is complex with varying

moral levels. On a state level, this victory itself is cause for both simultaneous celebration and grief. However, this intersects with the personal level of tragedy given that the battle was essentially a conflict between two brothers, which resulted in each one's death by the others' hand. This compounds the tension of the political/state response by adding the element of familial conflict and mutual destruction. Set against the model of what family is supposed to represent – loyalty, support, love, and honor – these events are seen as a result of arrogance and selfishness that unnecessarily destroyed a great family. In fact, even the background of the Theban civil war is wrought with familial strife – upon learning that he had married his own mother with whom he had four children, Oedipus blinds himself and curses his family. The family was therefore doomed to destruction from the start, and the play demonstrates how the curse unfolds, mounting tragedy upon tragedy until nothing is left.

The background of the play weaves a network of ethical questions, including the validity of the family structure if it is defined by incest, whether Oedipus was right to condemn his family, whether we should weep for both Eteocles and Polynices, and what is best for the city of Thebes. As such, the context of the play absorbs the audience by presenting ethical tensions and provoking them to invest their own moral judgments in it. Although this background is assumed knowledge for the audience, setting the play against these circumstances might immediately trigger ethical thought, which the play intensifies as it progresses.

When the play begins, the audience learns that Creon has assumed control of the city and proclaimed that Eteocles will be honored for defending Thebes and given a proper burial, even though he may have actually catalyzed the war by refusing to step down from power and allow his brother to assume control, as they had agreed. Meanwhile, Polynices will be dishonored and his body will be left outside without funeral rights as food for the animals. Whether this is just or not is dubious. In fact, the chorus tells Creon, “That is your decision... / As to the one who meant our city well / And the one who meant it ill.”⁵⁸ The audience themselves are forced to evaluate whether one of the two, both, or neither of the brothers should be honored, from a political perspective *and* from the familial perspective. From the outset, therefore, the audience engages with the play across a variety of ethical levels and thus immerses themselves both intellectually and emotionally in the complexity.

As the ruler of Thebes, Creon’s edict *does* make sense – politically, it might be wrong for the Thebans to honor an invader bringing war. However, Antigone’s logic also makes sense – she wants to honor both of her brothers to uphold her familial love, familial obligation, and familial honor. The tension of the play comes from the fact that both principles are logically sound and are morally sensible, but are irreconcilable. What’s more, both sides become more stubborn as the drama unfolds, which leads them both to utter ruin. By my reading, as these ethical codes come into conflict more openly and intensely, the audience will feel caught between the two sides in which they’ve invested ethical

⁵⁸ Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2001), 9.

judgments. Not only would they feel an intellectual conflict, but they would also feel emotional tension if they've identified themselves ethically with either of the sides. Thus, the audience would become more intellectually and emotionally absorbed via this moral conflict.

When Creon first hears that his edict has been disobeyed, he exclaims that he is "gorged with rage," and thus begins his descent into madness.⁵⁹ Although he does not know who buried Polynices, he believes the act to be an affront on his authority and on the stability of the city after the civil war. However, this fury and suspicion give rise to his own madness and poor judgment; he begins acting like a tyrant, assuming that this is part of a conspiracy, that the Watchman who told him of the event was motivated by money, and threatens to have him tortured. Creon's logical position, which made political sense at first, becomes less credible as his judgment is clouded by paranoia and rage. Nevertheless, as the dictator his word is law, and the audience would find themselves in the same position as Antigone if they also oppose him ethically. As such, this identification might provoke an even greater emotional connection to Antigone's plight, and draw a greater feeling of pathos from the audience.

Creon's confrontations with opposing forces, represented by Antigone, Haemon, and Tiresias, illustrate his descent into madness (and the disastrous results of his clouded judgment), as well as the equal validity of Antigone's moral decision to bury Polynices. When Antigone is first brought forward, her

⁵⁹ Sophocles, *Antigone*, 12.

exchange with Creon illustrates the tension between his moral outlook in conflict with other common moral codes. Antigone asserts that death and burial rites are in the domain of the gods, and Creon's denial of Polynices' funeral violates this ethical obligation. What's more, she explains that in her own moral view, she "cannot side with hatred. [Her] nature sides with love,"⁶⁰ that is, familial love. With this, she comes to embody the values of loyalty and family honor. And while Creon may have represented state logic and political values at first, his growing paranoia and rash judgments also make him a figure of madness and corruptibility. Though his political logic is sensible, the audience's identification with his moral side would become emotionally uncomfortable by association with Creon's manner. This conflict and dissonance would therefore add to the sense of tension and anxiety around the plot and raise the stakes on its resolution (or lack thereof).

When Haemon confronts his father later in the play, he is careful to choose ambiguous words so as not to enrage Creon. However, as their interaction progresses, with Haemon urging Creon to see the mass response to his condemnation of Antigone, we see the relationship between father and son deteriorate into a shouting match ending in public humiliation for both of them. The scene is a spectacle of tension, ramping up the suggestions of conflict until it explodes in open shouting at one another. While it is not physically violent, the scene represents a major fight between father and son, which may recall the disastrous results of previous Theban family struggles. Yet while Creon's

⁶⁰ Sophocles, *Antigone*, 22.

judgment is obviously blinded by madness and paranoia, he remains a morally gray character whose principles are, in and of themselves, sound and just. The tragedy is not simply that he is stubborn or that he has bad judgment, but that this madness came from such a logical and understandable place. The scene nevertheless demonstrates that Creon's edict is leading the characters on a path to ruin, and while the shouting offers some catharsis in itself, it also suggests further dissolution and ultimate disaster. Again, the audience would be absorbed by the palpable tension of their shouting match, and also be provoked to reflection by the ethical dispute in question. Already, the play may begin to provoke *fascination*.

The true tension of the drama lies in the intersection between the moral choices and their consequences – the two opposing positions are irreconcilable, but there is validity in each. And what's more, no matter what happens in favor of one side or the other, it will have serious consequences on the other side: Creon's edict denies the gods their right to Polynices' soul and the honor of his family; Antigone's burial of her brother violates Creon, and is thus, legally, a crime against the city and could upset its tenuous stability; Creon's death order against Antigone terrorizes and silences the citizens of Thebes, destroys his relationship with his son, and contributes to Haemon's death; Antigone's death leaves Ismene alone with no family, robs Haemon of his bride and contributes to his own suicide, thereby causing Eurydice's suicide, and resulting in Creon's own ruin. Clearly, the play offers great emotional drama for the audience, as the family structure is exposed as a house of cards that is easily toppled. With each

tragedy compounding and leading to another, the audience's emotions are stretched to the limits of their sorrow. Of course, the play also offers considerable subjects for reflection in the central ethical question – though Tiresias and the majority of Thebans support Antigone, Creon is still acting according to understandable and logical principles. Even if they side fully with Antigone and consider Creon's edicts and actions unjust, the play nevertheless demonstrates the disastrous results of bad judgment, and how madness can lead anyone to ruin, which, on this reading, displaces some of Creon's blame and makes him more of a tragic character doing what he thinks is right in all the wrong ways. The question is open to interpretation, but it certainly offers another compelling view of the story.

Yet while *Antigone* is driven by moral tension and acts as a litmus test on our own moral beliefs, it is also in large part an exploration of grief and human powerlessness in the face of social circumstances. The central issue in the play is a drama over funerary rites, set against the backdrop of a disastrous civil war. The citizens of Thebes are all coping with the losses of loved ones and heroes, and Antigone is certainly one among them. The only difference is that her grief and mourning are for the invader whose expedition cost the lives of many other Thebans. Regardless of whether Polynices' invasion was just or unjust, Antigone's personal grief is set in opposition to the collective grief of Thebes as a whole, at least according to Creon. But Polynices was himself an Athenian, and more importantly, he still has living Theban relatives. So even though he was a traitor to the city, we discover that the Thebans rally around Antigone in

support of Polynices' burial. It seems that the power of grief transcends political differences, even in a tender post-war moment. It would be understandable if the Thebans continued to carry resentment against Polynices for the destruction he brought on the city, and for them to side with Creon against Antigone. But the fact that popular opinion sways in her favor is indicative of the overcoming power of death and grieving. The citizens understand and identify with Antigone's familial obligation to her brother, setting aside the actions he's committed. She sees him as a brother rather than as an invader, and the citizens of Thebes believe that his status as a brother takes precedence over his side in the war. But more importantly, grief is for the living, not the dead; forbidding Polynices' burial does damage not just to his soul, but also to his family.

The Theban attitude towards death and grief can be summed up in Antigone's main argument against Creon, which is echoed by Haemon and Tiresias throughout the rest of the play: death and burial practices belong to the gods. Death and burial are sacred, and to deny someone's burial, even if they have fought against the city, is an offense to a higher power. As such, it casts Creon's poor judgment as hubris against Hades. But what this means for society as a whole, and for the audience, is that death is an incredibly powerful force, one which can have profound effects on individuals and their communities; as such, grieving and mourning are not just important, but necessary. This necessity operates on both an individual and collective level – it is not only a right, but also an obligation to the family to maintain honor. It is so important that Antigone is willing to sacrifice her own life to bury her brother. But her

death has consequences, too, leading to the suicides of Haemon and Eurydice who are unable to cope with their respective (preventable) losses. What is so tragic about *Antigone* is that the losses of life could have been avoided. Creon's edict may have been sensible, but had he listened to the reason of Antigone, Haemon, and the entire population of Thebes (via Tiresias), at least three deaths could have been prevented.

The other major consequence of saying that death is the domain of the gods is that it admits the powerlessness of humans in the face of it. *Antigone* portrays the struggle of individuals and community to cope with their losses and to recover from the circumstances that have befallen them. From the first moments of the play and all throughout, the characters proclaim their misery, from the aftermath of the civil war to the aftermath of Eurydice's death. The dialogues and monologues flesh out the anguish and misery that the characters feel. Because of this level of detail and powerful language in their speeches, the audience is invited to agonize with them. *Antigone* manifests a diverse array of human responses towards death, capitalizing on the sense of despair that follows a loss, and instilling this emotion in the audience as well as the characters. Creon's edict itself feels almost representative of death's reality – preventing any further contact with deceased. Although Antigone is trying to honor the dead, her true despair comes from the circumstances of Polynices' death, not his burial.

Ultimately, *Antigone* is about our living responses to death. It manifests the misery, interpersonal conflicts, and self-destruction that the death of a loved

one can bring on people. It is an effective piece of tragedy because it taps into the audience's latent interest with mortality. Each death is a tragedy, and the plot shows that death begets death, mounting tragedy on top of tragedy. This raises the stakes of the drama, creating greater tension to resolve it, and ultimately shows how this tension breaks, and the collapsed ruins it leaves. Viewers become absorbed and invested in the characters because the plot engages them morally, confronting them with compelling questions and showing everyone's ultimate fates. What's more, destruction and death befall every side of the drama, so there is room for moral dissent while still preserving the experience of the tragedy. As a result, the audience is able to confront utter despair, and by watching the conflict on stage, the individual both exercises their own emotional range while also exposing their own inherent beliefs to themselves – together, these visceral responses and reflective content make the work a tragic example of *fascination*.

Antigone thus illustrates many aspects of human nature – *fascination* with death and its gravity, the immense power of grief, tactics of coping with both death and conflict, human tendency toward self-destruction, the madness that can cloud judgment and lead to ruin, the sensations of hope, the power of our moral duties, the experience of despair, and even the propensity for chaos in the face of conflict.⁶¹ The play draws out the extremes of peoples' moral beliefs and taps into their sense of grief and despair. By so explicitly and often beautifully verbalizing anguish, the audience is absorbed into the experience of

⁶¹ Sophocles, *Antigone*, 10-11.

the characters' anguish, feeling real emotion towards the events of the play. The experience of any tragedy is an experience of pathos and sorrow, and its context as a work of theater positions this experience as aesthetic. This is the basis of catharsis – audiences desire to feel these emotions, even if they are emotionally draining, because they affirm their humanity and put them in touch with themselves.

PART 2: CYCLES OF VIOLENCE

“Cycles of violence” are another central issue in many masterpieces – often, violence either comes from or sets in motion a series of retributions or retaliations, which may leave the conflict in question in a perpetual state of flux and uncertainty. Although it can offer a powerful catharsis, it is rarely controllable. In fact, it often exceeds its capacity for regenerative thrill and instead becomes senseless destruction. As such, excessive violence can have a distancing effect on audiences and can provoke them to reflect on it rather than relish it. The moment where violence switches from this absorbing effect to the distancing and reflection is imprecise (as it may vary from person to person), and in some cases may actually be an afterthought. Thus, the “cycles of violence” may appear in a text at different times or at different stages of the aesthetic experience, and may provoke different sorts of *fascination* as a result.

In *Beowulf*, the “cycles of violence” issue enters the poem as a sub-story with the bard’s song of Finn and the Frisian, and only comes to prominence at the very end of the tale after the hero’s death. Throughout Beowulf’s life, his violence is glorified, celebrated, and honored. Yet this may be because he commits it against a two-dimensional enemy that embodies evil. Had he faced another human, one whom the audience may have had a chance to learn about, his glory might strike the audience differently. After all, as the bard’s story illustrates, glory in war is relative to which side one is on, and rather than putting an end to hostilities, violence often begets violence. When Beowulf

ultimately dies, his Danes are put in danger not from another evil creature, but rather from neighboring kingdoms. While the poem itself may represent the cathartic power of narrativized violence, it ends with a distancing effect which provokes one to wonder whether the glory was in vain, and even whether humanity's greatest enemy is actually humanity itself.

Macbeth deals with "cycles of violence" differently than *Beowulf*, although the two bear similarities in their placement within warrior cultures and the role of violence within it. The turn from glorified violence to uncomfortable brutality occurs early in *Macbeth*, as Macbeth's murder of King Duncan is presented as a highly unethical act of excessive violence. Yet while the play examines Macbeth's haunting sense of guilt, it also illustrates how Macbeth's first murder compels him to commit more and more unjust violence until he himself is vanquished; once he has committed the first act, further violence becomes necessary for him to maintain the status quo. As his murders mount, his guilt mounts as well, but he is set in a cycle to which he cannot put an end until he is killed, as well. The *fascinating* aspect of the play, however, is that it generates sympathy for Macbeth through his own remorse (a tacit acknowledgement of his wrongdoing, which indicates his desire to undo it). Thus, the audience might reflect on how evil is not unashamed of being evil, how "cycles of violence" are a survival mechanism, or perhaps how justice is contingent on context – the line between battle and murder is a thin one, and a society founded on systems of violence may be plagued by it from within.

Ultimately, both works exhibit “cycles of violence” in distinctive places and frame them differently. Initially, both works overlap in their positioning of their main character as a loyal warrior for whom violence is a way of life. But while *Beowulf* presents the issue as a somber reminder of humanity’s own ingloriousness and its danger to itself, *Macbeth* presents it simultaneously sympathetically and condemningly as a survival mechanism (one which may arise organically out of a culture of violence). Because they contain different content for ethical reflection, the “conflicts of ethics” and “cycles of violence” are distinct, but may still go hand in hand. Again, while I emphasize *fascination* on the grounds of this one issue for ease of illustration, in reality an audience may find multiple interwoven issues in a text. In *Antigone*, for example, I demonstrated the “conflict of ethics” central to the plot, but given the tragedy’s place in the larger context of Theban mythology, the work also embodies the tragedy of the “cycles of violence.” In these texts, however, there is less of a clear opposing ethical code in either case, although the argument may be made for the internal conflict within Macbeth’s character. In each case, ethical questions are ultimately central to the reflection as the audience works to disentangle their emotions towards the characters and explore their own ethical beliefs.

BEOWULF

Beowulf, the Old English poem of the titular Scandinavian hero, is a key example of the form of cultural production in which the extremities of violence and horror are both explored and embraced. While the conflict within the poem

is construed as a simple matter of good vs. evil (or human vs. monster), the clash between the two sides is meant to absorb the reader and create a sense of excitement and danger. However, it also demonstrates that in the heat of these climactic battles, the lines between good and evil become blurred and one side begins to resemble the other. Although the ethical codes within *Beowulf* are rather simple and straightforward when compared with the moral drama and questions of a work like *Antigone*, *Beowulf* captures the inherent human interest in the extremes of death, destruction, and violence, while also touching on more complicated notions of tragedy and human strife.

The poem begins with a call to the reader to “Listen!”⁶² as the story is laid out. The story begins with a genealogy of Hrothgar and his mead-hall Heorot before introducing the lurking danger that comprises the first conflict of the story: “Out on the moors, a bold demon / exiled from men and dwelling in darkness, / hated the sounds / of rejoicing and revelry loud in Heorot.”⁶³ The poem immediately identifies this ominous presence as distinctly inhuman – calling it a demon and an exile from men instantly positions it as something mysterious, dangerous, and evil. What’s more, we learn that he hates humanity:

He was a wretched creature / kin to all un-things, ogres and elves
and giants, / who fought a long time against the race of men. /
Helméd in darkness, / the shadow-creature crept toward Heorot /
to see how the Ring-Danes / fared after feasting and drinking.⁶⁴

⁶² Julie Boyden trans. *Beowulf - A Pagan Hero : A Modern Poetic Translation*, (New York, NY: Algora Publishing, 2014.) 31.

⁶³ Boyden, *Beowulf*, 35.

⁶⁴ Boyden, *Beowulf*, 36.

Throughout the text, monstrous enemies are identified by their inhuman qualities, which have a moral effect on the audience by distilling the conflict to a battle between human forces and inherently evil monsters. Unlike wars or conflicts between humans, there is no legitimate side to the demon's story; he is simply a manifestation of evil, and even if he does not commit evil deeds (which would be against his character, anyway) he is still outside of human ethical considerations.

We learn that the monster's name is Grendel, and he viciously attacks Heorot in the night, destroying the hall, killing thanes, and devouring their corpses. From here, word spreads around Scandinavia of Grendel's night attacks, and sorrow and death overcome the Danes. The poem describes the "woe and wailing [that] filled men's throats"⁶⁵ and captures the spirit of grief and tragedy around them. Suddenly a hero arrives at Heorot, boasting that he will undertake the glorious deed of defeating Grendel himself. Like nearly every narrative work that seeks to absorb its audience (and even like the Balinese cockfights), something must be done to raise the stakes of the upcoming challenge. Not only does Beowulf remind them that, without him, they "are doomed to darkness and grief,"⁶⁶ but he also announces that he will fight Grendel hand-to-hand without sword or armor. Scenes of boasting and bragging about past deeds and exploits follow, ramping up the tension, and finally it comes time for Beowulf to prove himself: Grendel returns that night to wreak havoc once again.

⁶⁵ Boyden, *Beowulf*, 36.

⁶⁶ Boyden, *Beowulf*, 44.

The text captures the intensity of the battle with vivid detail and poetic descriptions of the characters. Grendel is “full of rage” as he puts his hands on the door and tears them open. The poem does not shy away from graphic detail, and brings the reader into the heat of the horrifying action: Grendel “snatched a sleeping warrior and slashed unhindered, bit through bone-locks, drank vein-blood, and gorged great chunks.”⁶⁷ The gruesome detail both repulses and excites the audience, inviting them to imagine for themselves these scenes of carnage. Yet when Beowulf rises to fight Grendel, the poet makes interesting remarks about their battle: “Beowulf and Grendel battled full of rage and loathing,”⁶⁸ that is, the poet uses the same description for both of them. Not only does this paint the picture of their ferocity, but it also positions the two as equals despite their inherent differences in character and even species. While Beowulf is the glorious and honorable hero, he nevertheless fights the same way as Grendel, and his victory even parallels Grendel’s own mutilation of his victims: “A mortal wound / split open the monster’s shoulder. / Sinews sprang apart and bone-locks burst. / Beowulf was given war-glory, / fate had chosen him the victor.”⁶⁹

From here, the story goes on to describe Beowulf’s reception in the mead-hall the next day, detailing the festivities and gifts in his honor. A bard comes out to sing songs for the entertainment of the guests, and the poet records these stories within the poem. Yet these tales are more than mere additions to the

⁶⁷ Boyden, *Beowulf*, 65.

⁶⁸ Boyden, *Beowulf*, 66.

⁶⁹ Boyden, *Beowulf*, 68.

celebration – in fact, they are tragedies filled with details of family conflict, death, and cycles of destruction. The section of Finn and the Frisian is especially significant because it parallels the cycles of violence that leave the Geats in grave danger of invasion at the end of the poem. In this section, Hildeburh wails and laments the loss of her son and brother in a recent battle between Finn and Hengest – the two sides ultimately enter into a peace agreement, but the peace is extremely delicate. Within this sub-story, the audience is also placed face-to-face with death, since the bard spares no detail of the funeral pyre for the dead: “Heads melted, wound-gates burst when blood gushed out through all the hate-bites in the bodies.”⁷⁰ Ultimately, the peace breaks when Danish reinforcements arrive and Finn the besieger is killed while Hildeburh is returned to her people.

This episode within the story provides a striking contrast to Beowulf’s battles against the monsters throughout the text. Here, the conflict is *between* men, not pitting men against monsters. Both parties are human, and the story shows how humans themselves are equally capable of wreaking havoc and destruction on one another as the monsters are. It disrupts the black-and-white morality that the audience has encountered thus far, and seems to remind them that although they can be easily seduced by the righteous violence that Beowulf inflicts on Grendel, they should not forget that human conflict is also a major source of destruction and sorrow. Although the Scandinavian kingdoms in the poem are all warlike peoples, their way of life is comprised of the extremes of glory/victory and sorrow/death/defeat. What’s more, battles between humans

⁷⁰ Boyden, *Beowulf*, 83.

can feel like Beowulf's battle against Grendel – the righteous side against a purely antagonistic force – yet this episode reminds us of the humanity on both sides.

With this in mind, Grendel himself and the monsters that follow in the story come to occupy extremely important positions. On the surface, they represent inhumanity, monstrosities, and harbingers of destruction. In short, they are the manifestations of the dark forces that exist outside of the confines of society; Grendel and his mother are even identified as “exiles” at various points. However, “inhumanity” can be understood not only as referring to another species, but it could also refer to the qualities that we deem “inhuman” – that is, if humanity is defined by the virtues of our conduct, then inhumanity could be defined as all those actions or modes of being that contradict the ideals by which we identify. With this understanding, the monsters represent the dark sides of human nature itself. Thus, the monsters are the incarnations of the “inhuman” things we are capable of and the dark forces within us that society seeks to exile – Grendel is rage and hatred, Grendel's mother is either misogynistic views of women or unjust vengeance (a topic that will be addressed later), and the dragon is greed. These are all “inhuman” characteristics that many humans often embody, and the poem occasionally offers the audience a glimpse into how the humans share characteristics with the monsters. This struggle between human and monster is therefore not just a physical one, but also an inner one.

The next section of the poem returns to the story of Beowulf wherein we learn that “a fiend-avenger still lived, a loathsome wight full of long-held war-

grief — Grendel’s mother. The vile monster-queen, a wretched creature, mourned her demon spawn” and “greedy for slaughter, went forward / with grieving step to avenge her son’s death.”⁷¹ Grendel’s mother represents the drive for vengeance, which she enacts by attacking Heorot and killing Hrothgar’s favorite thane. While the audience is moved by Hrothgar’s loss, there appears to be little thought or pity for Grendel’s mother – she has suffered a loss, too, and while her offspring may have committed terrible crimes, it does not mean that she does not grieve.

Nevertheless, she is portrayed as a monster hell-bent on vengeance, but the notion of vengeance is also troublesome. Beowulf counsels Hrothgar after the attack that, “It is better to avenge a friend than to much mourn. Each of us must abide the end of our life in this world and strive after glory before death.”⁷² Vengeance itself can therefore be honorable, but it appears to be more a matter of perspective than an absolute – Beowulf’s vengeance is honorable and glorious because we assume the righteousness of his cause, but Grendel’s mother’s vengeance is disgraceful and evil because Grendel’s death was a retaliation against his violent aggression. Thus, vengeance itself is not the dark force, since it is an instinct that both the humans and the monsters seem to share; rather, it is vengeance without morality. We know that Grendel “did not mourn his deeds”⁷³ and had “no remorse”⁷⁴, which suggests a lack of a moral compass – thus he was right to be killed. But Grendel’s mother does not acknowledge her

⁷¹ Boyden, *Beowulf*, 90-1.

⁷² Boyden, *Beowulf*, 96.

⁷³ Boyden, *Beowulf*, 37.

⁷⁴ Boyden, *Beowulf*, 38.

son's wrongdoing and seeks vengeance for his death. What she comes to represent ultimately is the cyclical nature of violence – vengeance may be good, but it engenders more vengeance rather than peace. And as we see in Hrothgar's hall, the result is destructive.

Beowulf's fight against Grendel's mother switches the story back to the excitement and intensity of battle – he and a number of Danes chase her, searching for her lair to settle the score. He boasts again to the other thanes and the text records the details of the dangerous lands and the monsters that roam it. Finally, he daringly dives into the waters in his chase after her and they fight inside of her underwater cavern. The battle is vicious and tense: Beowulf's blade fails him and Grendel's mother almost bests Beowulf, except that Fate does not allow her dagger to pierce his chainmail. Finally, in a critical moment of high tension, Beowulf picks up a giant's sword and slays her, then brutally decapitates a barely-breathing Grendel and carries his giant head back to land.

When Beowulf returns to Heorot, the scenes parallel his victory over Grendel: in each case, he has a gruesome souvenir of Grendel's body (first his arm, now his head), there is revelry and celebration, words of honor and love from Hrothgar, and the bestowing of many gifts. Then, when Beowulf and his crew return to Wederas, Beowulf comments on the political situation of the Danes before launching into his own daring exploits. He explains that the peace between the Danes and the Heatho-bards is fragile, and although Hrothgar's daughter is meant to secure the peace by her marriage to Ingeld, the slightest comment about their past conflicts could set off the powder keg yet again. This

situation mirrors the story of Finn and the Frisian from earlier, except that the final cycle of destruction has yet to happen to the Heatho-bards. Nevertheless, it demonstrates how vengeance is a characteristic of all humans, and how vengeance and glory are a matter of perspective – violating the peace would be an act of aggression according to the Danes, but for the Heatho-bards it would be an act of vengeance for all the lives the Danes took in their last conflict.

Beowulf as a poem invites us to embrace its battles and all their splendid violence by presenting the titular character as a clear-cut moral hero doing glorious deeds; however, it also drops hints to remind us that our biggest enemies are not Grendel and the dragon, but rather our fellow humans, and that humans are just as major progenitors of destruction as these monsters. By constructing literal monsters to bring the violence and destruction, we have no qualms about allowing ourselves to be swept up in the battle and cheer for Beowulf's gruesome victories over these creatures. These monsters personify evil, and as such, the poet and the audience can explore their appetites for violence, mutilation, and gruesome destruction without regard to the humanity of the victims. Yet the poem also takes certain steps to remind the audience that humans are the source of these conflicts; they can embody these forces the same way the monsters do and bring the same kind of destruction – the only difference is that they have reasonable motives. The human propensity towards conflict is a major underlying theme throughout the text, and it suggests how cycles of vengeance repeat themselves. Nevertheless, *Beowulf* is also a study of the honorable side of humanity: it simultaneously provides solemn reflections

on age and decay, death, glory, sorrow, and greed – it explores a vast range of human emotions and attitudes towards the circumstances of life and struggle. At least the strife of the Danes allows us to explore grief.

The final section of Beowulf's story centers on his ultimate battle with the dragon. We learn that this beast has sat on a hoard of gold for some 300 years after it was left by the last survivor of a ruined society. The poem recounts how this last warrior returns the gold to the Earth now that all its owners have died: "Earth, the gold was taken from you by good men long ago, and after they had seen much hall-joy, war-death and life-murder took them each away."⁷⁵ Grieving his lost friends and full of sorrow, this survivor hides the hoard since he knows death is approaching, and when it does there will be no one left to enjoy it. As the last of his society, he wants to do away with this hoard for good. The dragon comes to watch over it soon after, and although this pile of gold was hidden away, the dragon represents a lurking danger.

The dragon is awoken one day when a servant accidentally stumbles upon the hoard while fleeing from the violent punishment of his master, and steals a jeweled cup to win his master's favor again. On a metaphorical level, this represents the reawakening of greed, and the dragon's subsequent attack on the town is the result. This final section takes place fifty years after the episodes with Grendel and his mother, so Beowulf is now an old king leading the Geats in a time of relative peace. Yet after this attack, Beowulf knows he must face Fate once more, now in the form of the dragon, and feels his death looming. He

⁷⁵ Boyden, *Beowulf*, 133.

assembles a cohort of thanes to fight the dragon and they track it down together. Recounting the story of his life, Beowulf tells his thanes about the tragic story of past Geat kings. The episode in his monologue deals with the results of an accidental fratricide and the sorrow and anguish of the father – when he dies from grief, however, the cycle of violence emerges again since the neighboring Swedes see the chance to attack when the community is weak. Beowulf therefore foreshadows his own death, not only in its sorrow, but also in the disastrous results that it may hold for the future of the Geats if they lose their leader. Nevertheless, he makes his final boast-speech and goes off to meet the dragon in combat, accepting whatever Fate has in store for him. Although he is the picture of bravery, honor, and trust in Fate, the poem constructs an aura of tragedy and sorrow around this final battle, since Beowulf's death at the hands of a monster will bring destruction on the Geats from a larger source – the Franks and Frisians.

Beowulf's fight with the dragon is another scene of violent intensity: "Though each death-minded foe was filled with dread toward the other, the war-king and the ring-coiled dragon were eager to meet the strife."⁷⁶ However, it ends up being a less-successful endeavor than his previous battles – his sword fails him multiple times and the dragon ultimately "clamped Beowulf's neck in his fiendish fangs and drenched him in blood and waves of gore."⁷⁷ Meanwhile, "Beowulf's war-band of faithful hand-companions and nobles' sons did not rush to stand with their lord in valor, but began to slink off into the forest to save

⁷⁶ Boyden, *Beowulf*, 148.

⁷⁷ Boyden, *Beowulf*, 155.

their lives.”⁷⁸ All but one, Wiglaf, run from the battle in fear. In a warrior culture and a society built on bonds of strength and loyalty in combat, this cowardice is radical – like the foreshadowing of the Geat’s uncertain future after Beowulf’s death, this fact signals the dissolution of society. Nevertheless, Wiglaf epitomizes loyalty and bravery, and with his help Beowulf is able to slay the beast before finally succumbing to his wounds.

Beowulf dies gazing on the dragon’s hoard and Wiglaf plunders the gold. When he returns to Wederas, he castigates the other thanes for abandoning their king and warns them that their cowardice will have serious results for the kingdom: “When nobles from afar learn of your flight and inglorious deed they will rush to attack and bring war to our nation. All of you, and your kin-clans, will be deprived of land-rights. Death is better for all men than a life of shame.”⁷⁹ This supposed collapse of society makes Beowulf’s death all the more tragic because it continues the cycle of violence that his reign had briefly stopped. But more significantly, it changes the form of the danger from a mysterious monster to a human threat.

While Beowulf’s battles may have satisfied an innate desire to explore violent and destructive themes, the poem leaves the audience realizing that the Geats might face destruction again very soon – but this time it will be at the hands of fellow humans rather than by a monster. In fact, it seems to confront the audience with the realization that humans pose a more consistent threat than the odd monster ever could. While monsters embody wrath, humans have

⁷⁸ Boyden, *Beowulf*, 150.

⁷⁹ Boyden, *Beowulf*, 163-4.

motives. And while monsters are often solitary, humans live in groups with collective memory (which keeps the cycle of vengeance turning). Beowulf's glory is absolute because he slays monsters rather than people – he is never the cause of sorrow or grief, but always of celebration, no matter where he goes. But the reality of his warrior society is different; glory is relative, because all the glory that one might win means as much sorrow for the loser – in this view, their way of life is founded on conflict, and life is nearly always at one extreme or the other. Whether it is the original audience or an audience in our vastly different society, the poem satisfies our lust for adventure and violence. The dark forces that lurk outside of peaceful society are manifested in the monsters – they represent everything we are not, and as such, we revel in their destruction. Yet, on the other hand, even if the modern audience judges virtue differently than the intended readers, our sympathies for the characters' sorrow, destruction, grief, glory, and honor are universal.

MACBETH

Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, although by far his shortest tragedy, is a dense example of the Bard's exploration into ambition, lust for power, paranoia, and all-consuming guilt. Set within Scottish history, *Macbeth* is not a "history play" in the same way as Shakespeare's "Henriad." As Northrop Frye wrote, we do not go to *Macbeth* to learn about the history of Scotland, but to discover what it is for a man to gain a kingdom and lose his soul. Although the text leaves much of Macbeth's character and state of mind up to the actor, the text nevertheless plots

a similar downward trajectory for every reading, cataloguing Macbeth's intensifying actions as usurper, murderer, and tyrant. And despite the multitude of ways to read the character, the text nevertheless offers great depth and insight into the character's inner conflicts over his supremely unethical "deeds." The work addresses other large themes, including the guilt and paranoia of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (referred to here as the Macbeths) and the sorrow, fury, and vengeance of Macduff's forces. Yet most importantly for this reading, the text also explores the notion of cyclical violence. The play is filled with violent act after violent act – from Macbeth's return from brutal war, to his murder of Duncan and subsequent murders of Banquo, Macduff, and Lady Macduff, and finally towards the climactic war at Dunsinane. There is some force of violence behind every scene. What's more, Shakespeare does not shy away from showing the graphic murders onstage – the play includes three onstage murders and even a ghost with "twenty trenchèd gashes" in its head. There is no question that the play is fueled by violence, but where it offers unique insight is into the human psyche confronted by increasingly dangerous circumstances.

The play begins right at the end of a war in which Macbeth is fighting. Although he has yet to appear onstage, his fighting abilities are lauded, which builds up his persona and an image of incredible violent power even before he begins to consider killing his king. It is reported that Macbeth "unseamed hi[s] enemy" from the navel to the chops, / And fixed his head upon our battlements," a gruesome image to which King Duncan responds, "O valiant cousin, worthy

gentleman!”⁸⁰ The king praises this example of raw power because it brings him victory in war, so in this context it is *good* that the report paints Macbeth with the aura of violence. Yet to the audience, this Macbeth is immediately associated with brutality, however honorable it may be within the context of the play. The entire scene of the captain’s report is full of the excitement of battle, so much that the captain even passes out. From the beginning, Shakespeare seeks to raise our awareness of Macbeth, associating him with brutality even if he is also honored for it. By not introducing him immediately, the text suggests a mysterious, and thus foreboding presence around Macbeth based on the biases of the captain’s report.

The next scene introduces Macbeth and his encounter with the witches, which shapes the character and the story from this point forward. Macbeth’s first lines set a thematic tone for the play, implying contradiction and inner conflict between right and wrong, good and evil, fair and foul: “So foul and fair a day I have not seen.”⁸¹ These two themes will continue to play in the minds of the audience as Macbeth is caught between his conscience (fair) and his ambition to gain and maintain his power by murderous means (foul). As he returns from the battle mentioned in the captain’s report, he and Banquo encounter the three witches who prophesy his future to him. Promising Macbeth that he will become both the Thane of Cawdor and the King, he is shocked, intrigued, and “rapt withal.”⁸² Yet this prophecy does not simply

⁸⁰ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. R.A. Foakes, (New York: Applause Books, 1996), 6.

⁸¹ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 10.

⁸² Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 12.

promise land and titles, but also defines Macbeth's character: like the Thane of Cawdor before him, Macbeth will also take on the role of a traitor. While he and Banquo seem to try to play off the encounter, this scene represents the inception of the idea to usurp the throne, and it begins drives Macbeth to obsession.

Their encounter with Ross almost immediately after seems to foreshadow Macbeth's murderous thoughts, especially because Ross delivers the news that the first part of the prophecy has come true: Macbeth has been named Thane of Cawdor. Though Ross' comments refer to Macbeth's actions in the war, the words seem to touch on the prophecy that the characters just heard: he is "nothing afeared of what thyself didst make, / Strange images of death,"⁸³ yet as we discover later, these strange images of *Duncan's* death will drive him to madness. When added to the first scene's report on Macbeth's gruesome strength in battle, it suggests to the audience that Macbeth is not only capable of violence, but is not afraid of it either. As the scene ends, Macbeth reiterates the "foul and fair" motif, saying to himself that, "This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good," and he proceeds to question why he yields to the idea of murdering Duncan, "Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair / And make my seated heart knock at my ribs, / Against the use of nature?"⁸⁴ While he clearly has a moral compass that is repulsed by the thought of murdering the king, he imagines the murder anyway. The most significant part of this is that Macbeth is not searching for justifications – he understands immediately how horrible these thoughts are, and in expressing this he sets up an inner binary

⁸³ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 14.

⁸⁴ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 16.

between his ethical side and his unethical side. Rather than try to merge the two with some sort of justification for doing one or the other, his soliloquy suggests that these opposing sides are in open conflict, and one must win over the other.

In this first scene, when we finally meet Macbeth, we discover he is not quite as resolute as the captain's violent image paints him – from his meeting with the witches onward, he is tormented by an inner conflict between his sense of duty (which may be his morality) and his ambition for power, which imbues him with a sense of anxiety on top of his raw strength. In short, he is a powerful, volatile force. In fact, we find that in his inner conflict he is even afraid of himself: “Let not light see my black and deep desires!”⁸⁵ he exclaims. Though he is afraid to admit it since he knows it is wrong, he admits his desire to murder Duncan and take the throne. This is no longer the *idea* of becoming king; now Macbeth is thinking of actively seeking it, by whatever means necessary. Lady Macbeth pushes this thinking further. On reading her husband's letter about the prophecy and his dark desire, she immediately commits herself to the idea of Duncan's murder. In a dramatic soliloquy she calls on the spirits to “unsex” her, shroud her in darkness and fill her “from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty”⁸⁶ so that she may help Macbeth kill the king.

As the audience continues to watch Macbeth's actions and attempt to make a judgment about him, his inner conflict will play a key role. He is a character with ethical understanding whose conscience is as appalled as the audience by his dark desires – it is as if Macbeth himself gives voice to the

⁸⁵ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 22.

⁸⁶ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 26.

audience's thoughts and judgments about his developing plot; however, in doing so, the audience may also identify with Macbeth's conscience and thus judge him to be ethically aware. While this does not excuse his eventual actions (and may even make them worse since he should know better), this self-awareness generates empathy with his inner conflict because we know at least one part of Macbeth does not want to murder. Thus the notion of inner conflict complicates our judgment of the character. And what's more, it brings the audience onto Macbeth's level – while he struggles with his inner conflict of whether to usurp the throne or not, the audience is struggling in response to judge him either totally evil or more of a mixed bag.

In the final scene of Act I we see Macbeth obsessing over the deed again. Worried about the consequences of his actions if he fails, he describes how the act is like drinking from the cup of poison just like his victim. However, Lady Macbeth is the voice of encouragement, first taunting her husband for his cowardice and then promising him that it would make him “so much more the man.”⁸⁷ She also uses particularly violent imagery to convey the severity of her dedication to the murder – she describes killing her own baby to illustrate her point, how she would “Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums, / And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn / As you have done to this.”⁸⁸ The audience must now also consider Lady Macbeth's role in pushing her husband to commit murder – how accountable are they individually and do the actions of one of them excuse the other? After all, Lady Macbeth may just be the dutiful

⁸⁷ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 34.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

wife trying to help her husband achieve his goal – goals which *he* first expressed to *her* in his letter. Regardless, by the end of the Act, the Macbeths are resolved to murder, and their descent into the darkness of the murderous psyche continues.

In Act II, we see Macbeth preparing to murder Duncan, who is staying in his castle. As the hour draws near, Macbeth delivers one of his famous soliloquies about his vision of a bloody dagger. Whether it is a hallucination or a real vision, it becomes clear that Macbeth's guilt is beginning to control his mind. The horror we see in Macbeth's response to the vision parallels the audience's response. The vision comes from within Macbeth's own desires; however, his horror towards the sight suggests the ongoing conflict within him. This may drive the audience to empathize with his desire to escape his own gruesome thoughts, but the fact that he is having such powerful visions is also incriminating. Ultimately, while he is tormented by his own mind, he still resolves to murder the king. Lady Macbeth, his determined encourager, was unable to kill the sleeping king because he resembled her father too much, but when Macbeth returns to stage in the next scene he grimly announces, "I have done the deed."⁸⁹

Lady Macbeth's verbal cues indicate that he is covered in blood, a grisly sight, but seems to contrast with Macbeth's inability to reconcile his action. To the audience, this suggests a dissonance within Macbeth. On the one hand he is as horrified by his deeds or even his own image as the audience is by the sight of

⁸⁹ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 42.

his blood-drenched figure, and the blood is a symbol of his guilt. “This is a sorry sight,” he says, and proceeds to obsess over his inability to say “Amen” when the guards said ‘God bless us.’⁹⁰ What’s more, Macbeth tells his wife that he heard a voice announcing that he will “Sleep no more! / Macbeth does murder sleep.”⁹¹ Macbeth has crossed the point of no return, and he seems to feel a regretful response instantly. Not only does his inability to say “Amen” signal that he has lost any chance at spiritual redemption, but he can now no longer sleep; since sleep is the “balm of hurt minds,”⁹² this means that Macbeth will continue to suffer mental torments without respite. But above all, Macbeth cannot bring himself to speak of the murder – he only refers to it as “the deed” or “what’s done.” At this moment, Macbeth is undoubtedly guilty of murder and is responsible for his actions. However, while he is morally reprehensible for what he’s done to his king, the audience would still feel pity for the suffering that his conflicted actions are bringing on himself.

What the audience sees in Macbeth from this point forward is a man consumed by a conflict of extremities. He desires to go further in his murderous deeds to secure his safety and kingship, but he is also tormented by his own actions such that he cannot rest, and this inner tension is tearing his mind apart. Due to both his guilt and the suspicion that someone would do to him what he did to Duncan, he is unable to shake the anxiety that he will be deposed, which drives him to commit even more murders to cover up for the

⁹⁰ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 44.

⁹¹ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 44.

⁹² *Ibid.*

murder he's already committed – a fact which drives him even more obsessive and mad. Through this process, Shakespeare is exploring how cycles of violence are perpetuated, but in doing so he offers insight into the psyche of the man causing them. Perhaps the most tragic insight, however, is that given the action's he's already committed, Macbeth's logic is sound. Yet the audience may feel discomfort in acknowledging this logic because it is used for such unethical purposes. So from an ethical standpoint, the audience might condemn Macbeth's actions and may legitimately hate him, but the text also develops some sort of pity for him because his guilt is so apparent and self-destructive – after all, he is now locked into a path of murder, and although he is responsible for it, the remorse indicates that there is at least a part of him that does not want to do it. Again, since Macbeth's guilty conscience gives voice to the audience's ethical horror, it suggests that there is a part of the audience (or someone that the audience can identify with) within Macbeth, and thus he cannot be wholly evil unless the audience would also condemn themselves. In fact, the audience may also identify with Macbeth's ambition, even if the means and results are horrifying.

In Act III Macbeth delivers a monologue regarding Banquo's children and his anxiety about how the witches prophesied that his children would be kings. His paranoia leads him to conclude that he must have Banquo's children killed, or else he will never be safe, and he hires a trio of murderers to dispose of Banquo and Fleance. The sad irony is that this occurs while Macbeth is supposed to be reigning; although he has gone to such lengths to become the

king, he never acts as one onstage – his attention is always on preserving his position rather than acting in it. Yet shortly afterwards, Lady Macbeth laments, “’Tis safer to be that which we destroy, / Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.”⁹³ Their actions have ensnared them in a position of perpetual anxiety, so much that she almost wishes that she were the one destroyed. Nevertheless, they must continue on this path – “What’s done is done,”⁹⁴ she counsels her husband. But it does not mean they will not suffer. “O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!”⁹⁵ Macbeth shouts in frustration. The image is powerful and horrifying, and it shows how although he inflicts suffering on others, Macbeth is also causing himself tremendous suffering, too.

Act III Scene iii holds the first onstage death when the murderers surprise Banquo and Fleance (although the latter escapes). Distancing the audience from Macbeth himself, the portrayal of these deaths onstage drives home the savagery and injustice of Macbeth’s rule. By showing the audience the brutality of these murders – not just the horrid idea of them, but the stabbings themselves – Shakespeare raises the stakes of Macbeth’s continuing reign and how much humanity is riding on its demise. By getting out of Macbeth’s inner conflict for a moment and reminding the audience of the results of his decisions, the audience is forced to reevaluate the character based on his actions and rather than focusing on pity for his self-destructiveness. The text switches back to Macbeth’s own hall shortly after this scene when he receives word that

⁹³ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 74.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 76.

Fleance has escaped (meaning that the prophecy could still come to pass, and thus that Macbeth's line will end with him), and he becomes caught between his sense of personal danger and his guilt. Yet he also learns of the brutal way that Banquo has died – “safe in a ditch he bides, / With twenty trenchèd gashes on his head.”⁹⁶ Not only does this remind the audience of Banquo's tragic death, but it also adds a new element of description beyond what the audience may have witnessed.

Macbeth soon hallucinates again, and this time Banquo's ghost actually walks in with all its mutilations and wounds. These visions of guilt strike him at a moment when he is trying to maintain composure in front of his lords, but the horrifying sight interrupts his decorum: his face is “blanched with fear”⁹⁷ he shouts at the ghost to “never shake / Thy gory locks at me”⁹⁸ and laments the time that, “when the brains were out, the man would die, / And there an end.”⁹⁹ This would be a shock to the audience, not just for its surprising appearance but also because of the grotesque terror of the sight. Macbeth's response of revulsion mirrors that of the audience – however, this creates another moment of reflection. Since Macbeth is responsible for Banquo's gruesome murder, it may feel unfair for him to try to escape the horror of the ghost. But this may be because his reaction mirrors the audience – Macbeth acts as though he were innocent like the spectators are, when in reality he is culpable. In fact, the

⁹⁶ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 82.

⁹⁷ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 88.

⁹⁸ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 84.

⁹⁹ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 86.

audience may also feel a sense of righteousness in the scene as Macbeth is literally haunted by his vile actions.

Finally, at the end of this scene, Macbeth observes that, “blood will have blood,” admitting to his wife that the cycle of violence has been put into motion and that he is “in blood / Stepped in so far, that, should [he] wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o’er.”¹⁰⁰ The imagery of Macbeth wading through blood is powerful and disturbing, but an apt metaphor for the gruesome cycle he is stuck in – from even before the first murder there is no going back, and Macbeth must continue to suffer himself as he murders more, bringing Scotland down with him. This is a key idea for the audience, too, in judging Macbeth as a character. Since he has already embarked on the path of murder, he almost has no choice but to continue doing so to maintain his hold on the throne. Thus, the cycles of violence seem to perpetuate themselves, and this idea is likely factored into the audience’s judgment of Macbeth – either excusing him of some of the later murders as a matter of necessity, or making him even more accountable since, by setting the cycle in motion with the first murder, he is also directly responsible for the further deaths. However, the murders also cause him tremendous suffering, and this self-destructiveness reinforced the pity an audience might hold for him. His inner conflict is thus a humanizing force. Macbeth is accountable for many brutal deaths, and that makes him a villain. But he may also be a tragic villain because there is a part of him that doesn’t want to be one. As such, Shakespeare pushes the audience to

¹⁰⁰ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 90.

find pity within the terror and even identify with the morally (and due to all the gore, physically) repulsive – an uncomfortable view that essentially requires further reflection.

Even after consulting the witches again and getting the assurance that no man born of woman can kill him, he still orders Macduff killed even though he does not believe him to pose a threat: “Then live, Macduff; what need I fear of thee? / But yet I’ll make assurance double sure, / And take a bond of Fate.”¹⁰¹ What’s more, he demands to “Give to th’ edge o’ th’ sword / His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls / That trace him in his line.”¹⁰² This order would strike the audience as unnecessary, as Macbeth essentially admitted, and would thus color their perception of him a few shades darker. But the scene also establishes the push and pull of Macbeth’s psyche between these two absolute sides – fair (his conscience, manifest by his guilt) and foul (his ambition and brutality).

The Macduff family is the victim of the next onstage murder, and Lady Macduff especially emphasizes the tragedy of her innocence. “I have done no harm. But I remember now / I am in this earthly world, where to do harm / Is often laudable, to do good sometime / Accounted dangerous folly.”¹⁰³ In this earthly world where morality is all backwards, innocence seems to make her a threat. Not only does she lament the danger she is in, but her scene with her oblivious son also strengthens the audience’s empathy with their plight. When they are finally murdered onstage, the son is the first to die, and the scene ends

¹⁰¹ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 104.

¹⁰² Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 108.

¹⁰³ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 114.

with the horror of Lady Macduff running from the assassins screaming bloody murder. As this was all done on Macbeth's orders, one cannot help but associate this scene with Macbeth – whatever pity Shakespeare had built up before would likely be fading away and replaced with a more absolute judgment of villainy.

In the next scene, Macduff, who has fled to England, gets news that his family has been “savagely murdered.”¹⁰⁴ Yet in his grief, Malcolm counsels him to seek revenge rather than to simply mourn: “Let's make us med'cines of our great revenge, / To cure this deadly grief.” “Be this the whetstone of your sword, let grief / Convert to anger: blunt not the heart, enrage it.”¹⁰⁵ Since Macbeth must keep the cycle of violence going in order to maintain his power, he has also caused the cycle to turn against him. As the murders mount, so does the suffering of both the Macbeths and Scotland at large – his actions force a reaction against him, especially when his actions decrease his legitimacy. Yet the force mounting against him is also a fitting end to the guilt tormenting the Macbeths – as their moral guilt continues to drive them madder, the results of their actions must also have drastic repercussions. Again, the audience sees Macbeth's self-destructiveness at play, and while it is a necessary end to the cycle, one might also consider the cycle itself tragically unnecessary.

Act V Scene i is a manifestation of the Macbeths' guilt and a clear result of Macbeth's “murder” of sleep. Lady Macbeth is shown sleepwalking onstage, apparently mad and obsessive over the blood that she hallucinates to see on her

¹⁰⁴ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 128.

¹⁰⁵ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 130.

hands. “Out, damned spot!”¹⁰⁶ she cries, asking if her hands will ever be clean from the stench of blood around her. Nevertheless, “what’s / Done cannot be undone,”¹⁰⁷ no matter what she wishes. Her guilt is still tormenting her mind, such that she still cannot bring herself to say the word murder or refer to Duncan by name. While Lady Macbeth is a villain in the text, the text inspires pity for her, exploring the psyche of a murderer facing an ethical conflict over her actions. Like Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, the Macbeths believe themselves to have the right to murder, yet when they do, they cannot reconcile their actions with their own lingering ethical horror. Their guilt drives them to paranoia, anxiety, and madness. Again, this remorse is a signal of their sense of ethical understanding, and as a result, the audience can identify with part of this character and even empathize with them. If we view Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s inner conflicts as the direct opposition between the good and evil within them, we can easily identify with and pity the good. It is almost as though there are two Macbeths within one character, and we empathize with the fair one for having to suffer through the victories of the foul one. Ultimately, even though the audience acknowledges the characters’ villainy, Shakespeare develops a sense of empathy by showing how they are unable to live with themselves. This complex combination of horror, revulsion, empathy, and pity are what make these characters *fascinating* – under such extreme circumstances the complexity of the audience’s responses to these multifaceted characters

¹⁰⁶ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 136.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

inspires reflection to sort out the emotional conflict; even despite all the atrocities they commit, the villains are humanized and their suffering is pitiful.

The majority of the final Act centers on the climactic rebellion against Macbeth. The dialogues establish that Macbeth is actually a terrible king, committing heinous deeds and causing Scotland to suffer immensely. Driven by both national and personal revenge against the usurper king, Macduff, Malcolm, and Siward's forces besiege Dunsinane, where Macbeth is waiting for them. As the battle commences, Macbeth finally resolves to make his last stand, announcing, "I'll fight till from my bones my flesh be hacked."¹⁰⁸ Macbeth's final scenes in the war indicate the madness that he's developed. The audience can expect that Macbeth will meet a gruesome end no matter what, but it also shows how far his character has swung to the extreme. His fury, anxiety, paranoia, and brutality are palpable, even by the text alone.

Under these dire circumstances, he observes how his murderous ambition has corrupted him: "I have supped full with horrors; / Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts, / Cannot once start."¹⁰⁹ The tragedy of *Macbeth* is therefore not only the horrid deeds that the character inflicts upon Scotland, but also how the character is corrupted to such a vile extreme. The audience knows there is an ethical side within him, but his sequence of evil decisions corrupts his character further and further until that side of him is almost lost. The Macbeth at the end of the play is not the same Macbeth from

¹⁰⁸ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 142.

¹⁰⁹ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 148.

the beginning, and the audience's exposure to his shifting character arc amplifies the sense of tragedy.

At this point, the text reaches its high tension, including another onstage death after a duel with Macbeth and Young Siward, ending in the latter's death. The audience now sees Macbeth committing violence with his own hands, unlike commanding others or killing offstage. This onstage brutality (without remorse, unlike the previous murders) signals the culmination of Macbeth's arc and provokes a reevaluation of the character. Finally, Macduff and Macbeth come face-to-face and the prophecy is realized. Since Macduff reveals that he was not born from woman, but rather cut from her in childbirth, he is the one meant to kill Macbeth. In their ultimate battle, Macbeth is finally slain onstage, and in the final scene (paralleling the beginning), Macduff carries his decapitated head on a spear as he celebrates Malcolm's coronation. In a way, the play brings the actions around full circle with the death of another traitor and the bestowment of new titles. While the scenes of horror and brutality have been spread out among the play, Act V both amplifies the violence and condenses it into a series of subsequent scenes. Yet this final act of brutality forces the audience to question whether this is what justice looks like – does Macbeth deserve such a grisly end? Even though he likely deserves to die, does our previous empathy for him linger even after he's progressed to such evil? The gruesome end to Macbeth is perhaps a fitting, but nevertheless disturbing sight for a character so well developed. And while it brings the narrative full circle, this end also has serious implications for the view of society. With brutality and

horror so pervasive, *Macbeth* suggests that society and civilization are fragile, supported only a thin contextual line between ethical and unethical violence.

Ultimately, *Macbeth* explores the cruelty and violence of medieval Scotland, but in a way that is timeless. Through Macbeth's ambition for power, he is led against his own ethical code, and in doing so sets of a chain of violence that he must perpetuate in order to save himself. Nevertheless, this cycle both tears him apart mentally with irreconcilable guilt and necessarily leads to his death. Unlike other works such as *Beowulf* that explore both the suffering and glory of the righteous, *Macbeth* explores the psyche and suffering of the evil side. Yet the text operates through similar methods as the works that explore the "righteous" side of such conflicts – it establishes the character's importance and reputation early on, and presents them with a major challenge; as time goes on, the character is tested and the stakes are raised by some facet of that challenge. For *Beowulf*, his legendary deeds and heroic image are discussed from the beginning, while the horror of Grendel's attacks is explored early on. Macbeth's reputation is similarly established, but rather than doing valiant righteous acts, Macbeth's provocation from the witches is a call to commit murder, gaining a technical honor (title of kingship) while losing all one's true virtues. *Beowulf*'s battles are justifiable homicide since they bring an end to the monster's murderous plague, but Macbeth's homicide violates his civilized duty to his own society, and is thus damnable.

Nevertheless, once he commits the murder, the stakes get higher since he must continue to kill in order to maintain the throne. From the get-go there is

no way out once he has “done” the “deed,” and the audience watches his spiral into madness and his path to a grisly death. Once begun, the cycles of violence do not stop until its perpetrators are wiped out – in the case of Macbeth it is only the king, which should put an abrupt end to the series of horrifying murders. By parallel, Beowulf’s defeat of Grendel only awakens his mother, whom he must also defeat. The difference is that Beowulf engages in a redemptive cycle that ultimately weeds out the evil supernatural forces around him. Yet Beowulf also offers insight into long-term political cycles, in which no peace is ever strong enough to ensure that grudges and hostilities will not manifest again.

Macbeth is a disturbing work, horrifying in many ways – it is physically gruesome, brutal, and violent, but it is also unnerving in its psychological insights into the minds of the characters who commit the evil. Its ethical judgments may be obvious – the audience knows the Macbeths are the villains from the outset and their actions are irredeemable. Nevertheless, Shakespeare taps into his audience’s instinctive empathy by showing how the Macbeths are still ethically minded, even if that side is repressed; thus, the audience experiences a sort of emotional dissonance when pitying the source of these evil actions. Their mental anguish may be justified, but seeing it played out generates pity for the terrible path they’ve chosen. The insight into their guilt is *fascinating* in itself, and it inspires further thought because of our contradictory attitudes towards the Macbeths. One must reconsider the circumstances of Macbeth’s choices, his inspiration by the witches, his guilt, his paranoia, and his

ultimate demise – that is, reconsider his entire character arc – to make a final judgment about him and how he fits into the cycles of violence that he kicks into motion. Ultimately there are many ways of reading him – does he want to prove himself capable of seizing power, even though he is conflicted about it? is he pushed by his wife to commit these horrible deeds? is he unabashedly power-hungry, but meets his downfall in his fear of failure? is he a pawn of the dark forces of the witches? Whatever the interpretation, *Macbeth* leaves the audience with an intense exploration of the guilty mind and many questions of judgment to be resolved regarding the cycle of violence that the work explores.

PART 3: HORROR AND THE VISUAL ARTS

“Horror” in violence is a rich theme with many different forms and interpretations, and is thus difficult to define. Nevertheless, there are some key hallmarks of “horror” that I believe are useful to illustrate the concept. While “cycles of violence” and “conflict of ethics” engage primarily in ethical issues, this is not the case with “horror”. “Horror” appeals to emotion, and it often occurs within an audience’s absorption within a work. “Horror” is perhaps best understood in this thesis as extremity, an image or idea with such emotional power that it breaks the absorptive spell and provokes reflection. In the climax of many particularly tragic works, a character will often apostrophically ask “Why?” in an attempt to express both the intensity and senselessness of the circumstances. In the New Testament, for example, the climactic moment of the Crucifixion records Jesus in the ultimate moment of tragedy asking “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”¹¹⁰ In doing so, he expresses the sense of “horror” that the audience may also be feeling towards a moment so extreme as the brutal death of the Son of God. Although many works do not feature characters literally giving voice to this sense of outrage and extremity, audiences may nevertheless feel themselves asking the same question in such moments. Thus to answer their own question, they must reflect on the work.

Like the other issues I’ve examined, “horror” has both an intellectual element and an emotional one. “Horror” is derived from a visceral emotional

¹¹⁰ Matt. 27:46 AV

response to a work: feelings of extreme sorrow, unnecessary brutality, or unbearable pathos are all examples of the ways “horror” manifests in the audience’s experience. Unlike the other issues, “horror” therefore takes on very different content in each manifestation, since nearly anything can be taken to an extremity. But more importantly, “horror” originates as an emotional trauma and then develops into intellectual reflection, much like how “conflicts of ethics” begin as an emotional dissonance or discomfort to expose paradox. As such, “horror” has two distinct elements that function together: emotional horror, which I propose as the visceral and emotional response to the extremity portrayed, and there is ethical horror, which I argue is the searching for answers or means of coming to terms with the trauma through intellectual reflection. While emotional horror leads to ethical horror, it does not disappear in the process; rather, it lingers in the audience as they seek answers to their outrage, and the two “horrors” thus function together to make for a *fascinating* issue.

In some of the other chapters I’ve addressed, I’ve made it clear that there is overlap between various issues in the same work, and “horror” is no exception: the graphic imagery of Karna’s death in the *Mahabharata* may certainly be read along the lines of “horror” concurrently with the “conflict of ethics” and even “cycles of violence.” Likewise, one may reflect on the “horror” within *Journey to the End of Night* through Bardamu’s vivid and palpable terror at the many moments of danger while also considering the “cycles of violence” that the novel suggests on both international and personal levels. In these cases, one *fascination* is not separate from the other, but rather the two come together to

form a new, unique experience by mixing these issues and elements; in other words, they become entangled with one another, and thus may lead to a richer or more challenging aesthetic experience.

This section is also the first to address the visual arts. While the texts I've already examined include graphic language, the experience of a visual artwork is still different from the written word, even though *fascination* functions the same way for both of them. These works have not been placed in the "horror" section to separate them from the other texts, but rather because they are most illustrative of the idea of "horror." The visual subjects convey brutality and extremity with more immediacy than words may be capable of; that is, even though these texts may have ultimately equally powerful effects, the "horror" in the visual works strikes the viewer more immediately since they do not have to read or listen for prolonged periods to get the whole "picture." The "horror" portrayed on *Laocoön's* face, for example, is incredibly moving and rich with evocative power, but is particularly powerful within the context of the struggle in which he is immersed. The immediacy of his expression within the larger context presents the viewer with an overwhelming visual force that may provoke "horror" more quickly and viscerally than a text. To reiterate, this is not to say that text cannot have equal or greater power to convey "horror," but simply that, since the vision is more instantaneous than narrative, visual arts may illustrate "horror" more simply and immediately.

As is the case with many of the texts here, there are other issues and themes within these artworks that I may not address. Situated within the larger

context of the Trojan War, *Laocoön and his Sons* may also provoke reflection on “cycles of violence,” which could amplify the sense of “horror” and senselessness of the violence. Rubens’ *Massacre of the Innocents* may also provoke reflection on “conflicts of ethics,” since the Christian moral promise that these children are “saved” may cause dissonance as the audience still mourns them and experiences profound sorrow for them as they view the scene of their vicious murders.

Ultimately, “horror” is a particularly prevalent issue in art, since many works aim to transport their audiences to particularly extreme circumstances beyond the comfort of daily life. On the most basic level, such works expand the audience’s emotional capacities by testing their limits before they are “horrified” and provoking them with uniquely intense situations. Yet by exposing audiences to such intensities and extremes, works can also expose their immediate natural responses and give them insights into their own emotional and ethical selves. For this reason, as I aim to elaborate in the subsequent sections, “horror” is another issue that may lead to *fascination*.

JOURNEY TO THE END OF THE NIGHT

Journey to the End of the Night is a reflection on the author’s experiences in World War I. However, unlike other WWI books, like Ernst Jünger’s non-fiction memoir, *Storm of Steel*, Celine’s novel fictionalizes the events inspired by his real experiences, and extends far beyond the experience of the war itself. He follows the protagonist through his enlistment in the war, his return to France, his travels in Africa, his journey to America, and his return to France again to

become a doctor. But while writers like Jünger described the war and its realities, Céline creates a cynical narrative to the war that supports the rest of the plot, making it a literary event rather than a reflection on lived experience. In doing so, he provokes the reader to view the war on two levels – as part of the fiction, and as a real event; even though Ferdinand Bardamu never existed, the war did, and the narrator's disillusionment, terror, and cynicism reflect the reality of the war just as much as they do the character's personality.

Unlike a traditional hero, Bardamu views the war with the utmost cynicism and disillusionment. Although he was inexplicably swept up in fervor by the sight of the military marching, his first experiences on the battlefield are enough to horrify and repulse him. Rather than allowing us to embrace and become swept up in the violence and excitement of war, Céline exposes the true terror and devastation of war's reality. Yet unlike Jünger's work, which fails to produce *fascination* since it bases itself too much in reality, Céline abstracts, simulates, and aestheticizes the true terror of the war by narrativizing it. Thus, in my reading, audiences are only absorbed by the sense of terror and trauma because it is set within a narrative/fictional context (which makes it a distinctly aesthetic experience). Bardamu fears death lurking in the darkness, and it is always ready to strike. Nevertheless, although Bardamu does not relish the violence, he does describe with powerful language the scenes of carnage and destruction, and the transcendent feeling of madness all around. Bardamu is not a moralizing character – he is certainly horrified, but not morally outraged; rather, he is scared shitless. Like nearly everyone else in the novel, he is selfish

and cynical, and rejects the war on these grounds alone. However, this does not mean that the reader doesn't feel the intensity that Bardamu feels in the war – the difference is that it is an intensity that recognizes the terror rather than one that presents it as a delight. It is absorbing and cathartic not in the sense of becoming swept up in the rage and destruction, but of becoming swept up in the horrible and extreme tragedy of it all: “When the grave lies open before us, let's not try to be witty, but on the other hand, let's not forget, but make it our business to record the worst of the human viciousness we've seen without changing one word.”¹¹¹

Bardamu even suffers a nervous breakdown as a result of the war, which lands him briefly institutionalized. Although his armor of cynicism is strong, it is clear to the reader that the terror of the war and the paranoia it leaves on its participants are even more tragic than Bardamu would have us believe by his narration alone. Yet while Bardamu is the central character of the novel, the plot does not suggest that this moment is unique to him alone. Rather, Bardamu represent the masses of soldiers returning from the Great War – shell-shocked, mentally scarred, manic, and horrified. By putting the reader in Bardamu's mind, the experience would become more visceral, intense, and horrifying because it is so absorbing; yet at the same time, it would provoke reflection on the larger toll of the war on those who lived through it. Thus, it primes the reader both to feel the horror and sorrow, as well as to reflect more soberly on effects of the war across all the survivors – even the most cynical ones.

¹¹¹ Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, trans. Ralph Manheim, (New York: New Directions, 1983), 18.

Even beyond the war, *Journey to the End of the Night* is a journey through fear and disillusionment. Bardamu narrates his story with equal parts intensity and dark irony. His travels to Africa, for example, chronicle the terror he feels on the ship at the hands of his co-passengers, as well as the terrors of the wild once he's made landfall. The events on the ship are especially horrifying, since his life is put in danger yet again, now outside of the war context, by supposedly civilized people for almost no reason whatsoever. Though the war is over, humans are still capable of committing atrocities against one another, simply because they regard each other with suspicion. His terror is palpable and his cynicism actually reads like brutal honesty in these moments. As such, these scenes of terror illuminate the truly horrifying frailty of mortality and how death can strike anywhere. Yet he also reflects on these events with a sense of nihilism and absurdity. He has a dark, sarcastic humor and tends to accompany his more terrifying experiences with simple and ironic observations. Even when he has become a doctor and visits patients suffering from serious and debilitating illnesses, he is only concerned with *their* use to *him*, like how much money he can make by them, even though they need him. Ironically, he is not even good at getting paid in those situations. For example, he hopes to make a hundred francs in a day by talking to a woman who has lost her son in the war, and is disappointed only insofar as he won't be able to make a quick buck when he learns that she's committed suicide out of sorrow and desperation. And when treating a young woman suffering a miscarriage, bleeding profusely and on the verge of death, he cannot help but comment on her appearance and his

attraction to her physique.¹¹² Yet at the same time, the woman's parents won't get her the medical help she needs since they don't want to face the public embarrassment of her promiscuity. As such, Bardamu is a foil for the other characters' selfishness – this selfishness manifests as widespread disregard towards the suffering of others, since everyone is equally despicable. This is certainly shocking to the moral reader, who desires to empathize with these other characters, and it would make them reassert their own moral beliefs in opposition to Bardamu's nihilism. But on the other hand, Bardamu is an incredibly vivid narrator, which is what allows the readers to experience the full intensity of these scenes – at least until he interjects with his cynical commentary.

At his friend's funeral, he comments on the pride and selfish joy he feels by being a part of the procession. This initially distances the reader from feeling the full force of the tragedy, replacing it with cynicism and perversity. Yet this would also then amplify the reader's sense of tragedy, lamenting the loss of morality, as well, while also being forced to confront the question of whether they have ever been so cynical too:

At a well-conducted funeral, you're sad too, but you think of other things, the will, your next vacation, the widow, who's a good-looker and said to be passionate... Then's the time to behave properly, to look dignified, not to laugh out loud, to gloat only internally. That's permissible. Everything's permissible internally.¹¹³

¹¹² Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, 224.

¹¹³ Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, 39.

Perhaps the most important idea that *Journey* emphasizes is not the effect of tragedy and horror, but rather their necessity. Bardamu believes that tragedy and happiness are two sides of the same coin – they are the passions that occupy human lives and he suggests that people would face utter meaninglessness without them. These may be small-time tragedies, like lost loves, but they may also be encounters with poverty, death, and horror. War is conflict let loose, and Bardamu tells his audience that humanity desires and demands it, especially those that aren't fighting. As his own experience in the military demonstrates, it is easy to get swept up in patriotic fervor, the narrative and justification of the violence. He says of women, “war went straight to their ovaries, they demanded heroes...”¹¹⁴ and comments on his voyage to Africa how one of the schoolteachers onboard wanted to see him beaten since “a scene of high carnage” would “awaken” her ovaries.¹¹⁵ Even art, according to one of the characters, is meant to inspire this sentiment: “it is the poet's highest duty to revive our taste for the epic... A new soul has been born to us in the great and noble tumult of battle!”¹¹⁶ Bardamu asserts that people demand absorption and intensity in their experiences, because it has a triumphant life-affirming power (as in the Balinese cockfight). War and violence are celebrated by those that don't participate in it because they seem to yearn for primal thrills to satisfy their “taste for the epic”, especially because they can ascribe “noble” meaning to it beyond the drudgery of civilized life. But Bardamu's experiences of terror

¹¹⁴ Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, 75.

¹¹⁵ Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, 100.

¹¹⁶ Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, 82.

through his real experience of the war (rather than watching from the sidelines) demonstrate the vast difference between the enticing narrative and the horrifying reality – they break the absorptive spell of noble war, replacing it with an absorption into the horror of true destruction, and in subverting these expectations they provoke reflection on society’s construction of war’s value.

One of Bardamu’s encounters with a psychologist is especially telling of the human demand for violence and the reasons we want it:

You see, Bardamu, the war, by providing us with such unprecedented means of trying men’s nervous systems, has been a miraculous revealer of the human mind... Up until now, we hardly suspected the richness of man’s emotional and spiritual resources! ... By a process of breaking and entering, painful to be sure, but decisive, nay providential for science, we have penetrated his innermost depths.¹¹⁷

War and violence are a means of understanding the depths of the human mind by pushing them to the limit, even at a great cost. Literature and the arts, by distancing audiences from the reality, might hypothesize, estimate, or simulate these effects and allow them to experience and even become absorbed in some form of them; but as Bardamu demonstrates, there’s nothing like the real thing. Of course, there is irony in the fact that this idea is expressed and that powerful violence is represented through literature. But given the disastrous results of real violence that Bardamu (and Céline) have experienced, this distillation into literature is perhaps necessary to satisfy the human yearning for violence and thereby prevent another World War from erupting.

¹¹⁷ Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, 78.

Bardamu explains how Madame Herote loved to manufacture happiness and tragedy, not only because it was good for business, but because the life of the passions gives meaning and eventfulness to life itself.¹¹⁸ In another moment, he comments on a family that he sometimes sees on the street looking perfectly normal and happy, and compares that sight to the sounds he hears from their apartment; most nights the parents beat their young daughter mercilessly because it holds them together and ignites their sexual passion for one another.¹¹⁹ And with the death of Robinson at the end, he observes how life itself is like a carnival, filled with various amusements to placate and assuage our fear of death by distracting us with artificial issues that we throw ourselves into. Though the scenes of fear, shock, and destruction surrounding Bardamu might absorb audiences in the nightmare of nihilistic war, Bardamu's cynicism both amplifies the emotional sense of desolation in these scenes and provokes reflection on the role of violence in human life. Bardamu's terror becomes all the more horrifying because it cuts through his own cynicism – it shows that no philosophical armor can actually protect him from the realities of suffering, pain, and death. Yet having experienced these realities, Bardamu still asserts that they are necessary to human life; that despite the terrors they hold (or perhaps because of them), the intensity of violence inspires meaning and may save humanity from the greater terror of empty existence. As such, the work provokes profound reflection on the human condition at large out of this form of absorption in second-hand terror.

¹¹⁸ Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, 61.

¹¹⁹ Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, 229-30.

The role of narrative is therefore essential to life, because it provides meaning. Bardamu believes we are in a constant state of fear towards death. The notion of fear comes up again and again, almost always the fear of death. This is why war is so horrifying to Bardamu: because death is all around, out in the open, and always at one's heels. Yet death is an overwhelming fear, so fear of death itself is often substituted as fear of sickness or heights or other such dangers. Of course, even without directly facing it, people still fear the idea of death. However, the text suggests that some people attempt to manage their fear more easily by justifying it – Bardamu explains how Monsieur Henrouille had always been afraid of his own life, and in his old age, now feared his death. What he wanted, above all, was to have a justification for the unhappiness that this fear brought him, which he decides to be high blood pressure. In a way, Henrouille desires a narrative scapegoat to make his fears more manageable.¹²⁰ The text, then, is also exposing this strategy of terror management to the audience and provoking reflection on whether they cope in the same way. Again, the direct terror and fear in the midst of the violence is still absorbing, but these other insights into the subject of death continue to provoke existential reflection in the readers.

Journey to the End of the Night ultimately demonstrates the universality of cynicism and fear. Bardamu is a self-centered character, cynical and often nihilistic (insofar as his opinion of strangers); like most of the other characters, self-preservation and self-interest always come first for him, even against the

¹²⁰ Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, 216.

suffering of others. Throughout all his travels, he maintains this sense of cynicism and criticism against traditional moral values, and exposes their own cynicism as well. However, he does not rebel against them like a libertine; rather, he keeps his voice of distaste inside, sharing his thoughts with himself and the reader instead of those around him. It's a striking style that forces the reader to wonder whether they also carry the same cynicism and the same selfishness even if they don't show it. But it is often accompanied with notions of fear, which seem to follow him wherever he goes. In war, Africa, America, and even back in Paris, he often finds himself either in danger or participating in a scene of tragedy. He provides vivid detail and powerful language in these scenes that engross the reader and convey the power of the scene, whether it is the terror he himself experiences or the suffering of others. However, he creates a major contrast to the intensity of these descriptions with his own selfish interpretations of the situation or with his nonchalance towards it. The cycle of absorbing the reader and then breaking the absorptive spell generates discomfort, and pulls the reader out of the emotional depths of the scene as quickly as it lures them in. In doing so, it provokes further reflection on the complex emotional experience of the text, as well as the moral issues it raises, and thus contributes to a multi-layered form of *fascination*.

It is thus a unique way to experience this intensity, because the narrator does not fully indulge us in it. Instead, the audience is provided with brief glimpses of horrors, violence, and despair, and they are quickly countered with cynicism. Not only might readers have ethical objections to the scenes that

Bardamu describes, but they would also be equally outraged by his apathy towards the suffering of others. His cynicism therefore takes on an ethical dimension, which enhances reflection on the character, even though readers would be disgusted by his thoughts. The novel therefore works on two levels – it absorbs the reader into the dark themes of horror, fear, violence, and death, and it also counters this intensity with an equally dark cynicism and nonchalance towards it. It swings the audience between two equally antisocial extremes. Although audiences may not want to identify with Bardamu's terror in battle, in my reading they would still identify with the logic of his selfishness and apathy towards the suffering of others. The reader is sucked into the modes of both intensity and distance; a sense of terror and nihilism pervades the entirety of the literary experience. Readers follow Bardamu on a literal journey into the darkness of the human experience, both in horror/suffering as well as in an existential fear of life itself (which is manifested as cynicism and apathy). The journey is an attempt to outrun the human fear of the reality of existence, but it ultimately leaves characters and audience immersed in the bleakness of life. Bardamu therefore puts readers in touch with horror as well as cynicism, exposing the darkness of both, and provoking them to reflect on their own moral reactions towards the novel as a whole. It is a *fascinating* work with new, challenging philosophical views, and yet it also captures the real sense of hopelessness, disillusionment, and despair following World War I.

LAOCOÖN AND HIS SONS

The ancient statue of *Laocoön and His Sons*¹²¹ is one of the oldest and most archetypal visual works of suffering and agony in the Western canon. The work depicts three characters, Laocoön in the center flanked by his two smaller sons, who are all being strangled and devoured by two giant serpents. The serpents are woven between the limbs and bodies of the characters, intertwining them and constricting them simultaneously. The scene is dynamic and tense, conveying a sense of anguish and desperation. The sculpture captures the climax of the characters' struggle, depicting them in pain, grappling and fighting in their last moments having failed their ultimate mission. The drama of the scene contains ethical and emotional provocations, captured especially in the expressions of the character's faces and their contorted bodies. Yet the larger context of the scene also contributes further ethical significance to the piece. This work depicts a scene from the Trojan War, and the moment of Laocoön's death results in disaster and destruction for the Trojans of legend. As such, this iconic sculpture both absorbs its viewers viscerally in the drama and provokes pathos and ethical reflection on the scene and its ramifications for the larger story. For these reasons, I aim to demonstrate that this sculpture is not only a work of skill and beauty, but also a model of *fascination*.

Before all else, an understanding of the work's reference to mythology can deepen and amplify its audience's emotional experience of the piece. The

¹²¹ Attributed to Agesander of Rhodes, Polydorus of Rhodes, Athendoros of Rhodes, *Laocoön and his Sons*, c. 27 BCE – 68 CE, 208 x 163 x 112 cm, Vatican Museums

sculpture's scene is derived from Homeric legend as a key event in the Trojan War. When the Greeks offer their wooden horse to the Trojans as a peace offering, there is some debate about whether the horse is a trap. The Greek Sinon pretends to defect and assures the Trojans of the gift's safety, and many Trojans are convinced. Laocoön's part in the story varies somewhat in its details. In some versions he is a priest of Apollo and in others of Poseidon. In all versions, he contests Sinon's deceitful testimony, only to be killed by divine intervention. Some versions describe Athena (in her anger toward the Trojans) first blinding him as a sign that the Trojans should not trust him, then sending the serpents to kill him and his sons. Another version has Poseidon send the serpents to do the same deed, and still another has Apollo send them since Laocoön had offended him by sleeping with his wife in front of a cult image. In each case, Laocoön's death (whether a result of fornication or simply to silence him) convinces the Trojans not to trust him. Therefore, his death seals the demise of Troy, and it is fitting that his death is as painful and violent as the sacking of his city. Virgil's *Aeneid* describes the scene brutally:

Like troops on attack they're heading straight for Laocoön –
 first each serpent seizes his one of his small young sons,
 constricting, twisting around him, sinks its fangs
 in the tortured limbs, and gorges. Next Laocoön
 rushing quick to the rescue, clutching his sword –
 they trap him, bring him in huge muscular whorls,
 their scaly backs lashing around his midriff twice
 and twice around his throat – their heads, their flaring necks
 mounting over their victim writhing still, his hands
 frantic to wrench apart their knotted trunks,
 his priestly bands splattered in filth, black venom
 and all the while his horrible screaming fills the skies,
 bellowing like some wounded bull struggling to shrug

loose from his neck an axe that's struck awry,
to lumber clear of the altar...¹²²

The scene is particularly violent and horrifying, serving as a parallel to the destruction the Greeks are about to unleash on the city. Bearing in mind this myth, the stakes of the sculpture are raised. Not only does it evoke pity and pathos for the figures depicted, but it also evokes sorrow for the entire city of Troy. This moment is climatic for Laocoön's life and the existence of Troy itself. The context thus gives the scene greater weight and serves as a powerful prelude to the destruction that follows. Through Laocoön's contorted expression, the viewer can also read into the agony of all the other Trojans slaughtered by the Greeks. Even if the audience's absorption into the sculpture satisfies their bloodlust, they are left to reflect on the ultimate fate of Troy. Laocoön is only the beginning of a cycle of violence that will further erupt and produce the same results on many more individuals. The magnitude of the destruction that will follow will either fuel the audience's absorption and excitement, or also have a sobering effect with a realization of horror. The same scene, or at least the intensity and horrible brutality of it, will be repeated on a larger scale against individuals who may be even more innocent than Laocoön. As such, if one does not approve or pities the subsequent massacre of the Trojans, the work would provoke them to reflect on their initial response and absorption in the sculpture, since Laocoön's death cannot be separated from its ramifications on the city. Thus, in my interpretation, the context of the work would cause an audience to

¹²² Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles, (New York: Penguin Group, 2010), 82.

view it with more sorrow, to reflect on it more deeply, and to reflect ethically on their own engagement with the piece – that is, it exemplifies *fascination* in the visual arts.

The sculpture is interesting not only for its historical and mythological context, but also for its formal and emotionally evocative qualities. The sculpture conveys drama, power, and pathos from nearly every angle, and each detail contributes to the sense of energy within the piece. In terms of formal qualities alone, the sculpture poses its subjects frozen in a moment of extreme tension. Laocoön occupies the center of the piece flanked by his two sons, Thymbraeus and Antiphantes, on his left and right respectively, and all are wrapped by powerful serpents whose long bodies weave between and intertwine them. The composition is incredibly dynamic, and, by my reading, would immediately absorb the viewer with the power and drama that the figures evoke, especially Laocoön. Laocoön is clearly the centerpiece as both the largest and most dynamically posed subject. The eye is immediately drawn to his imposing figure, serving as a reference point to explore the rest of the scene around him. He towers over his sons even as he contorts his body in an attempt to escape the serpents, yet as we can see in his face, the effort is in vain. Laocoön's head is bent back and tilted upwards – his head position suggests that he is stretching, struggling, and forcing his body as far as he can in order to wrestle his way out of the serpents' grasp. The power and tension of the body contribute to the excitement and frenzy, and invite the viewer to imagine the intensity. Yet his pained expression also speaks to his sense of agony, sorrow, and loss even as he

fighters. The figure would therefore strike the audience emotionally and appeal to their sense of empathy, inviting them to exercise their pity for the tragic aspect of the piece. The sons exhibit this same struggle, but their smaller scale positions them more as compliments to their father rather than separate subjects. They balance Laocoön compositionally, and they also bring more chaos to the scene. On Laocoon's right, Antiphantes appears to be caught only by his arm and leg, which suggests that he could escape, but also that he could meet his end; this ambiguity adds to the excitement and tension of the scene as a whole. Thymbraeus, on the left, is similarly caught, but is more directly attacked than his brother. His hand pushes one of the serpents' heads away, but it is too late since its jaws have already closed on his flesh. The sculpture captures the decisive moment, and invites the viewer to imagine the moments that follow, thus immersing them more in the scene. What's more, his legs are being pulled close to his fathers', demonstrating that they will all be sharing the same fate. One of the most striking aspects of all three of the characters is that their positions imply forward motion – the movements of their legs and angles of their bodies suggest that they are running forward towards the audience. The bend of Antiphantes' planted foot is the clearest clue, but Laocoön's left leg and his right leg raised forward also imply this direction. By suggesting this forward momentum, the sculpture engrosses the viewer even more. The characters are coming right towards the viewer, demanding the attention of its audience and securing their absorption by placing them directly in its path.

Ultimately, all the bodies in the sculpture convey dynamism, energy, violence, and tension. The characters are all nude, which both reinforces the raw and natural power of the human body in battle and highlights the fact that each muscle is engaged in this struggle. As such, it amplifies the sense of power and urgency since it suggests that the characters are fighting for their lives. Antiphantes' depiction exemplifies this physical tension – his arm is caught by one of the serpents also wrapped around his father, and he leans away while staring at the other two characters. Yet he is also precariously balanced on one leg as he tries to escape the serpent on his arm; he is bent over slightly with one hand firmly on the serpent coiled around his raised leg as he is attempting to step out of its loop. His torso reinforces this danger since the line through the center of his stomach highlights the tense imbalance as he bends over. It is as though he is trying to free himself from the snake around his leg when another suddenly wrapped around his arm. Now he is caught by both and might be about to fall, unless the tension of the serpents' bodies will hold him in place, only to coil him tighter. The danger of ensnaring and strangulation are apparent, and leaves the viewer in dramatic suspense while also provoking them to imagine Antiphantes' destruction in the coming moments. Though the physical power of the struggle is frenzied and exciting, the prospect of his death also carries moral weight, and would horrify the audience and/or arouse pathos within them in addition to the suspense. It would also provoke tension within the viewer, as they both admire the work yet also empathize or feel sorrow for the subject. The moment of realization on Antiphantes' face is climactic and

suggests the brief moment of horror when both he and the viewer realize that he will not be able to escape – the very act of looking and perceiving the scene might animate it and create an absorbing narrative within the mind of the viewer. It is a pivotal moment when the ethical enters the frenzy of the scene, since it produces this dissonance within the viewer, and thus provokes reflection: it is this process that makes the work *fascinating*.

Laocoön is caught in a similar moment. He reaches behind his head to free himself from the serpent coiled across his back and down his opposite side, but his body is so tense that it appears as if he is being stretched by a force outside himself rather than moving of his own power. At the same moment, he pushes off of one leg while raising the other to fight back against the constriction of the second serpent. Fighting with all his limbs engaged, he appears to be struggling to extend himself outwards even though he is being pulled centrally. While the power evoked by his movements is thrilling and perhaps visually pleasurable, the unnatural tension of his movements suggest that Laocoön may not even be exercising control over his own body. The scene would therefore become one of sadistic power and control, since the body teeters on the edge of both power and powerlessness. The rendering of each muscle on his torso, the bulging vein on his left hand, and the vein across the front of his shoulder may not all be anatomically accurate, but they all evoke the intensity, tension, and power exerted both by him and on him. In any case, the contortion of these bodies is absorbing – it invites the viewer to try to figure out the scene, to analyze each position of the bodies, to infer the movements and their

chronology, and to respond emotionally to the scene with some sort of sadistic pleasure, empathy, pity, sorrow, frenzy, etc. Furthermore, it suggests the perpetual violence of the moment, since it allows the viewers to relive the climax of such ferocious energy over and over again as each glance animates it.

While the bodies primarily absorb the audience in the excitement of the scene, the facial expressions of these figures and the visual clues to their fate provoke empathy and emotional connection to the piece. One key clue is the look on Laocoön's face – it both reinforces and contrasts with the drama of the physical battle he is engaged in. On the one hand, his look of agony and pain compliments the muscular engagement of his body. His grimace may be a natural result of his intense grappling with the serpents, especially since he appears to be losing. On the other hand, he bears a look of resignation and sorrow, as though he has already lost his battle and is coming to terms with a painful and ignoble death; his expression is thus a look of sorrow and lamentation for his own end and his sons, but his look upwards also suggests that his agony is directed towards the gods. He expresses the idea of horror as he appears to both question and cry out to the gods on high, as though his suffering is at once incomprehensible and inevitable. Antiphantes' face is also powerful, although the nuances of his demise are different than his father. As I have argued, Antiphantes is caught in a moment of tense imbalance – he stands on one foot trying to free the other from the serpent's coil but has just been wrapped by another one and bends away from it. He appears to teeter and may very well fall at any instant. In this key moment, his facial expression speaks

volumes to his experience. Antiphantes' eyebrows are raised in worry and his mouth is open as if wincing – while Laocoön's face displays open agony, we find fear and anxiety in his son. Antiphantes has not yet realized that his fate is sealed, and thus he has yet to accept his death, but the audience would experience dramatic irony, since they are already aware of his doom. The fear on his face is palpable, but while his father seems to understand and acknowledge his death (although he laments it), Antiphantes retains a sort of innocence that provokes profound sympathy for his plight. As such, the work evokes pathos for Laocoön and his sons, and develops an intimate emotional connection between the figures and the audience as their last witness. While the sight of their bodies in motion and action absorbs the audience in excitement, the faces of these figures suggest a complex array of emotions that provoke empathy. In doing so, the dynamism and exhilarating violence of the work take on a quality of horror and sorrow, transforming the viewer's experience. These emotional and empathetic elements ultimately shift the viewer from their emotional absorption and provoke *reflection* on the plight of the characters; they invite the audience to reflect on the senselessness of the characters' deaths, to lament their suffering, and to perhaps ponder their own emotional dissonance when viewing the piece. Though the content of the audience's absorption and reflection may differ among individuals following different readings, the work ultimately leads these different experiences and responses to a place of critical reflection and aesthetic tension. As such, the work produces *fascination*.

MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

Within the Western canon of art and literature, violence and suffering figure as prominent themes in part because of their major religious significance. For all the differences between the Old and New Testament, violence plays a key role in both (albeit differently in each case). In large parts of the Old Testament, violence and war are divinely sanctioned and even necessary according to God. The binding of Isaac, the story of Cain and Abel, the conquest of Canaan, slavery in Egypt, Judith and Holofernes, and many other stories and arcs in the Bible depict destruction, suffering, and gore. What's more, God Himself acts in violent ways, smiting Sodom and Gomorrah and even destroying the entire world to save Noah's family. While the New Testament places much more emphasis on God's detachment from direct involvement on the earth, the story of Jesus also culminates in violence and suffering. The beheading of St. John, the pieta, and the Passion of Christ especially are all key moments of violence and death depicted over and over again throughout the Western canon. Interestingly, the most common Biblical scenes depicted throughout history have been the Madonna and Child and the Crucifixion – though one affirms life and innocence, the other exemplifies suffering, injustice, and violence with the ultimate result of redemption. Nevertheless, some other popular scenes are saturated with violence, yet lack the redemptive context of Christ's sacrifice. In particular, the Massacre of the Innocents is scene of sheer brutality and cruelty, yet emphasizes the pain and suffering without the promise of religious justification.

Peter Paul Rubens' 1612 painting *Massacre of the Innocents*¹²³ (not to be confused with his later version from 1638) illustrates how the religious context of an artwork can capture the depths of human trauma rather than celebrating divine sacrifice alone. The work depicts a scene from the Gospel of Matthew in which Herod, the Roman-appointed ruler of the Jews, orders the death of all infant males in Bethlehem to escape the prophecy announcing that he will lose his throne to a newborn King of the Jews. Rubens' painting captures the moment when Herod's orders are carried out. In typical Baroque style, the canvas is densely packed with highly muscular nude bodies arranged in a chaotic tangle of rich colors and high contrast. The composition follows a diagonal ascension from the bottom left of the canvas to the top right as the bodies are elevated higher and higher, and the drama is raised to greater heights, as well. Each figure is engaged in some sort of dynamic action, and each action is intertwined with another such that the painting appears to be a mass of flesh at first glance. And upon closer inspection, one finds that each action is distinct, evocative, and powerful.

The painting exemplifies dynamism, movement, power, and ferocity, and these effects contribute to its capacity to absorb the audience. The sense of chaos in the composition is such that the figures appear abstract at first glance, and the viewer must look closer to make out where each figure ends and how the bodies are interacting with one another. This motion and chaos is the first means of captivating the viewer. It is unclear in the depiction of its subject, and

¹²³ Peter Paul Rubens, *Massacre of the Innocents*, 1612, oil on canvas, 142 x 182 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario

thus demands closer attention. There is no clear focal point to begin dissecting the composition, so the audience's eyes likely wanders all over the canvas, further heightening the viewer's experience of the scene's movement and action.

For our purposes, let us begin examining it from the left side to the right. The top left of the painting situates the scene in Roman Bethlehem, offering the audience architectural markers, like Corinthian columns, to identify the location as a Roman city. In this background, the audience can still see some traces of action, as many women appear to be running, skirts and robes trailing behind them, from men dressed in armor. Much of the detail is difficult to make out in part because it is obscured by shadows and because it is far away, but the motion of the bodies is still apparent. Aside from this corner, however, nearly all of the action is on the same plane and takes place in the foreground, where Rubens renders his figures in dynamic and violent detail. The bottom section of the painting is littered with the bodies of infants strewn about. Most of the bodies are concentrated on the edges, with several hidden in the folds of clothes towards the middle of the canvas. The most gruesome bodies may be on the bottom left and just right of center – those on the left are bloated, blue, and leaking blood from open wounds; the other body on the right is particularly bluish-gray in the face, yet wears an expression of serenity despite its coloring. These infant corpses represent the horrific results of the violence, and the action continues to rage above them with all indications that more bodies will join.

In the central action in the piece, the large figures are locked in battle with one another. On the furthest left, a woman is barely holding onto a crying

child while a Roman soldier seizes her by the hair. The soldier is also grabbing at another woman's hair, although his form is obscured by an even more brutal scene before them: a muscular nude man towers in front of an elderly woman, whose body is angled back and about to fall. The man shoves one hand into her mouth to hold her in place while his other arm carries a sword, about to thrust it into her. Her expression is one of horror and fear – off-balance, she grasps the blade with one hand in a desperate attempt to hold it back, but the man is clearly on the verge of overpowering her. She evokes profound terror and sorrow, and while the audience may feel profound sympathy, her doom is imminent; the audience is simply witness to her death. The scene of these figures also transfers seamlessly to the figures to their right – as she falls, the elderly woman leans up against another younger woman in the midst of another violent struggle with another muscular nude man. This woman falls backwards as well, but rather than extending her arms out to support herself or break her fall, she simultaneously holds onto one child while attacking the man to her right. In her fall, her head is turned away from the viewer towards the man, and she reaches with her arm towards his face – on closer examination, one can see that she is leaving deep gouges in his cheeks as she falls. This climactic moment captures the drama of the struggle, where the woman is playing equal parts motherly protector to the infant and warrior against assailant. Although she is falling and therefore losing the battle, she is both noble and ferocious in her desperate attempts to injure him even as she drops. The man, on the other hand, bears a look of confusion and worry, and he is also leaning backwards

away from the woman to escape her. His fearful expression both reinforces the sense of the woman's power, and also highlights his cowardice and ignobility. Overall, this scene emphasizes the sense of injustice throughout the drama, providing narrative and characteristic clues for the audience to further facilitate their emotional investment and absorption in the action. The sense of movement in the painting is ultimately one of frenzy, a web of interrelated actions, which are all equally vigorous and violent.

At the same time, the composition's organization and shape also contribute to the high drama. Aside from the upward diagonal trajectory towards the right, some of the bodies lines form a V shape in the center: the man with the sword and the old woman both angle their limbs diagonally downward towards the right, while the younger woman and the other man angle their limbs downward towards the left. The significance of this compositional choice is that the eye follows both lines towards the tip of the triangle at the bottom. There, the viewer finds that multiple characters are fighting over a defenseless infant. The younger woman is barely holding onto him with one hand as she falls back, suggesting danger in itself, but the man on the right is simultaneously pulling the baby upwards by his clothes. As such, the composition conveys linear kinetic tension in opposite directions, and reinforces the visual impression of power and violence. The blood on the man's fingers and the ground littered with infant corpses also suggest brutality, and indicate that once he gets his hands on the child, he will savagely slaughter it. What's more, this V shape connects to another inverted V, which expands the sense of

dynamism and climax and suggests a formally organized repeating pattern. Another man is angled leftwards and upwards, holding an infant high above his head, and from the very right of the canvas a woman appears reaching in a similar direction towards him. At both these angles are infants (“innocents”) about to be murdered, and these compositional choices amplify the drama and tension by drawing the eye to the most brutal and unjust deeds within the scene. The baby at the top is curved backwards gracefully and appears almost divine in the climactic moment, but the eye is tempted to follow its intended trajectory downward, towards a pile of lifeless bodies slumped and scattered around. It is a scene of shock and horror, but one that engages the eye with powerful visual cues, and absorbs the viewer with its sense of chaos, excitement, and violent power.

Having outlined the scene, I believe I can explain the absorption process more clearly. The motion of the scene, combined with its tight composition, immediately strike the viewer and provoke them to look closer to make sense of the chaos. Since the painting has no clear central figures, the eye travels all over the canvas, linking the actions and bodies to one another, and thus the viewer may feel the movement in the scene through the movement of their own eyes. The formal elements of line and color also contribute to this effect – from the left of the canvas towards the right, the composition of the characters appears almost as a sine wave (/\ /\), and it reinforces the sense of movement as the eye discerns and follows this path; the use of color also underscores the dramatic visual force of the work, using bright and rich colors in an already vibrant scene.

Thus, the audience's experience of *viewing* the work reinforces the motion and invites them to participate in it. The figures themselves also contribute to this initial absorption. The tension in each of their bodies is striking, and each moment of action is depicted at its climax so that the power of the scene as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The bulging muscles of the left man's sword hand as the other hand brutally pushes into the elderly woman's mouth, the younger woman gouging the central man's face, and the veiny arms of the right man holding the infant above his head just before dashing him down all suggest high tension; however, they do not deliver the fulfillment of the final acts of murder. As such, even if the audience is horrified by the sight and does not *want* these actions to occur, the scene leaves them tense with the *expectation* of these results. The audience bears witness to the savagery of these moments, unable to change their fates, yet they are left in a state of tension from which they can derive no closure. They will always be *about to* die, and though this fact offers the hope that they will somehow avoid death, the audience is powerless to either help or even mourn. Each moment of action, however, is equally brutal and graceful. In fact, the rich technique, marvelous skill, and formal beauty of the scene seduce the viewer to look on in admiration despite the horror of the content. Thus, the very tension that brings about the audience's absorption gives way to the tension of *fascination*.

The juxtaposition of the beauty of the painting with the horror of its content is one of the many forms that *fascination* may take in the aesthetic experience of this work. The work is composed with great dynamism, but also

with great skill, vibrant color, and profound sensuality even amidst the violence. Although the interweaving of the characters appears chaotic at first glance, the composition is actually choreographed with incredible grace and powerful drama. For these reasons, the work invites viewers to marvel and admire the beauty of the canvas, although they do so in spite of the horrible tragedies it depicts. It is easy for a viewer to momentarily transfer their sense of pleasure and admiration to the painting's subject. In effect, the beauty of the painting can even seduce audiences to relish the *content* of the violence because of its *formal* artistic qualities. Thus in my reading, this juxtaposition of beautiful form with horrifying content generates a profoundly dissonant experience of the work. Through the contrast between the inviting formal beauty and the repulsive mortal content, the beauty actually becomes horrifying while the horrors become beautiful. With horror and beauty so bound up with one another, the work may even instill a sense of guilt in the viewer for their appreciation of and pleasure in such horrifying scenes. This juxtaposition is also important because it illustrates how tension always begets more tension. The contrast between this formal beauty and the various tensions within the painting create more tension by provoking the viewer to reflect on their enjoyment of the painting.

Furthermore, the tight compositional structure, skillful execution, and overall beauty are contrasted with the ethical tension of the horrors about to occur, the physical tension of figures' actions, and the emotional tension of the actions' inevitability. It is important to note that these tensions are all distinct.

The ethical tension of the horrors translates to the audience's moral discomfort and feeling of injustice for the innocent children. The physical tension of the figures refers to their bodies flexed and in motion, yet just before the moment of execution. The emotional tension is due to the inevitability of the horrid events, by which the audience becomes a passive bystander to a scene of carnage. This provokes the viewer to expect and perhaps even desire the completion of the action. Even though they are horrified by it, they crave the culmination simply so that they can escape the feeling that they may still be able to do something while the action still has yet to happen. Thus, each of these tensions is a type of *fascination* in and of itself, and while audiences may experience different combinations of them, it is plausible that all three may be felt together.

So far, I have illustrated how the painting creates absorption and tension, leaving the element of reflection as the final point of full *fascination*. To reiterate, the audience might be drawn into the scene first by the formal composition, then by their emotional investment in the content, and eventually find themselves struggling with the tension between their appreciation of the painting and the dissonance of their ethical experience with it. I propose that tension is one of the keys to reflection in a piece like this, although I will also elaborate on the other ethical provocations that may provoke it. As previously discussed, the audience may find themselves absorbed in the frenzy of the work and then suddenly be horrified by both their ethical evaluation of the subject and their own excitement towards it. I believe audiences would likely even bounce back and forth between these two states. Tension is generated from

these conflicting attitudes towards the work, and this dissonance both highlights the viewer's self-awareness and provokes reflection. I believe the unfulfillment of the action is one of the best examples of this sort of tension, since it generates such discomfort in the viewer. Because the scene is just about to climax yet never delivers on its promise, it can both encourage the viewer to excitedly imagine the upcoming murders and, on the other end of the spectrum, subject the viewer to a heightened sense of their passivity. The figures exhibit great potential energy as they are about to deliver death-strokes, and the positioning of their bodies clearly shows the viewer how these strikes will be delivered – as such, they encourage the viewer to animate them within their own minds and imagine the culmination of the action. Yet while this might excite viewers with the high drama of the murder, it may also highlight their weakness in the face of the scene – the fact that these murders have yet to happen may be a call for the viewer to intervene and try to prevent the killing, even though it is impossible. Since the scene captures a perpetual state of near-death, viewers may experience a prolonged feeling of their own helplessness towards the figures. In either case, the viewer would desire that the murders occur, and the scene is able to make them ethically aware of this desire. By committing the violence against innocent infants, the image of the children provokes a clear sense of injustice and ethical horror, which the audience would realize in contrast to their violent desire. Ultimately, this painting functions as an ethical work by instilling guilt in its audience, becoming a powerful force for reflection.

Using Rubens' *Massacre of the Innocents*, I have argued that *fascination* can be generated both through the narrative context of a visual scene as well as by the content contained within the work itself. Of course, Rubens is not the only painter to have depicted the Massacre, and other works of the same topic would produce somewhat different aesthetic experiences. Bruegel's *Massacre of the Innocents*, for example, lacks the same close-up dynamism as Rubens' canvas, instead offering a wide view of a Flemish town square with smaller distinct episodes. It is worth noting that Bruegel's painting underwent major alterations in its history, and most of the images of dead infants have been painted over and changed to images of hams, cheeses, dogs, bundles, etc. Nevertheless, each episode offers a moment of profound drama through the sorrow desperation of the parents, even without the gruesome depictions of the children. And even in their approaches to the same subject, the experience of *fascination* varies in each due to differences in style and content. Thus in both cases it highlights these distinctions to make for a more unique aesthetic experience of each work.

GUERNICA

Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*¹²⁴ may be one of his best known and most iconic works, and is one of the 20th century's most powerful artistic statements on war. His cubist masterpiece is a response to the 1937 German bombing of the Basque city of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War, and the result is a

¹²⁴ Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, oil on canvas, 3.49 x 7.76 m, Museo Reina Sofia

striking depiction of the horrors of war. Though abstracted and largely symbolic, the work captures the raw energy of desperation and the deep intensity of sorrow that the war has wrought on the people. By highlighting the human element of war, that is, the pain and suffering divorced from the war's political purpose, *Guernica* elevates the specific tragedy of violence to a universal horror. While the context of the piece can inform one's understanding of certain elements and contribute to the content of their reflection, the work is fully *fascinating* in and of itself, and its overall lack of specificity allows it to be read as a testament to the evils of war in general.

Like many cubist works, *Guernica* is a complex composition with inconsistent perspectives and overlapping lines that challenge the viewer to work in order to put the scene together. However, despite the complex cubist web of figures, there are certain forms that are clearly visible and comprehensible, which may immediately draw the viewer's attention. The central figure of the canvas is a horse, brightly illuminated by the harsh and sharp light of the lamp above it, with a gaping spear wound on its flank. Though this is the center of the piece, the rest of the scene is equally chaotic and visually dynamic. High contrast light and shadow fall across many of the figures, and though some of their features are exaggerated or depicted from impossible perspectives, they convey a recognizable sense of horror. Below the horse lies a man with his mouth agape and arms outstretched; to the right are two women, one coming through the window and one running from across the room, who each bear a look of genuine worry despite the wild formal exaggeration of their

bodies; on either end of the canvas is a figure in immense sorrow – on the right a figure extends its arms and head upwards as if shouting in horror, and on the far left below a perplexing and off-putting figure of a bull is a woman wailing to the skies as she holds the seemingly lifeless body of a child. Without yet getting into the style and formal techniques, the expressions of the figures speak volumes to the power of the work. Out of the chaos, the faces stand out and immediately draw the eye, situating the viewer in a world of intense suffering and pain. Their wailing faces convey horror, and other aspects of the painting convey danger, as well. From the first glance, the audience can feel that this is a scene of extremity, and as their gazes jump from one discernible point (i.e. faces) to another, they may well be struck by the discomfort and tense terror that it evokes – and as such, they would be drawn in and compelled to look further to find understanding and catharsis in it, now that they have been engaged.

Guernica's formal style is one of the key aspects of its absorptive power on the audience – the striking image of the clearly visible faces contorted in pain might provoke the viewer to dissect the scene to understand what exactly is happening in it. The formal techniques come into play here, and can throw a great deal of tension into the work. One of the first instantly visible qualities of the work is the use of color in the canvas – all the paints are shades of gray, black, and white, which is to say it lacks color, life, and vibrancy. This gives the painting a sense of soberness and stoicism, and to some minds may link it to classical Greek and Roman sculpture (such as the thrilling and dynamic scenes of the Pergamon altar's frieze). Thus, the use of monochromatic paints may both

elevate the work, by referencing classical friezes, as well as setting a bleak tone for the scene. It may instantly create an air of mystery, inviting the viewer to examine the work more closely, and thereby absorbing them in the act of deciphering the scene. The use of line and light also provoke absorption by challenging the viewers to immerse themselves in the painting simply to make sense of it. The light sources in the scene cast harsh, bright light in sharp geometric shapes across the figures. The light is especially bright around the center of the canvas, which draws the eye as a focal point. Yet the light does not make the scene any easier to read – in fact, it makes it even more complex. The light falls across the bodies in impossible ways, like how the horse is lit in one section of its body but has a sharp diagonal shadow across it, despite the fact that it has a light directly above it. The wall by the horse's rightmost foot also has a bizarre shadow across the bottom. In short, the light sources are inconsistent; there appears to be a sharply delineated triangular area of light in the center of the painting, yet it does not match up with the placement of the lamp or the candle. In fact, even the lit sections have confusing dark spots. This is also due, in part, to the figural style employed in the piece. In typical cubist fashion, the bodies are fragmented, exaggerated, and reassembled. The figures appear as though they are composed of body parts viewed from different perspectives and distances, dissolved into one inconsistent form. This visual confusion demands attention and input from the audience – they must work to assemble the scene, and through their immersion in the act of looking, they

become more invested in the work itself. Thus, these stylistic choices facilitate absorption by engaging the viewer visually and harnessing their focus.

By concentrating on each of the forms and the actions they are engaged in, the horror of the scene may come across in tandem with the viewer's interest in the scene. Looking more closely at the horse, for example, one might recognize the spear tip exiting through its flank and realize that the strange diamond shape on its side is actually a gaping wound. One may also have to look more closely to notice that the soldier's right arm is severed from his body. While it still grips a broken sword, the audience may also be able to make out the faint shape of a flower growing from the hand on closer inspection. The other arm of the soldier has some hidden details as well, such as the stigmata on the palm – a possible reference to Jesus' wounds.

The wailing woman on the left also bears exaggerated bodily features, which require close attention from the viewer to fully understand – she is shirtless and wears a skirt, and her hands are almost grotesquely large and her breasts misshapen. In her arms, she is holding a child whose body has gone limp – the head hangs back upside down, the arms fall over from the force of gravity, and the face bears no expression. What's more, unlike the other figures, the child has no pupils, which suggests that it is dead. The sex of the child is indistinct, since it is bald, though the triangular shape above the legs is reminiscent of a dress or a skirt, so it may be a girl. The woman's relation to the child is unclear, but a viewer would immediately make the connection that they are mother and child based on the way she holds it and cries for it. She cradles

the child in the archetypal motherly pose, yet only with one hand. The other hangs at her side, palm out, as in defeat and exasperation, and this sense of madness is reinforced by the position of her head. She faces straight upwards, mouth wide open as though she is screaming. Her face is abstracted and contorted, which may strike audiences as disturbing because of its odd and uncomfortable arrangement of shapes. The eyes and nostrils are shaped like tear drops, and occupy one side of her face all together, and her tongue is triangular and sharp. Because this formation is physically impossible or malformed, it evokes a sense of trauma, pain, and madness, which all reinforce the open-mouthed expression of suffering on her face.

The man on the far right bears similar features with a similarly disturbing effect, yet his body and face evoke terror as opposed to horror. His face is tilted directly upwards and he holds his hands to the sky with fingers outstretched as though they are tensed. Like the woman to the far left, his face is impossible – the eyes are teardrop shapes arranged on the same side of the face even though the nose indicates that it is in profile. His mouth is also open and raised even higher than his eyes, which directs attention to the sounds he may be emitting. Like in other areas of the canvas, there is an impossible shadow across part of his hair and arm, which likely confuse the viewer, but the most confusing aspect may be where the rest of his body is. The man's body cuts off at the chest, and the painting provides no explanation of where in reality he is actually positioned. Light triangular shapes above and below him suggest flames, so a viewer may infer that the man is on fire and that the fire is the

source of his terror – it would explain why his head is tilted upwards and arms are raised to avoid the flames. Whatever the case, though, the terror that he evokes is powerful, and the absence of the rest of his body amount to a sense of tension, loss, confusion, and/or frustration in the audience – by leaving the question unanswered, the audience may devote more and more attention to finding a possible explanation, and thus keep the image of the terrorized man in their heads. Thus, the compositional decisions contribute to the audience’s emotional and intellectual tension when viewing the painting, and thereby increase their investment and absorption in it.

Another major effect of *Guernica’s* stylistic choices is the chaos that the forms evoke – the cubist depictions of the figures forgo rational perspective, and thus make it difficult if not impossible to determine how far away each object is from the other. Although cubism plays with perspective by offering multiple angles at once, the effect is actually to flatten each of the forms onto a singular plane. As such, the figures sometimes overlap each other, which heightens the connection and simultaneity of the actions; everything is happening all at once, altogether, in the same place. The audience is exposed to a scene of utter chaos, an enigmatic world that lacks rationality, yet is bursting at the seams with violence and power. The harsh light doesn’t just illuminate the figures; it also contributes to the high contrast and energy of the piece. The scene is vaguely threatening in many ways, as well. The tongues of the horse, woman on the left, and the bull are all rendered as sharp points, almost like spear tips, and the lamp on the ceiling resembles the “evil eye” and suggests violence with the

sharp, angular rays of light it emits. The movement of the figures amounts to a sense of dynamism – the horse turns its head sharply around its body, as does the bull, and the mane and tails flap to reinforce this; the women on the right are also in motion, one of them extending forward through the window and the other running towards the left; and the man and woman on the far right and left, respectively, are all angled towards the sky, suggesting upward movement that contains the rest of the action between the two. All of these choices come together to evoke motion and unrestrained power. The audience may find great excitement in the canvas as a result – the painting might tap into their desire to view action and extraordinary dynamism and absorb them on those grounds. Yet the painting also evokes a sense of horror along with the action, and the images of these bodies in various states of pain and suffering may engage the audience by provoking a sense of wonder and awe in the face of such destruction. Whether the subsequent reaction be empathy, sadistic pleasure, sorrow, or a combination of all three, this initial view of the scene as *spectacle* allows the viewer to become absorbed in it for all of its primal energy.

Guernica also provokes the audience on emotional and ethical terms, and while some aspects contribute to absorption, others provoke a turn to reflection. As discussed earlier, the horror expressed in the figures' bodies is emotionally compelling – the sight of bodies in pain may tickle the audience's sadistic desire to see violence and suffering, offering a primal spectacle of horror that may have a cathartic effect for the audience. In this way, the audience can become emotionally invested in the piece, but it would be on the basis of their violent

impulses and the desire to feel the thrill of destruction. The black-and-white stoicism of the piece may also elevate it as a spectacle or as abstract violence, since one may think of it in the same way as a classical Greek frieze. Yet the piece is also emotionally compelling on the basis of empathy – the horror of the figures inspires not only sadistic excitement, but also pathos and sorrow on behalf of the figures. The man on fire, the dead soldier, and the woman holding a dead child in her arms are powerful images, all of which inspire intense pity, ethical horror, and communal suffering. The viewer, as a witness to the scene, may feel a sense of identification with the figures, lamenting the tragedy and expressing horror alongside them as they wail to the skies. However, this sense of empathy does not mean that the desire for violence is gone – the audience may feel tension between their thrill of the chaotic spectacle and their pathos for the suffering it depicts. Like the woman coming through the window, the viewer is peering into the scene, witnessing it yet not entirely part of it. The audience may feel a sense of revulsion towards the scene, as well – the sight of a dead body, of a severed arm, or of a gaping wound in the horse might provoke an instant reaction of horror and revulsion. Many of the figures themselves are also grotesque: the style of their depiction exaggerates their features and makes them appear as crude, twisted, abnormal, and disturbing. The woman on the right is exemplary of this – her feet are oversized, as is her knee, and her toes appear more like cancerous growths than appendages. The hands of all the figures are especially grotesque in this way. As a result, they may repulse the viewer and prevent full identification with the figures even despite the pathos that their

contorted expressions inspire. Again, this contributes to the viewer's tension between negative attitudes (repulsion, sadism) and their positive feelings (empathy, pity, sense of identification). These aspects of the painting and the effects that they provoke thus heighten the viewer's self-awareness of their own response to the painting; it makes them aware of the contradictory feelings that they may hold towards it. As such, it would inspire reflection, not only on the content of the painting, but also on their own real ethical feelings compared with their ideals.

Yet even if the viewer responds with a consistent attitude of empathetic horror, the work would still provoke deep reflection. Overall, the work conveys extreme danger all around – the bull stands threateningly in the corner, blocking any attempt to escape the violent throes of the wounded horse, the flames engulfing the man on the right, or the soldier's dying suffering. This may transfer a sense of discomfort to the viewer, implying that the suffering is inescapable. As such, the work might provoke feelings of sorrow and pity for the figures. The style of figuration can also provoke reflection on the power of horror. Though the bodies are grotesque and malformed, that may actually be a manifestation of the violence inflicted on their bodies. In other words, the suffering and pain that they experience may transform them into these horrifying creatures; their grotesque forms are the embodiments of their own traumatic experiences. Such an interpretation would offset the thrill of the spectacle and provoke reflection on the nature of war – how the thrill of the idea of war does not correspond to its horrifying reality, and the awful effects it

wreaks on humanity. Once one begins thinking along this line, all the excitement of the chaos and artistic admiration of the suffering bodies may become subject of sorrow and pathos instead of cathartic pleasure. The aesthetic experience of the work would thus pivot dramatically from one of visceral thrill to contemplation over the evils of war.

Guernica generates another unique effect through its stylistic choices – the intricate cubist composition engages the viewer’s powers of analysis, but in demanding this work from them, it may make them experience a sense of responsibility for the actions in the scene. As I have discussed, the work employs complex uses of line, angle, and formation, which require concerted effort on the part of the viewer to fully dissect and understand. Yet the more that the viewer analyzes the composition, the clearer the scene becomes; as a result, the more one looks to understand what is happening and how, the more the horror is revealed. In effect, the viewer is unearthing the suffering and violence by closely deciphering the work, and in revealing this pain they may even feel as though they are the ones *causing* violence to them. The more the audience understands how exactly the figures are suffering, the more visceral and powerful their suffering becomes. Though the idea of the work as a spectacle removes the capacity to intervene from the audience and allows them to indulge in their cathartic viewing, the analysis that the work requires changes this experience. By engaging the viewer with the complicated task of decoding and deducing the work, *Guernica* might give viewers a feeling of agency and even responsibility for their discoveries and interpretations. As such, close analysis and dissection of

the work may come to actually feel as though they are *inflicting* the suffering on them. On the one hand, it may heighten the visceral thrill of seeing the bodies under the extreme suffering, and perhaps affords the viewer a feeling of power. Yet on the other, if the viewer is struck or provoked by ethical considerations of the figures' suffering, their sense of responsibility may instill a feeling of intense guilt and even greater pathos for the figures.

This emotional shock may also give way to further reflection on a variety of ideas suggested here: the audience may consider their own guilt and reevaluate their own desires in contrast to their ethical ideals; they may also consider how the act of witnessing, yet not acting, is what allows war to function and devastate humanity so horrible; they may reflect on the ethics of spectatorship itself, that is, whether they have an obligation to bear witness to these horrors or whether their penetrating gaze into the scene is invasive of such deeply personal tragedies; and/or they could also reflect on questions of innocence and how war affects the humanity of all of those involved. Needless to say, the work provokes a multitude of topics for reflection, yet imbues each with a sense of horror and sorrow since it is derived from such images of suffering. For all these reasons, the work is a powerhouse of *fascination*.

The question of symbolism is also particularly powerful in *Guernica*. Though the work depicts abstract violence, free of content that would make it a painting specifically of the Guernica bombings, there are several references to the reality of the event that may provoke further reflection on those specific circumstances. The bull, for instance, is a national symbol of Spain, and in this

work seems to represent the Spanish fascist army under General Franco. The Nazi bombing of Guernica was meant to provide aid to Franco's army, since Guernica (a city on Basque Country) was a stronghold for the Republican rebel forces. The bull's face is illuminated in the painting, though its body is shrouded in darkness, and it stands menacingly in the corner of the canvas over the woman holding the dead child. The bull suggests danger and power, and, like Franco, though it is not responsible for the actions in the painting (as far as the audience can tell), it is certainly present as a key figure in the destructive landscape. Another smaller detail is the right hand of the man on fire at the right edge of the canvas. Though many of the figures have grotesque and crude hands, this right hand is far more misshapen than all the others; most of the other hands, including his left, have bulbous fingers hanging off of large palms. However, his right hand lacks the round palm, and his fingers appear as if they are blowing in the wind. The hand is actually reminiscent of the shape of an airplane, which may be a reference to the Nazi planes that bombed the city. If this is so, it makes sense symbolically that the hand would be raised so high above his body, especially since his body is being consumed by the fire of the Nazi bombs. These details may be attempts to ground the work in reality. By tying it to a specific event, even with the artistic license it takes, the painting may feel more real and therefore more powerful to audiences that pick up on these hints. While these details may link the work to the real event, they do not detract from the universal ideas that the painting suggests. If anything, they simply add another layer of meaning and symbolism on which to reflect.

The work features other more general symbolism amidst the chaos, which bear multifaceted ideas of empathy and sorrow. The soldier on the ground may be the most detailed example. For one, his severed arm grips a broken sword, from which the faint outline of a flower appears to sprout. The severed arm may simply be another horrific detail to reinforce the terrors of war. Yet the broken sword seems to suggest larger ideas – it may signify an end to violence, but it may also represent the loss of an individual’s capacity to defend themselves. Since the painting does not clarify the context of the scene, it is ambiguous whether the soldier is an aggressor or a defensive force, though in both cases he does represent violence. As such, audiences may find tension in these conflicting interpretations; they may be repulsed by the gruesome image, yet they may also find themselves mourning for the defenseless soldier or feeling relief at his inability to do more harm – perhaps a combination of all of these. They may even feel a sense of justice and satisfaction with his pain if they interpret him as accountable for violence, and this may further illuminate the seductive power of violence despite their other moral objections towards the suffering of other figures– this is yet another source of tension that may provoke the audience to reflect on and reconcile. The soldier also bears a stigmata on his open palm, which may be a religious allusion to the martyrdom of Jesus. In this case, the work may therefore suggest that the bombing, and perhaps war in general, was a sin against God. Again, the soldier’s own accountability for the violence is in question, and these symbols he bears can be interpreted either with empathy for him or with horror towards his actions. Because it is

ambiguous, yet full of potential meaning, the symbolism of the work offers a variety of subjects for reflection, and contributes to the painting's quality of *fascination*.

Yet while the painting emphasizes the terrible, gruesome, and awful results of war and destruction, the work also contains hopeful symbolism amidst the despair. The flower sprouting out of the severed arm is one of the clearest visual messages of hope. Growing from the dead arm gripping a broken sword, the flower suggests that new life can still grow and prosper from the wreckage and devastation of war. In fact, the flower may not just be a comment on this possibility, but also be a plea for an end to war entirely. Overall, the addition of this image in the midst of such a violent and horrific spectacle suggests hope for peace, but also its translucency symbolizes the dangers that threaten peace from taking root; though the seed is there, it is unclear whether it will be able to prosper in a landscape where violence continues. As such, audiences may feel an emotional investment in the hope that the flower symbolizes, and might thus feel anxious about its precarious position amidst the war. On the other hand, they may also see the flower as doomed to die in such a hellish scene. Whatever the interpretation, the image suggests powerful and profound messages that may resonate with some viewers and provoke them to further reflection.

The other major symbol of hope in the work is the woman looking through the window with the candle. To reiterate, she may represent the audience within the scene – she is outside, separated from the violence, yet peers in and casts her light on the suffering. She grips her chest (which is suggested by

the rounded breasts though the body is not visible) and her face expresses deep concern, pity, and sorrow. This expression of pity and sorrow may represent the hope for humanity by emphasizing her moral response to the scene, perhaps suggesting that the horrors of war cannot strip us of our humanity.

The most powerful symbol of all, however, may be the candle that this figure holds inside. Its light is put in juxtaposition with the light from the lamp inside, and they differ in aura: the lamp is harsh and threatening, emanating sharp rays of light that suggest violence or danger, while the candle is softer and contained within the glass. Again, if the woman represents the audience as witnesses, the candle signifies the importance of casting a light on these horrors, etching them into our memories, and perhaps hoping that we will not repeat them. While the lamp is a piece of machinery, the candle is softer and bears more human qualities with its formal curves. As such, its light may represent hope, or perhaps also refer to Enlightenment and its vision of human progress and peace. These symbols, like the flower, are juxtaposed with the horror and chaos of the scene, yet offer another, deeper element of reflection with the suggestion of hope. Though the landscape appears hellish and offers a bleak sense of the present, these hopes for the future, precarious as they may be, provoke an emotional sense of redemption, and a positive idea to reflect on and reconcile with the rest of the violence. Thus, by casting a tragic yet hopeful light on the darkest features of humanity, *Guernica* ultimately juxtaposes the most extreme ends of the human spectrum to amplify the emotional, reflective, and thus *fascinating* power of the painting as a whole.

CONCLUSION: EXTENSIONS OF *FASCINATION*

Throughout this thesis, I have applied my model of *fascination* to a variety of great texts and artworks in order to illustrate its insights into how audiences might experience them. As diverse as my sources may be, they are all linked by the presence and significance of violence in the work. I sought, in part, to demonstrate how a single theme could take on wildly different forms, connotations, and ultimately different experiences. Yet by choosing to explore this idea through violence, I also presented violence as a unique theme – my emphasis on violence may have implied that it is the only (or at least primary) theme that could produce *fascination*. The relationship between violence and *fascination* is particularly helpful for demonstrating how the model functions. Since violence is so immediate and viscerally powerful, it provokes particularly extreme responses in the audience, which are easier to single out and contrast to one another. By using the examples of these extremes, I illustrated most clearly how absorption and reflection operate – that is, how the emotional impact of a work becomes interwoven with the reflective and ethical issues around it. At this point, I aim to reiterate the role of *fascination* in each of the distinct pieces I’ve analyzed, and outline the ways that *fascination* functions across these works.

I begin by returning to the issue of “conflicts of ethics” and the works I analyzed through this lens. While each of these works is distinct in the way and context in which it incorporates this issue of “conflicts of ethics,” the issue functions similarly in each one to produce *fascination*. Across each one of these

texts are competing currents of ethical thought, and the drama of each is framed at least in part by the tensions and irreconcilabilities between them. While the circumstances of the conflict between libertine philosophy and common French morality of the Revolutionary period differ immensely from the conflict between Hindu cosmology and ethical action on earth, they are all ultimately ethical issues that hold great importance for the audience. Whatever the fantastical, extraordinary, or dramatic events of these texts, the ethical questions raised within them have a direct impact on the lives of their readers, even though the context is distant from them.

The problems and paradoxes that this issue poses (in all its multiple forms) engage the reader both in terms of their moral investment in the texts as well as in their daily lives. While readers of the *Mahabharata* will reflect on the high drama and ethical ambiguity of the characters, they will also reflect on the application of the text's ideas to their own lives – though they simultaneously acknowledge the importance of the larger cosmology as well as the ethics of terrestrial life, they would be provoked to wonder whether these are actually compatible and, if not, how one should prioritize them. Audiences of *Philosophy in the Bedroom* could indulge in the sexual depravity that Sade describes in great absorbing detail, as well as either relishing or mourning the dramatic loss of innocence. However, in my reading they would also be provoked to evaluate the logic of libertine morality and test whether their own convictions stand up to comparative reasoning. And finally, while *Antigone* is a powerful work of cathartic tragedy, it also incites audiences to reflect on the tensions between

collective and personal ethics, and whether there are absolute ethical principles at all or whether they are contingent on the society/situation.

Though violence is a central theme in all of these works, the way violence is framed in the issue of “conflicts of ethics” allows it to challenge audiences on their convictions towards the characters as well as more broadly towards their own ideals. While other issues also provoke ethical thought on the real-world implications that the works pose, the dissonance of “conflicts of ethics” is unique because it directly challenges audiences to reflect on their own ethical beliefs. Ultimately, since these works expose many ethical paradoxes of the principles that people hold dear, they are uniquely generative and ultimately insightful in the reflections that they provoke.

Within the issue of “cycles of violence,” *fascination* also models the commonalities and distinctions of the works I’ve examined. While *Macbeth* and *Beowulf* begin in similar places, only to lead down vastly divergent paths, *fascination* nevertheless provides unique insight into the experience of both of these works. At the beginning of each text, both *Macbeth* and *Beowulf* are positioned as vassals within a warrior culture, and their great powers (verging on brutality) are extolled. As the texts continue, *Beowulf* narrates a tale of glory and honor, while *Macbeth* is marked by dishonor, cruelty, and degradation. *Beowulf* faces 2-dimensional opponents that manifest evils; since they are distinctly inhuman and flatly antagonistic, his battles serve as straightforward manifestations of triumph and power. *Macbeth*, by contrast, follows a path of

dishonor as he casts morality aside in favor of his ambition; he himself ultimately comes to embody the negative and evil.

Yet despite these differences in approach and framework, *fascination* offers a vision into the profound similarities that these works ultimately provoke in their audiences. Both tap into something about the human condition and its negativity – humans rather than monsters most often perpetrate the “cycles of violence”, and the issue is especially powerful when the work exposes the validities that lie on both sides of such cyclical conflicts. *Beowulf* suggests this negative view of humanity subtly– that is, Beowulf and his comrades fight in an honorable and united front against the plainly evil monsters, while the darker sides of humanity itself are either suggested marginally through the bard’s stories or disguised in the personifications of “inhuman” (or anti-social) qualities by the monsters. *Macbeth*, on the other hand, throws the audience directly into the psyche of a character that perpetrates these “cycles of violence,” yet does so with pity and sympathy for the villain’s faults while still acknowledging his evil. Thus, the two works ultimately provoke similar ideas about the nature of humanity and human conflict – whether humans are guided into conflict by blind ambition, greed, or revenge (to name a few), these reasons are not only understandable and identifiable, but are the unfortunate qualities that make us human.

As another result of the role of “cycles of violence” within the works, both texts expose a certain frailty to the social structures in which they each take place. *Macbeth* and *Beowulf* both come from warrior cultures where violence is

lauded and honored, but only within a certain context. But since these societies are founded on the perpetual commitment to acts of violence (even if only to protect themselves), they necessarily invite violence against them in response. While *Beowulf* only fights monsters throughout most of the epic, his death leaves the Danes susceptible to the looming threat of attack and conquest while they are leaderless – such is the way of the world when societies operate on the principles of violence. Similarly, *Macbeth* illustrates how cycles of violence are perpetuated *within* a society by hubristic ambition. Although he is praised for committing acts of brutality against “traitors,” the same acts become unjust when the context shifts back to the system of feudal obligation. *Macbeth*’s original act of violence (in killing the king) is followed by the exact same act against him (killing the king), except that one is designated as injustice and the other as justice based on the context. With such overlapping lines, the play ultimately suggests that because of the human propensity to violence and greed, warrior societies are unstable examples of the uncontrollability of violence.

Finally, both texts foster absorption, albeit for different reasons, and ultimately harness this evocative and emotional power to provoke reflection these ideas. *Beowulf* invites audiences to relish the violence, framing the battles as a conflict of good vs. evil in which both sides descend to equal levels of savagery in an attempt to vanquish the other. The text offers many gruesome details, but because it is framed as a battle for honorable and noble purposes (to protect Hrothgar’s kingdom), the repulsive gore takes on a positive quality as a symbol of victory. Though *Beowulf* himself parallels inhumanity in his battles,

he returns to triumph and celebration. But when such violence is re-contextualized in conflicts between humans (in the bards songs and at the end of the poem), the audience is confronted with a realization of the danger that humans, rather than monsters, pose to one another. Thus, when the new (or perhaps lurking) enemy is highlighted, the absorption pivots to sobering reflection. Macbeth is treated similarly to Beowulf at first; when King Duncan praises his nearly inhuman brutality against the traitor's forces, he seems to give voice to *Beowulf's* audience celebrating his vicious power. Yet as the play proceeds, Macbeth's acts of violence become even more horrifying as he gives into his unethical ambition and succumbs to paranoia and madness. Rather than relishing the violence itself, the audience is repulsed by his cruel crimes. Yet the absorption also stems from the fact that Macbeth is a pitiable and sympathetic character – for all his faults and for all the reasons audiences may rightly condemn him, he embodies identifiable qualities of ambition, greed, guilt and regret all taken to an extreme context. This tension between the pity for Macbeth and the repulsion towards him is what compels the audience to continue watching, and ultimately to reflect, in the hope of resolving this dissonance. Both texts ultimately harness this notion of dissonance to provoke a reflective turn to the issue of “cycles of violence,” and as such, they exemplify the function of *fascination* across disparate works.

Fascination also functions comparably across the issue of “horror;” though the precise content of the absorption and reflection differ in each of the various works, there are common functions throughout each one that reinforce

the notion of horror and ultimately suggest similar questions for reflection. Comparing *Journey to the End of the Night* to *Guernica*, for example, illustrates how “horror” plays a similar role in both, even though they contain different content and offer distinct views on both war and the human condition.

Journey absorbs the audience equally with the intensity and immediacy of its language as with the palpable terror that Bardamu feels in the face of war; the novel breaks down the idea of the noble sacrifices of war and valiance in the face of death (and even openly satirizes it), suggesting that both cowardice and madness are more essential qualities. The visceral power of Bardamu’s fear absorbs the audience at first, but the moments of terror and “horror” throughout the novel ultimately shift the audience’s perception; whether it is Bardamu’s own fear of the war and his fellow passengers to Africa, the tragedy of his patient’s death due to her parents’ fear of shame, or even the savage violence of two parents to their own daughter as a means of igniting their passion, these moments of overwhelming trauma turn the audience from passive receptors of a narrative to empathetic witnesses lamenting both the suffering and ignobility of humanity.

Guernica also functions by tapping into the audience’s sentiments of empathy and tragedy, although through a different logical path. The work is compositionally intricate, requiring close attention and analysis to interpret, and it initially absorbs its viewers through the formal act of dissecting it. Once viewers have uncovered the tangle of bodies and suffering figures, the work provokes emotional investment and empathy into their plight. As the viewer

scans the canvas, revealing further details of pain and anguish, the sense of “horror” is compounded until it reaches a breaking point, where the audience is likely to reflect on the circumstances that have led to such tragic events. Yet while the work suggests pain and terror, certain visual details provoke reflection along more hopeful lines – instead of simply emphasizing the terror and evils of humanity, the work provokes empathy, which reinforces a sense of common morality; furthermore, the work also suggests hope for peace even in spite of the bleakness and overwhelming suffering of the scene. Like in *Journey*, *Guernica* absorbs its audience through the same means by which it ultimately provokes their reflection: either their sense of terror or their empathy are means of securing identification and investment, but both eventually overwhelm the audience until they question the meaning or reason for such profound suffering. While the content of the reflection also sits on two ends of the spectrum (*Journey* nihilistically emphasizing the human evils and *Guernica* appealing to a sense of common humanity), the issue of “horror” is equally active in both and provides insight into the depths of the audiences’ experiences of these works.

A brief comparison of *Laocoön and his Sons* and *Massacre of the Innocents* also yields valuable understanding of the role of “horror” in each artwork. These works bear significantly more similarities in terms of their absorptive processes, and ultimately lead to a similar sense of discomfort and loss as a result. Both works convey incredibly vivid, dynamic motion, and the formal beauty of each seduces the audience to admire the piece despite the tragic content. The complexity of both pieces invites the viewer to dissect the

scene, making sense out of the tangle and chaos of the bodies. At the same time, audiences would begin to make out exactly what is happening to each of the figures, and would become absorbed by their sense of empathy and tragedy. Furthermore, the contexts of each of the works (both mythical and biblical) would provoke greater emotional investment by the audience into the scene, since knowledge of the larger narrative would amplify the drama and significance of the moments. Thus, viewers would admire the formal and technical skill behind each work at the same moments as they are overwhelmed by the “horror” of the struggling bodies, painful contortions, and the deaths that the figures face. And as a result, the audience may experience moments of overlap in which their admiration for the beauty and skill of the work is transferred to their opinion of the work’s content, as well. While audiences would eventually catch themselves, they would experience a dissonance resulting from discomfort towards their own feelings about the work. In short, like in *Journey* and *Guernica*, the issue of “horror” first absorbs the audience by appealing to a common sense of empathy and tragedy, but ultimately overwhelms the audience with traumatic intensity and thus forces them to confront and interrogate the larger forces behind this “horror.”

In a broader sense, while I have demonstrated the roles of specific issues within individual works, there is significant overlap between issues even within the same pieces. I have already discussed how *Journey to the End of the Night* exemplifies the role of “horror” as *fascination*, but the work also embodies the issue of “cycles of violence.” Through *Bardamu*, readers see how violence is

perpetuated not only in acts of vengeance, but also more widely and randomly to satisfy a sort of passion or lust. Violence and trauma follows him wherever he goes, from the western front of WWI, to a ship bound for Africa, to Africa itself, and even back to Paris (on multiple occasions). While it supports the dismal suggestion from *Macbeth* and *Beowulf* that humanity has a dark propensity to brutality, it differs greatly in other forms and interpretations of these “cycles.” *Journey* openly mocks the notion of bravery and nobility in wartime, and uses cynicism and terror to provoke the idea that these “cycles” are not just political in nature, but also personal passions for cruelty as well as the great drama of death. The combination of “horror” and “cycles of violence” therefore generate a more unique and complex form of *fascination*, provoking reflection, for example, on the overwhelming sense of suffering that “cycles of violence” produce and lamenting the possibility that there is no escape from these dialectics of conflict.

Similarly, *Antigone* not only embodies “conflicts of ethics,” but also “cycles of violence” and even “horror.” The entire plot of the play is precipitated on a failed invasion following familial conflict, and the subsequent responses to the battles eventually result in further deaths. What’s more, with the play’s powerful cathartic elements ramping up the drama around the characters’ fates, the tragedy of Antigone, Haemon, and Eurydice’s deaths rouses a sense of “horror” that provokes the audience to reflect on the justice/injustice of Creon’s edicts, the needlessness of the interrelated sequence of deaths, and the failures of reason in the face of pigheadedness; that is, this provocation of “horror” then

provokes further reflection on “conflicts of ethics” and “cycles of violence.” In sum, these issues are all interrelated in this play, and the task of reflection is not only to analyze one’s experience of a single issue, but also to explore the web of ideas and relations that the work weaves together.

Thus, *fascination* is an intuitive and valuable way of interpreting the aesthetic experience of many works of art. Throughout this thesis, I applied the model of *fascination* to several masterpieces in order to demonstrate the rich insights that it offers into artistic audiences. Although I have analyzed these works according to a single theme (violence), I have also explored several of the various issues that exist within that larger category. And while I’ve interpreted these works individually, and by a single issue at a time, I have also illustrated the commonalities between these works and addressed the overlapping themes within each one. Ultimately, I argue that the two-step process of *fascination* accounts for both the emotional investments and intellectual/ethical considerations of an audience’s experience of an artwork. As such, it leaves ample room for contradiction, dissonance, and tension within that experience. By accounting for these tensions, and proposing an interpretation that even thrives on them, *fascination* opens the door to a wider multitude of readings that more accurately and perceptively capture the complex workings of artworks on their audience. The choice of the term *fascination* is therefore deliberate – since the act of reflection itself becomes an absorbing dialectical process of self-analysis and re-interpretation, the term “*fascination*” captures the notion of long-lasting enthrallment that these works are capable of producing in their

audiences. For works of art that produce such powerful effects on their audiences, I ultimately propose there should be an equally powerful philosophical framework to account for the multitude of experiences and interpretations in a post-modern and reception-focused academic world.

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