



# THE GRAIL

VOL. XII

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ISSUE III

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## FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

We've all finally made it to the end of this semester! Whether you've finished your papers and exams or are desperately trying to avoid them by picking up whatever literature you find strewn about, *The Grail* is here for you! We're ending this semester on a high note, just like we hope you soon will be too, with an array of writers and artists old and new. We begin with editor Dan's reckoning with the study of literature and tragedy through the work of Eugene O'Neill (1-3). From there, discover a feline friend (and a personal and physics-filled account) from first-time contributor Lex (4) and enjoy the view and check out Sarah's photography (5). Misha revives the travelogue and muses from Russia (6-7), and Kaleb shares his untitled poem (8).

Finally, the fashion column DeSastre returns, with an exclusive look at Reed College's most iconic dog-accompanied lesbian

(10)! Also, the beautiful cover design, titled "Doorknocker," is the work of the incredibly talented Sophia T.

From two juniors only now emerging from the depths of JSEM after fourteen weeks, we thank you, our readers, for sticking with us until the very end. Thank you to our wonderful contributors and to our layout editor Sophie — we couldn't have done it without y'all! Have a restful break and take care of yourself!

Love,

Dan and Lauren

P. S. from Dan's first time doing layout: Thank you so much Sophie! Also we managed to not disappoint our *Grail* foreparents and future descendants with an 8 page issue, and for that holiday miracle I thank you all!

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*Front cover Doorknocker by Sophia Tidwell*

# Something Sad

## My self-centered ponderings on why I study literature

By DAN PRIMKA

It seems inevitable in every literature major's educational career, after innumerable questions of "what are you going to do with an English degree," to question, what is the reason to read, study, teach, or even write literature? This is obviously a broad question, too broad to truly answer here, but the clearest marker of impact is that of large scale effect. The seemingly obvious answer is that literature can work to begin dialogue and reach for social or political change. Within American literature, no genre could be seen to be striving so to bring freedom to the oppressed than the American protest novel. In a 1949 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," James Baldwin explores the hypocrisies of the genre, specifically looking at Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Baldwin suggests that, "The 'protest' novel, so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene... Whatever unsettling questions are raised are evanescent, titillating; remote, for this has nothing to with us, it is safely ensconced in the social arena, where, indeed, it has nothing to do with anyone, so that finally we receive a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all." Baldwin rejects the protest novel as overly categorical and lacking in an examination of the complexities of human life, as well as overly sentimental, which "is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel... the mask of cruelty." If even the so called "protest novel" cannot effectively sow a desire for change, what can?

This question becomes even more potent within the realm of tragedy. Often, in my phone calls with my mother, she asks some version of "why study something so sad?" This is, indeed, a question I have to ask myself every day. Working on Eugene O'Neill, especially his play *The Iceman Cometh*, I feel my academic work encroaching upon my own mentality.

*The Iceman Cometh* is a work deeply concerned with the delusions of humankind. For those who do not know the play, it takes place in 1912 in New York City in Harry Hope's bar, which is inhabited by a motley array of sixteen lovely and nearly continuously drunk leeches. Only sober when they do not have the money for their poison, these drunk-

ards lounge around continually talking about how they will get their old lives back together... tomorrow. Traveling salesman and their long-time friend, Hickey, comes twice a year, and the play's chorus is patiently awaiting his arrival for Harry Hope's birthday party. Hickey comes but is uncharacteristically sober. Pronouncing his desire to convert the roomers from the "religion of tomorrow" and rid them of their pipe-dreams, Hickey is unsettling and often irritates the other characters. Long story short, Hickey has gone insane, having killed his wife, which was, in his mind, a mercy killing in order to rid her of her pipe-dream that he will stop cheating on her. In his speeches, Hickey confesses and attempts to terms with his guilt. Before arriving, Hickey has called the police and told them to come to Hope's to pick him up in the early hours of the morning. The police enter quietly in the midst of Hickey's soliloquy's (in performance often lasting fifteen minutes) and hear him detail his murder. After a bit of shocked reactions from the other characters Hickey claims he has gone insane and lets the police lead him away. Parritt, a recent arrival and former anarchist (who worked with Larry and Hugo, another anarchist), has sold out the movement resulting in the imprisonment and figurative death of his mother. He hears in Hickey's story his own and, at the prompting of Larry Slade, the old foolosopher, jumps of the fire escape to his death. The derelicts of Hope's bar turn back to their pipe-dreams and drink. Only Larry possibly has changed. Having condemned Parritt to death, Larry sits alone staring at the floor, as if a long-lost faith has returned to him.

This line has baffled critics. Many existentialist critics read Larry as Nietzsche's Übermensch and as the true tragic hero and protagonist of the play. Their argument centers on Larry's condemnation of Parritt, suggesting that it is an act that transcends morals and is only an act that an Übermensch could perform. Larry in a sense acts as judge, jury, and executioner. In doing so, he is the only character able to cast off their pipe-dream and illusion (his is that he has entered the "grandstand of life" and does not pity or have compassion for the other inhabitants of the bar). Their argument



Eugene O'Neill courtesy of National Park Service

is that *The Iceman Cometh* is truly an optimistic play depicting the possibility of the Übermensch to overcome traditional morality and the illusions and dreams of the world that hold us back from acting as an “overman” should.

In my opinion, and that of another set of critics, Larry actually operates as the chorus leader and pseudo-narrator as he introduces each of the characters and their own particular dreams. Hickey is instead the protagonist and tragic figure. Larry’s act at the end of the play reads a bit less of a transcending of morals and more of a reaction of pity. Parritt clearly wants his own death and views it as the only possible punishment for his betrayal of his mother. Larry simply pities the man he sees as the closest thing to his son. Larry does not actually cast off his illusions; he acts out of pity and compassion. He ends the play rather sadly, alone, away from his friends dealing, having seen two of his friends die. Hickey, likewise, does not rid himself of his illusions, despite his claims to have done so. He casts off the illusion that he can reform and be a good husband, but he simply takes up new illusions, like his own role as savior and eventually his insanity. O’Neill is pointing out humankind’s need for illusions to actually live in our world.

This is the position that has been challenging to me. O’Neill appears to be about as pessimistic as one can be. He points to our sad need for illusions and our inability to truly face ourself in the mirror and make real, fruitful change in our lives. It has affected my own thoughts as I attempt to address my own illusions and come to terms with my inability to cast them away. As I face a life working with literature, I have to ask myself, “am I deluding myself in hoping that literature matters?”

O’Neill himself, at the end of his life, worried about this. He wrote the third act of *Iceman* as Germany invaded Poland and many of his work-diary entries are littered with war news. O’Neill wrote in a letter on July 17, 1940, “For the past few months I’ve been so demoralized by the world debacle that I haven’t worked or paid much attention to anything. The theatre has seemed to me about the most unimportant doll’s house on earth, and playwrighting a silly futile business.” The work he completed before the end of the war, his most critically acclaimed, was the last work he ever produced despite living ten years longer. He never got “back to a sense of writing being worthwhile” (comment from an interview from 1946, before the opening of *Iceman*). He concluded that statement suggesting,

“In fact, I’d have to pretend.”

O’Neill’s rather sad conclusions about his writing are hard to deal with for me. In fact, I tried to write this for the first issue of *The Grail*, but for various reasons I didn’t finish. Having worked with O’Neill this entire semester I’m somewhere else, though I know not entirely where. O’Neill’s most important biographers Arthur and Barbara Gelb insist upon his celebration of life, quoting him as saying, “I love life... But I don’t love life because it is pretty. Prettiness is only clothes-deep. I am a truer lover than that. I love it naked. There is beauty to me even in its ugliness. In fact, I deny the ugliness entirely, for its vices are often nobler than its virtues, and nearly always closer to a revelation.” If we are to believe him, O’Neill’s work in pointing out the illusions necessary to everyone is actually a celebration of life. It is not a condemnation of our pipe-dreams. It is a fact and he is celebrating the people he has known in his long life inhabiting bars and similar joints. This seems to be evident in the comedy of

the play. Its comedy is cut and overcome with the tragedy, but that seems to be the case with most histories of the world.

I am no closer to an answer. I hope I have learned something about what it means to be human through O’Neill. I don’t think that literature can cause wide spread change in the ways I thought it could my freshman year. It can take positions on politics and art, but above all its subject is life, all of it. At pains of sounding like the critics I hate who ignore the political and social, I may have to agree with Baldwin that art takes an aesthetic distance from politics and is not the most effective way of bringing about change. If artists ignore the political, social, and all other realms, however, they cannot portray the depths and dirt of life. There is, I hope, something to learn from an investigation of life. I just haven’t fully figured that out yet. All I know is that I cannot cast off my pipe-dreams, but I must live with them and have compassion for others and their illusions.



2018 revival of *The Iceman Cometh* featuring Denzel Washington as Hickey courtesy of Critics at Large

# PS

By LEX LEI

There is a gigantic glass box on display in the City Gallery with one cat in it, and, in accord with Schrödinger, the cat is named Lex.

Schrödinger's cat illustrates how a cat can be both alive and dead inside a nontransparent box where no one is able to observe it. Here, the box we are dealing with is, seemingly, transparent. The cat is no longer simply both alive and dead, because each side is different. Some have questioned what is inside the box, if there is a cat at all, but as you touch the cold wall of the box, you can almost feel the cat's heartbeat. Accordingly, it's a she.

Standing in front of the box, you see the cat in her round glasses and a white lab coat. The innate laws of the physical world that last longer than she does fascinate her, because studying the universe makes her feel that she belongs. She does belong, belong to the universe, as sooner or later she will become the particles she studied. There is one thing though. Try not to talk about the entropy if you find it disturbing. Although the concept states that the universe is always progressing towards disorder, she finds it irritating that people agree, without much thinking, that disorder is a bad thing. She will ask you, squinting behind her glasses, to prove that entropy has negative effects, whether you or she or anyone is happy today. She will ask you to define "good" first, of course.

Pacing to the left, you see the cat wearing a purple wig and weirdly shaped sunglasses, swaying to rap or punk music. She has lousy taste in art, or a brilliant one, for most people think she knows nothing about art, but art is never easily defined. Maybe she really knows nothing, but she knows what she likes, and it's better than taking on others' preferences. She got bored of telling people she loves Pink Floyd or Green Day or Eminem. For now, her favorite lyrics are "if the mountain does not come to me, I'll walk up to it," from a Chinese rap song, because it makes walking a very bold accomplishment. Also, notably, she's a bad translator, but lyrics are always hard to translate, so the fault isn't really hers.

At the back of the container, the cat seems less grumpy, more loving and kind. She always tries to welcome wallflowers in conversations, despite the fact that she is sometimes one of them. She won't make you nervous. She hates it when teachers teach students to make "good friends" and stay away from negative people as if they are biological weapons. She likes that her friends are people who don't laugh at the offensive jokes that kids make on introverts. She loves pretending to be sunflowers under the sun on the playground when she and her friend feel like wilting. They even fooled a butterfly, enough to get it to rest on them once.

Going around to the next side, the cat shows up in the same glasses but wearing a robe, like an ancient philosopher who is fond of making connections between the physical and the spiritual world. She writes on the stone wall behind her: "Schrödinger's cat explains why particles change routes depending on whether there is an observer. The different coexisting possibilities of their moving tracks collapse into one when being observed." She starts off another line, "From every angle, a cube only shows three faces at a time, and you never get to find out what it's like on the three faces you're not seeing."

Then she leaves the chamber and enters the first one. Now you remember this is the exact fourth side you have seen, so you try to chase after her. But you're stopped By AN OFFICER.

"Sir/Madam, I'm sorry, but the 650-word limit is reached. Your visit is over."



*Beauty Outlives Finals* By SARAH BUTA



# *Travelogue from Russia*

By MISHA LERNER

For this semester, I have spent my time reading a genre which I believed was all but dead, the literary travel-lounge. In this age of the information superhighway, the literary travelogue, with its cliched markets, leaning italics of words and phrases in the native tongue of the location in question, and contrived reflections on the state of the folk, seems to no longer be needed. Of course, there is the immensely popular genre of the video-travelogue, but I would prefer to put these, for the most part, in the category of “free-advertisement” for specific locations. In my almost half year in Russia though, I have been forced to the conclusion that the travelogue is an ever more necessary genre. Unintuitively, the closer our world comes together via digital media, the less the peoples of the earth understand each other. This is most acutely exemplified in the case of the American and the Russian peoples. And so to a limited extent, I attempt one here.

To a certain extent, this lack of understanding comes from the fact that Russia and the United States are reflections of each other. Both countries have a history of slavery that only ended in the 1860s. Both are countries that extended laterally, pushing out a native population in the process. Both are multicultural countries, although the ways in which they both became multicultural vary greatly. The American looks at the Russian, and the Russian looks at the American, and is afraid to find himself. This especially becomes true in the case of peoples’ imaginations in relation to the supposed “Russiagate.” Americans, unfortunately mainly liberal Americans, who praise themselves for upholding with all their strength the pillars of tolerance, inclusivity, and equality, start barking in semi-opaque tones when they even begin to hear the trilled “R” that starts the name of the country, “Rossiya.” I remember when I first came to Reed (for reference, this was in 2017, the first year of the reign of Trump), at the Russian department open-house, a newly matriculated student’s mother said, without the slightest shade of embarrassment, “Do you teach in your classes how to hack the elections?” And at the moment, I wished a slight breeze would have blown into the house, opening the bathroom door, so from across the kitchen, in the bathroom mirror she could see her

eyes, which only about 25 years ago, read with pleasure the headline that the United States entered the elections that re-elected the then president of Russia, Boris Yeltsin. And so, the liberal American runs around, scared of their own shadow, knowing that that shadow would probably tell him to take off his shoes when coming into the house, and to not say hello over the door threshold.

Russians, especially those of the older generation, take particular joy in this picking at these parallels, like they pick at the bones of the river-fish they eat. “Crimea, this is like our Texas.” The logic was clear, just as Crimea had a referendum to break off from Ukraine to join Russia, so did Texas have a referendum to break off from Mexico to join the United States. While Crimea was once part of Russia, however, Texas never was part of the United States before its accession to statehood. On Channel 1 (the major state-run television channel in Russia), a documentary about the history of Texas was shown to display this point.

Of course, there are major points of divergence between the United States and Russia, which trickle down into our foreign policy. Primary among these is the split between the Russian and American mentalities, especially in regards to one’s material existence. The American, when presented with the opportunity to work more, and in turn earn more, without a doubt will jump at the opportunity. Americans fill their lives with objects, stuffing them like pastries, only to enjoy the visage of them in their minds, as they work away. A Russian provided with the same choice, would choose the opposite. Better to work less, and if that means earning less, so be it. There will always be the collection of cans stretching back 30 years, from which one can eat. When presented with sanctions, Russians don’t think, “How will I buy all the Western products I once enjoyed?” For Russians, the joy is not in the consumption, but in the process. Trips to Estonia and Finland to buy European cheese, coordination of relatives to bring different groceries from different countries, the attainment of multi-entry visas for day long grocery trips, and of course, the use of the black market. Sanctions only provide for Russian people another challenge which many gleefully take on, a return



to the rituals of Soviet life, in which people took weekend trips to Moscow to buy sausages.

Russia is not a solitary state by its history, but a collection of differing principalities, yet another similarity with the United States. In addition, the ethnicities of Russia span from Russians, Tatars, to Caucasians, to Ukrainians. As a result, in the back of the national consciousness, there is always a fear that the centuries-old seams will come undone. If anything unites the Russian nation it is the banya, or public bath. The smell of the banya is that of after a hot rain; it makes up the one leg of the trinity of Russian smells, the other two being the mold of Soviet apartments, and the smell of watermelons being sold on the street in the summer. Collections of branches, which are used for exfoliation (or self-flagellation), soak in vats of hot water. Men, with powerfully protruding bellies, saddle themselves, fully exposed in a changing room that doubles as a smoking room and impromptu bar. Little

streams of dirty soap run from each direction. Further within, into the steaming chamber, there is the constant sound of leaves against flesh, as people whip themselves with the aforementioned bundles. The repetitiveness of it all, and the heaviness of the accompanying breathing reminds one of crickets before dawn. The Russian language, which slips into its most comfortable form in the banya, by itself has a certain chirp to it, as it oscillates between the rolls of K-T-K-T. If there is some US military high brass, sitting up in his tower, thinking of ways of how to destroy Russia from behind his velvet cape, he should not worry about the Kremlin. No military base, or naval installation should even be considered a target. Russia will exist, even if half of it is raised to the ground, and the other half is frozen over for a thousand years. But if the banya is targeted, and destroyed, so too will Russia vanish. As long as the Banya lives, so will Russia.



Banya courtesy of Harper's Bazaar

By KALEB SAUM

You pulled my love like  
 stitches of  
 lightning across the pale  
 autumn airs  
 never meant to place to begin with but inexplicable  
 insensitive unapologetic  
 in their insistence on remaining in an environment  
 cautiously constructed entirely from  
 other's threads  
 unwrapped from who I knew them, who I  
 knew you as tenuous  
 so tenuous and you cut you  
 tore holes into my sky and from the ripped seams dark water  
 flowed out  
 antediluvian does not necessarily imply goodness  
 as Abzu purifies you corrupt and there is no mother to right your  
 wrongs for you this time you have no  
 priests  
 to which you can bless their lips by letting your name be spoken.

I will not rise. If I rise,  
 I will not rise far. If I rise,  
 it will be entirely of my own plodding mediocrity.  
 but for this do not pity me do not  
 dare to pity me your pity struck on my gentle  
 horror is awful lightning or  
 worse the cloying sweetness of a dead  
 mouse in a beehive,  
 nothing but a mummy who's body is what you remember but not the life  
 proceed, drone, as usual.  
 It is as useless as your guilt.  
 You know what needed to be done and did it.  
 Do not be sorry for that.  
 If anything, be sorry for never explaining. A sentence does not  
 resolve hours of gasping,  
 panting breath, a sentence does not  
 resolve forty days of ecstasy.  
 Your sentence of me  
 revolves it is but a condemnation. You made the horizon  
 stand and greet you, and without you I weep and wail and wait for  
 the dawn  
 of an age long past a nostalgia for something I thought I would never  
 know and your glimpse of it makes this worse than hell  
 for there I lived unabashed, knowing my helplessness and thus freedom from  
 shame from consequence  
 but here all affects other but it's not me it's who you made me so return it! Take back the  
 knowledge you fed me, merchant, blind me to the day outside prison I spent because while  
 the innocence of the coldest winter was correct in that a day is a lifetime of memory  
 and that the only prisons that exist are those we hold  
 it was wrong to assume I could ever break the prisons I self-actualize. a  
 question I am too afraid to answer myself so I pose to you  
 Why was I born if you already were?

# *Inequalities in the ISU*

By ALICE LEASK



Yuzuru Hanyu courtesy of CGTN

The International Skating Union (ISU) scoring system is the point system used in higher level figure skating competitions both nationally and internationally. It's based off of set base values for each element in a program, with 5 extra grade of execution (goe) points that can be added or subtracted. Elements are graded within the technical score of a program, thus goe points only count directly to the technical score of a program. An artistic score is also applied, based off of a set of skating skills split into six sections.

This system was devised in place of the 6-point system previously in place, as this system was revealed to be subject to bias and bribery in a scandal involving a French judge being bribed to give another nation the win in the Olympics. While this point system has largely been successful, the recent changes to the goe points have skewed results, and more and more bias has been revealed in the judging. Previously, only plus or minus 3 goe points could be applied to each element in a program. In singles, an element is a spin, jump, or footwork/choreo sequence. During the previous 3 point system, the artistic and technical scores were relatively well balanced, but with the addition of the new plus or minus 5 goe system, bias towards the technical score has been introduced.

Due to a skater's technical score now often outweighing their artistic score, changes have occurred in how some skater's choreograph and lay out their programs. A large emphasis on jumps, the biggest point grabbers in Junior and Seniors level competition, has been introduced, and often artistic expression, seen in the past as

an essential part of a program and paramount to the sport, has fallen to the wayside. The more recent introduction of quad jumps (jumps with four revolutions while in air), has also fed into this development. Previously, skaters who lacked quads but whose skills were rooted in their artistic expression, such as American skater Jason Brown, were able to qualify for and even medal at the Grand Prix Final, one of the largest competitions of the year. Now, this seems virtually impossible and out of reach.

The goal of this entire point system was to reduce bias and the possibility of corruption in the judging system, something that in recent years especially, it has failed to do. The most recent example is this past Grand Prix Final, just a few days ago. The main contenders for the gold were Nathan Chen, a 20 year old american Yale student who has won three Finals and two Worlds, and Yuzuru Hanyu, a 25 year old Japanese skater who has won four Finals, two Worlds, and two Olympic golds. Nathan Chen won the competition, and while it was ultimately deserved, many followers of skating and many skaters themselves, have commented on the blatant favoritism that was shown during the judging. Over the past couple of years, ISU judges overscoring Americans (and Chen specifically), and underscoring Hanyu, has been the topic of many conversations. This was especially blatant a few days ago, many saying that they want to see a fair match between the two, where Hanyu, hailed for his beautiful and emotional programs, and Chen, well known for his multitude of quads, are scored on an equal standing.

# *Return to Lesbos*



On any given night, you will find Kira doing one of two things: at her sewing machine, crafting her very own, abstractly sapphic wardrobe, or alternatively, taking loving care of her dog Louie. But don't let her 4'11 frame fool you, folks. Kira is the embodiment of pure lesbian top energy, and will fight pretty much anyone who is abelist, mean to dogs, or hurts her close friends. Kira gets her style inspiration from gay pulp fiction covers featuring '50s cowboys and housewives, and half of her closet is iconic dad fits. When she can't afford the off-the-wall, weird, statement-making pieces that make her style unique, she just makes them herself. Powerful.