

Allie Talarico

Professor Frey

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### Applications of Sex, Death, and Humanity in the Real World

“Being human is being a lot of things at the same time” (Matthias Schoenaerts), and this globally shared experience could not be phrased with more simple accuracy. The Oxford English Dictionary defines *human* as “of, relating to, or characteristic of people or human beings”, but what does it mean to be human, aside from our bipedalism, our classification as *Homo sapiens*, and our capacity to think and speak? What makes us human besides the scientific evaluations and the physicality of our bodies? With very few exceptions, all humans on this Earth share a few key experiences that both connect us and drive us apart: we are born, we live, and we die, experiencing a multitude of emotions and hardships between. This semester, we analyzed the experiences of humanity among individuals and the societies in which they live by reading a variety of novels pertaining to the themes of sex, death, the human experience, and individual agency. By looking at how these phenomena vary across cultures, time periods, and individuals, we can develop a better understanding of how both the human paradox and individual agency influence our experience as humans. In conjunction with the books and poetry we read in class, work by writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Pablo Neruda, musicians like Beirut, and novelists like Markus Zusak also reflect these shared human experiences. Poe’s proficiency for unnervingly dark verse draws from inner personal and familial demons that many people can connect to on some dimension, while Neruda’s lush romance plays upon emotional and sexual

elements of the human experience. Bastille's indie pop and Beirut's alternative indie rock songs have lyrics with subtle undertones of the experiences of the human race. And in Zusak's novel *The Book Thief*, themes of love, family, friendship, and death combine in a heart-wrenching historical fiction that sum up not only the hardships of a historical era, Germany circa 1940, but the hardships of being, observing, and experience *humanity*.

Edgar Allan Poe employs several poetic devices and themes right from the onset of one of his poems, "Annabel Lee", which is curiously reminiscent of one such Annabel *Leigh* in Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, who was the main character Humbert's childhood lover. Nabokov purposely mirrors Poe's work in the creation of his Annabel, as so many parallels can be drawn between the two, like their young ages and both Annabels' deaths. In Poe's poem, he relates a kind of purity and strength that comes with first love, and the naivety that may stem from it, especially considering that "[he] was a child and *she* was a child" (7). In terms of love and sexual themes, Poe uses different rhyming schemes to tell a story about being in love with this young girl, the love they have only for each other, and how their love "was stronger by far than the love/ Of those who were older than we-/ Of many far wiser than we" (27-9), so much so that not even angels or demons could sever it. This then ties in directly to death, as the speaker details the envy with which the angels in heaven must have looked down upon him and his beloved, and so they sent a cold wind to kill Annabel. Both Poe's poetic expressions of the birth of love and death of a lover contribute to the characteristics that lend to our humanity and human condition. Just like Poe or the speaker of the poem, every human experiences these similar feelings, whether they be lust, love, or loss, because emotions are acutely felt regardless of age or experience. How we relate to and react to love and grief may differ according to the individual, as we saw portrayed by Alison Bechdel in her autobiography *Fun Home*, but we all experience

them or something similar nonetheless. Poe relates the concept of agency as well in his poem. Agency refers to an individual's capacity to make their own decisions, and the agency that the speaker displays in the poem is his decision to love and make every move to be with his love, Annabel. Perhaps he chooses to be with her against others' better judgement, just as we sometimes make decisions in our lives that others might consider risky.

Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* centers heavily around death and mysterious, almost supernatural themes. The speaker is riding on horseback when he comes across a most depressing, forlorn establishment, the House of Usher. Upon gazing on it, he feels "an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart- an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime" (Poe). Poe's prose reflects death and sadness in not only its descriptions but also its content. We learn that, when the speaker decides to stop in on his old friend, Roderick Usher, who he has not seen in many years, Roderick is wracked with illness and frailty. Not only that, but Roderick admits that "much of the peculiar gloom which thus afflicted him could be traced to...the long-continued illness...of a tenderly beloved sister-his sole companion for long years-his last and only relative on earth" (Poe), his twin sister Madeline. To analyze between the lines of the story, one might argue that, among the gloomy overtones of the story, one could find themes of love and perhaps even incest. It is clear how much Roderick loves his sister, even to the point of, when he discovers she is dead, eerily wanting to preserve her corpse in a vault in the mansion. His love could be looked at as just that, an incredible love for his sister and last relative, or in a more morbid light, Roderick could have had a kind of obsession with his sister, perhaps out of a desire to continue the Usher bloodline. That could have caused or expedited the illness from which Madeline died. Aspects of Poe's tale that emphasize shared traits of the human experience include, just as in the previous poem,

feelings such as love and grief. A large percentage of people on the earth have siblings, with the relationships between them ranging from distant and volatile to loving and caring, so people with siblings share the experience of growing up and interacting with brothers and sisters, even if the context of the relationship isn't necessarily the same. Everyone in the world also has to experience death, whether it's their own or someone they know. Usher, in his growing paranoia and declining health, demonstrates his individual agency in choosing not to leave his mansion. He, in fact, tells the speaker how he is resolved to and has conceded to the fact that he would die there, and does not wish to leave his home to seek medical attention for either himself or his sister. He and Madeline display agency in their decision to discontinue the Usher bloodline by not having kids, just as people in real life can make decisions such as aborting, having and raising kids.

Pablo Neruda's poem, "If You Forget Me", is a love letter from the speaker to presumably his lover, and connects more to love and sexual themes than it does to anything else. One analysis of the poem is that it exudes a feeling of acceptance and concession from the point of the speaker, as though he is telling his lover that he understands if "little by little [she stops] loving [him] / [because he] will stop loving [her] little by little" (Neruda 18-19) and will, in that case, also move on and forget her. However, as he amends toward the end, if his lover finds that she loves him more and more each day, he will mirror those same feelings. What's interesting about the message is that there is no indication of sorrow or regret so much as there would just be acceptance that the lover moved on; the speaker does not proclaim how he will fight for her or even miss her, almost suggesting that his feelings and subsequent actions hinge on those of another. Love, or even just feelings of lust or attraction, are in general universally-experienced emotions. Playwrights like William Shakespeare have long since immortalized incredibly

romanticized love, the kind of love in which one person would do *anything* for the other, such as transcend societal threats or even die for them, like in *Romeo and Juliet*. Much modern young-adult literature and teen fiction idealize romance and occasionally portray unrealistic relationship standards, such as aggrandizing large, public displays of affection and underestimating small, leisurely moments of love. For some, love is an all-consuming emotion, perhaps in some cases taking a turn for the worse and becoming codependency. In other cases, love can be a little sparkle of light that warms every crevice of your body and home and life, permeating even the most mundane things and giving you new perspectives with which to view the world and others. The individual perception and feeling will differ among every individual, but the experience will most likely be there in everyone.

Another interpretation of love as scribed by Neruda is presented in his sonnet “XVII”, which so eloquently ties in the ideas of individual agency and choice versus fate. What I like about this poem that perhaps I appreciate or identify with more so than the previous poem is the idea that feelings of love are not *dependent* on another’s presence or absence of love, but stem from somewhere unidentifiable inside the person experiencing them. I like how, in the third stanza, Neruda writes how he “[loves] you without knowing how, or when, or from where. / I love you straightforwardly, without complexities or pride” (9-10) because love is neither guaranteed nor predicted. It is unexpected, and comes with its ups and downs, its lights and its shadowy abysses. In a similar context, Neruda notes how the love he feels for this unknown lover is not synonymous to that of the material love felt for gemstones or flowers. Instead, he loves the person the way dark, imperfect things are loved, how they are loved with and because of their flaws instead of in spite of them, because as humans *we* are imperfect and have our more unpleasant sides. Perhaps this darker love is a truer love, because it emerges from the depths

instead of from the superficial surface. In the second stanza, he talks about the beauty of flowers that don't bloom, but remain beautiful because of the light and the substance they hold inside, and I feel that this very much rings true for humans and each individual's inner beauty. The concept of agency and whether or not love is a choice or a fate plays a role in this perception of love as well. Because Neruda wrote how he did not know where or when his feelings of love began to take form, it begs the question of whether we have any choice in who we love and why. Does love indeed occur at first sight? Is there a moment in which an individual can accurately pinpoint when he or she started loving someone? Is it solely the functions of the brain that attract us to others? Whatever the case, this multi-faceted concept we call *love* exists for people, or at least they claim it does. People feel love for one another, whether it be romantic, friendly, or familial, and it does not necessarily fit in the confines of one single definition.

The band Bastille is an English indie pop band that formed in 2010, with two of their most popular songs being "Pompeii" and "Bad Blood". The latter, "Bad Blood", incorporates many important qualities of the human condition that so many people have experienced before. Just like in Pablo Neruda's "XVII", in which he writes about loving the person, but not knowing how or when or from where, so too does the band Bastille mirror that uncertainty and that inability to predict the future in their lyrics "And you said you always had my back/ Oh but how were we to know?" (3-4). The message of the song sounds like the singer is asking why the bad blood between him and another person cannot finally be put to rest, as he is ready to move on and doesn't "wanna hear about the bad blood anymore" (22), even though the little things are the things that we remember and the things that bind us to other people. Because of our capacity to remember and analyze and feel, humans often tend to look back on the past, whether fondly or bitterly. Sometimes, people look back on the wrong things, things they can no longer change but

wish they could manipulate, and the singer accurately notes how “if we’re only ever looking back/ We will drive ourselves insane” (11-12). That is a quality that many humans share, which can sometimes be positive, but other times negative. We tend to let emotions affect the way we think or our otherwise better judgement, and sometimes living in the past blocks any future growth potential. The concept of ‘bad blood’ is also a widely understood concept, something that refers to ill feelings between people. These feelings of resentment can remain small scale, such as an argument with a friend, or can grow until the people involved can’t even stand to look at each other. Bad blood can tear families and friendships apart, if they can’t or won’t be amended. Because humans are imperfect and make mistakes, I think this concept is easy to connect to, as we occasionally argue and fight with the people in our lives. We can make the choice to let the bad blood die and together reach a compromise with the other person, or we can let whatever the problem was separate something that was good and pure. We can hang on to the unchangeable past, or we can let it go and look toward a brighter future with more possibility than what is behind us.

Beirut, an American indie rock band, is another musical application of some of the themes with which we have worked in class this semester. One of their songs off their album *Gulag Orkestar* is titled “Postcards From Italy”, and is reminiscent of the romantic themes seen in Neruda’s love poems. The singer begins the song remembering the times he had with someone, presumably a lover, where “the wind would blow with rain and snow” and they “put [their] feet just where they had, had to go” (2-4). Just like in the previous song, by Bastille, these lyrics are another testament to the world of meaning usually hidden in small moments, like between the rain and snow, just walking or holding your lover’s hand. As the song progresses, the singer says how he’d love to see the day “when she will marry [him] outside with the willow

trees/ and play the songs [they] made” (14-15), similar to how so many people imagine finding the love of their life and marrying him or her. Humans can find connection with one another through our similar desires, such as wanting to be in love, get married, and start a family, and through the emotions we often can't help but feel and the memories driven by them.

Arguably one of the most profound books I've read and my personal favorite in my arsenal of paper and ink is Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*. I think it eloquently relates all the aspects of our class this semester, themes like sex and love, death, mortality, and fate versus free will, into one beautiful historical fiction. One thing that sets this book apart from others is its unorthodox narrator. Rather than a character or disembodied speaker telling the story, *The Book Thief* is narrated by Death himself, who “could introduce [himself] properly, but it's not really necessary. You will know me well enough and soon enough, depending on a diverse range of variables. It suffices to say that at some point in time, I will be standing over you, as genially as possible. Your soul will be in my arms. A crow will be perched on my shoulder. I will carry you gently away” (Zusak 4). At times, he directly addresses the reader and he becomes a kind of companion for the entirety of the tale. With the introduction of our narrator and an immediate death occurring within the prologue of the book, it becomes apparent that death will be featured heavily. It is not particularly surprising, considering the book takes place during WWII. Upon reading the first chapter, we meet the main character, Liesel Meminger, a 9 year old girl on a train with her mother and younger brother, Werner, to be given up to foster parents. The year is 1939, and Liesel's brother dies in the train car, which haunts her for much time to come. Besides witnessing the death of her own brother, over the course of *The Book Thief*, Liesel experiences more death and destruction, and their subsequent causes, effects, and results. She reads and hears as well as views firsthand how the Jewish are directly affected by the war, as her family takes in



a runaway Jewish man, Max. Around the middle of the book, Liesel and her best friend Rudy place a teddy bear in a dying pilot's arms. Finally, in a horribly sad conclusion to the war's affliction of Himmel Street, where Liesel and her friends and family live, Liesel survives a bombing only to discover that Rudy, Mama, and Papa have not. But woven between the notes of sadness, death, and war are also themes of love and growth. Until finally finding solace in the arms of her foster parents, Hans and Rosa Hubermann, Liesel struggles to move on from the fear and abandonment that accompany her from the moment she steps onto Himmel Street. In Papa especially does she start to find this beautiful love, compassion, and calm beneath an exterior weathered by time, age, and marriage to Rosa Hubermann. Papa is definitely the first one she comes to love in her new home, and between his teaching her how to read, staying up with her at any hour of the night to chase away nightmares, toting her, a few paint cans, and an accordion around Himmel Street, and rolling cigarettes with her, it's hard not to love the tall man with the kind, silver eyes. Liesel also loves and cares for Max, the man living in their basement, and together they share their fears and their immense love for words. Even Mama, in all of her five feet of rigidity and vulgarity, loves Liesel and takes care of her. Rudy Steiner, however, is the wild card. In the years that span their friendship, Rudy continually badgers Liesel for a kiss. He begs and barter, they fight and joke and have fun together, but even though their friendship is an unbreakable bond, Rudy never does get that kiss. Not until the last bombing of Himmel Street, after which Liesel "leaned down and looked at his lifeless face and Liesel kissed her best friend, Rudy Steiner, soft and true on his lips" (536). The interaction of love, loss and death in that scene is arguably one of the most heartbreaking in the novel.

The human experience in the time period of *The Book Thief* encompasses a wide variety of variables, many of which stem from pain and suffering. In the book, every resident of Himmel

Street and the surrounding towns and countries are all sitting in the midst of a war in which no one can escape the death, anger and sadness. They are all living during the same time, and many of them are confined to the same places, but their experiences of life are vastly different than those around them. Max Vandenburg, the Jewish man hiding in the Hubermann's basement, is probably around the same age as Hans and Rosa's biological son Hans Jr., and yet their existences could not be more different. One runs from certain death and the blind-faith hatred of an entire country because of both a physical and invisible brand he wears. The other holds the whip and stomps polished black boots to the same blind rhythm, parading both a physical and invisible brand of his nationality through throngs of the proud and of the oppressed. And yet the two are roughly the same age and were born to and raised by loving families in the exact same time frame. Did either have a choice, or were they victims of circumstance and brainwashing? Hans had a choice when he was pressured to join the Nazi Party, and his choice was to refuse, even though it cost him socially and financially. Max, who perhaps did not have a choice in the religion or nationality into which he was born, chose to preserve himself and his values by seeking help and shelter instead of surrendering. Each time Liesel stole a book, whether upon impulse or meditation, whether from a burning pile, an icy river, or a mayor's library, she made an unalterable choice that built the definition of who she was and how to act next. While many of the events during the time period were unavoidable or 'destined' to happen in a matter of time, each individual was able to make decisions in his or her own life that impacted not only him/herself, but the surrounding people, families and communities.

The themes of sex, death, humanity and the human condition, and agency are themes prevalent in all areas of our lives. They are present in our feelings, thoughts, and actions. They can be found in our literature, our music, our schools and homes. They give us a lens through

which to connect our individuality to that of everyone around us, and draw similarities and differences. Every human on this Earth is born and dies, and between that time, whether it's over the course of many years or a few short hours, we see, hear, smell and experience a world around us that all our fellow humans live in as well. Just as we are connected by such invisible strings, we are also separated by the same concepts. To testify to the fundamental paradox of the human condition, while we all experience the same or similar events in our lives, each experience is relative to the individual, meaning we can never truly understand another person as we understand ourselves. However, we will forever share a bond in our humanity, even if the billions of people alive in the world at this very moment all have their own definition of it.

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