

Post Early Modernism: A Humoral View of *Barton Fink*

by Michael Neuhoff

Derived from the work of the ancient Greek formulations of Galen, Humoralism was an early view of the human body which sought to explain human psychology and physiology through the presence of four bodily fluids or “humors.” The belief was that the relative balance of these four humors of blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm was directly related to their four conjugate temperaments of sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic (in that order). These four temperaments were also associated with a position on a dry/wet and warm/cold scale. Specifically the warm, moist sanguine temperament was associated with vigor and energy, while the warm, dry choleric temperament was a sign of irritability. A cold, dry melancholic temperament was linked to thoughtfulness but also sadness, while the cold and moist phlegmatic temperament was evident of a more peaceful thoughtfulness. Though these characterizations of temperament were somewhat fluctuating throughout history, their link to the humors was strong and became an essential part of early modern medicine. Though humoral analysis is relatively uncommon with respect to modern fiction, significant work has been done to explain the influence of the humoral view of the body in early modern writing and particularly that of Shakespeare. Despite being produced and set in a time where such conceptions have been dismissed as pseudoscience, the overwhelming presence of bodily fluids in The Coen Brothers’ 1991 film *Barton Fink* suggests that its characters may be subject to a humoral model of physiology and psychology. These humoral aspects even reflect the more explicit motifs in the film such as the idealization of the “common man”, and offer explanations for important character traits in the film which postmodern and psychological analyses are often unable to consider.

From a modern critical perspective, Galenic humoralism has been used to give historical context and added insight into the early modern conception of the body. Particularly in Shakespeare studies, humoralism is often crucial to understanding the motivations of characters and their now-archaic interpretations of a variety of physical conditions. In her comprehensive treatment on the subject, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage*, Gail Kern Paster examines the function of humoral thought in many of Shakespeare's plays, providing humoral readings of scenes in order to show the significance of humoral ideology in underlying symbolism, character development, and acknowledgement (or sometimes subversion) of concurrent cultural beliefs.

For example, Paster argues that a humorally informed analysis of *Othello* is essential to understanding Desdemona's apparent shift from a quiet maiden to the articulate defender of Othello's reputation, and eventually of Cassio's. She notes that Brabantio resorts to bodily explanations of Desdemona's change of character and choice to elope with Othello when he remarks, "Some mixtures pow'rful oe'r the blood, / Or with some dram (conjur'd to this effect)" (1.3.104-105). Paster goes on to explain this particular invocation of humor (blood) as not necessarily the true cause of her transition in demeanor, but rather that this explanation was of cultural significance. She argues, "In humoral narratives of the reluctant virgin, an early modern audience would have a frame-work for recognizing and normalizing the social transformation in her" (Paster 109). She goes on to show the continued significance of the reluctant virgin trait and its diagnosis as a consequence of female coldness which prevented free flow of humors, by tracing Desdemona's gains in agency alongside her characterization by other characters as warm (Othello's description of her hand as "hot, hot, and moist" for example) (3.4.39). This reading of *Othello* and Paster's broader conclusions about gendered humoralism in what she refers to as the

“caloric economy”, are but one example of how a humoral reading can provide important cultural context for otherwise benign language.

While the hard historicist view of Humoralism is particularly effective at explaining and contextualizing the passions expressed within Shakespeare’s plays, such analysis is not all-encompassing. When considering the psychology of the characters within the plays, the principles of psychoanalysis, despite the fact that they postdate Shakespearean texts by several centuries, can often illuminate text in new ways that overcome the limitations of the humoral model. In his essay “Love, Humoralism, and "Soft" Psychoanalysis”, Douglas Trevor makes parallel use of a humoral understanding of melancholy and a psychoanalytic interpretation of love to show how the psychoanalytic method can improve upon the humoral approach by explaining the overall function of idealized love in *Romeo and Juliet*. First, Trevor employs the humoral view of love and particularly lovesickness as a consequence of melancholia which is an expression of humoral imbalance. He argues that the way in which Benvolio tries to remedy Romeo’s lovesickness — by convincing him that the object of his melancholia, Rosaline, is not so desirable — is representative of concurrent humoral beliefs. Trevor cites Timothy Bright’s *Treatise of Melancholie* from 1586 as congruent with this strategy as it posits that dissuading the melancholic towards his would-be lover with, “he will find his blood cooled as a result, and a more serious melancholic bout potentially averted” (Trevor 89). While he acknowledges the success of the humoral view of melancholy (a topic which he fully supports and has explored at length in his other works), Trevor maintains that a psychoanalytic understanding of idealization and narcissism as essential to the process of love is useful in explaining Juliet’s continued love of Romeo. Juliet’s love for Romeo intensifies after she finds he has murdered Tybalt. In spite of Romeo’s actions, Juliet describes him as, “beautiful tyrant, fiend angelical! / Dove-feathered

raven, wolvish-ravening lamb!” (3.2.75-76). While the humoral method employed above would expect Juliet’s love to wane, Trevor argues that in a psychoanalytic view informed by Jacques Lacan’s conclusion that narcissism and pleasurable identification are necessary for love, the opposite is true, as Romeo’s murder, “forces Juliet to love him that much more in order to justify her desire for him as both a lover and an idealized love object” (Trevor 91). Though he doesn’t use more advanced techniques of psychoanalysis or even more specific psychoanalytic language, he is able to identify love in the psychoanalytic view as more capable of describing Juliet’s situation than the more properly historical humoral reading.

Just as Douglas Trevor argues that theories of psychology can be applied to non-concurrent texts to great effect, it is not a stretch to suggest that a modified or “soft” humoralism can be used to analyze more modern work. In his essay, Trevor distinguishes between the so-called “hard” psychoanalysis filled with terminology specific to the writing of Lacan and Freud, and the “soft” psychoanalysis that he performs in the essay uses more general concepts and trends, such as agency and self-delusion, in order to read Shakespeare (Trevor 88). It is in this “soft” mode of humoralism that I wish to analyze *Barton Fink*. As with the case of psychoanalysis of Shakespeare, the particular language and most specific mechanisms of the model are so foreign to early modern thought that they may not always be directly applicable or even helpful to understanding the characters. In applying humoral analysis to *Barton Fink*, it is important to consider that in modern medical practice (both of the 1990s when the film was made and 1940s when the film is set), the four humors do not necessarily have direct analogs. Modern medicine does not make distinctions between yellow and black bile, and the early modern conception of melancholia (black bile) cannot be likened to any modern approach of the subject. However, general conceptions of flow of clear and unclear fluids and the four

temperaments of the associated humors which were essential to Galenic thought can be readily recognized in modern fiction despite being mostly pseudoscientific in nature.

One indicator that the *Barton Fink* universe might be governed by the laws of humoralism is the surprising number of references made visually, verbally, and auditorily to bodily fluids. Among the first of such references in the film occurs when Barton meets one of his idols, the Faulkner-esque writer W.P. Mayhew. We are first introduced to Mayhew when Barton finishes urinating in the bathroom of a diner only to find a man kneeling over a toilet and loudly (and apparently quite prodigiously) vomiting into it. As he's washing his hands, Mayhew apologizes to Barton about the odor and introduces himself. Barton is stunned to meet the writer he's long looked up to, and he praises Mayhew's work. Before he leaves, and in non-sequitor response to Barton's specific question about "wrestling pictures", Mayhew very sternly and deliberately informs Barton that he should dry his hands, saying, "You are dripping, sir." While this is clearly in reference to Barton having just washed his hands and is not necessarily bodily in nature, the line is delivered so oddly and forcefully that it draws attention to itself. What's more, this line is echoed at the end of the film (and in a clearly bodily context) when Charlie remarks to Barton in the (now burning) hotel room that he's "dripping again" in reference to the fluid streaming out of his ear. This scene is not the only time that Mayhew is linked to flow of bodily fluids in the film. Later on, Barton has a picnic with Mayhew and his secretary/lover Audrey where he drunkenly walks away from the table and proceeds to urinate on a tree in full view of Audrey and Barton.

Throughout the film, the Hotel Earle where Barton stays for the entirety of his time in Hollywood seems to function as a humoral entity. Perhaps the most obvious instance of a humoral presence in the hotel is the peeling and dripping wallpaper of Barton's room. On

Barton's second night in the hotel, after he first meets his neighbor Charlie, the wallpaper above his bed peels almost completely off, and as he attempts to re-affix it to the wall he sees that the wallpaper is drenched in a viscous, milky liquid which appears to have been used as an adhesive. Before he goes to bed the liquid streams out of the wall onto his hand. The following night Barton experiences the same problem and he tries to mend the wallpaper with some ineffective tacks provided by the hotel. Once again the wall exudes the same liquid onto Barton, but this time we hear several loud, distinctly female moans and a deeper, male laugh coming from the other side of the wall. The pairing of the liquid with the clearly sexual sounds emanating near the source (Charlie later makes reference to the "two love birds next door") implicates the liquid at least metaphorically as ejaculate. Barton's attempts to impede this flow of liquid from the wall by pinning up the wallpaper even ends up having the appropriate humoral consequence. As Douglas Trevor points out about in *Romeo and Juliet*, should Romeo not consummate his marriage with Juliet, he would have, "pent-up seed, which, unreleased, would continue to overheat his body and mind" (Trevor 90). This prognosis fits with the fate of the Hotel Earle which becomes progressively hotter (Charlie in particular mentions multiple times how hot the hotel is) and ultimately catches fire from an uncertain cause.

While the Hotel seems to function on its own as a humoral vessel, the Hotel Earle can also be seen as a reflection of Charlie or perhaps Charlie a reflection of it. The Coen brothers have even mentioned this connection explicitly as a consciously produced aspect of the film. In a 1991 interview with Michel Ciment and Hubert Niogret, director Joel Coen mentioned that, "The hotel had to be organically linked to the movie – it had to be the externalization of the character played by John Goodman. Sweat falls from his brow like wallpaper falls from the walls." Sweat can be seen streaming down Charlie's face in all of the scenes in Barton's hotel room and almost

all of the scenes involving dripping wallpaper come directly before or after Barton's encounters with Charlie.

While the hotel's presence as an extension of Charlie helps contribute to the overall "bodily" focus of the film, the most directly humoral aspect of the Charlie character are the repeated references he makes to his infected ear. In his second meeting with Charlie, Barton inquires about Charlie's ear, and Charlie responds by saying, "Ear infection. Chronic thing. Goes away for a while and then comes back. I gotta put cotton in it to stop the flow of pus." In their next meeting, Charlie reveals that he went to a doctor to get his ear examined and got in an argument after the doctor charged him for simply diagnosing his problem as an ear infection. The film doesn't revisit this subject until the end of the film, though the detectives on the case of Charlie (now Karl "Madman" Mundt) mention that he has recently killed an ear, nose, and throat doctor, presumably the one who diagnosed his ear. It is in Charlie's final scene, after he has brutally murdered both of the detectives with his shotgun, that he calmly begins a conversation with Barton. During this conversation, in addition to sweating profusely and commenting on the heat (the building is now on fire), pus streams out of Charlie's ear, now curiously on the right side (cotton was previously seen in his left ear). Charlie realizes the problem and says, "Jesus, I'm dripping again," while stuffing his ear with cotton.

Through the lens of soft humoralism, Charlie's ear infection can be seen as a clear indicator of his surprising presence as the sadistic killer "Madman" Mundt. Gail Kern Paster succinctly summarizes humoral thought by suggesting, "Heat stimulated action, and cold depressed it. Clear judgement and prudent action required free flow of clear fluids in the brain" (Paster 13). Charlie's constant visual depiction throughout the film as hot and sweaty indicates that despite his apparently docile demeanor around Barton, he is predisposed in the humoral

view to a sanguine, aggressive temperament. Additionally, the fact that he is constantly impeding the flow of fluids in his head by stuffing his ears with cotton, and the unclear nature of this fluid “pus” suggests that his judgement may be unsound and his actions rash. Charlie possibly even makes reference to his clouded thoughts in his final speech. Charlie tries to seek identification with Barton (or possibly humanity in general) in this speech by saying, “I know what it feels like when things get all balled up at the head office.” While it is unclear exactly what Charlie is referring to here, his language of “head office” reflects his physiological condition of stagnant unclear fluids which are clouding his thought. This line’s placement but minutes before pus comes pouring out of his ear indicates that the humoral buildup which has governed his psychology throughout the film has reached a breaking point and can no longer be contained in his “head office”.

Charlie’s general lack of control of bodily fluids is consistent with the early modern conception of the relationship between humorally governed expressions of passion and social class. In *Humoring the Body*, Paster points to the evolution of the character Hotspur in *1 Henry IV* as emblematic of this humorally informed view of class distinctions. Paster argues that Hotspur’s high-spirited but increasingly impulsive behavior is representative of his change in image from high-class warrior to archaic rebel. She cites his wife’s reminder that he is “altogether govern’d by humors in response to his rather curt demand that Lady Mortimer stop singing (3.1.233). This is but one example of her observation that, “Characters ... represented in fictions as impulsive, inconsistent, or unable to sustain a mood or an action are also likely – like Hotspur – to bear an imprint of social backwardness,” and that the humors are directly associated with this type of impulsiveness (Paster 196). As previously discussed, the character of Charlie in *Barton Fink* is linked to his impulsiveness through the humors, but he is also a central part of the

film's concern with social class, by his representation as the "common man" whom Barton idealizes. Though his target audiences seems to be the posh aristocrats at the party he attends in the beginning of the film, Barton seeks to portray the plight of the common man, explaining to Charlie, "The hopes and dreams of the common man are as noble as those of any king." Between Charlie's constant sweating, buildup of unclear fluids, and even his inability to control his stomach as he vomits upon seeing Audrey's dead body, this lack of humoral control would be seen in the early modern perspective as representative of his lower social status. The revelation that Barton's reverence in "common man" Charlie is ultimately misplaced is prefigured, both by the link between Charlie's body as an overflowing humoral vessel and his psychotic murderous nature.

In contrast to understanding the strange occurrences in the film as having logical character psychology causes, other writers have pointed to the incoherent events as a product of postmodern filmmaking informed by psychoanalysis. Andrew Moss, in his essay, "Schizophrenia and Postmodernism: *Raising Arizona*, *Barton Fink*, and "The Coen Brothers," posits that the cinema of the Coen brothers is marked by a type of "schizophrenia" as conceived by Frederic Jameson in a modified version of Jacques Lacan's more clinical formulation. Jameson defines this aesthetic model of schizophrenia as, "A breakdown in the signifying chain, that is, the interlocking syntagmatic series of signifiers which constitutes an utterance or a meaning" (qtd. in Moss). As a result of this communication breakdown, the audience of the film is forced to experience the film not simply as a plot-based narrative, but as a collection of images and sounds which describe meaning which cannot be explicitly conveyed through the medium. Moss argues that the breaking of the signifying chain in *Barton Fink* is used to convey the inner madness of the protagonist. He goes on to describe this general reading of the film as one where,

“Barton is losing, or has in fact lost, his mind; that the Hotel Earle, Barton's home while working in Hollywood, is his inner Hell; and that Charlie Meadows (a.k.a. Karl "Madman" Mundt), Barton's "common man" neighbor, is a physical manifestation of Barton's downward-spiraling psychological state” (Moss). In this postmodern conception of the film, the actions of the characters need not play out in logical succession as it is more conducive to the goal of portraying a deteriorating mental state to have surreal characterizations such as that of Charlie/”Madman.” Moss is not alone in his interpretation of Charlie as a possible fantasy of Barton’s. Clark Buckner similarly raises the questions of Charlie’s true presence mentioning that, “Charlie’s status in the film similarly complicates the boundaries between inside and out. Is Charlie a living, breathing salesman and mass-murderer or does he embody the monstrous excess in Barton’s conflicted desire?” (Buckner). Though Buckner’s conception of Charlie revolves around the character as a repressed “common man” inside Barton whom he wants both to praise and avoid, this interpretation also places Charlie as a construction of Barton’s mind.

While the postmodern/schizophrenic reading of *Barton Fink* provides unique insight and is more fittingly contemporary of a film made in the 1990s, this interpretation necessarily limits the depth of character analysis and raises questions about the film’s timeline. By implying that the characters of the film reflect Barton’s schizophrenia, it becomes difficult to analyze characters aside from Barton whom the Coens have so richly drawn. If Barton is to be viewed as somewhat of an unreliably narrator for the film, the distinct character traits which are so ripe for analysis such as Charlie’s quaint colloquialisms, movie producer Lipnick’s rapid-fire, desk-tapping optimism in contrast to his later militarism, and writer W.P. Mayhew’s repeated drunken singing of “Old Black Joe”. Moss’s analysis does not attempt to analyze these curiously specific characterizations, and as a result this interpretation suffers from reductionism of these separate

and often constant aspects of characters into a single cause in Barton's mental state. What's more, as Moss mentions, this model of reading the film cannot specify a particular moment where, "the narrative shifts from "sane" to "insane" (Moss). Though he provides several possibilities of where the film makes its shift including Barton's traveling to California, Audrey's murder, and Charlie's slapping Barton awake, these points are quite far apart in the film's timeline. Consequently, this wide margin of error means that interpretation of events in the movie are heavily dependent on the starting point for Barton's insanity as otherwise it is unclear which events we are to believe the film has relayed to us faithfully. In contrast, the humorally informed reading of the characters in the movie sees them, in spite of their seemingly insane transitions, as logically following their conditions, and leaves no need to question the timeline of their actions against Barton's mental state.

Though more detailed analysis of the humoral implications of the character of W.P. Mayhew and the protagonist Barton Fink (particularly of Barton's relationship with the otherwise inexplicable mosquito which preys on him) has yet to be done, the preceding analysis of humoral influence on the character of Charlie should serve as a model for "soft" humoral analysis of a modern film. Furthermore, the connections drawn out by this humoral analysis show deeper connections to the film's more readily apparent reflections on the "common man". Though Galenic humoralism as a medical model has no real place in modern study of physiology, in the age of mind/body dualism, the psychological predictions of the four temperaments are not that different from some modern psychological models. The four temperament system as proposed by psychologist Hans Eysenck in the 1960s (using introversion/extraversion and neuroticism/psychoticism as axes) which significantly influenced personality questionnaires now widely used in modern clinical psychology, is not so far removed

from the Galenic construction of the temperaments as warm/cold and wet/dry. Though not relevant as a predictive medical model, the humoral mode of thinking is indeed useful for analysis of fiction spanning divides of epoch and medium.

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