

Center for the Study
of Writing
2012-2013



The Karl Lemmerman First-Year Essays

2012-2013

The Center for the Study of Writing
&
The Seminar Approach to General Education and
Scholarship (SAGES)

present

The Karl Lemmerman First- Year Essays

2012-2013

*The Karl Lemmerman First-Year Essays represent the
best writing produced by first-year students enrolled in
SAGES First Seminars and English 150.*

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Written for FSSY 146: “Doc Talk – Language & Medicine,” Prof. Kimberly Emmons

Assignment Description: This assignment asked students to choose a medical genre and collect samples for analysis. The final paper required a careful close-reading of the features of the genre as well as a focused scholarly argument exploring what those features could tell us about the uses and users of the genre itself.

Instructor’s Nomination: In this essay, Ms. Walker integrates and explicates the complex definition of genre that rhetorical scholars have recently proposed. She does so in the service of her own argument exploring what cold medicine labels tell us about society’s attitudes toward sickness and its expectations for productivity and symptom relief. Her writing is clear and precise; her argument is sophisticated and compelling. Her evidence is carefully analyzed and the essay clearly demonstrates mastery of academic argumentation.

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Written for FSCC 100: “The Life of the Green Mind,” Dr. Christopher Strathman

Assignment Description: The assignment asked students to write a 4-6 page essay on the ways in which the ecological and/or environmental trope of Wilderness informs some of the readings for the course up to that point. The assignment also invited students to reflect on how the readings shed new light on the trope itself.

Instructor’s Nomination: I think Mr. Workman’s reading of Thoreau’s essay “Walking” is outstanding because not only does it offer fresh new insights into the essay itself, but it also incorporates a variety of other materials from the syllabus in a way that is illuminating and, dare I say, exhilarating. The use of Aldo Leopold and Jon Krakauer’s account of Christopher McCandless to complicate Thoreau’s notion only adds further complexity to the argument regarding the true nature of walking.

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Written for English 150: “Expository Writing,” Mr. Michael Parker

Assignment Description: The final research paper asks students to consider the entirety of course discussion/readings/visual texts/music and to relate or connect an idea present in these narratives with a larger issue. This means, in essence, that students consider outside narratives that incorporate utopian rhetoric and discuss why these narratives function as they do, and/or to what ends the rhetoric is used or offered. The assignment does not specifically demand that students connect with texts from the class, but instead asks them to think about how ideas from those texts point to problems elsewhere.

Instructor’s Nomination: Mr. Laursen’s essay is an extremely complicated analysis of Ayn Rand’s *Objectivism* positioned against Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* and Karl Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto*. What makes his argument outstanding is the brilliant maneuvering between these philosophical texts and the balanced and tactful discussion of Rand’s inconsistencies (specifically because her works are so polarizing). This essay is one of the best, if not the best, I have read from an undergraduate (at any level).

Genre Studies: The Interactions between Society and the Genre of Cold Medication Labels

by Abigail Walker

An important process that can allow us to develop new insights on society's language and discourse, especially in the field of medicine, is the study of genre. Mary Jo Reiff defines genre in the article "Materiality and Genre in the Study of Discourse Communities" as "a typical response to repeated social situations," or a particular template or "roadmap" that is followed for a specific type of publication or written piece, like a business card or a thank-you note (Devitt et al 553). By analyzing a particular genre, "we not only gain access into communities, but also begin to recognize how 'lived textualities' interact with and transform 'lived experiences'" (Devitt et al 549). In other words, when we examine a genre in terms of its stylistic patterns and recurring language types, we can gain a better understanding of society or a particular group in society, as well as understand the relationship between our culture and the language of the genre – how each one affects the other.

One particular medical genre that is strongly shaped by society is the cold medication label. Because these labels are essentially advertisements (they serve to catch the eye of a consumer and create in them a desire to purchase the product), the cold medication companies cater to the specific motivations that a consumer would have for buying their product. Therefore, through a study of this genre, we can recognize and articulate our cultural views toward the common cold, and take note of how they are reflected in the genre of the medication labels.

Furthermore, through this simultaneous study of the genre and of society, we can come to important conclusions as to why the genre displays its unique patterns. In particular, cold medication labels tend to focus on relief: an instant relief, a complete relief, and a relief of symptoms only, rather than the illness as a whole. The reason for this can be seen in society's rejection of the "sick role" for the common cold – even if we have a cold, the cultural expectation is that we are still required to go about our normal lives and fulfill all of our usual social responsibilities. The

language that cold medication labels use stems from this – because it is so difficult for us to continue our daily routines while we are ill, the medicine responds to our need by promising to relieve the symptoms that are causing us difficulty as quickly and completely as possible, and allow us to return painlessly to our normal lives.

In order to understand how cold medication labels respond to the demands of society, we must first look closely at the specific language patterns that the labels share. For example, on each label, the emphasis is clearly on relief of some sort of pain or discomfort, and besides “relief,” recurring words include “reliever,” “reducer,” “suppressant,” “soothes,” and “cools.” Along the same lines as the theme of relief, the labels tend to have a calming element to them, and seem to have the promise of relaxation of some internal stress, chaos, or burning. Many of the medications focus on a mitigation of some burning sensation or heat, especially by their use of words like “cools,” “numbing,” and “soothes” (which is a word often associated with healing burn wounds), and even by their use of color. For the most part, the labels all use darker, cool colors like blue, green, and purple, which all elicit a sense of calm, relief, and relaxation.

Simple relief alone is a very compelling reason for consumers to buy a particular cold medication, because it means that they are on their way to returning to their normal lives painlessly. But the language of the medication labels often takes this relief a step further by offering it as quickly and completely as possible. For example, the Vicks DayQuil promises “multi-symptom relief” (DayQuil Cold and Flu), and the Halls package claims to offer “triple soothing action” (Halls Mentho-Lyptus Drops). The Cepacol package is another example – it uses phrases like “instant acting” and “maximum strength numbing” (Cepacol). Another thing to point out about this type of language is that it gives the medication an active role in the healing process, almost personifying it. For example, the Cepacol package implies that the medication “acts” inside the body, and the Halls package emphasizes the actions that the medication performs – it “*soothes* sore throats,” “*relieves* coughs,” and “*cools* nasal passages” (Cepacol).

Furthermore, the relief that the language of the medicine labels so repeatedly emphasizes focuses on an alleviation of only the specific *symptoms* of a cold, not the cold itself. Two of the examples of medications, the Halls lozenges and the Cepacol, do not relate the symptoms that they are treating to a whole, cohesive illness at all. Nowhere on either of these packages is the word “cold” even listed; instead, they do not say any more than the fact that they treat sore throats and coughs. Even on the other labels, which still do advertise that the medication is treatment for a “cold or flu,” a listing of the particular symptoms that the product treats is still a major focus of the label. For example, the Vicks DayQuil promises “multi-symptom relief” and continues on to list the symptoms that the medication treats, including aches, fever, sore throat, nasal congestion, and cough (DayQuil Cold and Flu). The Robitussin and Alka-Seltzer Plus similarly provide a list of symptoms that are targeted. Furthermore, the fact that the medications could be applied for either a cold *or* the flu (which can have similar symptoms but is nonetheless a completely different illness) shows that they are primarily directed towards the symptoms, and not the condition as a whole. This, as well as the other characteristics of cold medication labels that I have described, is in fact an important advertising strategy for the medication companies because it speaks directly to our cultural assumptions about the cold as an illness.

In essence, the reason that cold medication companies seek to offer quick and complete relief directly to the symptoms of a cold is because of our rejection as a society of Parson’s “sick role” for the common cold. The sick role is, most simply, society’s idea for what is acceptable and/or necessary behavior for those who have any type of illness. For example, when someone is sick, it is generally common protocol for them to go to the doctor, stay home from work or school, and get plenty of rest (Gwyn 62). Their social responsibilities are thus reduced because of their illness, and we see this as acceptable and normal because of our perception of the sick role. However, because the sick role can be easily abused (i.e. someone could fake an illness or exaggerate the effects of one in order to avoid social responsibilities), the sick person “is obliged to produce evidence

and take action to prove that the malady is not contrived” (Gwyn 62). Probably the most generally acceptable way of proving this is by seeing a doctor, who can “determine the authenticity of the patient’s complaint” (Gwyn 62), and by doing so, give the patient’s family, boss, or school a proper reason to allow the patient’s occupying of the sick role. This, according to Gwyn, “places the doctor in the role of a social arbiter” (62).

The case of the common cold, however, is different. It can’t be treated with antibiotics or any medication that a doctor could prescribe, and doctors know that it can be easily fought off by our own bodies with time. Even if someone with a common cold went to see a doctor, they would simply be sent home empty-handed, with some loose instructions to consume plenty of water and vitamin C. On the other hand, if a patient knows that this will be the outcome of seeing a doctor for the common cold, he probably will not even go to the doctor at all. In this case, the physician’s authentication that is required for the sick role is not obtained, and the patient cannot enter the sick role. He lacks the proof that would allow any reduced social responsibility to be acceptable.

As this knowledge that a doctor cannot fix a cold becomes more common in society, increasingly greater amounts of people will decide to skip that doctor visit when they know they have a cold. In fact, as is true in our society today, it becomes such a common practice that it is essentially its own cultural assumption: when you have a cold, a doctor’s visit is unnecessary and pointless. As this cultural assumption develops, another develops alongside it – that of the sick role being unauthenticated for the common cold, since a doctor’s validation is never obtained. If the sick role is not authenticated, then it cannot be accepted, and thus yet another cultural assumption is formed: when you have a cold, you cannot expect to be allowed into the sick role. Instead, you have to “tough it out” and go about your typical activities, including going to work, going to school, attending meetings, and completing daily chores, among other social responsibilities.

For this reason, our culture really expects a lot from cold medications, because we ourselves are expected to endure our usual exhausting, overloaded lives even when we are, quite

frankly, in pain. Non-prescription cold medication is our way of temporarily relieving that pain so that we can continue to meet the social expectations placed on us even when we are considerably “under the weather.” Since we are expected to seamlessly remain in our standard routines when we have a cold, we look for the greatest amount of relief possible, and in the least amount of time. That is why promises like “maximum strength,” “instant acting,” (Cepacol) and “triple soothing action” (Halls Mentho-Lyptus Drops) are so sought-after. It is also why the labels give an active role to the medication itself. Because we are expected to still engage in our habitual activities, which are full of their own stresses and worries, even when we have a cold, the last thing we want is to have to worry about the cold itself in addition to all of that. Instead, we prefer to give control of our illness over to some other, outside entity, and since we know we will not receive much help from a doctor, we hope that the over-the-counter medication we buy can be the active healer we need.

Similarly, our extreme reluctance to add an additional stressor to our regular routines is the reason for the medication labels’ focus on relief and calming through words like “reducer,” “reliever,” “suppressant,” “soothes,” and “cools,” and through the use of cool colors. We all have conflict and anxiety within ourselves that result from our usual daily lives, and when we have to fulfill our social responsibilities while also dealing with the internal pain and discomfort of an illness, it adds significantly to our internal chaos. The cold medication labels reflect our desire for a release of this added internal tension and heat with their calming and cooling words and imagery.

Even more importantly, society’s rejection of the sick role for someone with a common cold is why the cold medications are so reluctant to recognize or call attention to the idea of a cold as a unified illness – because society does not recognize it as such either. First of all, because society does not allow someone with the common cold to enter the sick role, it is easy to forget that the cold is even an illness at all, simply because we pay so little attention to it. We see the cold instead in terms of the conditions (which are really just symptoms of the illness) that are preventing us, or at least making it difficult for

us to carry out our everyday routines. We actually care little about the cold itself, we only care about its immediate effects on us, which we see as their own separate entities. Because we, in our state of stress and chaos, can only acknowledge the most immediate cause for our increased difficulty in fulfilling our social responsibilities, our most pressing need is to be relieved of the symptoms of a cold as quickly and completely as possible. This is therefore the focus of the cold medication labels, to promise quick relief of the effects of a cold, rather than the whole illness itself.

The genre of cold medication labels is, therefore, determined and shaped by the values and assumptions of society. Primarily, the genre is shaped by our culture's rejection of the "sick role" for someone who has the common cold. But the interaction between genre and society does not end here – once the cold medication labels portray society's influences, they reflect them back onto society and reinforce them. For example, as the medications begin to offer such quick relief of the conditions that are keeping us from our social responsibilities, our rejection of the sick role for the common cold is justified and strengthened. In this way, the interaction between the genre and our culture is a two-way and ongoing process.

Studying this two-way interaction between the genre and society is valuable because it results in a deeper understanding of both. This type of study can therefore give us insight into the workings of society by allowing us to understand the reasons behind its actions and values, as I have done with cold medication labels and society's assumptions about the common cold. That is the reason why genre analysis is such an important process, and why the genres themselves cannot be simply overlooked. It is a process that can even, once we understand society more thoroughly through the genre, point us in the right directions for determining the necessity of and the means for social change.

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Man, Nature, and the Philosophy of Walking

by Mac Workman

For most of our history, we humans have lived in small, mobile, hunter-gatherer communities. With the invention of agriculture, however, our nomadic lifestyle was abandoned as we localized ourselves in massive civilizations. This shift in our lifestyle changed the way we view the natural world: in his book *Ecocriticism*, Greg Garrard points out that to “designate a place apart from, and opposed to, human culture depends upon a set of distinctions that must be based upon a mainly agricultural economy... Agriculture becomes both the cause and the symptom of an ancient alienation from the earth...” (67). As nomads, we were at home anywhere in the world, but localized in civilizations, we began to construct a dichotomy of civilization and its opposition – what we have come to call wilderness. Over millennia, this dichotomy has been deeply ingrained into our collective consciousness; more recently, however, there has been a movement to challenge this dichotomy. The movement, with its roots in Thoreau’s essay “Walking,” seeks to once again view humankind “as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than... member[s] of society” (Thoreau 260). The idea of walking that Thoreau promoted has become a powerful force for reinventing the relationship between man and nature.

In “Walking,” Thoreau develops his philosophy of what it actually means to take a walk. He returns to the ideal of the nomad, who has “no particular home, but [is] equally at home everywhere... this is the secret of successful sauntering” (Thoreau 260). For Thoreau, the point of walking is not to exercise, but to think, to free oneself from the clutter and chaos of human culture for a time and bask in unadulterated nature. Thoreau laments the fact that we are removed from this pure environment very early in life: “Here is this vast, savage, howling mother of ours, Nature, lying all around, with such beauty, and such affection for her children, as the leopard; and yet we are so early weaned from her breast to society, to that culture which is exclusively an interaction of man on man”

(Thoreau 281). This separation of man and nature has caused harm on both sides – humans perceive themselves as masters of the land, but in doing so, prevent themselves from being part of a greater community.

According to Thoreau, nature is significantly more valuable than we usually perceive; as he says in “Walking,” “in Wildness is the preservation of the world” (Thoreau 273). Thoreau recognizes that we ourselves are products of nature, and that as much as it may seem that we have removed ourselves from nature, we still depend on it to sustain us. That said, Thoreau does believe that society “has its place” (Thoreau 265). He does not advocate leaving society behind to live solely in nature, but rather, he promotes “a sort of border life, on the confines of a world into which I make occasional and transient forays only” (Thoreau 284). The true art of Thoreau’s walking, then, is to recognize the full value of the wilderness, to be at home both in wilderness and society, and to pass from one to the other frequently and easily, for they are two halves of the same thing.

A century and a half later, following in Thoreau’s footsteps still holds merit. Ecologist, nature writer, and master walker Aldo Leopold perhaps understood this better than most. A professor at the University of Wisconsin, Leopold, in 1949, published *A Sand County Almanac*, which was a compilation of essays about his weekend retreats to his family farm (*The Aldo Leopold Foundation*). In true accordance with Thoreau’s walking creed, Leopold believed that

it is fact, patent to both my dog and myself, that at daybreak I am the sole owner of all the acres I can walk over. It is not only boundaries that disappear, but also the thought of being bounded. Expanses unknown to deed or map are known to every dawn, and solitude, supposed no longer to exist in my county, extends on every hand as far as the dew can reach.

(Leopold 41)

Indeed, the opening essay of the almanac chronicles a walk Leopold took through the snow one January as he followed the tracks of a skunk – not to exterminate it as he would a “pest,” but simply out of a curiosity to see where it went (Leopold 3-5).

In Leopold’s understanding of walking, when we walk we must not merely turn our thoughts away from society. We must take the time to appreciate every facet of our environment. To Leopold even the smallest, most insignificant organism has intrinsic value. He speaks of the *Draba* flower, which he says

plucks no heartstrings. Its perfume, if there is any, is lost in the gusty winds. Its color is plain white. Its leaves wear a sensible woolly coat. Nothing eats it; it is too small. No poets sing of it. Some botanist once gave it a Latin name, and then forgot it. Altogether it is of no importance – just a small creature that does a small job quickly and well.

(Leopold 26)

There is even a place for disease – diseased trees provide both food and shelter to birds and other animals (Leopold 76). In Leopold’s eyes, everything in nature has a purpose, and everything is interconnected.

Leopold himself displays in his writing a strong connection with the land and its inhabitants. As he writes about his farm as it changes over the seasons, the reader is struck by the amount of detail Leopold records: the return of the geese in March, the calls of the birds in the early hours of the morning, the river as it floods and recedes, the “weeds” growing on the side of the road. Although Leopold is an outdoorsman and enjoys hunting and fishing, he enjoys it not for the kill, but for something more: he interacts with fish and wildlife as if they are equals for whom he has much respect. Hunting is, in fact, merely a walk with a gun in hand: he meanders through the woods with his dog, not bent on finding game, but open to exploring and satisfying his curiosity with the natural world.

However, like Thoreau, Leopold also recognizes that society has its place: “We are remodeling the Alhambra with a

steam-shovel, and we are proud of our yardage. We shall hardly relinquish the shovel, which after all has many good points, but we are in need of gentler and more objective criteria for its successful use” (Leopold 241). Over the years, Leopold’s walks through his Sand County property led him to fulfill this need for new criteria with the development of what he called the land ethic: the idea that we as humans have a moral obligation to the land. Ultimately driven by his almost irreligious, spiritual connection with the land and its inhabitants, Leopold’s land ethic is founded in the principles of community. Leopold says,

All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. ...The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively, the land. ...In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.

(Leopold 219-220)

Our current approach towards nature is, according to Leopold, based entirely in economics: we do not seek to preserve that which we perceive has no economic value. Instead, Leopold would have us develop a social conscience, whereby we could evaluate courses of action through a moral and ethical lens, which he defines as such: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (Leopold 240). We must believe that each individual has an obligation and responsibility to care for the land in this manner; only then will we have ended the “modern dogma [of] comfort at any cost” (Leopold 71).

Leopold was not the only modern disciple of Thoreau’s walking creed. In his article in *Outside* magazine, “Death of an Innocent,” Jon Krakauer describes one Christopher McCandless,

a young man from an affluent, suburban family who graduated from Emory University in 1990 and, inspired by the “asceticism and moral rigor” of the author Leo Tolstoy, abandoned his modern, civilized life and “headed west without itinerary...to shed a life of abstraction and security, a life he felt was removed from the heat and throb of the real world. [He] intended to invent a new life for himself, one in which he would be free to wallow in unfiltered experience” (Krakauer 4). McCandless became Thoreau’s idealized nomad, walking into the West, which to both Thoreau and McCandless symbolized freedom and the future: it is the land of the frontier, of the vast plains and hulking masses of the Rockies – a true wilderness. Similarly, Thoreau, McCandless and Krakauer his biographer all share an awe for the sublime, which is epitomized by Krakauer’s account of his solo climb of a treacherous Alaskan peak that he completed when he was younger in spite of the warnings of his friends and family: He says that, at the time,

death was a concept I understood only in the abstract. ...I was stirred by the mystery of death; I couldn’t resist stealing up to the edge of doom and peering over the brink. The view into that swirling black vortex terrified me, but I caught sight of something elemental in that shadowy glimpse, some forbidden, fascinating riddle.

(Krakauer 6)

Krakauer’s revelation carries deep echoes of Thoreau’s “Nature...savage and awful, though beautiful. ...This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night” (qtd. in Garrard 73).

An extremely idealistic and altruistic person, McCandless wanted desperately “...to make sense of the world, to figure out why people were bad to each other so often” (Krakauer 3). He thought that the truth could be found in the face of the sublime, which he sought endlessly during his exodus from the modern world. He took walking to the extreme, embracing the simple but hard life of the vagabond as he wandered across the West, surviving off the land and his own

resourcefulness in the backcountry of America's mountains and deserts. After two years, McCandless' search finally led him to test himself in the Alaskan wilderness.

Not far from Denali National Park, McCandless set up camp along the Stampede Trail in a bus abandoned years ago by hunters. It was April of 1992 – still winter in Alaska, and McCandless was miles from civilization. According to Krakauer, he “scrawled an exultant declaration of independence” on “a sheet of weathered plywood” in the bus:

Two years he walks the earth. No phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes. Ultimate freedom. An extremist. An aesthetic voyager whose home is the road. Escaped from Atlanta. ...And now after two rambling years comes the final and greatest adventure. The climactic battle to kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual pilgrimage. Ten days and nights of freight trains and hitchhiking bring him to the Great White North. No longer to be poisoned by civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild.

(Krakauer 11)

This declaration clearly displays McCandless' unwavering, dramatic idealism, and suggests that he upheld the commonly accepted dichotomy of civilization and wilderness mentioned earlier. That McCandless upheld this dichotomy is further supported by Krakauer's comparison of McCandless and his innocent idealism to the papar, a group of Irish monks who left society to settle on a desolate island off the coast of Iceland, “...chiefly from the wish to find lonely places, where these anchorites might dwell in peace, undisturbed by the turmoil and temptations of the world” (Krakauer 10). Leopold notes in *A Sand County Almanac* that “Your true modern is separated from the land by many middlemen, and by innumerable physical gadgets. He has no vital relation to it” (Leopold 239). Perhaps McCandless' rejection of modernity was a rebellion against these middlemen; perhaps the truth McCandless was searching for

before he starved to death in Alaska's backcountry is that man and nature are not separate after all, but are of the same vein. What we learn from McCandless and his death, then, is not that we need to return to the wilderness from whence we came, but that our best and most reasonable course of action is to live Thoreau's border life between the two extremes.

Through Thoreau, Leopold, and McCandless, we are able to see that man is, in fact, a part of nature. McCandless shows us that while we should eschew the modern cornucopian lifestyle, it is not necessary to wholly embrace our nomadic roots and retreat into the wild. We can live the border life between the two extremes that Thoreau advocates as long as we embrace Leopold's land ethic. Ultimately, we must take it upon ourselves to walk as these three men did – to get away from society for a time, to think, to appreciate our surroundings, and in the end, to be connected as deeply as possible to the land.

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A Capitalist Utopia by Colin Laursen

In recent election cycles, more and more often we are confronted with a new kind of rhetoric from the right. It is a rhetoric less informed by the policies of Ronald Reagan – perhaps the most commonly recognized Conservative icon – but inspired by an idea: a paragon of laissez-faire capitalism, in which “greed” (or some euphemism thereof) is the principal driving force of economic affairs. It is an aspiration less pragmatic in reasoning, and more idealistic: intellectually backed not by history or economics, but by a series of works of philosophically charged fiction. We can hear it in rhetoric from Ron Paul to Paul Ryan, politicians whose beliefs have steadily gained popularity in recent years (so much so, in fact, that Ryan found himself running for vice president). In essence, what we have seen is the portrayal of an institutional utopia, characterized by extreme individual liberty, and the freedom to pursue “self-interest” to its farthest extent. Such a utopia is presented as the ultimate manifestation of fairness, where all individuals touched by the Capitalist institution are given full authority to act on their innate “self-interest.” It is a very “social Darwinist” idea; the greatest individuals rise to the top, because they are superior players in the market, and thus contribute more to society. Regulation is painted as an inhibition to the might of the market, and the market is painted as the ultimate catalyst of human progress. Despite these seemingly elegant relationships, there are a number of points I will dispute within this paper – especially regarding the position that a laissez-faire system can truly give rise to equality for all individuals; I view this to be the ultimate intellectual fallacy.

To many, the kind of utopian rhetoric I have acknowledged evokes a very specific image: that of the author and philosopher Ayn Rand, with a cigarette between her limp fingers and a dollar sign pinned to her lapel. Paul Ryan himself has stated, “there is no better place to find the moral case for capitalism and individualism than through Ayn Rand’s writings and works” (Ryan). Best known for her lengthy novel *Atlas*

Shrugged, Rand presents a new kind of capitalist philosophy, grounded in the work of Adam Smith, yet considerably more radical and unforgiving. Her doctrine, known as Objectivism, is rather broad, concerning subjects from art to human perception; for the purposes of this paper, I will primarily discuss her belief in “rational self-interest” – the concept that pursuit of one’s own interests is the only moral path, and that all forms of altruism are inherently immoral.

The child of Russian bourgeois parents, Rand suffered during and after the October revolution, losing her family’s property, esteem and power, all of which ultimately prompted her to immigrate to the United States at the age of twenty. Her experience with the Soviet regime very likely led to her disillusionment with Collectivism, and the idea of obligated altruism therein. Perhaps fearful of an American embrace of Collectivist values, yet impressed by the economic might of the country, Rand, through her writings, arrived on a theory she coined the “Trader Principle.” This principle – perhaps the center of her overarching philosophy of “Objectivism” – is a principle by which the ideal man lives his life. She states, “A trader is a man who earns what he gets and does not give or take the undeserved” (*For the New Intellectual*, 133). Essentially, Rand desires to overturn the idea that morality must always be about the collective good; to her, it is about the “good” that an individual brings unto himself. An individual is “moral” if he only looks out for himself, because this is the ultimate expression of freedom.

There is a clear similarity between the philosophy of Rand and that of Adam Smith, widely regarded to be the founder of Capitalism. Both put great faith in the free market, and both view greed, in one form or another, to yield economic prosperity for a people. Why, then, one might ask, is it Rand – not Smith – who is cited so frequently as inspiration? One could certainly make the point that Smith is tamer: less utopian in rhetoric, and more pragmatic. It is no coincidence that Smith’s primary works are academic, whereas Rand’s are fictional; perhaps, then, a politician might deem it wiser to cite the more contemporary, accessible, and altogether loftier (radical) of the two. But where

precisely do they differ? Robert White, a political economist, makes an important observation:

Smith believes that self-interest, not benevolence, is necessary for a trading relationship. Remember, Smith claims that “[i]t is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.” Whereas Rand, in contrast, believes that it is self-interest that gives rise to human benevolence (White, 154).

Smith’s philosophical landmark, found in *The Wealth of Nations*, is known as the Invisible Hand Principle; it essentially states that individuals who use the free market to their financial advantage are inadvertently led by an “invisible hand” to contribute to the common good. It seems that perhaps Smith views greed as a means to an end – an admitted moral sacrifice that, on a large scale, collectively results in good. He does, however, make a distinction between benevolence and self-interest; according to White, Rand sees them as one and the same.

Another important distinguishing element of Smith - one that Karl Marx was quick to cite in *Capital* – is his sympathetic acknowledgement of the consequences of the division of labor. Specifically, he discusses the concept of “alienation,” in what E. G. West calls “the only reference to an alienation-type process in the whole of *The Wealth of Nations*” (West, 11):

In the progress of the division of labour, the employment of [...] the great body of people, comes to be confined to a few very simple operations, frequently to one or two. [...] The man whose life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects are perhaps always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding or to exercise his invention [...]. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become (Smith, 267).

This “alienation passage,” as West coined it, outlines a clear difference between Smith and Rand; in a Randite, utopian portrayal of Capitalism, there is neither room for the admittance of such inconsistencies, nor sympathy for the working class: the “great body of people.” If a utopia is to strengthen an argument, it must be the perfect embodiment of an idea; such self-reflection, even doubt – as Smith displays – tends to weaken the utopian rendering of an argument. In all of Rand’s writings, there is rarely, if ever, such a moment as is comparable to Smith’s “alienation passage.” A prime example of this unwavering utopian rhetoric can be heard in Rand’s first television interview; offered the question, “If a man is weak, or a woman is weak, then she is beyond – he is beyond – love?” Rand responds, “He certainly does not deserve it” (Rand, *The Mike Wallace Interview*). This position does not seem remotely compatible with Smith’s “alienation passage,” and is a clear departure from his more calculated, palatable rhetoric.

To further understand Rand’s Utopian ideal, it is imperative that we examine her most celebrated work of fiction, *Atlas Shrugged*. Published in 1957, the work describes an alliance of industrialist moguls who go on strike against an economically repressive government, instigating the collapse of the nation to prove their worth. Within this story, however, is the portrayal of an Objectivist utopia: a perfect representation of the way one should live, in relation to others, according to Rand’s Objectivist ideals. This utopia is called Taggart’s Terminal, after the central rail mogul in the novel, Dagny Taggart. It exists in a valley in the Colorado Mountains where all the striking industrialists reside, at least for one month out of the year, as they wait out the ensuing economic disaster. While the main body of the work comments on the collectivist trend that Rand observed in mid twentieth century politics, this small portion of the book focuses on the individual; it is here that Rand touts her vision for steadfast, infallible adherence to the Trader Principle, imagining a society where every individual aspires to as much (although Rand would surely back away from the characterization “society”). According to the book, there is only one law in Taggart’s Terminal: “it is against our rules to provide the unearned sustenance of another human being” (Rand, 706).

Because of its completeness, popularity and overt utopian qualities, it is this passage concerning Taggart's Terminal that is most often examined for inconsistencies in Rand's Objectivist ideal. Specifically, the aforementioned "giving rule" seems to result in the most problematic inconsistencies. As Alan Clardy points out,

There are a *number* of rules, customs, norms, and shared values that unite these inhabitants: All members are to return to the valley to live together one month a year; they are not to use their real genius in the outside world; they must swear to Galt's oath; and whatever is created belongs to the producer and cannot be expropriated by anyone else (Clardy, 246).

Not only is it false that there is only one "rule," it is also quite problematic and inefficient for such rules to merely be honor-bound. These very specific and unwavering ideas could, theoretically, be written into law; however, regulation and codification of such laws would necessitate the institution of government – an idea vehemently opposed by the moguls of Taggart's Terminal (not to mention Rand). It seems that such utopian faith in the moral integrity of industrial moguls might not translate so seamlessly to the real world.

Clardy further points out that acts of selflessness are indeed present in the story: "After she [Taggart] crashes through the barrier, Galt rushes to her aid and cares for her momentarily without the promise of compensation, and he ends up paying the doctor for her care" (246). While one could certainly characterize this act as a mutual exchange (an exchange of aid for the satisfaction of having helped someone), it does raise the question, why must it be forbidden to "provide the unearned sustenance of another"? In a realistic world, doesn't the exchanger define the concept of "mutual exchange" for himself? Indeed, might one define *all* voluntary giving to be "mutual exchange"? Such a clear-cut rule can certainly exist in a work of fiction; however, it seems as though Rand has molded her characters to fit the utopia she has created, thereby weakening her argument for the Trader Principle.

In the end, if we are to really examine the difference between Rand and Smith, we will come away with this: Smith can be perceived as Utilitarian, whereas Rand categorically cannot. As Henry Sidgwick puts it, the intent of Utilitarianism is to “produce the greatest possible happiness to the greatest possible number of all whose interests are affected” (Sidgwick, 253). While Smith’s writings are certainly not as overtly utopian (if at all) as Rand’s, his philosophy does seem to fall in line with the most common understanding of institutional utopia: a system that produces the “greatest possible happiness.” Of course, the variability inherent in Utilitarianism arises when “happiness” must be defined. Whereas Marx discusses happiness in terms of meaningful labor, Smith puts enormous weight on the idea of free enterprise. While Smith never explicitly defines happiness as such, it is clear that, in a Utilitarian sense of the word, one can take Happiness to mean a great many things. Raanan Gillon is quick to point out this imprecision: “it is not clear what the theory is actually claiming. [...] What is meant by happiness? How can happiness (and suffering) be measured? Is it total happiness, average happiness, or something else that is to be maximized?” (Gillon, 1412). Perhaps this is why neither Smith nor Marx used the term “happiness” with much frequency. Regardless, it is clear that both theories (Capitalism, Collectivism) intend to maximize the wellbeing of a populace – whether that wellbeing is in the form of economic freedom, material comfort or meaningful labor.

Furthermore, Capitalism is portrayed by Smith as a fair, practical and efficient mechanism for the distribution of goods, in which an admitted moral failing – greed – is the catalyst for benevolence. He looks at it as a “means to an end” scenario – an idea commonly accepted in Utilitarian thinking (though, admittedly, Smith lived a century earlier). This idea, too, is present in Marxism; Communist thinkers are more than willing to give up the romantic ideas of power and wealth for the promise of equality, fair treatment and meaningful labor. It is an idea that, even in the case of Smith (ironically), can be viewed as Collectivist; Gillon criticizes this “means to an end” relationship as counterintuitive, stating, “if overall maximization of welfare is the supreme moral objective the individual seems to be in

permanent jeopardy before the overriding interests of society” (1412).

Here we find the defining nature of Rand, and the reason she is not, by any stretch, a Utilitarian; like Gillon, she finds fault in the assumption that “maximizing happiness [is] morally obligatory or, even if it were, that it [is] the only, or the overriding, moral principle” (1412). Far from viewing Capitalism as a way of “maximizing happiness,” she sees it as a mechanism by which the greatest individuals can rise to their rightful places at the top of the economic pyramid: those who *are* better *deserve* better. Rand takes the generally understood definition of “morality” – the way one should behave towards others – and redefines it as “a code of values to guide man’s choices and actions—the choices and actions that determine the purpose and the course of his life” (Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 13). In other words, she has defined it to concern the individual, as opposed to the collective good. In the aforementioned television interview (p. 5), Rand is asked the question, “There are very few of us, then, in this *world*, by your standards, who are worthy of love?” Her response: “unfortunately yes, very few” (Rand, *The Mike Wallace Interview*). This kind of Fascist thinking, in the sense that some individuals are innately superior, is a theme that neither Smith, nor Marx, nor Mill would condone as academically or ethically sound. It is Individualism at the expense of other individuals: an idea inherently contradictory, as Individualism in its earliest form posits, “no one ought to harm another in his life, health, *liberty* or possessions” (italics supplemented) (Locke, Sec. 6). By redefining morality to support her philosophy, Rand has instilled a false righteousness in her agenda, painting it as ethically appropriate to pursue one’s interests at the expense of others.

Especially for this reason, it seems inappropriate for Objectivism to pervade American politics, where representatives are elected to represent *all* of their constituents – not just those with economic power. Furthermore, if “rational self-interest” is the only “moral” creed, then a representative taking a moral path will act only out of his own self-interest. Not only is there a blatant conflict of interest in such circumstances, there is also a

broader, ingenuous quality to the rhetoric; Rand has presented a laissez-faire Capitalist utopia, and has positioned the reader on the side of those who have access (the industrial moguls). In reality, a politician who uses this utopian rhetoric for political devices is excluding the majority of his constituents from the promise of utopia. When politicians such as Paul Ryan use Objectivist rhetoric, we are given a promise that is not only exclusionary, but also impossible to fulfill. It is an idea that is certainly romantic – perhaps the reason it has gained such immense popularity. But such romanticism, as I hope I have demonstrated, is incompatible with politics, and should be left to fiction.

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