

Jyoti,

(1) A generally strong and clear opening paragraph is somewhat undermined by the one that follows. The fundamental problem here is that your sense of the ambiguity of "hand" is inadequately developed. For one, while "hand" can mean a "sailor" (though it could mean a manual labourer of any kind really, such as a farmhand etc.), it seems really implausible to take this meaning as one that survives a reading of the poem. Even in Fish's case, certain kinds of ambiguity are not considered at all (for example, spare meaning thin), since the poem as a whole can't support them. And I find it difficult to see anything in this poem that might support the notion of hand referring to a sailor ("streams" is the only connection and sailors don't really go down streams, do they?). And in picking on this meaning, you ignore the range of meanings of hand that are relevant (or might be)---you need to check a dictionary like the OED more carefully: for example, hand as synecdoche for "agency" (that is, linked to doing); hand as "aid" (as in lending a helping hand); hand as grasping or controlling (as in "unhand me!"); and, most important, "hand" as handwriting (there was reason I gave you two versions of the poem, one which calls it a poem in the ms. of cap and bells, ms = manuscript = hand-written). So, the rich ambiguity you want to set up is impoverished right away (and then you ignore "this"---what is it doing?---and "living"---why explicitly used a word which seems assumed by "hand" in one sense?).

You try hard, and I appreciate the effort, but there are too many logical problems with the reading (some of which I indicate) and the paper needs a careful sentence-level edit. It seems to me somewhat strained to read this poem as a love poem (as you end up doing), without at least conveying how perverse this would be were it a love poem. Indeed, the love poem reading itself seems a projection of biography onto text in rather a pre-determined fashion: since they were in love, you seem to assume, this must be a love poem---but can't people in love be nasty to one another, play power games?---but this also ignores the fact that the suggestion that the poem was intended for Fanny is a later one, made by critics. But even if it were true, surely you need to somehow account for the bizarre idea of thrusting a disembodied hand in your fiancée's face, and saying that once dead, it would haunt her nights and chill her blood. If this is love, it is a pretty strange love, and needs to be accounted for! On top of that, you miss the metatextual; if hand is taken to mean written by hand, then the poem itself is the very hand that is thrust out threateningly to its reader (Here, I hold it towards you). The very use of here, now, this suggests the way in which the present of the thrusting, of the moment of writing is being emphasised: a proper Fish-ean reading would easily yield these meanings, but you ultimately don't carry out a Fish-ean reading, since the trajectory of your interpretation seems largely pre-determined by certain assumptions (biographical and otherwise), which means you really pursue the ambiguity in a way that preserves the "openness" of the poem. So, while you note that "would", for example, starts off the predicate part, that observation is an observation about grammar (we need a predicate and we get one), but a Fish-ean reading would have something to say about the kinds of expectations "would" creates: for one, it's a conditional or a subjunctive, and therefore specifies or points to a future that is hypothetical and dependent upon earlier conditions being met. It marks a particular connection between the present ("here" and "now") and a future that may come to pass. These are the sorts of things you need to pursue if you are to carry out successfully a reader-response interpretation of the poem. A good effort, overall, but needs more a sustained thinking through of the theory being used. (B-/B)

Laurel,

This is a well-argued, generally well-written, and engaging discussion of the poem that also reveals a good grasp of the basic structures of Lacanian thought. Quite an achievement! There isn't actually very much in your reading I disagree with, so these (brief) comments should be read more as a continued discussion or engagement than as criticism. I think your sense of the poem as a playing out of the construction of the self through the inherited narratives of myth is on target, and your local reading of the text is very strong. My one dissatisfaction (and this is, in part, my response to Daniel's paper as well) concerns the avoidance of the "positive" dimension of Rich's poem: that is, the sense in which the real is not simply the stumbling block, but the very source or trigger for a reconfiguration of the self, the emergence of a new and different identity. In other words, the poem's concluding stanza's, with their movement away from the binary oppositions of gender and sexuality, seem to mark as well the emergence of a different, fluid sense of self, a remaking that goes beyond (and reveals the limits of) the binary oppositions and modes of selfhood that the Symbolic offers. The turn to the real (with its dangers, of death, of drowning, of becoming someone of the sea---merman or mermaid---or of both and sea and earth) is thus also a potentially productive turn, since it opens up the possibility of displacing (and rewriting) the myths, the books of stories that have fashioned who we are. (In Rich's case, the sexual ambiguity, and androgyny is, of course, far from accidental, since one of her poetic projects is to create a different, and feminist, conception of identity that breaks from the "conventional" oppositions, and makes place for, e.g., homoeroticism, but not in terms of a sexual politics of identity, of essences, but in terms of fluid and mobile networks of self-constitution that are not simply solipsistic, that come to terms with social constitution as well.) Another way of saying this might be the following: is Rich rejecting myths or just the book of myths? Is there a sense for you in the poem of the power (emotive and otherwise) of myths? Does the poem mark itself as mythopoetic?

An excellent paper! (A)

Tim,

Quite a good paper, overall, but persistently plagued by a confusion between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, I think. Despite that confusion, your basic argument does seem to me plausible, and on an intuitive level (though not quite on the "conscious" level) you actually do seem to have grasped the Imaginary/Symbolic distinction. Your basic intuition seems to me the following: Nathaniel's case represents a situation (in response to a primal trauma) in which the Symbolic identifications that would normalise the human subject have broken down, resulting in a predominance of the Imaginary in his make-up. As a result, we have a constant machine-like repetition (characteristic of the Symbolic order that lies outside the subject), but this repetition can never be integrated with an Imaginary order of dualistic identifications that can never settle, never produce a subject that seems endowed with stability or permanence. That is, at one extreme, with a dysfunctional Imaginary, one would never really have a sense of self, for one would be shaped entirely by the demands of the Symbolic (result: the automaton or the machine). At the other extreme, with a dysfunctional Symbolic, one would "only" have a sense of self, but that sense would never really settle, constantly having to regenerate itself via dualistic and binary oppositions, so that the individual keeps moving from one "I" to another, or shuttles back and forth between competing "I"s (result: something like schizophrenia or multiphrenia). The persistent gap between these orders would seem to be signified by Death (the Real). That oscillation would seem to correspond to the undecideability you locate between the Sandman haunting him and his thinking that the Sandman is haunting him. As you can see, I have reformulated your argument regarding the story to try and extract what I think you really want to say. For you don't quite say this. And in part this leads also to a split between the two sorts of things you want to say: the failure on the Symbolic level (the lack of recognition from the Other which---and you need to add this---is necessary for N. to constitute himself as subject), on the one hand, and the Uncanny, on the other (you link the uncanny to N's fantasies, but here again, Fantasy "belongs" in a sense to the Symbolic, which sets the scenarios, lays out the terms through which the subject desires, and not to the Imaginary, since the Lacanian Imaginary is not at all the same as imagination). The connection between these two dimensions of your paper seems to me not quite there. I have made marginal notes to indicate where some of the problems lie, but in a fundamental sense all the questions I have stem from the basic indistinction (analytically) between I and S.

The other weakness of the paper is that it relies too much on plot and not enough on the texture of the language (and the detail) of the text. This tends always to create the impression of a theory being foisted on to the text---now, this is the place to start: when one begins with theory, one's first (and right) desire is precisely to squeeze the text to fit the theory (so that one overlooks details in favour of broad plot movements), but a truly successful paper would then go back over this ground, descending to the details, modifying the theory to fit the text--and thereby creating a sense of a dialogue between text and theory. I don't penalise you for this, since it takes a while to learn to do this, and it requires as well a firmer grasp of the theory than you as yet have. So, all in all, a promising paper, one that shows effort, intelligence, and succeeds despite its conceptual problems. Well done.

(B+/A-)

Leila,

(An important stylistic note: your paper is weakened a bit by the overuse of sentences driven by "to be." In many cases, you can find a much stronger active verb. Their use would make the paper more dynamic. Be attentive to this when you revise your final paper. Whenever you use a form of "is" as your main verb, ask yourself how you could rework the sentence to avoid that: sometimes you can't, and then leave it be, but more often than not, you will quite easily find a punchier alternative.)

This a very smart and productive reading of difficult story. It is a story I am myself still fumbling with, so many of remarks stem from my own uncertainty. I have a few overall queries. First, I am not entirely sure that your Greimasian rectangle is entirely the right way around. It seems to me that mortal/immortal (dying/undying) would be one axis of contradiction and earthly/unearthly the other. In addition, I am not sure whether "divine" corresponds to the unearthly or the immortal (and indeed, the important discussion around the difference between Greek and Norse gods suggests that story is quite concerned with that distinction). Indeed, the difficulty of fitting that distinction into your rectangle suggests that there is some modification that remains necessary. Second, your integration of mortal and immortal would seem to include both Adam's uncle and the family line, in so far as he seems to stand for that family line, adhering absolutely to its dictates and traditions. This means that that the "earthly/divine" nexus would have to be something else (perhaps the impossible conjunction around which the story turns?). I suppose I am reacting in part to your introductory paragraph (far too brief, actually, for so complex a point) which seems to suggest that Dinesen's story supports the kind of inherited quasi-divine power that the Uncle possesses. I am not sure what the story is aiming at (it is a difficult and troubling tale, is it not?), but doubt very much that it offers an unalloyed support of such a position. (One might wonder, too, why Adam is called Adam, the first man?). Third, you do very well with the notion of duty (and indeed, interestingly enough, this dimension of your reading accords well with Sophocles' *Antigone*, which stages a similar opposition between two types of demands (of duty/state and family/individual). Your reading of this story would correspond to a defence of Creon in the *Antigone* story (or, in modern terms, of the CEO in a corporate structure!). However, you do less well with the opposed term (for which America is a signifier): passion, imagination, liberty. Now, as with Sophocles, it may well be the case that Dinesen is trying to explain the logic of a position such as the one asserted by the Uncle/Creon (a position that is, I think, almost incomprehensible for us, today, to grasp, given that we live in a world that---at least on the surface---seems to grant priority to the individual and his/her desires). But, at the same time, there is a "wrongness" about the story which is very hard to let go off, not least in a kind of dispassionate distance that ironizes what it describes. That is, I think there is a sense of injustice that does not go away, even if we understand the logic of duty, fate, and so on. And it is this dimension that doesn't quite come through in your paper. Perhaps another way of saying this would be to insist upon the dimension of tragedy: of "suffering," of "pathos," again very much a part of the Greek dramatic universe. Which of the Greeks was it that said: happiest not to be born at all, but failing that, to die young? Finally, you forget the woman. Why have that long section in the story at all?

My remarks, as you can see, are muddy. Your paper gave me a lot to think about, and my responses are perhaps less criticisms than an attempt to complicate the ostensible clarity of the Greimasian rectangle, that is, to push the Greimasian paradigm in the way that Jameson does: to see it not as the "solution" to the text's riddles, but as an underlying ideological structure that the

text both projects and distances itself from (and in this case I would say very consciously projects and distances itself from), works at and complicates. A very good effort, and, as ever, intelligent. (A-)

Shankar

This an interesting paper and a very good effort, all in all, but has certain problems. Some of these are stylistic, and I have made changes along the way that are meant to indicate the kinds of issues you need to be aware of when working through your final paper (in particular, the use of passives, of over-wordy modifying clauses, and so on). I do this in some detail for your opening paragraph to give you a clear sense of the kind of things you need to do. But, despite these awkwardnesses, the writing is error-free, by and large (a good thing), so the paper doesn't suffer too much.

The more important issue for me has really to do with your own instinctive appropriation of theoretical paradigms as formalist mechanisms ("algorithms," to use your word). The problem with that assumption (which is a good starting place, actually) is that it essentially re-describes the text in the language of the theory being used, but does not answer the "so what?" question. That is, interpreting a text demands that re-description needs from the outset to be aimed at the problem of meaning and signification, so that the description of the process sustains a sense of why the poem is doing what it does, what's at stake in it, why it was written at all. And formalism of any kind cannot of itself answer such questions (though it may predispose one to one sort of answer rather than another). The closest you come to answering that question is "the integration of the subject in to the socio-historical reality of scuba exploration." But doesn't that sound patently absurd? Why would Rich care about the socio-historical reality of scuba diving clubs? In other words, scuba diving is obviously (and you know this) a metaphor for something, it provides the form of exploration, which is not simply the exploration of the sea, but a way of exploring the sea that points metaphorically to something else. And it is this something else that needs to come into focus for the poem to work (and you need in the process to answer the question of why diving is the metaphor chosen, rather than, say, hunting---the elements of this are implicit in your paper, but are never clearly articulated: for example, using your sense of the awkwardness of the diver, you might want to think about the gap between the clumsy suit that nonetheless allows survival in an alien environment, and thus of the dangers of the kind of exploration being envisaged, and so on).

So, the question then is what is this exploration in aid of? One answer might be: the very nature of what constitutes the self---and this would mean paying close attention to the last third of the poem, the shifting gender, sexuality and number of the speaking subject that seems to dissolve conventional and inherited notions of what human subjects are. Thus, the "one who find our way" doesn't really refer to the "community of scuba divers" except in so far as the community refers to all those who carry out the kind of dangerous exploration that Rich's poem is engaged in, of the self, of reality, of the self's relationship to reality, and so on. Without a sense of this larger project, the purely formal tracing through of Lacan as "algorithm" doesn't do enough.

My other comments are of a specific nature and may be found on the margins of the paper itself. In general, while I see what you are trying to do, I find the descriptions of the imaginary and symbolic procedures a bit confusing. They seem to me to need clarification and elaboration. Nevertheless, a good effort overall, and shows a real desire to get hold of some basic ideas in Lacan. I look forward to your final paper. (B+)

Margaret

As ever, you write clearly and smoothly. But this paper is not, ultimately a great success for me, for reasons detailed below. First, it reads much too much like a plot summary. Now, to a certain extent, all interpretations of texts require, shall we say, a “re-description” of the piece being analysed, and this involves in part summarization. But, not only does a reading have to do a good job of zeroing in on the relevant plot details (rather than following the story through sequentially, movement by movement), but it has to make sure that its redescription is done in such a way that it is directed towards the interpretive argument. This doesn’t happen here, to the extent that the literary details all but vanish from view. This leads to my second point, that your “rationalization” of the plot tends to evacuate the story of what is distinctive about it, both formally and atmospherically. Thus, the peculiar blend of epistolary and third person narration is ignored (literary form dumped in favour of plot content), and the eeriness of the story which lies in part in the undecideability of the question of whether this is all in N’s mind or not vanishes as well. You seem to want to claim that his failure to distinguish “reality” from “imagination” leads to his death. But the story is one that is itself constantly entangling these categories, rendering their very separation suspect. That being the case, a claim such as yours somehow misses contact with what is interesting about the story. This leads to my third point, even if one were to accept your explanation for N’s death, it remains unclear what the stake in all this is? This is the famous so what question. What are the implications of your thesis? To put it an intentionalist manner, why would Hoffmann care to write story of this kind? I don’t of course expect you to read his thoughts, but you need a larger frame to make the plot analysis relevant. Finally, though I suppose you want to make a link between the ternary structure of Victim-threat-protector and Lacan’s oedipal triangle, this connection is never really worked out in your reading. You do show a formal repetition of the shape, but there is no discussion of why this triangle is indeed a Lacanian triangle (that it also misses the “imaginary” doubles of the story: N-Lothar, N-Siegmund, and so on, is yet another clue that the connection to the theory is underspecified). Indeed, in so far as the basic thrust of Lacanian criticism (at least as Žižek presents it) concerns the inseparability of reality and fantasy, that is, the extent to which desiring in life has as its condition of possibility a structure of fantasy (the moebius strip being the way in which he describes that relationship), your own rationalization of N’s predicament seems to be very differently directed from the basic impulses of Lacan.

Overall, a competently written essay, but one that does not suggest a great deal of deep thinking on the relationship between textual analysis and the theory it purports to employ. (B-)

Emily,

This is both an interesting argument, and an original one in that it focuses on the odd sub-story in the main story, one that seems crucial yet whose presence seems oddly superfluous at the same time. Before making my overall thematic comments, however, I want you to see the stylistic issues you need to address in your subsequent paper. I re-work your introductory paragraph to show you how a simple and careful editing can improve readability tremendously. For one, never start a paper weakly and vaguely,,: “because the story is difficult, I am tackling something else in it”! Just go for it:

**“The character of SM paradoxically seems both central and marginal to Isak Dinesen’s complex short story, Sorrow Acre. This paper will read the trajectory of SM’s internal development and her relationship with the external world as exemplifying the interrelationship among Lacan’s three registers, the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. Lacan describes this interconnection through the figure of the Borromean knot (Figure 1), a mathematical construct composed of three rings interlaced in such a way that if one is disturbed, all three are affected. Sophie’s awareness of an absence in the symbolic order has the consequence of severing the ties that bind the three stages together. The eventual clash between the symbolic demands of duty and her imaginary conception of her self and its desires results in a “tear,” through which the real drops out.”** [Need one or two more sentences to specify what’s at stake in the “real” dropping out, or to amplify on what you mean by that]

{I’d end the introductory paragraph with that since Lacan doesn’t say that all have to be “cut” or severed if one is. He says that cutting one means that all become separate from one another, unmoored, which is pretty much what you are saying as well. Though I do like the willingness to take L. on and propose a variation on his theory! At any rate, I hope you see how a simple editing of the first para makes it tighter, clearer and more concise. You need to do this for the rest of the paper yourself. While I will occasionally note infelicities, I focus from here out on thematic/conceptual responses.}

1. Not sure you correctly configure the triangle here. The place of the phallus (that as signifier stands for the Symbolic order as such) must be taken up by the Lord (who “holds” the phallus as it were)---the direct evidence for this is the concern regarding an heir, and his performing dutifully his husbandly duties (just as she performs her wifely ones). In other words, the Lord and the phallus mark the same point in the oedipal triangle, standing for and ‘filling’ out the constitutive lack of the Symbolic. The other two points of the triangle would be (1) Sophie herself (as you note); and (2) her point of imaginary identification (in this case the peasant girls, whom you read as marking an image of purity, innocence, and fundamentally a notion of the safety of being a child---and again there is evidence for this in the description of the family from which she comes, as well a sense of loss even there). Your general sense of a clash between the symbolic and the imaginary seems to me spot-on, but you describe the structure incorrectly here, I think.



2. You need to do a bit more with the real, since your paper ends a little abruptly. In other words, what it still lacks to a degree is an answer to the so what question? What are the implications of the real “dropping out” (you need also to say more clear what you mean by this). I think your reading of the flea as standing for the real, the smudge that marks a discord, and your identification of existential horror with Sophie’s void is really very productive and intelligent. But you need to do more with it, perhaps by pursuing the particle analogy further.

So, a very good paper overall in terms of content, showing real progress towards mastery of complex theory, and an ability to use the theory well in relation to the story you analyse. Its shortcomings are that it perhaps doesn’t quite go far enough at times, and that it needs some stylistic work. But all in all, an impressive midterm essay. Well done.

(B+/A-)