Is the Authentic Experience Required for Individual Identity Exploration Present in Contemporary American Literature?

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**Preface**

**Authentic Experience:** the punctuated moments in life that draw us out of monotony and routine and force us to think about things in a new perspective.

**Individual Identity:** the characteristics and personality we label ‘me’ or ‘I.’

**Identity Exploration:** the process of developing individual identity through authentic lived experience.

Through extensive reading, research and analysis, these are the definitions that I have chosen as foundational vocabulary throughout my thesis.

The question that is asked in the essay portion of my thesis reads: ‘Is the Authentic Experience Required for Individual Identity Exploration Present in Contemporary American Literature?’

Individual identity is not a resolute list of traits that can be recognized, simplified and categorized. It is a fluid and constantly changing abstraction that people have difficulties pinpointing within themselves. People have trouble figuring out what it is that makes up their individual identity. But what a person can recognize is how he or she reacts in situations that are not preconceived: authentic experiences. How a person reacts and feels before, during and after these experiences displays who he or she truly is as an individual when uninhibited by society’s influence.

What are these societal influences that combat authentic experience, and where do they originate? They are any beliefs that display how a person should react or behave. The person then accepts and acts out (whether consciously or unconsciously) these acquired beliefs. Such beliefs are generated through government, religion, family, education, media, culture…
It is through these mediums of societal structure that synthetic identities are displayed which individuals can choose to pick up and put on. This is not authenticity, this is performance. This is not an experience, it is a script. These are the issues explored through contemporary American literature in this essay.

The American society that is referred to throughout the essay describes the media’s idyllic portrayal of the American middle class family. America is a complex society with numerous diverse subcultures. Yet, the generalized subgroup this essay discusses is the middle class family that the media displays as idyllic. The creative pieces are examples of the conclusions drawn in the essay.

The short pieces of fiction focus on the punctuated moments that elicit authentic experience. They focus on the societal structures that subdue authentic experience. After undergoing such intensive studies of authentic experience, individual identity and identity exploration in contemporary American literature, it seems natural that I try my hand at my own creative work that tackles these issues. The six pieces following the essay are the creative products of my research.
Part I: The Essay

Contemporary American literature is keenly interested in the pursuit of individual identity. This pursuit is constantly influenced by outside factors such as family, tradition and many other societal standards. People desperately want to fit into the vast conglomeration generalized as American society. As the Australian character named Klaus states in The Corrections, “people[in America]… pretend they’re all alike….But the people are not all alike….There are class differences, there are race differences, and yet nobody’s honest in this case. Everybody pretends” (Franzen 454). Americans are so busy attempting to pretend ‘normalcy’ that they cease to truly achieve or pursue authentic experience. Instead, Americans pursue a simulated reality of what it is to be American, i.e. the media’s portrayal of American as middle class families. Individuals attempt to forgo identity exploration for social conformity. According to contemporary American literature, what is the difference between simulated reality and non-simulated reality? And is the authentic experience required for identity exploration achievable in these realities?

Author Jonathan Franzen makes a distinction between two realities while describing the city of New York in How to Be Alone: “two New Yorks…one a virtual province of Planet Hollywood; the other a definite spot on the surface of earth” (Franzen 180). The first described New York is an abstract conceptualization of the city: the city as idealized, glamorized and fantasized place of imagination. The second ‘reality’ is the mapable location: the physical city where individuals dwell and have friends and family. This physical and present New York City is the local reality. It is here that the foundation of each individual's identity and present reality resides. Local, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is “belonging to a town or some
comparatively small district, as distinct from the state or country as a whole.” Thus local life is the most condensed and individually perceivable reality in American society.

Local reality is rooted in the family because family is the bedrock of a town. Family is the space in which an individual can explore identity. *The Corrections* revolves around the Lambert family’s locality of St. Jude but, in particular, the very house itself:

here were the familiar tan tiles of the stall. The tiles, like every other physical constituent of the house, were suffused with the fact of their ownership by Enid and Alfred, saturated with an aura of belonging to this family. The house felt more like a body—softer, more mortal and organic—than like a building. (Franzen 622)

This description of the house in which the Lamberts raised their children displays the intimate nature of the local reality. The tiles are referred to as ‘physical constituent[s]’ of the house, as if they are a part of a body. This is confirmed later with ‘the house felt more like a body.’ The house has been given a life of its own—it exudes an essence of family and parenthood. It is the physical conceptualization of the relationship between Enid and Alfred and the dwelling in which their offspring were nurtured and raised. The house is the boundary holding in everything these parents own, love and control. It provides a boundary and space for the most basic and intimate social group: the family.

More than a boundary, the house serves as a sphere in which the ‘outside’ world is brought ‘inside’ and consumed by the family:

The light in the wood-framed windows, though gray, had a prairie optimism….And the posture of the older oak trees reaching toward this sky had a jut, a wildness and entitlement, predating permanent settlement; memories of an unfenced world were written in the cursive of their branches. (Franzen *Corrections* 621)

How the family constructs and assimilates this ‘outside’ of ‘prairie optimism’ into its sphere constitutes the ‘inside’ of the house. The house then becomes the living embodiment of the
family. The house takes on the life of the family, displaying the image the family exudes. This living sphere of space for the social family is local reality.

May Sarton elaborates on this idea of home as literal ‘living space.’ While in solitude, Sarton acknowledges her home as a companion: “I know it is essential for me to move within a structure. The bed must be made…the dishes washed, the place tidied up before I can go to work with a free mind” (Sarton 83). The structure she describes is essential for life because it keeps her safe from the elements and other dangers of the outdoors. But Sarton does not directly reference this survival aspect of the structure’s essentiality. Instead, she discusses the essentiality of tending to the structure and making sure it is in order and clean. Only when the structure is tended to is she able to go about her individual activities and identity exploration. This concept of ‘tending to another before focusing on self’ seems very maternal, or at least relational. Sarton furthers this idea by stating “A few days of neglect and the soul goes out of the house, that’s for sure” (Sarton 114). Sarton directly personifies the house as a living entity with a soul. The house is not a space to dwell in, but a living entity to with which to dwell.

The idea of the house as a living being is taken to an extreme level when Sarton describes her return, “I knew when I walked in here last Sunday that this house dies when there are no flowers. It felt desolate and I ended the day in tears, as if I had been abandoned by God” (Sarton 124). Upon her return, nothing ‘living’ has resided within the structure. Deadness has proliferated the entire house. By bringing flowers into the house, Sarton hopes to bring the house to life. For, only when the house is alive is she able to concentrate and function as a living being.

According to the philosopher Martin Heidegger, the assimilation of the ‘outside’ world into the space of dwelling fulfills a foundational quality of what it means to be a human. Heidegger states that “to be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to
dwell” (2). To ‘dwell’ is to “abide or continue for a time, in a place, state, or condition” (Oxford English Dictionary). What Heidegger is referring to is a long-term or extended ‘settling down’ in an area. Not just physically in a place but mentally choosing a settled state. Such a place inherently is co-habitated with family, a house, friends, schools, churches, grocery stores, Starbucks, ect.: all of the people and places that constitute the local, or present and immediate, reality. For example, Chip’s description of his childhood house from The Corrections is ‘an unfenced world’ in which the family has ‘entitlement’ and ‘settlement.’ Chip associates his ‘memories’ of childhood life and locality with this house because this building is a true depiction of a basic need of humanity: to dwell.

In order to achieve this state of dwelling by assimilating the ‘outside’ world, the local reality looks to the medium of media. The spreading infection of the ‘outside’ or inflated reality into the local reality is exemplified through DeLillo’s depiction of the Gladney family. Every Friday night, the Gladney parents make their children watch television in the hopes that: “if kids watched television one night a week with parents or stepparents, the effect would be to de-glamorize the medium in their eyes, make it wholesome domestic sport” (DeLillo 16). This familial tradition is founded on good intentions, but ultimately undermines its purpose. The mother speaks of the television as a medium: a source through which knowledge can be portrayed and conveyed to the viewer. Little does she realize that the world of the television is inviting the family to buy into its reality, a cold and non-intimate reality outside that of the local.

Television is auditioning those who wish to participate within its enhanced reality: “a little later I watched Steffie in front of the TV set. She moved her lips, attempting to match the words as they were spoken” (DeLillo 84). Steffie is repeating and mimicking what she sees on television in order to remember and apply what she has learned. The television produces visual
information that extends beyond the realm of Blacksmith local to the greater unknown world.

David Foster Wallace addresses this concept directly

> It’s not paranoid or hysterical to acknowledge that television in enormous doses affects people’s values and self-perception [individual identity] in deep ways. Nor that televisual conditioning influences the whole psychology of one’s relation to himself, his mirror, his loved ones, and a world of real people and real gazes. No one’s to claim that a culture all about watching and appearing is fatally compromised by unreal standards of beauty and fitness. But other facets of TV-training reveal themselves as more rapacious, more serious, than any irreverent fiction writer would want to take seriously. (Wallace 54)

Wallace acknowledges the fact that television influences the viewers in deeper ways than they can imagine. ‘Values’ and individual identity are affected through what is displayed as ‘real’ in the ‘outside’ world of local reality. A culture of ‘watching’ soon develops. The culture asks: what are the standards for ‘beauty’ and ‘health?’ Americans observe what the television’s answers are to these questions, and then apply the answer to life in the local reality. The ‘outside’ moves inward.

Eggers’ protagonist, Chris, directly addresses the idea of media extending reality beyond the local: “we’ve grown up thinking of ourselves in relation to the political-media-entertainment ephemera, in our safe and comfortable homes, given the time to think about how we would fit into this or that…TV show or movie” (202). Chris confirms the fact that mediums such as the television provide an alternate and seemingly superior reality to the local reality.

Wallace agrees with this when he critiques the image of the family: “I have never seen an average American household. Except on TV” (Wallace 22). This is a perfect example of the idealization generated through the medium that has a lasting impact on the local reality. The ‘average American family’ of husband, wife and kids is displayed as a norm. This image seems to say ‘this is what is normal and you should fit it.’ The family in the local reality that views this inflated reality looks at themselves and wonder, ‘do we fit this mold? If not, what is wrong with
us?’ It is through this distant and impersonal reality that people are told what to desire as and look like as Americans and consumers, what possible individual identities they can put on, and how they can act within these identities.

Eggers comments on this strict formula for individual identity when describing Chris’ coworkers at *Might* magazine:

> We have opted out, taken the ultimate apathetic approach to looks and attire, have moved past the check-me-out look, past the look of rejecting-the-check-me-out-look-in-favor-of-darkly-rebellious-look—have rejected both and have chosen a kind of elegance through refusal—the check-me-out-if-you-must look-but-you’ll-get-no-encouragement-from-me-look— the look of absolutely no look at all. (Eggers 244)

The continual use of hyphenation to simply tack on a new aspect of individual identity displays an assembly-line process of establishing identity. Rather than generating identity through experiential exploration, there is a chain production of individual identity. A mass market of individual identities generated through the fabrication and application of synthetic identity slapped on by a mere hyphen. And the factory for mass-production of synthetic identity is the medium of the media. Wallace says it best when he states “it’s TV, and not any specific product or service, that will be regarded by Joe B. as the ultimate arbiter of human worth. An oracle, to be consulted a lot” (Wallace 56). The television is viewed by a mass audience, and the same images are presented. This generates a universality that enables Americans to have an identity standard. Thus, people model their individual identities in a way that reflects the ‘oracle’s’ images and produces purpose through synthetic identity.

Benedict Anderson, author of *Imagined Communities*, elaborates on this assembly-line production of synthetic identity versus exploring individual identity as a nationalistic mass ceremony: “each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of
whose [individual] identity he has not the slightest notion” (Anderson 35). Mass society can be aware of the ceremonies (synthetic identities) they are offered to replicate and fit the norms. And if an individual attempts to seek a new ceremony (individual identity) through authentic experience and identity exploration, the person is in for an unpleasant surprise. Goffman states that “if the individual takes on a task that is not only new to him [identity exploration] but also unestablished in the society [authentic experience]…he is likely to find that there are already several well-established fronts among which he must choose [synthetic identities]” (Goffman 27). If someone attempts to create an individual identity through genuine experience and identity exploration, the person will instead follow a pattern that media and society deem ‘unique.’ Individual identity realized through genuine experience and identity exploration is virtually impossible under the auspices of the media’s influence. It is easier and simpler to choose synthetic identity. Consequently, a mass culture of limited synthetic identities generates and extends beyond individual identity to that of national identity.

As a people without a unifying language, race, or religion in the United States, a need exists for cohesion and national identity. The media provides an answer to the lack of national commonality by creating a societal ideal. The people depicted through this social ideal “are the top third of earners who have children, a professional and monied stratum” (Conley 9). These are the people who are able to afford the time and money to actually participate in the national identity presented through media. The old-money class is forgotten as distant and snooty, while the poor are simply ignored. Instead, it is the middle class that is presented as ideal and from which those who fit the ‘top third’ of professionals seek to fit their individual identity.

The media’s ability to present this ‘top third’ synthetic identity as ideal began with “print-journalism….made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves
and to relate themselves to others” (Anderson 36). Where print-journalism enabled individuals to place themselves within a national identity, television and internet only furthered this mindset. These mediums generate a mass culture with commonality based on consumerism and “‘homogeneous, empty time,’ in which simultaneity is…transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar” (Anderson 24). There is no location more centered on ‘homogeneous, empty time’ and ‘clock and calendar’ than the city, especially the metropolis.

In the metropolis, all different languages, races and religions exist. There must be some sort of cohesion, so it is found in the preeminence of punctuality. Sociologist Georg Simmel claims that

concerns of the typical metropolitan resident are so manifold and complex that, especially as a result of the agglomeration of so many persons with such differentiated interests, their relationships and activities intertwine with one another into a many-membered organism. In view of this fact, the lack of the most exact punctuality in promises and performances would cause the whole to break down into an inextricable chaos. (34)

A ‘metropolitan resident’ has so much going on in a typical day that they do not have time to consider those around them unless the ‘others’ pertain directly to their ‘activities.’ Furthermore, since Simmel wrote this piece, the emergence of internet and social media has furthered the metropolitan mindset and increased interpersonal disconnect. With an entire social world in an individual’s phone, people do not need to interact with those around them unless for necessity. Thus, the city becomes a ‘many-membered’ organism, functioning through mutual utility. Every member is expected to follow through on ‘promises’ with an adequate ‘performance’ in a ‘punctual’ manner. If a member does not follow through, the rhythm of the organism will be disrupted. Because of the focus on mutual utility, individual identity becomes unnecessary. Individuals must go to great lengths to present their individual identity in a way that will draw
attention. As a result, presentation of identity becomes synthetic because it is ‘other’ focused.

Simmel carefully deconstructs the mindset behind flashy identity presentation when he states that

there is the difficulty of giving one’s own personality a certain status within the framework of metropolitan life. Where quantitative increase of value and energy has reached its limits, one seizes on qualitative distinctions, so that, through taking advantage of the existing sensitivity to differences, the attention of the social world can, in some way, be won for oneself. This leads ultimately to the strangest eccentricities, to specifically metropolitan extravagances of self-distanciation, of caprice, of fastidiousness, the meaning of which is no longer to be found in the content of such activity itself but rather in its being a form of ‘being different’ – of making oneself noticeable. (Simmel 42)

In the metropolis, there is no room for individual identity. People are forced to go about their business quickly and efficiently. In an effort to ‘be different,’ people resort to observable qualities (synthetic identities) that will mark them apart from others on sight. In a sense, people are wearing their synthetic identities, through the adornment of these observable qualities. And this outward appearance is only what people will know, because they do not have the time to understand the person’s individual identity. For this reason, “one never feels as lonely and as deserted as in this metropolitan crush of persons” (Simmel 40).

Individual identity has been consumed by the city. So what better place could there be to seek comfort for the adornment of synthetic identity than the television-room. Novelist Colum McCann speaks through the character of Corrigan that “‘Television[is] the perfect drug’” (281). The television provides comfort and safety. It tells the viewer that it is normal to give up identity exploration through genuine experience for the ease of synthetic identity. Furthermore, the television is catered to its viewers. It is “what we as Audience want to see ourselves as. Television, from the surface on down, is about desire” (Wallace 22). The television tells its
Audience what it wants to be and the Audience continues to watch, indicating a desire to replicate the television’s displays of synthetic identity.

By concurring with the synthetic identities of the television, the viewer experiences a forced synthesis of two realities: the physical television-room in the local realities and the presence of the extended reality through the medium of media. As Emerson explains, this synthesis of realities occurs because humans consume information and process on the same flat horizon of perception: “the eye…makes the horizon, and the rounding mind’s eye which makes this or that” (Emerson 246). Humans unconsciously create meaning from what they perceive through their senses. Thus, by continuously watching television and ‘taking-in’ the synthetic identities, “we start to ‘feel’ ourselves feeling, yearn to experience ‘experiences’” (Wallace 34). The audience begins to confuse experiencing events first-hand (authentic experience) with observing events ‘second-hand’ (synthetic experience) from the television. When the line between authentic experience and synthetic experience blur, the medium of media seems to become a legitimate reality in the realm of the local reality.

If the media is a separate but equally legitimate reality within the local real, the medium ceases to function as a medium. Jean Baudrillard, the French intellectual and philosopher states: “there is no longer a medium in the literal sense: it is now intangible, diffused, and diffracted in the real, and one can no longer even say that the medium is altered by it” (Baudrillard 30). The medium, as described by Baudrillard, ceases to be a messenger for an unattainable reality, and becomes an extended reality (synthetic experience) for the local. The original intent of media and its mediums was to communicate information and national reality through first-hand experiences conveyed as accurate accounts. But, the medium eventually loses its ‘glamour.’ People become desensitized to the detachment of the accounts: the simulation of an event’s retelling, the copy
of an event’s copy. David Foster Wallace has an interesting take on the mutation of television: “the best TV of the last five years has been about ironic self-reference like no previous species of postmodern art could ever have dreamed of” (Wallace 33). Television no longer needs to remind the audience that it is a medium through which media presents itself, but instead references itself for justification and validation. This produces a sense of ‘being’ for the medium that seems to be interactive with human beings. As a result, people begin to feel as if the synthetic experiences encountered while interacting with the medium are in fact authentic.

What is the difference between experiencing a situation and a simulation of the same situation? Simulation (synthetic experience) is not reality (authentic experience); nor is it representation: “whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum” (Baudrillard 6). Representation admits that it is a false copy. Simulation attempts to deceive and convince that it is authentic experience. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘simulation’ is “the action or practice of simulating, with intent to deceive; false pretence, deceitful profession.” The media has succeeded in its simulation. The populace has been deceived, consuming synthetic experience from the media as if it were a source of authentic experience: “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard 1). The simulation has conquered the authentic. Simulation’s synthetic experience has displaced authentic experience as truth.

This shift is perceivable through television: “TV is watching us, TV alienates us, TV manipulates us, TV informs us…In all this, one remains dependent on the analytical conception of the media” (Baudrillard 30-1). Not only does a medium establish itself as a simulation of
authentic events outside local reality, but it claims to interpret, give and convey meaning to the events. Thus the simulated events are inherently linked to the establishment of meaning in the local reality. The media is not just displaying events but telling the viewer how to respond and apply meaning. This simulation of authentic experience in the media is precisely what SIMUVAC does with disasters in *White Noise*:

I want to welcome all of you on behalf of Advanced Disaster Management, a private consulting firm that conceives and operates simulated evacuations. …The more we rehearse disaster, the safer we’ll be from the real thing. (DeLillo 205)

SIMUVAC not only teaches the town how to deal with disasters but comforts them that disasters will not occur. By rehearsing (synthetic experience) disaster, fear of the unknown seems to be removed. The simulation victims believe they are getting a taste of what ‘the real thing’ (authentic experience) will be like. Thus, their fear of the authentic experience begins to fade because of their understanding of simulated disasters, or synthetic experience. Those participating will find comfort in this and will fear the authentic disaster less.

Simulation conveys synthetic experience to the public for much more than just communication, but for acculturation: “all the messages in the media function…as neither information nor communication, but referendum, perpetual test, circular response, verification of the code” (Baudrillard 75). Media is not just telling the culture how to interpret synthetic experience, but how to react and live according to synthetic identity. The media imbues messages with meaning in all simulations. Similarly, during the airborne toxic event in DeLillo’s *White Noise*, the Gladney daughters begin to exhibit symptoms that the radio describes: “the girls were complaining of sweaty palms. ‘There’s been a correction,’ Heinrich told her. ‘Tell them they ought to be throwing up’” (DeLillo 112). The media clearly sends messages as to how individuals should act and display synthetic identity. Following Heinrich’s corrections, the
daughters soon comply and begin to feel queasy. The daughters are performing the synthetic identity of sickness the media describes. The girls are a part of an authentic disaster occurring within their locality, but they do not know how to respond to this authentic experience without the direction of synthetic experience. By performing the symptoms described on the radio, the girls are auditioning for the media’s synthetic identity of sickness rather than the authentic experience of the disaster around them.

The media perpetuates and establishes a social code through synthetic identity and then maintains it through the continual reinforcement via its mediums. As aforementioned, media establishes itself as the means to generate national unity due to America’s lack of cohesive identity: “consider the basic structure of the two forms of imagining: the novel and the newspaper….these forms provided the technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the…imagined community that is the nation” (Anderson 24-5). Thus, the imagined community that unifies the nation is a simulated social code of synthetic identity articulated by the synthetic experience of media.

But who enforces the social code? Who ensures that the media is generating a social code of synthetic identity that is pertinent and acceptable to the masses? As Wallace states, this question is irrelevant today because

> television has become immune to charges that it lacks any meaningful connection to the world outside it. It’s not that charges of nonconnection have become untrue but that they’ve become deeply irrelevant. It’s that any such connection has become otiose. Television used to point beyond itself….at versions of ‘real life’ made prettier, sweeter, livelier by succumbing to a product or temptation. Today’s mega-Audience is way better trained, and TV has discarded what’s not needed. (Wallace 33)

The answer is that no one checks the social code of synthetic identity established by the media because the media is now the synthetic experience that people attempt to fit. The very citizens that the media imposes the social code upon enforce the code by accepting synthetic experience
as equal or superior to authentic experience: “everywhere socialization is measured by the exposure to media messages…. Everywhere information is thought to produce an accelerated circulation of meaning” (Baudrillard 80). The media is selling a simulation full of messages and meanings that construct a social code. The consumers can or cannot choose to accept the social code. But, since consumerism is by no means losing its grip on society, the media still maintains dominance on social and political reality.

The travesty of synthetic experience’s rise to dominance through the simulation constructed by media is that society has forgotten that authentic experience never ceases to advantage its participant. Authentic experience rejects the simulation and seeks ‘the real.’ As Emerson so profoundly explains,

There are objections to every course of life and action, and the practical wisdom infers an indifferency, from the omnipresence of objection….Do not craze yourself with thinking, but go about your business anywhere….Fill the hour,—that is happiness; to fill the hour, and leave no crevice for a repentance or an approval. We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them. (236)

Society presents opposition and punishment for decisions that go against its established code. Rather than be controlled by the worry of these possible societal ramifications, it is better to remain indifferent to this code and seek individual identity exploration. Only when individuals explore moments of authentic experience can they begin to think outside the pitfalls and comforts of synthetic identity and encounter individual identity. Eliminating the influence of social code and synthetic identity enables interaction with authentic experience and the exploration of individual identity. This is what May Sarton hopes to achieve in her solitude. In her solitude, she hopes to “leave family and responsibilities and become…‘holy’…a wanderer…in order to complete…self—a time for laying aside all that has pulled the soul away from nature, from pure contemplation” (Sarton 117). By separating herself from the burdens and
stresses of the social code and synthetic identity, Sarton is able explore her individual identity through the ‘pure [authentic] contemplation’ of her soul.

Emerson also calls for a mental transcendence from the clutches of the past and worries of the future to the authentic experience encountered in the moment: “we must set up the strong present tense against all the rumours of wrath, past or to come” (Emerson 239). By rooting one’s individual identity in the present moment, one escapes the potholes of the past and the fears of the future. By being free from these constraints, a person is open to authentic experience and the resulting exploration of identity. Synthetic experience presented by the medium of media does not allow for a ‘strong present tense’ because the medium remains detached from the authentic event’s location. Thus, synthetic experience will never enable identity exploration through authentic experience.

Is there hope for authentic experience within the local reality? Emerson’s outlook seems bleak: “every roof is agreeable to the eye, until it is lifted: then we find tragedy….How many individuals can we count in society? How many actions? How many opinions?” (229). This depiction of the local places tragedy within the safety of the most sacred social space: the household. Despite this outlook, Emerson advocates the potential of encountering authentic experience.

Emerson’s protégé, Henry David Thoreau, would argue that an essential way to achieve authentic experience is through the rejection of simulation’s synthetic identity. Eggers’ America in Short Short Stories displays synthetic identity as sleepiness: “there was a group of people, called the Americans, who once had a very vivid nightmare, simultaneously. The nightmare, which lasted many years, was nightmarish in many ways” (34). This sleepiness—this unawareness—is what Thoreau warns against. Thoreau urges Americans to awaken: “to be
awake is to be alive….We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn” (83). By rejecting the complacency and stability offered by the sleepy simulation of synthetic identity, people remain awake and alert to the rambunctious realities of authentic experience—the ‘infinite expectations of dawn.’ This dawn is continual newness, refreshment and vigor. It is the start of the cycle of the twenty-four hour day: the chronological process of day to night with an eventual, unknowable dawn abounding with potential authentic experience. Sarton states this eloquently in her journal: “There is nothing to be done but go ahead with life moment by moment and hour by hour—put out birdseed, tidy the rooms” (Sarton 33). By constantly going ‘ahead with life moment by moment,’ people are firmly rooted in the ‘now’ and are more likely to encounter authentic experience. And through this authentic experience, contemplate and explore individual identity.

Hope for authentic experience does exist within modern texts. As Baudrillard expresses, authentic experience exists solely within local reality: “meaning, truth, the real cannot appear except locally” (Baudrillard 108-9). The outlook is bleak, but Baudrillard admits to the possibility of authentic experience. An example of a successful, yet painful, acceptance of authentic experience is found in Franzen’s *The Corrections*. Enid and Denise incessantly hurt one another due to unresolved bitterness. But, while at home, wrapped up in the nostalgic atmosphere of Christmas and the reality of Alfred’s severe dementia, Denise and Enid throw their prideful emotional barriers aside and experience an emotive and authentic conversation unlike any previously depicted in the novel:

For while there was no Denise in the kitchen, just mush and wetness and remorse….Enid gazed bleakly at the unpeeled potatoes by the sink. ‘He’s not going to get better, is he.’…. ‘I don’t think so,’…. ‘It’s probably not the medication, is it.’ ‘It probably isn’t.’…. ‘Denise, what are we going to do?’ ‘I don’t know.’” (Franzen 608)
This painfully honest conversation involves the removal of all facades and protections of synthetic identity. The women realize their need for one another emotionally and choose to accept this authentic experience. As a result, they experience a moment that will strengthen and empower their relationship forever. In great distress, these women are strong enough to accept authentic experience and learn from it. And through this difficult experience, Enid and Denise are able to realize how deeply the other controls or affects them. Through this realization, Enid and Denise can gain a better understanding of their individual identities through reflective exploration.

In McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin*, a group of women who lost their sons in the Vietnam War get together for lunch visits. At these visits, they reminisce about their boys and chatter about the mundane of everyday life. It is supposed to resemble some sort of a support group, but it feels more like a trap that forces these women to learn the synthetic identity of how to pretend everything is okay. But, the day of the tight-rope walker between the twin towers, one woman fled, unable to watch him. She could not allow herself to see if the tight-rope walker would live or die. When the ladies inquire, her response tears them away from their carefully constructed defenses of not really expressing or thinking on their feelings:

‘Because if he was alive it couldn’t possibly be Mike Junior.’ All of it hit like a slam in the chest. So immediate. At all of their coffee mornings, it had always been distant, belonging to another day, the talk, the memory, the recall, the stories, a distant land, but this was now and real, and the worst thing was that they didn’t know the walker’s fate, didn’t know if he had jumped or had fallen or had got down safely, or if he was still up there on his little stroll, or if he was there at all, if it was just a story, or a projection, indeed, or if she had made it all up for effect—they had no idea—maybe the man wanted to kill himself, or maybe the helicopter had a hook around him to catch him if he fell, or maybe there was a clip around the wire to catch him, or maybe maybe maybe there was another maybe, maybe. (McCann 99)

The women are all caught up in the emotive terror that this one woman felt. The fear of life and death is no longer a distant image of their boys in the past. The tight-rope walker is the ‘now’
and ‘real.’ The experience is authentic. The distress that they all feel proves to each and every
woman that none of them are ‘okay’ and that all of them struggle. This is a beautiful, yet painful
scene of discovery and realization. The women realize that they are not suffering alone and that
they are allowed to suffer. They are not weak for it, they are normal. Although this break-
through is quickly calmed and the ladies return to civil and unemotionally invested dialogue, the
impact has been strong enough that it will stick with the characters throughout the rest of the
novel, affecting their actions and choices as unique, hurting individuals.

*Olive Kitteridge* is a novel that revolves around the elderly woman after whom this book
is titled. Olive lives in the small town of Crosby, Maine. The novel follows her life with her
husband Henry from early marriage until his death. After Henry’s death, Olive is left alone to
wallow in the fact that she lived her last years with Henry disgruntled, angry and somewhat
verbally abusive. Her self-loathing radiates outward to those around her, causing others to avoid
her and further her isolation. That is, until she stumbles across Jack Kennison laying on the
sidewalk out for a walk. This older man is an object of Olive’s loathing for his a wealthy and
conservative retiree.

The book ends with Olive choosing to not let life end. She chooses life, even if it is a life
with a man she had belligerently hated without knowing all her life before. As she climbs into
bed with him in the final scene, she reflects

> oh, what young people did not know. They did not know that lumpy, aged, and wrinkled
> bodies were as needy as their own young, firm ones. That love was not to be tossed away
carelessly, as if it were a tart on a platter with others that got passed around again. No, if
> love was available, one chose it, or didn’t choose it. And if her platter had been full with
> the goodness of Henry and she had found it burdensome, had flicked it off crumbs at a
time, it was because she had not known what one should know: that day after day was
> unconsciously squandered…if this man next to her now was not a man she would have
> chosen before this time, what did it matter?. But here they are. (Strout 270)
Olive looks back on her past and realizes that she made a mistake with Henry. She did not love him properly. She had been flippant with his love and did not realize what she had until he was gone. Thus, when Jack came along, she is not willing to hold back based on what other people would say, or what other people would think, or what her ‘liberal, peasant’ persona would want; she goes for it. She chooses to pursue love. To pursue life. To pursue authentic experience as Olive Kitteridge. And, for the first time in the entirety of the novel, she states “It baffled her, the world. She did not want to leave it yet” (Strout 270). By being willing to reflect on her past circumstances and recognize her faults, Olive is able to perceive what it is she really wants: love. And through that, she is able to pursue Jack as nothing more or less than Olive. Uninhibited by what society, family, political constraints or other components of synthetic identity have to say. She listens solely to what the individual identity of Olive has to say. And through that, Olive finds the will to live.

While American life in contemporary literature is characterized by the adherence to synthetic identity generated by simulation of society through the medium of media, the exploration of individual identity is still perceivable through authentic experience gained by resisting the synthetic identity. For, in the end, “you may still be one version of yourself…but then you peel off the…the long day’s costume…and in the shower you’re naked and alone” (Franzen 278). Instead of putting on a synthetic identity to fit the different synthetic experiences of the day, stand apart and step into authentic individual identity. By rooting life in the present moment of authentic experience, recognizing and respecting the past and future but not dwelling there, individuals can resist the enticements of synthetic identity and truly explore individual identity.
As the tight-rope walker began to practice his skill in McCann’s novel, he discovered something that would glue this skill to him as nothing less than an obsession. As he began to rise to new heights, uninhibited by anything around him but his own body, completely in control of his own faculties and his own future, he had a moment of enlightenment. “He felt for a moment uncreated. Another kind of awake” (McCann 164). And it is this feeling of ‘uncreated’ identity that people must discover through authentic experience, or else society will control and mold individuals into synthetic creations of the media.
Part II: 6 Short Pieces of Fiction

The creative pieces to follow are examples of the conclusions drawn in the essay. The short pieces of fiction focus on the punctuated moments that elicit authentic experience and enable identity exploration. Through this process, the formation of individual identity is possible. Each piece looks at this process from a slightly different angle.

At the beginning of each short piece of fiction, there will be a quote that references back to the essay. Please take a moment to contemplate the meaning of these quotes, how the quotes served a purpose in the overall essay and how the quotes interact with the individual piece.
“there was a group of people, called the Americans, who once had a very vivid nightmare, simultaneously. The nightmare, which lasted many years, was nightmarish in many ways” (Eggers 34).

**Paradise Lost**

Deborah bopped about on the dance floor. It was just her, the music, the flashing lights and her sweaty bangs draped over her eyes. Her body moved in tune with the sounds and pulses of the music as if it were the conductor and she were the orchestra. A deep bass-thump bent her knees, a guitar wail moved her shoulders in a tentative shimmy, a down-beat shifted her weight and body left to right while an up-beat produced a serpentine roll from head to toe, and a cymbal crash thrashed her head and arms in a sharp, yet graceful union. Her reckless-abandon on the dance floor was intoxicating. Everyone around her starred and gawked with an intense desire to join and feel like her, but no one felt right to interrupt. Alone she danced, and alone she felt free.

As the music slowed, Deborah fell out of the trance and into cognitive recognition of her surroundings. She met the lustful gazes that quickly turned away and blushed. Embarrassed for them, and a little for herself, Deborah slid off the dance floor. She walked into the bar area, first looking at her cell-phone clock, and then scanning the room. She made her way straight forward with ‘excuse me’ and ‘pardon me’ until she could grab the shoulder of a boy her age eagerly chatting with two other girls.

“Ryan, we have to get home. Mom and dad will kill us if we aren’t home by two.”

“Serussy. Do we aft do?”

“Oh great, you’re drunk. YES we have to. Now come on.”

She tugged on his shoulder as he pulled out his cell-phone.

“No Ryan! Scoot along hussies.”

The two girls gawked in confusion and anger as Deborah pulled her brother away. Once past the crowd, Ryan pulled free from her grasp.

“I can walk…myself.”

“Are you sure? You seem drunk.”

“I’m not bad. Juss a lil tipsy.”

“Come on. Out the door.”

They continued out the door into the brisk night air, Ryan stumbling a bit as he walked.

Twins, Ryan and Deborah had always been inseparable. Ryan, the charming and naive jock who could befriend anything that moved and Deborah, the self-assured recluse who attracted, yet
intimidated, those around her. Ryan ensured Deborah would be out with people and Deborah ensured that those people were worth his time. It was an excellent combination as long as they could stand each other.

Once at the car, Deborah held out her hand.

“Give me the keys please.”

“I got this. Don’t worry bought it.”

Deborah cocked her head, pursed her lips and raised her eyebrow. ‘The look.’

“Oh jeez. Whatever. Here you go.”

Deborah snatched the keys, unlocked the doors and flung herself into the driver’s seat.

“Okay, let’s get home.”

“Ugggg. Why’d you pull me away in there? I could totally have gotten some.”

“Shut up. Don’t be disgusting. You know you don’t want that anyway. You just think that’s what you want because every other brainless jock-friend you have thinks that’s part of being an athlete. Pathetic.”

“Don’t talk so much. My head hurts.”

“So glad you’re listening.”

“Uggggeee.”

Deborah backed up, pulled into the street and proceeded westward to their parent’s posh home in the suburbs. It was 1:15am and the drive home usually takes a half-hour. Their parents agreed to fund their weekend excursions as long as Ryan and Deborah are home by 2:00am. Deborah thought this was a pretty sweet deal and intended to keep her end of the bargain.

“Uggggeee. I need some food or I’m gonna barf.”

“Hold it. We’ll be home in thirty.”

“No…seriously. Stop somewhere.”

“Shit Ryan! We can’t be late!”

“Jus get it to go! Not much time!”

“Fine. There’s a McDonald’s up ahead. Probably a good idea to sober you up, anyway.”
Deborah swerved into the McDonalds and sped to the order stand. She slammed on the brakes, causing Ryan to lurch forward with a grunt. Giggling to herself, Deborah asked for his order.

“Welcome to McDonalds. What can I get for you tonight?”

“JUST A SECOND. What do you want Ryan?”

“Just get me two hamburgers. And a small fry.”

“I’LL TAKE TWO HAMBURGERS AND A SMALL…”

“…make it large…”

“…EXCUSE ME, LARGE FRY.”

“Will that be all, ma’am?”

“Oh, and a mountain dew!”

“AND A WATER PLEASE!”

“What? I said…”

“Thank you ma’am. Your total is four dollars and twenty cents. Please pull up to the window.”

Deborah rummaged through her purse and pulled out her wallet. Pulling forward, she threw the wallet at Ryan.

“Grab me a twenty, will you?”

“But I wanted Mountain Dew…”

“You don’t need the caffeine or sugar.”

“Uggg. Thanks MOM.”

“You’re welcome honey.”

Deborah looked as the McDonald’s employee opened the glass. Ryan stuck his tongue at Deborah in drunken defiance. Handing the money to the woman, Deborah noticed the employee’s stifled laugh. Turning quickly, Deborah caught sight of Ryan’s tongue slowly disappearing into his mouth. With a ‘tsk’ of disgust followed by a coy smile, Deborah turned back to the window lady.

“Pardon my brother…he’s a little…slow…if you know what I mean.”

“Oh yeah, deary. I know what you mean. Here’s your change and your food will be right out.”
Deborah turned back to Ryan. A look of dull fury lingered on his face.

“You’re so mean to me.”

“It’s all out of love.”

“Whatever. I’m just ready to eat.”

“It’s not like you didn’t eat a massive dinner. And you drank the heck out of that bar. Think of the calories. Yuck.”

“What are you worried about? I’ve got a boy’s metabolism!”

“Oh gosh. I can’t wait until you’re forty and obese.”

The window-lady appeared and handed Deborah the food.

“Enjoy the rest of your night.”

“Thank you!”

Deborah began to pull forward as she handed Ryan his food.

“Here you go porker!”

“Deborah….umm….”

A figure lumbered in front of them. It came from around the corner. Dressed in tattered rags, a disheveled woman staggered toward their car. Her hair was cut like a boy’s and stuck about in sticky disarray. Her face was smeared with a mixture of make-up and bruises. Her low cut halter and short mini-skirt exposed her bulging-belly which hung far below a tight waist strap. She walked with a stiff right leg and her arms outstretched. She clearly mouthed the words ‘help.’ Deborah screamed as the woman grasped the open window. Slamming her foot on the gas pedal, Deborah flung the car forward. The woman let go of the window quickly and wobbled a bit. Ryan stared out the back window as McDonalds disappeared behind them, the battered figure standing motionless, staring, alone.

They drove in silence. Ryan held his food on his lap, never once opening it. They reached home five minutes before two. Deborah pulled into the garage, turned off the car and closed the garage door. She placed her hands in her lap. They listened to the garage door close. With its final bump, silence.

They sat and stared forward. Motionless. Still. Afraid to move in the fear of upsetting something. The garage light turned off and they sat in darkness. Silent.

The bag of food crinkled. Sobs began to issue from the shadowy figure of Ryan.
“I could have given her my food. I could have fucking given her my food.”

They sat in the car, weeping together. Weeping together amidst the smell of dirty food and the terror of disruptive realities.
“each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose [individual] identity he has not the slightest notion” (Anderson 35).

Seconds

‘Should I get another? I’m kinda full.’

‘You’ve only had two! Weak Phil, weak.’

‘Dammit Hillary.’

‘Yep. Your manhood is entirely in question.’

‘I hate you.’

‘You lie. You love me. Now take it like a man and order another.’

Hillary made eye-contact with the waiter to bring him over, ignoring Phil’s mock-anger and competitive smirk.

‘What can I get you guys?’

‘I’ll take another.’

‘Do you want a half bowl?’

Hillary snorted after failing to quench her reaction.

Phil didn’t flinch, a quiver in his smirk the only sign of annoyance.

‘No. A full bowl. And throw in some extra garlic bread too.’

‘You got it. Coming right up bud.’

The waiter quickly walked away, jamming his little-black-book of orders into his waist skirt.

‘Bud?’

Hillary let the laughter freely erupt.

‘BUD! What the hell! He’s like two years older than me. Where does he get off thinking he can call me bud! Superiority complex much. Bastard. There goes his tip.’

Hillary’s eyes dripped with joyful merriment. She giggled as she dabbed at the joy running through her mascara.

‘This just isn’t your night, is it…’
‘Don’t you dare...’

‘...BUD!’

‘I hate you.’

‘So much hate from such a little man.’

Phil’s smirk broke into a small, clenched, ‘O.’

‘Stop.’

‘Oh no! Did I hurt wittle Philly’s feelings?’

‘Whatever. I just want my freaking pasta. Then we’ll see who’s the little man.’

‘You’re ridiculous.’

‘Stop being such a bitch.’

‘What the hell?’

The waiter quickly approached. Hillary sat back in her chair, folded her arms across her chest and stared at the wall. Phil glared at the pasta placed in front of him as if it were a ferocious foe. The waiter stepped back and made a quick attempt at interpreting Phil’s facials.

‘Is there anything else I can get you?’

‘No.’

‘Refills? A box?’

Phil’s intense concentration broke. His will was shattered. He slowly raised his head from the food, his face simmering with red fury. Through clenched teeth, he attempted a calm, whispered, response with each word slowly, and emphatically dictated.


The waiter stared at Phil with blank confusion. Fortunately, he was only half-with Phil and half-with the several other tables and their dining needs. He quickly shook off his confusion.

‘Okay bud. Let me know if you need anything else.’

He was off. And Phil’s face snapped from fury to complete devastation. Hillary snickered.

‘Way to verbally abuse the waiter...BUD.’
Phil tossed his complete, internalized fury at Hillary with one quick eye-jab. He focused back on his hearty pasta and the two buttery garlic toasts oozing in a basket nearby. Resignation and determination straightened his slumped shoulders and he dove into the bowl. Hillary stared in utter disgust and awe as globs of food were flung into Phil’s mouth, down his thick neck and into his broad chest. The garlic toasts met their end within the pasta massacre, and soon, nothing was left but an empty plate with sauce residue and an oily basket. Phil sat back in his chair with a sense of accomplishment seeping from his pores. The waiter waltzed back to the table and quickly snatched the bowl and basket.

‘Wow, I’m impressed sir. I’ll go get your check.’

Phil puffed his chest and let out a loud sigh as the waiter quickly scurried away.

Hillary stared in continued disgust.

‘Congratulations. Your manhood is affirmed.’

Phil’s face erupted with a painfully genuine grin as the waiter appeared at the table and quickly placed the ticket in front of the beaming boy. With a spontaneous motion, Hillary grabbed the bill. The waiter paused in confusion as Hillary pulled several bills from her purse and handed him the payment. The waiter stared at the ticket in his hand and looked at Phil.

‘Keep the change.’

The waiter snapped back into his reality.

‘Thank you ma’am. Have a wonderful night.’

Hillary stood up and threw on her coat. Deflated, Phil slowly followed.

Unfazed, the waiter ran quickly about the restaurant, immediately forgetting Phil and Hillary.

Hillary and Phil walked out of the restaurant into the chilly night air. With much regret and defeat, Phil pushed out a lie.

‘Thank-you for dinner. You really didn’t need to pay.’

‘Oh, it was my pleasure…Bud.’
“to be awake is to be alive….We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn” (Thoreau 83).

**Sight**

Every Thursday evening, Roger and Julia Burgess, Tim and Fleur Goldstein and Scott and Rachelle Stanley get together for dinner and drinks at the elegant French Café. The café is dimly lit with glittering lights embedded in the black velvet walls. A woman dressed in a shimmering white dress quietly scats along with her jazz ensemble. This soothing sound sits just above the din of the bustling café but just below the speaking radius of each individual table. At each table sits smartly dressed men and glamorous women. And at table seven, our three couples reside.

Tonight was the men’s night to drink, but Fleur’s rough day at work translated into diligent consumption of an entire bottle of wine. Fortunately, Tim is not much of a drinker. He had silently observed his wife’s intake and began to monitor his own. He rested his hand on her thigh throughout the night to reassure her of his presence.

Rachelle had also disregarded the night’s designation in order to match her husband, drink-for-drink. The Stanley’s are known for their ‘colorful displays’ in public. Constantly bickering and flinging violent insults, Rachelle and Scott seem to be on the verge of imminent explosion. At that moment, Rachelle was accusing Scott and the other men at the table of being sexist by advocating males drink one week and females drink the next. Scott was pointing out that her argument was invalid because she was drunk. She corrected: ‘merely tipsy.’ The battle continued.

Roger and Julia sit together, but distinctly apart. The senior couple, the Burgess’ sometimes feel as if they are with kids at their Thursday night get-togethers. But both Roger and Julia find the encounter immensely amusing. To hear about the woes of work life from the Goldstein’s and to observe the explosive Stanley marriage provides them with weekly relief from their own difficulties. Roger and Julia always walk away rejuvenated and validated.

Fleur began to sob quietly. Rachelle raised her voice in argument as Scott insisted she was far beyond tipsy. Tim placed his arm around Fleur and reached for her wine glass. Scott began to laugh as Rachelle desperately attempted to defend herself. Tim grasped the wine glass and begun to pull it away. Scott giggled and leaned into his wife.

“I think we should hold off on anymore wine, dear.”

“You’re so sexy when you’re drunk.”

Fleur gripped the glass as Time attempted to retrieve it. Rachel slapped Scott’s face with a sharp, quick motion.

A stillness hovered over the table.
Roger and Julia stared in wonder, eager to see the resolution of each conflict. Everyone held their breath. Decisions were being made. Resolutions were being constructed. Actions were being prepared.

Fleur released her grip. Quickly setting the glass down, Tim held his wife tightly in his arms where they both sighed and smiled broadly.

Rachelle lowered her hand and suddenly lunged forward, melting her lips into her husband’s mouth.

“I love you.”

Roger and Julia’s countenances sagged. Raising his hand, Roger got the waitress’s attention and asked to close up the table’s tabs.

Within ten minutes, the three couples were outside of the café. Julia called a taxi for the Stanley couple, still attached in a grotesque display of passion. Once the taxi had left, Roger and Julia said goodnight to Tim and Fleur.

“I’m sorry for making a fool of myself. I hope you guys can forgive me.”

“Don’t worry about it Fleur. We’ll see you guys next week.”

“Definitely. Drive safely.”

Roger and Tim shook hands while Fleur and Julia hugged. The two couples walked in separate directions.

Silence fell between Julia and Roger just as the soft snow fluttering around them.

Once at the car, both moved toward the driver’s door. Julia cleared her throat and Roger turned to her with a quizzical look. She pointed at the passenger seat and Roger quickly remembered, obeying her directive finger. In the car, Julia waited a couple minutes for the heat to permeate the car. When she was content with the temperature, she pulled out of the parking spot.

“Be careful, its slick.”

“I’ve got it.”

Silence reestablished itself as Julia drove forward.

As she approached a stop sign, Julia slammed on her brakes and slid a bit before coming to a complete stop. Roger gripped the bar above the window as they slid.

“Julia. I’m sober. I can drive the rest of the way. Just pull over.”

“Roger. Shut up. I’ve got this.”
Julia softly hit the pedal and moved forward.

“But seriously, I can take over whenever.”

Julia entered an intersection with a flashing yellow light.

“If you ask me that one more time, I’ll...”

Roger screamed. A black, metal object flashed in front of them. Julia slammed the wheel hard right, the car plummeting into a uncontrollable slide. Uselessly slamming the break and trying to regain control, Julia began to scream in terror. In a matter of seconds, the car was face-first in a ditch. The black car that had run the flashing red zoomed off into the darkness.

Silence.

Rogers hand gripped Julia’s. Shaken and distressed, the couple looked at one another for any signs of injury.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah. I’m fine. You?”

“I’m good.”

“That was horrifying.”

“What an idiot. He almost killed us.”

Their eyes met. More than just met, they saw.

For the first time in a long while, Roger and Julia saw one another.

They saw what they had. They felt ‘us.’ They realized their love. And they grasped the gravity of near loss. A tear trickled down Julia’s cheek.

“Oh Roger, what would I have done if you’d...”

“Baby, I love you.”

“I love you so much.”

The two embraced.

Silence returned,

but not for Julia and Roger.
The sound of beating hearts pulsated through their clasped hands and circulated through their bodies like blood. They were in tune. Rekindled. Reborn.

Later they would call AAA and the police. They would get their car towed. A cop would give them a ride back to their house. And, in that cop car, Julia and Roger sat with hands clasped all the way home. They would never let go again.
“you may still be one version of yourself...but then you peel off the...the long day’s costume...and in the shower you’re naked and alone” (Franzen 278).

The Joke

Mr. Lorely walked about his high school English class with crossed arms. The students sat silently, staring, waiting for him to make the next move.

The classroom is a sort of reciprocal exchange: the teacher inquires, the students respond. The teacher further inquires, the students continue to respond. As long as this is not disrupted, the class will remain safe and structured.

During the past two months at Burgatte High School, Mr. Lorely had developed a reputation for disrupting this cycle. Students would discuss a topic for an extended period of time. Slowly the discussion would trickle. Ideas and words would become exhausted. Odd intervals of awkward silence followed by sporadic comments from courageous students.

Complete silence.

And Mr. Lorely would stare at the ground. Stare as if deep in contemplation. About the time the silence became unbearable for the students, he would stand and begin to move around the room as if a wild-cat locked in a cage. Confined and contained. Eager but restrained.

He would stare at the ground. A look of contemplation frozen on his surprisingly smooth and mid-aged face.

This strange phenomena in the classroom occurred at the end of class. Six minutes before the bell, to be precise. Six minutes of silence.

But, just before the bell would ring, Mr. Lorely would bring down his arms, look up, and observe the awkward countenance of his classroom. A smile would cross his face. Not a malicious or sadistic smile, but a smile of realization and sincere warmth.

“Well students, it was a pleasant discussion with you today. Please do your reading for the night and come back ready for another in-depth discussion.”

RINGGGGG

Every day. For two months.

But not today.

After four minutes of silence, Mr. Lorely stood up and moved to the front of the room. He brought his hands to his side and raised his head to look directly at the students. A collective gasp electrified the room. He had broken the cycle. Two months of class and this was the first
time he had broken the cycle. But, more than the shock of the broken cycle was the difference in expression on his face: intense seriousness. Concern. Anger?

“Performativity. The idea that we do not live as actual human beings but as projected images of what we believe ourselves to be. We look in the mirror and see our reflection. We see ourselves but ask, ‘what should I be?’ But we don’t really want the answer. At least from ourselves. We look all around us for the images of successful and beautiful men and women. Who are they? What have they done to find this niche in society? How can I follow suit? And if I cannot be like these people either physically or emotionally, what other niche can I find? Essentially: how do I fit? How do I perform an image that others around me will understand and accept? Look no further than the living room for an answer: television, movies, malls, advertisements, magazines, etc. The media has the solution for our social needs. The media teaches us to be social consumers: we buy personal-identity images like products. The better we put on and collect self-images, the more successful and individual we will be. This is social control. Yet, who controls the media that controls us? We do. We create the monster that enslaves us. Now, this is an excellent introduction to the next book we will be reading: Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*. Read this novel in its entirety over the weekend. No complaints. And come Monday ready to discuss. I believe our discussion has the potential to be highly productive. Please do not disappoint me.”

RINGGGGGGG

Mr. Lorely turned to the chalkboard and began to erase the day’s discussion. As he scrubbed, he realized something strange: no sound issued from behind him. Slowly turning around, he found frozen students, utter confusion on their faces.

“Mr. Lorely…why did you do that?”

“What?”

“Talk. You never talk at the end of class.”

“Well…that was my intention. I didn’t speak for the first two months so that you would hear me today.”

“I don’t understand?”

“Did you consume every word I said during the past two minutes because you were confused and desired to know what was going on?”

“Well…yes! But I still don’t know what’s going on.”

“Emily, I wanted everyone to actually listen.”

Silence. Stunned faces.
“…Do you think it worked?”

“I can only hope. Go home everyone. And apply this inquisitive nature to your texts, please. I believe you will truly glean something from this work if you do.”

Mr. Lorely returned to his chalkboard as the class rose from their seats and glided out of the room like zombies, minds too preoccupied with thought to contemplate proper appearance-walking.

Once the classroom was empty, Mr. Lorely grabbed his bag and coat and hurried from the room. He dashed toward his car, hoping to miss coworkers. Tonight was his wife’s birthday and he had to pick up her present before arriving at home. If he ran into his coworkers, he risked a long conversation about today. He wanted to properly explain his experiment, but did not have the time. He did not want to appear offensive cutting conversations short. Coworkers were highly inquisitive about his six-minute dismissal. He had diligently adhered to the response, ‘just wait,’ and consequently created infectious anticipation. He realized he was foolish to have chosen today for the implementation of his project. But, if he could just make it to his car, he could explain properly on Monday.

He relaxed as he reached the doors to outside. He was in the clear.

Oh no, Mrs. Jensen. Maybe she hadn’t heard.

“Mr. Lorely, are you in a rush?”

“Umm…yes actually. Tonight is my wife’s birthday and I need to pick up her present on the way home.”

“Oh, how sweet! Although a bit last minute!”

Uncomfortable laughter.

“What did you get her?”

“A diamond necklace and earring set.”

A look of jealous-anger subdued by a plastic smile.

“That’s so wonderful. She’ll love it. Good night.”

She hurried into her car. Relieved by the freedom from this near-disaster, Mr. Lorely took no time in getting in his car, backing out and fleeing from the parking lot.

The rest of getting-home was a breeze. He parked his car at the mall, acquired the present from the KAY outlet and called to make dinner reservations.
Tonight would be perfect. And who knew. Maybe he’d get something extra-special out of it. He sheepishly smiled to himself.

Home. He stepped out of his car and checked his demeanor. Calm, collected, confident. Precisely what attracted Amelia to him. He walked through the kitchen door and closed the garage.

“Amelia! I’m home! Come here if you have a chance!”

“I’ll be right there.”

He heard her moving from the bathroom near their bedroom. The careful clink of her hair curler being set down, followed by the ‘swish-swish’ of Amelia moving toward the kitchen in her slippers. The sweet-smell of Amelia’s shower essentials wafted through the air. She was clearly preparing for a night-out. He felt a little cheated, it was supposed to have been a surprise. She must have assumed…

“Hello darling! You sure got home quickly. I’m not even ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“Well, your arrival at home, of course.”

Mr. Lorely smiled at her. She looked beautiful mid dress-up.

“Happy birthday Amelia.”

“Thank you darling!”

The two embraced. Mr. Lorely smelled the inviting scents rising from her firm yet delicate body.

“I got reservations for two at Le Beau Gateau. Tonight at eight.”

Amelia’s face radiated excitement.

“Oh Richard! You shouldn’t have! I’m so excited! I better finish getting ready! Good thing I planned to look sexy tonight!”

Mr. Lorely laughed at her crafty cover and play at ignorance.

“Amelia, before you go, I have something you may want to match with your clothes.”

Slowly turning around, a look of quizzical intrigue sat on her perky face. She looked like a work of art: true emotion evoked by a moment of unforeseen surprise. She quickly recovered herself and moved forward to meet him.

“What could it be? You shouldn’t have Richard!”
He pulled the little box from his pocket and placed it in her hand. Her face erupted with joy. Her eyes glimmered as the diamonds reflected light: sparks flung back-and-forth between her eyes and the precious stone. She lowered the box and stared deep into Richard’s gaze. The spark remained.

“Thank you so much Richard. They are beautiful. I’m a lucky woman to have a man with such an excellent eye.”

Moving forward with a sudden gesture, Amelia placed a delicate kiss on Mr. Lorely’s soft lips. Her tongue quickly fluttered on his lips. But as he moved forward to reciprocate, she pulled back with a giggle.

“Every kiss begins with KAY! I guess it’s true.”

With a wink and another giggle, Amelia bounded back to the bathroom.

Horrified, Mr. Lorely stared forward as his wife vanished into the bathroom. He couldn’t move. Shock.

Reaction: treat the situation the only way you know how.

He laughed. Uproariously. Sadly. Convincing himself that this was just hilariously ironic.
“I have never seen an average American household. Except on TV” (Wallace 22).

Real Family

“The rapid plunge in temperature is due to an aggressive front from the Northeast. Today’s rainfall will quickly turn to treacherous black ice before snow begins to fall. We advise our entire listening network to make this a stay-in night with friends and loved ones. This is not a safe nice to be out. Channel three news, providing you with continual weather updates. Bringing the weather from outside your door, to your comfortable living room!”

“MOM! DID YOU HEAR THAT?”

“Yes Sadie. I heard. I want to call your father to make sure he has left the office. But I don’t want to distract him from the road if he already left...”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine. Dad’s pretty ‘B-A’ when it comes to driving.”

“Sadie! Just because something is an abbreviation does not mean it is any less inappropriate. I don’t want to hear that term anymore, you hear me?”

“What ever mom.”

“Sadie...”

“Okay. Okay. Sheesh.”

“Thank you. Now, come help me with this. Aunt Laurie wants me to send her a copy of the extended-family photo and I don’t know how to attach pictures.”

“Seriously mom?”

“Sadie, don’t patronize me. Just come help!”

“Ugh. Fine.”

With an emphatic and laborious sigh, Sadie stood up from the couch and moved toward the kitchen. The television continued to flash ‘ice’ and ‘blizzard’ alerts while on mute. The couch in front of the television was Sadie’s spot. She loved television, and DVR enabled her to watch whatever shows she wanted, whenever. Mrs. Thorpe wished she had never bought the DVR because it enabled Sadie’s obsession. It killed her to watch her pretty little daughter sit in front of the television for hours-on-end, munching on snacks while dabbling with her homework. Sadie’s grades remained stellar, so Mrs. Thorpe could not use that as justification for television banishment. When she began to notice a bit of pudge developing around Sadie’s waist, Mrs. Thorpe concocted a plan. She did not want to worry twelve-year-old Sadie with the pitfalls of weight-concern, so she had to be sly. One night, Mrs. Thorpe announced that her doctor had informed her she was not taking in enough vitamins and minerals gleaned from fruits and
vegetables. And, worst of all, this terrible deficiency was hereditary. Thus, Mrs. Thorpe was
enacting a household-wide movement to rid of all snack foods and replace them with fresh fruits
and vegetables. Sadie and seventeen-year-old Brett sighed and shrugged their shoulders in
response to their mom’s extreme enthusiasm. Mr. Thorpe knew the tale was complete fiction, but
knew better than to question his wife. At work, he had a stash of invariable goodies in his
office’s desk. With this in mind, he affirmed his wife’s brilliant plan and the dinner moved
forward. Mrs. Thorpe smiled at herself, proud of her clever and non-hurtful solution.

Now, if only she could apply that cleverness to understanding email…

“Mom, see where it says attachment? Well, that word means, something that is ATTACHED to
the email, like a PHOTO.”

“Honey. Please. I saw it. I just wasn’t sure…”

“Yes mom. Click that.”

“Double click?”

“Really mom?”

“YES OR NO?”

“Sheesh. No!”

The rumble of the garage door suddenly sounded.

“Daddy’s home!”

“Praise the Lord.”

Mr. Thorpe burst through the door with a flurry of frigid air.

“My goodness is it cold out there! And the roads are as slick as all-get-out! I’m just thankful I
got home! How’s my Sadie doing? Good to see you away from your perch.”

“Dad! The channel three weather said everyone should stay home tonight! It’s going to be bad.”

“Well dear, I just drove in it, and for once in my life, I would have to agree with that good-for-nothing meteorologist.”

Quick, rhythmic thumps issued from the living room as Brett ran down the steps. He burst into
the kitchen, coat on and keys in hand.

“Woah woah woah. Where do you think you’re going mister?”

“Matt’s house. If it’s going to be as bad as they say… I want to be stuck at his house.”
“Well Brett, it is ALREADY as bad as they say...so you are going to stay right here.”

“Crap. I knew I should have left before you got home.”

“Why wouldn’t you want to be at home with your loving family and dutiful mother?”

“Ah mom, you know that’s not what I meant. Gah. Fine. I’ll be in my room. Call me for dinner.”

Brett rushed out of the kitchen and flew up the steps. His lithe, athletic body bounded from every third step to the next.

“Who is this Matt kid?”

“He plays basketball with Brett. They’ve become good friends since the fall.”

“Well, he’s going to have to be content with the family tonight. What should we do for dinner?”

“I was thinking you had that dinner meeting at your client’s house and Brett was going to Matt’s. So Sadie and I were just going to go get soup at Olive Garden.”

“Well...that’s a pickle. Could we order something? You suppose Papa John’s is delivering?”

“Honey, I believe that is something you are fully capable of handling. Now Sadie, back to this attachment thing...”

Mr. Thorpe grunted at his wife’s sass and walked to the phone. Sadie sighed and continued guiding her mother. Quickly finding the number in the phonebook, Mr. Thorpe shouted.

“Brett! Get your butt down here, I need to know what you want on your pizza.”

A disembodied voice wafted down the steps.

“I don’t care. Whatever you want.”

“BRETT. DOWN HERE. NOW!”

Silence followed. Then a slammed door. Then much slower and heavier footsteps down the stairwell. Then an extremely irritated Brett entered the kitchen.

“Brett. We are having a family night tonight. I’d appreciate you remaining downstairs for the rest of the evening.”

Brett grumbled under his breath as he turned toward the living room.

“What was that young man.”

“Nothing.”
“Excuse me?”

“Ug. Yeah. I’ll stay.”

With a heavy sigh, Brett plopped on the couch and switched to ESPN.

“‘The Works’ sound good?”

“Sure honey. That sounds great.”

With his wife’s go-ahead, Mr. Thorpe picked up the phone and called Papa John’s pizza. After a few rings, a worker picked up.

“Papa John’s pizza.”

“Hey, are you guys delivering?”

“Well sir, we have one car in the ditch so I sent everyone else home. I don’t want any more mishaps tonight. Could I offer you a special discount for the inconvenience?”

“Oh, that’s fine. Don’t worry about it. We’ll just make up something here.”

“You’re at home, sir?”

“Yeah.”

“With family?”

“…Yes?”

“Sorry, I’m not going to be able to make it home because of the wreck. I’m stuck in this shop all night. I just wish I was at home.”

“…I’m sorry…”

“Oh…don’t worry about it. I’ll be fine. Have a good night sir------”

Mr. Thorpe stared quizzically at the phone issuing a monotone buzz before shrugging off the conversation and hanging up.

“Looks like we’re on our own.”

“What did the pizza guy have to say?”

“They had a wreck or something. The manager sent everyone home but is marooned. Poor kid.”

“That’s terrible.”

“I understand how he feels.”
“BRETT!”

“Just kidding! Sheesh.”

“Hey daddy, what should we make?”

“Umm…Well Sadie…that’s an excellent question. Honey?”

“Don’t look at me. I can’t even attach a photo to an email.”

Sadie and Mrs. Thorpe giggled together. Mr. Thorpe failed to observe what was funny and proceeded to search the fridge.

“BRETT! Get in here and help your father find something for us to eat.”

Another dramatic sigh followed by Brett shuffling into the kitchen.

The two fellows foraged through the kitchen cupboards for sustenance while the ladies worked on the computer. A light crash issued from the cupboard Brett was digging through. No reaction. A much louder crash from the fridge Mr. Thorpe sifted through. Mrs. Thorpe jumped up.

“Okay, okay. I’ll help.”

The four family members worked to find foods here and there that could be made into a hearty ‘catch-all’ stew. Mrs. Thorpe and Sadie cut the vegetables, Mr. Thorpe grilled the chicken and Brett stirred the broth. While cutting the onion, Sadie’s eyes started to water. Brett laughed at her, causing Mrs. Thorpe to grab the onion and stick it on Brett’s nose. He yelped and his eyes quickly grew moist.

“Sheesh mom, violent much?”

They all laughed. Mrs. Thorpe smiled to herself. There was something so delicious about all of this. The closeness. The laughter. The cohesion. She’d never felt so alive and so ‘family.’

After putting some rolls in the oven, Brett volunteered to make chocolate shakes. Mrs. Thorpe cringed because she knew these ‘shakes’ consisted of his weight gaining, protein drinks. But, unwilling to squash her boy’s enthusiasm to contribute in the kitchen, she declared it a wonderful idea. He quickly ran and grabbed his shake mix and began to create the concoction. Mr. Thorpe glared at Mrs. Thorpe with wide-eyes, and she simply giggled back.

Once the rolls were finished, the Thorpes moved all the food into the living room. They placed the food and plates on the coffee table in front of the couch. Sadie flipped through the television as they prepared to sit.

“It’s a Wonderful Life! What a perfect movie to watch. A real family, family!”
“Just like us!”

The lights flashed. The television screamed bright-white before silencing black. Sadie and Brett shrieked. Mr. Thorpe was up in a flash and rushed to the garage. Mrs. Thorpe jumped to the kids and hugged them.

“How are you guys alright?”

“Yeah mom, we’re fine. What happened?”

“Something with the power, I suspect.”

“Way to scream like a girl Brett!”

“Shut up Sadie! I was surprised.”

Sadie burst into hysterical giggles.

“Sadie, don’t be rude.”

“Sorry mom.”

A sudden, sharp ‘thunk’ issued from behind the television. Mr. Thorpe was throwing logs into the fireplace.

“Brett, could you go grab a few more please?”

“Sure dad.”

“What happened, honey?”

“We lost power. The entire block. I want to get this fire started right away. Sadie, do you want to go grab blankets and sleeping bags from upstairs. Looks like we’ll have to camp out in here for the night.”

“This is…”

“…terrible!”

“I was going to say wonderful.”

“Are you loony, dear?”

“No. I mean. We’re all together. Sure, the situation isn’t the best, but, it’s just great to be a family for a change.”

“Don’t be silly! We’re always a family!”
“I know, but…”

“Here’s the rest of the wood, dad.”

Brett lumbered back into the living room and handed over the wood. Sadie soon returned with the blankets, sleeping bags and a plethora of pillows. During the flurry of arrivals and dispersing goods about the living room, Mrs. Thorpe vanished. As the room began to settle into an actual living space, she returned with a big box. She walked about the perimeter of the room placing candles and lighting them one by one. Ending at the coffee table, she placed a large candle in the center and lit it. Once it was lit, the family sat down around the table and served the soup. Sadie took the first bite.

“Mmmmm! This is delicious!”

“And we made it together, kiddos!”

Mrs. Thorpe beamed even brighter. The family ate heartily and talked about their days. Sadie talked about her classes and how other girls were getting tall and skinny. Mrs. Thorpe realized weight-concern had reached her daughter despite her careful plan. Brett revealed that the real reason he was spending time with Matt was the older sister, Amelia. Mr. Thorpe bellowed that he knew there was a girl at the bottom of ‘all this.’ He proceeded to tell the family about his busy day at work. Brett and Sadie acknowledge that they didn’t really understand what their daddy did at work. He thoroughly enjoyed explaining, in brief summary, what his job entailed.

“That’s really cool dad.”

“I had no idea that’s what you did. I think that’d be fun. Do you think I’d be a good lawyer?”

“I’m sure you would Brett. But you’ve got plenty of time to figure that out.”

“Mom, dad, Brett, I think this is the best dinner we’ve ever had!”

They all smiled and agreed.

“I suppose being here isn’t that bad.”

Sadie punched Brett in the arm and they all laughed. Brett quickly ran and grabbed his shakes. They all choked the concoction down.

“All hands on deck! Bring the dishes into the kitchen.”

Marching into the kitchen with Mr. Thorpe leading the train, the Thorpe family pretended to be a four person band. Banging on pans and striking silverware together, they made quite a racket. Within moments, the dishwasher was loaded for when the electricity returned, and the marched back into the living room. They collapsed on the couch, all four a giggly mess. Mrs. Thorpe couldn’t contain herself any longer.
“I love you all. My beloved family.”

The lights flashed. The television screamed white and continued screaming as Jimmy Stewart popped back up on the screen. The electricity was back. The family sat in stunned silence.

Brett suddenly realized Sadie was sitting on his lap. Sadie soon realized this, too. They jumped to their feet. Brett looked around uncomfortably for a moment before reaching a conclusion.

“Well, I should probably head to bed. Thanks for dinner.”

He was off and up the steps before the others could grasp what had happened. Sadie looked at her feet and sighed.

“I suppose I’ll head upstairs too. Do you want me to blow out the candles mom?”

Silence. Mr. Thorpe saved the day.

“Its fine pumpkin. Just grab the sleeping bags and…everything you brought down.”

“Okay daddy.”

She shuffled about the room gathering the former living arrangements before slowly sauntering up the steps.

Mr. and Mrs. Thorpe sat silently on the couch staring at the fireplace. They had never moved a muscle; Mrs. Thorpe neatly tucked under Mr. Thorpe’s right arm. Stillness.

Mr. Thorpe carefully stood up, Mrs. Thorpe a limp ragdoll. Gliding to the door, Mr. Thorpe flipped the light switch. He walked about the room, blowing out all the perimeter candles before sitting back down by his wife. He placed his arm around her and kissed away the single tear sliding down her porcelain cheek.

“Let’s stay here tonight, Mrs. Thorpe.”
“leave family and responsibilities and become... ‘holy’...a wanderer...in order to complete...self—a time for laying aside all that has pulled the soul away from nature, from pure contemplation” (Sarton 117).

**Home**


Smooth brown cedar GO. Dark swirls intermingle with light horizontals STOP. White hands clenched GO. Red blood throbs into white STOP. Smooth brown caresses hands GO. Swirls and horizontals explode from underneath throbbing red STOP. Once cold, now sweaty and wet. His heart GO STOP now

he grabs letter from pocket. Sweat soaks into parched paper. The two parents receive his mind. His solitary mind and body come together: letter. now: transfer. Transfer to two bodies. now: two bodies access solitary mind. Transfer solitary into two minds. Transfer complete. Words

Words

Wordstogether

SentencesSentencesintoletterLetterintomeaningMeaningdemands


‘Is this true?’

‘Yes.’

Silence. Aside from renewed sobs. Silence and sobs respond completely and fully.


‘Get out of my house.’
Frozen pause.
Sobs halt. Breathe dies.
Reality?

‘Get…’

Yes. Reality. He obeys. Stands to his feet.

‘Out…’

Pushes in chair.
Sobs erupt. Louder than before.
Letter crumpled in furious hand.

‘NOW!’

RUN.
RUN.
Out door. Bright noonday sun attacks watery eyes. Down cement driveway into street. Across street. Sidewalk on other side. Other side. Banishment. Other. Other to family. Family is identity. Other to identity. What is left?
RUN.
Down sidewalk. Cross street to next block. And next block. And next. And next. And next. And next. And
RUN.

Mine.

Birds. Chirp.
Cars. Zoom.
Wind. Dance.
Me. Here. Now.

I begin to grow conscious of my surroundings. The sounds of activity and life all around me are no longer distant interrupters, but present reality. This is real.

The small park plot on the edge of my suburban neighborhood, the twittering robins fighting over an unearthed worm, the ducks squawking in the man-made pond, the cars that are hidden, but heard, in this oasis, the summer sun pinching my perspiring and exposed face, the comforting wind massaging my sweaty and exhausted body, the green grass tickling my flushed cheek, parched lips and convulsing nostrils, the soil acting as a pillow for my weary head.

All Real.
As are the multitude of thoughts and emotions, piercing and screaming and spiraling and exploding and gnawing and grinding and bumping and battering and rampaging and ravaging and violating and and and and and mocking my disjointed and fragmented mind and my heart is destroyed. Or hiding. Deep within. For all that remain: anguish and hopelessness.

My fear is realized. My family is gone.

It sinks in. Deeply. Deeper into my soul. Gone. Is coated in poison. And venom. Protruding thorns and razors. Slicing and inflicting cantankerous and infectious wounds to my defeated soul. Limp and brutalized. Oozing family blood. It begins to thin. The red tears through quicker. The crimson blood of family is now a torrent bursting from my conquered soul. Until all that is left is. Gone.


‘Where do I go?’

Tears begin anew. Devastation turns to panic. Panic turns to terror. Terror turns to unknown. Unknown turns to tears. Tears…
Gasp and jump!

‘Young man, are you okay?’

I recover myself. Tears stop. Stop tears. Tears stop. STOP!
Good. Thank you.

‘Yeah. I’m fine.’

Hand on shoulder. Uncomfortable. Fear.

‘Can I help you?’

Can he?

‘I have some water.’

Yes Yes Yes!

‘Thank you so much!’

But he stopped. Why?

‘Thank you so much sir.’

I hand him the water bottle back. It is mostly empty. I want to apologize, but don’t.

‘You know kid. Can I tell you something?’

‘Sure.’

‘I don’t know what you’re going through and it isn’t any of my business, but I want you to know, no matter how alone you feel, there’s one that always loves you. He will never leave you. Maybe you can find hope in that.’

He stands up. Never looks at me. My heart feels warm and exposed.

As he walks away, I remember. Familiar face: Gina Foster’s father. Reverend Foster.

Does he know my parents?

Does it matter?
A tear drips down my right cheek. The last I will allow myself tonight.

I’ll call a friend. I pull out my phone, contemplating the next step.

Cut short.
The phone buzzes.
Mom.

I stare at the screen.
What was gone now stares back at me.

Click.

‘Hello?’

‘Please come home.’
Conclusion

Authentic Experience: the punctuated moments in life which draw us out of monotony and routine and force us to think about things with a new perspective.

Individual Identity: the characteristics and personality we label ‘me’ or ‘I.’

Identity Exploration: the process of developing individual identity through authentic lived experience.

These are the three concepts that drove the research for the essay, ‘Is the Authentic Experience required for Individual Identity Exploration Present in Contemporary American Literature?’

By exploring the interaction of authentic experience and identity exploration within Contemporary American literature, in an attempt to achieve individual identity, a resolute conclusion was achieved. That conclusion read “By rooting life in the present moment of authentic experience, recognizing and respecting the past and future but not dwelling there, individuals can resist the enticements of synthetic identity and truly explore individual identity.”

From this conclusion, I sought to generate pieces of my own contemporary American fiction that wrestled with these same three concepts and conclusions. For, only through the authentic experience of exploring my identity as a writer would I be able to genuinely validate my individual identity. If I simply researched these issues of authentic experience and identity exploration, I would be a hypocrite for not enacting my own individual identity through the exploration of myself as a writer through the genuine experience of composition.

My hope is that the play between the research component and the creative pieces has opened further understanding for the reader, just as the process did for me.
Bibliography


