Dying to Be Remembered:
The Autobiographer's Creative Response to Death Anxiety

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Abstract

Contemporary study of the social sciences largely mirrors the field's origins in its attempt to solve a certain enduring puzzle: What principally motivates humankind? Unlike theories labeling the human desire for power or the sexual impulse as humankind's chief motivation, cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker in his principal works *The Denial of Death* and *Escape From Evil* examines our reactions as humans to the concept of death, ultimately proclaiming death anxiety as one's chief motivating factor in life. Developing his "denial of death" theory, Becker proposes that we as humans use personal achievement as a way of combating our innate fear of death. In creating immortality symbols, "a string of sexual conquests, a Big Brother, a flag, the proletariat, and the fetish of money and the size of a bank account" (*The Denial of Death* 56), we combat the risk of dying with insignificance, for these heroic symbols provide a means by which we may be remembered after death.

As an artist creating a memoir, the postmodern autobiographer particularly exemplifies Becker's immortality ideology framework. Writing after traditional religious solutions to the problem of death have lost considerable credibility, the postmodernist must find another way to cope with his death anxiety; the creation of a text becomes the coping mechanism. Examining Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*, William Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, this project explores the contradictions inherent in preserving one's life through storytelling, and further argues for the

support of life-promoting rather than life-suppressing or life-limiting strategies for managing the knowledge of one's mortality.

Introduction: The Theory of Death Anxiety

> [M]an's tragic destiny: he must desperately justify himself as an object of primary value in the universe; he must stand out, be a hero, make the biggest contribution to world life, show that he *counts* more than anything or anyone else.
>
> --Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*

As the old saying goes, there exist only two certainties in this world: death and taxes. In a world of uncertainties, this adage provides little comfort. Although death and taxes seem at first glance unrelated, they in fact connect in that the first certainty (death) inevitably leads to the second certainty (taxes). Not only will I, as a United States citizen, be forced by law to financially back the American government, but even more importantly, the taxes I pay provide an avenue through which I may contribute to my culture. Although taxes help fund things like public education and medical services, they inevitably also pay for the production of American symbols. Every year we print American flags and pay for the upkeep of the White House; these and similar symbols largely construct our American culture. But what do these symbols mean to me personally? After all, my tax dollars contribute relatively little to this world. Even more unsettling, the money I make in the workforce will eventually amount to nothing. All the potential nice jobs, fancy cars, lofty salaries, and big brick houses with white picket fences in this world ultimately allow for one thing: the illusion of participating in something of permanence.

No matter one's success and symbols, the end result remains the same: we all die. A realization unique to human beings, our knowledge of inevitable death raises

some profound anxieties in the human psyche that no other animal experiences. As sociologist Zygmunt Bauman points out,

> Humans are the only creatures who not only know, but also know that they know—and cannot 'unknow' their knowledge. In particular, they cannot 'unknow' the knowledge of their mortality. Once humans tasted of the Tree of Knowledge, the taste could not be forgotten, it could only be *not remembered*—for a while, with attention shifting to other impressions.
>
> (*Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies* 3)

Each human being can anticipate his mortality ever lurking in the distance from about age five onward (and instinctively even before this), and thus we paradoxically do everything in our power to deny that certainty; we rationalize, "Although I will die and I *know* that I will die, I want the big house, fancy car, and dream job, and I am willing to pay my taxes in order to have the protection of a common community because these symbols make me feel permanent and significant. They help me forget." The question remains, *why* do we crave success, only to die one day and not be around to enjoy it?

In his principal works *The Denial of Death* and *Escape From Evil*, cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker examines our reactions to the concept of death. More specifically, he asks how human beings approach their own inevitable mortality and how this approach affects societies. Nodding to the theories of psychologists such as Freud, Rank, Kierkegaard and others, Becker develops his "denial of death" theory,

proposing that all humans use personal achievement as a way of combating our innate fear of death. In order to understand this "immortality ideology," however, we must first visit Becker's most basic assumption—that humans are animals first and foremost. Becker opens his work *Escape From Evil* by quoting Thomas Hardy, who states, "'If a way to the better there be, it lies in taking a full look at the worse'" (Introduction). In other words, in order to remedy the problems in our culture today, we must first examine the "dirty" part of human nature, the animal characteristics which none of us can escape. Becker articulates the essential contradiction of the human condition:

> Man is an animal…At its most elemental level the human organism, like crawling life, has a mouth, a digestive tract, and anus, a skin to keep it intact, and appendages with which to acquire food. Existence, for all organismic life, is a constant struggle to feed…Seen in these stark terms, life on this planet is a gory spectacle, a science-fiction nightmare in which digestive tracts fitted with teeth at one end are tearing away at whatever flesh they can reach, and at the other end are piling up the fuming waste excrement as they move along in search of more flesh. (*Escape From Evil* 1)

No matter our advanced intellectual ability or ingenuity as compared to animals, the fact remains that we cannot escape our animal nature—the necessities of eating and excreting followed by inevitable death. Becker agrees with Bauman that what separates us from the animal is that only we *know* what we know: "in man the search

for appetitive satisfaction has become conscious: he is an organism who *knows* that he wants food and who *knows* what will happen if he doesn't get it" (2). Put another way, "Man is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever" (*The Denial of Death* 26). Because of this central contradiction, we can understand why man fears death and disease as the "two principal evils of the human organismic condition. Disease defeats the joys of prosperity while one is alive, and death cuts prosperity off coldly" (*Escape From Evil* 2-3). Becker suggests that we will always fail at creating and fostering a happy society as long as we refuse to acknowledge this, our animal nature. We must, therefore, force ourselves to confront the unhappy—to examine death and to do our best to understand the possible benefits and potentially harmful effects of our denial of death during life.

In order to deal with the "unhappy," the fact that "Man's body is a *problem* to him that has to be explained" (*The Denial of Death* 51), humans have become the symbol-making animal, desperately searching for ways to conquer death in symbolic terms. Through these symbols, we create our own personal "immortality ideologies." Because we will die and we *know* we will die, humans seek out roads to heroism during life. Becker puts it best: "what man really fears is not so much extinction, but extinction *with insignificance*" (*Escape From Evil* 4). In other words, we can more easily tolerate the idea of our own deaths if we feel that we have made a lasting contribution to society. By contributing to society, we create a piece of immortality

for ourselves; although we will die, we will leave something behind which will impact future generations. Suddenly, man cares deeply about symbols such as "a string of sexual conquests, a Big Brother, a flag, the proletariat, and the fetish of money and the size of a bank balance" (*The Denial of Death* 56) because these avenues to heroism, or self-esteem, provide the reassurance an anxious person needs to feel one's life has had meaning in this world. As Norman O. Brown succinctly points out in his psychoanalytic analysis of history, "Civilization is an attempt to overcome death" (*Life Against Death* 284). In other words, our contribution to culture is inevitable; we feel drawn to a collective effort for survival, one that requires the support of a community. Zygmunt Bowman concurs: "There would probably be no culture were humans unaware of their mortality: culture is an elaborate counter-mnemotechnic device to forget what they are aware of. Culture would be useless if not for the devouring need of forgetting" (*Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies* 31). Hence U.S. citizens pay taxes, for some of the money will fund American life-affirming symbols such as flags and a White House. Taxes—our contribution to society—ensure certain protections, such as access to education, 911 services, and military defense. We are happy to pay for intangible symbols, for these creations serve as "an expression of the will to live, the burning desire of the creature to count, to make a difference on the planet because he has lived, has emerged on it, and has worked, suffered and died" (Becker, *Escape From Evil*, 3).

Having established that we seek to create meaning in life, or more specifically, a significance that will outlast us, we may discuss the different avenues

which society provides for this transcendence. I will here distinguish between *collective* means of achieving a sense of immortality and *individual* means. We must keep in mind,

> It doesn't matter whether the cultural hero-system is frankly magical, religious, primitive, or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is still a mythical hero-system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning. (Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 5)

An immortality ideology, therefore, can take a wide variety of forms. Collective avenues for achieving immortality include, but are not limited to, religious-, national-, academic-, familial-, and career-oriented achievements. These avenues provide ways in which a person can feel important in the world, thus transcending the human fear of death, and each necessarily depends upon other human beings collectively establishing a hierarchy of importance regarding one's contributions to society. For example, in the Christian world, followers may become *saints* or *martyrs*, thus becoming heroes. Although these terms suggest Catholicism, one often hears one person referring to another, "Oh that Emily, she is a saint," giving Emily a heroic stature. America gives its citizens the opportunity to become heroes by pursuing the age-old American Dream of rising from rags to riches. Families also establish avenues for heroic achievement through natural hierarchical structures (hence, sibling rivalry), as does the academic world (doctoral degrees, tenure, publications) and the job world (long hours, coveted promotions, impressive presentations). According to

the death denial theory, we will always feel the need to strive for new success because we cannot escape our innate desire to be remembered—to have made some mark upon the world so that once we have died, a part of us continues to survive: our successes.

These immortality ideologies are always social constructions; others must be involved, for "this is what society is and always has been: a symbolic action system, a structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules for behavior, designed to serve as a vehicle for earthly heroism" (*The Denial of Death* 4). The only exception to this, according to Becker, is the artist who creates his/her own personal ideology of immortality. For Becker, the artist is the rare individual with the power and courage to construct a personal ideology, more or less independent of the dominant culture. This lonely avenue to heroism necessarily requires enormous self-confidence, and examples might include Thoreau, Emerson, Nietzsche, Tolstoy, Picasso, and Emily Dickenson—all artists who carved their own strikingly independent paths, despite society's bounds. Often, the artist will be misunderstood by his culture, but the possibility remains of impacting a later society. Becker nods to Kierkegaard in his discussion of the "introvert":

> What is one's true talent, his secret gift, his authentic vocation? In what way is one truly unique, and how can he express this uniqueness, give it form, dedicate it to something beyond himself? How can the person take his private inner being, the great mystery that he feels at the heart of himself, his emotions, his yearnings and use them to live

> more distinctively, to enrich both himself and mankind with the peculiar quality of his talent? (*The Denial of Death* 82)

The artist inevitably asks herself each of these questions and answers them by creating the distinctive work of art. Because of the uniqueness of her work, the artist inevitably feels that her creation is meaningful—a contribution either to society (present or future) or, in a spiritual nature, to God. In this way, the artist may "enrich" mankind with his "true talent, his secret gift…[through his] private inner being."

Sounds easy enough, right? Becoming an artist solves the problem of relying on others to provide one's claim to immortality. This eliminates the task of working long hours to impress the boss, publishing a winning essay, and buying the most expensive home—for the artist no longer relies on the esteem bestowed upon him by others in society in order to combat his fear of death. But not so fast, argues Ernest Becker. The majority of human beings earn their symbolic immortality through collective means for a reason; living as an artist-type requires dedication to an enormous and endless struggle. To Becker, artists are lonely outsiders who find they cannot be supported by the conventional immortality ideologies that support most people. Separating oneself from society's construction of immortality symbols, the artist must deal with a new fear: "The most terrifying burden of the creature is to be isolated, which is what happens in individuation: one separates himself out of the herd" (*Denial of Death* 171). Even so, the artist accepts his fate, for this creative type is

> separated out of the common pool of shared meanings. There is something in his life experience that makes him take in the world as a *problem*; as a result he has to make personal sense out of it…Existence becomes a problem that needs an ideal answer; but when you no longer accept the collective solution to the problem of existence, then you must fashion your own. (171)

Fashioning a symbolic immortality through artistic creation rather than following society's preordained paths to significance, however, does not permit the artist to create his own immortality. The artist cannot serve as his or her own God, and therefore, despite his or her creative contributions to society—whose members cannot bestow upon the artist the immortality he desires because they do not share his values—the artist must give his gift to something larger than humans: to the Beyond. Becker articulates the artist's unique task:

> If you are the average man you give your heroic gift to the society in which you live, and you give the gift that society specifies in advance. If you are an artist you fashion a peculiarly personal gift, the justification of your own heroic identity, which means that it is always aimed at least partly over the heads of your fellow men. After all, they can't grant the immortality of your personal soul…There is no way for the artist to be at peace with his work or with the society that accepts it. The artist's gift is always to creation itself, to the ultimate meaning of life, to God. (173)

In fashioning a "peculiarly personal gift" aimed "at least partly over the heads of [one's] fellow men," Becker's artists enter a ceaseless struggle; the artist finds herself caught in a paradox—wanting to be understood, but also desiring to leave a mark entirely original and distinct. In order to cope with this problem, artists develop their "'private religions'" (172) by displaying an irrational, religious commitment to creating an artwork in an attempt to gain symbolic immortality, while simultaneously knowing that an artwork can no more save one from death any more than the idea of an afterlife.

Writing functions as an ideal art form in our consideration of Becker's theories regarding the artist and his immortality construction through a creative medium. Many keep a diary or a journal—an artwork—and this creativity exemplifies a person's need to specifically write his story, even when the only reader is the author himself. Diaries and journals, though, generally remain limited to private viewing. Unique in the goal of writing and publishing one's life story, the autobiographer denies his own death in symbolic terms by creating a text which will out-live him. In the world of literature, then, the autobiographer turns his life into art, thus functioning as Becker's type of artist. Arguably, the autobiographer is the most transparent of all the artists in her attempt to leave a mark that will represent her distinctive gifts. Significantly, unlike keepers of diaries and journals, the autobiographer writes his personal story *specifically* for others to read. This desire for our stories to be heard stems from death anxiety, for we want to feel when we die that we have made a significant impact, and printing our life stories becomes one way

of reaching others. As Becker quotes Freud, "'Immortality means being loved by many anonymous people'" (*The Denial of Death* 121); this love may be earned through the creation of a text. Additionally, the published autobiography contrasts the orally transmitted story in that printed text may be forever preserved as the author created it. Hence, like no other literary form, the autobiography amounts to a summary statement of one's fixed "immortality project"—a distinctive monument or record of a life, a permanent marker.

As an artist creating a memoir, the postmodern autobiographer particularly exemplifies Becker's immortality ideology framework. Writing after traditional religious solutions to the problem of death have lost considerable credibility, the postmodernist must find another way to cope with his death anxiety; the creation of a text becomes the coping mechanism. Examining Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*, William Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, this project explores the contradictions inherent in preserving one's life through storytelling, and further argues for the support of life-promoting rather than life-suppressing or life-limiting strategies for managing the knowledge of one's mortality. Additionally, it attempts to complicate Becker's often gender-specific theory by presenting Hong Kingston's text as a feminist response to the works by our three male authors, which notably help to reinforce Becker's seeming assumption of the masculine as the neutral in his texts.

"Tim Trying to Save Timmy's Life With a Story": Death Anxiety Manifested Through Storytelling in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

A postmodern autobiographical novel, Tim O'Brien's acclaimed *The Things They Carried* (1990) exemplifies Ernest Becker's theory regarding the artist's response to the inherent problem of human mortality. The novel features a first-person narrator, forty-three-year-old Tim O'Brien, who reflects upon his experiences in life thus far, chiefly focusing on his years of service in Vietnam as a member of Alpha Company. When reading O'Brien's vignettes of old war stories, we are not surprised to discover that he had experienced a heightened level of anxiety while in Vietnam, as he and his fellow soldier buddies encountered death and danger on nearly a daily basis. More interesting, however, is O'Brien's continued struggle with the knowledge of his looming mortality once the days of war have long passed. Ultimately, the text represents O'Brien's struggle in middle age, not as a young man at war. What results is a creative autobiography that blurs the lines of fact and fiction to bring us a moving account of one man's creative response to death anxiety.

We may divide our study of *The Things They Carried* as an immortality project into the following four-fold pattern. First, we must recognize the narrator's conscious dread of mortality and his subsequent desire to save the essence of both others and himself through his artwork, his text. But since O'Brien lives in a postmodern era that has experienced the fall of religion, traditional religious solutions to the problem of mortality are no longer available to writers like himself. Therefore,

the autobiography becomes itself the narrator's attempted solution. O'Brien as narrator realizes, however, that even his published text cannot truly "save" others or himself from experiencing the obliteration of death due to his postmodern preoccupation with the failure of language and memory to accurately depict life; therefore, like the traditional religious avenues to salvation, the autobiography ultimately fails the narrator in his quest for symbolic immortality. Consistent with Becker's hypothesis, however, O'Brien realizes the limits of autobiography in preserving the essence of others and of himself, and yet writes and publishes his stories anyway. In this way, O'Brien displays a faith beyond reason: his stories will not, he knows, provide immortality, yet he feels compelled to write them anyway. As Becker helps explain O'Brien's actions, the line between religious and secular means of achieving immortality ultimately breaks down, for each requires a continued commitment to giving something to the Beyond.

Due to the retrospective nature of O'Brien's work, we can observe his stages of a consciousness of the problem of human mortality by examining his stories in the chronological order he resists. During moments in childhood, then as a young adult soldier in Vietnam, and finally as a forty-three year old writer, O'Brien remains consciously aware of death as a problem and struggles to understand why the idea of death bothers him at different points in life. In order to alleviate his death anxiety, O'Brien characterizes his life as a series of struggles with the reality of death; ultimately, he attempts to symbolically "save" both others and himself through the written text. As a young child, O'Brien first conceptualizes death as a problem, and

this conscious awareness remains a troubling dilemma for him throughout his young-adult life as a soldier and middle-aged years as a writer/family man. At first, third grader O'Brien experiences a mere curiosity and fascination with death. He recalls his reaction to viewing a movie at age nine: "the main character was a corpse. That fact alone, I know, deeply impressed me" (*The Things They Carried* 232). The concept of death soon becomes more complicated, however, when his first love, nine-year-old Linda, dies of a brain tumor. After she died, O'Brien tried to imagine the inconceivable:

> I drank some chocolate milk and then lay down on the sofa in the living room, not really sad, just floating, trying to imagine what it was to be dead. Nothing much came to me. I remember closing my eyes and whispering her name, almost begging, trying to make her come back. (237)

From this moment forward, the idea of death becomes a conscious problem for O'Brien, one that seems to pertain directly to him. Puzzled as a child by his inability to bring Linda back despite "almost begging," O'Brien suffers from this same sense of insufficiency during young adulthood while fighting in Vietnam. As a child, O'Brien had struggled to accept the reality that others—including his friends—ultimately die. But in Vietnam, his level of anxiety regarding death notably increases when faced with the reality of death on a daily basis, and specifically, O'Brien's angst regarding another facet of death becomes problematic: awareness of one's own inevitable mortality. During this stage of his life, O'Brien can no longer ignore his

consciousness of death's universality. Watching his friends die in Vietnam serves as a constant reminder that he, too, will one day cease to (at the least) physically exist. During war, O'Brien clearly indicates his conscious awareness of death as a problem: "Beyond all this, or at the very center, was the raw fact of terror. I did not want to die. Not ever. But certainly not then, not there, not in a wrong war" (44). Although he fully comprehends the fact that he will inevitably die, Tim cannot willingly, peacefully accept this concept; instead, he struggles against the reality of death, amazed by "how crazy it was that people who were so incredibly alive could get so incredibly dead" (223). Even at forty-three, death remains a psychological problem for O'Brien. Reflecting upon his life, O'Brien realizes that the fears of Tim are not that different from the fears of Timmy:

> It's now 1990. I'm forty-three years old, which would've seemed impossible to a fourth grader, and yet when I look at photographs of myself as I was in 1956, I realize that in the important ways I haven't changed at all. I was Timmy then; now I'm Tim. But the essence remains the same...Inside the body, there is something absolute and unchanging. The human life is all one thing, like a blade tracing loops on ice: a little kid, a twenty-three-year-old infantry sergeant, a middle-aged writer knowing guilt and sorrow. (236)

Here, O'Brien realizes that he has not changed in "the important ways," remaining, we may argue, the same creature from childhood to the present, terrified by the

prospect of dying. For Tim the narrator, despite one's age, "human life is all one thing": a body waiting to die.

Tim O'Brien's focus on his art as a bulwark against death anxiety arguably has a great deal to do with the time in which he lives. Unlike previous generations whose members relied on religious ideology to combat death anxiety, particularly the idea of an afterlife, O'Brien's postmodern generation typically has little confidence in these traditional religious solutions. *The Things They Carried* is typical of its secular, scientific age. Where Puritans, for instance, would eschew poetry and rely on the belief that faithful people achieve an afterlife in Heaven, O'Brien's art *is* his religion, his attempt to preserve both others and himself through writing before he himself encounters death. *The Things They Carried* instead displays a lack of traditional religious models for dealing with the problem of death. For instance, recall Tim telling of Timmy's reactions at Linda's visitation. No mention of religious ceremony is made, nor is any hope of an afterlife—any comfort of Linda going to Heaven—discussed. Instead, Timmy encounters just plain death. Here, O'Brien does not look to God to see if He saved Linda; instead he tries to save her himself through telling stories, knowing full well that this cannot save her body, but will perhaps in some way save her essence, her soul.

This lack of comfort gained from religious ideology continues as O'Brien fights in Vietnam. For example, in "Church" only Kiowa has a problem with setting up camp in a church. In an ensuing conversation between Henry Dobbins and Kiowa, Dobbins replies, "'I was a kid. The thing is, I believed in God, and all that, but it

wasn't the religious part that interested me. Just being *nice* to people, that's all. Being decent" (121). Here, Dobbins admits that he bought into what we could call the Early Christian idea of loving one's neighbor as oneself, void of the religious ceremonies in which Kiowa participates. Even the faithful Baptist Kiowa's religiosity is based to a certain extent, he admits, on factors other than faith: "'[I would not be] a minister…but I do like churches. The way it feels inside. It feels good when you just sit there, like you're in a forest and everything's really quiet, except there's still this sound you can't hear'" (122). Thus, O'Brien imagines the religious as participating in religious practices not for the doctrine behind the religion, but for the feeling of comfort a peaceful church can provide. O'Brien's memoir men do not practice a particular religion necessarily because they fear eternity in Hell if they do not; rather, they question whether an afterlife truly exists in the first place. Towards the end of the novel, when the members of Alpha Company hold a mock funeral for a Vietnamese man, O'Brien recalls the soldiers propping up the man's body against a fence, and drinking to the health of their guest of honor: "They proposed toasts. They lifted their canteens and drank to the old man's family and ancestors, his many grandchildren, his newfound life after death. It was more than mockery. There was a formality to it, like a funeral without the sadness" (227). This scene lacks any traditional reverence for dead bodies, instead completely secularizing the idea of a funeral. *The Things They Carried* contains so much death, yet no mention is made of God's "saving grace" due to society's declining faith in religious

beliefs. Therefore, with the traditional mode of achieving immortality no longer available to O'Brien, he turns to another possible solution: the autobiography.

As an artist, O'Brien seeks to achieve a sense of immortality both for himself and for his friends who have died. In outlining five general modes of immortality, cultural anthropologist Robert J. Lifton points to the importance of symbolic immortality achieved through "works": "the mode of creativity; the achievement of enduring human impact; the sense that one's writing, one's teaching, one's human influences, great or humble, will live on; that one's contribution will not die" (*Death and Identity* 24). Like Becker, Lifton argues that "one's writing," the creation of text, can potentially buy a piece of symbolic immortality for the author. O'Brien the narrator concurs: "We kept the dead alive with stories" (*The Things They Carried* 239).

Void of the belief in traditional religious solutions to the problem of death, O'Brien deals with his death anxiety through his autobiographical text. To combat conscious awareness of death as a problem during childhood, O'Brien would "dream" Linda alive through stories, and even as a middle-aged adult, he retains this strategy of storytelling in combating his fears. O'Brien first realizes the comforting power of a story when trying to save Linda as a child. As a boy trying to grasp death's finality, O'Brien often dreams and daydreams of Linda: "Lying in bed at night, I made up elaborate stories to bring Linda alive in my sleep" (243). Preserving his memories of Linda through his childhood dreams, however, does not afford O'Brien lasting comfort against his death anxiety. Even at this young age, O'Brien experiences a

keen desire to save Linda from being forgotten: "She was dead. I understood that. After all, I'd seen her body, and yet even as a nine-year-old I had begun to practice the magic of stories" (244). Through the medium of dreams and written stories, both the child and the adult O'Brien attempt the magic of preservation, religiously committed to the creation of a gift for the Beyond. The boy and the adult share the same wish: to save Linda's essence from dying as her body has died: "And as a writer now, I want to save Linda's life. Not her body—her life," for "in a story I can steal her soul. I can revive, at least briefly, that which is absolute and unchanging. In a story, miracles can happen. Linda can smile and sit up. She can reach out, touch my wrist, and say, 'Timmy, stop crying'" (236). Through his story of Linda, we find the young boy O'Brien's conscious awareness of death as a problem, the anxiety this realization produces, and his ultimate reaction: writing stories about Linda, both as a child and professionally as a published author, in order that she may metaphorically survive death.

This obsession with stories continues for O'Brien the narrator as he recalls events of his Vietnam days. One particularly important scene regarding O'Brien's reaction to death encountered in war occurs as he wishes to be able one day to tell his daughter, Kathleen, about a man he killed during the war. He notes,

> I want to tell her exactly what happened, or what I remember happening, and then I want to say to her that as a little girl she was absolutely right. This is why I keep writing war stories: He was a short, slender young man of about twenty. I was afraid of him—afraid

> of something—and as he passed me on the trail I threw a grenade that exploded at his feet and killed him. (131)

Here, as O'Brien suffers anxiety over the death of the man he claims to have killed, he comments on the huge importance of this one event: "This is why I keep writing war stories." In this way, publishing stories about events he experienced in Vietnam becomes a way that he can attempt to put the past to rest—to save the memories of the dead through stories; thus, he attempts to control his death anxiety. As he tells stories of those who have died in his life, such as Linda and men in Vietnam, in an attempt to save their essences from dying along with their bodies, O'Brien also writes *The Things They Carried* in an attempt to save himself—to leave a gift (his text) behind for society so that he might have a significant impact upon the world. In fact, this mode of preservation—the story—is precisely the avenue of all his preservation attempts. When examining O'Brien's commentary as a middle-aged author, his childhood and Vietnam long gone, we find that deaths occurring much earlier in his life still affect him, and his reaction to the anxiety death produces remains the same for O'Brien at forty-three—he continues to dream and to writes stories:

> But this too is true: stories can save us. I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, and even still, right here, I keep dreaming Linda alive. And Ted Lavender, too, and Kiowa, and Curt Lemon, and a slim young man I killed, and an old man sprawled beside a pigpen, and several others whose bodies I once lifted and dumped into a truck.

> They're all dead. But in a story, which is a kind of dreaming, the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world. (225)

As he himself recognizes, O'Brien's impulse to write stories derives not ultimately from a desire to save Linda and his war buddies but to combat his anxiety surrounding death's finality and his inability to control it. At forty-three, O'Brien still insists, "stories can save *us*" (emphasis added). Significantly, O'Brien does not say stories can save those who have died, but instead the all-encompassing "us," which includes all humans. O'Brien writes to preserve not only the essence of others but also himself—the little piece of Tim O'Brien that might survive through his text. Stories "save" O'Brien in that telling them seems to provide him at least a temporary comfort against his death anxiety, and stories "save" their authors to the extent that their texts become lasting, creative solutions to the problem of dying with insignificance—the text will outlive the author and has the potential to affect the author's society.

So there we have it. All we must do in order solve the problem of death is to write an autobiography—we will save the essence of others and of ourselves by making a significant contribution to the Beyond. And yet this, too, is an illusion—an illusion which the postmodern artist recognizes. Ultimately, creating a work of art as an immortality project fails in preserving others and oneself in two respects: language fails, and memory fails. Despite our best efforts to allow others and ourselves to live on through a text, this effort is in vain because memory fails us in that we can never remember people exactly as they are or events exactly as they occur, and even if we

could, the failure of language, to the extent that we can never perfectly capture someone's essence in words, prevents our success. O'Brien's text foregrounds the troubling notion of memory:

> In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen…And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth at it *seemed.* (71)

In the human difficulty of separating "what happened from what seemed to happen," O'Brien captures the inevitable cloudiness of the human mind. Each time we tell a story, it changes slightly because fact gets mixed with fiction—what actually happened becomes intermingled with what seemed to happen. Hence, the testimonies of witnesses during court proceedings become quickly complicated—small details change often from telling to telling. O'Brien's text reflects this unreliability; each time he tells a story, he tells it a little differently. He further explains how memory is complicated and convoluted by language: "The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head. There is the illusion of aliveness" (230). If memory and language could remain pure fact and not "spirits in the head," subject to transformations, then "aliveness," or a sense of immortality, might truly be achieved through the autobiographical text, rather than simply an "illusion of aliveness." For this reason, O'Brien turns to the hybrid text,

the mixture of autobiography and fiction in *The Things They Carried* that accurately reflects the inconsistency of memories and the insufficiency of language. Repeatedly, O'Brien highlights the hybridity of any autobiography:

> Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief.
>
> Here is the story-truth. He was slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped whole. I killed him. (180)

For O'Brien, the "happening-truth" and the "story-truth" are just that—both *true*. The "happening-truth" is those vague facts he remembers—bodies, being young, being left with "faceless responsibility and faceless grief." The story-truth, however, is also true—this is what *seemed* to happen, what his memory can neither confirm nor deny. It conveys the truth of how O'Brien *felt* during the vague events of the happening-truth: "What stories can do, I guess, is make things present" (180). What stories cannot do, however, is completely capture an exact essence, and therefore the autobiography can no more guarantee one's symbolic immortality than more traditionally religious answers can in the postmodern world.

Due to his understanding of the failures of memory and language, Tim O'Brien realizes the inability of the autobiography to truly preserve others or the self.

Yet despite this knowledge, O'Brien writes his autobiography anyway. In this way, he displays the faith beyond reason that Becker claims is typical of the artist. Although he realizes the ineffectiveness of the autobiography in buying a piece of immortality, he still feels compelled to write it, to give his gift. This is exactly what Becker argues: the line separating religious and secular means of achieving immortality ultimately breaks down—both the artist and the faithful offer a gift to the Beyond. O'Brien notes,

> I feel guilty sometimes. Forty-three years old and I'm still writing war stories. My daughter Kathleen tells me it's an obsession, that I should write about a little girl who finds a million dollars and spends it all on a Shetland pony. In a way, I guess, she's right: I should forget it. But the thing about remembering is that you don't forget. You take material where you find it, which is your life, at the intersection of past and present. The memory-traffic feeds into a rotary up on your head, where it goes in circles for a while, then pretty soon imagination flows in and the traffic merges and shoots off a thousand different streets. As a writer, all you can is pick a street and go for the ride, putting things down as the come to you. That's the real obsession. All those stories. (35)

Here, O'Brien's "memory traffic...goes in circles" and connects the past and present. Memory and imagination combine and branch off into numerous directions. Recognizing his memory's impurity, O'Brien nevertheless still writes his stories. In

fact, it becomes an "obsession"—not only does O'Brien want to write, but he feels a great *need* to publish his stories. This desire, this obsession, is ultimately nothing more or less than the instinct for self-preservation.

Given his recognition of inherent failures in memory and language and his decision to publish his text anyway, O'Brien displays the tension of Becker's artist—one who rationally knows the limitations of an immortality project, yet irrationally commits oneself to fostering one's creation. We see this tension most clearly when examining the poignant ice metaphor O'Brien utilizes to "preserve" Linda. He ends his text:

> And then it becomes 1990. I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, still dreaming Linda alive in exactly the same way. She's not the embodied Linda; she's mostly made up, with a new identity and a new name, like the man who never was. Her real name doesn't matter. She was nine years old. I loved her and then she died. And yet right here, in the spell of memory and imagination, I can still see her as if through ice, as if I'm gazing into some other world, a place where there are no brain tumors and no funeral homes, where there are no bodies at all. I can see Kiowa, too, and Ted Lavender and Curt Lemon, and sometimes I can even see Timmy skating with Linda under the yellow floodlights. I'm young and happy. I'll never die. I'm skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades, doing loops and spins, and when I

> take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story. (245-246)

Placing Linda underneath the ice of his text, O'Brien may preserve his friend. In his almost magical "spell of memory and imagination," O'Brien can "save" not only Linda, but also his deceased war buddies. Yet ice, like memory and language, fails to preserve accurately; instead, what results is a broken, distorted, unclear Linda—a girl whom O'Brien cannot remember perfectly or adequately describe even if he could. Fully aware that the Linda he preserves is part real, part fiction, O'Brien knows he cannot save her. Interestingly, though, he writes his story anyway, to preserve her under the ice.

In his religious commitment to writing his autobiography, despite its flawed nature as an immortality project, O'Brien denies death as an artist, just as Ernest Becker hypothesizes. An action Becker finds necessary, O'Brien buys into the idea of a constructive illusion transcending death. In stating, "I'm young and happy. I'll never die," O'Brien buys into the immortality ideology fostered by his published text in order to keep from suffering from severe death anxiety. Irrationally believing in the illusion, Tim may write of his life, then, "trying to save Timmy's life with a story."

"He Alone Is Left to Do the Thinking": J.M. Coetzee's Duty to the Dead in *Boyhood*

Best known for his Nobel Prize-winning fiction, South African author J.M. Coetzee delivers poignant vignettes of his childhood in his creative autobiography *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997). Revisiting the South Africa of the mid-twentieth century, Coetzee employs an unnamed third-person narrator to deliver his story—a speaker who describes "the boy" (Coetzee's own childhood persona) through the eyes of a child. What results is a beautiful mixture of childhood innocence, as seen through the boy's internal dialogue regarding the experiences of a pre-teen, and adult insight, as evidenced by Coetzee's fingerprints of adult wisdom upon the text. On the brink of adolescence, the boy wrestles with life's big questions surrounding one's maturation, developing as a typical adolescent in experiencing the confusions associated with growing up, yet baffled as to their solutions. In addition to his anxieties and guilt about sexual desire, academics, and child-parent relationships, the boy struggles with the idea of death and all of its resulting implications. Indeed, the boy's death anxiety becomes the chief problem with which he grapples, as evidenced by Coetzee's choice to both open and close his novel with the boy's thoughts on this subject. As Becker argues, death becomes a problem for us as children and remains a dilemma as we grow into adults; Coetzee's "boy" reflects this unending struggle somehow to overcome the problem of mortality—of dying with insignificance, one with which the adult Coetzee must still struggle, as evidenced by his decision to write the book.

Like the narrator Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried*, *Boyhood*'s protagonist also displays a conscious awareness of death as a problem, even as a boy of age ten or so. Although he fears both the deaths of others and his own inevitable mortality, his greatest fear is dying without being remembered. The boy thus experiences two fears: (1) that of death itself, and (2) that of ceasing to exist, only to be forever forgotten. As he matures, the boy becomes increasingly conscious of the fact that those he loves will die, and this greatly worries him. For example, the narrator notes the beginnings of the boy's anxiety surrounding his mother's eventual mortality:

> The memory of his mother on her bicycle does not leave him. She pedals away up Poplar Avenue, escaping from him, escaping towards her own desire. He does not want her to go…He wants her always to be in the house, waiting for him when he comes home. (4)

At this point, the boy feels anxious regarding death, but cannot articulate his fears; he wants her to stay and always welcome him home, yet he does not yet attribute this desire to his fear of her dying. As he continues thinking about death, however, his fears become more focused; no longer does he just "not want her to go," but now, "He cannot imagine her dying. She is the firmest thing in his life. She is the rock on which he stands. Without her he would be nothing" (35). Here, the boy is consciously aware of death as a problem, for not only will important figures in his life (like his mother) leave him forever, but imagining life without them forces the boy to ponder his own death and what will happen once he ceases to physically exist.

A typical child, the boy finds his body problematic, yet cannot clearly articulate the problem: "He has a sense that he is damaged. He has a sense that something is slowly tearing inside him all the time: a wall, a membrane. He tried to hold himself as tight as possible to keep the tearing within bounds. To keep it within bounds, not to stop it: nothing will stop it" (9). The boy "has a sense" that his body is flawed somehow with a membrane "tearing inside him all the time," representing his awareness that the body is not unbreakable, but loses its durability over time. An adult reading the text (and Coetzee composing his work), however, truly *knows* the body's limits—no matter one's triumphs, one will inevitably die, leaving them all behind; death will always conquer life, even an impressive life. The speaker conveys the boy's uncomfortable reaction to thoughts of death:

> He does not like to think of death…He does not like ugly old bodies...His own death is a different matter. He is always somehow present after his death, floating about the spectacle, enjoying the grief of those who caused it and who, now that it is too late, wish he were still alive. (164)

Significantly, the boy, although bothered by thoughts of other people's decaying bodies, seems less bothered when thinking about his own death, his own body; although we tend to find the bodies of others repulsive at times, rarely do we view the self as repulsive, despite its possession of the same creaturely qualities. Unable to imagine his non-existence, he is "always somehow present" post-death. As Freud and

Becker argue, one cannot imagine the world without oneself; it is the great cognitive impossibility. Coetzee harbors this sentiment even as a child:

> In this silence he tries to imagine his death…He subtracts himself from everything…But he cannot. Always there is something left behind, something small and black, like a nut, like an acorn that has been in the fire, dry, ashy, hard, incapable of growth, but *there*. He can imagine himself dying but he cannot imagine himself disappearing. Try as he will, he cannot annihilate the last residue of himself. What is it that keeps him in existence? Is it fear of his mother's grief, grief so great that he cannot bear to think of it for more than a flash?…Or is there something else in him that refuses to die? (112)

Here, Coetzee takes the psyche of a ten-year-old ("What happens to people after they die?") and mixes it with an adult's death anxiety ("I cannot imagine completely ceasing to exist—how can I stop that?") in such a beautiful way that we cannot distinguish where the child's death anxiety ends and where the adult author's fears begin; this suggests the universality of death anxiety—something that we may be better equipped to fathom and articulate as adults, but which we nevertheless also experience as children.

As with O'Brien, Coetzee lives in a time when religious solutions are no longer available to remedy the problem of death. Like Timmy, Coetzee's "boy" lacks the traditional religious solutions (like a solid faith in an afterlife) to deal with death anxiety, substituting a secular means of achieving immortality, which he in turn treats

religiously. From the start, we see a lack of religious tradition in the boy's household: "He comes from an unnatural and shameful family in which not only are children not beaten but older people are addressed by their first names and no one goes to church" (6). Later the narrator emphasizes the boy's strictly secular upbringing: "In religion they are certainly nothing…He himself has been in a church only twice in his life: once to be baptized and once to celebrate victory in World War Two" (18). Despite his lack of a religious upbringing, however, the boy displays a curiosity towards religion, particularly fascinated by Roman Catholicism—not because of its belief system, but because of the interesting lives of the saints: "That is what he would like to be: a hero. That is what proper Roman Catholicism should be about" (25). We may connect the boy's ideas regarding religion to those of Kiowa and Henry Dobbins as displayed in "Church" in *The Things They Carried*. Here, Kiowa and Dobbins are "religious" for secular and worldly reasons; both men admit to attending church not because of a devotion to God, but largely because it makes them feel good. In much the same way, the boy longs to be a Roman Catholic so he can feel good about himself—and taken a step further—so he can feel like a hero. In his innocence, the boy intuits the real goal of religion: to give people opportunities to earn their heroism. This attitude concerning religion characteristically follows the postmodern sense of a lack of traditional religious solutions in dealing with death anxiety, and Becker helps us to understand through his death anxiety theory the boy's need to be a hero; if traditional religious avenues to immortality do not exist, then the boy will place his faith in another avenue.

The boy lacks the traditional religious avenues to immortality, as does Tim the narrator in O'Brien's text, and yet he develops an essentially religious faith in the secular means of fostering remembrance. Having discovered death as a conscious problem, *Boyhood*'s childhood protagonist represses it, reassuring himself of his own significance. The boy senses his uniqueness in the world, yet his uncertainty of his purpose in life posits a puzzle to solve: "He is convinced that he is different, special. What he does not yet know is why he is in the world. He suspects that he will not be an Arthur or an Alexander, revered in his lifetime. Not until after he is dead will he be appreciated" (108). As Becker hypothesizes, all humans desire to transcend death symbolically by leaving something significant behind through which one survives. Again, we may directly tie our desire to devote ourselves to an immortality project to the postmodern fall of religion. Specifically, the boy places faith in the power of the family farm in constructing his immortality ideology. Unlike humans, the farm, he feels, will never die:

> All farms are important. Farms are places of freedom, of life [...] The farm is greater than any of them. The farm exists from eternity to eternity. When they are all dead, when even the farmhouse has fallen into ruin like the kraals on the hillside, the farm will still be here…He [his grandfather] lies buried, but the farm is still his…When he dies, he wants to be buried on the farm. If they will not permit that, then he wants to be cremated and have his ashes scattered here. (22, 96-97)

In the boy's imagination, even "When they are all dead," the farm somehow lives and remains itself, and the idea of being buried on the farm comforts the boy as he struggles to be remembered, for "On the farm, it seems, there is no decay" (83). Here, the line between secular and religious avenues to a sense of immortality breaks down, for the boy comes to regard the farm religiously; it becomes his afterlife, his Heaven—his means to avoid ceasing to exist.

Although the idea of being buried on the farm helps the boy deal with his death anxiety, this type of death denial does not seem to be enough to appease the adult Coetzee, who felt compelled to write the text. In this way, Coetzee and O'Brien mirror each other in their use of the autobiography as an immortality project. For the adult Coetzee, the farm is not enough—he writes his autobiography to fill the void of dying with insignificance. Like *The Things They Carried*, *Boyhood* functions as a hybrid text, mixing fact and fiction due to the postmodern recognition of the failure of memory and language to capture events as they exactly happened. But whereas O'Brien explicitly discusses these failures, Coetzee instead implicitly demonstrates, through two distinct literary choices, his awareness of the autobiography's inability to complete grasp one's essence: his use of the unnamed third person narrator, and secondly, his choice of the "boy" as his protagonist, Coetzee's unnamed self. The third person narrator implicitly signifies that Coetzee knows his memoir resurrects a boy who never really lived. Appropriately, *Boyhood's* narrator does not bear Coetzee's name, for the author realizes his inability to perfectly narrate events as they occurred in his life, due to the failures of language and memory—our ability instead

only to *re-create* rather than *reconstruct* when writing. In much the same way, the "boy" as protagonist is a simulacrum and not the young Coetzee as he actually was. Rather, he is a construction, and like the unnamed narrator, Coetzee appropriately calls his protagonist the "boy" rather than naming him after himself. As in *The Things They Carried*, where Tim O'Brien creates Timmy knowing that author and the character are unavoidably different people, Coetzee in *Boyhood* recognizes that there is a boy he tries to resurrect but who will inevitably be a different boy than Coetzee had actually been. In his choices of narrator and protagonist, Coetzee captures the postmodernist's recognition of the limits of memory and language.

Despite the recognition that even the autobiography cannot perfectly "save" others or oneself, authors like O'Brien and Coetzee place a faith beyond reason in their choices to write their creative autobiographies anyway. Just as O'Brien is consciously aware that he cannot completely preserve the essence of Linda through his text anymore than he can "save" himself, Coetzee knows that he cannot perfectly remember or describe his life as a boy, as evidenced by his choice to use an unidentified third person narrator and an unnamed protagonist. Yet despite this fact, he still finds it necessary to write *Boyhood*. Coetzee's childhood desire to be buried on the farm after dying does not prove a sufficient means to achieving immortality; because his death anxiety has not been "cured" by the idea of living on through the farm, Coetzee copes with his death anxiety as an adult through composing his autobiography.

We best see his reasons for doing so when examining the sections of the text in which the boy ponders his Aunt Annie's life and death. Right before Annie dies, the boy discusses his aunt's life with his mother, focusing upon Annie's devotion to posthumously translating, publishing, and publicizing a book written by her German father. Although the boy has tried to read the book, he finds it too boring; nevertheless, his aunt's project intrigues him. "'[W]hy,'" he asks, "'did she spend all her money printing his book…wasn't he already dead?'" "'Yes,'" his mother replies, "'he was dead, but she surely had a sense of duty toward him'" (118). The boy leaves the conversation as it stands, but continues to turn this idea over in his head—the idea of his aunt's duty to finish her father's work after his death. Soon afterwards, he returns to this lingering question of one's duty to the dead. When preparing her body for burial, the undertaker learns of Annie's life as a teacher for forty years, to which he responds, "'Then she left some good behind'" (166). The undertaker's words obviously make a strong impression upon the boy, as years later Coetzee the author includes the conversation in his self-proclaimed memoir. Upon hearing that she has "left some good behind," the boy suddenly asks his mother, "'What has happened to Aunt Annie's books?'" (166). His mother offers no answer, and suddenly we can hear the adult Coetzee's anxieties once again surface through his narrator. The following scene concludes the novel:

> ...no one has given a thought to the books except perhaps Aunt Annie herself, the books that no one will ever read; and now Aunt Annie is lying in the rain waiting for someone to find the time to bury her. He

> alone is left to do the thinking. How will he keep them all in his head, all the books, all the people, all the stories? And if he does not remember them, who will? (166)

Having been "left alone to do the thinking," Coetzee questions how he will keep memories of his aunt and others alive. Now understanding Aunt Annie's sense of duty to her father in overseeing the publication of his books, Coetzee feels this same sense of duty to care about *her* legacy. As an anxious creature fearing death, Coetzee is left the task of keeping the memories of the dead alive. After all, if he does not take on this responsibility, who will? Even more unnerving, if he refuses to attempt to "save" others through storytelling, who will one day save him from dying insignificantly? Most disturbing, of course, is the fact that these attempts are all in vain—the autobiography ultimately fails as an immortality project, for the mortals who read it cannot confer immortality upon the text's author.

Boyhood is Coetzee's way of remembering, his way of fulfilling his duty to the dead. Though reason tells him that his creative autobiography cannot completely capture one's essence, he still places faith in creating a text that attempts to do just that. And again, we are reminded of Becker's argument that we must buy into the illusion of fostering a sense of immortality in order to survive; Coetzee irrationally buys into the illusion that his autobiography can somehow allow he and his loved ones to survive, knowing that the writing of his book will be a failure in terms of an immortality project. His way of making sure his loved ones are remembered is to publish a story about them, yet this book will likely become just another inch on a

shelf, soon to be forgotten. Even so, just as the boy placed a religious kind of faith in the family farm, so, too, does the adult Coetzee place faith beyond reason in his hybrid text, hoping beyond reason that someday his text will allow others and himself to survive symbolically after death. It is significant that Coetzee chooses to end his novel in this way, discussing the fear of living a meaningless life. This book could have focused upon the cultural complications of living in South Africa or on adolescent issues other than one's fear of death, but instead it touches upon a universal emotion—the human need to feel important. The fact that Coetzee opens his work discussing his childhood fear of his mother's mortality and then ends his text discussing his aunt's death and legacy suggests that death anxiety and our need to be remembered supersedes all other human dilemmas in terms of importance.

“[A] Roundabout Futile Way of Making Amends”: Guilt Linked to Death Anxiety in William Maxwell’s *So Long, See You Tomorrow*

Revisiting moments of a childhood spent largely in the American Midwest, seventy-two year old William Maxwell writes *So Long, See You Tomorrow* (1980), arguably his finest work, in an attempt to overcome his longstanding guilt surrounding two life-changing childhood events: the premature death of his mother, and his interactions with a boyhood friend he calls Cletus Smith. Typical of postmodern publications like *The Things They Carried* and *Boyhood*, Maxwell’s work characteristically functions as a hybrid text in its mixture of fictional and autobiographical elements. As O’Brien and Coetzee, Maxwell, too, recognizes that to preserve is to invent. In this way, *So Long* foregrounds the problem of distinguishing between fiction and non-fiction. As in my discussion of O’Brien and Coetzee, I will be reading Maxwell’s text as hybrid autobiography; all autobiographies are a mixture of fiction and non-fiction, but O’Brien’s, Coetzee’s, and now Maxwell’s are more deliberate in their discussions of this hybridity.

Roughly divided into two sections, the first half of his text focuses upon the adult Maxwell struggling to accept the heartbreaking loss of his mother by recalling events that took place shortly after her death. Maxwell uses this personal struggle as a backdrop for the second half of the autobiography/novel where he shares his story of Cletus—a friend with whom Maxwell associates much guilt. A classmate, Cletus befriended the young Maxwell when Cletus’s life suddenly turned tragic: his father, Clarence Smith, had murdered a fellow farmer, Lloyd Wilson, for Wilson’s

adulterous affair with his wife, and then had subsequently taken his own life. Since this event, Maxwell's narrator has felt great guilt over his inability to express his condolences to Cletus regarding the murder/suicide Mr. Smith committed. In response to his guilt, Maxwell creates a more elaborate, more whole-cloth fiction describing the Smith-Wilson clash in hopes of telling the story the silent Cletus never expressed to Maxwell. By telling Cletus's story as he imagines it, Maxwell gives Cletus a voice—a chance to finally be heard after Maxwell's childhood inability to express his willingness to listen should his friend need a confidante. In preserving the stories both of his mother's life and preserving/inventing those of his friend's life, Maxwell attempts to alleviate his anxiety surrounding guilt and death.

Like O'Brien and Coetzee's frustrations regarding the loss of important female childhood figures (Linda and Aunt Annie, respectively) when only boys, the young Maxwell is made conscious of death as a problem from an early age by the death of a key female in his life. After his mother's death from the Spanish flu, the ten-year-old Maxwell struggles to accept his mother's disappearance and adjust to a new life, complete with a new stepmother. Confused by the emptiness he feels after losing his mother, noting, "I hadn't gone anywhere and nothing was changed, so far as the roof over our heads was concerned, it was just that she was in the cemetery" (8-9), Maxwell describes his reaction to his mother's death:

> My mother died two days later of double pneumonia. After that, there were no more disasters. The worst that could happen had happened, and the shine went out of everything. Disbelieving, we endured the

> wreath on the door, and the undertaker coming and going, the influx of food, the overpowering odor of the white flowers, and all the rest of it. (6)

For young Maxwell, the "worst that could happen had happened," and from this first loss of a loved one directly follows his realization of death as an inevitable, universal occurrence. Not only did Maxwell as a child have to endure the unpleasant, frightening experience of a death in the family, but also he recalls recognizing the underlying problem of our knowledge of death—the shadow it forever casts upon one's innocence, how from this moment forward, "the shine went out of everything." Maxwell articulates his struggle to return to the innocence he enjoyed before his mother's death, knowing all the while that he will lose the battle:

> I [...] clung to the idea that if things remained exactly the way they were, if we were careful not to take a step in any direction from the place where we were now, we would somehow get back to the way it was before she died. I knew that this was not a rational belief, but the alternative—that when people die they are really gone and I would never see her again—was more than I could manage then or for a long time afterward. (11)

A key factor in experiencing death anxiety, Maxwell here displays a conscious awareness of the most terrible fact, "that when people die they are really gone." Feeling that if he could manage to bring his mother back then his life would return to normal, the passage implies Maxwell the narrator's guilt, his sense of powerlessness

against the inevitable march of time. As the narrator notes, coming to terms with the fact that people leave us forever when they die took him an undesignated, but presumably lengthy, time to achieve. Yet, we may question just how much Maxwell has completely come to terms with his mother's death, considering he must write stories about her sixty years later in order to somehow alleviate his guilt. Due to his consciousness of mortality as a problem, Maxwell searches for a cure to this ailment, ultimately relying on the medicinal power of his writing to cure his sickness.

In Maxwell's recognition of death as a problem from a young age, we can understand why he writes of his mother—to help alleviate his death anxiety. Less obvious, however, is why exactly Maxwell devotes the entire second half of his work to his story of Cletus. After all, Maxwell did not lose Cletus as he lost his mother, so how do the two figures connect in this text? Why write the second half of the novel? In answering these questions, we must add a new concept to our study when examining Maxwell's story of Cletus: death as a problem manifested through guilt feelings.

In exploring death denial's role in *So Long*, we return to Becker and examine his discussion of psychoanalytic guilt. Unlike the traditional definition of guilt as a feeling one experiences after committing wrong, Becker defines guilt more broadly as simply one's general feeling of insufficiency, the "experience of fear and powerlessness" (*Escape from Evil* 36). Because of our human creatureliness, we inevitably harbor guilt feelings, for every imperfection is a reminder of one's failure to be God-like, one's inability to confer immortality on one's self. The guilty person

says, “I am not sufficient. I am not good enough.” Guilt, therefore, is the root of all depression, the root of all suicide. Often, our guilt results from our relationships with others:

> We feel guilt in relation to what weighs on us, a weight that we sense is more that we can handle, and so our wives and children are a burden of guilt because we cannot possibly foresee and handle all the accidents, sicknesses, etc., that can happen to them; we feel limited and bowed down... (34)

Due to our relationships with others and our inability to protect unfailingly our loved ones and ourselves from life’s dangers, we experience guilt, and thus are reminded of our human, creaturely inability to conquer death. Because of our feeling of insufficiency—our guilt—we necessarily fear both life and death:

> Here we see in pure culture, as it were, what is at stake in all human repression: the fear of life and death. Safety in the face of real terror of creature existence is becoming a real problem for the person. He feels vulnerable—which is the truth! But he reacts too totally, too inflexibly, [...saying] to himself “If I do anything at all...I will die.”
>
> (*The Denial of Death* 180)

Thus, we may connect guilt and death anxiety. Recognizing that we inevitably die, we feel guilty in our inability to control our bodies—to make human life last forever. In a larger sense, guilt plagues humanity in that it reminds us of our imperfection, our creatureliness. The guilty individual feels this guilt due to one’s human

powerlessness to be God-like. Because this kind of guilt causes depression and even suicide, solving guilt becomes a basic necessity of life, as eating and breathing are necessary to survival. Put another way, self-esteem is a necessity.

This definition of guilt directly applies to Maxwell in his relationships with both his mother and Cletus. We may rather easily grasp Maxwell's reasons for feeling guilty regarding his mother's death; as a child, the young Maxwell felt insufficient and powerless when realizing that, despite his efforts, he could never bring his mother back. Thus, his mother became "a burden of guilt," as Becker hypothesizes, because Maxwell could not "possibly foresee and handle all the accidents, sicknesses" that would happen to her, including death. In this inability to save his mother, Maxwell experiences Becker's psychoanalytic guilt. It is precisely this same feeling of guilt, however, that motivates Maxwell to devote the latter half of his text to Cletus. Maxwell's guilt over not asking his good friend about the murder/suicide of his father functions for the author as another manifestation of death as a problem, for Cletus is a mirror image of himself. In Cletus's being forgotten and ignored in his community and specifically by his childhood buddy, we read Maxwell's own fears of being forgotten and ignored—key fears of an anxious humankind that is conscious of its inevitable mortality. In the end, Maxwell's guilt directly leads to his obsession with creating an immortality project, for guilt necessarily leads to death anxiety.

Maxwell's search for a cure for his death anxiety would perhaps have been less agonizing to conduct could he have relied on the traditional religious solutions to

the problem of death. Could he have said, "I know for a fact that my mother is in Heaven," then likely Maxwell's fears surrounding the permanence of his mother's death would have subsided, for he would know that she could survive in an afterlife. But, like O'Brien and Coetzee, Maxwell cannot believe this solution to the problem of mortality. The religious solutions are not available to Maxwell as a postmodern writer—one who can no longer sustain belief in the traditional magical solutions. As in O'Brien's account of Linda's death and Coetzee's account of his aunt's passing, Maxwell's narrative of his mother's death mentions no religious ceremony, no funeral rites that eased the grief. Instead, Maxwell offers images of a general hustle and bustle in the house in the days following his mom's death. His father spoke little of the "unspeakable" (his wife's death), Maxwell notes, when pacing the room beside his son: "Because he [my father] didn't say anything, I didn't either" (*So Long, See You Tomorrow* 7). In fact, Maxwell makes no mention of his father ever offering his son a comforting image of a life after death; although most ten year olds would presumably take comfort in the idea that one's mother lives on in Heaven, Maxwell never mentions hearing of this conventionally comforting religious solution to death as a child.

As evidenced by the novel's end, Maxwell presumably had not found a religious answer to the problem of death during his adult life either. Had Maxwell not been a product of the post-modern era, he might have visited with a priest to confess his guilt regarding his mother and Cletus. Ideally, a priest functions as a stand-in for God in his role as a confessor, lessening the sinner's burdens of guilt and

death anxiety, since one's guilt regarding one's insufficiency and one's inability to be God-like necessarily leads to one's death anxiety. The postmodernist, however, has a rough time viewing a priest in this light, due to the fall of religion. Instead, the psychoanalyst becomes Maxwell's confessor—a faith placed in science rather than religion, characteristic of the post-modernist. Even so, this ostensible man of science—the analyst—cannot provide Maxwell with the religious sense of forgiveness for which he longs, for the analyst, like the priest, is not God:

> I meant to say to the elderly Viennese, another exile, with thick glasses and a Germanic accent, I mean to say *I couldn't bear it*, but what came out of my mouth was 'I can't bear it.' This statement was followed by a flood of tears such as I have never known before, not even in my childhood. I got up from the leather couch and, I somehow knew, with his permission left his office and the building and walked down Sixth Avenue to my office. New York City is a place where one can weep on the sidewalk in perfect privacy. (145)

In stating, "I can't bear it," Maxwell refers to his overwhelming guilt. Realizing that his psychoanalyst cannot provide him with the religious solution to guilt (forgiveness) anymore than a priest can, since no mortal can confer immortality, Maxwell ultimately leaves his therapist's office—left alone to search for a new cure for his guilt. In the end, writing an autobiography replaces the traditional solution to the problem of death in providing at least the possibility for this cure—the chance to ease his guilt and redeem himself through preserving the stories of those to whom he finds

that he has done wrong. As he notes, "This memoir—if that's the right name for it—is a roundabout futile way of making amends" (5). Thus, religion and psychoanalysis having failed him, Maxwell attempts to alleviate his guilt and simultaneously calm his death anxiety by turning to the production of the memoir itself.

Like O'Brien's and Coetzee's, Maxwell's autobiography serves as an immortality project, an attempt to save others and the self through published stories, and, like O'Brien and Coetzee, Maxwell, too, fully recognizes the limits placed upon the "saving" power of the text by the inherent failures of memory and language. Maxwell knows that each time we tell a story, little details change, for we can never remember events exactly as they occur, and even if we could, Maxwell knows that words never suffice to capture them. In typical postmodern form, Maxwell refers to photographs throughout his text to highlight the frustrating failure of memory. In one example, he recalls a "vague and idealized" photograph of his mother, which confusingly does not capture his mother as he remembers her:

> My mother sometimes got excited and flew off the handle, but not this woman, who died before her time, leaving a grief-stricken husband and three motherless children. The retouched photograph came between me and the face I remembered, and it got harder and harder to recall my mother as she really was. (11)

Maxwell's memories of his mother mix with his memories of the photograph, resulting in a puzzling combination of memory and imagination; after viewing the photograph, he can no longer truly distinguish between the real mom he once

remembered and the “vague and idealized” mother the photograph appears to capture. In the end, both memory and photography fail to capture his mother’s essence.

As a postmodern autobiographer, Maxwell realizes the power of memory’s failure to capture perfect essence as it applies to storytelling. Maxwell relates the idea of the confusing photograph to creating his text:

> What we, or at any rate what I, refer to confidently as memory—meaning a moment, a scene, a fact that has been subjected to a fixative and thereby rescued from oblivion—is really a form of storytelling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the telling. Too many conflicting emotional interests are involved for life ever to be wholly acceptable, and possibly it is the work of the storyteller to rearrange things so that they conform to this end. (28-29)

Here, Maxwell directly parallels Tim O’Brien and his distinction between the “story-truth” and the “happening-truth,” for as perception and memory change, so too do stories change. As Maxwell notes, the storyteller writes to create a work “wholly acceptable,” and yet the limits of memory prevent this creation; what results is not a completely true text, but an unavoidable, inadvertent mixture of fact and fiction, of honest mistake, accuracy, and wish-fulfillment.

Maxwell addresses the problem of memory at length in his story of Cletus. Throughout his adult life, Maxwell has felt guilty for not seemingly saying to Cletus, “I’m sorry about the murder” when they supposedly ran into each other in the hallway of Maxwell’s Chicago high school. At the end of the text, however, Maxwell locates

his high school yearbook and stumbles upon a mystery: "Cletus ought to have been between Beulah Grace Smith and Sophie Sopkin and he isn't…I went through the yearbook carefully from cover to cover looking for him. He isn't in any group picture or on any list of names" (149). In the end, Maxwell had to write a novel in attempts to alleviate his guilt regarding Cletus, and yet this guilt results from an event that perhaps, or even likely, never occurred—Cletus may never have set foot in Maxwell's Chicago high school. This failure of memory prevents Maxwell from writing his story of Cletus as absolute truth, making his attempt at preserving his stories through an autobiography at least partially in vain.

As in O'Brien's discussion of this "story-truth" versus the "happening-truth" and Coetzee's choice of an unnamed narrator, Maxwell realizes that even if memory remained a perfect reflection of events, the autobiography would still fail because of the failure of language. For example, in creating his fiction of the events surrounding the town murder, Maxwell recognizes the fiction present in presumably factual texts, such as newspapers recalling the event. After realizing that "there are always sources of information about the past other than one's own recollection" (35), Maxwell locates an old newspaper article about the murder of Lloyd Wilson:

> [The editor's] stories gave the impression of being dashed off in the last minutes before the paper went to press; that is to say, they are repetitious and disordered and full of not very acute speculation. Also of clichés and reticences which the ideas of the period no doubt required. People are quoted as saying things I have trouble believing

> they actually said, at least in those words. I am reasonably sure, for example, that Cletus's father did not say to the man he met on the street the day before the murder, 'I am broken and a failure and I have nothing for which to live.' Nobody I know in the Middle West has ever gone out of his way to avoid ending a sentence with a preposition. (36)

Even in the local newspaper, the murder story has been fabricated; Maxwell's keen observation regarding preposition usage is not only amusing, but perfectly captures the failure of language—in this case, our tendency to romanticize or improve upon the actual past to make it more acceptable and/or grammatical. In his own life, Maxwell writes to alleviate his guilt/death anxiety in not saving his mother and in ignoring Cletus. As he admits, the words of his story are always insufficient:

> The unsupported word of a witness who was not present except in the imagination would not be acceptable in a court of law, but, as it has been demonstrated over and over, the sworn testimony of the witness who was present is not trustworthy either. If any part of the following mixture of truth and fiction strikes the reader as unconvincing, he has my permission to disregard it. I would be content to stick to the facts if there were any. (61)

Even witnesses, who swear to tell the truth in court, often inadvertently recall events differently during multiple appearances in court (a failure of memory). But even when clearly remembering events, an eyewitness uses different word choice each

time she describes a crime (a failure of language). Even slight inconsistencies in word choice can influence a particular verdict. Like the witness, Maxwell presumably attempts to tell the truth in his memoir, and yet the failure of his ability to perfectly remember events (a memory issue) and then perfectly describe them (a language issue) makes for a flawed autobiography.

Like O'Brien and Coetzee, Maxwell recognizes his inability to achieve a symbolic immortality through creation of an artwork since his text is inherently flawed, yet like O'Brien and Coetzee, Maxwell feels compelled to write his autobiography anyway. The weight of the flawed nature of memory and language is balanced, if not outweighed, by our human need to remember and to be remembered. When he writes, "In any case, in talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw" (29), Maxwell perfectly captures this dichotomy. Yes, we do lie in telling stories because language and memory are imperfect. Yet, as Maxwell's phrasing reminds us, telling stories is one of life's necessities in the same way that breathing is necessary. We must tell stories to survive. In the way that breathing satisfies a physical need, storytelling satisfies an emotional need just as vital. Thus, Maxwell writes to alleviate his guilt.

As with *The Things They Carried* and *Boyhood*, *So Long* can productively be read as Maxwell's constructive way of dealing with his death anxiety. Like O'Brien and Coetzee, Maxwell reveals that he has been keenly aware of death from a young age, and like them, Maxwell has little faith in traditional religious solutions to the problem of mortality. With no faith in an afterlife, Maxwell, too, turns to his art to

save both others and himself from being forgotten. Keenly aware of the limits of memory and language as preservers of the past—our inability to perfectly recollect or describe events or emotions, and the tendency of language to distort them—Maxwell writes his autobiography anyway. Maxwell's defiance of reason—his decision to relay his stories knowing they are an imperfect attempt at preservation due to their inevitable mixture of fact and fiction—makes him one of Becker's artists; through the creation of a text, Maxwell demonstrates the human desire to symbolically preserve others and ultimately himself from a meaningless death. As Maxwell once wrote in a letter, "'[writing] is the only cure [for ailments]…, including those that are incurable'" (*The Element of Lavishness* 225). For Maxwell, writing his autobiography offers a tentative cure to his anxieties regarding guilt and death, and he thus presumably finds comfort in the fact that he and others may now symbolically survive through his text.

"The Reporting Is the Vengeance": Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* as a Feminist Revision of Death Denial Theory

Thus far, we have examined the issue of death anxiety as it appears in the postmodern autobiography written from various male standpoints. Broadening our perspective, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1975) fits our established pattern of the way postmodern artists have expressed death anxiety through the creative autobiography, yet it also functions as a distinctly female response to Ernest Becker's seemingly gender-specific theory. Written in the 1970s, Becker's theory assumes the masculine as the neutral and gives no particular attention to death anxiety as experienced by women. Although this shortcoming may largely be explained by his participation in the cultural context of the often male-dominated field of cultural anthropology in the 1970s, Hong Kingston provides an example of a woman's struggle against mortality that Becker does not address.

In this memoir chronicling her life as a Chinese-American searching for a balance between these two often-antagonistic cultural forces, Hong Kingston, like O'Brien, Coetzee, and Maxwell, reveals her conscious awareness of death as a problem. Like O'Brien, Coetzee, and Maxwell, she finds no comfort in traditional religious solutions to this death anxiety, and like them she creates a hybrid text in an attempt to achieve the symbolic immortality of others and herself. In terms of her presentation of gender politics, however, Hong Kingston offers a different angle than

our three featured male writers in several ways. For instance, unlike our male authors who strive to immortalize key female childhood figures, Hong Kingston allows the women she wishes to "save" through her text to speak through her, giving them a voice, subjectively; this, then, is our first example of a woman offered the chance to speak for herself, expressing her own likes and dislikes, in a text rather than being spoken for by a given male author. Taken a step further, the dead female figures for which O'Brien, Coetzee, and Maxwell mourn never speak in their respective texts. In this sense, these idealized females remain objects rather than autonomous subjects. Hong Kingston's text, in contrast, gives a voice to the dead women before her—all those who have died in shame, oppressed by a socio-political system that allowed them virtually no self-expression, no autonomy. She tries to imagine them as subjects—as individuals with desires, dreams, fears, and pasts of their own, instead of merely characters defined only in relation to other people. And of course, Hong Kingston finally speaks for herself. Ultimately, *The Woman Warrior* functions much like our other featured autobiographies, yet its differences allow for comparative study along gender lines regarding the creative response to death anxiety, demonstrating that women experience death anxiety just as strongly as men.

Like our first three authors, Hong Kingston writes of her consciousness of death as a problem at a very young age. Indeed, she begins her work by narrating a specific "talk-story" (as she calls it) first related to her as a girl by her mother, Brave Orchid. Having given birth to a child conceived during an adulterous affair, Hong Kingston's forgotten aunt, shamed by her village, immediately drowned herself and

her baby in a well. As in our other texts, this early mention of the author's keen awareness of mortality suggests the centrality of death anxiety to the autobiographer. Recalling their conversation, Hong Kingston thus opens her first chapter, "No Name Woman":

> 'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born.' (3)

Revealing to her daughter their family secret, Brave Orchid establishes for Hong Kingston the concept of death as a threat, warning the young girl to never speak of the "unspeakable," her aunt's dishonorable death (as defined by Asian culture), let alone her existence. Not only must Hong Kingston keep this secret out of respect for her father, but Brave Orchid further warns her of the dangerous consequences of discussing her aunt's death: "Don't let your father know that I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful" (5). Here, death manifests itself as a problem in Hong Kingston's life in that, through this story, she realizes that human error judged as undesirable by one's society can lead to one being purposely forgotten and ignored after death. Significantly, Hong Kingston's Chinese culture threatens women—but not men—with death, should they find themselves in "undesirable" situations such as this one; occurrences like unwanted pregnancies, in other words, pose a gender-

specific threat in this culture. Like her aunt, should Hong Kingston make undesirable "errors," she risks being disowned and forgotten by her father. This prospect obviously causes the young Hong Kingston to experience death anxiety, realizing that, should she make a mistake, she, too, risked dying with insignificance—the greatest human fear, according to Becker. Ultimately, Hong Kingston's death anxiety manifests itself much as William Maxwell's does in his later text as seen through the experience of guilt. As a child, Hong Kingston abided by her mother's wishes and kept silent about her forgotten aunt; this silence, however, now haunts the author through her resulting guilty conscience: "I have thought that my family…needed to clean their name, and a wrong word would incite the kinspeople even here. But there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her [my aunt's] punishment. And I have" (16). Here, Hong Kingston experiences a double guilt—guilt in the psychoanalytic sense as the type that correlates to death anxiety (reflecting her feelings of smallness, insufficiency, and being unacceptable), and guilt for her action in allowing her aunt to remain forgotten all these years. Hong Kingston's first sense of guilt over her silence results in her experiencing death anxiety because, since she directly connects to her aunt as a typical human, capable of making the same mistakes, she risks being forgotten and ignored upon dying just as she has contributed to her aunt's being forgotten and ignored. From this childhood memory of hearing her aunt's story for the first time, Hong Kingston remains consciously aware of the problem of mortality—a problem for which she must find a solution. Secondly, Hong Kingston feels guilty in the traditional sense in that she feels she has done something

wrong by not allowing her aunt to be heard; the guilty feelings that result from both the psychoanalytic and traditional avenues compel Hong Kingston to finally speak through her text.

Following our established pattern of the postmodern artist, Hong Kingston lacks faith in the traditional religious solutions to the human predicament of death. Like O'Brien, Coetzee, and Maxwell, Hong Kingston also finds traditional religious avenues to immortality unappealing, as she never mentions relying upon any religious background in a conventional sense. Developing in a world in which Chinese myth supported her parents' immortality ideologies, Hong Kingston lacks their conventional adherence to religion and rather appropriates myth as a storyteller for her own purposes; she presents myths not as actualities but as metaphors—not as magic, but just as stories that give her courage and help her to imagine for herself a productive, significant identity. In this way, she relies on the creation of metaphors to combat her fear of death—avenues of dream and fantasy that allow her to feel like a hero, much as the boy in Coetzee's text desires to practice Roman Catholicism not because of its belief system or its promises of a literal afterlife, but because of its avenues to heroism, such as becoming a saint. Correcting Becker's gender-specific description of our need to feel important, Hong Kingston reminds us that girls, too, grow up wanting to be heroes. She recalls how "on Sundays, from noon to midnight, we went to the movies at Confucius Church. We saw swordswomen jump over houses from a standstill" (20). Again, the narrator notes the importance of myths to her childhood: "When we Chinese girls listened to the adults 'talk-story,' we learned

that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen" (20). Significantly, Hong Kingston here mentions watching movies while inside a church—a religious arena secularized. Through these movies and through "talk-stories" she heard as a child, Hong Kingston situates her desire for heroism in traditional Chinese terms, imagining that she, like the legend of Fa Mu Lan, fights for and ultimately saves her village. Unlike her mother, however, the postmodern Hong Kingston is not superstitious regarding religion and myth and is not a true believer; instead, she views the traditional myths she shares as metaphors only. In thus mixing myth and metaphor, Hong Kingston does not try to convince her readers of the magic of Chinese myth, but instead employs these myths to serve her own needs as a modern woman in a divided by misogynistic culture. Ultimately, Hong Kingston imagines herself as a heroine because her Chinese parents do not consider her American successes as authentically heroic:

> My American life has been such a disappointment.
>
> "I got straight A's, Mama."
>
> "Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village."
>
> I could not figure out what was my village. And it was important that I do something big and fine, or else my parents would sell me when we made our way back to China. In China there are solutions for what to do with little girls who ate up food and threw tantrums. You can't eat straight A's. (47)

Knowing that "it was important that [she] do something big and fine," Hong Kingston highlights our basic human need to feel important, to feel significant. Although a successful student, Hong Kingston, caught between a Chinese culture that encourages women to remain silent and serve, to be docile, quiet, chaste, and an American culture that requires successful women to be attractive and more outgoing in a Barbie Doll sort of way, does not receive the necessary reassurance from her parents; thus, she dreams of life as a heroine saving a village. As a postmodernist, however, Hong Kingston does not place faith in her family's traditional religious/mythological solution to the problem of dying with insignificance. Instead, she must find another avenue to importance; *The Woman Warrior* itself is her attempted solution to the threat of mortality, of being forgotten.

Like Maxwell, Hong Kingston writes her hybrid text largely as a response to guilt as defined by Becker—the general feeling of insufficiency, the experience of fear, and the trap of powerlessness. Hong Kingston's mother, who reminds her daughter of her insufficiency each time she refuses to acknowledge her American accomplishments, of course, only reinforces the author's sense of guilt. In many ways, *The Woman Warrior* becomes Hong Kingston's personal immortality ideology in that her text provides her the opportunity to finally be heard and to give a voice to others who have been forgotten.

Made to feel guilty for being Chinese, for being American, for being a woman, Maxine Hong Kingston attempts in this text to imagine the author as hero. Telling stories ultimately fails as an avenue to achieving one's immortality, for

language and memory produce not a genuine record, but a recreation—a mixture of fiction and nonfiction. Hong Kingston recognizes this in the hybridity of her text and in the fact that, in the end, her creation cannot guarantee her the significance for which she longs any more certainly than placing faith in traditional religious mythology would provide this remembrance.

Like O'Brien, Coetzee, and Maxwell, Hong Kingston creates a text that acknowledges the unavoidable failures of memory and language that will always frustrate she who seeks to preserve her past. For instance, in her chapter entitled "At the Western Palace" the author chronicles her Aunt Moon Orchid's journey from China to America in search of her husband, who left her long ago, and who finds that her husband has married another woman. An elaborate and detailed but plausible narration ensues, yet the reader is surprised at the beginning of the next chapter to learn that "At the Western Palace" has been totally fabricated by Hong Kingston. Beginning the last chapter, "A Song for the Bavarian Reed Pipe," she notes that the story is her brother's and not her own: "What my brother actually said was, 'I drove Mom and Second Aunt to Los Angeles to see Aunt's husband who's got the other wife'" (163). A few sentences later, she contradicts this first confession with a second admission: "In fact, it wasn't me my brother that told me about going to Los Angeles; one of my sisters told me what he'd told her. His version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs" (163). In her story of Moon Orchid's ordeal, Hong Kingston demonstrates the piecemeal nature of storytelling; Hong Kingston provides the original lens through which we view this

story, yet what she sees has been based on what she has been told, not what she has witnessed. Here, O'Brien's "story-truth" and "happening-truth" once again collide, for Hong Kingston cannot clearly differentiate what actually happened to her aunt and what *seemed* to have happened, based on information transmitted to her through her siblings. Thus, memory is convoluted, and when put to paper through a story, another problem ensues: the limits of language.

Like memory, language inevitably fails to preserve people as they actually are and events as they actually happen. This limitation of language is most evident in the book's final chapter, "A Song for a Bavarian Reed Pipe," when Hong Kingston and her mother trade guilt feelings. Growing up, Hong Kingston developed Becker's sense of guilt—a general feeling of insufficiency/unimportance—largely due to her mother's insistence that she, as a girl, had not been good enough—not good in the sense that a son would have been. Criticized often by her mother, Hong Kingston arguably writes her text to express to her mother and others like her that she is, in fact, important to her family, to her world, unlike her mother's suggestion that she is not. Ultimately, though, her feelings of guilt have largely resulted from misunderstanding her mother's language. Criticizing her daughter for having "'turned out so unusual'" (203), Brave Orchid defends herself as a mother:

> [Maxine]:"When I get to college, it won't matter if I'm not charming. And it doesn't matter if a person is ugly; she can still do schoolwork."
>
> [Brave Orchid]: "I didn't say you were ugly."
>
> [Maxine]: "You say that all the time."

> [Brave Orchid]: “That’s what we’re supposed to say. That’s what Chinese say. We like to say the opposite.” (203)

Her entire life, Hong Kingston has believed her mother finds her ugly, and this criticism has fueled her desire to tell her story through her hybrid text—to gain a voice that could contradict her mother’s suggestion of her ugliness, of her failure, of her insignificance. In fact, however, Brave Orchid has not viewed her daughter as ugly or insignificant, but told her so because the Chinese “like to say the opposite,” meaning that superstitious Chinese women like herself fear the “evil-eye,” the idea that someone regards something as special, one starts to fear that it will be taken away. By calling her daughter ugly, Brave Orchid means just the opposite: that Hong Kingston is so special to her that she must protect her from being harmed by the jealous “evil-eye.” This enlightening conversation makes Hong Kingston aware of the problem of language: its ability for meaning to become easily convoluted.

Yet despite the pitfalls of memory and language as modes of perfect preservation, Hong Kingston writes her memoir anyway, attempting to preserve both others and herself. Significantly, the text both begins and ends with the idea of creating a voice for voiceless women so that shamed women, including herself, might survive through *The Woman Warrior*. In her opening story of her forgotten aunt, Hong Kingston notes, “The real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family’s deliberately forgetting her” (16). In committing imagined stories of her aunt’s ordeal to text, Hong Kingston writes to allow her aunt to defend herself, giving a woman a voice who had never been given one, rescuing her from the

oblivion of anonymity; she writes, "My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not origamied into houses and cloths" (16). In devoting pages to her aunt, Hong Kingston not only allows her to be posthumously remembered and forever preserved in a text, but also allows all women like the forgotten aunt to speak—all those women silenced by their oppressive culture. Here, Hong Kingston provides the female response to death anxiety and a representation of gender politics that Becker's theory, although it addresses many other types of political systems, truly lacks.

Additionally, a key difference exists between Hong Kingston and our three male authors in their representations of women in the text. Unlike O'Brien, Coetzee, and Maxwell who idealize important childhood female figures only through their own voices, Hong Kingston allows her aunt to speak for herself. From the texts written by male authors, we are left to question, what did Linda want? How did she feel? What would Aunt Annie say about her books? What did Maxwell's mother feel? We do not know; we only know how O'Brien felt *about* Linda, how Coetzee felt *about* Aunt Annie, and how Maxwell felt *about* how his mother. Alternatively, Hong Kingston imagines and creates her "forgotten" aunt's predicament in many ways it could have truly existed, rather than simply demonstrating how this female figure had been important to her life personally. Let us compare O'Brien's description of Linda, for instance, to Hong Kingston's description of her aunt. O'Brien notes, "In a story, miracles can happen. Linda can smile and sit up. She can reach out, touch my wrist, and say, 'Timmy, stop crying'" (236). Here, O'Brien invents Linda's reaction to her

own death only in terms of how it affects Timmy; in his objectification of her, he does not afford Linda the opportunity to express her own opinions, such as, "It was horrible living with and dying from a brain tumor, Timmy." Like O'Brien, Coetzee and Maxwell display this objectification of deceased female characters. In inventing her aunt's story, however, Hong Kingston is clearly *trying* to make her drowned aunt a subject, offering us many versions of her story, imagining her aunt in different scenarios as having been raped, in love, or loving her baby whom she takes with her; she envisions, "Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil," or "It could have been very well, however, that my aunt did not take subtle enjoyment of her friend, but, a wild woman, kept rollicking company" (6, 8). In her attempt to travel inside her aunt's psyche and voice plausible opinions the woman could indeed have displayed, Hong Kingston parts with O'Brien, Coetzee, and Maxwell by publicizing of the crimes against women that shame those who have committed the crimes and that restores the women to life from the death of anonymity.

In addition to "saving" her aunt from insignificance, Hong Kingston writes her hybrid autobiography to "save" herself from the problem of mortality. Like O'Brien, Coetzee, and Maxwell, although she realizes that the autobiography ultimately fails as a means to achieving immortality, Hong Kingston nevertheless irrationally feels compelled to write it, attempting to preserve herself just as much as she hopes to preserve others. In this sense, Hong Kingston functions as the artist as Becker defines it. Returning to the conversation between Brave Orchid and her daughter regarding ugliness, Hong Kingston's guilt only increases after she discovers

her mother's true intentions in calling her ugly: "It seemed to hurt her [Brave Orchid] to tell me that—another guilt for my list to tell my mother, I thought. And suddenly I got very confused and lonely because I was at that moment telling her my list, and in the telling, it grew. No higher listener. No listener but myself" (204). To a large extent, Hong Kingston's motive in writing has been to express her discontent regarding the criticisms she has had to endure from her mother throughout her life. And yet, making her mother feel guilty has in turn made Hong Kingston feel guilty again. When finally afforded the chance through her text to tell her mother how she really feels, she cannot, suddenly feeling "confused and lonely" when expressing her "list" of grievances. True to Becker's notion of the "artist," Hong Kingston realizes that the one person she most wants to understand her text—her mother—will ultimately misunderstand it, for Brave Orchid has not understood Hong Kingston's sense of guilt, and thus it seems no one else can entirely. With "No higher listener. No listener but myself," the author acknowledges that she composes her text as Becker says the artist always does—aimed slightly over the head of her intended audience. Of course, Hong Kingston fools herself in this statement when she claims no human listener; although no human listener—one who can truly understand her story—exists, she gives her text to a higher listener—the Beyond. If Hong Kingston truly had no listener but herself, then why would she feel compelled not only to write her story, but to publish it as well? Her choice to publish perfectly captures Becker's paradox of the artist—one who understands the limits of the written text as an avenue to immortality, yet devotes oneself to this immortality project anyway. In this regard,

Hong Kingston's text parallels our first three, ultimately functioning as the artist's coping mechanism in combating one's death anxiety.

Conclusion:

"Arists and Dictators: The Importance of Life-Affirming Versus Life-Suppressing Means of Remembrance"

As we have established, humans are fearful creatures who find themselves struggling in a certain paradox everyday, existing as creatures who are animal-like in their inescapable bodily functions and eventual mortality, yet god-like in their *knowledge* of these animal characteristics. With all this talk of fostering a sense of "significance" during life in order to combat one's death anxiety, some might question the significance of studying Ernest Becker's death denial theory in the first place. After all, if each human experiences death anxiety as Becker hypothesizes, then why should we care to distinguish between the different types of avenues that lead to symbolic immortality? How much difference can there truly be? If we all end up at the same place (death), then what do the inconsistencies between personal immortality ideologies really matter?

These inconsistencies matter a great deal, in fact, because one's choice of a particular immortality project can have monumental effects in our world. Striving for personal achievement that will warrant a kind of immortality, one must be aware that there are both constructive and destructive ways to deal with the fear of death. Put another way, there exist both life-promoting and life-suppressing/life-limiting strategies when constructing immortality ideologies to manage the knowledge/problem of one's mortality.

Returning to Becker's *Escape From Evil*, we find that fearing death (a human certainty, according to this theory) can lead to destruction—even extreme genocide. Becker makes the connection for us between death anxiety and our world's obsession with war:

> Modern man lives in illusion, said Freud, because he denies or suppresses his wish for the other's death and for his own immortality; and it is precisely because of this illusion that mankind cannot get control over social evils like war. This is what makes war irrational: each person has the same hidden problem, and as antagonists obsessively work their cross purposes, the result is truly demonic […] (108)

As Becker notes, we each experience "the same hidden problem"—death anxiety—and yet often humans control this common fear of death by using war as a means to feel heroic—to stand out, to make one's mark, to gain a significance. Becker elaborates upon death denial's underlying causative nature of war:

> [V]ery few of us, if pressured, would be unwilling to sacrifice someone else in our place. The exception to this is of course the hero. We admire him precisely because he is willing to give his life for others instead of taking theirs for his…[in this way,] war is a ritual for the emergence of heroes. (109)

Adolf Hitler, then, becomes the extreme, but very real, example of one who manages one's death anxiety through destructive means, making a lasting contribution to

society by performing genocide. Becker argues that Hitler's death anxiety manifested itself through his world destruction; in ridding the world of an "inferior" race—the Jews—he would be forever remembered. In developing his destructive immortality ideology, Hitler recruited support for his war by creating avenues through which one could gain heroic stature. Becker explains the hero-system as supported by the dictator:

> From the head-hunting and charm-hunting of the primitives to the holocausts of Hitler, the dynamic is the same: the heroic victory over evil by a traffice in pure power. And the aim is the same: purity, goodness, righteousness—immunity. Hitler Youth were recruited on the basis of idealism; the nice boy next door is the one who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima; the idealistic communist is the one who sided with Stalin against his former comrades: kill to protect the heroic revolution, to assure the victory over evil. (150)

Using Hitler as an example, his Nazi Germany exemplified the life-affirming nature of genocide in that by ridding the world of the "other," the "non-Aryan," Hitler and his followers could justify genocide as an immortality ideology, feeling that they were, indeed, "helping" the world by "purifying" it. Of course, the life-affirming nature of this type of ideology is merely an illusion; war is only destructive in the sense that it unfailingly destroys human life.

The autobiographical text, however, presents a constructive way to achieve life after death, for both telling and reading personal stories can be therapeutic in

managing one's death anxiety. As we have witnessed with O'Brien, Coetzee, Maxwell, and Hong Kingston, postmodern autobiographers are keenly aware of the problem of death and feel compelled to write their text in order to "save" others and themselves—a life-affirming, not life-hindering, action. Although artistic creations cannot succeed in completely eradicating one's death anxiety, their creation seemingly provides the artist with at least enough comfort so that his/her fear of death becomes manageable; in other words, no human life, through murder or suicide, has to be lost when an artist uses a text to struggle against death anxiety. Unlike the dictator, the artist promotes life through his/her immortality ideology. Unlike Hitler seeming giving to the Beyond his gift of a "perfect" Aryan culture, the artist gives a constructive gift—one that continues a dialogue on the fear of death, rather than eliminating the possibility for such a dialogue to occur due to war and destruction. Thus, a study of the creative autobiography allows us to become more fully aware of our struggles as humans and seek ways of constructively dealing with these human emotions. As creatures capable of immense good or immense evil, it becomes vital that we study our human fear of death and work to channel our anxieties in constructive fashions.

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