

English Composition Program  
Department of English  
Award Ceremony  
March 4, 2014

University of Miami  
College of Arts and Sciences  
Coral Gables, Florida

# Award Winners

Twentieth Annual  
Audley Webster  
Memorial Essay Contest



## Audley Webster Memorial Essay Contest

**2013-2014 Contest Coordinators:**

Joshua Schriftman and John Wafer

**English Composition Program Director:**

Joanna Johnson

**English Composition Senior Administrative Assistant:**

Clara Maroney

**Contributing Judges:**

Adina Sanchez-Garcia

Alisa Be

Andrew Green

April Dawn Mann

Ben Alsup

Carrie Wheat

Charlotte Rogers

Darryl Ellison

Joanna Johnson

John Wafer

Joshua Schriftman

Josune Urbistondo

Judy Hood

Lauren Petrino

Lauren Riccelli

Lesley Kamphaus

Martha Otis

Matthew Meltzer

Melissa Burley

Nicole Hospital-Medina

Paul Deveney

Rachel Panton

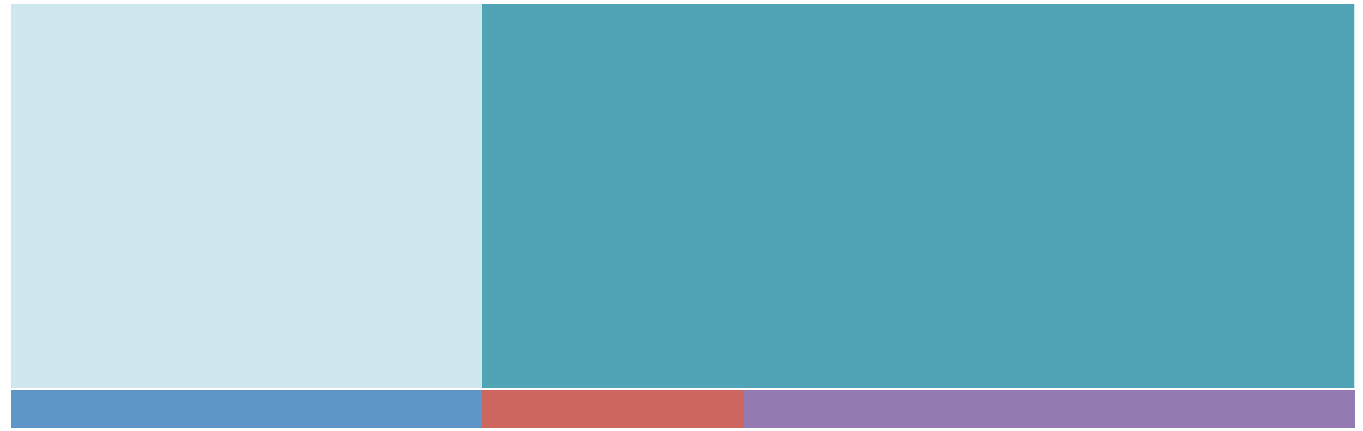
Samantha Phillips

Sarah Cash

Susan Leary

**Booklet Design/Cover Photograph:**

Roxane Pickens



Quality, like cream, rises to the top. Here in this booklet is the 2013-2014 English Composition Program's top-shelf academic writing. It has been shaped, composed, and revised by three talented writers who make us proud to co-chair the 20th anniversary of the University of Miami's Audley Webster Essay Contest.

It is appropriate that for this year's contest, we had more faculty members and graduate students participating as judges than in any year prior—a total of 24! For our final deliberations, fifteen of us crammed into our mailroom to consider eight essays finalists, and while the decisions were not easy, the process was illuminating.

This contest gives us not only a chance to peruse and reward such student excellence, it also lets us pause from our daily to-do lists, and have more than a short conversation with each other about our composition classes, what we are teaching, and what we value as the best academic writing. The Audley Webster Memorial Essay Contest allows us to appreciate the best of what UM students write, and what our colleagues have done to help inspire those students to write their best.

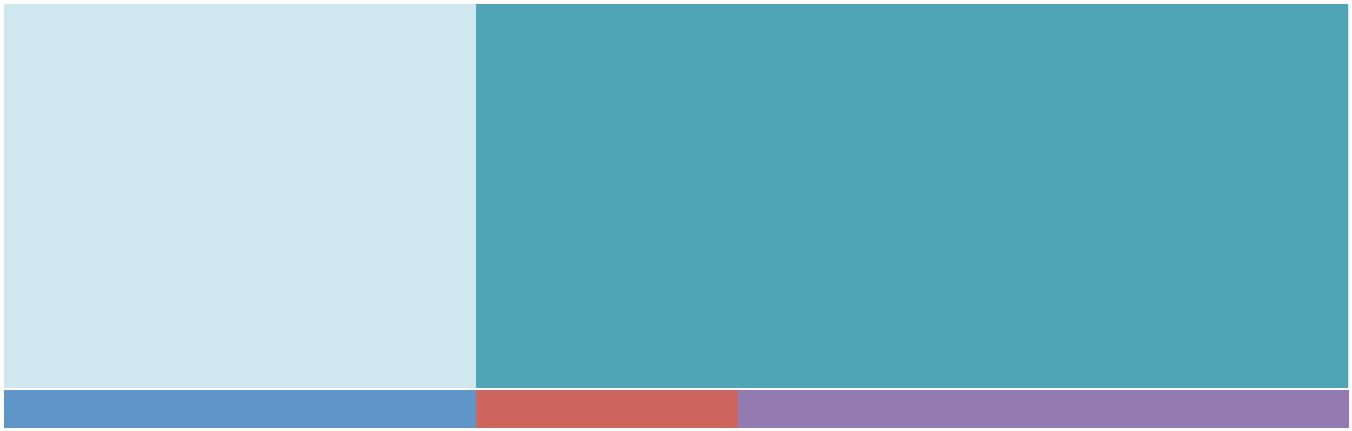
We don't think it's just a coincidence, either, that this year principally celebrates the work of Senior Lecturer Martha Otis. Often we have five or six entries from her students, and winners and runners-up as well. This year, both of Martha's students, Krystine Smith and Christian Mock, chose their own topics to pursue in their lengthy and engaging research essays. Both Krystine and Christian echo the sentiment, "The most powerful learning is interest-driven."

It's hard for the four-to-five page directed-topic essay to compete with that kind of extended and strong—personal and passionate—writing. Yet, the third contestant for this year's prize, Corey Johnson, taught by Dr. Charlotte Rogers, did just that, demonstrating not only the diversity of our program, but also the diversity of student accomplishment within the University of Miami Composition Program.

We hope you will enjoy these essays as much as we did.

Sincerely,

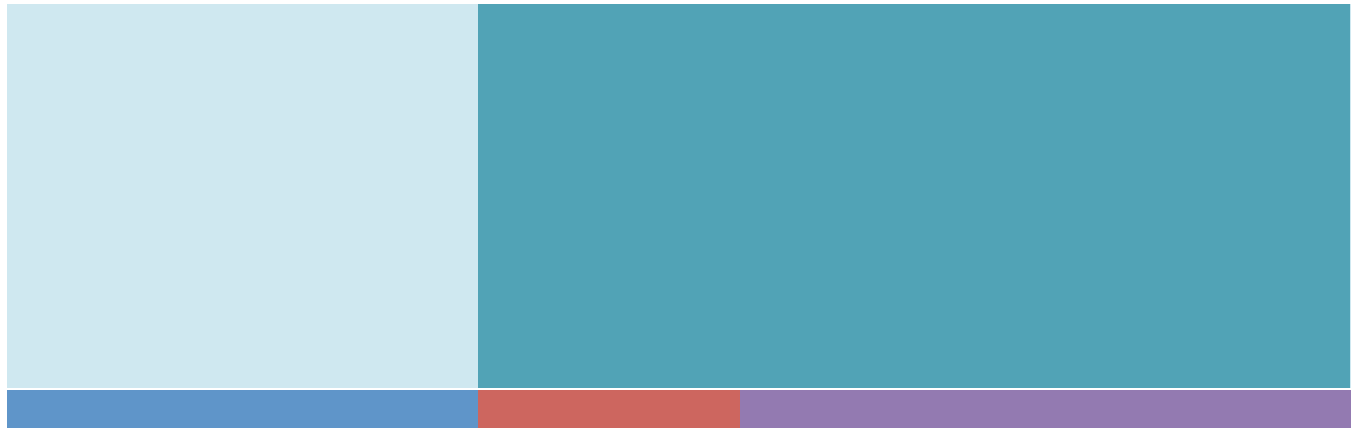
John Wafer and Joshua Schriftman  
Audley Webster Essay Contest Coordinators, 2013-2014



Dear Students and Colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that we present this group of winning essays from our first-year composition students. Every year the Audley Webster Memorial Essay Contest gives us the opportunity to recognize the outstanding writing done in our courses—writing that is informed, lively, and engaging, and which reflects the efforts of both the students and their instructors. All of us in the Composition Program offer warm congratulations to the winners in this 20th anniversary year. We are incredibly proud of the work you do, and hope that you continue to pursue your passions and writing with the same vigor and intelligence you exhibit in these pages.

Joanna Johnson  
Director, Composition Program  
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Dear Friends and Colleagues,

Please join me in extending hearty congratulations to the winners of the 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Audley Webster Memorial Essay Contest Award and their dedicated faculty mentors!

For two decades now, the English Department's Composition Program has recognized outstanding undergraduate writing in the name of one of our department's most honored former members, Audley Webster. Dr. Webster sought to instill his students with a love of literature, the academic life, and writing. I'm delighted to see his legacy continue with this year's celebration. The award winners—and their teachers—carry on in Dr. Webster's fine spirit of academic excellence and achievement.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Pamela Hammons".

Pamela Hammons, Chair  
English Department  
February 24, 2014



### Audley Webster—The Professional

by Charlotte Rogers

Twenty years ago we selected the first winning essays of the Audley Webster Memorial Essay Contest. These yardsticks of quality prose from the University of Miami's first-year writing courses continue to identify the highest standards. How fitting, then, to boast this name: Audley Webster! Webster's years of teaching composition at our University convey a working definition of the professional.



Webster felt responsibility to a larger educational goal, says his daughter Dr. Susan Webster: “[a] love of teaching, and broader—imparting knowledge.” He loved sharing knowledge and rational thought with all his students, and he “believed that the greatest gift is the gift of learning, and that that gift is not complete until it is passed on.”

Throughout his professional life, Webster made expertise his specialty. He developed skills necessary for both his job and beyond, kept his knowledge up to date, and taught the individual as that individual learned best. Pictures remain of Webster sitting with a student, both concentrating on polishing that clear sentence. Did he succeed? Testimonials offer evidence: “He made instruction so clear,” and “He really cared that I learn to write,” assert two UM alumni. Evidence came, too, in the Monday newspapers wrapped in quotable quotes of the NFL or NBA week's hero, his former students; evidence remains in both national and international market plans that came from UM alumni now in the business world; and evidence appears in the clear, persuasive writing in legal briefs filed by former students, periodically remembering and using Webster's standards for rational thought.

And his was a personality of candor, honesty, courtesy, and respect for human dignity in all relationships. Many teachers of writing remember his advice—about both life and writing. That advice included a professional attitude and optimism. In addition, he could relate a narrative—often personal—to sharpen a point. For example, Dr. Webster, a psychologist, remembers when meeting students their saying, “Oh, you are the feminist daughter.”

Webster in his quiet, dignified, and confident manner, earned the respect of students and faculty with his high values and principles. Even before joining the U.M. faculty, he helped bring about equality through diversity on campuses. He lived the belief of Martin Luther King, Jr. that “An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of the individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.” Audley Webster embodied King's words, and through the above professional qualities—and more—he reminds us all of the highest standards in both teaching and imparting knowledge. —C.R., 2012, *edited*.

# CONTEST WINNERS



**Krystine Smith..... 9**

“Songs of Freedom”

ENG 106 • Martha Otis • Spring 2013

**Christian Mock..... 21**

“Enter the Dream State”

ENG 106 • Martha Otis • Spring 2013

**Corey Jansen..... 31**


“Frayed Roots of a Nation in ‘For the Union Dead’”

ENG 106 • Charlotte Rogers • Fall 2013

*Writing entries appear as originally submitted, with no additional editing.*

## Instructor Reflections—Martha Otis on Krystine Smith

Reading “Songs of Freedom,” I’m struck by the simple, straightforward way Ms. Smith, who is a veteran, delivers the alarming statistics surrounding PTSD and suicide; I’m struck by her reverence for the veterans she writes about—her wry observations, for example, of their music therapy sessions. I’m impressed by her presence in this paper: on the sidelines, alert to the significant detail, the subtle joke, the reticence of friends suffering from a terrible condition for which they may never find help. What emerges is a story that will continue to play out all across the country for some time to come. “Those stories were painful for me to think and write about,” she says. “I’m still amazed that [Brandon] let me use any of them.” Of her writing process she says, “The most difficult part was the narrative portion.... I’m used to a very formal writing style. It helped that your classroom was a ‘safe’ zone.... That helped me feel more comfortable branching out.” I think her paper creates its own safe zone, a space of reflection, understanding, and some measure of healing—a space that subtly invites the rest of us to be more present for our veterans.



English 106 • Spring 2013

### English Composition II: “Writing about Science and Nature”

For your formal paper this semester, you will do an inquiry into something that fascinates you. All semester, reading and discussing the pieces in *Best Science and Nature Writing 2008*, you have been encouraged to develop criteria for what makes good science writing for the general audience. Using these criteria, you can write about anything—even if it does not fit our “science and nature” theme. Remember the two triangles: ethos, pathos, logos; argument, protagonists, cinema. Make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. “A” papers will be very strong in higher order concerns: they will start and end with critical questions, they will offer ideas about your findings, and they will leave the reader unable to so easily make the same old assumptions about this topic.



# Songs of Freedom: Music Therapy with Veterans Suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Krystine Smith

ENG 106 • Martha Otis  
Spring 2013

## History is a nightmare from which I am trying to wake

–James Joyce, *Ulysses* 1922

*“You don’t understand! I’m numb. Empty. Do you think I want to be like this? I want to feel something, anything. But I can’t. I told you I was f\*\*\*ed up when we met, but you just wouldn’t believe me.”*

When I moved to Miami last summer, Brandon\* quickly became one of my closest friends. We did everything together. My heart stopped when I heard him say those words, explaining a change in his behavior that had been upsetting me for weeks. Brandon is a Marine Corps veteran who served on multiple deployments. Though he claimed to have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, I never saw any real signs. Of course, I knew very little about PTSD at the time. Sure, he was protective and always on the alert, but he is a Marine. All Marines think we are hot stuff and that it is our duty to protect those around us. I had no idea how much he was hurting inside.

About 7% of the American population are veterans of the Armed Forces, but veterans make up 22% of the national suicide rate (Martinez and Bingham) (“Suicides Keep Rising,

Among Vets and Americans”). Recent studies from the Department of Veteran’s Affairs reveal that a veteran commits suicide approximately every 65 minutes, resulting in an average of 22 deaths per day (Walsh 1). In 2012, 349 service members took their own lives. More service members died by suicide than combat (Walsh 2). One major cause of Veteran and military suicides is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Approximately 30 percent of veterans will develop clinical PTSD at some point in their lives (Paulson and Kripner 14). Most of our veteran population has served in war, whether it was World War I or II, Vietnam, Korea, the Gulf War, or the more recent Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Therefore, the number of veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder will only continue to rise. Department of Veterans Affairs treatment facilities around the country cater to Veterans, but applying and qualifying for these benefits is typically a long process. 20,000 troops die each year waiting to receive benefits (“Suicides Keep Rising, Among Vets and Americans”).

As a Marine Corps veteran, I find these numbers striking. There are many different resources meant to help veterans medically, educationally, and

\* Indicates that the name has been changed to protect individual privacy.

professionally. Unfortunately, acquiring any of these benefits can take months, sometimes years. I waited 9 months to receive disability benefits from The Department of Veterans Affairs. PTSD is a disorder that causes anxiety and avoidance. Men and women suffering from PTSD need help quickly. Long periods of waiting often discourage them from receiving the benefits they deserve. Though I never had the



Fig. 1 Koterba, Jeff. [Military Suicide](#)

opportunity to deploy, many of my friends have. Every day, I see the damaging effects that war can have. One of my friends, a Marine Veteran named James\*, cannot handle anything similar to gunfire. Something as simple as a loud crash will send him shaking in a corner. Brandon spends every day on edge, waiting for the next disaster to happen so he can jump into action. Brandon and James, like so many other veterans, are aware of the resources provided by the VA, yet they chose not to receive treatment. Why do these veterans choose to live in pain rather than seeking help through the Department of Veterans Affairs and other resources?

Brandon and I met through the University of Miami's Veteran Student Organization, a group designed to help veterans transition into college life. Several days after meeting, we both



Fig 2. Peterson. Kevin. VSO

attended a barbeque at the VSO house intended for new members to get to know other students and veterans. Encouraged by the juicy aroma of freshly gilled hamburgers, veterans and students alike opened up to each other and quickly became friends. Brandon and I spent a good chunk of that evening talking to each other. Though he is not currently enrolled at the University of Miami, he is a die-hard fan and was very interested in my future career as a music therapist. Of course, I had yet to begin my studies. I really had no idea where I wanted to go with my degree until Brandon said, "You know, I have PTSD and I've tried so many different things. But I've never heard of music therapy. What could you do to help me?" What could I do? I had no idea, but that was a pivotal point in my life. That question has been eating at me for months. How can I help my fellow veterans? How can music be used to bridge the communication gaps and make veterans more comfortable with therapy?

**One good thing about music, when it hits you, you feel no pain.**

**-Bob Marley, *Trenchtown Rock* 1971**

Music and the military have been linked for centuries. Starting in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, trumpets, bugles and

flugelhorns were used to give orders and signals. Trumpets and bugles were used with the cavalry while flugelhorns, a larger, smoother instrument, were



Fig. 3 D'Annibale, John Carl. [Taps](#).  
Pictured: Marine playing a bugle.

used with infantry. Drums were used to inspire the cavalry and give the infantry their marching tempo. In 1680, the German regiments established oboe bands to motivate their troops. These were typically small, 6-piece ensembles without percussion. After the French Revolution, larger military bands marched in parades and gave public concerts. This is a tradition that has continued today with military bands around the world (Monelle 114-138).

**You can't patch a wounded soul  
with a Band-Aid.**

**-Michael Connolly, *The Black Echo* 1992**

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is an Anxiety Disorder caused by a traumatic, usually life-threatening event. People can typically forget painful, unhappy memories; those suffering from PTSD are unable to do so. Traumatic events become a powerful influence on their everyday behavior, so they cannot move on with their lives. This causes symptoms such as flashbacks, hyper-vigilance, dejection, panic attacks, depression, unpredictable rage, anxiety, and guilt (Paulson and Kripner 3-5). Music

therapy and traumatic events are both sensory oriented, so music can provide a sensory, non-intimidating path to access traumatic memories. Music can also cause positive biochemical changes within the brain, which lead to reduced stress and anxiety (Bensimon, Amir, and Yuval "A Pendulum...").

One of the most difficult symptoms to cope with is re-experiencing, which causes unwanted memories, dreams, smells, images, sounds, and flashbacks (Carr 181). Veterans often avoid situations that could cause them to re-experience war memories. This can eventually lead to a complete withdrawal from society (Paulson and Kripner 3). Most people do not think twice about everyday sounds like a car backfiring or a blender running. A seasoned veteran with deployments under his belt will hear gun fire or an explosion. He will hit the deck, dropping to the ground and waiting for incoming fire that will never occur. As you can imagine, this is uncomfortable and embarrassing for veterans. Such automated responses, learned through training and experience, make assimilating into civilian life difficult (Paulson and Kripner 4). Some veterans avoid driving completely because of the frequency of Improvised Explosive Device explosions during convoys (Paulson and Kripner). They avoid and disassociate themselves from relationships and everyday situations as a defense mechanism, but this prevents them from recovering and enjoying life.

Avoidance can also lead to a dangerous addiction to drugs or alcohol. Veterans use alcohol and other substances to escape painful war-time memories, but this blocks healing (Behar 464) (Carr 181). Substance abuse has also been linked to causing

flashbacks with disorientation (Behar 463). The military treats substance abuse in Active Duty service members as a crime. They are allowed to attend rehab for alcohol addiction, but drug use almost always leads to a dishonorable discharge. This bars them from using the Veterans Affairs' benefits they so desperately need, such as counseling and health care (Paulson and Kripner 22).

Soon after Brandon and I met, my mother came for a visit. Like me, she really did not understand the symptoms associated with PTSD. Brandon graciously agreed to be our tour guide around Miami. Like a genuine gentleman, he drove us everywhere, abandoning all other plans. On one such occasion, Brandon tried to explain the impact that PTSD has had on his life to my mother and me. I still had not seen any overt symptoms, but Brandon said that he was so angry all the time. At first, he had very little control over his impulses. He tried to get therapy, but it did not seem to help and often left him more frustrated. The therapist just could not understand and was unable to relate.

Eventually, he stopped attending therapy because it left him so on edge that he had very little control over his temper. One evening after therapy, Brandon went out drinking with some friends. A car cut him off and it sent him over the edge. He stopped his car, grabbed his pistol, and started patrolling around the car. Of course, the poor people around him had no idea what was going through his mind. Brandon was suffering from a flashback. He was re-experiencing a shocking experience from his deployment. Fortunately for him and everyone around, Brandon came to and

realized what was happening. He separated memory from reality, got back in his car, and drove away. But that could have had a very different outcome. Brandon is a Marine with specialized training and multiple expert shooting awards on the M16 A2 Service Rifle and M9 Pistol. If he had not "woken-up" in time, that situation could have turned deadly. Brandon is a smart man with more self-control than he gives himself credit for. He realized the connection between the alcohol and his flashback. Now, he limits himself when he drinks and focuses his energy on caring for those around him.

Music therapy can treat re-experiencing and avoidance by using the associative recall technique, where the therapist uses music that the client associates with traumatic memories, allowing the patient to confront his or her memories in a safe environment. PTSD patients tend to associate metal instruments with trauma, injury, and destruction. Wooden instruments, like maracas, xylophones, or flutes, tend to represent gentleness and relaxation. Using music that evokes traumatic memories forces the veteran to acknowledge and tolerate its effect, limiting avoidance. (Clements-Cortes) (Bensimon, Amir, Wolf "Drumming Through Trauma...")

Veterans and active duty service members often delay or refuse medical or psychological help, despite its constant availability. The military encourages bravery and masculinity, which are certainly admirable traits to have in a combat environment. However, those principles do not allow for admissions of weakness or hurt (Paulson and Kripner 46). Military members warn each other not to tell their superiors about symptoms



because they fear that seeing a doctor or shrink could have negative ramifications on their careers (Paulson and Kripner xiii). After serving four years in the Marine Corps, I have first-hand experience of the negative impact that the military's "macho" mentality can have on one's health. I developed a heart condition during my first year enlisted that caused me to faint over 10 times in 6 months. The first time I passed out, two Staff Sergeants had to drag me off the field. But my command never considered that I may have a serious medical condition. Instead, they asked me, "Did you drink water today?" or "What did you eat for breakfast?" They assumed I was locking my knees or faking it to get out of work. They did not send me to a doctor until I passed out mid-conversation with my Commanding Officer.

Fortunately, my condition is not serious and can be controlled with medication. There are many Veterans who are not so fortunate. They return from war with life-changing medical and psychological problems but refuse to seek help because of the military's negative stigma. While Brandon was in the Marine Corps, he suffered from multiple injuries to his knees and back, eventually getting knee surgery. He

also fractured portions of his face during an IED explosion on a convoy. Those are only the beginning of a long list of medical problems that he deals with daily. Brandon waited to seek help while he was enlisted and does not receive any disability now because he refuses to go through the long, drawn out process of dealing with the VA.

Veterans suffering from PTSD need a safe therapy environment where they can create positive meaning from their war-time experiences. They tend to see the constant suffering caused by PTSD as punishment for their participation in certain activities of war. In their book *Haunted by Combat, Understanding PTSD in War Veterans*, Paulson and Kripner write that PTSD sufferers have to stop seeing themselves as victims. Medications are rarely effective in treating PTSD because they do not fix psychological issues. Therapy helps veterans see themselves as human beings capable of regaining control in their lives (Paulson and Kripner 52-56). It can provide patients with a sense of wholeness and resolution to an issue (Cements-Cortes 13). Through therapy, veterans can "unlearn" the automated responses that have made it near impossible to assimilate into the civilian world (Paulson and Kripner 3).



Fig 4. Miller, Kurt. [Guitar Therapy for Veterans](#).

**After silence, that which comes  
nearest to expressing the  
inexpressible is music.**  
-Aldous Huxley, *Music at Night* 1931

Patients often view talking therapy as distressing and intrusive, but music can be non-verbal. Patients can perform on instruments or actively listen. This provides a safe environment for arousal stimulation and regulation (Carr 180-195). Group music therapy

and active music making can provide PTSD patients with that sense of control that they feel they lost after their traumatic event occurred (Carr 181). Group music making does not require eye contact, which can be too painful and personal for PTSD patients suffering from severe avoidance. Music therapy can allow for a positive socialization experience in the initial stages of treatment by providing a pressure free environment for patients (Bensimon, Amir, and Yuval "A Pendulum...").

I have noticed that Brandon and other veteran friends avoid therapy because they feel isolated from the therapist and society in general. They feel that the therapist cannot help because he "didn't experience what I did" so he will never understand. Though a therapist does not necessarily need to understand and relate to the patient's feelings, this disconnect often discourages veterans from seeking or continuing treatment. Group music therapy gives veterans the opportunity to recover alongside other veterans (Bensimon, Amir, and Yuval "A Pendulum..."). Though each veteran has had different experiences, they can all understand and relate to the pain and difficulties that follow.

**Music happens to be an art form that transcends language.**

**-Herbie Hancock, jazz pianist**

The Miami Veteran's Affairs Hospital has a residential rehabilitation program for trauma that utilizes many kinds of therapy. I was fortunate enough to observe one of the music therapy sessions working with 8 veterans ranging from 29 to 64 years old. They had all done multiple tours in

war-zones like Vietnam, Granada, Panama, Iraq, and Afghanistan. I unintentionally met all of the gentlemen on the elevator heading up to therapy. At this point, I did not realize that they were the men I would be observing; but I was immediately struck by their sense of humor. As they boarded the elevator, one veteran announced, "Ok, children. Time to behave. You're around normal people now!" They were constantly poking fun at each other. The 40-year age difference did not seem to affect their relationships. The younger guys called the older gentlemen "old men," while



Fig 5. [Miami VA Hospital.](#)

the "old men" referred to the young guys as "12-year-olds." When we reached the therapy room, I was surprised to see that we were travelling to the same destination. I followed them into the room, but the therapist was not there yet. I was uncertain about the therapist's plan from me, so I turned around and waited outside. As I left, I heard one veteran turn to the others and say, "See! You scared the pretty lady away." Music therapist Shawn Buller arrived after a few minutes and the veterans saw that it



takes a lot more than a few raunchy jokes to scare this Marine off! I reentered the therapy room to a chorus of, “She came back! She likes us after all!” Ms. Buller then informed me that humor is a common coping mechanism for veterans. That, of course, was met by a series of jokes from the guys.

Before starting the session, Ms. Buller allowed us to introduce ourselves to each other. I explained my research, conveniently leaving out the fact that I am also a Marine veteran. The vets then bombarded me with their names, ages, branches of service, and areas of deployments; however, I cannot use any specific names because it would violate privacy laws. During this particular session, Ms. Buller used listening and lyric analysis to promote self-esteem. The first song she utilized was “Message to Myself” by Melissa Etheridge. When Ms. Buller started the recording, all of the men were silent for the first time since we met. The wave of silence was a sharp contrast to the loud, bawdy humor I heard on the elevator. They sat in a circle, soaking in the song’s words and meaning. Though all 8 men admitted that this is not a song they would normally enjoy, they each related to the lyrics. One section of the song reads:

I made every **choice** along the way  
 Each day I spend in hell I **chose** to stay  
 It’s funny what you fear can make you weak  
 Truth is what you get when truth is what you speak

I’m sending out a message to myself  
 So that when I hear it on the radio  
 I will know that I am fine  
 I will know that I am loved

The veterans said that, before coming to therapy, they lived every day with this constant feeling guilt and self-loathing. They **chose** to isolate themselves from the world as a form of defense. They thought that no one could help them and that they would feel this way for the rest of their lives. Their world was gray and pleasure-less. One Vietnam veteran said, “Isolation feels good, but it doesn’t get you anywhere. Love and trust are basic human needs,

but you cannot connect with others if you **choose** the path of isolation.”

The second song they analyzed was “I’m Amazing” by Keb Mo. The Melissa Etheridge song focused on making positive choices, while this song focused on having a positive self-image. Keb Mo was obviously more to the veterans’ tastes. As the recording started, the veterans started smiling and tapping to the beat. They did not make eye contact with each other during the music; instead they stared off into the distance, listening to every phrase.

I’m amazing; I’m incredible  
 I’m a miracle, a dream come true  
 I’m marvelous; I’m beautiful  
 Guess what?  
 So are you.

**Basic 12 bar Blues form**

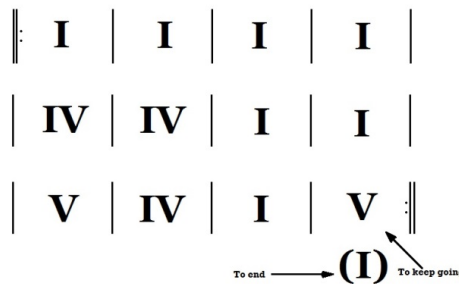


Fig 6. Basic 12-Bar Blues Form. The roman numerals show which chord is played in each measure.

One of the Vietnam veterans said that these lyrics reminded him of looking through the window at his new born son right after the war. His son reminded him that life can be beautiful. That image kept him going through the hard times. Another Iraq and Afghanistan veteran said that he hated dealing with people after his deployments.

I thought that everyone was stupid and should be shot. I was always blaming others for my problems. The constant numbing [that comes from avoidance and isolation] was draining. Learning to appreciate life and respect yourself is important.

The veterans said that Keb Mo's "I'm Amazing" gives them hope for a brighter tomorrow. The parallel between the two songs is that you are what you think you are. Thoughts affect actions, so you can choose to have a positive or negative life.

The last approach Ms. Buller used was a fill-in the blank lyric sheet. The veterans were encouraged to use positive thoughts to finish the following statements:

"I deserve \_\_\_\_\_  
I am willing to \_\_\_\_\_  
I am learning to \_\_\_\_\_"

The veterans did not realize that this was a musical activity. They wrote out whatever was in their hearts. Ms. Buller then set each patients' lyrics to a 12 bar blues progression and sang their new "songs." The veterans wrote expressions like: "I deserve a brighter tomorrow. I am willing to work for it. I am learning to do the necessary things." "I deserve forgiveness. I am willing to accept it. I am learning to let go of my demons." And "I deserve love

and happiness. I am willing to do whatever it takes. I am learning to understand and control emotions." The wonderful thing about the 12-bar blues progression is that there is no set rhythm or tempo. Musicians can easily alter the tempo, melody, and accompaniment to fit different lyrics or feels. Ms. Buller changed her keyboard style with each set of lyrics to best fit the mood. These raw, heartfelt statements made the veterans uncomfortable, so they started resorting to humor again. They made fun-loving jokes about each other's lyrics to lighten the mood. One set of lyrics, "I deserve to be happy every day. I am willing to dig deep and surface feelings. I am learning to combat sickness and change my daily life" was too long to fit into a natural sounding song. Ms. Buller rushed through the lyrics, trying to fit them all into one short chord progression. The veterans joked about it being too long and then said, "Dave\*, you know we're just joking with you, right? We love you man! Got to have someone to pick on!"

Watching the veterans' faces, I could easily see the positive effect of music therapy. They walked into the session loud and rambunctious as a way to cope with the negative feelings they had experienced throughout the day. During the listening portions, the veterans looked somber and calm. They were not sad, just accepting. By the end of the session, their energy and playful banter had returned. The session caused them to reflect on painful subjects, so they coped by returning to humor. Life has thrown some terrible things their way, but through the combined therapy of the VA hospital they are slowly learning to live with it.

**If you've got a problem,  
take it out on a drum.**  
-Neil Peart, lyricist and drummer of  
Rush

Drumming has been very effective with veterans. In their study "Drumming Through Trauma: Music Therapy with Post-Traumatic Soldiers," therapists Bensimon, Amir, and Wolf found that group drumming can create feelings of openness, togetherness, sharing, closeness, connectedness, and intimacy. Strong rhythmic beats unite people by causing to move their heads and bodies in unison with others. Veterans in the Bensimon study claimed that group drumming gave them the ability to open up to their peers and talk about traumatic events. It also gave the veterans a sense of empowerment, satisfaction, and control over their lives. (35-45)



Fig 7. [Marines playing drums.](#)

Circle drumming is one popular technique, in the therapy world and out. This is when all group members sit in a circle and take turns drumming. One member plays a certain pattern and the person sitting next to him repeats it, like a musical version of the game "Telephone." This encourages group interactions and cohesion.

(Bensimon, Amir, Wolf "Drumming Through Trauma..." 38)

Drumming can also serve as an outlet for rage. Beating on the instrument and playing at a loud volume allows patients to release pent up anger and energy. This gives the patients a sense of control over emotions that they struggled with in the past. Veterans also tend to associate traumatic memories with percussion instruments. Pounding on drums forces veterans to confront and cope with these memories (Bensimon, Amir, Wolf "Drumming Through Trauma..." 39-40)

**I think music in itself is healing. It's an explosive expression of humanity. It's something we are all touched by. No matter what culture we're from, everyone loves music.**  
-Billy Joel, pianist, singer, and songwriter

Music obviously is not the cure-all solution for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or for the rising suicide rates around the country, but it can be used to improve the daily lives of the brave men and women sacrificing for this country. By giving veterans a safe, accessible way to manage traumatic memories, music therapy helps keep them alive. Once veterans learn to cope with their experiences, they will be more likely to succeed in the civilian world. Veterans have so many positive traits that can add to any work or personal environment; we just need to give them the opportunity to shine.

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Last Saturday night, Brandon and I went over to the VSO house. The President and Vice President of the

organization both live there, so it has become a refuge of sorts. There we were, 5 Marines, hanging out and watching TV. I was kicking Brandon's butt at a game of online scrabble. The guys were busy talking about video games and Chipotle and Brandon's new job. We might easily have been mistaken as your average college students, but each Marine in that room has a story. Most have learned to live with their memories, others are still struggling. James, a UM graduate, was extreme when we met. He drank heavily and bragged incessantly to hide his abysmal self-esteem. Saturday was the first time I had seen him in months. He seemed different, happier. Knowing that Brandon suffers as he once did, James said, "Bro, I just started some new therapy. You've got to check it out. It's like nothing I've ever had before. I haven't felt this good in years! I'm like a new person." Brandon, still uncomfortable with therapy, said "No, man. I've tried it. I'm not interested." But, he thought for a minute before responding. That he even took a moment to consider gives me hope. Brandon keeps promising to get help, but he always has an excuse why now isn't the right time. "I need to finish school first." Or "I just started my job. Maybe after a few months."

When I first started researching music therapy and PTSD, my relationship with Brandon helped me connect the dots and better understand the impact of flashbacks and re-experiencing. Those are not just medical terms. They are painful experiences that PTSD patients are subject to on a regular basis. I was not certain if he would let me use his story, but I decided to try anyway. As Brandon was reading my first draft, I

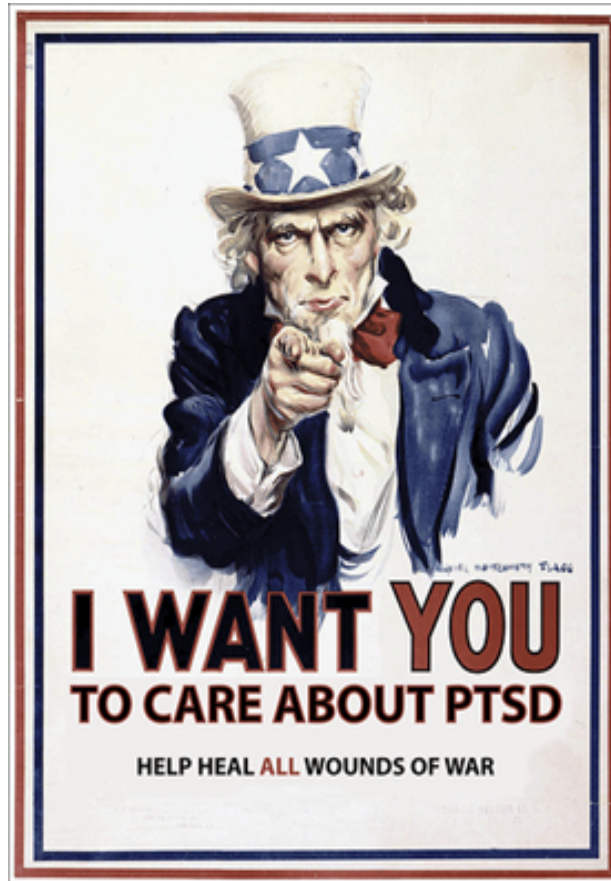


Fig. 12. [I Want You to Care About PTSD](#)

was terrified that this would ruin our friendship. How could I betray his trust and include so many personal stories? But Brandon was moved. Seeing his story written out like this was obviously painful, but it meant that someone cared enough to listen and remember. Maybe, just maybe, he can be loved. Maybe he deserves to be loved.

I told Brandon to take a few days to consider whether

or not I could use his story, but every day I waited was nerve racking. I thought that our friendship was over for good. When he gave me the "OK," I realized that this was a huge step for him. He could have easily chosen to avoid the pain of having his story written for others to see. Instead, he

chose to accept and allow it. Maybe Brandon isn't ready for help yet, but he is coping as best as he can. I hope that one day he will be comfortable with some form of therapy, but I cannot rush him into accepting help before he is ready.

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## Instructor Reflections—Martha Otis on Christian Mock

What I most appreciate in “Enter the Dream State” are the questions steering the paper: Why do dreams so easily elude scientific description? What makes it so difficult to discover why we dream? What happens if we find out? Mock’s work reads so smoothly, and his voice carries such authority, that it’s almost too easy to miss the writer’s hand doing the hard work of writing. But note, for example, the provocative selection of epigraphs before each section, or the skillful framing and reframing of his subject as he proceeds from famous, prophetic dreams to sleep science to dream science to the outer limit of our knowledge in these fields. Mr. Mock says, “Numerous theories and proposals have been published on dreams, and filtering through this material was both frustrating and intriguing. In a world where science has the answer to so many questions, it was refreshing to write on something that’s still puzzling to even the greatest minds in research.” He ends the paper right on that edge, in the company of scientists still struggling to define what we don’t know. Ah! That edge.



English 106 • Spring 2013

### English Composition II: “Writing about Science and Nature”

For your formal paper this semester, you will do an inquiry into something that fascinates you. All semester, reading and discussing the pieces in *Best Science and Nature Writing 2008*, you have been encouraged to develop criteria for what makes good science writing for the general audience. Using these criteria, you can write about anything—even if it does not fit our “science and nature” theme. Remember the two triangles: ethos, pathos, logos; argument, protagonists, cinema. Make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. “A” papers will be very strong in higher order concerns: they will start and end with critical questions, they will offer ideas about your findings, and they will leave the reader unable to so easily make the same old assumptions about this topic.



# Enter the Dream State: A Study of the World Behind Closed Eyes

Christian Mock

ENG 106 • Martha Otis  
Fall 2013

*“Let us learn to dream gentlemen,  
and then perhaps we shall learn  
the truth.”* Fredrich August  
Kekule, 1866

An old clock in the hallway chimed as the first feeble rays of an overcast day slipped through a crack in the curtains. Teams of raindrops slid down the windowsill in an urgent race to the bottom. It was a French morning like any other. Well... almost. One man, dressed in nothing but his nightclothes, was about to change the face of science.

The chemist Fredrich August Kekule von Stradonitz (hell of a name, I know) lay in a deep slumber, unaware of the storm brewing just outside his window. Up to this point in his life, he had been nothing more than a struggling scientist adrift in the sea of his competitive colleagues. He wanted to change that. In the preceding months, Kekule had devoted his life *entirely* to determining the structure of a simple chemical known as benzene. Family and friends began expressing concern about his isolation from society. His journal from those months reveals an enthusiast,

almost hysterical man engaged in his work. But his obsession was not without reason.

Take a look at the plastic in a name brand water bottle. Appreciate the soft bounce of the rubber in your soles. Consider even the overpriced fuel needed to fill the tank of every car in the parking lot. These and many other everyday items require benzene. Without the knowledge of its structure, their components could not be synthesized properly. Kekule, knowing the potential of this compound, worked diligently to discover its properties. Unfortunately, his tireless efforts yielded almost no evidence in his favor. He reported being “near his wits’ end” due to lack of progress (“Famous Dreams”). Failure seemed imminent.

That rainy morning in 1865 changed everything. Like a flash of light in a dark room, Kekule suddenly had every answer he needed. Yet he required no modern technology or well-equipped lab. Oddly enough, he was not even awake when he formulated the heart of his theory on benzene’s structure. The answer came to him in a dream. So how is it possible that all of

Kekule's diligent research was fruitless, but a simple *dream* provided what was needed? The answers may surprise you.

### THE SCIENCE OF SLEEP

*"I love sleep. My life has the tendency to fall apart when I'm awake, you know?"* Ernest Hemingway, 1940

Before one can even begin to explore the realms of dreaming, a necessary precursor must be understood first: sleep. After all, a great deal of activity transpires in the time between turning out the lights and turning off the alarm. The body may be at rest, but the mind is not. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine (AASM) divides sleep into four active stages. The first three phases are categorized as non-rapid eye movement, or NREM (Dotto). As the body enters NREM stages 1 and 2, muscles begin to release tension and the sleeper becomes less aware of his or her external environment. In stage 3, often known as slow-wave sleep, one's brain and bodily awareness become even further detached from physical reality (Montangero). Together, the three NREM phases comprise roughly 75% of activity during sleep. Though they play a significant role, the most important period of slumber - particularly significant to dreamers like Kekule - lies in the remaining portion: Rapid Eye Movement, or REM.

During this phase, the eyes move quickly and without pattern beneath closed eyelids. Muscles lose tone and many neurotransmitters stop activity, leading to a general paralysis of most

bodily activities. Involuntary paralysis like this may seem strange or even dangerous, but it is believed that "[The mind] is protecting the body. REM can cause vivid and often frightening mental images. The body is at risk if free to act upon instinctual reflex" (Dotto). REM paralysis essentially keeps the sleeper from physically responding to these images, eliminating any risk of physical harm during sleep. This allows for a phenomenon that would be otherwise impossible: dreaming. But we'll get to that later.

Though a great deal of information like this is available, with an abundance of contemporary research in support, scientists still struggle to reach a middle ground on why sleep is a necessity. To begin, there is no doubt that sleep is indeed necessary. Countless studies, on both animals and humans, show the damaging consequences brought about by sleep deprivation. In one study, two groups of rats were deprived of both food and water. One group was further deprived of any sleep while the other was allowed a good night's rest. By the end of the testing period, the rats barred from both rest and nutrients died 10 to 20 days earlier than those denied of only food and water (Alhola). Many other researches have repeated this exact procedure with other animals and insects, and the same results surface; those who sleep live longer (Alhola).

Studies on sleep deprivation in humans show similar results. And while no subject has ever been allowed to *die* from such a study, an

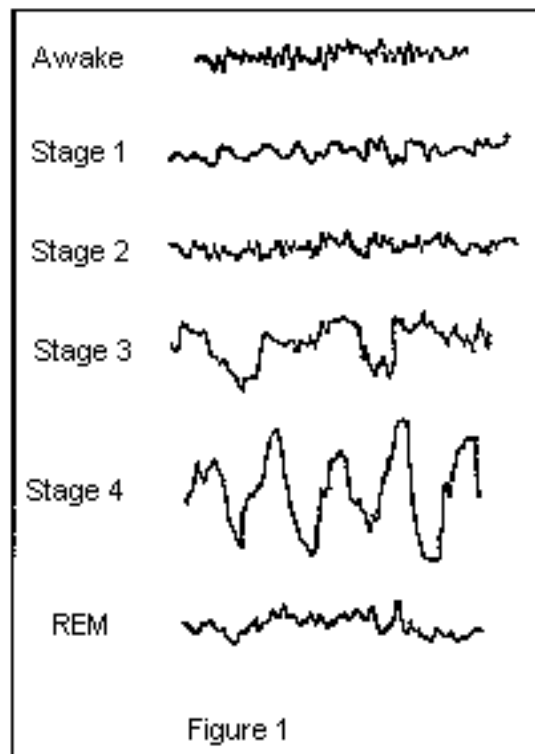
obvious physiological need for sleep becomes apparent. In most studies, subjects who received insufficient sleep exhibited severe irritability, lack of focus, and notable loss in short-term memory capacities (Alhola). For readers, scientific data like this probably isn't necessary to validate the importance of sleep. We all know the *long day* that follows a night of last minute studying or restless tossing and turning.

Sadly, for science at least, to say we sleep simply because we *need* to falls short of a suitable explanation. Such an answer is akin to saying we eat only because we're hungry. Consequently, researchers are giving an increasing amount of attention to the reasons behind sleep. One of the first theories on sleep necessity, proposed by Anderson Zager, stated that it was developed as an evolutionary mechanism to minimize the daily risk creatures may experience (Sejnowski). Not only does sleep limit physical activity, a costly asset in terms of personal energy stores, but it also affects the window of time in which certain creatures behave. It would be considerably

more dangerous for a human to venture into the woods at night than a bat for obvious reasons. Zager's theory subsequently states that sleep cycles evolved alongside creatures' activity windows to promote the best chance of survival (Sejnowski). And though this theory may be true, more recent science suggests even greater possibilities for sleep.

A single common theory in the current state of dream science is being advocated by a rising number of researchers; the brain simply needs time to rest and carry out functions that cannot be completed while awake (Fischbein 733). The

mind, though incredibly powerful and complex, *does* need a break from time to time. The amount of activity it performs throughout the day is immense, and research indeed confirms that the brain "relaxes" during rest (735). Recent testing of sleeping humans and animals shows a significant decrease in many neurotransmitter activities during sleep, particularly during the REM stages (Siegel 92). Equipped with this knowledge, neuroscientists



Brain waves during a typical sleep cycle. Note the similarity between REM and waking brain waves.

Source: Montangero, Jaques. "Dream thought should be compared with waking simulations." *Dreaming* 22.1 (2012): 70. Print.

Jerome Siegel and Michael Rogowski revealed in 1988 that, without sleep, some of these neurotransmitters would fail to function properly. Their study showed that norepinephrine, serotonin, and histamine - all vital during daily activity- lost most receptivity when subjects were deprived of sleep. In contrast, those that were allowed appropriate sleep maintained appropriate levels of receptor sensitivity (94). In a follow-up of this study, Siegel wrote, "The interruption of this neurotransmitter release during REM sleep thus may allow the receptor systems to 'rest' and regain full sensitivity. And this restored sensitivity is crucial during waking..." (95). This is further verified by the previously mentioned REM-induced paralysis, which shuts off these and other neurotransmitters as a protective measure. Current research has yet to disprove this theory (95).

Even with mounting evidence in favor of these and other recent theories, the science of sleep is still relatively new to researchers. Unlike the disciplines of medicine and physics, actually understanding sleep has been considered a serious and worthy endeavor for less than a century. If history is any measure, time and research will shed a great deal more light on this somewhat hazy field. But for now, the words of William Dement, founder of Stanford University's Sleep Research Center, will suffice: "As far as I know, the only reason we need to sleep that is really, really solid is because we get sleepy."

### **TO SLEEP, PERCHANCE TO DREAM**

*"People think dreams aren't real just because they aren't made of matter, of particles. Dreams are real. But they are made of viewpoints, of images, of memories and puns and lost hopes."* -Neil Gaiman, 2005

It wasn't long after neuroscientist Eugene Aserinsky discovered REM in 1952 that he hypothesized dreaming was also occurring during the phase; turns out he was right (Hamzelou). Aserinsky observed that, during REM sleep, subjects' eyes were restless and facial emotions were noticeable. Curious, he began waking subjects following these observations. In virtually every case, the individual reported being in the middle of a dream experience (Montangero). This discovery prompted other scientists to pursue dream research, leading to huge leaps in the development of polysomnography testing (PSG). These tests, which record all physical and mental activity during sleep, promoted greater understanding of the purpose of sleep.

Moreover, these new PSG tests allowed scientists to determine why dreaming occurs almost *exclusively* during REM. For years, it was believed that dreams permeated all cycles of sleep; some were just more memorable than others. Innovative polysomnograms revealed that this was simply not the case. As it turns out,

one's mental activity when awake bears a close resemblance to that of the brain during REM (see Fig. 1). Heart and breathing rates rise, temperatures fluctuate, and, most importantly, neurons enter an excited state. The brain essentially believes that it is awake, consequently forcing any thoughts or feelings to mirror awaking reality (Koch). This is the source of a dream.

So what *exactly* happened during Kekule's visionary dream that forced him to rewrite history? As he later reported in an 1890 speech before the German Chemical Society, Kekule dreamed of serpent writhing violently on the floor in front of him. In his narration of the dream, he described feeling a sense of both dread and curiosity.

Suddenly, however, the snake seized its own tail and formed the outline of a circle on the floor. After seeing this, Kekule awoke and knew exactly what the dream implied (Dierdre). In the days following this reverie, he formed a theory that had never before been proposed; benzene bonded in the shape of a circular, ring-like snake. As research then proved, he was right. Kekule's painful labor had finally paid off. A monumental piece of modern science had been unlocked by a simple REM cycle.

#### **EXPLAINING THE UNEXPLAINABLE**

*"The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind."* –Sigmund Freud, 1900

Though many physiological components behind sleep and dreams are becoming increasingly clear to scientists, many questions still remain. Do we *need* to dream? If so, why? Could there be more to dreaming than the physical world would have us believe, like the seemingly prophetic revelation of Kekule?

Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychology, provides one answer. Even a cursory study of his work will show one thing; everything starts at the subconscious level. Throughout Freudian psychology, there are three "pilots" that control one's mind. The first is the id, which asserts all primitive and instinctual thoughts. Second is the ego, a facet that controls rational and cognizant thinking. And third is the superego, which essentially acts as the brain's conscience (Brealey). In his 1899 publication *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud proposed that the id, usually censored in reality by the superego, is allowed to come forth while the mind is at rest (Brealey). However, Freud's theory does not let the id run wild. Instead, at points when an individual's dream becomes excessively shocking or even harmful, the superego steps in. This, according to Freud, explains the bizarre nature of most dreams. The id is fighting to express wild and often abstract notions, while the superego attempts to condense these concepts into perceptible material. The result is an odd mix of cryptic symbols that are merely acting as a metaphor for the often-suppressed desires of the id (Brealey). Accordingly, Freud asserts that there is indeed a necessity to

dreaming in that it acts as a release; the id is allowed a brief liberation from the superego. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he summarizes this notion with a famously simple phrase: “Dreams are the royal road to the unconscious” (Brealey). Other scientists, however, do not feel that Freud’s road is the right one to travel.

Jerome Siegel, the previously mentioned researcher involved in REM studies, has his own explanation that combines evolutionary necessity with Freud’s notions regarding the id. Siegel’s hypothesis essentially portrays dreaming as a defense mechanism that has evolved over thousands of years. He notes the bizarre and frightening nature often found in dreams but does not attribute this to the authority of the superego. Siegel instead proposes that dreams, particularly the vivid and terrifying ones, are meant to force an individual to prepare for extreme situations when awake (Siegel 94). He suggests that, when confronted with risks or abnormality in the dream state, the mind is better equipped to deal with dangerous situations in reality. The dream state is like a “video game” that allows an individual to “practice dealing with danger” (95).

Siegel further proposes that nighttime reveries help condition the undeveloped minds of young individuals. Dreams, according to Siegel, “... act as a substitute for the external stimulation that prompts neuronal development” (97). They provide a foundation upon which a new brain can build and learn. However, his unique theory that dreaming cultivates the undeveloped

psyche does have a weakness. From an evolutionary perspective, which Siegel makes note of, this hypothesis fails to explain the persistence of dreams in humans after maturity (96). Science has already proven that all creatures’ brains develop within a certain timeline. Evolutionary science would then suggest that, once adulthood is reached, the necessity of dreaming would be discarded (96). Last time I checked, my 57 year old mother still had nightmares about driving a manual transmission car up a hill. We must chalk up Siegel’s theory as unsatisfactory.

In an attempt to find new answers, some contemporary researchers have started thinking entirely outside of the box; the results have been groundbreaking. In an astounding new essay, neuroscientist David Solms, proposes that dreams are not a by-product of slumber. Instead, they allow sleep to happen in the first place (Solms 592). Through his research, Solms has concluded that dreams act as a distraction to keep the brain occupied, allowing the restorative benefits of sleep to commence (593). As he puts it, “Dreaming does for the brain what Saturday-morning cartoons do for the kids; It keeps them sufficiently entertained so that the serious players in the household can get needed recovery time” (593). Solms supports this hypothesis with a mountain of research on dopamine activity during sleep. It has shown that dopamine is responsible for creating a “seeking system” within humans. Its presence promotes focus and anticipation, encouraging an individual to focus on achieving a goal. He concludes that dreams -



which generate heavy dopamine production - simulate a sleeplike seeking system that distracts the individual, allowing everything else to gather needed rest; the system in this case is merely what we would call a dream (595). Solms himself concludes that more research is needed and his theory could be “coincidental,” but it is certainly a step in a promising new direction.

### **A WORLD BEYOND SCIENCE**

*“I believe in everything until it's disproved. So I believe in fairies, the myths, dragons. It all exists, even if it's in your mind. Who's to say that dreams and nightmares aren't as real as the here and now?” -John Lennon, 1972*

Though the shortcomings of dream science explained can potentially be attributed to lack of time and research, one begins to wonder: Is the ultimate answer behind why we dream unattainable by science? Or is there some unknown variable that has no solution? While we as humans will likely never be able to answer this with confidence, history offers its own set of anecdotal data that science cannot hope to explain. Consider Abraham Lincoln, who recounted a dream to his wife one day in 1865. He told her of a vision of mourners parading through the White House; when asked who had died, they responded, “The president was killed by an assassin.” Three days later, Lincoln was murdered by the infamous John Wilkes Booth in a theatre box (“Famous Dreams”).

Does the name Adolf Hitler ring a

bell? Prior to creating his German Nazi regime, he was a soldier in World War I. While napping in a trench, he reported having a fierce nightmare of being buried alive by earth and fire. Upon waking, he left the trench; minutes later, an explosive hit and killed every soldier at his post (“Famous Dreams”). Even the great songwriter Paul McCartney reported composing the hit song “Yesterday” entirely in a dream. It now ranks as one of the most covered and recorded songs in all of history (“Famous Dreams”). And let us not forget the great Fredrich August Kekule von Stradonitz, whose midnight reverie has essentially shaped the world we live in today. It would appear that these instances are controlled by some unseen hand rather than mere systematic coincidence.

Science and the supernatural have always battled for precedence in society. Contemporary researches can reasonably say that the world we live in today was formed by the Big Bang and evolutionary biology. But no theory exists to explain how –or why – these phenomena surfaced in the first place; there is an intangible air surrounding the matter that chemistry or biology simply cannot grasp. The science of dreams appears to follow a similar pattern. Perhaps sleeping and dreaming really are just scientific conundrums, comprised of nothing more than the chemical reactions and evolutionary functionality discussed. Maybe our current knowledge of the mechanisms dreams can be made more complete with a little (or a lot) more time and effort. Or maybe there's something more.

Part of me wants to believe that we'll have all the answers one day. To completely understand of the purpose of dreams would enable science to turn the science fiction of *Inception* into reality. We could become the masters of our own dreams, offering an unseen world of undiscovered potential to every individual. Perhaps this knowledge would even allow society to solve the mysteries that science cannot. The possibilities are endless. Unfortunately, I am not optimistic of this ever happening.

The impossibilities that current science faces, when combined with the visionary dreams recorded by some of history's most important figures, convinces me that one variable will remain undiscovered. Scientific research will continue, and I hope new advances will crumble previous barriers. But for now, I accept that there are some things we'll never know.

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## Instructor Reflections: Charlotte Rogers on Corey Janson

Corey Janson's winning essay continues his winning ways. Corey—from Westin, Florida—came to the University of Miami as a Foote Fellow. Enrolled in the Honors Program, he majors in psychology and political science with minors in math and business law. After graduation, he will prepare for law school—and win his future legal causes.

In addition to his essay on Robert Lowell's "For the Union Dead" in English 106, he wrote two other 98-grade essays, three 95-grade essays, and three 95-grade writing logs. Had he not chosen Lowell's poem, he would have submitted his essay for this contest on Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. "Why did you choose Lowell's poem?" Pausing, he replied, "From our team's discussion and presentation, I found an interest to explore. The more I read, put things together from Lowell's many extended metaphors, the greater the poem. With this passion, I started writing and liked how Lowell's complexity came together in unity."

Corey also wins on the Hurricane baseball team. He played two years on the main team: the catcher. But contrary to the prejudice about catchers, one of his most thrilling events occurred after an injury and return to the spring lineup: he hit a home run on his first up at bat! With hours of practice, games, travel, and classes, he found slight time for extracurricular involvements. He solved that interest this year: Cory—the opinion sports writer—submits his work to the Miami Hurricane. But baseball gave him his one trip to Boston, the setting of Lowell's poem. The team travelled to Boston for its series of games the first week in March. Boston's snow—after the University of Miami team arrived—cancelled the games, creating the vacation to explore Boston.

Exploring a professor's prerogative, I asked Corey, to "list four bits of advice for improved writing based on his process." He replied: "1. Read much by other writers. (In the course, Books That Matter, he is reading these first weeks Frans Johansson's *The Medici Effect* and Shigehisa Kurigama's *The Expressions of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine*.) 2. Start with the thesis in your head—a solid thesis and one not obvious but with meaning to you. This reflects your thoughts, ideas original for me—for you. 3. Revise. I reread all I'm writing as I advance.... The thoughts have to flow unified, especially between paragraphs—with all connected in focus—words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. 4. Stress importance of the ending. Here leave the reader with the overarching feeling of the idea. 5. Read the writing aloud when finished. What sounds good in one's head may differ from what is on the paper." Congratulations, Corey!



## English 106 • Fall 2013 English Composition II

The choice for this literary criticism comes from eight stories and poems, each dealing with our universal problem: violence. These include Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," Tadeusz Borowski's "Silence," Naguib Mahfouz's "The Wasteland," Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover," Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est," Billy Joel's "Goodnight Saigon," and Robert Lowell's "For the Union Dead." Choose one from the eight selections for developing your essay. Narrow the thesis for complete development within four pages; use a fifth page for works cited, both primary and secondary sources of evidence.

# Frayed Roots of a Nation in “For the Union Dead”

Corey Janson

ENG 106 • Charlotte Rogers  
Fall 2013

“That’s what makes America different. That’s what makes us exceptional” (Obama). In a recent speech to the nation, President Obama reminded us of our roots. These roots, like those of the Great Elm on Boston Common, are deeply embedded within America’s social conscience, all at once preserving the great heritage of its past while offering a moral compass for its future. But when these roots begin to fray and the guidance they provide is ignored, our nation inevitably plunges into a moral abyss. We become lost in a sea of sin, without a guiding light on shore to shepherd us in. It is about this dilemma that Robert Lowell writes—during a time marred by *laissez-faire* ethics and glutinous materialism—and it is of the void left behind that he is so deeply critical. In his canonical work, “For the Union Dead,” Lowell offers a biting critique of Boston’s values, and thereby America’s as a whole, to reveal just how far Americans have strayed from the ideals of their founders and of the unyielding avarice left in their wake.

On both the shoulders and the backs of one of the first African-American regiments in history, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and his men carried with them the momentous weight of justice, the idea that all men were

created equal, and even more exacting, the weight of the hope of a nation. In this sense, Lowell alludes to Colonel Shaw to serve two distinct purposes: to establish the moral center of the poem and to expose how far from this center Americans have drifted.

More than anything, Colonel Shaw epitomized the Union’s values: he looked beyond the racial boundary and into the eyes of his regiment as equals. Moreover, his acknowledgement that Blacks were as man and as capable to defend not only their homes, but also their ideals is representative of his enlightened morality. To be sure, Lowell comments that Colonel Shaw “rejoices in man’s lovely, peculiar power to choose life and die” (37-38). His celebration here of personal freedom is reminiscent of the same values Thomas Jefferson espoused, principally the idea that guarantees all men the rights to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. By placing him in the same company as one of our nation’s greatest citizens, Lowell undeniably furthers the case for Colonel Shaw’s inherent rectitude—a case that culminates by characterizing him as being “as lean as a compass-needle” (31-32). In equating the two, Lowell indicates that Colonel Shaw is

the overriding moral-compass of the poem and, more importantly, argues that his actions can serve as a guide to Americans who have lost their way.

As time passes though, the “stone statues” of Colonel Shaw and his men grow “slimmer and younger,” their memories wither away and the principles they fought for erode (45-46). Juxtaposing this with the lifelike vitality of the Shaw memorial at its dedication, where “William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe,” Lowell depicts a country—and specifically the city of Boston—as ignorant of its own history (28). Instead of serving as a symbol of public gratitude, the monument has been reduced to a “fishbone” sticking painfully “in the city’s throat” (29-30). Bostonians, incapable of swallowing their uncomfortable lack of morality, are left with a glaring identity crisis: the inability to reconcile the sacrifice of those memorialized with the continued societal subjugation of the same group.

This ethical crisis that is endemic to Lowell’s setting—1960s Boston and America—is further exacerbated by the city’s rapidly changing landscape, and he uses the construction site of the Boston Common garage to again show the alienation of America’s past principles from its present conscience. Amidst Lowell’s nostalgic reverie, his “hand draws back” at the sudden realization of how far America has departed from the idealism that defined the country during his youth (9). Boston Common, the once “hallowed acreage” that “served as Ralph Waldo Emerson’s family cow pasture” and later as the “parade ground for Union Soldiers,” is being destroyed (Davidson). Questioning the resilience of America’s grand values in

the face of this materialistic destruction, Peter Davidson of *The Atlantic* asks, “In what light could the heroism of a Robert Gould Shaw be appreciated when after only a hundred years the cherished common ground of Boston’s, and Lowell’s, past was being transformed into a stable for machines?” By juxtaposing the boyish enthusiasm Lowell once felt for the old South Boston Aquarium with the ominous “barbed and galvanized fence” now surrounding the Common, we can see this departure from history (Lowell 12-13). Moreover, we feel the prison-like sentiment the fence invokes, finally realizing that Bostonians are imprisoned by their own worldly pursuits.

Furthering the dissociation, Lowell portrays “yellow dinosaur steamshovels” tormenting the city with their “grunts,” “gouging” out Boston’s noble roots “as they cropped up tons of mush and grass,” and leaving behind only a vast “underworld”—a stark moral void suggestive of the city’s overall moral degeneration (14-16). The Statehouse is literally “shaking over the excavations,” and Colonel Shaw’s monument is left “propped by a plank splint,” suffering to remain erect in the face of the construction’s avaricious “earthquake” (21-24). Endangered by the growing cleavage between past and present, the city’s structure, foundation, and heritage are at the precipice of collapse (Sarwar 126).

Without the self-awareness that is required to emerge from this brink, however, Boston’s “savage servility slides by on grease” (Lowell 67-68). Concerned with only their “giant finned cars,” the city “nose[s] forward” into a rapacious immorality, and Lowell’s allusion to World War II proves it (66).



“There are no statues for the last war here,” he remarks, because there is nothing to celebrate; the intentional slaughter of hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women, and children in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is one of the most—if not the most—morally abject decisions in United States history (54). What is present, though, is a “commercial photograph” depicting “Hiroshima boiling over a Mosler Safe,” marketed for its ability to survive even a nuclear blast (55-58). By ignoring the decimation surrounding this valiant Mosler Safe, the advertisement encapsulates the material concerns that dominate the city—sure, countless lives have been forever lost, but our money endures! How lucky we are to have invested in a Mosler! This woeful indifference for America’s once grand values makes the advertisement initially possible, as it echoes the sentiments of Boston’s newly commercialized mentality.

Essentially, then, Lowell’s reference to rock-and-roll America says it best: the Mosler Safe is more than Boston’s average rock star; it is the city’s “rock of ages,” beloved as the monument embodying the values of this new era (Lowell 58). A nation built on the ideals of the great and the sacrifices of the brave has been reduced to commercially exploiting mass-murder to further its financial interests. Morals have been traded for money, and consequently, America has become a materialistic aberration of what it once was, ignorant of “the horrible costs in human suffering [that] paid for its current affluence” (Thurston 100).

Now that the link with America’s monumental history has been severed,

Boston’s guiding moral roots have undoubtedly frayed. As a result, “the ditch is nearer” than ever, Lowell argues (53). It’s time for America to start climbing out.

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