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Critiquing Academic Culture with Satire through Lady Lazarus, A Fictional Biography

Amber R. Perry
University of New Orleans, aroseperry@gmail.com

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Critiquing Academic Culture with Satire through Lady Lazarus, a Fictional Biography

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English

by

Amber Rose Perry

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
The Set-Up: Using Reader Expectations as a Tool for Mocking.....	1
A Traditional Foundation for <i>Lady Lazarus</i>	6
Dissecting Calliope and Altschul's Narration and the Morath Myths.....	14
The Muse, "Arraignment" and Posthumous Fame: What Does Altschul Want from Readers, Fans, Critics and Academia?.....	30
Works Cited.....	40
Vita.....	42

Abstract

In the tradition of academic satire, *Lady Lazarus* is the fictional biography of the daughter of American rock musicians. In her late teens she rises to fame as confessional poet, who, despite only publishing one collection of poems during her brief life, becomes an overnight sensation. Author Andrew Altschul is satirizing academia's need to be a part of popular culture and in doing so, privileges the ability to use controversy and conventional beauty to sell books as opposed to creating quality art. By focusing on how the author uses Hans Robert Jauss' horizons of expectations, unreliable narrators, anecdotes in biography and the economics of fame as a deciding factor in academia, the author has created a dense and punitive opinion of academia's inclusion of popular culture into its world.

parody, pop culture, horizon of expectations, Sylvia Plath, confessional poetry

I. The Set-Up: Using Reader Expectations as a Tool for Mocking

Fictional biographies and academic novels have existed for as long as western novels have been printed. From the 18th century Scriblerus Club to the present, writers have taken advantage of preconceived ideas of the fictional biography and used them to express their dissatisfaction with politics, religion, education and the like. For the members of the Scriblerus Club, it was to illustrate the ease with which writers abuse information and the readers who are oblivious to said information because of the labels “nonfiction,” “letters,” “memoir” and the connotations of legitimacy they carry with them. Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal,” for example, puzzled even the most educated readers. In short, Swift’s essay proposed impoverished Irish families sell their children to affluent families to eat. Swift’s introducing the idea of cannibalism and infanticide to remedy poverty was twofold; the first examined the plight of the Irish, especially at the impoverished level, and the second looked at the various failed methods of the rich telling the poor how to make their lives better.

Andrew Foster Altschul combines literary biography and satirical academic fiction to create *Lady Lazarus*, a novel set at the turn of the 20th century ostensibly illustrating the necessity of academics to be more circumspect about the pop culture used in the classroom. Academic novels, Elaine Showalter says in *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and its Discontents*, did not fully become satirical in nature until the 1950s. With Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim*, the genre began to “comment on contemporary issues, satirize professional stereotypes and educational trends, and convey the pain of intellectuals called upon to measure themselves against each other and against their internalized expectations” (5). In addition to being set on a college campus, the satirical academic novel pokes fun at the collegiate lifestyle, usually the strife between professors and their colleagues, administrators and/or the students. This thesis posits that Altschul sees the

21st century academic novel as chronicling the encroaching impact society has on academic life. Showalter describes the second half of the 20th century academic novels as a reflection of the changing society created by academic life, *Lady Lazarus* sees society pushing academics to bring lowbrow popular culture into the classroom.

Altschul's novel echoes what Kenneth Womack's essay, "Academic Satire: The Campus Novel in Context" says about the genre. Quoting Brian A. Connery, Womack argues that, "academic satire...aims its satiric barbs at the reader. In this way, he argues, academic novelists deny their readers the ironic, self-congratulatory pleasures of neoclassical satire because the readers themselves, often academics, function as the texts' ultimate targets" (328). Altschul's audience, then, doubles as the cause and cure of his satire because of the literary devices he uses to convey his message. Altschul equally blames academia and pop culture for lacking rigor, dismantling the canon and including celebrity studies in academic discourse. However, instead of writing an essay or a nonfiction book illustrating the abuses and misuses of modern collegiate studies, Altschul creates a fictional world inspired by actual people to illustrate the decline he sees. Like the Scriblers Club before him, Altschul foregrounds his novel as a fictional biography to illustrate to readers how close reality is to fiction and vice versa.

Unlike the readers of *The Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus*, the readers of *Lady Lazarus* are aware that the book they are reading is fiction, yet they believe it to be a simple satire of the lives of married musicians Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love — depicted as Brandt and Penelope Morath — and their Sylvia Plath-like daughter, Calliope. Hans Robert Jauss writes in "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory" that literary work, "even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as something absolutely new" but "awakens memories of that which was already read, brings the reader to a specific emotional attitude" that "arouses expectations" which

can “be maintained intact or altered, reoriented, or even fulfilled ironically in the course of the reading” (12). This statement applies to Altschul’s novel. There is no new form he is creating, but what he is doing is using readers’ preconceived notions of literary biographies. Instead of shedding light on the psyche of his subjects, his text is actually examining his audiences’ ideas of how much pop culture should be applied in academia.

To achieve this realization that the novel is a satire, Altschul uses fictional biography to lure readers in and then uses feature writing style, literary theory and academic writing techniques in a self-referential way to the point where readers realize they are “the texts’ ultimate targets.” Narrator-author Altschul¹, the unofficial biographer of the Morath family, blurs the line between fan and critic. Author Altschul² echoed Wolfgang Iser’s four perspectives of narration, which are narrator, characters, plot and the fictitious reader. Physical readers have to contend with the narrator’s version of events, the varying character interviews, the Author’s sub-plots and how the physical reader is supposed to respond to the narrator’s story. Although these four “may differ in order of importance, none of them on its own is identical to the meaning of the text” which is the result of “their constant intertwining throughout the reading in the reading process” (113). Like Charles Kinbote in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, Narrator Altschul is constantly injecting himself into the text and during the second half of the novel, the text focuses on his journey in gathering information on the Moraths. Kinbote and Altschul are unreliable narrators, yet because of the proximity to their subjects, they both become executors of their subject’s memories as well as being their biographers.

Author Altschul’s overarching question in this novel is, can the academic world survive and be rigorous when the writers of biographies and critiques are so smitten his or her subjects

¹ The fictional narrator of *Lady Lazarus*.

² The physical writer of *Lady Lazarus*.

that they cannot see flaws or will not allow opposing discourse. Instead of posing this question straightforwardly, Author Altschul uses satire to illustrate his trepidations. Because Calliope is so heavily modeled after Sylvia Plath, incorporating a modern take on Plath's work is necessary to have a better understanding of Author Altschul's satire. Janet Badia asserts that such fanaticism can taint artists' perceptions in the academic world in her book, *Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Women Readers*. Tracing the discourse about Plath's work from her death to the present, Badia finds that many in academia disregard Plath scholarship because they see those who study her as, "young women," "uncritical consumers," "Plath addicts" and "literary cannibals" (2) "blinded by illness or feminist ideology, [they] fail to understand how such a work should be properly read or valued" (7). This is how Author Altschul positions Narrator Altschul, like Kinbote, as the wrong kind of biographer, one not to be admired or copied. Both men lack the academic rigor to critically assess poetry and their fandom gets in the way of true detective work necessary to write a biography.

This interpretation of Altschul's novel takes the position that the reader has to understand Jauss' theory of reader response. The level of satire goes from a large, general critique of celebrity biography into a more nuanced look at using pop culture as a tool to engage students. Within reader response theory, Jauss says that readers interpret a text based on their historical, social and economical frames of reference. Readers of *Lady Lazarus* will have to be familiar with Cobain and Love as well as social science departments in order to understand its underlying meaning. They will have to be aware of the "continuous horizon setting and horizon changing," which "determines the relation of the individual text to the succession of texts which form the genre" (Jauss 13); as a result of these ever changing horizons, the characters and their outcomes do not only surprise readers, but also these horizons "evoke responses so that they can frustrate

[readers]” (13). Calliope and Narrator-author Altschul, the main characters of the novel, do not follow preconceived ideas of fictional subject-and-biographer relations as *Pale Fire* does, because as Jauss has stated, literature is evolving. It is never revealed or suggested that Calliope is aware of Narrator-author Altschul’s existence, yet he was able to include her narrative. Instead of the biographer being directly involved in the downfall of the subject, revealing a sordid past or another character in the biography, Author Altschul has narrator-author Altschul question the role of biography and its relation to the commercialization of the subjects the biographies discuss. Referring back to *Faculty Towers*, Showalter says 20th century academic novels were internally satirical, but for Altschul’s 21st century academic novel, the satire is in academia’s inability to see that it is being used to legitimize mediocre pop culture. It is because of these pop culture references that readers are able to apply a reader response lens to the text. Jauss writes that:

Whenever the writer of a work is unknown, his intent not recorded, or his relationship to sources and models only indirectly accessible, the philological question of how the text is “properly” to be understood, that is according to its intention and its time, can best be answered if the text is considered in contrast to the background of the works which the author could expect his contemporary public to know either explicitly or implicitly. (19)

If readers are aware of the horizons they believe are expected of them, of Author Altschul’s pop culture references — fictitious, real, caricatured; they are able to grasp the novel’s aims without having experienced this style of novel before. Once readers understand the horizons in which the author is expecting them to reference, *Lady Lazarus* then becomes a scathing indictment of academia’s willingness to include popular culture into their classrooms for popularity and

relevance. The novel transforms itself from merely a parody of the public lives of Courtney Love, Kurt Cobain and their daughter Francis Bean and into something much bigger. Using traditional storytelling tropes to make the satire “stick.”

This thesis will primarily focus on the chapters in which Narrator-author Altschul is narrating. Those are: “Early Influences,” “Milestones, Millstones and Maelstroms,” “The Hard Kernel of the Real,” “The Silver Cord,” “The Hanged Man,” “[The symbol for Calliope/Muse], or the Murder of the Thing,” “More Terrible Than She Ever Was” and “In Girum Imus Nocte Et Consumimur Igni³.”

II. A Traditional Foundation for a New Model

To apply Steven Mailloux’s general claim, the entirety of Author Altschul’s novel is founded upon his encouragement of “expectations in his readers so that he can later disappoint them and use that disappointment to educate the reader’s perceptions” (70) about the plot and moral of the novel. Positing the novel as a standard biography, Narrator-author Altschul begins the biography of Calliope Bird Morath with the event that would define every facet of her life, the morning of her father’s suicide when she was eight years-old: “in the context of all that was to come, one might easily overlook what happened that morning, write it off as merely one of many spectacles in a life destined, from the first, to be spectacular” (5). Author Altschul is purposefully leading readers to believe *Lady Lazarus* will only focus on the life and death of “the most famous poet in America...beloved to deconstructionists and culture theorist and fifteen-year-old girls alike” (5) when in fact it will become a satirical study on academia’s—specifically

³ Latin. A rough translations reads, “Roundabout We Go into the Night and the Fire Consumed.”

English departments—need to be included in popular culture that it will promote the daughter of two rock musicians with questionable poetry talent. Our attention is focused on Calliope's traumatic experience of seeing her father's suicide and her mother's downward spiral in the aftermath. When the narrator tells us that his book, *Lady Lazarus*, will be a more truthful version than the one Penelope "has told [Calliope] for the last fourteen years" (9) because his version will avoid the "mythology" that surrounds the Morath family (10), we have no choice but to believe him.

As a result of this, Narrator-author Altschul takes liberties in setting up the narration. This is a literary biography, but how are readers within the novel supposed to take his artistic freedoms? Peter Nagourney's essay, "The Basic Assumptions of Literary Biography," asserts that "it has become fashionable in biographical literature to acknowledge the inevitable subjectivity of the biographer's choices" (90) in literary biographies. Nagourney's comments on subjectivity rely on the idea that no matter whom the biographer interviews, he or she will have a specific bias. An objective biography would encompass mainly factual dates of births, deaths, marriages, divorces, battles or speeches with little anecdotal stories. If that were the case, he says, the biography would not be very interesting. The literary biography focuses on facts told in a stylistic manner that is engaging to readers. It is told more in a traditional dramatic structure. But when the biographer asks his subject's teacher to recall memories or assessments of their academic record, readers are drawn in by these accounts because of the anecdotal form. Depending on whom the biographer is interviewing and his or her relationship to the subject, Nagourney writes, "there is no absolute truth about a man, only relative and partial truths which are themselves limited by humanity, and by depending upon subjective statements by the biographical subject and his contemporaries" (90).

This then leads us to anecdotes and their effects on biographies. There is an excellent chance no one gave Narrator-author Altschul the details on Calliope's sliding "quietly out of bed, [taking] her father's yellow, rhinestone-rimmed sunglasses from the dresser, and perching them on the crown of her head in the manner of the famous photo of him from the cover of *Time*" (1), but there is an emotional connection readers will have with the subject. Narrator-author Altschul is illustrating to readers the connection and influence Brandt had with his daughter, making his sudden death all the more tragic for Calliope to the readers.

Biographers are supposed to have limited creative license with their subjects, yet Narrator-author Altschul exemplifies Nagourney's thesis that even with the most objective writer, a biographer can never get to the bottom of "truth" because the subject has sometimes "expressed himself incompletely, sometimes dishonestly, usually without thinking about the use his writings would have" (98). Biographers come with an agenda; in the case of Alice Walker, it was to revive Zora Neale Hurston's work as an important black woman writer during the Harlem Renaissance. The narrator points to this fact when he writes:

And what of the poet's inner life, that strange country of unscaled peaks, arid expanses...knowable to us only through the medium of words, the serpentine vehicle of syntax? For that is all we are left with, what you, the reader, are unarguable confronted with at this very moment: verbal representations of a subjectivity that is not present — a shadow of flickering on a cave wall, a ghost. Any biography quickly comes up against the problem of exteriority, the inability to re-create the particular experience out of the common, primitive material of language. (Altschul 116-7)

If Calliope's interviews and poetry cannot be trusted as accurate accounts and assessments of factual events, what is the job of the biographer and reader? Nagourney sums the job up as "to understand the complexities of a human being" (98). Then the reader must evaluate the interviews the Narrator-author has included in his biography. Author Altschul creates typical interviewees who shed positive and negative light on Calliope's life: there is the fame-hungry public relations manager Rhonda Lubinski; the PhD candidate Taryn Glacé who builds her academic career on Calliope Morath Studies; and Roshi Bob, a Buddhist guide who befriends Calliope and the Beekeeper. In this sense, Author Altschul is trying to provide readers a typical biographical sketch in a biography. Readers know Narrator-author Altschul's objective for his Calliope biography is to present the poet in a more positive light, focusing more on her talent and perceived doomed fate, so it makes sense that Author Altschul would have layered and complex interviewees. Neither Penelope nor Calliope are the villains in this tale; if any one entity has to be given the title villain or foe, it would be the concept of fame. But what we see in these interviews is Narrator-author Altschul's attempts to demonstrate the many facets of truth and the complications behind getting to these truths. Because Narrator-author is not an academic, who would have learned critical analysis, he is leaning on his journalist training by implying an angle to this biography.

There are times in the narrative where Author Altschul speaks through Narrator-author Altschul to convey his thesis. When discussing the various truths in biographical writing, the dual Altschuls ask:

Which version of these events is the Truth? A faithful detailed review of the facts—or a highly stylized, impressionistic rendering not only limited to the subjective perceptions of one of the participants, but

undoubtedly distorted by the poetic necessity to reconcile action
with theme? Can there be a truth based in one to the
exclusion of the other? And how is the biographer, devoted
to Truth, supposed to distinguish? How is he to know? (136)

The two Altschuls add that although they have letters and journals from Calliope, “without the speaker’s presence, [it] continually mocks the inadequacy of that narrative, exposing it as a mere construction of words” (136-7).

The novel has one hundred and sixty-six footnotes because readers of Author Altschul’s *Lady Lazarus* expect footnotes as a result of their becoming accustomed to them in biographies. The footnotes give authority to Narrator-author Altschul’s reporting, and readers even though they are aware it is a fictional tale, expect Author Altschul to follow the basic rules of biographical form. What is interesting about Author Altschul’s footnotes is that they fraudulently, of course, reference factual publications and living people, giving readers the necessary horizons on which to interpret specific passages. Narrator-author Altschul says that the pearl-handled letter opener Calliope uses to unwrap Christmas presents is possibly the same letter opener “a kneeling Brandt had once offered, handle-first, to Penelope, begging her to end his suffering,” an act which was detailed in “*People, Billboard...and The Christian Science Monitor*” (4). Later on, when confronted with romantic rumors surrounding Calliope with various men, narrator-author Altschul writes, “the author shall resist the tendency to focus on the salacious details of Calliope’s romantic attachments, an obsession which has all too frequently gripped tawdry-minded critics” (103).

In this case, Narrator-author Altschul is not using footnotes to legitimize a “fact,” but is using the footnote to satirically steer audiences away from the topic of Calliope’s sexual

activities. By continually declaring his refusal to discuss Calliope's alleged sex life, the narrator, and to a larger extent Author Altschul, is discussing it. Second, Shari Benstock writes that the use of footnotes "highlight the interplay between author and subject, text and reader," which, "give[s] us occasion to speculate on self-reflective narration as an aspect of textual authority" (205). Benstock makes the distinction that while we may think footnotes in scholarly works differ from footnotes in fictional works, "the footnote in fiction operates in much the same way as it does in criticism: to call attention of the presence of author and reader on the textual grounds" (205). For Author Altschul, this description is twofold; his use of footnotes provides readers with a horizon in which to ground them and gives the author another avenue to showcase his satire. Illustrating the narrator-author's lack of self-awareness, Author Altschul writes, "The author is certain he was meant to be included in the list [of journalists and biographers who would receive approval and documents to write their pieces about the Moraths], as he had recently sent a proposal and sample chapter to Lubinski Management, along with a query regarding authorization for the biography" (254). Twice more Narrator-author Altschul uses the footnotes to dismiss and scold critics for discussing Calliope's romantic attachments. He writes of Calliope and a staff member from *Saturday Night Live*: "as for the rumors of a sexual tryst between the two, the author takes this as merely the worst kind of New York tittle-tattle," "unworthy of even the briefest consideration here" (220). If Calliope's romantic relationships are so unworthy as the narrator states, then why continue to mention them? Author Altschul is again having fun with readers in his overarching theme of satirizing biographers. Calliope's relationships are layered satire. It is first mocking the narrator's emotional attachment to Calliope; as his son remarks how much the poet favors the narrator's deceased wife and how the

narrator wants to see Calliope as a daughter-figure and second, his inability to seriously dissect his subject's personal life for critical analysis.

As Nagourney has previously stated, it is the biographer's job to write a "coherent view of the complex life" of his subject while sifting through mountains of documents, "never quite certain whether his selections are based on his prejudices, truth about his subject, or his intuitions about the needs of his book" (98). Narrator-author Altschul, who revered Calliope's father, sees the poet as his daughter and as biographer, protector of her image. He asks the readers in his footnotes if they have "learned nothing about the amoral voraciousness of the publicity industry" (220). As a result of Narrator-author Altschul's heavy-handedness towards these rumors and the people who propagate them, Author Altschul is illustrating biographers' prejudices to the extreme. The biographer claims to write about the subject's work and life, yet a subject's sexual past is a part of the subject's life, especially when that subject is a confessional poet who uses sexuality in many of her poems. By avoiding the truth of Calliope's sexual past, readers of Narrator-author Altschul will have a hard time reconciling the overt sexuality of Calliope's poetry with the chaste, almost virgin-like life the author is presenting. Through creating an author who defends his or her subject in an editorial approach, Author Altschul is satirizing biographers while revealing pronounced agendas. It is the biographers' job to confront the truth and present all evidence to readers, allowing them to come to his or her own conclusions. In constantly interjecting the biographers' own opinions, those opinions lessens the biography's credibility.

In using real publications and people as evidence for the text, Author Altschul is providing levels of truth that, as defined in Lisa Zunshine's essay, "Eighteenth-Century Print Culture and the 'Truth' of Fictional Narrative," are not believable to readers because they are

aware the story they are reading is fictional; the biographer provides “certain extratextual⁴ and intratextual⁵ cues to which...readers would be attuned” (221). Normally the addition of footnotes creates “visual cues in [his] culture [that] are understood to attest to the respectability and integrity of the source of this particular type of printed information” (222). Zunshine writes that the “very first sentence in any book provides the first set of intratextual cues” (222), but that for readers of the eighteenth century, this was a complicated test to pass. Because book writing and publishing were seen as exceedingly expensive endeavors only for the highly educated and wealthy, readers automatically believed the books to be true. Using the Scriblerian’s fictional book as an example, she says its goal was to ““obscure the already dubious line between authentic and spurious publications until the reading public became bewildered”” (225).

However, Author Altschul’s goal is not to bewilder or confuse his readers. In a sense, Author Altschul’s argument is that academia is to approach pop culture not as a fad to retain students, but to study cultural moments and movements that have defined and sustained a generation or subgroup. Taryn Glacé, the PhD student whose published work *Karl. Che. Kaliopé.*, is predicated on the notion that Calliope’s poetry should be viewed through a Marxist critical lens. Author Altschul invite the readers to ask how long can Glacé’s career last on Calliope’s singular work. Although Author Altschul gives Taryn insightful observations about Calliope and pop culture, Narrator-author Altschul is never far behind reminding readers that like the capitalists profiting from the Moraths’ downfall whom Taryn is railing against, she and those who are also engaging in Morath Studies are profiting as well.

⁴ Outside of the literary text itself. In regard to how the term is being used, it means *Lady Lazarus* would “look” like a literary biography. It would have a literary title, front and back cover design, serious font type, be published by a university press and the author would have the literary credentials on par with the subject matter.

⁵ Within the confines of the text. Stylistically, *Lady Lazarus* would resemble other literary biography in its tone, rigorous research and editing.

III. Dissecting Calliope and Altschul's Narration and the Morath Myths

The first chapter of the novel opens with Narrator-author Altschul beginning the biography in a typical fashion. Authors have creative license to start a biography before the birth of its subject or at the point where the subject begins their transformation from ordinary to extraordinary; this narrator chose the latter. Narrator-author Altschul says that beginning his biography of Calliope at age eight, highlights “the singular way in which this moment served as both confluence and catalyst, gathering all the strands of genetics and poetics, of nature and nurture and her formidable will, and propelling her thenceforth into the life that awaited her, the life of a true monstrosity, of Calliope Bird Morath, Death Artist” (5). Here Author Altschul is following the conventions of biographical narrative. The narrator-author tells readers that Calliope's path to becoming a “Death Artist” began at age eight and that her life, and her parents' life before the incident, has no bearing on the woman she would become. The narrator assumes this without any confirmation from Calliope or her mother.

However objective the Narrator-author may think his biography is, Author Altschul wastes no time dismantling readers' preconceived notions that the narrator-author is not an objective observer. Benstock homes in on the notion of a deliberate unreliable narrator when she says, “the author is always aware of the reader's presence...the persona who speaks in the guise of the author therefore plays a double role, existing in the narrative...but continually extending its boundaries to include the reader” (207). The unreliability of the narrator in this type of fiction can only work if the reader is aware of the author's intent for the narrator, resulting in “the ‘real’ action becom[ing] the dramatic conflict between the author and the reader.

Both Altschuls leave out a preliminary introduction. Many standard biographies have an introduction in which the author states their reason for writing the biography and how the audience should read their work. In Manning Marable's *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, Marable calls Malcolm, "a master of public rhetoric," who could "artfully recount tales about his life that were partially fiction" (10). And as such, Marable calls his subject "Janus-faced" because "the trickster is unpredictable, capable of outrageous transgressions; the minister saves souls, redeems shattered lives, and promises a new world" (11). The introduction to the Malcolm X biography gives readers an understanding of why Marable titled the book "Reinvention": readers are supposed to see the subject as someone who is continually reinventing his life and personal narrative for the sake of survival. Without an introduction, readers can be confused as to the author's purpose and through what lens should the subjects be viewed.

Author Altschul is alerting readers to the fact that this biography is fictional by using vague dates and by assigning created quotes to real people and publications. Richard Beach says in *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories* that, "in adopting the role of the 'narrative audience,' a reader accepts what the speaker is saying as truth. At the same time, a reader may sense that the speaker is not reliable and in doing so, may self-consciously reflect on how they are applying narrative conventions to respond to a story" (28), which means that he or she has signed on to actively decipher Author Altschul's many meanings for the novel. Although the author employs many of the conventions of a conventional biography, Author Altschul's purpose is to allow readers to create their own conclusions about the novel and arrive at his thesis on their own. *Lady Lazarus* is to be read as a satirical parable of what is currently happening to academia, but unlike typical biographical works, there is no introduction giving insight into the biographer's rationale for writing about this particular subject.

Narrator-author Altschul's fandom⁶ of Brandt and Calliope is apparent, and for readers, this complicates his assessment of their talent and the biography as a whole. When Marable writes that "the great temptation for the biographer of an iconic figure is to portray him or her as a virtual saint, without the normal contradictions and blemishes that all human beings have" (13), he argues the biographer is doing a disservice to both the reader and the memory of the subject. Because Narrator-author Altschul goes to greater lengths to avoid Calliope's sexual trysts than he does to search for truth, readers are aware of his partiality. Marable goes on to write that as a result of working on the biography for over two decades, his bias towards his subject as faded as a result of "many years in the effort to understand the interior personality and mind of Malcolm" (13). Narrator-author Altschul is of the opposite mind. Instead of taking his time to understand and digest the events of Calliope's life, he is in a hurry to be the first to publish a definitive biography; he rushes a visit with Roshi Bob at the Mountaintop Zen Center for absolute answers when Roshi answers him in riddles and parables. Author Altschul has created a biographer who is more concerned with the speed with which he can publish his biography, so he can be included in the national discussion of her, than with the time necessary to make sense of Calliope's life and work.

Chapter 8's "The Silver Cord" begins with Narrator-author Altschul writing of the insurmountable grief he experienced after learning of Brandt's death. His wife finds him at Ocean Beach, a place made popular by Brandt and his band, Terrible Children. Narrator-author Altschul tries to explain to his wife why he cannot leave the beach with the other mourners: "It

⁶ A slang term that illustrates a group of people joined by a common interest (usually a musical act, video game, book series or sports team) who spend considerable amounts of time involved with said interest. This can include, but is not limited to: on-line groups, regular physical meetings (reenactments), creation of fan fiction and art. Members of fandoms also have names: Janeites (Jane Austen), Potterheads (*Harry Potter*), Trekkies ("Star Trek") and Whovians ("Doctor Who").

was his⁷ close relationship with the deceased and his life of the music which had brought him there, his empathy for human suffering which bade him stay” (219). Those two paragraphs are quickly undercut by his pronouncement of his biography’s goal: “the author takes it as his sacred mission to avoid revision and romanticism in his work, German philosophy be damned! For that reason, he has set himself a simple, if arduous, task: to objectively recount the factual existence of the poet named Calliope” (219). What these paragraphs illustrate is the narrator’s inability to grasp Brandt’s lack of interest in talking with the narrator, leading readers to question his familiarity with the Morath family. He touts his closeness with Brandt, yet even then in his recorded memories, their exchanges seemed one sided:

He had known the poet’s father in the last years of his life, known him as something more than an acquaintance or colleague, having been close to Brandt in age and circumstance: They had been married in the same year, their careers had risen in rough parallel. At the time of their last encounter, the author had himself recently become a father, a fact he pointed out to Brandt at the conclusion of the band’s homecoming concert...They had much in common, he told the singer, they were soldiers in the same army, struggling for the same revolution, a suggestion which elicited a grunt of approval. (114)

A few paragraphs down, this event between the Narrator-author’s fact and the dialogue quoted in the book are at odds. He begins about asking Brandt when should they have another interview by saying, ““should I drop by the studio this week? We’d love to get an exclusive on how the new album’s coming. Or the five of us could have a beer, do a casual thing’,” with Brandt replying, ““Sure, man, whatever. You gotta talk to the label’,” which ended with Narrator-author Altschul

⁷ Narrator-author sometimes refers to himself in the third person. This can be seen as Author Altschul satirizing the stereotypical authorial voice that nonfiction work often time has.

answering, ““Right, right...Proper channels. I’m hip”” (115). These exchanges have been created by Author Altschul to mock certain biographers who try and have been too “close” to his or her subject. There is no academic or critical distance in which the narrator views Brandt and Terrible Children’s music.

Narrator-author’s Altschul’s inflated view of his personal and professional relationship with Brandt and his unreliability in giving readers an accurate account of events in their lives are qualities that Greta Olson argues enhances the story because they suggest to readers that the author is trying to highlight a specific topic or theme for readers. In her essay “Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators,” Olson quotes Wayne Booth as defining unreliable narrators as “those who articulate values and perceptions that differ from those of the implied author” (94). To understand Author Altschul’s intent for *Lady Lazarus*, we must first realize that his thinly veiled Narrator Altschul is not himself, but a representative of society which hero worships to the point where its believed they have a personal connection to the “hero.” Narrator-author Altschul’s unreliability as a narrator is not a flaw, but a mode for Author Altschul to illustrate his concept of a biased biographer.

Author Altschul shows readers Narrator-author Altschul’s blindness to reality in chapter 5, “The Hard Kernel of the Real.” Calliope is visiting a fasting Beekeeper, trying to get him to rejoin society while ranting about the public wanting more of her; ““there’s this creepy guy in San Diego who says he knew my father, now he wants to write my biography”” (138). In the attached footnote Narrator-author Altschul writes, “here she is likely referring to Edwin Decker, a local hack vastly unqualified for such an undertaking” (138). Readers understand Booth’s use of irony as a narration device. Even his instance of injecting himself into Calliope’s biography is questionable. When Narrator-author writes:

The author watched from the comfort of his living room, where he was spending a pleasant evening with his son, enjoying the kind of bonding all too rare in the turbulent days of a child's late adolescence, when peer pressure and media culture combine so virulently with raw biology, often resulting in the kind of parent-child schism the author was determined to avoid. (224)

For Author Altschul, if the narrator cannot discern between his private family troubles and the biography of someone else, how can he possibly be a reliable authority on Calliope? The narrator litters the biography with quips about his fragmented relationship with his son, yet except for a section where his son and Calliope meet, the child has no real bearing on the narrative. Mailloux, author of *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction* would suggest that the type of writing Author Altschul is undertaking is an "expectation disappointment structure" where the writer "encourages expectations in his reader so that he can later disappoint and use that disappointment to educate the reader's perceptions" (70). Benstock says, "this overt wrenching of the storytelling from the narrator is part of the attempt to invert our notions of what to expect from a narrative" (210). That is to say that Author Altschul wants his readers constantly to be aware of the narrator's voice and his intentions.

Author Altschul is not mocking Narrator-author Altschul's point of view in the way that many see Nabokov mocking Kinbote, but Author Altschul is discrediting biographers like his character as a small part of a larger force that is responsible for the decline in serious academic scholarship. If the reader can interpret the narrator's unreliability as a marker of the author conveying a larger message rather than lampooning biographers, Olson reasons that those readers will "share the inside joke and enjoy having survived the initiation ritual the text appears to require" (95). Olson goes on to write that there are five indicators writers use to signal when a

writer is using a narrator's unreliability as a mode of irony rather than a character flaw, and Author Altschul's novel fits three: "obvious grammatical, stylistic, or historical mistakes on the part of the narrator; conflicts between fictional facts; and discrepancies between the values asserted in the work and those of the author in other contexts" (95). As a result, Olson says that Booth does not equate an unreliable narrator to being a conscious liar, but rather his or her perceptions of reality do not fit societal norms. This is the case for Narrator-author Altschul. His intentions are honorable, but readers question his ability to be an objective biographer.

However unreliable the narrator-author may be, Calliope is just as capricious in her versions of "Truth." Sharing the narration of the book with Narrator-author Altschul, readers get no answer to whether Calliope actually spoke to the narrator or if her account is a creation of Narrator-author Altschul's imagination because many times Calliope's narrations are often just in-depth accounts of Narrator-author's Altschul's speculations. Despite watching her father commit suicide, Calliope still believes her father is alive: "The death certificate was always a point of contention...No agency ever identified it as having issued from their office...Signed the first day of April, in the year 199_, by a Dr. Cornelius Roberts, whom no one has ever tracked down" (84). Calliope also likens herself to "Bertha Mason, marooned in her attic, no language sufficient to express the outrage" (167).

For Author Altschul, Calliope is the unreliable subject many biographers face. What does a biographer do when the subject and everyone associated with the subject are unreliable? It is with these two characters, the main narrator, the fictional Andrew Altschul, and Calliope that Author Altschul undermines the idea that biographies can be truly objective. Everyone's reality is skewed. Regardless of whether their unreliability is purposeful or not, it is there and as readers, we must be able to examine every account with apprehension. Calliope's narration is not

conventionally satire; however, Author Altschul is highlighting the ease in which perceptions of a subject can be deceptive.

Although Calliope is unreliable, it is Narrator-author Altschul who is the most unreliable because he is controlling the narrative. He speaks against likening his biography of Calliope to a tragic myth: “humans have a need to mythologize...to find or create the sublime...But if we can learn anything from Calliope, it is the danger of such mythologizing, the wounds it inflicts on those already wounded by loss” (219). Myth-making dehumanizes the subject who is being linked to a myth. Narrator-author’s two main characters, Calliope and Penelope (her band, Fuck Finn happens to be working on an album, *Ulysses*, after Brandt’s suicide), are named after the muse of epic poetry and a symbol of marital faithfulness, respectively; they also live on Azalea Path, a nod to the Sylvia Plath poem, “Electra on Azalea Path,” a verse about a girl who has a hard time reconciling her father’s death with reality. “Electra” points to the Neo-Freudian psychological theory of a young girl’s psychosexual competition with her mother, events that were well documented by Plath and embodied in Calliope and Penelope’s relationship. Although the Greek myth parallels are noted, Author Altschul is relying on his readers’ horizons to catch the literary references.

Calliope sees herself and her mother much in the same way. During her narrative she writes, “picture Poor Penelope, trapped in the Ithaca of her rock-and-roll fantasy, waiting stone-faced for an impossible return — and I, pathetic Telemachus, bloodied at my father’s hand...Who was left to watch over her? Who would hold her elbow, shrive her soul? Who’d lift the albatross from her shoulders, collateral damage from a vagrant’s indiscriminating bow?” (174). Although Calliope makes no mention of Electra in this passage, she does associate herself and her mother with victims of a Greek myth; involving a faithful wife and son patiently

awaiting the return of their husband and father after two decades. Perhaps then we can see the humor and irony in Narrator-author Altschul's proclamation that Calliope was "born to spectacle, existed in spectacle, and was destined from the first to disappear into the burning glare of mythology" (219) because he is a part of the cultural machine that turns celebrities into mythological figures.

Nagourney writes that it is the biographer's job to sift through the myth surrounding his or her subject in order "to understand the complexities of a human being, usually long dead, who expressed himself incompletely, sometimes dishonestly, usually without thinking about the use his writings would have" (98). The reader is trusting Narrator-author Altschul to piece together the truths about Calliope's life and work, yet all he manages to do is add more myth and misinterpretation to the Morath family. Narrator-author Altschul begins his creation myth story with Brandt as a drunk, ranting intruder at his magazine office. He quotes Brandt as saying because Narrator-author Altschul's magazine and other publications like his review "bad" art, they are "playing their game reviewing this stuff. Even a bad review acknowledges this shit exists" (41), while he and other "good" and "authentic" artists are "living under fishing piers making great music...while you [the rest of the world] slaves are still listening to the radio, sucking on the corporate teat" (41). This passage would be an excellent example of Narrator-author Altschul's ability to present Brandt in a more human light, as an insightful artist aware of capitalism's role in the music business, but Author Altschul undercuts readers' expectations of a insightful biography by interjecting Narrator-author Altschul's own perceptions: "Suffice it to say the author was not overly pleased at being referred to as a slave...nor by the implication that his life's work was enabling a conspiracy of widespread artistic degradation" (41). Their first meeting ends with Brandt talking about the Greek god Dionysus' hypnotic pull that resulted in

“men and women [leaving] their homes and families just to be with him” who “had orgies in broad daylight” and “made the Beatles ‘64 look like a Tupperware party” (42). Brandt is casting himself and his band the Terrible Children in mythological terms, a willing accomplice in the celebrity myth-making scheme. The narrator contributes to this effect when he writes:

Attentive readers will note the many ways in which the Brandt Morath of this vignette differs from the public persona that evolved over the course of his career. That he sought out the attentions of an influential local writer, literally throwing his demo tape at him, that he engaged in an informed, if cantankerous, discussion of the state of the contemporary music industry, that he so unmistakably indicated his penchant for seeing himself in mythological terms, all of this works against the familiar portrayal of Brandt as a socially fearful, overgrown runaway who lived for years under a fishing pier before being dragged, kicking and screaming, into the klieg lights of global adoration. (42)

Observant readers will also note Author Altschul weaving elements of fact, fiction and myth into Narrator-author Altschul’s narrative. The narrator tells readers that while Brandt’s public life was a creation of ingenious marketing from Brandt’s music label, the musician was an abettor in the myth he pretended to despise. Myth tells us that Brandt was the reluctant celebrity, a disinclined hero “for whom even great fame could not restore faith in the world—for whom indeed, that very fame and worship could only confirm his terrible suspicions about the worthlessness of existence” (43), yet Narrator-author Altschul’s shows readers that Brandt is more aware of his celebrity and his music’s legacy than he lets on.

Narrator-author Altschul tries to debunk myths about Calliope’s sexual and romantic relationship with her MFA poetry teacher, L. Moreno, when he writes, “this author finds these

claims predictable and repugnant” (109). Earlier he says that the poet “almost never discussed the details of her romantic résumé, responding to questions in a prickly manner which fans and critics, accustomed to the candor of her poems, often mistook for coyness” (48). In defending his disbelief in the rumors, Author Altschul lets readers see that hard facts, and not impassioned editorials, are what debunks myth. The remainder of the passage is the narrator-author’s rant against the rumors, which turns into the defense of a confirmed fan when he insists, “the reports...that Moreno often came to her trailer past midnight, carrying a bottle of tequila...are easily explained: Art, true art, cannot be held to a schedule, nor confined to a sterile classroom” (109). Regardless of whether the rumors and myths are true or false, the narrator-author has negated their importance because he has become a defensive fan.

To this end, Author Altschul is asking readers two questions: 1) Is Brandt and Penelope’s celebrity myth necessary to their fame and, 2) would their fans still adore them if they had known Brandt and Penelope had consciously worked at their celebrity personae? It is safe to say Author Altschul’s answer would be yes and no respectively. Calliope tells readers the origins of her mother’s myth when she discloses that despite the belief that Penny Power was “born in Detroit in the Summer of Love, illegitimate offspring of a groupie and the drummer of the MC5” (174), everything about the story is fabricated. In reality, Calliope says that Penelope “grew up in New Jersey—middle-class, suburbs, braces, JV tennis...Daddy’s little favorite, groomed for the Ivy League...Off to Yale where she majored in drama” (174). After graduation Penelope bought a plane ticket to San Diego, and “stepped out Penny Power: parentless miracle of the self-invention” (175).

Timothy Galow uses F. Scott Fitzgerald as an example of the calculated “celebrity myth” created by the artist when he writes, “the only significant difference between Fitzgerald’s self-

presentation and the reviewer's depictions of the author was the standard used they used to assess his persona... Yet... Fitzgerald's supposed gift was not something in and of itself, worthy of praise" (318). Galow says that it was not Fitzgerald's talent and subject matter that wowed critics and readers, but his lifestyle and public persona he portrayed that created interest in his work. Fitzgerald became the caricature of what a writer was supposed to be in the 1920s and 1930s, hard drinking and spending lots of cash, which created a negative result because the "knowledge of public personae could help to guide general readers' interpretations of texts and, in more extreme cases, could even be said to replace to reading altogether" (318-9).

Brandt compares himself to Dionysus, and his fans evaluate his actions as a true depiction of the Greek god, without learning for himself or herself what Dionysus meant to those that worshiped him. A true fan would research and be well versed in every reference his or her favorite artist made. Within the novel, there is never any indication fans of Terrible Children took anytime to critically analyze the lyrics, with the exception of trying to find his so-called hiding place after, what some believed was a staged death. Brandt has taken the most popular and extreme aspects of Dionysus and built his myth around it. Instead of learning about ancient Greek and Roman deities, fans of Brandt would get their distilled understanding from him, thus creating a cycle of rudimentary knowledge. Both Galow and Author Altschul do not believe that celebrities create an authentic sphere of knowledge where they are the guides to a higher understanding, but rather make themselves the pinnacles of knowledge.

Galow writes "authorial personae functioned as an important site of knowledge production that could ultimately displace texts upon which a writer's fame supposedly rested" (319). This conception even spills over to the "Morath scholarship." Providing a description of the biographical film première about Brandt, the narrator-author writes, "the film's genius... was

in its ability to reference such stories without fully dramatizing them, a cinematic shorthand dependent on the audience's prior knowledge. Whatever the audience was 'seeing' was an intricate conflation of memory and narrative, a highly satisfying synergy resulting in a delicious déjà vu" (338). Here, Author Altschul is illustrating Galow's theory of "common knowledge" as factual knowledge. Fans of Brandt are not receiving any new or insightful information because the director is relying on optics to engage audiences. For audiences unfamiliar with the musician, this film will probably not engage them enough to learn more about Brandt, but it will give them enough information to claim they "know" the artist's work.

Alexis Easley in *Literary Celebrity, Gender, and Victorian Authorship, 1850-1914*, sees celebrity mythmaking as "the cult of celebrity [fostering] an illusion of stability during a time of rapid social change (11). In summary, audiences and fans are being sold a lie about the time in which popular artists lived and how they were perceived by their contemporaries and presently. By including research from the Victorian era, we are able to see that celebrity worship is not a production of the 20th century, and that Author Altschul is well aware of the tradition of creating personae for writers, musical artists and actors. The Author is telling readers while celebrity culture is selling fans on the idea that Brandt and Terrible Children brought in a new era of music and the time period in which he and the band were active was music's best years, this is a lie. For Author Altschul, celebrity culture makes it's money selling nostalgia and name recognition. We will see this notion of an artist's name acquiring more fame than the work in the case of Brandt's daughter Calliope.

Whereas Brandt and Penelope were creating myth to sell records and become famous, Calliope's Telemachus is not created by her; she satisfactorily fulfills the myth already created by the media. Narrator-author Altschul recounts an interview with *Seventeen* magazine that

described her “‘heaving breast and savage embrace’...one can’t avoid the conclusion that our clever young poet, coached by her brilliant publicist, was inventing from whole cloth just the kind of story that would interest readers of *Seventeen*” (52). Calliope is not entirely in control of her persona, and whenever she tries to defy her already created myth, she is seen as mentally unstable or uncontrollable. When an artist does not comply or tries to break with the myth, backlash ensues for her.

Chapter 8 ends with Calliope’s assumed death at sea after a string of misadventures at public readings, an interview with Charlie Rose and several mishaps at a live recording of “Saturday Night Live” that included Calliope hearing her father’s voice and a perceived anti-Islamic performance of her poem, “Suicide Bomber.” Of her mental collapse, Narrator-author Altschul writes, “why must a young poet — burdened by history, besieged by the terrors and vicious pains of the world — be drafted to represent a particular philosophy or historical movement? Why must she be made the standard-bearer?” (234). Narrator-author Altschul attributes Calliope’s victimization by the media in this passage. Whether she created her myth or simply pretended to embody the myth for the public is never clearly stated, but what she and the narrator suggest is that when the poet wanted to create her own identity, the public would not allow it.

It is here where Narrator-author Altschul blames the reader and the society they belong to for Calliope’s predicament. The Author speaks through the narrator by asking, “must...the world impose coherence upon such a creature, why must the radically inconsistent jumble of her words and deeds be reorganized, shaped to a particular agenda, repackaged?” (234). And he goes on, “if we insist on cloaking sloppy reality in a false mantle of narrative integrity, on making a discrete object out of nebulous subjectivity, then how can we expect to know her, to really *know* her?”

(234). The crux of the Author's argument against celebrity mythmaking is that for the living celebrity, the myth has a repressive and stultifying effect on the artist. Brandt, Penelope and Calliope never seem to overcome their myths, and in the case of Calliope, even staging her death seems only to fulfill her prophecy:

That's all I was, after all, what I had become: a curiosity, a clown. My foolishness knew no bounds or borders: a buffoon, a knave, a jack with just one eye, chasing after the suicide king. Let's just say I wasn't playing with a full deck. Let's just say it wasn't fun anymore. (345)

Even her bogus death is typical of her myth, and Calliope is aware of it: "the worst part was I was only doing it because it was expected of me, because I'd made a deal...typical Calliope. To do otherwise would confuse the critics" (346). The byproduct of mythmaking is a farther departure from the truth of the subject's life: "the Stunt of the Century" (347).

Mythmaking, then, compounds the trials a biographer has to overcome in dissecting his or her subject's life and work. Because a subject, like in the case of Fitzgerald, is aware of his posterity and how culture sees him in the future, he has constructed a version of himself that he believes his fans and popular culture will enjoy. Nagourney says, "the biographer examines whichever documents the accidents of time have preserved...these documents have been written, perhaps thoughtlessly, by his subject and by contemporaries of his subject who have deliberately distorted their writings for reasons the biographer can never recover or understand" (98). Myth, for the biographer, has the potential to leave readers with more questions than answers. Author Altschul is suggesting to readers that while a biographer is in the pursuit of truth, that ideal is false and unattainable. It is the readers' job to approach biographies and profiles with trepidation. When Narrator-author meets with Connor, a former band member of Terrible Children and a

friend of Calliope's, Connor is circumspect about the narrator's motives. He says that whatever the Beekeeper, or Calliope's poetry mentor Moreno or her manager Rhoda say about her is the truth "because it's lodged itself in people's opinion of her, their whole understanding of her. That's all that matters—not the kind of toothpaste she used or what her favorite color was. Nobody cares about that shit. They want stories. They want to construct a fantasy and call it Calliope'" (309).

The reader, who is accustomed to either of two narratives when it comes to celebrity personas — an artist crashes, never to recover (either dying or retreating to obscurity) or an artist falls and then returns to his or her previous glory — is not ready for the return of Calliope two chapters later as the embodiment of a myth. In the second part of the novel, titled "The Second Act" Narrator-author Altschul writes:

Of course many biographies offer a postscript or "epilogue," summarizing the long-term consequences of the subject's life or revealing the fates of secondary figures or even...of the biographer himself. Make no mistake: What was required here was not such a collection of afterthoughts, not some "mop-up" operation, but an altogether new movement, a continuing and ever more complicated chronicle of the poet's path, the scorch-marks she continued to leave as she blazed through the world—the very world she already left! No longer life (bios), then, but death (thanatos); as of December 19 no longer a biography but a thanatography. (388)

Author Altschul is giving readers actually what they have always wanted, a narrative in which the deceased artist makes a physical reappearance and the author, within the biography, continues to document his search for his and Calliope's truths. Allen Hibbard writes that in books like *Lady Lazarus*, readers are actually getting an expanded epilogue because their "quests

have most often been relegated to places outside of the biography, such as anthologies gathering anecdotes of biographer's experiences and travails, or even entire works devoted to the biographer's journeys, retracing the quarry's path" (22); readers are getting this extra information along with the biography.

To Author Altschul's credit, we then are "introduced to a biographer who becomes interested in an odd character, and with a delicate deceptive sleight-of-hand the book builds up not one picture but two" (23). In the fictional world of *Lady Lazarus*, Calliope searches in earnest for Brandt, whom she believes to still be alive. In the real world, the world in which the readers of Author Altschul's novel exist, sightings of singer Elvis Presley persist and rapper Tupac and Big Foot still populate tabloid newspapers and magazines, Author Altschul is meeting and exceeding readers' expectations. While readers may be confused and even dislike Calliope's narrative return and shift in the mythological discussion, this expansion of readers' expectations is what gives the novel its edge over a conventional essay documenting the increasing popularity of pop culture in academia. Instead of telling readers, Author Altschul is showing them.

IV. The Muse, "Arraignment" and Posthumous Fame: What Does Altschul Want from Readers, Fans, Critics and Academia?

This thesis has discussed Author Altschul's motives for his narrator and the characters. Approaching the novel with a readers-response lens, this thesis has sought to examine Author Altschul's way of illustrating his thoughts on biography and celebrity via the mode of satire. This section will focus more on Altschul's criticisms of readers and fans, critics, academia and their

perceptions of Calliope's talent as a poet. Popular culture is a youth culture, and as a result of their exalting youth and conventional standards of beauty, academia has named Calliope their representative. In trying to present themselves as both beautiful and "cool," academia, in Author Altschul's satire, is privileging the ability to draw large revenues as opposed to being a poet of substance. Yes, the author is well aware that an artist of substance can be both beautiful and "good" in their art, but in this instance, he is pointing to a mounting occurrence that academia, in their competition with popular culture, is fostering tokens rather than talent.

As a teenager, Calliope had literary fame at Mountain Arts, a boarding school Author Altschul created at which poet was to debut her work. Although she is accepted into the University of California at Irvine's MFA program — without attending or graduating from college — her honors poetry teacher Marshall Vaughn had reservations about her poetry and going directly from high school to graduate school. In a set of comments on her work, Vaughn wrote, "if you are ever to be more than a novelty, you must dive deep within yourself and find something other than your father to interest and challenge you as an artist" (47). As a result, Calliope produces a sexually charged poem that almost leads to her expulsion. Instead of addressing the technical make-up of the poem, Narrator-author Altschul and other critics focus in on its overt sexual overtones. There is no discussion of whether the poem is "good" or "bad." All the narrator says of the poem is it being leaked to the media: "it is nearly impossible to determine whether this leakage is best understood as the vindictive act of close friend nursing a simmering envy...or as a carefully wrought addition to the myth, an act of marketing brilliance of the highest order" (48).

At its height in the 1950s and 1960s, poets Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and others helped make the term confessional poetry a household name. The works of poets who

were labeled “confessional” dealt with personal, singular issues like mental illness, sexuality and suicide. Badia argues against strictly defining confessional poetry as spectatorship of calamity for audiences and critics alike because it marginalizes or ignores the poet’s (more often female) voice and talent. She says that “what the label ‘confessional poetry’ comes to signify...are reading practices that are decidedly (auto)biographical and therefore, in many critics’ minds, uncritical and subliterate” (10). For Badia, confessional poets like Calliope will always have their poems read on a visceral, not aesthetic, level because of the way they have been categorized. Readers and critics tend to look at confessional poetry as an act of non-fictional creativity. They are unable to grapple with the notion that confessional poetry has elements of fiction or imagination. The poet and the character become one idea. Badia says that because of its gripping and entertaining nature, confessional poetry can induce readers to respond only to “what is immediately ‘accessible’ and most ‘sensational.’ So thrilling is this mode of reading that it can cripple or at least distract readers’ critical facilities, rendering them unable to see the deeper meanings” (11). But from Author Altschul’s presentation of Calliope’s poetry, and his depictions of her craft, readers are to understand that her poetry has no deeper meaning.

When Jauss writes of readers’ expectations, he does not limit those expectations to non-comedic forms. Any work that has a precedent can be over turned. He says, “the ideal cases of objective capability of such literary frames of reference are works which, using the artistic standards of the reader, have been formed by conventions of genre, style, or form. These purposely evoke responses so that they can frustrate them” (13). Jauss goes on to explain that readers initially approached *Don Quixote* expecting a traditional narrative of knights, when what they get is a parody of a hapless knight. So is the case with Calliope.

Calliope's poetry lacks artistic merit. Even Moreno, a poetry professor in Irvine's MFA program, by all accounts Calliope's mentor and authority on her work, has reservations about her talent. After Calliope's preliminary in-class reading, Moreno replies that it was "'a lovely polemic—though to be frank, we prefer things a bit more academic. And you quote-unquote meter needs work'" and "it was clever, if more than a bit crass"'(82). In this case, what is Author Altschul attempting to convey to readers about Calliope's poetry? That her easy entry into the literary *élite* was paved by her parents' name recognition and her own predilection for press? Calliope's fame is predicated on her pedigree. After Calliope's first breakdown and confinement to a hospital bed, her manager Rhoda tries to rally the poet from the bed to continue on her book tour. The two discuss Calliope's wanting to "retire" from being a famous poet when Rhoda tells her, "'Snow Lion's expecting you to sell a million books—do you think you're going to do that with just poems?'" When Calliope tells Rhoda her only talent is being a poet, her manager mocks her and replies, "'Don't be naïve. You are what we tell them you are. You're art and glamour and danger and no-holds-barred rebellion, you're youth and genius and sex and drama all rolled into one. The formula is a winner, baby. It's working'" (146). No mention is made of Calliope's poetry. This episode quickly follows another breakdown with the accompanying newspaper headlines: "Dive, Diva, Dive! UCI Writer Creates Chaos, Little Else" (170); to Rhoda's happiness, the paper says "'followers are more interested in mystical communion with her late father than the poetry'" (170). Here Calliope as a poet gets slighted. The slights focus on her inability to turn her bedlam into anything other than trite poems about her father and sex.

What makes Calliope's poetry and Author Altschul's portrayal of her so interesting is we see that Calliope genuinely believes her poetry is good and that people are authentically interested in her poems. Calliope's fate perhaps calls to mind Anne Sexton's, as described by

Susan Wood by Badia: “I think...it is primarily young girls and women who admire Sexton for all the wrong reasons, making her a martyr to art and feminism; who...identify with her pathological self-loathing and...romanticize its heroism. It has very little to do with poetry and it does neither poetry nor Anne Sexton a service” (7). What Wood’s criticism and Rhoda’s response point to is the fact that Calliope Morath, daughter of the late Brandt Morath and Penelope “Penny Power” Morath, has more value than her poems. Rhoda says this when she tells Calliope another time, “It’s not just the lines, it’s who wrote them. It’s not just rhyme and meter, it’s context and history, the circumstances of their creation...what it says about them that they even own your book” (192). Calliope’s talent is moot: “After all that work, they wouldn’t even be reading my poems—not the way I did” (192-3), to which Rhoda succinctly replies, “these words aren’t the real poem: You are” (193). Altschul has boxed the readers and characters into the predicament in which Badia sees Sexton, Plath and other confessional poets: Their words are unable to be aesthetically enjoyed because of the public baggage that comes along with it.

Author Altschul is not mocking confessional poets, or female poets, which is what Badia says is happening to Plath and Sexton scholarship, but he is illustrating how these stereotypes can arise. The same people who help create the celebrity Calliope, who buy her work and call themselves fans, are those who inadvertently make the case to discredit her work. Just as Calliope realizes that her fans will never read the poems the way she has written them, Badia writes that critics of Plath’s work see these fans as “unhappy young women who have identified with Plath despite her clear rejection of their identities, politics, and pathologies” and are “poor readers who have failed to recognize Plath’s disparagement of their own kind in her poetry” (35). Georgiana Banita argues that because Plath’s speakers “often create the impression of being victimized and tortured, there is hardly any clear perpetrator in view, except...the image of the

father” (49). For Banita, Plath fans and sympathizers turned her into a proto-feminist symbol in the same way Calliope’s fans have turned her into a death artist from one collection of poems that deal with one facet of her life. Although Author Altshul never discusses what Calliope’s poetry could have been had she lived, readers have enough evidence from Calliope herself that her poetry would have not matured and probably would have not focused on other topics. A consequence of a limited body of work is readers and academics pigeonholing the artist to his or her work. The artist does not get the opportunity to reflect on his or her work years later or create contradictory work. Calliope will forever be known as being obsessed with her father’s death because of her solo poetry collection. The artist “is relegated to the status of a poster figure around whom the fan community comes into being and continues to function as a self-serving mechanism” (Banita 49).

Such is the case with Robin Morgan’s 1972 poem “Arraignment.” “If the poem stills holds out attention, it’s largely because of what the poem has come to represent within cultural conversations about Plath” (Badia 91). Morgan’s symbolic lashing of Plath’s husband Ted Hughes for his supposed involvement in her suicide fits into Author Altschul’s novel because it shows how fans can be a potential deterrent to potential readers interested in Calliope’s poetry. After Calliope’s death, she returns as the voiceless Muse who has eight followers who are in trance. They are mindless disciples who assist Calliope/the Muse in “punish[ing] only the speakers and promoters of falsehood;...the Muse now sought to sweep up the willing, hungry consumers of falsehood” (499). Here Author Altschul has exceeded readers’ expectations. Where readers believe that the Muse’s eight devotees will follow in the footsteps of the Beekeeper and others who are cashing in on the Morath name and construct their own versions of Calliope, they are in fact helping her revise her myth by remaining out of the spotlight. Though academics try

to piece together the events surrounding the Muse's appearance and her followers' involvement, what they remember makes no logical sense, yet it adds to Calliope's myth. In the end, Author Altschul shows readers that Calliope, and creators of art, cannot and will never have the final say as to what their work represents or means. As hard as Calliope fought to clarify herself, scholars and critics will continue to provide "bottomless inspiration for future poets hungry for new myths to inhabit, to rehabilitate, to cannibalize" (549). Although Calliope might not agree with the criticisms and interpretations, "in this way the artist achieves immortality" (549). Popular culture, in the author's eyes, is a self-serving entity that jails an artist to his or her persona. Whereas in academia there is room for revival and various interpretations, popular culture icons' perceptions' are not revisited.

A larger question than whether these poets, including Calliope, were as talented as their fans claim is the financial impact these poets had on poetry and literature at large. The Narrator-author writes that following Calliope's "death," "life...returned to the sameness that had marked the days before the poet had gripped the imagination" (293-4) of the public. The interest in her poetry was fickle because fans flocked to her and not to the medium in which she was creating. Author Altschul is pushing readers towards the notion that Calliope's poetry is not strong enough to create a new generation of poetry consumers because they were only interested in her celebrity. This is seen directly after Calliope's death when the narrator writes of "publishers and starmakers [scouring] art academies and MFA programs and the spoken word circuit" (294) looking for the next Calliope. The footnote says the University of Iowa conducted a weekend of screen-testing poets at their writers' workshop. Calliope was not a creative poet but a replaceable commodity. If Calliope's proverbial poetic shoes could so easily be replaced, what does that say about how her poetry was actually regarded? Through Narrator-author Altschul's reporting on

pop culture after Calliope's death, readers see Author Altschul's perceptions of Calliope's work, which he writes are too indebted to pop culture to be saved.

The narrator goes on to write “commercially, too, poetry went into a tailspin: Although in the weeks after Cabrillo Point [Calliope's last performance before her disappearance] sales for poets from Sappho to Sexton soared,” by the following year they had “returned to pre-Calliope—which is to say, minuscule—levels” (294). Like celebrities who had died before her, the economics of tragedy, or, as Taryn Glacé (who by the time Calliope's metamorphosis into the Muse occurred, would become a member of her group), the Marxist Morath scholar would say, “the ‘poeexploitation machine’” (294) began. Author Altschul again employs irony in that while Glacé is lamenting the financial manipulation of Calliope's death, she has built a lucrative career in academia herself on the Morath family. By means of Glacé's Marxist analysis, Author Altschul is able to elucidate his beliefs that pop culture and financial incentives are currently driving academia. Her book, *Karl. Che. Kalliope.* discusses “the relationship between death and capitalism” by saying “the distance between celebrity and fan corresponds to the energy (and capital) the consumer is willing to expend or possess or ‘own’ that celebrity” (295).

Fans feel as if they know Calliope on a personal level; therefore anything produced associated with her, no matter the quality, is likely to be consumed. Badia says scholars and fans want “a token from Plath herself or some insight into her death: what both kinds of readers share...is an interest in Plath's writings as objects for dissection, despite the resulting destruction such processes entail” (131), this interference being their “oblivious...intrusions upon the Hughes family” (132). Penelope is almost driven mad trying to keep her daughter shielded from reporters after her father's suicide. Calliope can no longer speak for herself, therefore her words and meanings are opened to reckless interpretations. The narrator later writes of Calliope masks

becoming popular among female gang members in California and becoming a point of contention for rebellious teenagers at various high schools.

The final arguments that Author Altschul makes for Calliope's success being rooted in economics and not talent is when the narrator says, "though the poetry world still mourned their fallen idol, the general public's emotional investment was waning, their fascination with new mysteries and insinuations attenuated by what Skip Cárdenas calls 'Morath Fatigue'" (332). And when Calliope returns as the Muse:

Snow Lion Press capitalized on the appearance of the Muse with a one-two punch of publishing prowess...it was announced that a new, limited edition of *(I)CBM* was in the works: leather-bound and gold-leafed, *(I)CBM and Beyond* would include twenty-four color-photo plates, facsimiles of handwritten drafts of many of the poems, and line-by-line explication by Camille Paglia; the volume, scheduled for an initial print run of twenty-five thousand, would be priced at \$599. (391)

At the ending of the book, the narrator visits the Spook Terrible Children Haunted House. Due to mounting hospital bills, Penelope's parents leased her Azalea Path home to "The Entertunement Factory, a Hollywood-based carnival/festival/special-events coordinator" (552). Like many homes that have been converted into tourist attractions, the company capitalized on Brandt's death by featuring it in the home tour: "As the author stood watching, the girl came in the room...upon which the seated figure raised an arm, there was a muffled explosion, the glass was spattered with red and gray, and the lights in the studio went out" (554). The narrator-author and readers should have learned something about the commercialization of art and the wreckage it

leaves the artist, but for the fictional readers who are reading *Lady Lazarus*, the irony of their consumption escape them.

Interpreting *Lady Lazarus*' satire through readers' response theory has multiplied the ways in which this novel can be read and enjoyed. The author plays upon readers' expectations of fictional biographies by creating "'lives' from the facts by working within the formal traditions of the novel. As far as they are to be taken seriously, they avail themselves of the structural techniques of contemporary fiction which have been developed in the attempt to convey human reality" (Schabert 8). The reader, like the author(s) is perplexed about the second lives biographies can create. When the Narrator-author writes, "no one is an authority on their own life. No one can know the permanence of its shape, the entirety of its consequence, until the last line has been written" (551) every reader will approach and leave the work with varying views. However, those varying views should not be guided by economics and propaganda. Once academic culture is driven by popular demand and not quality, Author Altschul predicts an eventual future where academia loses its clout as an institution of higher learning and new ideas to become a facet of an economy that creates myths just to tear them down after selling them.

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VITA

Amber Rose Perry was born in the small town of Independence, Louisiana. She received her B.A. in political science from Southern University A&M College in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and her M.A. in English literature from University of New Orleans.