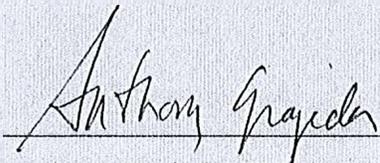


Honors Thesis Proposal

For

Five Degrees

Cassia Hinds



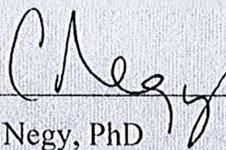
Anthony Grajeda, PhD.
Thesis Committee Chair
Department of English



Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, D.A.
Honors in the Major Coordinator
Department of English



Lisa Roney, PhD
Committee Member from Major
Department of English



Charles Negy, PhD
Committee Member from Outside Major
Department of Political Science

Introduction:

How do we explain sight? Green trees in the distance shivering in the cold breeze, and children running around, knobby knees and sticky hands bushed with browns? According to the National Keratoconus Foundation “Light rays enter the eye through the cornea... The cornea’s refractive power bends the light rays...through the pupil...in the center of the iris.” This is the sensation of seeing like tasting, hearing, touching, and feeling are senses. “Sensation is passively receiving information through sensory inputs” (Green). Sensation isn’t what fascinates me, however. Perception is. “Perception is interpreting this information” (Green).

We all know at least one person who has said something like, “your red might be what I call red but actually looks like your green.” Even though most of us roll our eyes at things like this, the phrase said to the point of becoming nothing, it speaks about the secretiveness of our minds, the unsharable individual experience, our perception. Perception is important to us I think. Deep down inside I, at the very least, am fascinated more about our disagreements on the quality of a movie even though most of our eyes and ears work similarly. It’s the reason why so often we say things like, “What don’t you like about egg rolls? Everyone loves egg rolls. You’re weird” and “Why are you voting for him? That hair can’t run our country.” Perception is an intangible separation, palpable and arguable, between me and you. Them and us.

My thesis will be a series of interrelated short stories that attempt to better understand this separation. Before I could really even begin to tackle this topic I had to really understand how perception is studied, the difference between truth and fact, and self-awareness.

Arguments, introspection, experimental and neuroscientific methods are of the models used by Psychologist to study perception (Stufflebeam). Arguments, as Stufflebeam puts it, is “a means of proving, explaining, persuading, convincing...” and upon studying the art of this we

can learn more about each other's perceptions and inferences. And this is our perspective, our piles of perceptions dictated by sensation.

The most fascinating part about perceptions, intrinsic in arguments, is the difference in truth and fact. "[Truth] is what a person has come to believe" (Pfeffer). Truth is the lack of intended deceit in giving information, honesty. "Facts possess internal structure being complexes of objects and properties or relations" (Honderich). Fact is the implication of usable and recyclable knowledge, something is true beyond the singular "I." The color red is a fact because it can be agreed upon. Without expressing our minds if told to point at a red tile we will choose the same one. When we are told to raise our right hand we'll raise the same one in relation to the rest of our body. This is the weight of fact.

Truth and fact seem very close in definition for a good reason. The perception of fact is truth. With a healthy mind and a clear understanding of concepts without obscurity then truth is fact. We, much more fallible than the above example, deal with disagreement by arguing and assuming that while they are wrong and we are very right, it is only food and politics and at some point it won't matter. We'll get over it and move on because the things we typically disagree upon are nuances and preferences. When perceptions are manipulated through sensation or otherwise then a person could lose touch with bigger more substantial fact.

Sitting in the back of my mind like an empty jungle gym in the park of a bad neighborhood is Merriam-Webster's definition of self-awareness: "knowledge and awareness of your own personality or individuality." Do we truly know ourselves, our personality?

I did some research on disorders, both physical and mental, that could potentially remove the knowledge of our personality and/or our individuality. Cotard's Delusion, Encephalitis Lethargica, Sleep paralysis, and Delusional Memory are all examples of dysfunction that could

prove to blur or destroy the sense of self that Merriam-Webster describes. Its use to me here is to explore the effects of such disruptions on perception through fiction to see if readers find themselves in a strange position where they must sympathize with these perspectives.

Research on Dysfunction:

Delusional Memory:

This delusion blurs the line of perception through false identity.

“False memory with delusional attributed significance delusional memory.” (Howard)

I’ve devised an old character, once a psychiatrist, lost in between the throngs of dementia trying to put back together his life to feel safe, to feel at home. He is a finicky, orderly man who after spending most of his life with those obsessive tendencies is old and alone without work to fall back on. His previous patients have become a reservoir of details he takes into himself, their stories interwoven into his own to keep at bay the black hole of empty memory.

“Memory falsifications are not found exclusively in schizophrenia.

Patients may confabulate to cover an amnesic disorder or just be telling lies.” (Howard)

Anthem by Ayn Rand is a book about revelation of the individual. “I am. I think. I will.” (Rand 94). When those words start the eleventh chapter a part of my soul opened up. Watching the protagonist, Equality 7-2521, find a word to define his existence apart from those that oppressed him, is in essence freedom. “My hands...My spirit...My sky...my forest...this earth of mine....” These words were possessions and while treated like an insane person Equality escapes to be his own, to be alone with the knowledge.

Anthem not only functioned as inspiration for my thoughts on perception of self, but as a spring board for a stylistic endeavor. The lines “We are on in all and all in one. There is not men

but only the great we, one, indivisible and forever” (Rand 19) are an oppressive chant from the book. My thesis will attempt to mirror the “we” type of speech patterns in that chant with the old man’s story line. The reason for this is to show the devolving of the old man’s psyche, the way that his lies degrade him when he’s alone. He uses “we” to feel like more than the emptiness inside himself.

Cotard’s Delusion:

This delusion blurs the perception of the living and the dead.

Cotard’s syndrome is an illness that surrounds a range of “beliefs that one has lost organs, blood, or body parts to insisting that one has lost one’s soul or is dead.” (Ruminjo)

In my thesis, specifically in the sections about Cotard’s delusion, I attempt to create a character that seems reasonable. She is a somewhat funny, eccentric woman with a loving husband and realistic goals. She’s observant but obsessive. She complains about a smell and feeling in her stomach like she is truly sick with maybe an ulcer or possibly a parasite. She comes across as someone reliable because only her illness seems to be in question, not her logic, not her love for her husband. I would like her to believe she’s become a ghost after her “death.” At this point readers are struck with the choice of suspending their disbelief or retroactively correcting the events of the story before. In the end, it puts a lot of strain on the reliability of the narrator.

“Ms. L, a 53-year-old Filipino woman, was admitted to the psychiatric unit when her family called 911 because the patient was complaining that she was dead, smelled like rotting flesh, and wanted to be taken to a morgue so that she could be with dead people.” (Ruminjo)

I took a great deal of form from *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Phillip K. Dick. In Dick's novel there is a suspicion that Resch, an android bounty hunter, is an android. Deckard, the protagonist and an android bounty hunter, must kill him after working with him. Before delivering the test Deckard starts to reason that Resch is an android because he has no compassion for the things he's killed. It turns out Resch isn't an android and suddenly there is a level of uncertainty about the narrator's ability to discern humanity from android. "Empathy, he once had decided, must be limited to herbivores or anyhow omnivores who could depart from a meat diet. Because, ultimately, the empathic gift blurred the boundaries between hunter and victim, between the successful and the defeated" (Dick).

Encephalitis Lethargica:

This disorder blurs the lines of perception by destroying the brain and thus the personality.

"In 1916, von Economo first described encephalitis lethargica (EL), a CNS disorder presenting with pharyngitis followed by sleep disorder, basal ganglia signs (particularly parkinsonism) and neuropsychiatric sequelae" (Russell).

The idea in this story is that contrast is key. I plan to first write a college woman who was always thought to be laid back and smart. She is a bit guarded and keeps to herself, but a sociable enough woman. The story follows her love story and her eventual marriage. Through the romance, I intend to incorporate the symptoms, allow them to take over her motor functions, and collapse her into a coma just after the marriage. After the coma she is a different person, trying to rationalize her before behavior, trying to stay her old self, but she cannot shake her apathy. When she does feel anything it is aggressive and violent. Her violent tendencies flare up and soon she hurts more than herself.

“Seventeen of 20 patients had psychiatric disturbance. Mutism occurred in ten patients. Emotional disorders were also common and included depression DSM-IV ($n = 6$), obsessive–compulsive disorder DSM-IV ($n = 3$) and anxiety ($n = 2$). Apathy and catatonia occurred in four and three patients respectively” (Russell).

“Patients may also experience abnormal eye movements, upper body weakness, muscular pains, tremors, neck rigidity, and behavioral changes including psychosis.” (NINDS)

A Clockwork Orange by Anthony Burgess influenced the nature of this story. Burgess’s violence and social mentality are the basis for the character I intend to create after Encephalitis lethargica. Alex, the protagonist of the novel, is a merciless psychopath who undergoes a special Pavlovian teaching that “corrects” humanity. He becomes a good man and attempts to kill himself because of it. I would venture to reverse Burgess’s model for Alex while keeping the mentality of a ruthless killer intact. I would set free his pre-operation Alex onto the modern day.

Sleep paralysis:

This disorder blurs the perception of reality and dreams, warping the sensibilities.

“Sleep paralysis (SP) is characterized by a discrete period of time during which voluntary muscle movement is inhibited, yet ocular and respiratory movements are intact and ones sensorium remains clear.”

I plan to write about a depressed young man who lays on his back most nights, thinking about the events of the day, wondering if it is worth it to get up the next day. He’s actually fairly outgoing, but when he gets home it’s like the walls close in and melt the door knob. He can’t just leave, weight dragging him into the bed to sleep and sleep and sleep. When he wakes it’s like a

weight is crushing him, holding him in place. He can't move and all he sees are demons, feeling bones going over his skin.

“Unnatural involuntary movements (e.g., levitation), autoscopy, the presence of malevolent intruders in the bedroom, and physical/sexual assaults are common SP hallucination themes” (Sharpless).

Stephen King wrote a story called the “Man in the Black Suit.” In this story there is a boy who meets the devil by a lake while fishing. King manages in a short period of time to go from a pleasant feeling, comfortable encounter, to a terrifying preemptive strike. “The mouth of the man in the black suit was like that shark’s mouth when it opened, only his gullet was blazing red, the same color as his awful eyes, and I felt heat bake out of it and into my face, the way you feel a sudden wave of heat come pushing out of a fireplace when a dry piece of wood catches alight” (King 53). Sleep Paralysis is all about helplessness and King manages to highlight a fearfulness similar to that in “The Man in the Black Suit.” His sense of suspense and pacing are what I’d like to emulate in my thesis.

Conclusion:

I’ve chosen to create an interwoven fiction piece to represent each of the perspectives of perception and its effects on self-awareness. The most effective way to blur the line of self in my structure is to braid their minds, voices, and stories, using the Delusional Memory as the focal point where all the voices eventual drift to.

In my thesis I would like to explore the effects of different types of mental and physiological illnesses through fiction, highlighting the effect of perception on fact and the perspective of the mentally ill.

Excerpt:

It was my stomach that had the smell. The dead flesh curled in tight and deep, rotting. I think the fumes made me delusional. I'd find myself awake at midnight staring at the skin. I'd run my nails over the rows of purple bruises close to my hips. I'd been dreaming that I was carving out the dead bits of stomach with a boning knife. The curved blade would scrape against my ribs and scoop out the infected flesh. I'd felt the pain coming like wind over hills, but I pulled back the flesh like flaps and in between my cleavage I bled black. My whole hand disappeared into my stomach and returned with chunky slices of black gelatin squeezed between the blade and my thumb.

In a metal dish—like the ones used in autopsies—it smelled like a mix of sewer and bile just an inch from the top of my throat. When I'd woken up panting, crying softly, my fingers were be digging into my stomach. While I laid awake in a pool of my own sweat I could still smell it so strongly, lingering.

#

My husband, Andrew, and I were in a restaurant one night. The fancy kinds with blankets on the windows that don't seem to serve any function. All of the waiters have fake French accents and moustaches needlepointed on. The waiters have towels on their arms for some reason and when they talked they never made eye contact. We were Madame and Monsieur in those kinds of places.

Andrew looked so out of place, scooting his chair inch by inch on the difficult carpet, face an inch from kissing the plate. He'd dressed up and shaved for that night. He looked like he might belong if he'd sat there quietly like the silent beauty he should have been, but instead he

rubbed the carpeted floors jerk by jerk. When he'd finally stopped he smiled up at me, resting his hands on the table.

When I smiled back at him it wasn't a real smile. Smelling garbage gargle urine and bile a foot from my nose made genuine happiness impossible. My nostrils flared like I was too important for this small little place and puckered like I was laughing or crying. I wasn't; I just wanted the stink to stop.

"What's the matter? I thought you couldn't wait to come here," he said.

I fake-smiled to reassure him that I did. I nodded and placed the thin white napkin on my lap. I do like fancy places like this. I'd been dreaming about this place for months, saving my half of the bill. It wasn't until last week when the smell started that I couldn't bear the idea.

I looked over the menu for a moment, trying to keep my expression neutral to my subtle but not subtle enough husband. He was brooding because I wasn't excited enough. Granted, a week ago, I'd have been beaming and bouncing like he was when we just got there, but he was always quick to brood.

There were frog legs on the menu. That made me laugh and the lines above his eyebrows smoothed. Andrew hoped and prayed that the menu had it. He'd sometimes call and ask if he could hear the menu over the phone. For some reason the management refused to speak of food over the phone. But the menu really mattered to Andrew. My husband joked that he was going to be eating his boss when he saved up enough money to go to the restaurant. He thought his witty joke was so good he'd tell it over and over to anyone who would listen.

His boss was this huge man, heavy round upper torso but with these skinny long legs. You wouldn't be able to tell he had such thin legs because of the way he wore business attire constantly even on casual Fridays (Which only happened once a month).

My husband happened to be playing tennis on a Saturday and caught sight of his boss frog-squatting in the changing room, trying to pick up his keys. This was Andrew's favorite part. He'd say, "What kind of man picked up things like that?" He'd grin and ask the question aloud like he had never asked these same questions rhetorically before. "It was because of his bad back!" Then he'd clap his hands once and shake his head.

"As I looked down the long hallway of the changing room, stink of sweat infused in the walls and wood, I couldn't stop thinking of how my 60 year old boss looked so much like a frog."

I caught a whiff of my stomach and I tried not to frown. I couldn't eat anything. With the kind of odor coming from my stomach I was sure nothing in there could still be working right. I looked at my husband and his nose had begun to flare.

"Can you smell it too?" I tried not to sound too excited, keeping my eyes on the menu.

"Smell what?"

I flickered my gaze from his eyes to the tablecloth on my lap. I knew I should have brought up his boss and got him to laugh instead, but if he smelled it I had to know.

"The smell of garbage in here?" I said it like a question but it wasn't supposed to sound like that.

When he sniffed the air for a moment I suddenly felt exposed. I dug my nails into the napkin. When he shook his head and frowned I was relieved but then dissatisfied. "Is that why you'd been so sour?" he said.

A waiter dropped off a bowl of bread and bowed back. "Madame, Monsieur. What would you like for wine?" His lips were so tiny on his long glossy face.

Andrew's expression turned sly and cocky. He'd been reading online about wines. He didn't really like wine so he tended towards the fruitier things, but red moscato would have him laughed out of any establishment. He'd been practicing drinking one particular wine so that his face didn't screw in when he sipped it.

"Pinot Grigio," Andrew said handing back the wine booklet without looking at the waiter. My husband probably thought he looked so cool.

"Of course, Monsieur."

Then we were alone again. I wanted to know why he'd been flaring his nose if he'd not smelled anything. Was he lying about the smell to protect my feelings? That's what I was thinking when I stared at him as he stared down at his menu.

"Let's go to the bathroom together really quick."

Andrew's head snapped up, grey eyes glowing. His lips curled up. His eyebrows bounced once and then he pursed his lips, tongue pushing against his cheek.

"No. God! Stop it, Andrew. Just follow me," I hushed.

He looked around and nodded putting his finger to his lips. He was so obvious. Hand in mine, I dragged him to the large Femme labeled bathroom. It was just as ridiculous as the waiter's towels and the blankets on the windows.

In the stall with me he'd already started to loosen his tie and unbuckle his pants. Andrew rubbed his hands together, slow like a villain.

"Just smell my stomach," I said.

His brows sewed together then one eyebrow went up. I lifted up my long black dress up over my breasts. I beckoned him, shaking the dress in my hands. He stared at me first without saying anything. Then he walked over and kneeled. I curled over looking at him through my

cleavage and the smell was so strong. As he looked up at me I remembered the way I'd dreamt my skin peeled back and how everything was so messy and black.

"What am I looking for down here?" he said.

"You can't smell it?" I said. He had this look of recollection suddenly. He nodded and patted my stomach. "The worst thing I smell is sweat mixed with the bathing soap I bought for you. Just the way I wanted you," he joked.

I didn't smile. I rubbed at the bare skin. I didn't believe him. His dress pants were pressing into the dirty floors of a woman's bathroom stall to lie to me. I stared him down; he sighed, sniffed again, and shook his head. I don't know what came over me but I grabbed his face and pressed it against my stomach. His hair felt soft in my hands.

"Patty, I'll stay here and smell you all day, but believe me I don't smell anything strange," he said. Seeing him smile up at me, kneeling on the ground broke my heart. He knew what the smell meant.

I ran my fingers over his bristled face. His smile died and then he kissed my stomach. It took so much out of me not to gag when he did. I let him go and backed up in the stall. Andrew stood and his fingers wrapped around my hips. The pain from the purple bruises rippled. He gave me a small peck then another.

"So does that mean I should buckle my pants or what?"

If he could still kiss me and smile at me the way he did then I couldn't be dead enough yet.

#

It was the middle of summer in Arizona and even the house was sweating. It was three days after the restaurant, and moisture slid off of the plastic plaster coating. The air conditioner broke last night and Andrew and I were too busy to remember to call someone to fix it.

I was sitting upright when I woke up this time. My eyes sizzled in my head like expired yolks on a sidewalk. The smell was stronger now, making me suck in my cheeks like I'd bit into a lemon. The smell consumed the room and my husband with it. Andrew laid face down, hair slick to the right side with sweat. Out of the corner of my eye I watched him move his lips slowly and hum to himself far off in his own dreams.

Gnats flew around my bedroom clinging to the furniture and hissing around my husband's head. The more I smelled my stomach the more it reminded me of the two day old road kill I'd I driven over yesterday morning. Its body was baking in the sun like something a caveman had forgotten to eat. I cried, thick smelly drops from dried up dehydrated craters in my face. The liquid stunk, but it felt so nice on my skin that I wouldn't stop. When I sobbed I was hoarse and each cry sounded like an older and older version of myself. I sounded like I'd already rotted away.

I was afraid to look back at the heavy, bloated image of myself sitting in the bed. Afraid to catch a glimpse of a dark and discolored splotch sinking in and tearing a way into the rotting chasm below. The bed groaned and I stepped out of it.

"Honey." Andrew's voice sounded tired and delusional. "Sleep some."

I wanted to. I wanted to lay down next to him, but when the maggots cut through the flesh and spilled into the bed he'd look at me with such horrible eyes. He'd back away from me and cry out that I was an abomination.

The sound of liquids in my stomach sloshed as I walked. There was hardly stomach anymore. I imagined death had broken down the lining and spilled into the rest of my body. I thought it would hurt. That dying was painful, acid burning through the enamel of my bones, splitting, mixing into the marrow. My whole body sounding like a frog sludge diet coke.

It wasn't like that. It was slow and numbing.

I was standing on the front lawn, the humid breeze rising off of the hills. It felt like a good place to lay down and die. When the stomach burst I could fertilize the earth. It was one of the last comforting thoughts I had. I laid down on the cool morning dewed grass and closed my eyes.

Works Cited

- Burgess, Anthony. *A Clockwork Orange*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986. Print.
- Dick, Phillip K. *Chaos: Do Androids Dream of Android Sheep?* New York: Doubleday, 1968. Print.
- Green, Ellie. "Intro to Sensation and Perception." *Study*. Web. 7 April 2016.
- Honderich, Ted. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. Web. 6 April 2016.
- Howard, R. Burns, A. "Delusional Memory in Schizophrenia." *The British Journal of Psychiatry* (1992). Web. 6 April 2016.
- King, Stephen. *Everything's Eventual*. New York: Pocket Books, 2003. Print.
- Pfeffer, Jeffrey. Sutton, Robert I. *Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truth and Total Nonsense: Profiting from Evidence-Based Management*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2006. Web. 6 April 2016.
- Rand, Ayn. *Anthem*. New York: Penguin, 1995. Print.
- Ruminjo, Anne, and Boris Mekinulov. "A Case Report of Cotard's Syndrome." *Psychiatry (Edgmont)* 5.6 (2008): 28–29. Web. 7 April 2016.
- Russell C. Dale, Andrew J. Church, Robert A. H. Surtees, et al. "Encephalitis Lethargica Syndrome: 20 New Cases and Evidence of Basal Ganglia Autoimmunity." *The Guarantors of Brain* (2003). Web. 7 April 2016.
- Sharpless, Brian A., and Jacques P. Barber. "Lifetime Prevalence Rates of Sleep Paralysis: A Systematic Review." *Sleep Medicine Reviews* 15.5 (2011): 311–315. *PMC*. Web. 9 Apr. 2016.

Stufflebeam, Robert. "Introduction to the Methods Used to Study Perception." *Consortium of Cognitive Science Instruction* (2006). Web. 6 April 2016.

"NINDS Encephalitis Lethargic Information Page." *National Institute of Neurological disorders and Stroke*. Office of Communications and Public Liaison, 25 September 2007. Web. 6 April 2016.

"How Does the Human Eye Work?" *National Keratoconus Foundation*. National Keratoconus Foundation. Web. 6 April 2016.