

Spring 2015

# Buddhism Moves West: Its Influence and Reflection in Literature and Film

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## Recommended Citation

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Its Influence and Reflection in Literature and Film**

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Senior Thesis**



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## Introduction

**By analyzing certain parallel aspects within literature and film in the twentieth and twenty first centuries, the emergence of Buddhist thought in modern Western society can be understood as becoming increasingly integrated as a means of understanding.**

American culture and the Western world is a dominant force on the global stage, having a strong influence on many other countries in a variety of ways. Looking to religion, another force has become intertwined with this dominant culture: Buddhism. As the Western world has continued to progress and expand in the past century, Buddhism has steadily become more interrelated into this culture. One of the most obvious ways is seen through literature and film. Literature and film, along with their strong presence in this culture, is extremely significant to how Americans think, act, and live in the modern era. Therefore, Buddhism's presence within these modes of understanding is a prime example for how the religion has influenced the culture and societal ideas in the Western world.

This emergence can be reflected in Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* (1943), J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), Terrence Malik's *The Thin Red Line* (1998), and Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012). Through a chronological study of these four works, the parallel Buddhist aspects within them will be discussed and illuminated. Beginning with *The Fountainhead*, Ayn Rand outlines ideas about the self and reality that are specific to individualism and Objectivism. Buddhism can be seen through her philosophical interpretations of the self and its emphasis on the individual journey as well as an adherence to the present undiluted state of reality. This can be seen primarily through her main character and protagonist, Howard Roark, an embodiment of the self, entirely objective and a proponent for progression of the individual.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien creates a fictional world that is riddled with Buddhist ideas of interdependency, attachment that leads to suffering, and engagement. Not only do these

parallels arise through characters like Frodo, various epic battles, and the overall plot to destroy the “One Ring,” this novel is exemplary of David Loy’s notion that humanity has innate desire and attraction to violence and war, otherwise defined as the triumph of good over evil.<sup>1</sup>

Buddhism helps explain that desire through this popular work, while also being very much in conversation with the themes that Tolkien presents throughout the three volumes within *The Lord of the Rings*.

Looking to the rise of film, director Terrence Malik demonstrates obvious and unique parallels with Buddhism through his celebrated war film *The Thin Red Line*. While this is quite separate from the war and ideas found in *The Lord of the Rings*, this depiction still explores various ideas that are closely related to Buddhist ideas of impermanence, interconnectedness, emptiness, and *anatta* or the “no-self.” These are all related to how the self is viewed, both in Buddhism and American culture, and how those perceptions can be interpreted and understood. Through the transformative qualities that occur throughout the film, a distinct reflection of how Buddhism is transforming in the West is shown.

Lastly, the recent film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, is yet another and fuller example of how Buddhism is becoming more integrated into the culture of America. Director Benh Zeitlin transforms the gothic world of southern Louisiana and allows the story of a vivacious young girl, Hushpuppy, to bring out themes about humanity and the human condition. These themes are also in line with Buddhist thought, especially in terms of interconnectedness, attachment to suffering, impermanence, and a unique awareness to all of those ideas in relation to the self and the surrounding world. This film shows how Buddhism is becoming more and more clearly depicted, as a mode of understanding and living in the Western world.

It is important then to elaborate on these Buddhist aspects that have become so present within American culture and society. Suffering is a common theme found throughout these works, a primary Buddhist concern, especially in terms of attachment to all things. This relates quite specifically to impermanence, the idea that all things are always changing, with nothing maintaining its present form. Rupert Gethin defines these two Buddhist notions quite specifically, demonstrating how suffering is caused from an attachment and desire to things that inevitably change, “yet in a world where everything is always changing, in a world of shifting and unstable conditions, craving of whatever kind will never be able to hold on to the things it crave.”<sup>2</sup> This exemplifies the Buddhist notions of suffering and impermanence that are going to be observed throughout these two novels and two films as well as their relationship to modern Western culture.

Other Buddhist themes that are important to note are interconnectedness and karma. These two are related in the sense that karma and karmic value gives rise to interconnectedness. Karma is a Buddhist way of promoting interconnectedness as well as individual spiritual development, as David Loy states, “How our life situation can be transformed by transforming the motivations of our actions right now.”<sup>3</sup> This also relates to ideas about the self that will be seen as critical to the themes in these works as well as Buddhist integration into the Western world. Loy states quite simply and accurately, “Interdependence means that nothing has ‘self-existence’ because everything is dependent upon other things, which are themselves dependent on other things.”<sup>4</sup> Karma, interconnectedness, and perceptions of the self are all found within these books and films and are extremely relevant to Buddhism’s growing emergence in America.

Furthermore, by looking at the ways in which these two novels and two films can be observed as fully Buddhist, we will see how a conclusive reflection of how Buddhism is



becoming increasingly integrated within the Western world is happening. Among each of these works, Buddhist parallels will be drawn in order to demonstrate this notion. At the same time, all of these works are not fully Buddhist in terms of the author or director's original intent. This is where it is important to explore the ways in Buddhism can be applied to "the missing Buddhist pieces" in these novels and films, not as a corrective but as an assessment as to how Buddhism could enhance the piece. Through this analysis, we can reflect on modern Western culture and society as it continues to integrate Buddhist ideals. This slow and subtle integration is exemplary of the significance of the Buddhist emergence in the America that is becoming stronger and more prominent with the advancement of both literature and film.

## Chapter 1

### *The Fountainhead*

**Ayn Rand's philosophy within *The Fountainhead*, can be seen as parallel to Buddhist thought about the self and reality, while also applying Buddhism to the places where it is not found in her philosophy, providing substantial insight and guide to the human condition and morality in modern society.**

Literature has the capacity to express a variety of themes, ideas, and philosophies that reflect upon and enlighten society. Ayn Rand was an author who exemplified that notion throughout all of her novels. Though controversial, Rand created visions of worlds and people that exemplified, not only what man could be, but also what a human being should aspire to and, in some cases, is. In her novel, *The Fountainhead*, Rand conveys her views about the self in relation to society in a way that resonates with Buddhism. Though on the surface they seem to be very dissimilar, Buddhism and the themes within *The Fountainhead* can be seen as parallel, especially concerning issues of the self, reality, and society. Yet they are not perfectly parallel thoughts. An application of Buddhist teachings and ideas can be used to show how her philosophy is parallel and sympathetic with Buddhist thought. Because both ways of thought come from very different backgrounds, their union demonstrates how holistic and significant Rand's themes and Buddhism are to society and making sense of modern life in America, as well as how Buddhist thought began to emerge in the twentieth century.

One of the most important philosophies that is seen throughout *The Fountainhead* and is central Rand's overall thought is Objectivism. Rand defines Objectivism as an individual celebration of the individual human capacities for thought. It is about how one sees the world through the various facets of his or her own mind using reason and without any added illusions.<sup>5</sup> Nathaniel Branden, a friend and protégé of Ayn Rand, discusses how Objectivism is an "open system," a philosophy that is open to new ideas, views, and is always changing.<sup>6</sup> It is an independent and unaltered way of thought, seeing things for how they are and not how one might

want them to be. In Rand's own words, "my philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute."<sup>7</sup> This line of thought is reflected throughout *The Fountainhead*, mostly through her main character Howard Roark. Ayn Rand uses Roark to convey her most prominent and significant themes about the self, morality, and one's relation to others in society. For Rand, Howard Roark exemplifies the human as he should be. He is independent, self-focused, open-minded, and most importantly never deviates from his own beliefs or practices. Buddhism is reflected through this central character's life practices and individual attributes, while also illuminating where his role is not Buddhist through the ideas behind interconnectedness. While he is not necessarily an obvious or explicit reflection of Buddhism, his role in the novel is where Buddhism can be found, interpreted, and used as a means to understand Rand's logic and overall philosophy in a way that relates to modern societal perspectives on the self and reality in the West.

## **I. Reality and Reason**

### **a. Objectivism and Buddhist Mindfulness**

The first topic that Ayn Rand focuses on heavily in *The Fountainhead* is reality and reason. Through Rand's distinct stance of Objectivism, she expresses this philosophy in the plot and characters of her popular novel. The way in which this relates to Buddhism is through its similar focus on reality, an empirical means of understanding the world via the five senses and via reason, providing an interpretation of that sensory information.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, in the Buddhist tradition reality and reason are more so defined and understood as mindfulness, which is the ability to be completely aware of one's surroundings as they are through the senses, and impermanence, an understanding that these surroundings are transitory. All of these demonstrate a separate means to an overall internal awareness of the self and the surrounding world. In

Buddhism, mindfulness can be defined as a way of observational learning through one's sensory perceptions. A more specific definition is, "mindfulness is a flexible state of mind in which we are actively engaged in the present, noticing new things and sensitive to context."<sup>9</sup> For Rand within *The Fountainhead*, this is a direct parallel to her use of and emphasis on Objectivism, a means to see the world objectively, without any other adherences or delusions, only the persistent use of one's own thoughts and experiences.

Throughout *The Fountainhead*, there is an overall motif of building or creating, especially through architecture. Whether it is the elusive Howard Roark or the ignorant Peter Keating, the characters are constantly focusing on a construction of either their own life's work or relationships with their rivals, lovers, and supporters. This goes along quite well with David Loy's interpretation of how Buddhism suggests humanity lives as well: one must strip away the delusions that society presents in order to reveal the truth of being. It is how one chooses to construct his or her world that determines his or her individual perception of it.<sup>10</sup> Rand is constantly reminding her audience that one must always revert back to the truths that the present perceptions of his or her mind makes evident. She states this explicitly through her protagonist Howard Roark:

Man cannot survive except through the use of his mind...From this simplest necessity to the highest religious abstraction, from the wheel to the skyscraper, everything we are and everything we have comes from a single attribute of man—the function of his reasoning mind.<sup>11</sup>

While both of these ideas are displayed differently and perhaps in Rand's case are meant for separate interpretation, they are both rooted in the inherent nature of human existence. Through an application of the Buddhist lens, Rand's objective themes can be realized as a means for understanding human nature as well as a way to relate to the surrounding world fully in the present and critically mindful, a very modern understanding.

### **b. Howard Roark's Self and Buddhism's *Anatta***

Furthermore, in this novel, Rand continues to emphasize her points about reality and reason, demonstrating what that means to overall perception through Howard Roark's conversation and relationship with Peter Keating. Keating is the antagonist of the novel, constantly attempting to thwart Roark and move his own way to the top of the architecture world through devious and false actions. Most importantly, Keating gets through life through ignoring the reality of his own abilities and the changing aspects of New York City. Roark frustrates him perpetually because Keating refuses to acknowledge the truths behind Roark's claims and actions. He says to Roark during an interview for a position at his firm:

Do you always have to have a purpose? Do you always have to be so damn serious? Can't you ever do things without reason, just like everybody else? You're so serious, so old. Everything's important with you, everything's great, significant in some way, every minute, even when you keep still. Can't you ever be comfortable—and unimportant?<sup>12</sup>

Roark of course responds to these questions with a definitive no, exemplifying Rand's ideas about the importance of having a purpose through the affirmed logic and reality of one's own thoughts and distinct ambitions. While this is very much in line with Buddhist thought through its acknowledgement of a purposeful, mindful, and individual journey, it is in direct conflict with the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta*, or the "no-self." *Anatta* is concerned with giving up all relation to the attachment of any delusions that ail the self and the world by stating that one cannot conclude that a definitive self exists.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore important to understand how that relates to Howard Roark's notion about the dominance and outright existence of the self. While Buddhism calls for seeing the conditioned nature of all things, it does not say that humans should not have purpose or meaning. When speaking with Dominique Francon, the female protagonist and Roark's love interest, about his building that is going to be torn down by those who wish to

destroy his visions, Roark almost unbelievably says, “Where I can think of nothing and feel nothing except that I designed that temple. I built it. Nothing else can seem very important.”<sup>14</sup>

Howard Roark has stripped himself from attachment, not allowing society’s definitions to define him and distinguish his creations, what he decides define him, from his self, abiding by the principles of *anatta*. Through this act he alleviates much of his suffering because instead of dwelling on that which changed, he accepts it. Yet Buddhism can still be applied in order to fill in the gaps in Roark’s view. Buddhism, consonant with Roark’s attitude to his work and self, shows that there is purpose in life but it is no more important than any other person’s, accepting that everyone has equal meaning and a right to explore that purpose. This is a mutual reasoning that can be understood through both the novel and Buddhism. Roark would accept Keating’s ambitions if he knew they were done with genuine desire and love for his individual goals. It is this notion that shows how *The Fountainhead*, like Buddhism, promotes a mutual effort for an equal goal, which is the benefit and development of the individual self. This further exemplifies how one should perceive the nature of reality and reason, a very reflection of modern American society.

## **II. The Individual Journey**

### **a. Egoism and Interconnectedness**

Though *The Fountainhead* outlines a distinct philosophy throughout its lengthy plot, it is through the characters that these ideas are portrayed and developed. It is in her central character, Howard Roark, where Rand’s themes about the self, egoism, and individualism are most clearly and effectively seen. Howard Roark demonstrates Ayn Rand’s philosophies concerning the individual and “selfish” self as well as Buddhist ideas about how the development of the self is entirely individual. This man goes throughout his life seemingly stubborn and illogical: he does not finish school, he refuses to be a part of any prestigious architecture firms, and he eventually

gives up on his beloved and advanced skills as a talented architect for manual labor. Though to the rest of society these actions and decisions are rash and irrational, Ayn Rand uses these actions to show how Roark is living according to his own individual self, rather than on the terms of society as a whole. While this seems to be opposing Buddhism especially when thinking about interdependency, looking at the concepts of Buddhist doctrine of the self, a parallel similarity between the two should be considered. For example, in the opening to the fourth part of the novel entitled “Howard Roark,” Rand paints an image of a young boy on bicycle who internally thinks about the world as he experiences it, “Don’t work for my happiness, my brothers—show me yours—show me that it is possible—show me your achievement—and the knowledge will give me courage for mine.”<sup>15</sup> This is a disregard for any help or additional benefit from others for his life needs, but most importantly a pledge for the advancement of the individual self. This is a statement that Howard Roark lives by and through it Buddhism is reflected. When it comes to the self, Buddhism sees the path to overall enlightenment as an individual journey, one that must be accomplished without help from others. This quote shows how Rand is somewhat in line with Buddhist teaching, understanding that one is connected to others inevitably, but it is the personal decisions that one makes that determines how that connection is formed and experienced.

### **b. Nonattachment and Suffering**

In relation to suffering and how that is related to the individual, Roark makes a profound statement during his a part of his long speech in court in response to Peter Keating’s witness testimony:

Men have been taught that their first concern is to relieve the suffering of others... To make that the highest test of virtue is to make suffering the most important part of life. Then man must wish to see others suffer—in order that he may be virtuous. Such is the nature of altruism.<sup>16</sup>

This claim is very interesting in what it says about suffering and the individual. With the application of Buddhism, this idea that virtue causes suffering is affirmed, though in a way that shows how suffering can be avoided through the dedicated path of the individual. Suffering is caused by attachment to the transitory aspects of this world. Buddhism can then provide a way of understanding Roark's suffering by suggesting that the human being's primary task is to relieve his or her own suffering, and through the process, relieves the suffering of others without any regard for his or her own enlightenment and advancement. This begins to echo the Buddhist notion of the Bodhisattva ideal, an individual who puts off their own enlightenment to aid others, many times by example and wisdom.<sup>17</sup> The Bodhisattva is fearless and determined, much like Howard Roark who also remains consistent with the Bodhisattva path in life, aside from the focus on the self.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, his opponents and even his love Dominique Francon, believe Roark will suffer by not seeing the vast potential of his buildings become a tangible reality because he chooses not to conform. Roark is attached to his architecture and his creativity within it, but refuses to compromise his talent for anything. He knows with patience and determination change will come. As long as he is true to his work without being attached to its physical form, he knows he will not suffer. Therefore, Buddhism shows how being passionate about one's desires is beneficial as long as one accepts change and understands that holding on to these desires in relation to the opinions of others will bring about more suffering.

### **c. Buddhist Interconnectedness in Rand's Philosophy**

Along with Buddhism and Rand's focus on individualism, is the principle of interconnectedness. This is something that Rand would have probably rejected entirely as a theme in her work, finding it as a means of illogical and unnecessary charity that hurts humanity rather than promotes it. Through the various statements made by Rand's central character in *The*



*Fountainhead*, Howard Roark, it is clear that this is true, “I don’t make comparisons. I never think of myself in relation to anyone else. I just refuse to measure myself as part of anything.”<sup>19</sup>

This statement is in conflict with the Buddhist doctrine of interconnectedness yet it provides a basis for how Rand built up the different facets of her philosophy and how Buddhism can be applied to this opposing idea. With the application of interconnectedness in *The Fountainhead*, Howard Roark’s journey becomes an understanding that each person must have his or her own unique journey, with each of these singular journeys, however, being able to inspire and enable others to do the same. Through Howard Roark’s adamant and persistent diligence to his own personal benefit via his beliefs, he becomes a character that lives to inspire others as a result of his own actions, allowing Buddhism to interpret Rand’s philosophy that echoes an all-encompassing and interconnected nature, something that can be understood and reflected in Western culture.

### **III. Moral Responsibility**

#### **a. Selfishness**

The final topic that Ayn Rand covers within *The Fountainhead* is ideas behind morality, a common theme outlined in Buddhist thought and action. Through Rand’s heavy emphasis on the self, which lends itself to capitalism, it is easy for many to think that on the surface her themes are void of or lacking any moral capacity. Because she focuses on a more selfish basis of living as seen previously through Howard Roark, one might deduct that a virtuous morality is difficult to find in the novel. Nevertheless, there can be a type of morality seen in *The Fountainhead*, one that can be fully realized once Buddhism has been applied. Buddhism claims that all people have and feel a sense of moral responsibility, to themselves and to each other. Because of the idea of karma, Buddhism prohibits ignoring responsibility for one’s actions that would generally lead to bad ends: “rejecting moral responsibility would have *affective*

consequences: it would render certain emotions, such as anger and resentment, irrational and inappropriate.”<sup>20</sup> Within *The Fountainhead*, the main characters talk about virtue and unconditional giving to another with disdain as a way to tarnish and disregard the self. Though virtuous and charitable behavior would be considered in the modern world as beneficial and kind, in *The Fountainhead* that is not the case. Roark states quite definitively again during his defense speech in his trial:

Men have been taught that the highest virtue is not to achieve, but to give. Yet one cannot give that which has not been created. Creation comes before distribution—or there will be nothing to distribute. The need of the creator comes before the need of any possible beneficiary. Yet we are taught to admire the second-hander who dispenses gifts he has not produced above the man who made the gifts possible. We praise an act of charity. We shrug at an act of achievement.<sup>21</sup>

Buddhism affirms and promotes the ability to care, love, and give to one another in a way that could alter Rand’s notions in her novel about morality by providing a more holistic view of self achievement and advancement. Once again, Roark begins to take on a Bodhisattva ideal, his selfish acts for individual promotion becoming a primary example and a personal sacrifice for those around him. Furthermore, looking at the idea of karma, one acts compassionately and good towards others in order to potentially benefit themselves. This can be seen as both an innately selfish act that can inadvertently evokes selflessness. It is clear then, that Buddhist concept of karma is something that both resonates with the themes in *The Fountainhead* while also showing how Buddhism could be as an important addition to the lack of a moral consciousness in the novel. Buddhism could add to this limited look at morality by affirming Rand’s moral interpretation by adding to it a karmic and holistic mindset that allows the characters, like Roark and Dominique, to reflect an objective and individual morality that also is aware of the surrounding world and their distinctive connection to it.

### **b. Conditionality and Karma**

Finally, a combination of Rand's morality in *The Fountainhead* and Buddhist thought can be brought together. The moral standpoint defined throughout the novel rejects an interconnected and charitable moral nature because it does not come with an understanding of the conditioned nature of existence. Her notion of human morality is limited for those like Howard Roark who are consistently expanding their mental capacities through rational thought and right individual effort to form a superior intellect. Therefore, Rand sets boundaries and restrictions on those who can benefit from this moral view, like Peter Keating who is constantly attempting to neglect rationality and the truth of his own thought. Rand promotes living for one's self though not in a way that interferes with another person, so long as that other person is also living equally within the realms of his or her own rational thoughts. Rand does not see those like Peter Keating and Ellsworth Toohey who don't "get it" as worthy of any moral benefit or sympathy. This is where Buddhism is absent from the philosophy. By applying a karmic attitude and a sense of moral responsibility, Rand's view about living for oneself can be seen as beneficial because it would include a unified and unconditional sense of compassion for the other, not in conflict with those who may be ignorant to objective thought. Karma allows one to see the equal suffering and transitory nature within each individual, uniting it as opposed to isolating it. The karmic experience is an individual one; something that can be seen as parallel in Rand's novel—though with the addition of Buddhism it would also be seen as unconditional, promoting a sense of equal right action towards each human being. By applying the Buddhist concepts of moral responsibility and karma, the principle of accountability is something that can be seen deeper within Rand's morality as well as explored more fully, reflecting back on the growing Buddhist presence in modern American society and its moral culture.

## Chapter 2

### *The Lord of the Rings*

**A Buddhist lens in *The Lord of the Rings*, exposes important ideas about suffering, interdependency, and engagement. These parallels help demonstrate a comprehension of an innate human desire to experience the triumph of good over evil, justifying the use of violence and war to accomplish that in a modern context.**

Violence and war are topics that pervade the actions, politics, and lives of every human being throughout history. In today's world, however, violence and war are explored more thoroughly than in centuries past due to the rise of the book and film industries, making an important and interesting comment on the human perspectives in the twenty first century. While the majority of these industries produce and portray violent and war-riddled works, it is the Buddhist perspective on these issues as well as the various parallels found within these works, that allows for a fuller understanding as to why they are at the forefront of current mass interest. Some of the most recognized films and books are those that consist of an extreme amount of violence and war, clearly reflecting the interests and desires of today's public. Therefore, looking at the preeminence of this interest through a Buddhist lens and various parallels, it can be further illuminate the origins and reasons for the interest in violence and war in world media.

*The Lord of the Rings* is a prime expression of the use of war to overcome an immense evil. The application of Buddhism to this popular novel, can then serve as a lens, to make sense of the humanly desires and fascinations with violence and war. In general, *The Lord of the Rings* is very much in line with many Buddhist teachings, such as letting go of attachment, interconnectedness, as well as engaging those ideas in terms of individual world experiences. Looking at how this novel expresses Buddhist ideas while also affirming the distinctive human interest with violence shows how Buddhism is increasing, finding a place in American society, especially through its immense popularity and influence.

## I. The Battle of Middle Earth

### a. Good versus Evil

*The Lord of the Rings* provides a unique space in which a variety of peoples, elements, and situations come together and interlink in ways that can be reflective of today's society. Though the setting and the people of Middle Earth is entirely a fantasy, these fictional aspects are a means to represent real situations. *The Lord of the Rings* has maintained its popularity for decades, eventually becoming a wildly successful film series. This can be attributed to its epic tale about the battle between the ultimate evil destructor, Sauron and his armies, against the rest of the good races of Middle Earth. While this is exemplarily of many popular novels, this book remains consistent with its use of violence and war in order to restore peace, in all facets of its plot. This is all in relation to some of the parallel Buddhist teachings and beliefs that also help explain mankind's innate and persistent desire to experience violence and war in the modern Western era and culture.

Throughout the novel, an immense, challenging, and gruesome battle is fought, all in hopes of aiding the protagonist, Frodo, in his quest to destroy the Ring of power and bring down the agent of destruction, Sauron. To understand why this complex plot line immersed with the aspects of warfare while following this various characters' trials and tribulations of heroism, one must explore the human appeal and enjoyment this novel brings. In David Loy's book, *Money, Sex, War, and Karma*, he discusses how war encourages the idea of salvation in the battle against evil in the American perspective.<sup>22</sup> He says that a common delusion maintained is that, "we can feel comfortable and secure in our own goodness *inside* only by attacking some evil *outside* us. There is something quite satisfying about this struggle between good (us) and evil (them), because it makes sense of the world."<sup>23</sup> This rings true, especially throughout Buddhism, which determines that humans suffer because they experience "lack," or otherwise known as the sense

that there is something missing or absent within one's own being, a gap that humanity is always trying to fill. In this way, war can unite a group, where people join together in the satisfying struggle against evil and in the pursuit of overcoming "the lack," or the missing pieces, that are inherent in the experience of the human being. Loy claims that binding together against a common enemy, through the act of war, is a type of motivation, allowing for a potential end to overall suffering and a means to transcend death within the spiritual struggle. In *The Lord of the Rings*, this ideal is exemplified within each chapter and that is why it is so enticing to the reader; its images, characters, and overall plot line are surrounded by ending all the evil in the world and fighting for the good still left in it.

**b. War as a Reaction to the Experience of "Lack"**

Firstly, *The Lord of the Rings* is a central example of the American attraction to war. This can best be understood through Loy's use of the term "lack." Loy believes that, "for Buddhism, this sense of lack—the feeling of something missing, that something is wrong with my life—is the shadow side of one's delusive sense of self."<sup>24</sup> This is a modern interpretation of how one experiences suffering, but it works well with the ideas of suffering found in *The Lord of the Rings*. By looking at the amount of adversity the characters must overcome, especially Frodo and Sam, the ring bearers, the reader becomes enraptured by the strength and moral goodness it takes to succeed against evil. Frodo and Sam, as well as the other members of the "Fellowship," are persistent and diligent in their goal to destroy the Ring and overcome evil. The driving force behind their actions is the fact that they are fighting for the "good" left in the world. Sam reflects on his and Frodo's own grim situation through the stories of adventure he heard as a child:

I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for because they wanted them, because they were exciting...But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the

mind...But I expect they had lots of chance, like us, of turning back, only they didn't.<sup>25</sup>

This shows that for these characters, as long as they are striving towards a mutual goal, towards goodness, then they can continue to carry on, endure their trials, and end their suffering. It is the “lack” of goodness they feel through the evil surrounding them that allows them to overcome it through their experience in war.

Nevertheless, the duality of war seen in Middle Earth, the battle of good versus evil, is something that Buddhism rejects as a way to get rid of suffering. While that is why the story is so appealing and compelling, it is also why Buddhist thoughts are found within it. Though the plot is exemplary of Loy's argument for American's attraction to war, the characters embody Buddhist doctrine, “Frodo realizes—makes real—his own nonduality with the world by doing everything he can to help it. And by doing what he can to transform it, Frodo transforms himself.”<sup>26</sup> Through continual selfless acts as seen throughout the novel, in more ways than just Frodo, the Buddhist ideas about emptiness, being void of own personal being, and non-duality can be understood. Not only does the Buddhist lens provide the audience of *The Lord of the Rings* with this extensive Buddhist knowledge, but also it allows Americans to understand and reflect upon their relationship with war in modern society.

## **II. Suffering and Lack—Violence and Power**

### **a. Violence as an Unfortunate Necessity**

While this novel expresses David Loy's theory about the human desire for war to overcome lack quite accurately, there is more to be explored about the use of violence and the power of ambition that Buddhism can explain. Beginning with violence, the characters in this novel use violence as a weapon for peace, a necessary means to defeat the evil and violence that is ailing Middle Earth. The main characters, especially the ring bearer Frodo and his accomplice

Sam, strive for peace for their home as well as among their friends, yet they seem caught between wanting peace and imploring the use of violence to reestablish it. Therefore, violence is seen explicitly within each of the three volumes of the novel. From beginning to end, gory and horrific battles, great or small, must be carried out successfully in order for the final act of destroying the Ring and restoring balance can be fulfilled. While violence, the use of a sword, bow, or axe, is second nature to many of the characters; the hobbits are unfamiliar with such modes of action being that they are a naturally peaceful people. They hail from the rural undisturbed farmlands at the edge of Middle Earth, much unnoticed by the rest of the world, yet eventually they too learn and succumb to this common violent means of achieving victory. Whether it is through Frodo's taking up of his own sword "Sting" or one of the other hobbit, Merry, desire and participation on the battlefield with men, these normally passive beings resort to violence as a means to save Middle Earth.

#### **b. War as Purpose**

Looking at Buddhism, this use of violence is something that needs further understanding. Similarly, to the discussion above about the battle between good and evil, violence can be regarded as an outward action to overcome some sort of personal lack that one generally identifies with evil. Fighting against an evil or injustice can insight individual purpose, fulfilling the human desire for meaning and alleviating suffering. This is certainly the case within *The Lord of the Rings*. Through each of the character's individual acts of violence, they are slowly alleviating their own suffering as well as the suffering of their comrades. Not only do they save each other from physical harm, but also through acts of violence towards the enemy, especially by the leadership of Aragorn and Gandalf.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the characters are able to allow each other to advance in their quest to reclaim Middle Earth as a place of peace. Some characters turn



the act of killing into a game as a means to cope with the violence. Legolas, the elf, and Gimli, the dwarf, are two opposing characters yet remain good friends, arguably because of their uncanny ability and mutual will to kill. Along with Aragorn, they make it their “duty” to kill the Orchs of Sauron’s army by turning it into a competition between themselves. Whoever kills the most, wins. While this is a sort of comic relief in the novel, this example of violence shows how much these character’s rely on it in order to delude the horrors of battle and attempt to end their own suffering. When applying Buddhism, this competition is an example of how the use of violent delusions are another way to attempt to overcome lack, while also justifying the use of violence.

**c. Desire for Power Creates Suffering—“The One Ring”**

Similar to violence, *The Lord of the Rings* creates various situations that deal with the theme of power and ambition. Power, or the ambition to seize control over Middle Earth, is something that the evil character, Sauron, is hoping to achieve as the other characters are attempting to build an overall power over his impending rule. Tolkien’s way of symbolizing this drive and desire of power is manifested through the “One Ring.” In a way, it represents evils of overly ambitious power which can also be seen as the ways in which man allows himself to suffer, through attachment. Attachment to this power is what leads many of the characters, especially those who succumb to its persuasions to suffer immensely, to death. In the first volume, Boromir, a man from and heir to stewardship of Gondor, one of the dominant areas in Middle Earth, attempts to use the Ring for his and Gondor’s benefit in order to overcome the bordering land of Mordor, Sauron’s evil and warring land. While his intentions are good, the condemning desire that the Ring procures eventually leads Boromir to betray his friends by attempting to take the Ring. He succumbs to the desire and attachment of the Ring, an act that

eventually causes his death. Because men desire the Ring and its power immensely, it causes them to suffer because they are attempting to overcome the lack, that its creator Sauron has produced, demonstrating fully that the Ring, or more specifically ultimate power, cannot alleviate suffering regardless of intent. It is only through the Buddhist aspects of resistance to delusion, letting go of attachments, and human interdependency that one can overcome all of suffering, a notion that can be seen very clearly within the material world of American culture.

In opposition to Boromir, this notion can be seen clearly through his counterpart and central character of Aragorn. Aragorn is the rightful heir and king to Gondor, a line of inheritance that has been lost over time due to the corruption of the Ring. As a man, Aragorn is powerful. He is a skilled warrior, intelligent, and has noble blood, always dedicated to fighting for good. When the Ring is offered to him, at first by Frodo and then towards the end of the novel by Sauron himself, he resists the intense temptation. Though he knows that his intentions for using that power are good, the power of the Ring could never fulfill the lack felt by him in this world, and therefore he resists. This is in line with Buddhism because it shows how to overcoming lack as opposed to using attachments; “Buddhism does not provide us with something to fill up our hole. It shows us how to stop trying to fill it.”<sup>28</sup> His reference to “hole” is another way to demonstrate the inherent incomplete nature of humanity, a synonym for lack. The juxtaposition of these two characters shows how Buddhism is reflected in this work and therefore Western society, through an affirmation of violence and power as a result of lack that cannot be alleviated through their own devices.

### **III. Interdependency and Social Buddhism**

#### **a. Connecting the Races and Realms of Middle Earth**

The Buddhist theme of interdependency is a third thread in *The Lord of the Rings*. Throughout Middle Earth, there are a variety of different peoples, realms, and landscapes that all

play in to the main plot: victory over an impending evil. While many of these things are in opposition with each other, it becomes very clear that they all must act together; they must tap into their interconnectedness with each other in order to be successful in obtaining peace. For example, the creation of the “Fellowship of the Ring” in the first volume is the most obvious symbol of a union between all races and realms of Middle Earth. There are hobbits from the Shire, a wizard, men from Gondor and outside lands, an elf of the Woodland realm, and a dwarf. By recognizing the intertwining of their fates, whether it is between men and hobbits, elves and dwarves, or even rival realms like Rohan and Gondor, allows them to be able to rely, trust, and eventually feel mutual compassion and love for one another, a complete embodiment and realization of the nature of interdependency.

#### **b. The Fellowship of the Ring and Frodo’s Task**

This notion of interdependency in the novel can be seen very clearly in the first volume once again through the “Fellowship of the Ring.” This is a company of nine people is a unique union that represents all the races of Middle Earth. Through this union of separate races and people, the characters recognize that each of their races will also be doomed to the same fate that of their comrades. They are brought together under one goal, and though this brings back the themes discussed about war, the union of the Fellowship shows how important it is to acknowledge one’s own fate in relation to another, regardless of vast superficial differences. All of these characters also share something significant in common: their mutual lack or dis-ease. They are all feeling the impending doom and suffering that has manifested with the return and rise of the Ring. This is based on Loy’s understanding of a social *dukkha*, or suffering in terms of the overall societal problems, and how Buddhism teaches that through a full understanding of and acting upon interconnectedness, social suffering can be overcome, “Buddhist emphasis on

nonduality between ourselves and the world encourages identification with ‘others’: hence *compassion*, suffering *with*, because we are not separate from them.”<sup>29</sup> Another instance of the centrality of interdependence is in Frodo’s original decision to embark on this journey. While Gandalf, his friend and ally, explains the direness of the situation of the Ring, Frodo begins to understand that if this item is not destroyed, his far away home, the Shire, will also fall under that darkness and evil that is Sauron. To save his own home he must also save the homes and lands of people he does not know and may never know. In his case, working out of interconnectedness, among all others, demonstrates how even a distant threat can deeply affect Frodo through its effect on those close to it.

Another unique and interesting aspect of this novel that presents itself is through the character Gollum. Gollum is a figure completely corrupted by the Ring, his entire existence devoted to reclaiming it for his own. Though he is a character considered to be evil and reflects little of the Buddhist tradition, his role in *The Lord of the Rings* is what makes him crucial to the ideas behind interdependency. Gollum has a very important role in this novel: aiding Frodo in his journey to Mordor and the fires of Mount Doom in order to carry out in the destruction of the Ring. He is unwilling to be a part of this quest, yet because he is also a part of this world and the fate of the Ring directly relates to his fate, Gollum must persist in his assistance to Frodo. Without Gollum’s participation in the plot, the Ring would have never met its destruction in Mount Doom. Even Gandalf admits to this reality, “And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when it comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many.”<sup>30</sup> This shows how important it is for the reader to recognize interconnectedness in the narrative. The significance of Gollum’s role shows

how, whether or not one approves, everyone and everything is interdependent, creating an overall oneness and connection that is irreversible.

#### **IV. The Quest and the Ring**

##### **a. Engagement**

Finally, the Buddhist teachings about engagement must be addressed in terms of the themes and ideas within *The Lord of the Rings*. In Buddhism, engagement lends itself to the idea of fully understanding, acknowledging, and accepting the nonduality of the surrounding world. It is about awareness. Being engaged is being mindful, mindful and present of all of the facets of life. This includes what was been said about interconnectedness, suffering and lack, and ideas of the self. Buddhism stresses being engaged with everything against passiveness and indifference. This can be very clearly represented in *The Lord of the Rings*. Through all of the raging battles, flights to safety, and all other turmoil that must be overcome and experienced, the characters are always fully engaged in these situations. They are aware of what trials they must face, no longer attempting to deny or dilute the reality of their collective or individual situations. Each character responds actively to what needs to be done, even if it becomes a sacrifice of their personal needs.

##### **b. Frodo and The Ring—“Letting Go”**

An example of this intensive Buddhist engagement can once again be seen through the main character, Frodo. The Ring comes to Frodo through his uncle. It not something he sought out or desired like the other races of Middle Earth. Yet, it is this young hobbit who accepts the Ring’s coming to him and the gravity of that appointed task. Frodo’s overall dedication to destroying the Ring enforces the Buddhist teaching of *anatta*. While this can relate back to interconnectedness, *anatta* is a means of letting go of the idea of an individual self, recognizing its insubstantiality and its place in the larger all-encompassing mutually caused and conditioned world. By sacrificing his hold on his “self,” his needs, and his desires, he matches them up with

the overriding needs of Middle Earth. Through this obvious reflection of *anatta*, Frodo can be seen as fully engaging with his current surroundings, acknowledging what must be carried out, and acts upon those needs. Carrying the ring throughout the various lands of Middle Earth places Frodo in accordance with the rest of the world, understanding the suffering that comes from the Ring comes from everyone, including himself.

Another way this idea of engagement is demonstrated in this novel is through the power of the Ring, as a physical object and as a symbol. The Ring is an object that enhances the power to whomever is bearing it. It is a tool for ultimate power, authority, and dominance. In all these ways, the Ring embodies various attachments. For the Fellowship and those who support it, getting rid of the Ring, “letting it go” into the fires of Mount Doom in Mordor, is not only a way of freeing themselves from evil but also a way to free themselves from attachment. The entire story is based on the idea that this one Ring must be purged from the world, and the most actively engaged way possible for this to happen is the only way for this task to be completed. As it is a physical thing that must be extinguished, the symbolic representations of the Ring are equally important, especially because these are the Buddhist aspects that can be found in it. Because of all of the delusions the Ring creates, Frodo’s journey to it exemplifies the fact that this novel is about a fully engaged process in which attachment is both acknowledged and actively diminished, allowing Buddhism to shine forth through this one small object and one small hobbit.

### **c. Karma in Middle Earth**

A final point to bring up in terms of Buddhist engagement is karma. Through the karmic themes of this novel, Buddhism can be very naturally integrated. From start to finish, though many of the events are difficult and trying for the characters, everyone seems to have gotten

what he or she deserved in the end and balance is fully restored, karma having run its course throughout Middle Earth. Though this fictional world is karmically constructed, it is structured in a way that deviates from the obvious ideas and aspects of karma.<sup>31</sup> Karma, especially in the social realm, is a natural and essential part of engagement, something the characters and the plot seem to be aware of both consciously and subconsciously. While there are many setbacks due to evil, causing the outcomes to seem dire, the success of evil is generally brief and temporary, leaving the good and peaceful results to become more permanent and long lasting. The characters in the novel, while opposing the evil forces around them simultaneously accept the conditions of a war-faring Middle Earth and understand that one act of morality or victory over suffering will not immediately result in their karmic reward. As stated most definitively by

David Loy:

Evil often seems to succeed, at least in the short run; goodness has a harder time prevailing. This reminds us that karma should not be understood as some inevitable calculus of moral cause and effect, because it is not primarily a teaching about how to control what the world does to us. It is about our own spiritual development: how our lives are transformed by transforming our motivations.<sup>32</sup>

This is a concrete explanation of the Buddhist principles, especially in terms of karma, within this epic novel. A Buddhist understanding of karma, exemplifies engagement because karma reflects with how one interacts with the world as a system of causes and effects. Frodo interacts with the problems of Middle Earth: agreeing to carry the Ring, having compassion for the creature Gollum, and choosing the path to Mount Doom. Frodo knows full well that his decisions with these aspects of the world will have effects that are out of his control yet he continues to engage with them with genuine and good intent. By the end of the novel, karma has run its course with Frodo. With the help of his friends, he has made it out of Mordor alive and safe, beginning to make his return back home to the Shire. At the same time, through the various trials

he experiences during his trek across Middle Earth, Frodo is no longer the same hobbit he was prior to his journey, and he never will be the same again. He has gone through an intense spiritual transformation that eventually leads him out of Middle Earth. His journey and transformation is an accurate exemplification of karma and how it is supposed to be incarnated in the life of each individual, reflecting on how the transformation individual and his or her relation to the rest of the world can be seen as influentially Buddhist in modern American culture.





### Chapter 3

#### *The Thin Red Line*

**Through the use of explicit Buddhist thought, *The Thin Red Line* demonstrates how important impermanence, interconnectedness, and ideas about emptiness, all in terms of the self, are to the transformation of the individual in the modern world.**

The concept and portrayal of war throughout film is complex and multifaceted. Looking at the unique and critically acclaimed film, *The Thin Red Line*, the Buddhist aspects of emptiness, *anatta*, impermanence, and interconnectedness come to light in a way that differentiates the film, not only from other war depictions like *Saving Private Ryan* and *Braveheart*, but from the many ways in which war is depicted in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. This film, without necessary intent, clearly reflects Buddhist principles. Through the characters and their own personal relationships to the war against the Japanese in the South Pacific, Buddhist teachings are both explicitly and subtly outlined. The Buddhist aspects of the film are able to convey ideas not solely about war but about coping with tragedy and death, as well as what it means to be a human within that realm of tragedy, death, and violence. Furthermore, as these parallels are identified and recognized, an application of Buddhism makes clear the ideas about emptiness, the self, impermanence, and interconnectedness that *The Thin Red Line* is portraying, connecting it to current themes in modern society.

Private Robert Witt is the primary carrier of Buddhist aspects of the film. He is young, observant, and a positive character in the film, seeming to react to the war and its violence in a much more internal and metaphysical way than his fellow soldiers. Through his mannerisms, Witt reflects a Buddhist nature allowing his inner thoughts (voiceovers in the film) as well as outward statements, especially to Sergeant Welsh, to be in line with many Buddhist ideas as well. Through his characterization, he is able to drive the elements of Buddhism consistently throughout the film. He represents humanity's struggle to come to terms with the idea of

interconnectedness in relation to the self, as well as ideas about death and how that is to be interpreted. Witt's role in the film is also exemplary of Buddhism's current role in the Western world. He is slowly beginning to understand and apply these Buddhist ideas to his experiences that are representative of Buddhism's slow yet decisive entrée into the Western modern society. His journey and its parallel to the integration of Buddhism into American society, further affirms the argument that Buddhism is becoming a more forceful and beneficial means of living in the Western world.

In opposition to Private Witt and Buddhist views is Sergeant Welsh. His depressive and limited way of thought is constantly conflicting with Witt's, and therefore Buddhism's, progressive stances of the self and interconnectedness. Yet like Witt, Welsh goes through his own transformation due to his experiences with Witt and the war. Because of Welsh's close mindedness, Buddhism could complete Welsh's missing pieces that he is discovering as he moves through this war. Witt is the Buddhist element in Welsh's life that brings him closer to a Buddhist way of thinking as well as to overall understanding of the human condition. In one of the primary scenes when Welsh is reprimanding Witt for going AWOL, the two engage in a conversation that is very revealing to each of their characters. Witt talks about seeing another world aside from the evils in his present one to which Welsh replies, "then you've seen things I never will."<sup>33</sup> His full transformation can be seen at the end of the film, after the passing of Witt, when Welsh attempts to speak to him in an internal way, "let me feel the lack; a glance from your eyes, and my life will be yours."<sup>34</sup> This is exemplary of, not only what Witt stands for in the film but how Welsh is beginning to understand Witt's notion of what it means to have an internal and existential "light or spark," seeing the nonduality of this world.

## **I. Impermanence and Suffering**

### **a. The Ensemble Cast**

Another important aspect of this film that connects directly with the Buddhist themes of the self, emptiness, and interconnectedness, is impermanence. Impermanence is a central Buddhist idea that helps interpret and alleviate suffering and attachment. In *The Thin Red Line*, attachment to things that change is seen throughout, particularly due to the wide variety of characters, as well as their relationship to each other, war, and even love. Because the film has such a large cast, there is no one central character. The soldiers of this film, apart from Witt, Train, and Welsh, weave in and out of the plot, the audience only receiving glimpses of their experiences. Some of these characters die abruptly. Some are never seen again leaving the audience with no conclusion. This is reflective of Buddhism because it shows that there are no absolutes besides the fact that things change—something that is entirely out of one's control, as is very exemplary of wartime life. The audience does not know what happens necessarily to the soldiers John, Bell, Fife, or Tall, characters that are seen throughout the film fighting, talking, and reacting, and may never know if these individuals make it out of the war nor its effects on them. This tactic of the film demonstrates and perpetuates the idea of non-attachment to these characters because, like each and everyone's life, change is constantly occurring and in some cases, death is one of those occurrences that is inevitable and uncontrollable, affirming impermanence.

### **b. Private Bell and His Wife**

In a way that deviates from the warring and violent aspects of this film, *The Thin Red Line* uses Private Bell's relationship with his wife to explore ideas about love among a variety of horrors. Bell is deeply in love with his wife, thinking about her constantly and using the memory of her to keep him sound, stable, and as a way to cope with violence, "Why should I be afraid to

die? I belong to you.”<sup>35</sup> Private Bell places his entire purpose into his love for his wife, only observing himself in relation to her, limiting the idea of interconnectedness. Buddhism is able to expose how this sole attachment and limited understanding of being leads him to immense suffering. Earlier in the film, Bell recalls the binding and powerful love that he has with his wife holding on to that memory and those feelings, “I want to stay changeless for you. I want to come back to you the man I was before.”<sup>36</sup> Yet, unfortunately for Bell, this is not possible. While he hopes to stay changeless for her despite the violence he experiences, she changes, asking for a divorce when she falls in love with another man. For Bell, his greatest suffering is his response to the deception and betrayal of his wife. Through his experience with his wife, Buddhism’s ideas behind impermanence come to light. The film show that no matter how much one desires sameness and consistency, attachment and a lack of understanding to that will only cause suffering, a theme that is consistent throughout these works and can be easily relayed back into American culture.

## **II. Emptiness Leads to Acceptance**

### **a. Sergeant Welsh and Private Witt**

Because *The Thin Red Line* is a war film, concepts and ideas about death and violence inevitably come to light. Yet what this film focuses on is not the reasons or desires for war, but how its consequences manifest in the lives of those experiencing it directly. Through this illustration of death, *The Thin Red Line* emulates Buddhist ideas behind emptiness and how that can reflect upon an overall mutual acceptance of death through this teaching. Emptiness is a Buddhist means of understanding the notion of the self, “the emptiness of all things that we might be tempted to think truly and ultimately exist of and in themselves.”<sup>37</sup> In this relation to the self, emptiness is another way of saying that the self is also caused and conditioned, leading it to be considered “empty” of its own being.<sup>38</sup> This can be seen very clearly through the

character of Sergeant Welsh. His interactions with his fellow soldiers, especially that of Private Witt, reveal various ideas about how one can interpret death in relation to the self and others. In the beginning, Welsh has an “every man for himself” mentality telling Witt that, “if you die its gonna be for nothing,”<sup>39</sup> denying Witt’s attempt to speak about another world or alternate level of existence aside from the present. Therefore, Welsh regards death in a way that is both final and meaningless. When looking at the Buddhist idea of emptiness, a new interpretation to Welsh’s ideas of man being nothing as well as the how he views death can be deduced. By applying emptiness, Welsh’s conversation with Witt that reveals his “nothing” view on death can become something that has meaning.<sup>40</sup> Though there is a finality within death, an empty view allows it to become void of actual being, being another aspect of the transitory nature of this world. Therefore, when Welsh begins to understand Witt’s notions of another world, he transforms his view on death to have meaning, as opposed to dismal and full of suffering.

Furthermore, the film is able to convey this notion in a Buddhist light as Welsh continues to transform. While he finds man’s role in the world to be purposeless, Buddhism is able to show that is untrue. Thinking about Welsh’s ideas about death with the principles of emptiness in mind, an acceptance of humanity as empty of all attachment and suffering can replace his ideas about man as literally nothing. This is to say that man is, when fully aware, void of any attachments or suffering, he understands himself, as empty of his own caused and conditioned being yet not meaningless or without purpose. By the end of the film, Welsh reflects this notion in a conversation with Private Storm, another older soldier who shifts in and out of the film. Storm says after a recent violent battle with the Japanese, “I see that boy dying I feel nothing. I don’t care about nothing anymore.”<sup>41</sup> It is Welsh’s response that a fuller comprehension of non-attachment, this time more so in relation to impermanence within the self, is being portrayed,

“Sounds like bliss. I don’t have that feeling yet. That numbness.”<sup>42</sup> While he says this in a bleak manner, he is beginning to understand that emptying oneself of attachment from the horrors of the world would result in a more stable and blissful way of being. Through Welsh, Buddhism is beginning to show the difference between feeling hollow or meaningless and the experience of emptiness as being caused and conditioned. This then becomes an alleviant to the pain of the suffering he is experiencing, a very relatable notion to life and war in the modern world.

### **b. Private Witt and Private Train**

Another way that the conversation about death and emptiness is explored in *The Thin Red Line* is through Private Witt and Private Train’s individual observations and internal questions. In the beginning when Witt is AWOL, he thinks about his mother and her death, her calm acceptance of it being juxtaposed with his fear and confusion:

I remember mother when she was dyin'; all shrunk up and grey. I asked her if she was afraid...she just shook her head. I was afraid to touch the death I seen in her. I couldn't find nothin' beautiful or upliftin' about her goin' back to God. I heard people talk about immortality... But I ain't seen it. I wondered how it'd be when I died. What it'd be like to know that this breath now was the last one you was ever gonna draw... I just hope that I can meet it the same way she did. With the same...calm. Cause that's where it's hidden—the immortality I hadn't seen.<sup>43</sup>

In this passage, Witt explores how he has had trouble finding positivity in death due to his fear among the turbulent war he is currently engaged in. At the same time, it becomes clear that he is beginning to find real meaning and the experience of timelessness within it, showing that this world is not necessarily the end of existence. His mother’s approach to death and the way Witt begins to interpret it during the war, is a principle Buddhist teaching about how emptiness can help understand it. Though Buddhism claims that one cannot know about an afterlife, by using its teachings concerning emptiness, understanding death can be made clearer. Through Witt’s understanding of a certain “immortality” ideas about emptiness as being a part of the endless and

connected stream of being are evoked.<sup>44</sup> The characters of the film can begin to meet it more calmly and peacefully, discovering this “other world” and finding the life within death, like Witt’s mother.

Furthermore, at the end of the film, Private Train, who has also been exploring various Buddhist ideas throughout, attempts to understand death by uniting the duality of it, exemplifying the Buddhist ideas of being empty, promoting a positive nature in death. He says, “One man looks at a dying bird and thinks there's nothing but unanswered pain. That death's got the final word, it's laughing at him. Another man sees that same bird, feels the glory, feels something smiling through it.”<sup>45</sup> While this is an exact articulation of how Witt feels about death during the war, it also shows that a Buddhist perspective on death is manifesting in Train’s interpretation. He brings together two ideas about death, a good and a bad, and through the Buddhist perspective of emptiness, a fuller understanding of life can be realized. When one is empty of his or her own individual being, death can become something that is not an individual suffering but something everyone experiences. It becomes another part of the interconnected way of being, providing a more positive outlook on death. These two characters are clearly aware of some other worldly essence that they, as well as death, are a part of, but by emptying themselves of other preconceived notions about death as well as their own being, they can begin to see the goodness and calmness in it bringing them to a mutual acceptance. Therefore, Buddhism is able to help fulfill the Buddhist capacities that are consistently recurring throughout *The Thin Red Line*, demonstrating how Buddhism becomes more integrated into modern society.

### **III. Understanding and Awareness of *Anatta***

#### **a. Private Witt and the Self**

Perhaps one of the most significant and emphasized themes in this film deals with the self and its relation to the surrounding world. This coincides quite directly with the ideas previously



discussed about how the film portrays emptiness. While some men regard each other as “meat,”—animals void of any humanity—“In this world, a man himself is nothing,”<sup>46</sup>—Private Witt strives to interpret that in a way that is inherently Buddhist. He determines, through his various experiences with the war and the natural elements and people found in the South Pacific, that each person has his or her own unique “spark,” the communal and mutual life within each individual. While he holds on to the idea behind the spark, Witt also explores how the self is not permanent through the death he witnesses on Guadalcanal. From the beginning, he starts to think of himself in relation to others, slowly moving from a focus on his personal self to becoming more in tune with the Buddhist concept of *anatta*, “maybe all men got one big soul everybody’s a part of, all faces are the same man.”<sup>47</sup> He ponders this notion in the way a Buddhist would: unsure whether or not there is a definitive soul but placing that potential soul in union and relation to everyone else, emphasizing an understanding of interconnectedness with relation to the self. This affirms how emptiness and its relation to *anatta* are perpetuated throughout the film, demonstrating clear ideas of how the self is becoming increasingly understood as in relation with others in the modern world.

Furthermore, because he is thinking about himself in relation to the other people around him, Private Witt is becoming acutely aware of an interconnected understanding of humanity which helps him cope with the war and violence he encounters throughout his tour in Guadalcanal and all the way up to his death. Later on Witt continues by posing, “does our ruin benefit the earth?”<sup>48</sup> Through this question, Witt connects himself and all of humanity to each other in an all-encompassing manner though still centering this union around the mutual violence the soldiers, from both sides, share. Using Buddhism, this idea can be interpreted as a detachment of the self that benefits the world, becoming a more spiritual comprehension while

also acknowledging the circular nature of existence. Witt's statement with the addition of Buddhism, exemplifies what it means to use interconnectedness as a means of understanding the self and humanity, especially in such extenuating circumstances. This understanding further demonstrates how the characters, especially Witt, go through various internal transformations that are also exemplary of the current understanding of the self in the modern era.

### **b. Private Witt and Interconnectedness**

Though he is continual thinking and expanding on his idea of the "spark," Witt begins to equate himself not only with his fellow soldiers but also with the Japanese soldiers he is fighting. Halfway through the film after a successful attack on the Japanese, Witt encounters the body of a dead Japanese soldier buried in the dirt, who speaks to him in a subconscious way saying to Witt: "Are you righteous? Kind? Does your confidence lie in this? Are you loved by all? Know that I was, too. Do you imagine your sufferings will be less because you loved goodness? Truth?"<sup>49</sup> Through this scene, the film shows that there is equality and likeness among everyone, regardless of background or purpose. It shows that one's suffering and death cannot be alleviated or prevented because his cause is more just than the other, since each person believes his cause is equally just. Even Private Train, a parallel character to Witt who is in reflects a clear Buddhist view, poses his own rhetorical question, "have you passed through this night?"<sup>50</sup> He says this internally, referring to "this night" as another way to describe the war. Private Train is beginning to realize that everyone in this war is experiencing the same horrors, violence, and death. This further affirms the film's acknowledgement of understanding an interconnected nature through self-reflection and experience, especially in terms of war, a very relevant notion that relates back to American culture and war.

One final way this is outlined is through Captain Staros, an older but more pensive and sensitive character. In the main battle scene, Staros refuses to send his company up the hill towards a torrent of Japanese and into what he has determined as certain doom. This action gets him demoted, and eventually sent home, but he stands firm that he made this condemning personal choice to disobey orders to save his men. Before he leaves he calls his troops his sons, saying, “You live inside me now. I’ll carry you wherever I go.”<sup>51</sup> He recognizes the interdependent nature between himself and his soldiers, relating it back to his own personal self-experience and nature. Though this is something he comes to terms with through their mutual suffering on the battlefield, it further exemplifies this film’s Buddhist capacities in the modern world.

### **c. The End-Awareness**

The film illustrates Buddhist impermanence and suffering once again through the character Sergeant Welsh, especially in his relationship to Private Witt. By the end of the film, Witt has died, sacrificing himself on a mission to warn his company of a strong force of Japanese soldiers. Welsh, who has held conflicting views about Witt throughout the film, takes his death particularly hard, pondering “where is your spark now?”<sup>52</sup> Though he is deeply saddened by this loss it has helped him understand what Witt stood for and meant, all in terms of suffering, interconnectedness, and impermanence. Welsh helps close out the film by saying to the departed Witt, “if I never meet you in this life, let me feel the lack, a glance from your eyes and my life will be yours.”<sup>53</sup> Welsh comes to terms with Witt’s death acknowledging the impermanence of their warring life while also beginning to understand Witt’s concept and promise of another world. He feels a sense of closure in this moment, appreciating Witt’s emergence in his life and, though it was brief and he died abruptly, it is because of his understanding of the vulnerable

nature of change that Welsh can accept this death and find the joy of Witt's presence in his own life. Welsh feels the suffering of death, acknowledges it as an attachment, but interprets it in a way that reflects awareness. For Welsh, his acceptance of Witt's death reflects on his appreciation of the intertwining of their lives, acknowledging and understanding his interconnected nature with everything, even through death. This demonstrates how recognizing the principles of impermanence can move behind suffering, death, and the human experience. Therefore, the transformative power of Buddhism in *The Thin Red Line* is undoubtedly present; exemplifying how the film both expresses Buddhist themes while using Buddhism to express those themes in an all-encompassing way, clearly reflecting back onto how Buddhism has made an increasing influence in the Western world.



## Chapter 4

### *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

**Understanding and perpetuating the Buddhist ideas of impermanence, awareness, interconnectedness, and suffering in the film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, through its setting, themes, and main character, Hushpuppy, reveals ideas about society and the human condition in a modern American context.**

*Beasts of the Southern Wild*, a 2012 independent film directed by Benh Zeitlin, received various awards and nominations from institutions like Sundance and the Academy Awards. Yet what may be more distinctive of the film than its many awards, are the Buddhist themes about humanity and the modern world that can be seen throughout the film. Through an analysis of the Buddhist concepts in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, ideas about Buddhist issues such as suffering, interconnectedness, impermanence, and awareness reflects their presence in modern American culture.

Hushpuppy, the narrator and protagonist, embodies various Buddhist aspects in the film. She is representative of humanity and its struggle to make sense of the surrounding world, as well as of the contextual nature of the self. Through her story and the motifs in the film, Buddhism's central understanding of the world is expressed. While in some ways Hushpuppy is representative of Buddhist thought, she is also representative of the entire human condition, something that Buddhism comes into conversation with in terms of suffering and interconnectedness. This representation extends to her surroundings and fellow Bathtub residents. The "Bathtub" is the fictional and rural strip of land behind a Louisiana levy where the film is set. Hushpuppy's attitudes towards her surroundings and Bathtub community, is where the Buddhist aspects of Hushpuppy are absent. Therefore, Buddhism can be applied to make sense of her lack of understanding with the reality of the world and not the fantasy that the Bathtub evokes. Nevertheless, not only does the film perpetuate and adjust certain Buddhist aspects of Hushpuppy through her words and actions, it allows for a fuller and deeply symbolic

understanding of life in the modern world and how Buddhism has come to the forefront of that understanding.

### **I. Suffering as Resistance to Change**

The Buddhist notion of suffering provides a glimpse into how people chose to live their lives, especially in terms of the Bathtub, as well as make sense of their given situation. When looking specifically at Buddhism, “suffering”, or also defined by David Loy as “lack,”<sup>54</sup> is understood to be at the crux of the human condition in a transitory world. From the Pali word *dukkha*, suffering is a consistent presence in all life; it is in the nature of being. In a general sense, suffering can be understood at the surface as attachment to those things that change, which inevitably includes all things. From a Buddhist perspective, suffering is categorized by attachment, aversion, and delusion. Through these three principles of suffering, the human condition can be understood and alleviated on a modern American platform.<sup>55</sup>

#### **a. The Bathtub**

In *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, it is clear from the very beginning that suffering is present throughout the lives of the Bathtub residents. The Bathtub is a fictional place in Louisiana, a section of land cut off from the mainland by a levy. The film opens with images of the Bathtub, depicting a very natural place but riddled with poverty and destitution. There is not any beauty portrayed, yet only a few scenes later, that unfavorable living space is juxtaposed with images of the residents, as well as the protagonist, Hushpuppy, celebrating, singing, laughing, and playing. From the very beginning, it becomes obvious that there is a definite attachment to this home called the Bathtub, regardless of it being a suitable living space. The Bathtub is a very isolated, impoverished, and rural space. Though it appears basically unlivable through the deteriorating houses, dirt roads, and pollution, the community remains attached to the Bathtub as their home,

creating a delusion to its harsh realities. It is where these people have always lived and the only way they know how to live and survive. Because of their attachment to the Bathtub, they cannot begin to fathom life on the other side of the levy, in the “developed world.” It is depicted as a good thing when in reality it is not. Hushpuppy, her father Wink, and the rest of their fellow neighbors are completely resistant to change in the way they chose to live in the Bathtub.

Though at first the film portrays the Bathtub in a positive light, as the film continues it becomes more and more obvious that choosing to live in this space only causes suffering.

Nevertheless, in this opening sequence, Hushpuppy’s narration provides the audience with crucial insight into her conflicting thoughts about the Bathtub. While she states, “one day, the storm's gonna blow, the ground's gonna sink and the water's gonna rise up so high ain't gonna be no Bathtub, just a whole bunch of water.”<sup>56</sup> Recognizing the transitoriness of this space, she follows that line of thought by continually praising the Bathtub saying, “they think we’re all gonna drown down here but we aint goin’ nowhere. We stay right here. We’s who the earth is for.”<sup>57</sup> Though this seems to be in conflict with Hushpuppy’s understanding of the transitory nature of the Bathtub, through her obvious dedication to it while also being aware of its inevitable decadence, this statement shows how she can appreciate the present within the transitoriness. These two ideas bring forth both what Buddhism stands for, pervasiveness of change, and what it attempts to alleviate: strong attachment to imminent changes that result in suffering. Hushpuppy expresses a sense of duty or loyalty to this place even while she knows that one day, “the fabric of the universe is gonna unravel.”<sup>58</sup> She knows that change will alter everything she currently knows as true, causing her attachment to the Bathtub and all that it entails, to cause immense suffering.



Nevertheless, Hushpuppy is caught between two worlds. The external one she has been raised in and loves dearly, the Bathtub, and the internal one being her Buddhist understanding born of her imagination and expressed in her narration. This latter understanding tells her that the Bathtub is not immune to change, and that in its present form is a difficult reality to face, while also exposing the realities it dilutes. She begins to make sense of this through *aurochs*, ancient wild beasts that she claims once ruled the Bathtub, the apparition of her departed mother, among the other fantastical elements that the Bathtub presents. This brings up ideas about home and it what it means to have a duty to that space even amongst the various visual doubts. She believes that, “we’s who the earth is for,”<sup>59</sup> but in a separate way that Buddhism interprets that duty. Buddhism would agree with this statement in terms of interconnectedness saying that all life is interdependent and interconnected, but Hushpuppy says it in a context that promotes an attachment to home as well as a protection over it, an obvious confliction with Buddhism. Therefore, the two interpretations of the Bathtub represent the ideas and lessons Hushpuppy has yet to learn and fulfill in order to rid herself of suffering.

#### **b. Wink, the Father**

Another character in the film who deals with suffering is Hushpuppy’s father, Wink. In his thoughts and actions, he embodies suffering as a direct result of resistance to change. Throughout the plot, he is fighting the changes that are pervading the Bathtub. He fights his illness by ignoring its affliction on his body, he forces Hushpuppy to remain behind the levy when the hurricane strikes, and he preaches “beast it!”<sup>60</sup> as a way of resistance to the destructive change as a result of the storm and to his overall struggles. Moreover, he bombs the levy as a way to keep the Bathtub from being over-flooded from the recent hurricane. In each of these instances he resists these changes and he suffers as a result. Whether it is physically as he fights

the storm, or psychologically as he struggles to provide a decent life for Hushpuppy, Wink continues to repeat to Hushpuppy, “I got it under control,”<sup>61</sup> when in reality he does not. His consistent and open resistance to change is the prime example of how humans create further suffering in a modern context.

Hushpuppy’s relationship with her father is very significant to Buddhism’s ideas about the inevitability of attachment and suffering in human nature, especially through David Loy’s use of notions like “lack.”<sup>62</sup> She looks up to her father, trusts him, and follows his lead. While it is clear that she begins to understand, through her father’s deteriorating health, that, “sometimes you can break something so bad, that it can't get put back together,”<sup>63</sup> she continues to take part in attempting to preserve the Bathtub with Wink. This is especially important when her father attempts to bomb the levy. As Hushpuppy sneaks away in the boat and ultimately gains control of the trigger, she listens to her father and detonates the bomb even among the warnings and pleas from Miss Bathsheba, an educator and more practical Bathtub resident. Through this act, she is giving in to his resistance, accepting it. Though she knows that this act may hurt them in the end, she follows through with the act due to her attachment to the Bathtub and her father.

In terms of the overall suffering, Hushpuppy understands that change is coming and that it is a necessary change, but has difficulty disassociating herself from her present situation or the resistance from the other Bathtub residents. Her struggle between her two worlds is where Buddhist aspects are seen as an attempt to pervade and make real the ideas about suffering and attachment that are resonating throughout the film. She shows how humanity cannot help but deviate back to what makes humans suffer as a part of the human condition. Therefore, Hushpuppy’s struggle and transformation illustrates Buddhism’s integration into modern society.

## II. Interconnectedness

Interconnection, interdependency, and an overall union with all sentient beings are an inherent part of Buddhism. Being interconnected means that everything is in union nondualistically and is thus fully engaged in the cycle of samsara. This is also the basis behind the Buddhist teaching of karma, the form of checks and balances that states how everything is caused and conditioned by other things, one's personal actions dictating the results of those causes and conditions.<sup>64</sup> This includes all beings and all of their actions in order to complete the cycle and reach ultimate enlightenment, or nirvana. Through an understanding of what it means for all beings to be interconnected a more collective understanding for modern life can be realized.

### a. The Particles of the Universe

Throughout *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, the idea of "The Particles of the Universe" permeates the worldview of the narrator, Hushpuppy. She speaks of everything in the universe as connected, having direct results on each other if something is to upset the balance: "if one piece bust, even the smallest piece, the entire universe will be busted."<sup>65</sup> This theme resonates with the Buddhist ideas of interconnectedness, and Hushpuppy believing that everything is connected, struggles to find her exact connection within herself and to her surrounding world. We see at the end of the film when Hushpuppy says:

When it all goes quiet behind my eyes, I see everything that made me flying around in invisible pieces. When I look too hard, it goes away. And when it all goes quiet, I see they are right here. I see that I'm a little piece in a big, big universe. And that makes things right.<sup>66</sup>

For Hushpuppy, being a particle of the universe is central to one's existence, establishing purpose and meaning for the self but also in terms of everyone else, the other particles. Her journey throughout the film highlights Buddhist "interconnectedness," not something that the

world acknowledges and has a general sense of, but as something that is truly understood and integrated into daily life, especially in American culture.

### **b. Heartbeats**

At the opening of the film, at the time the “Particles of the Universe” theme emerges, another theme is brought to the attention of the audience. When the young Hushpuppy, listens in on different animals’ heartbeats; she sees the heartbeat within the context of the particles of the universe, “all the time, everywhere, everything’s hearts are beating and squirting, and talking to each other the ways I can’t understand”<sup>67</sup> Because everything is a part of the big web called the universe, it has a heartbeat. While Hushpuppy recognizes that these individual heartbeats are not necessarily in sync, they are all linked in ways that make the universe whole and dynamic. This begins to outline the Buddhist idea of interconnectedness. Through her understanding of singular but connected heartbeats, the Buddhist focus on interconnectedness becomes a strong theme from the beginning of the film, demonstrating how recognizing connectedness allows for a fuller experience with the world.

### **c. The Bathtub**

The Buddhist theme of interdependency is once again found within the setting. The members of the community of the Bathtub seem to have a sense of agency or duty to each other regardless of race, gender, or situation. They understand that in order to live fully and successfully they must help each other. They appear to be fully aware of their intertwined lives and how each affects the other. Nevertheless, this does not extend to everyone, something seen quite similarly in *The Fountainhead’s* interpretation of moral responsibility seen in Chapter 1. Their sense of interconnection is limited only to people in the Bathtub, outsiders are considered threats to their living and peace. Here in the film a fuller incorporation of Buddhism could

extend that interconnected mindset outside the Bathtub. This is seen quite clearly, when they are forced to evacuate after the hurricane. The residents of the Bathtub resist the help of outsiders and refuse to integrate into the new space in which they have been placed temporarily. The people of the Bathtub suffer as they continue to disassociate themselves with the outside world, unable to see the fully interconnected nature of humanity.

### **c. *Aurochs***

Finally, a separate but significant element of the film is the fantastical and mythical *aurochs*. They are fictional and ancient creatures that Hushpuppy associates with the origins of the Bathtub. The *aurochs* are massive and wild beasts that appear very similar to boars. But most importantly, they are a symbol: a symbol for change, for karmic effect, and for interconnection. Like Hushpuppy, the *aurochs* were once members of the Bathtub though are no longer. Their journey back to the Bathtub, which allows Hushpuppy to come to terms with change and suffering, also shows her what it truly means to be a part of the big web of being, a part of the particles of the universe. By her acknowledging their earlier role in the Bathtub, Hushpuppy is able to understand how her life connects to theirs and therefore the rest of all beings.

### **III. Impermanence**

The Buddhist view of impermanence is also present in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Impermanence deals with the notion that all things are transitory and the process of living is entirely temporary. “The law that all things are impermanent is the teaching that we should be aware of the changing nature of all things and so not be surprised at or shaken by trifling changes in phenomena or circumstance.”<sup>68</sup> Therefore, due to the intense attachment to the unchangeable Bathtub, as well as an overall resistance to any new changes the difficulties of accepting impermanence as a mark of existence comes to light in the film.

### **a. Death and Wink**

Thus, in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, the theme of impermanence is found throughout and is both acknowledged as well as fought against. While this is also coupled with Buddhist teachings on suffering, impermanence deals with how one can choose to overcome that suffering. One facet of the film where this is evident is in the ideas surrounding death and dying. Death is a fearful event for many of the characters in the Bathtub, especially for Hushpuppy's father, Wink. The Bathtub residents' refusal to abandon their home for refuge from the oncoming hurricane is paralleled with the refusal to mention or acknowledge any of the deaths that were a result of that resistance. This can also be seen throughout Wink's consistently deteriorating health that he refuses to acknowledge to anyone. He even goes so far as to tell Hushpuppy, "it's my job to keep you from dying,"<sup>69</sup> as if that is the only thing that truly matters in his life and in their relationship. Still, acceptance of death, for Hushpuppy and the other members of the Bathtub, becomes complete when Wink returns to the Bathtub to die, after being treated by doctors from outside of the Bathtub. He finally gives up on the fight and succumbs to the change he knows would eventually come. Wink is somewhat aware of all the Buddhist aspects that Hushpuppy has embodied throughout the film but at the same time his original views of resistance to change are evident because of his return to the Bathtub, almost as a final stand. Overcoming and fighting death is something the Bathtub residents are attempting throughout the entire film, something that the Buddhist catalyst of the film, Hushpuppy, steadily exposes and alleviates.

### **b. Understanding Death Through Experience**

Furthermore, looking back to the idea of "The Particles of the Universe," it becomes a means for understanding and accepting death for both Hushpuppy and the Bathtub community, reflecting on how death can be interpreted in a modern setting. The film shows that for the

characters, being a particle of the universe in the Bathtub is being alive and not succumbing to death, making it appear that to die is to no longer be a particle. Buddhism provides an antidote to that common idea, allowing the idea of being a “particle” to persist even through death. Looking back on interconnectedness, Buddhism illuminates how each person is a part of the great stream of being. It shows that though one will die, it does not mean it is necessarily the end because everyone lives interdependently with everyone and everything else. At the same time, understanding that all things are temporary allows for an acceptance of death, that this life, like life in the Bathtub, will come to its end too. Through Hushpuppy’s final understanding of death, it is clear that she is in sync with Buddhism’s concept of impermanence, “everybody loses the things that made them.”<sup>70</sup> She continues by saying, “it’s even how it’s supposed to be in nature. Brave men stay and watch it happen. They don’t run,”<sup>71</sup> showing that though some of those ingrained views on death from her father are evident; she is able to transform this understanding into her overall Buddhist understanding of death. Life as Hushpuppy knows it, is temporary and she refuses to hide from the truth. This has a different affect on Hushpuppy. She seems to understand that inevitable change that is to occur within herself but also knows that it happens to everyone and everything. Yet at the end of the quote, some of her ingrained Bathtub perspectives about resistance and taking a stance against change are evident, “They don’t run.” This concept is fulfilled at the end as she accepts impermanence and says goodbye to her father on his deathbed, understanding that he is still a particle of the universe—“when it all goes quiet behind my eyes, I see everything that made me flying around in invisible pieces.”<sup>72</sup> This shows an understanding for how change works but also for how one can accept that change, a distinct Buddhist aspect of the film that is reflective of understanding change in a modern American context.

#### **IV. Awareness**

One of the most important aspects of Buddhism is awareness. Not only does this apply to how Buddhism tells one how to live but how to think in terms of, not only the individual self, but universally. Awareness is a means of liberation from suffering as well as an overall understanding of the nature of being, otherwise known as enlightenment. Awareness is a nondualist way of thought in which one does not separate the absolute, the knowledge obtained from the five senses, from the relative in terms of spirituality.<sup>73</sup> This goes along with the Five Aggregates of Buddhism: material form, feelings, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. These aggregates demonstrate how the person is not separate from another and the mind is not separate from the body, which includes the previously established statements on suffering, attachment, interconnectedness, and impermanence.<sup>74</sup> As a whole, the concept behind awareness is that it is a state of consciousness in which an individual attempts to disassociate one's thoughts from any ideas of self-importance, and to see the Five Aggregates as part of the great stream of being, in union with everything.

##### **a. Being a Particle of the Universe**

Throughout *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, Hushpuppy's attitude, thoughts, and actions are all moving towards her journey to awareness. As the film progresses, it becomes clear how Hushpuppy's understanding of the particles of the universe, while it has some Buddhist attributes to it, begins to grow into a more full Buddhist understanding about awareness and how that applies to her life. Creating the concept of being a particle within the larger scheme of things, allows Hushpuppy to be a part of the entire web of life and to have purpose within that web, "I see that I'm a little piece in a big, big universe. And that makes things right."<sup>75</sup> Because of the trials she has overcome, the death of her father included, Hushpuppy is able to understand what it



means to be a “Particle in the Universe”: it means that she can finally find a way to be whole, overcome suffering, and have an equal and interconnected meaning with the rest of the world.

As the film approaches its end, Hushpuppy makes a journey that is most definitely a fantasy to a men’s club on a boat in the gulf named “Elysian Fields.” While the implications of the brothel being called Elysian Fields is one in itself being that it is the name of the mythical Greek concept and place for the afterlife,<sup>76</sup> her journey there marks one of her final attachments to the Bathtub, her mother, and aversion to death. She claims on the way there that she, “wants to be cohesive,”<sup>77</sup> something she has been striving to achieve throughout the film. Through this journey, she is able to understand what that means as she let’s go of all that is causing her suffering and preventing awareness. This is also coupled with the encounter she has with the *aurochs*. Another presumed fantasy of Hushpuppy’s, this encounter marks her final acknowledgement and culmination of the entire Buddhist themes throughout the film. Their presence represents the Bathtub and its resistance to change, suffering, impermanence, as well as interconnectedness. As they bow to her and she says, “you’re my friend kind of,”<sup>78</sup> she frees herself from those attachments. She understands that they are a part of her but also something she must let go of, a facet of her life, like the Bathtub that she can hold but not hold on to, representing an awareness and a freedom from attachment. This allows her to say goodbye to her father and leave the Bathtub. This also recognizes the human condition. Humans cannot help but deviate back to what makes them suffer. The film then shows how that in itself will always lead to some sort of suffering and to alleviate it is to accept it, demonstrating an overall Buddhist guide to living in Western culture.

## Conclusion

### *Breakfast with Buddha*

Through each detailed chapter, it has become clear that Buddhism has made a distinctive and progressive integration into the Western world, especially via popular literature and films. Yet, in each portrayal, whether it is the strong sense of individualism in *The Fountainhead* or the outward interconnecting theme of “The Particles of the Universe” in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, Buddhism is not complete nor represented perfectly. This is reflective of how Buddhism, while becoming more obvious and present in the Western world, is still not seen as full or completely explicit in any of these works. It was not necessarily the author or director’s intent to portray Buddhist themes and parallels, but in these four works it inevitably occurred due to the growing influence of Buddhism.

Though these works have been shown to have helped perpetuate many Buddhist themes, there is a novel that has emerged from the growth of this religion as an obvious example of Buddhism in America: *Breakfast with Buddha*. This is a story about an average middle-aged man living in New York—Otto Ringling—who unexpectedly, due to the request of his eccentric sister, takes an extended road trip with a Tibetan Buddhist monk—Rinpoche—when he must settle his recently deceased parents estate in North Dakota. Through first person narration, Otto is able to convey to the reader his new worldly understandings from his experiences and conversations with Rinpoche. Otto is very skeptical and wary of Rinpoche in the beginning, but through their journey, Otto’s perspectives and mind become much more open to Rinpoche’s Buddhist ideals, transforming his overall thought and perspective. Otto’s progression is completely parallel to Buddhism’s development in America. It is something that has begun slowly yet has taken shape definitively over time. Not only is the title, *Breakfast with Buddha*, representative of Buddhism’s presence in America through literature, but the overall plot,

context, and words used in the novel are a perfect and full example of Buddhism's movement into Western culture.

Looking deeply at *Breakfast with Buddha*, it becomes clear that there are a variety of possibilities that the novel presents, especially in terms of Buddhism in America. It covers a variety of topics, from sex to poverty, and Christianity to capitalism. In the beginning of the novel, Otto starts to become aware of all of these things, these desires, "are we all just desperately looking for some strategy that will get us past the shoals of modern existence and safely into that imagines, calm port?"<sup>79</sup> This touches on ideas of attachment, suffering, and impermanence all of which have been previously discussed throughout the example novels and films. But what is different with this novel is that to answer all the pervading questions of the narrator, the author blatantly inserts a Buddhist understanding, through none other than a Buddhist monk. In chapter fifteen, a little over half way through the novel, Rinpoche begins to establish an answer to Otto's questions telling him in a conversation that, "a little bit sex. Not too much. Nothing too much for Rinpoches. Food, sex, sleep, business, giving talks, happiness, sadness...not too much."<sup>80</sup> This hints at the Buddhist idea of the "Middle Way," demonstrating an overall Buddhist understanding about life and temperament as equal in measure, as well as the clear Buddhist tendencies of the novel.

More specifically, besides the various conversations Otto and Rinpoche have during their road trip, Rinpoche teaches Otto in a very visual and relatable manner. The monk continues to convey his ideals through their instances involving food. Otto Ringling is a writer and food critic as well as food enthusiast, tending to eat quite abundantly and richly. Rinpoche, on the other hand, will often order something small and meager, at time only even a glass of water with lemon. This incites Otto's curiosity and intrigue into Rinpoche's lifestyle as he attempts to

rationalize his various teachings and anecdotes. In the beginning of the novel, Rinpoche and Otto eat breakfast at a hotel. Otto asks Rinpoche about the meaning of life to which Rinpoche responds by dumping soil into Otto's glass of water. While this angers and confuses him, the monk elaborates on the symbolism behind the murky water, peering through his own glass:

“‘The mind,’ he said, pointing at the clear glass. I was glad, at least, that he hadn't pointed at the glass of what was now becoming mud and said, ‘*your* mind.’ By then the dirt was settling, the top part of the glass was somewhat clear again. ‘Watch,’ he instructed, And as we watched, the dirt in my glass settled slowly to the bottom so that the top two-thirds of the water grew translucent, the transparent. ‘Your mind,’ he said, pointing at the glass in front of me. He picked up his spoon. ‘When you—when some person—does things he shouldn't do. Watch.’ He put the spoon out sat back with a look of complete satisfaction on his face. ‘Then you can't see.’”<sup>81</sup>

This instance, while also a reference to the title, shows how clearly Buddhist teachings are inserted throughout the novel. His simple demonstration exemplifies the way Buddhism is able to subvert its teachings into the minds of Americans, easily and clearly.

As it comes to its close, *Breakfast with Buddha* exemplifies Buddhism's growing influence in America by Otto's final words and thoughts. Though many of the characters we have analyzed like Howard Roark, Frodo Baggins, Private Witt, and Hushpuppy, all go through their own personal transformations that can be seen as directly related to Buddhism, none of them are as completely Buddhist as Otto Ringling's personal transformative experience. In the last few pages of the novel, after Otto has completed his road trip with Rinpoche and reunited with his sister, he reflects back on the beginning of his trip. He thinks about his Christian roots and the various rules that stemmed from that faith that he structured his life upon. Otto then realizes how he has taken that background and molded it to the Buddhist teachings and ideas he learned from Rinpoche:

Something happened inside me; one old thing that had been bending and bending finally broke. Sure, there was a bit of a mocking voice squeaking out its familiar

song, but all you had to do, really, was just watch it like you'd watch any other thought float past. Watch life do its things, watch the end of life do its things, and try to go toward the good side when you could see it.<sup>82</sup>

This statement shows how significant and transformative Buddhism has had on Otto Ringling and also how he plans to use it as a guideline for his life in future. While this is the story of one man and one monk, it shows on a small scale how present and important Buddhist thought is within Western culture and society.

Through this intensive exploration of literature and film, it is clear and entirely relevant that Buddhism has evolved into the Western world has an integrated and dominant force on culture. Buddhism's influence in this realm demonstrates new and perhaps more fulfilling ideas about how one intends to interpret various difficult topics immersed in these mediums like war, suffering, and the transitory nature of human existence. Buddhist themes about the individual self, interconnectedness, impermanence, and attachment, as well as the meaning of violence and war in an American context, can be realized using the examples of *The Fountainhead*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Thin Red Line*, and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. The twentieth and twenty first centuries have introduced innovative and revolutionary ways of thinking as well as constructing art in order to make sense of the surrounding world. Through an active and insightful interpretation and application of Buddhist practices and beliefs, Western society can begin to form concrete ideas about difficult topics, translating them into literature and film. This is critically important, not only for the Buddhist religion and American culture, but also for how Americans, as examples to the rest of the world, chose to live, prosper, and act on the world stage.

## Endnotes

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### Introduction:

- <sup>1</sup> David Loy, “Why We Love War” 127-138.  
<sup>2</sup> Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* 70.  
<sup>3</sup> Loy, *Money, Sex, War, and Karma* 61.  
<sup>4</sup> Loy, *Money, Sex, War, and Karma* 56.

### Chapter 1:

- <sup>5</sup> See Enright’s article on the ideas behind selfishness in Ayn Rand’s Objectivist philosophy. She describes the differences between selfishness and altruism while also demonstrating how this philosophy is ingrained with reason (“The Problem with Selfishness” 42-43).
- <sup>6</sup> Nathaniel Branden, “Who is an Objectivist?”  
<sup>7</sup> “Objectivism: A Philosophy for Living on Earth.”
- <sup>8</sup> David Loy talks about this Buddhist interpretation of reality and how it relates to a post-modern means of understanding reality and the self (*The Great Awakening* 2-5). “An equivalent transformation in the intellectual realm is the postmodern insight into the constructed nature of our truths and therefore our ‘realities’” (2-3). This is critical to how Rand’s views on reality become congruent with Buddhism
- <sup>9</sup> Langer, “Mindful Learning” 220.  
<sup>10</sup> Loy, *Great Awakening* 9-16.  
<sup>11</sup> Rand 679.  
<sup>12</sup> Rand 89.  
<sup>13</sup> Loy, *Money, Sex, War, and Karma* 56-57.  
<sup>14</sup> Rand 344.  
<sup>15</sup> Rand 504.  
<sup>16</sup> Rand 680. This is during the speech that Howard Roark gives during his trial. He is on trial for dynamiting the Cortlandt Homes project, an expansive and expensive housing project that he helped create. He did this to make a statement about his achievement, that he treasured it and is glad for its existence but refuses to allow those around him to corrupt his individual creation in ways that do not fit his intent for the buildings (Rand 677-686).
- <sup>17</sup> Gethin defines the Bodhisattva path, “it is only as we progress along the path that we come to understand that, in fact, suffering is above all something that beings share in common; with the dawning of this realization we are moved by compassion and the desire to help others...” (*The Foundations of Buddhism* 229). This may not match up with Roark’s ideals completely, but it demonstrates how his individual suffering can mirror the Bodhisattva ideal.
- <sup>18</sup> Niwano outlines “The Four Fearlessnesses of the Bodhisattva” which describe how a Bodhisattva has no fear of preaching the Law through an observance of all its requirements, understanding the Law in all capacities, answering questions sufficiently, and resolving all doubts (*Buddhism for Today* 297-298). Howard Roark is a different and inadvertent type of Bodhisattva as he represents these “Four Fearlessnesses” but with his first cause being his own self as opposed to others.
- <sup>19</sup> Rand 582. Howard Roark says this in the fourth and final volume of the novel during a conversation with Peter Keating about the contract they have formed concerning Cortlandt Homes. Peter tells Howard that he is kind and not conceited only to have him respond that he is

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too conceited because he treasures his individual mind and talents over anyone else's. Peter thinks he is beginning to understand and appreciate Howard though that is not the case (Rand 576-582).

<sup>20</sup> Goodman, "Resentment and Reality: Buddhism on Moral Responsibility" 366.  
<sup>21</sup> Rand 680.

### Chapter 2:

<sup>22</sup> "Why We Love War" 127-138.

<sup>23</sup> Loy, *Money, Sex, War, and Karma* 131.

<sup>24</sup> *Money, Sex, War, and Karma* 137.

<sup>25</sup> Tolkien 711.

<sup>26</sup> Loy, "The Dharma of the Rings."

<sup>27</sup> Aragorn is a man, and rightful king to the throne of Gondor, a realm of Middle Earth.

Along with the leadership and wisdom of Gandalf, a powerful wizard, these two are able to rally a mass variety of men in battle in ways that help Frodo and Sam get closer to reaching Mount Doom and destroy the ring. Their acts of violence help perpetuate Frodo and Sam's journey in a positive way.

<sup>28</sup> Loy, *Great Awakening* 35.

<sup>29</sup> *Great Awakening* 17.

<sup>30</sup> Tolkien 59.

<sup>31</sup> Loy, "The Dharma of the Rings."

<sup>32</sup> "The Dharma of the Rings."

### Chapter 3:

<sup>33</sup> Sean Penn, *The Thin Red Line*.

<sup>34</sup> *The Thin Red Line*.

<sup>35</sup> Ben Chaplin, *The Thin Red Line*.

<sup>36</sup> *The Thin Red Line*.

<sup>37</sup> Gethin 237.

<sup>38</sup> Rupert Gethin explains the Buddhist interpretations and understandings of the self, "for Buddhist thought there is only their 'connectedness'—nothing besides that. The fact that experiences are causally connected is not to be explained by reference to an unchanging self that underlies experience, but by examining the nature of causality" (*The Foundations of Buddhism* 139).

<sup>39</sup> Sean Penn, *The Thin Red Line*.

<sup>40</sup> Gethin also address the notion of meaninglessness when understanding the Buddhist ideas of the self. Once one understands the self as a set of experiences that are connected to all others as well as unchanging, then the connected meaning as opposed to individual meaning can be realized. "In other words, the idea of self as a constant unchanging thing behind the variety of experience is just a product of linguistic usage and the particular way in which certain physical and mental phenomena are experienced as connected" (*The Foundations of Buddhism* 139).

<sup>41</sup> John C. Reilly, *The Thin Red Line*.

<sup>42</sup> Sean Penn, *The Thin Red Line*.

<sup>43</sup> James Caviezel, *The Thin Red Line*.

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44     Though emptiness is a way of understanding the self, it is also a means of understanding one's current state of existence as well as how that existence persists even throughout the causes and conditions that pervades it. This gives rise to how one can understand existence that goes beyond the self and death (Gethin 238-241).

45     John Dee Smith, *The Thin Red Line*.

46     Sean Penn, *The Thin Red Line*.

47     James Caviezel, *The Thin Red Line*.

48     *The Thin Red Line*.

49     *The Thin Red Line*.

50     John Dee Smith, *The Thin Red Line*.

51     Elias Koteas, *The Thin Red Line*.

52     Sean Penn, *The Thin Red Line*.

53     *The Thin Red Line*.

#### Chapter 4:

54     David Loy defines the Buddhist understanding of suffering or lack in three parts, the self, impermanence, and the conditioned constructiveness in terms of the self and the surrounding world. "Everything we usually identify as physical and mental suffering—including being separated from those we want to be with, and being stuck with those we don't want to be with" (Loy, *Money, Sex, War, and Karma* 16).

55     Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* 60, 68-70.

56     Quvenzhané Wallis, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

57     *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

58     *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

59     Quvenzhané Wallis, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

60     Dwight Henry, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

61     *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

62     David Loy talks about how it is natural for people to feel attached as well as feel the lack that comes as a result of this, "That we find life dissatisfactory...is not accidental—because it is the very nature of an unawakened sense-of-self to be bothered by something" (Loy 16). This is exemplary of how Hushpuppy continues to revert back to her Bathtub roots while also recognizing the suffering that is present through it.

63     Quvenzhané Wallis, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

64     Loy, *Money, Sex, War, and Karma* 56-58.

65     *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

66     *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

67     Quvenzhané Wallis, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

68     Niwano, *Buddhism for Today* 28.

69     Dwight Henry, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

70     Quvenzhané Wallis, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

71     *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

72     *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

73     David Loy, *Awareness Bound and Unbound* 223-225.

74     Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* 135-136.

75     Quvenzhané Wallis, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.



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<sup>76</sup> The fact that this floating brothel is called “Elysian Fields” affirms it is a part of Hushpuppy’s imagination as well as the fact that her mother is dead. Nevertheless, this journey as well as the name Elysian Fields, demonstrates how she is becoming more aware of her present state, becoming closer to acceptance of death, and understanding her role as a particle. This is directly before her encounter with the *aurochs*, one of her final delusions that she must experience before becoming completely aware.

<sup>77</sup> *Beasts of the Southern Wild.*

<sup>78</sup> *Beasts of the Southern Wild.*

Conclusion:

<sup>79</sup> Roland Merullo 19.

<sup>80</sup> Merullo 119.

<sup>81</sup> Merullo 79.

<sup>82</sup> Merullo 319.

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