

THE *SUI GENERIS* IN CHARLES G. FINNEY'S *THE CIRCUS OF DR. LAO*

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Florida Atlantic University

Boca Raton, Florida

December 2013

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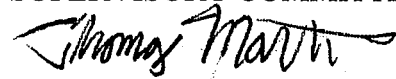
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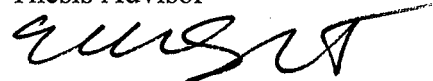
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Thomas Martin, Department of English, and has been approved by members of his supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

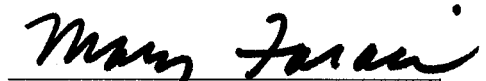
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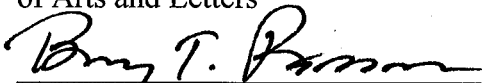
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank those who were instrumental in his success. Among these are the author's family, Debbie, Curtis, and Seth White, who have worked as hard as I have for my success. I want to thank my thesis committee, Dr. Thomas Martin, Dr. Mary Faraci, and Dr. Elizabeth Swanstrom for offering their own time and invaluable advice.

ABSTRACT

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Title: *The Sui Generis* in Charles G. Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao*
Institution: Florida Atlantic University
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Thomas Martin
Degree: Master of Arts
Year: 2013

Charles G. Finney's 1936 novel *The Circus of Dr. Lao* was published to enthusiastic reviews, but fell into relative obscurity shortly thereafter. Since its publication, it has been the subject of one peer-reviewed critical essay, a number of reviews, one non-peer-reviewed essay, and a master's thesis. It was published in a world where the fantastic and unique found only barren desert soil, with no scholarly tradition for the fantastic, nor a widely receptive lay audience for something truly unique, or *sui generis*. The concept of the *sui generis*, meaning "of its own kind," provides a useful lens for examining the novel, as Finney develops not only creatures, but people, which are truly of their own kind, borrowing from existing mythologies, traits of humanity, and aspects of nature, recombining them in a singular way which resists classification.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND CURRENT CRITICISM

Charles G. Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao*, published in 1935, is a one-of-a-kind spectacle of fantasy literature. Its unique collection of animals, people, and exhibits challenges readers' existing perceptions through its unconventional style and *sui generis* nature. It defies normal conventions of linear narrative, dividing its structure into episodic incidents and concluding with questions and information directly addressing the reader, and acknowledging questions intentionally left unanswered within the narrative. Within my thesis, I will contend that *The Circus of Dr. Lao* is a *sui generis* work of literature, in its structure and its unique traits. I will develop a working definition of the *sui generis*, beginning with the strict definition from the Oxford English Dictionary, before looking at examples to see how it has been used. As the term *sui generis* has rarely been used with regard to literature, using it to analyze *The Circus of Dr. Lao* will make this thesis an original and *sui generis* piece of its own. The novel itself has also received little critical coverage, and so most aspects of the work remain unexplored.

There is precious little criticism on *The Circus of Dr. Lao*; although the work has been appreciated for its unique nature, it was ultimately dismissed by most reviewers at the time of its publication. One peer-reviewed scholarly article exists for the work, Janet M. Whyde's "Fantastic Disillusionment: Rupturing Narrative and Rewriting Reality in *The Circus of Dr. Lao*." Whyde discusses the unique narrative style of the novel, and the "failure or denial of monolithic meaning" (Whyde), which has troubled reviewers and

critics. She discusses the early accomplishments of the novel, when it “received the American Booksellers Award for the ‘most original’ novel of 1935” and the rather lukewarm reception thereafter. Since its initial reception, it “has received only qualified praise” (Whyde). She addresses the unique episodic structure, and subversion of reader and character expectations.

Whyde feels, much as I do, that the “failure or denial of monolithic meaning ... may indeed be the most important and radical point of the novel” (Whyde), though a large part of Whyde’s project is that the “the work both asserts and denies hermeneutical possibility by consciously blurring, and implicitly questioning, the boundary between fantasy and reality” (Whyde). I do not see a problem with this interpretation, as the novel employs realistic characters, mixed with fantastic mythologies, and experiments with the expected structure of a linear novel, at times breaking the fourth wall to question the reader directly. There is a strong play against the expected boundaries of fiction, and *The Circus of Dr. Lao* does deny a number of monolithic and allegorical readings. The *sui generis*, however, is outside the scope of Whyde’s analysis. The ambiguity and denial of hermeneutical possibility that it would argue is often a result of the *sui generis* nature of the creatures and people in the circus. While Finney does employ myths from various cultures, and his creatures hint at certain allegorical readings, he inserts unique attributes which make them of their own kind, not someone else’s, so they may not be anything but themselves.

The work has also been the subject of one non-peer-reviewed article in the *Markham Review*, L.L. Lee’s “Fantasy as Comic American Morality: *The Circus of Dr. Lao*.” Lee gives a fair amount of plot summary while praising the book for its enigmatic

nature, viewing it as an imaginative fantasy which offers a new perspective on the mundane and realistic of the world.

Among authors who catalog the text within broader listings of literature are Farah Mendlesohn, in her book *A Short History of Fantasy*, John Clute and John Grant in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, and Cathi Dunn MacRae in her book *Presenting Young Adult Fantasy Fiction*. Macrae focuses primarily on *Lao's* inspirational value as it relates to Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*. Clute and Grant describe the novel's plot in brief detail, while relating it to Charles Finney's own experiences as a military man in China. Of particular interest, though, is Farah Mendelsohn's view that the book suggests a "promise of liberation through the abandonment of Christianity and the embracing of paganism" (39). This view demonstrates the way in which the work resists a single interpretation, as the novel asks, "Why should Apollonius of Tyana, who claimed superiority to Christ, fall back on the crucifix to banish Satan?" (153). The work clearly refuses to be boxed into a single explanation. Its collection of parts hint at a genus of myth, literature, or ideas that have been seen before, but it ultimately proves itself to be unclassifiable due to the variety and unique assemblage of its parts.

The novel has also been the subject of a previous master's thesis, "Charles Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao*: An Epistemological fantasy" by Daniel Creed. Creed proposes the idea of an epistemological fantasy, one centered on the subjects of knowing and what can be known, and examines Finney's work from that perspective. Creed examines what circus goers believe they know, and how this knowledge differs from the truth, and the creatures in the circus, who he declares "are the only sources of truth" (55) within the novel.

It will be my project to expand upon the novel's criticism by exploring how Charles Finney's unique combination of traits, which he has given the circus's creatures and people, create a group of *sui generis* characters and interactions. I will address the ways in which these *sui generis* combinations defy singular interpretations, scientific classification, and the search for parallels. The singular combination of traits in these characters and experiences create their own categories of one. Because they cannot be compared strictly with other like kinds, these utterly unique characters and unrepeatably experiences challenge the understanding of the circus goers, and are often identified with the fantastic itself.

CHAPTER 2: THE *SUI GENERIS*

The term *sui generis*, meaning of its own kind, presents an interesting challenge, as the term is not generally used in the field of literature. Typically, the term is used in fields of law or science. The first recorded use of the term *sui generis* in the English language, as listed by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, dates to 1787, from the *Life, Journals and Correspondence of Rev. Manasseh Cutler, L.L.D.* Vol. 1, where it is used to describe a unique biological specimen. Manasseh writes about his experience with a curiosity shown to him, a two-headed snake captured by a doctor. He describes multiple features, such as spot patterns and states that the doctor who showed it to him “thinks it must be a *sui generis* of that class of animals ... [and] grounds his opinion of its not being an extraordinary production, but a distinct genus, on the perfect form of the snake (268). There is only one two-headed animal in Lao’s circus, a turtle created on the spur of the moment, but Manasseh’s definition of the *sui generis* provides a useful insight into the *sui generis* as it is used in Lao’s titular circus, populated with numerous creatures, which are very much of their own kind due to their one-of-a-kind combination of traits.

The term *sui generis* is rarely used in reference to literature, and one of the rare examples is from the Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci who used the term to denote the profession of writer, particularly, what writers thought of their profession. Apart from this, the term’s usage is often limited to scientific or legal literature. Manasseh’s idea of the *sui generis* as a separation from the primary genus due to the

unique traits of a particular creature is apt for analyzing the various creatures in Lao's circus, and the Oxford English Dictionary's primary definition of the *sui generis* provides other criteria for the analysis of the experiences and people in Lao's circus, specifically, the combination of traits and circumstances that combine to create a unique, *sui generis*, individual or experience.

The limited reception of *The Circus of Dr. Lao* mirrors the lukewarm reception that fantasy literature has often received in academic circles, though perhaps for different reasons. Brian Attebery's *Strategies of Fantasy* discusses one of the more popular perceptions of fantasy literature used to denigrate the genre, that of fantasy as formula. Attebery defines this form of fantasy as "a form of popular escapist literature that combines stock characters and devices—wizards, dragons, magic swords, and the like—into a predictable plot in which the perennially understaffed forces of good triumph over a monolithic evil" (Attebery 1). This definition of fantasy in particular is of the least interest to critics, and one definition that *The Circus of Dr. Lao* directly opposes. While the novel contains one fortune teller who may be some form of wizard, there are few of the other typical tropes of fantasy as formula, and those that do appear are presented in a way that often contradicts their traditional mythical counterparts. There is no monolithic evil to be conquered, only a modern public hostile to the creatures of fantasy and mythology, and mystic creatures that sometimes become equally hostile and dangerous to the patrons of Lao's mystical circus. The novel's structure specifically avoids monolithic narratives and categorical explanations, and each individual's response to the fantastic is colored by his or her own unique expectations. Each person arrives with unique *sui generis* traits which sometimes conflict, and at other times coincide with specific traits of

the sideshows in Lao's circus, creating a truly one-of-a-kind encounter for each within the enclosed confines of a circus tent, isolated from the experiences of the others.

The Circus of Dr. Lao's reception problems reflect those of the fantasy genre itself. In his introduction to *The Circus of Dr. Lao and Other Improbable Stories*—a novel-sized paperback anthology of *Dr. Lao* and several other stories—Ray Bradbury attempts to define fantasy in contrast to genres such as science fiction. While defining Science Fiction as “the law-abiding citizen of imaginative literature,” he contends that “Fantasy, on the other hand, is criminal. Each fantasy assaults and breaks a particular law; the crime being hidden by the author's felicitous thought and style which cover the body before blood is seen” (vii). This defines the genre well and perhaps explains why it has found gaining critical acceptance difficult. While realist literature can easily fit into the mold of the real world and be classified based upon our common understanding of natural and scientific laws, fantasy challenges our ideas about the world and upsets our understanding.

Though the term *sui generis* comes originally from Latin, I will be focusing on its use in the English language. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the English use of *sui generis* in a number of interesting ways, offering different shades of meaning. The literal definition, as translated from Latin, is “[o]f one's or its own kind” (OED). This suggests that the *sui generis* object is unique in that it defines its own kind, type, or breed. The particular subject is peerless, rare enough to ostensibly be the only of its type in existence, at least for a time. For a work of literature, it may define a particular genre or subgenre, or carve its own unique niche in an existing one. Other works may follow its example, but the original sets its own kind and terms, and forms its own identity. This

definition is particularly useful for looking at both the construction of *The Circus of Dr. Lao*, which uniquely combines the mundane and realistic denizens of Abalone Arizona with fantastic mythologies, both ancient and original. This definition also serves well as a lens for examining the mythological and mundane inhabitants of the novel, who often form their own identities, either by the combination of certain traits they possess, or through actions or circumstances that separate them into their own kind.

Sui generis gains an even broader meaning within the next part of the OED definition, where the term is simply defined as something being “peculiar” (OED). *Peculiar*, in common vernacular, can mean unique, strange, or different, and that meaning certainly applies to numerous fantasy works, including *The Circus of Dr. Lao*. While this definition does offer a bit of freedom for interpretation, viewing the *sui generis* simply as things that are peculiar or strange is a bit too broad to allow for many interesting conclusions about what constitutes the *sui generis* in a work. Fortunately, the primary definition for *peculiar* in the OED provides more clarity: “[d]istinguished in nature, character, or attributes from others; unlike others, *sui generis*; special, remarkable; distinctive” (OED). This definition provides a clearer idea of how the *sui generis* is “peculiar,” and provides greater insight about the various aspects of the *sui generis*. The presence of *sui generis* within this definition is of note, demonstrating that the two definitions correspond to each other, which allows greater insight into the particular aspects of *sui generis* peculiarity. The aspects of being “special, remarkable; distinctive” (OED) suggest that the *sui generis* is unique and noteworthy, but evoke little other information on their own. More interesting are the aspects of otherness through “nature, character, or attributes” (OED). The *nature* of the *sui generis* subject is most in

line with kind, particularly as it relates to inherent aspects of the subject, perhaps that of form in story, and breed or kind in creatures. Character suggests the personality of either the work or the characters within. Attributes suggests all those distinct qualities, both internal and external that combine to form the *sui generis* subject, and may represent the individual traits of the whole which make it unique through combination.

The final definition listed in the OED describes the *sui generis* as “a thing apart, an isolated specimen,” and although this definition is described as being “illiterately” used, it still offers greater illumination (OED). The otherness, alienation, or separation of the subject from others is emphasized as an aspect as the subject is set apart due to its unique qualities, while the idea of an isolated specimen reiterates the first-created nature of a subject which defines its own terms, as in the literal definition. This final definition also focuses on the *sui generis* as a subject for analysis. The *sui generis* specimen must be analyzed on its own terms, and so it cannot be classified using the rules of other specimens. Attempts to find analogs and direct similarities will fail for this reason, and attempts to do so will lead to disappointment.

It is in this sense that Antonio Gramsci speaks in his Prison Notebooks, saying that “[i]ntellectuals conceive of literature as a *sui generis* ‘profession’ that should ‘pay’ even when nothing is immediately produced” (III, 24). Gramsci explains that intellectuals, particularly literary intellectuals, wish to define their own profession and set their own criteria. Gramsci’s intellectuals also desire that this profession be supported before it has borne fruit after itself, though such fruit may be forthcoming. The art of literature is to be allowed to exist before it produces any of its kind, and in lieu of predecessors which would determine its rules. To this end, he observes that “whereas

other professions are collective and their social function is distributed among individuals, this does not occur in literature” (III, 24). Gramsci is examining how literary professions differ from others in their social function, particularly that of apprenticeship, which is not the project of this thesis. But the broader scope of his analysis helps make the concept of the *sui generis* clearer as it pertains to fantasy, as fantasy has both been maligned for not following the accepted rules of realism, being something all of its own, while at other times being maligned for being formulaic, following too much of an existing mold.

One argument critics have made against fantasy’s status as a respectable form of literature has been its perceived predictability. In particular, the idea that it is inherently formulaic has limited its acceptance as a genre. Critics dismiss it for being among the basest forms of writing, that of popular commercial entertainment. Attebery captures this sentiment in his definition of Fantasy-as-formula, where as “a commercial product, its success depends on consistency and predictability: one expects every box of detergent to be interchangeable with every other” (2). The consumer of such a product might expect to receive at least one sword fight, one evil wizard, a daring rescue of a damsel, a couple of dragons, etc. All of the elements can be added in a different order, but the ingredients provide a comforting consistency, though they are nothing too adventurous. This interpretation of fantasy would naturally be the antithesis of the *sui generis*. If every fantasy is meant to contain some semblance of the same elements, in a particular order, then there is no room for something to be of its own kind, and it must be of a particular kind that operates the same as every other specimen of its type, like Attebery’s detergent. Even an avid fantasy reader might be reluctant to malign literary critics for having a low opinion of such fantasy. Although such a base could serve as a fertile field for inspiration,

an endless series of similar stories would quickly grow stale while not being worth very much analysis. Fortunately, the field of fantasy is blessed with much greater diversity than this definition would suggest, and many unique works make the genre impossible to pin down to a single formula.

A work that is truly *sui generis* defies strict allegory, as allegory relies upon the ability to see some parallel between a work and what it may represent. A piece that is of its own kind, like Manasseh's two-headed snake, may have parts which fit certain definitions, but are often contrary in other ways. Cutler's two-headed snake defies conventional expectations that a snake should only be gifted with one. Critics, similarly, may seek a singular interpretation or theme for a work such as *Dr. Lao*, while alongside is a forking interpretation that leads to a different alternative. This difficulty of interpretation may be analyzed briefly by examining passages of the novel in context of Mendelsohn's assertion that the novel advocates a return to paganism over Christianity.

Within the catalog of characters, the wistfulness for a return to paganism seems to be present in the description of the "Girl Formerly A She-Goat" (144). The text suggests biblical disapproval while speaking of such transformations in what may be seen as a positive, nostalgic light. Time after time these transformations are decried in the Old Testament. Today, we live more simply; love less ardently" (144). The implication that something has been lost elicits a sense of longing for some ideal decried by the Judeo-Christian Old Testament, and it is apparent why a critic may imagine such passages advocating a return to pagan ideas.

This longing for such a return may further be suggested by the scene in the novel where Agnes Birdsong encounters the satyr. The satyr himself, part of the "Greek

polytheistic mythology,” is a pagan symbol of fertility, and Agnes Birdsong’s experience causes her to feel that “life was beginning” (45). Agnes clearly finds the experience positive, and the satyr continues to serve as a symbol of fecundity. This encounter too seems to validate Mendelsohn’s view that the novel at least views certain returns to paganism in a positive light. Such a statement is too narrow, however. While the novel does present figures that have a pagan past, it is a stretch to suggest that Finney’s novel advocates a return to paganism or rejection of Christianity.

Christian symbolism is at least somewhat venerated within the course of the novel over figures that have non-Christian histories. Apollonius, a magician in the novel who claims to have been a contemporary with Christ, is able to perform many signs throughout the novel that seem miraculous, but when Satan appears toward the end of the circus, he is unable to vanquish him on his own. Instead, the reader sees him fall back on a Christian symbol, as “[r]eaching into his robe, the magician drew out a crucifix. Holding on high the little Jesus quartered on a cross, he advanced beneath the fiend” (124). Apollonius relies on an image of Christ and the crucifixion, the crux as it were, of Christian faith. Additionally, he carries it on his person, ready for such an occasion as he is able to produce it from his robes, suggesting a certain trust in it on his part. His own powers are downplayed, as he is referred to as simply a magician within the passage, suggesting the world of illusions and stage magic rather than miraculous power. Finney’s language undercuts Apollonius’s own sense of power while focusing on the crucifix that he holds “on high” (124), literally and figuratively elevating its position above the holder. The novel at least elevates Christian symbolism in some respect, while similarly speaking

of pagan era ideals in a positive light, making single classifications difficult, if not impossible.

Finney reflects upon this difficulty through both the creatures and people who interact in Lao's circus. While many of the residents of Abalone try to interpret the creatures through a certain lens, Lao's sideshows reveal a greater complexity than the limited perspective of Abalone's citizens can account for, as many have rejected the ancient and fantastic, trying to maintain a modern skepticism. The creatures in Lao's circus are *sui generis*, defining their own kind by unique combinations of traits which separate them from the limited knowledge of Abalone's residents.

CHAPTER 3: THE CREATURES

From the beginning, Finney's novel sets apart a unique space for the *sui generis*, those things that are of their own kind. The space which the circus will soon inhabit has become somewhat unique due to the increasing urban sprawl that comes with modern development, though it was a rather natural and normal area in the past. The newspaper advertisement which opens the novel calls for "the tents ... to be spread upon a vacant field on the banks of the Santa Ana river, a bald spot in the city's growth surrounded by all manner of houses and habitations" (9). Although the entire area was likely once as undeveloped, the increase of civilization has rendered this point on the landscape the sole patch of undisturbed nature. This is the perfect space for Lao's one-of-a-kind circus and its creatures, a place which remains alone and un-zoned, unclassified, as modern civilization has rejected it.

The creatures in Dr. Lao's circus are central to the unique character of the narrative, and so no analysis of the *sui generis* in *The Circus of Dr. Lao* would be complete without an account of the various creatures presented. The creatures are truly of their own kind, as Lao describes them as part of an "unbiological order ... because it obeys none of the natural laws of hereditary and environmental change, pays no attention to the survival of the fittest, positively sneers at any attempt on the part of man to work out a rational life cycle" (60). Like the work itself, they are unique in their traits and confound attempts at explanation by critics or observers. As such, they do not fall within

any known taxonomy and are apparently not born of any apparent ancestors which would share their kind. All the circus's creatures deserve the definite article, both in the grammatical sense of "the," as each may be denoted as unique, and in the sense that they are all as real as the ordinary inhabitants of Abalone, Arizona.

Dr. Lao marks the entire menagerie of his circus as *sui generis*, declaring the creatures to be outside of the typical order of animals normally studied by science. He discusses the medusa and her own unique nature, explaining that she is a "Sonoran medusa from New Mexico" (58), separating her from the traditional mythos of the Greek medusa, and making her, presumably, the only American born medusa in existence. He proceeds to discuss her specific traits before declaring that medusas "belong to that weird netherworld of unbiological beings" (59). He sets the medusa and the other creatures in his circus apart from creatures known and studied by science, marking each of them as their own kind. He proceeds to list the menagerie in his circus, including "the chimera, the unicorn, the sphinx, the werewolf, and the hound of the hedges and the sea serpent" (59-60) in this order of creatures. The creatures in the circus are unscientific and so fit within the *sui generis* as they are unique and may not be classified or studied in the way of normal fauna, defying taxonomical account, creating categories for themselves outside the usual ideas of scientific and natural kind.

Lao as the proprietor of the circus emphasizes its unclassifiable, *sui generis*, nature which has confounded reviewers and critics alike. As someone asks for a definition of science, upon encountering the unclassified chimera, Lao offers his view that "science is nothing but classification. Science is just tagging a name to everything"

(82). Classification entails assigning an individual to a group, and for the peerless elements of Lao's circus there can be no grouping, and attempts to do so prove fruitless.

The creatures in Lao's circus are absolutely strange, and truly unique, specifically violating the natural order of things, and often combining traits that may not ordinarily be combined. Lao describes the whole of his circus creatures as an "unbiological order ... because it obeys none of the natural laws of hereditary and environmental change, pays no attention to the survival of the fittest, positively sneers at any attempt on the part of man to work out a rational life cycle, is possibly immortal, unquestionably immoral"

(60). The discussion of their life cycle reflects the difficulty that the residents of Abalone, and those who wish for a logical scientific understanding may have with the creatures. What man understands of the nature of life doesn't apply to these creatures, and so it becomes clear why so many of the circus visitors rejected them, as they were unable to approach the truly unique and *sui generis* from a perspective accustomed to the logical world.

The creatures violate any sort of Darwinian ideas of evolution, avoiding the natural lifecycle, and so are further unclassifiable by such laws. They seem to violate what is known, and Dr. Lao describes them in what sounds like a series of contradictions, saying that their unnatural order "ruts, spawns, and breeds but does not reproduce, lays no eggs, builds no nests, seeks but does not find, wanders but does not rest" (60). They do not seem to reproduce, or be produced from any parent, and so their order can only be *sui generis*, or of "its own kind" ("*sui generis*" OED). They do not develop any offspring, and many have likely not come from any known parent themselves, and although they are classed by Lao under this same unbiological order, each of them have created their own

order through their unique combination of traits. This is the distinguishing definition of the *sui generis*, and will serve as the operating definition moving forward in this study.

The creatures in Lao's circus violate the principles of natural animals which are be classified and contained within taxonomies. They are all difficult to class according to the normal organization of animals, though most are composed of what appear to be normal animal parts. The medusa has her snakes and a human form, the satyr has goat feet, etc., but the combination or appearance of these parts is unlike that which is seen in the animal kingdom. This particular distinction recalls the criteria which Aristotle used in his work *The History of Animals*, where he separated animals based on the idea that they "differ from one another in their modes of subsistence, in their actions, in their habits, and in their parts" (*The History of Animals*, Aristotle). The animals in Lao's circus eat what other animals eat, sharing their means of subsistence, but their actions, habits, and physical composition differ significantly, making them uniquely unnatural.

No account of the creatures contained in Dr. Lao's circus would be complete without the hound of the hedges, the most *sui generis* exhibit in the circus, which is of its own kind biologically, not only as an animal, but as a plant. Whereas some animals fall into a specific genus, the hound of the hedges is neither completely animal, nor completely plant. It has no apparent gender, suggesting that it is the only one of its kind, and came into existence only when water touched a particularly dry rice field. It has no parental lineage and is the very definition of *sui generis*, "alone of its kind throughout the world" (68) as described by Dr. Lao. His choice of words are only one off from "Of ... its own kind" ("*sui generis*" OED), and most of Lao's references to the creature emphasize

its unique qualities. This reflects its unique relation to existing mythologies, particularly that it has none.

The hound of the hedges is one exhibit in Dr. Lao's circus which does not appear in any existing mythology. It is the sole creation of Charles Finney's mind, developed exclusively for the novel, and so it may not be pigeon-holed into any existing mythology. Finney demonstrates, through the voice of Dr. Lao, that he is working with the *sui generis* through his creatures, especially through the hound, separating it even from the other *sui generis* characters within the novel. Dr. Lao raises the hound above the other creatures in his circus as he tells his patrons, "Let me advise you, good people, to see the hound of the hedges even though you must forgo seeing the mermaid or the werewolf" (51), adding that "the hound is unique" (51). The other exhibits in Lao's circus are *sui generis* in their own right, and they are certainly stranger than the usual sights present in a circus, but Lao makes a special note of the unique qualities of the hound. This coincides with the strictest definition of the *sui generis* as the hound of the hedges is truly "of its own kind" ("*sui generis*" OED). Dr. Lao uses more superlative terms, calling the Hound "that *most* (italics mine) unique of *all* (italics mine) beasts" (50). It is set above any other creature in the circus, and above any animal in existence. Where the other creatures in the circus, such as the satyr, may have had others of their kind in previous eras, the hound came into existence alone.

The hound of the hedges has not come from a parent hound, or any similar creature. His creation presents an interesting issue when considering the need for a similar parent. Dr. Lao describes him in a way that strongly reflects his *sui generis* nature, describing him as "alone of his kind throughout the world" (Finney 68). The

hound of the hedges differs from Manasseh cutler's snake, which was certainly bred from ordinary snakes. The hound has no parentage, save for the fields he came from, and there are no offspring after him. His creation violates the principles of propagation Aristotle outlines in his work *On the Parts of Animals*. He outlines the basic principle that the child must proceed from a similar parent, as "propagation implies a creative seed endowed with certain formative properties ... the parent animal pre-exists, not only in idea, but actually in time. For man is generated from man" (Aristotle, I). No hound of the hedges preexists, neither within The Circus of Dr. Lao, nor in actual mythology. It violates both ancient and more modern evolutionary principles of life.

Within the real world, the Hound springs from Finney's mind, not a mythology, and perhaps for this reason, is described as "A dream" (146), within the catalogue of creatures separated from the main body of the text in the final chapter. Within the context of the story, the hound springs from green rice fields after they are turned from desert by the construction of a canal. Dr. Lao describes this creation through the actions of man, by the creation of an artificial canal, recounting that the "land had been nothing but so much parched dust with no green thing growing upon it anywhere. Then the canals were constructed and brought water to it, and over the dry skin lovely green things commenced to grow" (68). The conditions that create this abundance of life, and in turn, make the hound possible are a manmade alteration of the natural cycle of reproduction. Much as Finney creates the hound from his own mind, the hound is created similarly in the story, through a manmade canal. This genesis is not entirely of man, though. Man creates the canals, but not the hound itself, which spawns from the fields, while Finney exercises a

more direct hand in creation, though he himself constructs the hound from ideas from natural fields.

Within the novel, many plants and flowers work together to create an animal shape from themselves. Dr. Lao explains the multipart creation of the hound of the hedges, where, “as a symbol and embodiment of that exuberant fecundity, the grasses and the weeds and the flowers and hedges and bushes each gave a little of themselves and created this hound, truly an unparalleled achievement in the annals of horticulture” (68). Again, Lao describes the hound in superlative terms as he describes its *sui generis* creations. Where dogs beget dogs of their own kind, the hound of the hedges comes from numerous progenitors which are not of his kind. He has the qualities of a plant as well as those of an animal, but there is no creature quite like him, and no parentage of his kind.

Lao describes the hound by his parts, which, while largely ordinary on their own, have formed a singular creature by combination. Lao speaks of his first vision of the Hound, describing his appearance in the individual parts that constitute it, saying his “eyes that were like green unripened pods. . . . His tail of ferns wagged a little, switching his sides of green, green grass. From his panting mouth chlorophyll slavered” (69). A salivating dog is not uncommon, nor is a plant with chlorophyll, but the hound combines both into a trait worthy of note in its own sentence. The parts that Finney describes are quite ordinary, and even a short trip into the suburbs would be sufficient to see all of these components. Their particular combination, however—and in the shape of a living hound—makes this creature quite unlike anything in nature or mythology.

His own common construction allows him to be *sui generis* and truly fantastic, reflecting Tolkien’s view that fantasy “Is made out of the Primary World, but a good

craftsman loves his material and has a knowledge and feeling for clay, stone and wood which only the art of making can give” (147). Finney constructs something fantastic from the base elements of the world the reader inhabits, what Tolkien calls the *Primary World* as opposed to the fictional creation, which is the *Secondary World*.

Tolkien sheds light on the way which the Primary World can influence the fantastic. He elaborates the way in which the basic traits of the mundane may be combined to create the fantastic and *sui generis*, describing how the “human mind, endowed with the powers of generalization and abstraction, sees not only *green-grass*, discriminating it from other things ... but sees that it is *green* as well as being grass” (122). The mind is not just able to see the gestalt of the object, but its parts and thus is able to separate them and potentially recombine them into something original and unique. Tolkien discusses the ways in which this may be done, simply taking a descriptive adjective, a trait, and applying it elsewhere. Tolkien marvels, “how stimulating to the very faculty that produced was the invention of the adjective” (122). The specific application of particular components, such as those conveyed by adjectives, creates a unique fantasy, even though the individual parts may themselves be mundane. Tolkien emphasizes the magnificent simplicity with which the fantastic may be created, doing so through the simple application of color adjectives where they would not be expected under ordinary and mundane circumstances, describing how “[w]e may put a deadly green upon a man’s face and produce a horror; we may make the rare and terrible blue moon to shine; or we may cause woods to spring with silver leaves and rams to wear fleeces of gold” (122). Tolkien uses mythology, such as the Golden Fleece, a realistic

sickly pallor, and other known phenomenon to reveal just how vivid, powerful, and unique such addition of traits can be, even if the elements are ordinarily mundane.

Tolkien sees this application of common traits in uncommon ways as a sub-creation, meaning that man draws upon something else not created by him. Certainly, Tolkien's thought is of God being a biblical creator, and man drawing from that creation to define his own art, and so man is a lesser creating entity. Tolkien uses this idea to define his notion of fantasy and Faërie, following his explanation of the creative power of adjectives of color, by saying, "in such 'fantasy', as it is called, new form is made; Faërie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator" (122). This is well reflected in the creation of the canal within the *The Circus of Dr. Lao* and the subsequent creation of the hound of the hedges. The natural processes of growth are not man's invention, but man's actions support these the natural means of creation, as men build a canal to make fields grow, perhaps for food, indirectly causing the growth of the hound of the hedges by nourishing the fields. Likewise, Finney draws upon a number of natural traits, giving the hound a green color, but doing so because he is part plant, mixing the traits of both flora and fauna in a way which does not naturally occur. Finney becomes Tolkien's sub-creator, designing the hound of the hedges and his other creatures from more common traits.

The hound himself also does not possess any of the instincts that may be expected of a creature who concerned with its own survival, and that of its kind. The hound is foremost in Dr. Lao's unbiological order, being the "product of no trial and error process, lacking lust, unhampered by ancestral fears and instincts" (70). While the other creatures spring from unknown sources and do not seek propagation of their species, the hound makes this unbiological order clearer. Lao's first sentence excludes the hound from

Darwinian principles of evolution which require much trial and error based on the survival of the fittest. As the hound is not the product of this process, he also does not wish to continue his species, lacking the lust to do so. Lacking this ancestral need for survival or propagation, he also lacks the natural fear that is innate in creatures that possess fear of predators, as that often comes from an ancestry that has survived such dangers. The hound is docile and, even among the inhabitants of the circus, he is *sui generis* in nature.

He is set apart from the normal life cycle, as nothing that should be present in the continuation of an ordinary species is present with the hound. He is set apart from others in having “no mate and no sire; no dam and no brood” (68). There is no brood for him, no siblings who have similar qualities. He has no father and mother, save for the plants of the field that created him, and although he has some of their traits, such as chlorophyll, he combines them with animal form and locomotion, making him of a different kind from them. He also has no mate to continue the species, and even so, he does not even fit into normal categories of animal sexual reproduction, lacking a real gender. Dr. Lao simply uses the masculine pronoun for convenience sake, admitting, “I refer to him in the masculine gender, such designation is very loose; for, as a matter of fact, this hound has sex only as a water lily might have sex” (68). Despite his animal shape, which distinguishes him from plants, he has no clear animal gender, and so combines this shape with the traits of plants, a dog who cannot breed normally, and who has no drive to do so. Even considering the hound as neuter may be a stretch, as it implies a lack of genders normally in a kind of animal, but the hound has no peer to be compared with. Dr. Lao further distances the hound from the ordinary, comparing his gender to various

vegetables and plants, describing him as “no more masculine than a horse radish, no more feminine than a cabbage, less carnal than a tiger lily, and as little lustful as a rose bush” (68). If the hound has any means of reproducing, it is not through any intent, but the indirect pollination of flowers. The particular contrast to vegetables further distances him from even reproduction of plants, offering less room for pinning down an ordinary life cycle, while creating a truly *sui generis* combination of flora and fauna that exists nowhere else.

The hound’s complete lack of lust further distances him from the other creatures in the circus as well. Although the satyr’s encounter with Agnes Birdsong is dream-like in some respects, and appears to end, with some question as to what actually happened, the incident is a clear indication of the satyr’s own lustful nature, as well as Agnes’s. Even the chimera, who lacks a female of his species, possesses a lustful nature. When a circus patron asks if the chimera will breed in captivity, Lao confirms that he will, saying he will “breed any time. This fellow here is always trying to get at the sphinx” (81). The hound, though, is even kept out of this potential cross species attraction, and so does not fall under even the potential breeding habits of the *sui generis* creatures of the circus, elevating his strange aloneness above those creatures who are already *sui generis* in their own right.

When Finney does not create completely new creatures, he offers a unique spin on existing mythologies. The chimera is yet another creature in Lao’s circus who defies attempts at grouping. The chimera of Greek myth was a female, combining qualities of existing animals, but arranged in a way that makes it unique. Hesiod, in his *Theogony*, describes her as having “three heads, one of a grim-eyed lion, another of a goat, and

another of a snake, a fierce dragon; in her forepart she was a lion; in her hinderpart, a dragon; and in her middle, a goat” (l. 320). Her various components could all be part of an ordinary animal in the ancient Greek mind, assuming dragons were perceived to be common but rarely seen. It is the combination of traits which makes a singular creature, and which makes Lao’s chimera differ. Lao’s chimera is male, and as a result, has different traits than the traditional female chimera, and so is *sui generis* even among mythological creatures.

The chimera is one of the creatures most known for being *sui generis* due to its unique assemblage, combining the parts of many animals, some of them ordinary, into a combination that ordinarily should not be. Lao’s male chimera is somewhat less majestic than his female counterpart from Greek mythology, and his health appears somewhat poor. He is described as he sleeps in his pen, his parts making showing a sort of discomfort with the world that suggests the hostility against the supernatural shown by the mundane:

The great claws of his paws lacerated the clay upon which he slept. His eagle wings half spread, their ... feathers tangled and fluffy. His dragon tail stirred snakelike, and the metal barb of its tip plowed up little furrows in the clay. His whiskers were singed where his fire-breath had scorched them. Some of the scales on his tail were gangrened and sloughing off where a colony of parasites bred and pullulated. He was shedding; great loose patches of fur, like hunks of felt, hung from his hide. Ticks crawled about in and over those patches. He had a nasty monkish smell, keenly sweetish, fattily pukish, vile and penetrating. (77)

The chimera shares lion traits with his female counterpart from mythology, as well as some dragon parts, though the female does not have a metal barb, and his eagle wings make him unique. His various health problems suggest the difficulty of such a mythic creature living in the mundane world. Many of the residents of Abalone, and presumably the rest of the world, display at least passing hostility with the *sui generis*, and in the chimera, this clash is metaphorized through the parasites and ticks which assault the chimera. The effect on the *sui generis* beast appears to be anything but positive, with spots of gangrene and loose scales, and massive amounts of fur falling off, the potential danger of the mundane to the fantastic is suggested. The negative effect does not appear to make him any more appealing to the ordinary world either, giving him an unpleasant and difficult to avoid smell that is likely to cause further problems.

Dr. Lao's creatures face greater difficulty in a place like Arizona, where their diet must be watched to keep health problems from developing. Lao blames dry Arizona climate for the issues, telling his guest, "It is very necessary to watch our animals' diet down here in Arizona. I think it is because of the lack of humidity or something. Anyhow, if we overfeed them, they invariably have colic, or what is worse, worms" (83). His creatures do not seem to do well in a climate without moisture in the air, a concern which is particularly relevant in Abalone. The air is dry, and metaphorically, people's belief in the fantastic has dried up as well. They have been confronted with the *sui generis*, and are unchanged, they are presented with new, as of yet, undefined categories of the world's creatures, and many return home none the wiser.

It is in this unique creature's scene where Dr. Lao expresses one of the strongest explanations of the *sui generis* and its relation to science. A man, named in the text by his

outward traits, an “old-like, wealthy-looking party in golf pants and sport shirt and plaid socks” (78) asks about the existence of female chimeras and looks for a scientific explanation of the species. The chimera’s lack of a female equivalent “be that the female chimera, like the females of several insect species, is of an entirely different bodily make-up . . . and, so far, has not been identified as such by science?” (82) He tries to understand the chimera through his existing knowledge of entomology. The female chimera is of a different makeup, though not for any clear scientific reason, as such a *sui generis* creature has not been, and perhaps may not be, identifiable by the sciences. Dr. Lao, resistant to such attempts at scientific rationalization, argues that science “does not even recognize the existence of the male chimera, let alone search for its mate” (82). The man in golf pants has attempted to understand the chimeras through natural and logical laws that state that a male and female are both required for the reproduction of the species, and so a female must exist somewhere. He tries to explain the failure of science to identify the female of the species by hypothesizing from other scientific facts, though entomology is a long way from chimeras. Like the hound of the hedges, something is missing from the natural reproductive cycle, and the apparent existence of only one such creature does not seem to make much sense to the mundane minded.

The scientific method requires some degree of repeatability to establish a fact, and so the *sui generis* is naturally resistant to it, since *sui generis* creatures are rarely observed once, let alone multiple times. Lao, however, simply finds science inadequate to account for the *sui generis* creatures in the world, discounting it as simple taxonomy, arguing that “science is nothing but classification. Science is just tagging a name to everything” (82). Science keeps a distance from its subject in his mind, naming species,

and perhaps parts, suggesting a shallow pursuit which leads to limited knowledge. For the creatures of Lao's circus, this is inadequate, as shown by the limited understanding people have had of the various creatures. That is not to say that Lao does not see a value in the study of creatures, as he explains his capture of the chimera by saying, "chimeras have one frailty: they are enamored of the moon" (82). He has studied and understands behaviors, much like an animal behaviorist might, displaying expertise throughout the circus, but close engagement is his aim rather than distant categorization. *Sui generis* creatures are to be met and interacted with, not kept in a dry text book. After all, he brings his creatures around in a traveling circus rather than simply reporting them. Modern people revere such classification above all in many cases, and so the creatures face hostility.

The chimera is not even completely at home with himself, as his singed whiskers demonstrate, suggesting the truly unnatural combination of traits which makes him so unique. He is a strange creature which breathes fire regularly, but whose body is not fully equipped to tolerate it. He appears to defy common sense ideas that an animal's parts should be consistent with each other, though his own self-inflicted problems only seem minor compared to the hostility of the world.

The chimera is not quite so dangerous as the medusa who transformed Kate into stone, but he does reflect some minor, though perhaps unwitting hostility toward the outside world when it is hostile to him. The *sui generis* resists scientific classifications and people's attempts to explain it away. This resistance is illustrated thanks to the man in golf pants, who curiously "probed at the chimera with his walking cane" (78), showing a possibly unintentional hostility. The sleeping chimera responds to the swipe, switching

“his tail like a horse switching at flies, raking the cane out of the old-like party’s hand and sloughing him across the shins with the metal-barbed tip” (78). The *sui generis* chimera responds to the investigative probe with a return swipe, fortunately not injuring anyone with his barbed tail. The man in golf-pants, who wishes to understand the chimera through scientific classification, makes an unintentionally hostile gesture toward the chimera, as he literally “probed” (78), the beast, not trying to harm it, but trying to understand its behavior and response as it slept. Like Lao, the chimera sees this attempt at examination as mildly annoying at least and lashes out by reflex. The punishment is not quite as strong as that meted out by the medusa, as Kate tried to disprove that such a creature exists, but the illustration of the *sui generis* medusa’s resistance to examination is clear.

The sea serpent’s section is one of the most structurally unique in the novel, and it makes the novel itself *sui generis* by contributing its unique traits to the whole. The section begins in an ordinary third person narrative style which precedes it throughout most of the novel (94-95). This narration lasts for roughly three paragraphs until Mr. Etaoin startles the serpent, at which point, the narrative changes to a dramatic style, similar to line readings in a play script. Like the creatures in the novel, which gain their *sui generis* nature from the particular combination of their traits, the novel gains similar uniqueness through this and other sections, making it different from the typical novel which would likely keep to one style.

Not only do the characters change in relation to the circus and its creatures but, the reader’s relationship with the circus changes as well. The typical style of the novel up to this point, where a third person narrator relays dialogue and describes the actions and

appearances of the circus, encourages a passive observation of what is happening within. The reader looks at the novel and observes it from a comfortable viewing point much as one typically would in an ordinary circus, watching the creatures but not interacting deeply with them. Much of Lao's Circus involves direct interaction with the creatures, Kate being turned to stone by a medusa, as well as Agnes Birdsong having a tryst with the satyr. The narrative structure, however, has kept the reader in a distant position of observation. Within the serpent's chapter, the presentation of characters simply switches to names listed in petite capitals, with all letters capital, but initial letters twice the size of the rest. "THE SNAKE:" and "MR ETAOIN:" (95), are listed, and their dialogue follows with no quotation marks, reading in the style of a stage play and discouraging passive observation. The reader is placed in a role similar to a stage actor, given dialogue and a role within the novel, both as a visitor to the circus, through Mr. Etaoin, and as a part of it, through the snake.

The section also marks a collapse between the mundane residents of Abalone, those that would be considered traditionally real, and the fantastic elements of Lao's circus, which are as real as Abalone's residents, but are often perceived as less than realistic. The section begins with Etaoin and the serpent linked, observing each other as, "Mr. Etaoin contemplated the sea serpent, and the sea serpent contemplated Mr. Etaoin" (94). Finney uses parallel structure for this first sentence, and forms a sort of chiasmus, both individuals reflecting, and reflecting on, each other as if in a mirror. The nature of the mundane's relationship to this circus is mirrored, as the majority of interactions in the circus have involved the residents of Abalone looking inward at the circus and observing

the strange creatures within. The serpent, however, is now looking outward from his position at someone he perhaps finds equally strange.

The dialogue that follows their observation turns the study and inspection onto humanity, as Mr. Etaoin and the serpent discuss their differences. The serpent comments on his natural advantages over human cunning, telling Etaoin, “The god that made you cunning made my eyes efficient enough to perceive objects without aid” (96). Etaoin claims greater cunning, but the serpent’s commentary demonstrates a unique intelligence of his own, as he observes a particular human frailty. Humanity may have the cunning to invent eyeglasses, but they only exist due to the deficiencies in human eyes which necessitate them. It is likely for this reason that the serpent tells Etaoin, “I would not trade with you” (96) when Etaoin tells him that “The god who gave you bravery gave me cunning” (96). Humanity is unique in its cunning, but natural creatures, as well as those of Lao’s circus, often have abilities that mean certain kinds of cunning isn’t necessary. This furthers the *sui generis* nature of the serpent’s portion, and the novel itself, as the reader is not only drawn in as a participant, but the reader is also observed and judged, as the cunning and infirmities that Mr. Etaoin represents occur in the reader’s world as well.

The serpent’s disdain for cunning, and his preference for strength, reveals the difficulty of classifying the *sui generis*. One of the aspects of the novel as a whole is the difficulty in finding one-to-one allegories or symbols for the elements of the circus. The creatures are *sui generis*, and therefore no other myth fits quite right. Finney hints at a potential allegorical identity for the serpent, but doesn’t allow such an easy singular definition. The description of the serpent’s tongue references the serpent in the biblical account of the Garden of Eden, describing it as a “languidly sentient, gracefully forked,

taster of sounds, feeler of vibrations, symbol of strange senses, silent and secret, suggestive of evil that harked back to Eden” (95). The novel describes the serpent by the specific parts of his anatomy, the parts that make him different, and his tongue in particular is given a hint of slyness, though more instinctual. Finney’s description is clearer than just an allusion to craftiness, though, as he makes specific allusion to the Garden of Eden. The biblical account of the serpent begins, “Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made” (Gen 3:1 NASB), emphasizing cleverness, which Lao’s serpent has downplayed.

Another statement hints again at the biblical serpent, as Lao’s serpent regards Mr. Etaoin with enmity. As Etaoin startles him and observes him, the snake responds verbally, asking, “Why do you stand there staring at me? You and I have nothing in common except our hatred of each other” (95). This hatred, specifically directed at Etaoin, appears to hint at another part of the biblical account, particularly that in which God curses the serpent, saying, “I will put enmity / Between you and the woman, / And between your seed and her seed” (Gen 3:15 NASB), the woman specifically being Eve. Finney is certainly thinking about the biblical account of Eden as he writes the serpent’s dialogue and description. Finney allows the reader to see the similarity, at least for the moment, but develops him with more unique traits that do not fit the biblical account, revealing that such easy classifications are not accurate, and that the *sui generis* must be dealt with on its own basis.

This clever red herring works much like the serpent’s observation of Mr. Etaoin. The reader who expects an easy parallel will be disappointed upon further examination, but will get something richer, biblical allusions along with a completely unique creature.

The ease with which the readers see an easy biblical allusion, only to realize that it was perhaps incorrect, affects their own self-perception, encouraging them to analyze the ideas and personal expectations that they bring to Lao's *sui generis* circus, hopefully leading to self-reflection on their own unique nature. The novel, rather uniquely, looks outward.

The serpent judges humanity by setting himself apart from it, specifically focusing on his own advantages over the frailties of humanity. It is in his self-assessment that he most defines his *sui generis* nature, focusing on his particular combination of traits, discussing his advantages individually. As he discusses meeting his mate on an island, he tells Etaoin, "I swim fast. Notice how my tail is paddle-shaped" (97). He focuses on the part that gives him a unique advantage in swimming, describing his unique physiognomy. This not only furthers the idea of his own *sui generis* nature, but that of the novel as well, as in the absence of a third person narrator, physical description is left up to the character who manages to give as vivid an image of himself as an outside narrator could. He specifically sets his own kind, speaking about his strengths to convey his unique identity through superlative terms, bragging, "My venom is more virulent than a cobra's. My coils are more terrible than a python's" (97). His strongest attributes are clearly those of a sort of brute strength and not a manipulative deceptiveness as in the biblical account. He also sees himself as separate from other serpents, setting himself above them so that he has no direct peer. He is unique among any serpent, including that of the biblical serpent, particularly as he is of the sea.

His origin from the sea further marks him as *sui generis*, much as the hound of the hedge's origins from the fields does so. When asked about the mermaid in Lao's circus, he

explains that, "She is a daughter of the sea just as I am a son of it" (104). He does not reference parents or other common origins, and although he references a life, likely on the Galapagos islands, where Darwin studied animal life, the serpent describing "a place of enormous turtles and volcanic stones" where "turtles there eat only vegetables and fruits [and] attain tremendous age" (102-103). Like other creatures in the circus, the serpent defies the normal scientific order of reproduction, and such allusions reference specifically what the serpent is not. As in the case of the Garden of Eden, such references provide contrast, revealing the serpent's own *sui generis* nature, allowing readers to examine what they bring to the circus.

In addition to his observation of Etaoin, the serpent offers his unique view of humanity as well. As he discusses an island village where he ate three villagers, the serpent describes one attempting to escape, saying, "You know how those natives climb trees: tie their hind feet together and go up a slanting trunk with silly frog hops" (99). The fact that he regards the villagers as food is not quite as interesting as his animalistic view of their "hind legs" adopting his own ideas of anatomy to humans. He examines humanity from his own perspective, the *sui generis* and fantastic viewing humanity from its own perspective, looking outward from within the circus sideshow, as Finney does through his presentation of the distinctive residents of Abalone, Arizona.

CHAPTER 4: THE PEOPLE

The mundane residents of Abalone Arizona are often as fascinating as the unbelievable exhibits that come to their town. Most are physically ordinary people, save for one Frank Tull, a lawyer composed both of human flesh and mechanical parts, but their past experiences form a unique combination of personality traits, and their knowledge affects their encounters with the circus. Some approach the circus with excitement, some with skepticism, some with pride, and some with genuine curiosity. They are often changed through these encounters, becoming something they weren't before, for better or for worse, exemplifying how the clash of two unique entities can often produce circumstances that are even more unique and *sui generis*.

While humans are not typically considered *sui generis* genetically, their experiences and personalities are often of their own kind. *The Circus of Dr. Lao* concerns itself with the *sui generis* nature of human identity, and how people find individuality among the larger mass of humanity. Within the novel, people are affected by their own unique interests and circumstances and are led to one exhibit or sideshow suited for them. *Sui generis* creatures are paired with *sui generis* people who are most interestingly suited for the experience.

The formation of the *sui generis*, through the combination of particular singular attributes that create a unique whole, is further explored through the pairing of characters to particular creatures or exhibits, where individual people are led to a particular exhibit

and away from others due to their own unique circumstances. From the opening advertisement that introduces the circus, the residents of Abalone are drawn by specific parts of the advertisement that seem targeted toward them and no one else, and their own experiences at the circus. It is through these experiences with the *sui generis* that they finally manifest their own *sui generis* identity. The people at Lao's circus are often distinct in "character, or attributes" ("Peculiar" OED) from anyone else, and the novel studies each as an "isolated specimen" ("*sui generis*" OED), with unique circumstances, and truly of their "own kind" ("*sui generis*" OED). The residents of Abalone are often disappointed, angered, or otherwise resistant to the creatures in the circus, not always because of the creatures themselves, but because of their own interests and concerns, which guide them in particular directions from the moment they read the newspaper ad for the circus.

Lao's specifications for the newspaper ad demonstrate the care which has gone into addressing the specific traits of particular residents of Abalone. Advertising Solicitor Steele, being asked about the ad, explains that Lao required that "the words must be exactly the way he had" them (13). Lao clearly works at the most minute level, concerning himself with singular words, and their particular combination in the sentence. He makes sure that precisely the right words get included, and so designs his ad to have its proper effect on particular residents of Abalone. It meets the individual predilections and tastes of individuals and leads them in the proper direction. These predilections limit the characters in ways which reflect the habits of people in the primary world.

In *An Experiment in Criticism*, C.S. Lewis discusses the personal attitudes and baggage that people bring to art and literature which clouds their perception and taste of a

work. He speaks of a period in his youth when he could not appreciate art for being skillfully crafted, but because a particular aspect of the work appealed to him, such as a beautiful woman. He admits this deficiency by saying, “I admired a picture of a woman only if, and only because, it represented a woman who would have attracted me if she were really present. The result, as I now see, was that I attended very inadequately to what was before me” (Lewis 15). He was not interested in composition, color, or any other technical excellence, but simply was taken by attractiveness, missing the greater aspects of the work as a whole. His difficulties mirror those of the way in which Abalone’s residents react to the *sui generis* in Lao’s circus, and this is particularly illustrated in Lao’s interaction with Larry Kamper.

Having spoken with Kamper in Mandarin, Lao believes he has found someone who can truly appreciate the wonderfully outlandish creatures in his circus takes him to see the werewolf Larry, upon seeing that the werewolf transitions not from a wolf to a young attractive woman, but to an old woman, not attractive in Larry’s mind. Larry quickly complains, “That old dame’s like somebody’s great-grandmother. . . . I thought we was going to see a chicken” (112). He cannot appreciate the incredible transformation itself, having only wished to see an attractive woman, transformation or no. Lao, disappointed, quickly becomes hostile toward Larry, protesting, “Sensualist, . . . I might have known your only interest in this would be carnal. You have seen a miracle, by any standard sacred or profane” (112). Lao emphasizes the miraculous nature of this *sui generis* transformation and attacks Larry for his narrow interest, disappointed that Larry can only appreciate mundane carnality and not something truly special. More so, the transformation was likely intended just for Larry, who Lao may have believed to be the

sole person who could fully appreciate the fantastic in the circus, as Apollonius has earlier stated that “Later on in the month of October, it becomes a woman for six weeks. . . . Too bad it isn’t changing form now” (42). The werewolf is not expected to transform during this circus, but Lao brings Larry Kamper over specifically to see the change, presumably accelerating the show just for one person he believes can appreciate it. Unfortunately, Lao is disappointed and comes to see Larry in a similar way to the rest of the residents of Abalone. He is unique in his own experiences, but he cannot fully appreciate the truly *sui generis* and fantastic, being affected merely by his own interests.

The residents of Abalone, such as Larry Kamper, cannot appreciate the entirety of Lao’s circus, and so they are limited to what matches their own unique experiences and personalities. C.S. Lewis, through his discussion of viewer appreciation of art, offers the proper way to appreciate that which is new to us unhindered, urging, “We must not let loose our own subjectivity upon the pictures and make them its vehicles. We must begin by laying aside as completely as we can all our own preconceptions, interests, and associations” (18). This is also the way in which the residents of Abalone would ideally appreciate Lao’s circus, laying aside their own preconceptions and accepting the *sui generis* for what it is. Lao expects that most of the patrons to his circus will come with their own preconceptions, but still maintains the separation between his patrons and the circus, saying, “The world is my idea; as such I present it to you. I have my own set of weights and measures and my own table for computing values. You are privileged to have yours” (126). The circus, as well as the novel, have their own meaning that is separate from the individual viewer or reader, but each individual is unique, and it is

expected, though not ideal for the circus, that the individual will come burdened with their own preconceptions that influence their interaction with the *sui generis*.

Miss Agnes Birdsong is one such patron, who comes with her own set of personal issues which affect her interactions at the circus. When she first enters the novel, she is already lacking in confidence, needing to reassure herself of her own intellect, and her own professional and sexual identity. She concerns herself with her professional integrity at first, while trying to shore up deficiencies in her own vocabulary. When she views the circus advertisement, she is confused by the words “pornographic and hermaphroditic” and “reached for her dictionary” to look up the curious words (14). She shares an interest in language with other circus goers, such as Mr. Etaoin, whose interest is as a wrangler of typos and errors, and Larry Kamper, whose travels have given him skill with foreign languages, especially Chinese. Her interest, though, is solely in English, and deeper in the actual definitions of words, making her interest unique among others that work with language. She bolsters her own self-image through this unique interest, telling herself that a “guardian of the language could do no less” than to investigate the unfamiliar terms for herself (14). She forms her own elevated position, deciding what kind of person she is, while satisfying her own curiosity, increasing her sexual interest in the circus, which draws her to the satyr.

The satyr connects with Agnes largely because of her sexual identity as a woman, something she is initially uncomfortable with. The two words that she looks up are sexual in nature, and her interest in the circus advertisement is due to such an interest. After looking up the words *pornographic* and *hermaphroditic*, she is “wiser but not sadder” (14), which suggests her interest, and her main interest in the advertisement occurs as she

starts to “wonder what a fugitive vision seen through a peephole would be like” (14). This idea of fugitive suggests at least some transgression, the form of dangerous illegality that Bradbury spoke of in his introduction to *The Circus of Dr. Lao and Other Improbable Stories*. Unfortunately, that part of the circus is only intended for men, and so Agnes believes she must go without seeing it.

The restriction on women, and her own desire to see the peep show, compromises her identity as a woman. In order to see the show, she wishes “momentarily she were a man” (14), and “thought, and quickly slew the thought, of dressing up like a man and attending the peep show” (14). She is interested in what the circus offers her, particularly as it pertains to sexual thoughts, though she is ready to abandon her own sex if it means she can attend the show. For her, the show promises an awakening, but one that she feels she cannot have as a woman.

Her experience is not to be with the men of the peep show, but a *sui generis* one, solely between her and the satyr. The thought of the peep show makes her imagine “the conjuring up in a stuffy circus tent of an erotic dream of a long-dead day” (14), a rather accurate prediction of her encounter with the satyr later. Her mind is right for accepting the *sui generis* in Dr. Lao’s circus, though only that which is meant for her truly unique self. Before she may obtain the dream she feels she has been excluded from, she must exclude other parts of the circus that are meant for others, finding her own identity.

During the opening parade, she rejects or ignores a number of the circus’s creatures, such as the unicorn. She sees the unicorn and recognizes it, saying to herself, “that thing’s a unicorn” (36). Soon, though, her own need to reassure herself that she is a rational person causes her to reject this one-of-a-kind sight, as “she remembered that

unicorns were figments of the imagination” (36) and concludes that “[i]t’s a fake” (36), appealing to her own sense of rationality.

Her resistance to the fantastic is furthered by her fear of the natural, as she sees Lao’s serpent and regards “the snake with a slight feeling of illness” (36), worrying to herself twice, “suppose it should get loose” (36). Again, she rejects another part of the circus, though for different reasons. Still, her rejection leads her away from the other exhibits in the circus and towards the one meant for her.

Agnes constructs her own sense of identity through reassurance in her intelligence and rationality. She frequently reassures herself, “I am a calm intelligent girl” (37) when dealing with the fantastic circus. Her insecurities cause her to remind herself that she is intelligent, but her own self-esteem is less important in her own mind than other people’s opinion of her. When she hears the sphinx chide Apollonius for a lack of attention, she almost sits “down on the sidewalk in amazement” (36), a normal reaction to such a strange occurrence. After her initial amazement, though, she must verify her experience with the rest of the crowd, and so looks “at the people around her [who] seemed to not have heard a word” (36). The first thing to note about this experience is that the experience seems to have only been shared by her, Apollonius, and the sphinx who spoke. Her experience is explicitly isolated from the rest of the crowd who do not hear the sphinx speak, making the experience solely for her a *sui generis* occurrence within the parade.

This experience demonstrates the way in which Finney often links the idea of the *sui generis* and individuality within the novel. Agnes Birdsong’s first instinct, following her amazement, is to confirm what her ears heard by looking to the other parade

watchers, and judging their reaction. Upon seeing that others have apparently not reacted in the same way, she does her best to reassure herself, touching “her pulse and her brow” (37), as if to examine her health and check her passion, before repeating her mantra, “I am a calm intelligent girl” (37). She feels the need to reintegrate her own experience with the group, only able to accept the fantastic if it is verified by the other residents of Abalone. The wonders of the circus parade threaten to make her unique, of her own kind among the skeptics of the town, and so she tries to meld back with the crowd.

Her experience with the sphinx, with the serpent, and with the unicorn, specifically her rejection of each, frees her attention for the satyr when he appears. After she rejects the other members of the circus, she sees the satyr, who in turn sees her. Just as Agnes wished to see some vision in the peep show, the satyr “shielded his eyes with his hand and leered at her” (37). The satyr “peeps” back at her as she sees him, connecting with her in a way the others cannot. He does not look away, either, continuing to watch her and regard her own unique qualities. She holds his attention as he rides, “staring as though out of his accumulation of years he could remember nothing to compare with her” (37). For the satyr, Agnes Birdsong is truly of her own kind, having no equivalent, even throughout the satyr’s centuries-long life. Although she is an ordinary person, she is *sui generis*, of her own kind among not only the residents of Abalone, but all people throughout the centuries. Although she is but a customer and onlooker, and not an attraction in the circus, she fulfills the newspaper advertisement’s promise that the most beautiful women of all time would be present in the circus. Where her other qualities combine to create a *sui generis* person who is drawn to the circus, her beauty alone makes her *sui generis* in the satyr’s mind.

The advertisement that presents Dr. Lao's circus to the residents of Abalone already promises *sui generis* sights. The first claim in the newspaper advertisement attempts to draw visitors to the circus based on the beauty of its women. The first claim in the advertisement "alleged for the show's female personnel a pulchritude impossible to equal in any golden age of beauty or physical culture" (9). The advertisement begins promising the *sui generis* through superlative claims of beauty. The advertisement goes further, promising that "these were the most beautiful women of the world; the whole world, not just the world of today, but the world since time began and the world as long as time shall run" (9). The women promised are of their own kind, *sui generis*, in the greatest sense that the advertisement can promise, throughout the earth and throughout all time, a veritable Platonic ideal of beauty. This is precisely what the satyr sees looking back at Agnes, a resident of Abalone, but truly unique.

It is her encounter with the satyr that finally draws her to the circus as she once again tries to reassure herself that she is a "calm, intelligent girl" who has "not seen Pan on main street" (37). Again, she attempts to reassure herself and ignore the fantastic, though this time, her connection with the satyr, who watches her much as she would watch the peep show, arrests her attempts to reintegrate her unique identity back in with the mass of the skeptical crowd. She maintains some semblance of skepticism as she thinks, "[n]evertheless, I will go to the circus and make sure" (37), though it is apparent that she is no longer declaring what she sees to be fake, nor conforming to the crowd. She starts to manifest her own *sui generis* identity, and will soon be compared to a Grecian nymph, a unique creature of myth, and all the more *sui generis*, as she may become the last of their kind.

Agnes arrives at the circus, making her own decision to seek out the satyr.

Although there are other patrons at the show, they go unnamed on the page as Apollonius gives them the details of the circus. He simply refers to them by saying he is “glad to see so many of you people” (43), offering no greater clue to their identity, giving them a speech about the attractions before he simply “pushe[s] his way through the crowd” (43). The rest of the circus goers in the scene are meant to be an amorphous mass with no real distinct identity. Agnes is the only named patron on the page, having already become her own person. She takes the initiative in finding Dr. Lao, asking him for “the tent with Pan” (43). Lao corrects her, as they “do not have Pan in this circus” (43), before letting her know she is thinking of the satyr. Lao corrects her in a matter-of-fact, though eloquent, tone which demonstrates a facet of his own persona, his choice of dialect, which he varies for each person. His correction, and Agnes’s mistake, also emphasizes the *sui generis* nature of the satyr who likely now exists as the sole member of his kind, and so could be confused with a *sui generis* Greek god whom he resembles

Agnes acknowledges the satyr’s *sui generis* nature, giving him a proper name, though a mistaken one, to denote him as unique among all creatures, and soon she connects with him on the mythic level and takes on not only her identity, but that of the mythic nymphs of his day. As he plays his syrinx, she trembles “as Grecian nymphs had trembled when the same satyr, twenty centuries younger, had danced and played for them” (45). She is a woman, and an ordinary resident of Abalone, but she connects through the centuries with the rare nymphs of centuries before. She is *sui generis*, though, as the nymphs have almost certainly vanished, and though she possesses their beauty, she

does so as a human woman, and thus qualifies more as *sui generis* for not being a mythical nymph, but some unique combination of Greece and Arizona.

Her *sui generis* nature, and the nature of the encounter, is further emphasized by how her tryst with the satyr ends. The satyr takes an interest in her and begins to play his syrinx for her, seducing her like one of the nymphs of ancient times. The scene grows more intense until Agnes feels that “the world was spinning slower and slower, that gravity was weakening, that life was beginning” (45). The scene intensifies with just her and the satyr, growing vividly illustrative. The next sentence in the scene, however, simply reads, “the door opened and Dr. Lao came in” (45). The spell between Agnes and the satyr is immediately broken as soon as a second person comes in, the experience having been a *sui generis* one that she can only experience alone.

The people of Abalone arrive at the various exhibits with their own interpretation of what the exhibits are, many proudly expressing skepticism that the exhibits before them are fakes, or trickery of some kind. Readers, along with the patrons, quickly find that their preconceived interpretations are proven false, as the creatures reveal their own unique nature. Janet Whyde acknowledges this upset of expectations, but interprets it as an amorphousness of meaning, specifically stating that “Finney dismantles readers’ expectations by making reality always uncertain, always uninterpretable, or, to be more exact, infinitely interpretable” (Whyde). Existing cultural myths and other preconceived ideas are quickly dismantled, as when Agnes Birdsong interpreted the satyr to be the Greek god Pan. However, the events and creatures in Lao’s circus are not uninterpretable, or even infinitely interpretable; they are *sui generis*, one-of-a-kind, and thus will not fit entirely into any existing myth. This is not to say that they are uninterpretable or even

infinitely interpretable, but to say that they are what they are, individual creatures that often bear resemblance to something known, but with traits that make them unique. Allegorical interpretation is likely impossible, but the creatures in Lao's circus may be better understood by taking them at face value.

Finney discourages such an infinite number of interpretations and emphasizes the need to accept the *sui generis* for what it is. He does this particularly as the family of Ed, Junior, Martha, and Howard encounter the roc egg. During the scene, Ed, the proud skeptic, tries to impress his family and strengthen his role as head of the household by offering scientific sounding theories for what the egg truly is. He is quickly punished for his attempts at skeptical interpretation, having his role as head of the family undermined in front of his children who may find their own identity.

Ed is immediately resistant to the fantastic in Lao's circus, expecting, like many of Abalone residents, that Lao is taking him for a Rube by passing off a falsehood, and first rejects the mermaid exhibit when his wife suggests it. Martha offers, "Here's a tent with a mermaid in it. Let's go in here" (64), before Ed expresses his skepticism and vetoes her plan, arguing, "I hate to spend money on anything that's so obviously a fake." He reveals that his concern is monetary, not wanting to waste what he has earned, while downplaying the fantastic. He then demonstrates his role in controlling the family's group identity, stating not only what he believes, but what Martha believes, speaking as the sole voice for both, claiming, "We both know there aint [sic] any such thing as a mermaid" (64). Martha seems genuinely interested, but Ed determines the family opinion, denying them any particular identity. This is particularly evident in his choice to name

one of his sons Ed Junior, after himself, melding the son's name identity with his own, patterning his son after himself.

Ed Junior is the first to question his father's skepticism, showing some independence in going against his father's ideas, but mimicking his father's language. Ed Junior shows some degree of belief in the fantastic, saying, "Maybe it aint a fake, papa" (64). He contradicts his father on the issue of the fantastic and *sui generis*, but adopts his spoken mannerisms, repeating his father's "aint." Martha is quick to correct her son, gently chiding him, 'Don't say 'aint,' dear" (64). In one respect, she corrects his verbal mannerisms to something she finds more acceptable, trying to form his identity herself. However, by correcting his contradiction, she reinforces Ed's role as the father, indirectly correcting her son's contradiction.

The moment in which the roc's egg hatches is itself one of the most notable *sui generis* moments in the circus, and it reveals the *sui generis* nature of Abalone's encounter with the fantastic. The roc's egg has presumably been traveling with the circus for some time, visiting multiple towns without hatching, before it finally does so in Abalone, Arizona, contained within a specific tent at the circus, and only visible to a singular family.

Ed has a strong pride underlying his skepticism and financial concerns as well that affect his treatment of the circus. He suggests to his family that he prefers to be tricked without knowing it, though he fancies himself as savvy, both in his skepticism and concern for his finances, saying "I don't mind being fooled if I don't know at the time I'm being fooled, but the very idea of spending money to see something I know good and well is a fake is somehow repugnant to me" (64). He has already discounted the

mermaid as a fraud and so has no desire to see what he “knows” in his mind to be a fake. This conceit is ironic, however, as he will soon be fooled, without knowing it, in a way that he very much does not enjoy, thanks to the roc’s egg hatching. His emphasis on money further reflects his practical, if not materialistic, character and the issues that affect his take on the fantastic.

As the various characters react to the opening newspaper advertisement, Ed, being a traffic-warden for the railroad, takes an interest in the way the circus has arrived. Realizing that he never saw any circus cars arrive on the railroad, he worries about the potential business the railroad lost. He worries that his livelihood is becoming obsolete and laments, “it never came over the railroad; must have its own trucks. Just some more business we didn’t get. By George, there’s lots of it we don’t get anymore. First thing I know they won’t be needing traffic men on the line anymore” (17). Ed’s concern is a reasonable one in the middle of 1935, roughly the midway point of the Great Depression. He must provide for his family, and his industry may be declining in a time where many people are out of work, so money becomes an understandable concern. Like many of the other residents of Abalone, his opinion of the fantastic circus is based on his own limited knowledge and concerns, those of the railroad and his own finances. His concerns and skepticism catch the attention of Lao, who shifts his own identity to meet each *sui generis* patron of the circus.

Lao is enigmatic, and often reveals different facets of himself, real or feigned, to different individuals depending upon their own unique character. For those expecting a Chinese caricature, he adopts a sort of pidgin to communicate with them, lapsing into a simplified and sometimes ungrammatical form of English with those who are expecting a

“Chinaman” stereotype where he is capable of speaking completely fluent and skillful English in other situations. This makes his version of Pidgin English fascinatingly unique, as it varies depending on the singular attitudes of those he interacts with. Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable’s *A History of the English Language* describes a pidgin as “a simplified language used for communication between speakers of different languages, typically for trading purposes” (125), particularly between languages of European ancestry and African or Asian ancestry. Lao’s pidgin is uniquely interesting because he does simplify his language for communication, not because of a deficiency of language on his part, but because he perceives a deficiency in the perception of others, seeing them as narrow-minded.

Ed has already rejected the mermaid exhibit due to these concerns, and so leaves opportunity for Lao, who may direct the visitors to his own ends. Dr. Lao tailors his interactions to the family’s own unique nature. Though he has not heard Ed’s complaints about money and work, and it is unlikely he overheard Ed’s complaints about wasting money in the circus, with the narrative simply describing how Lao “came by headed for the medusa exhibit” (65), he demonstrates considerable knowledge about Ed’s character. His appearance is brief, but his response is surprisingly knowledgeable, as he adopts his pidgin dialect used for foolish people, yelling, “I no charge you nothing. You go in flor nothing; takeum whole dam family flor nothing. You see: I no fool you. This place no catchum fake” (65). Despite the limited extent of what he heard, he understands the influence that financial concerns have on Ed, and he tailors his tirade to match the family’s characteristics specifically.

Lao, in control of his circus and his visitors, controls where the family goes, and when they do it as he “pushed the traffic officer and his family into the tent with the roc’s egg and dashed on about his business” (65). Lao directs them into the tent just before the egg hatches, and more so, he does not follow them in or spend any more time discussing the circus with them. He has done what he needed to do in that single moment and proceeds to something else in the circus, leaving them to the event meant only for them.

Like many others at the circus, Ed discounts the fantastic based on his limited experience, figuring that “it’s preposterous that any egg could be so big” (66). His experience likely only relates to chicken eggs, and perhaps seeing an ostrich egg in a magazine, but no bigger, and so he determines that nothing much bigger can exist than what he knows. His son Howard forms his own unique opinion though, responding, “Well, it looks that big papa” (66). Though his father attempts to explain it away, Howard has his own unique ideas, though his father tries to bring both his sons back into agreement with the family opinion after Ed junior comments on the fact that the egg sweats.

Ed junior asks his father, “Well, why does all the water run out of it” (66), not fully sure that concrete should do that. Ed senior, in an attempt to bring his son back into line with the family, attempts to offer a rational explanation that will impress his sons, suggesting that “lots of times concrete’ll sweat in hot weather, if it’s poorly made” (66). He has offered an explanation, though with no real research, making a guess sound like certitude. At the same time, he presents hostility to what is outside his knowledge, a trait many residents of Abalone share. He declares it to not only be a fake, but a poor one. Given his sons’ skepticism, though, he offers a more detailed, scientific sounding

explanation to impress them, explaining, “It’s porous, see, and soaks up moisture on cool nights. Then when it gets hot like this afternoon, the moisture collects and runs out. Kinda like a water pitcher. Capillary action, they call it” (66), Capillary action of course has little to nothing to do with condensation droplets on a water pitcher, but Ed has cobbled together a basic explanation from his limited resources, and the explanation is sufficient to impress his son and bring him back, deferring to his father’s intellect.

Howard responds to the inaccurate explanation with wonder, seeming to have forgotten his earlier belief in the fantastic, and his disagreement with his father, that maybe an egg really could be that big. He is thoroughly impressed by his father’s explanation, gushing, “Gee papa, you know everything, don’t you, papa?” (66). Howard is obviously taken by his father’s display of knowledge, taking it for fact due to the scientific language, as well as a young boy’s opinion of his father.

Ed’s elevated status in front of his sons is short lived, however, and is soon undone by the *sui generis* event of the young roc hatching from his egg. Upon hearing a creaking, Ed continues to rely on his concrete theory, telling his sons that the sound is “the heat expanding it” (66). The egg soon hatches, though, and Ed’s sons begin to question him. Howard, who just recently said that his father knew everything asks, “It wasn’t really concrete, was it, papa?” (67). He no longer folds himself into the family identity and begins to become his own person. Ed has just been fooled without knowing it, but he is not as amused as he thought he would be, telling his wife, “Let’s go on home, Martha. I don’t like this place” (67). The event has cost him, but benefited his sons, allowing them to become unique individuals who may be responsive to other unique individuals in the future.

The final hatching offers a few points of metaphorical significance. The hatching itself is a birth for the roc, but a new birth for the boys who can form their own *sui generis* identity after the *sui generis* event, no longer basing their identity on their father and melding with the family identity. The scene both literally and figuratively involves a shattering, the egg shell breaking like the sons' opinion that father always knows best. Finally, Ed's theories are proven to be much less "concrete" than he had supposed, really being as thin as eggshell.

Ed's humiliation reflects an important aspect of how Finney deals with the fantastic. J.R.R. Tolkien distinguishes what constitutes "Faërie" or fantasy in his essay "On Fairy Stories" (108). Within the essay, he discusses the use of satire, and the position of reverence within a fairy or fantasy story, stating that "if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself. That must in that story be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away" (114). The fantastic must be respected if the story is to be a fairy story in Tolkien's definition, a condition strongly held too in Finney's frequently satirical novel. Finney's work remains within Tolkien's realm of fairy, treating the creatures in the circus as absolutely real while mocking those who would try to laugh at or explain them away.

Finney mocks the skeptical residents of Abalone through unfortunate events that befall them, and through the voice of Dr. Lao himself. One of the less fortunate victims of the fantastic, and her own skepticism, is Kate, who becomes incensed upon seeing the medusa, refusing to believe that she is a genuine medusa. Kate remains obstinate when confronted with the medusa and is, rather appropriately, turned to stone as a result of her

unwillingness to budge on her opinion. Specifically, she refuses to believe that people can be turned to stone and so turns to stone herself as she tries to prove her point.

Kate's skepticism hardly makes her *sui generis* among Abalonians, or among those who would dismiss the fantastic, and she is introduced simply as a "big fat woman in the crowd" (63). She appears from the mass of unidentified people that encompasses the non *sui generis* crowd, having little unique identity of her own, though she will soon become a *sui generis* specimen after she receives her punishment, gaining a *sui generis* appearance from her encounter with the circus.

Her reaction to Lao and the medusa is immediately hostile. After Lao has explained how people have previously been turned to stone, Kate lets her incredulity be known, telling Lao, "I don't believe a word you say. I never heard so much nonsense in all my living days. Turning people to stone! The idee!" (63). She expresses roughly the same sentiment in no less than four sentences, and Lao directly addresses her, "Madam, the rôle of skeptic becomes you not" (63). Lao's tone becomes amusingly formal, adopting a poetic syntax along with "madam" and circumflex "rôle" (63), his delivery theatric to match the grandiose, though less eloquent, performer he is facing. He matches her specific traits, using a similar tone to correct her. Dr. Lao, the world traveler, then sardonically addresses the limited experience she uses to try and determine what is real and what isn't in his circus, informing her that "there are things in the world not even the experience of a whole life spent in Abalone, Arizona, could conceive of" (63). For the reader, his tone is humorous, and amusingly satirical, though of the skeptic rather than the fantastic, fitting with Tolkien's view of fairy stories, and such skepticism is punished.

The humorous satire of Kate's limited experience reflects an issue which has faced the *sui generis* and fantastic for quite some time in the primary world. Modern people, having seen the development of science and discovery, tend to discount those things which their experience has not included, or which scientific understanding has not revealed. Tolkien expresses this dilemma as a cause of the miniaturization of elves and faeries in stories, believing that their "flower-and-butterfly minuteness was also a product of 'rationalization', which transformed the glamour of Elf-land into mere finesse, and invisibility into a fragility that could hide in a cowslip or shrink behind a blade of grass" (111). In the absence of elf or faerie sightings, any story about them must be made plausible within the primary world, and so their invisibility must be explained away as a diminutive size which makes them difficult to hide. This trend appears to develop around the time "here be dragons" is replaced on nautical maps with a complete chart of the discovered world, as it "seems to become fashionable soon after the great voyages had begun to make the world seem too narrow to hold both men and elves" (Tolkien 111). Man has not seen elves, and so they must not exist, or must be too small to be seen. This same issue faces the people of Abalone who have not seen Lao's *sui generis* creatures, and so dismiss them. Finney reflects on this tendency in the primary world through the residents of Abalone. A few of those residents will learn, as Kate does too late, that the fantastic is has a claim to reality, and they will develop an even greater *sui generis* identity of their own through these encounters.

After Lao's denouncement, Kate grows further incensed and intends to prove that the medusa is a fake, telling Lao, "I'll make a liar out of you in front of all these people, I will!" (63). Lao makes little move to stop her before or during her approach to the

medusa, simply containing the medusa in a “roped-in canvas cubicle” (63), which Kate easily passes through, and yelling, “In the name of the Buddha, stop her” (63). He does little else, mentioning Buddha, perhaps because he is genuinely Buddhist, or perhaps as another facet of his persona, before he allows Kate to attain a new *sui generis* identity through her encounter with the medusa.

Kate is quickly turned to stone as she confronts the medusa from beyond the line of safety, and is identified by a geologist as “solid chalcedony” (64), before he proclaims, “Never saw a prettier variegation of color in all my life” (64). Although she only appears briefly, and does not possess many qualities that would make her seem *sui generis*, coming from the amorphous crowd, she now displays a spectrum of color, one which the geologist has never seen. Although Kate likely would not appreciate the honor, he declares her as *sui generis* through being superlatively greater than any sample, or “isolated specimen” (“*sui generis*” OED) he has seen. Like the women promised in the circus’s advertisement, she becomes *sui generis* through superlative beauty, though not in any living way. Other residents, such as Frank Tull, are already rather *sui generis* before they arrive at the circus.

Frank Tull is one of the most distinct and interesting characters from the standpoint of the *sui generis* in *The Circus of Dr. Lao* as he bridges a gap between the physical uniqueness of the creatures of the circus and the residents of Abalone who ordinarily possess physical traits which are common, in varying degrees, to the rest of humanity. His physical makeup is composed of various artificial parts meant to compensate for defects in his anatomy, though he is skeptical of the circus, like many of the residents of Abalone.

Frank Tull is a lawyer in Abalone, Arizona and the town's most physically unique resident. Like the chimera, which he encounters during his visit to the circus, he is largely an amalgam of different parts which combine to create someone truly unique. Many of his organs are non-functional or damaged in some way, and so he is mostly held together with artificial wires, fibers, metals, arch supports, manufactured teeth, and other prosthetic implements which keep him alive and capable of functioning. Despite this, he "lived on, surviving, no doubt, because he was fit" (76). Like the unbiological order of Dr. Lao's circus, he violates traditional scientific laws of survival of the fittest, as he survives quite well, but is unable to live off the land in any way that natural Darwinian laws would require.

He is introduced in the opening list of newspaper readers as a "lawyer who prided himself on his knowledge of history and religion" (17), already coming to the advertisement of the circus with a base of knowledge to compare everything against, and like the other residents of Abalone, he reacts with incredulity. He reads the newspaper ad, and the narration describes how he "bogged down at the 'long-dead city of Woldercan' and the 'fearful god Yottle'" (16). The choice of the words "bogged down" (16) demonstrates the way in which his own special brand of knowledge affects his relationship to the circus advertisement. Like Agnes Birdsong, among others, he ignores certain aspects of the circus, not having a major interest with them, until he comes across something that pertains to his particular breed of knowledge. Upon checking an encyclopedia to supplement his knowledge on the subject, he complains, "Woldercan . . . baloney; somebody's been making up a lot of stuff. Fooling the people all of the time" (18), making a show of skepticism. The advertisement does its work, however, piquing

his unique interest, as he wonders “what a circus conception of a god previous to Bel-Marduk would be like” (18), deciding, “I’ll go to the darn thing. Can’t do any worse than bore me to death” (18). He still offers a sort of token resistance to the idea, but appears genuinely interested in the circus.

He remains equally skeptical as he watches the parade of creatures coming through the circus parade. He watches from his house and comments to his wife, griping, “A goofy little road show like that hanging silly disguises on animals to make them look like things out of mythology. It isn’t even well done. That horse rigged up like a sphinx, for instance. Look at that fool woman’s face on the thing. You can tell from here it’s paper mâché” (27). Frank sees what he expects to find, various disguises placed on ordinary animals, and although he is not alone in this assessment, his interest in the specifics, such as paper mâché, reflect his own composition, as he looks for various artificial parts added to a natural creature.

Frank’s particular physical constitution is the most *sui generis* of any of the residents of Abalone, and rivals even the creatures in Lao’s circus. Where his description in the opening of the novel relates to his knowledge and interests, he is described upon his arrival to the circus through physical terms, as a “man of many artificial parts” (75). The list of his artificial parts, and the physical maladies that necessitate them, is extensive, contributing a level of detail that gives Frank Tull his *sui generis* physical nature, and also lends him a degree of veracity.

Finney constructs this verisimilitude through explicit description of Tull’s physical issues, and the artificial solutions for them, describing how his “teeth had been fashioned for him and fitted to his jaws by a doctor of dental surgery. His eyes, weak and

wretched, saw the world through bifocal lenses, so distorted that only through them could the distortion of Frank's own eyes perceive things aright" (75). Finney fleshes out Tull with explicit detail about what specifically is not flesh, creating a complete and believable portrait of this unique individual. His entire description, a catalog of his deficiencies and artificial parts, fills a page and a half of the University of Nebraska press 2nd edition of the book. Finney gives a head to toe account of Tull, listing in part that:

He had a silver plate in his skull to guard a hole from which a brain tumor had been removed. One of his legs was made of metal and fiber; it took the place of the flesh-and-blood leg his mother had given him in her womb. Around his belly was an apparatus that fitted mouth-like over his double hernia and prevented his guts from falling out. A suspensory kept his scrotum from dangling unduly. In his left arm a platinum wire took the place of the humerus. (75)

Readers are able to know more about this *sui generis* character than they would about many real people, getting beneath Tull's skin with enough information to make him real in their own mind.

What Frank sees surprises him, as he views what he believes is a fake at a distance, but when he is figuratively called up to give his testimony, he finds the circus more real than he imagined: "Frank Tull, the lawyer, stood there and stared at the chimera and was horrified to perceive that it was not a fake after all" (77). Tull, the sickly man of many parts, who could not have existed centuries earlier, finds a creature which is just as diverse in its unique composition as he is, and he is shocked to find that it is

equally real. This pairing is rather appropriate, as the man with metal wires is presented in the novel with the unique chimera, who possesses a metallic barbed tail.

Frank Tull's artificially crafted nature emphasizes the rift between scientific classification and the *sui generis*. Although he is a member of the species *Homo sapiens*, and is aided in his life through parts crafted by science, he cannot be classified individually in any ordinary taxonomy. He was born human, but he has gained non-human parts due to his physical infirmities. These infirmities, however, have been compensated for by human cunning, and so Finney's description emphasizes how, "As a member of the finest species life had yet produced he could not wrest a living from the plants of the field, nor could he compete with the beasts thereof" (76). Humanity is spoken of in superlative terms, as a unique apex of the living world. Tull stands unique among humanity though in his physical nature, which is not a completely natural human body, but one representing the advantages of human ingenuity. It is in this that he violates natural laws of evolution, a fact Finney emphasizes.

Finney contrasts Tull's physical infirmity with his position and intellect as a respected lawyer, stating that "As a member of the society into which he had been born he was respected and taken care of and lived on, surviving, no doubt, because he was fit" (76). His community keeps him alive where he would have no doubt died were he a part of any other species. The last word, describing him as *fit*, specifically addresses Darwinian principles of the "survival of the fittest." Frank Tull is clearly separated from these principles. Where fossil records trace creatures' evolutionary changes and advantages, no such record can trace Frank's artificial evolution.

Frank would not appear in any natural fossil record, and Finney directly addresses just what is left behind after his death. Frank leaves behind fossils, but nothing human, as his physical description ends with the news that “[o]ne hundred years after he died they opened up his coffin. All they found were strings and wires” (76). All that remains is artificial, man-made. Anything that could be naturally classified as *Homo sapiens* has disappeared with time. Frank Tull leaves nothing to be scientifically classified, only the artificial supplements to his body that give him his *sui generis* nature. Finney leaves Frank Tull as an example of the *sui generis* in humanity, demonstrating that it is not only the unique combination of personality traits and experiences that make a person unique, but sometimes the individual’s physical makeup.

Finney reveals just how unique and *sui generis* the individual can be by creating characters that are surprisingly realistic, having ordinary concerns, and being fleshed out with enough detail that the reader gets a full idea of just who each person is. Having established the *sui generis* nature of the creatures in Lao’s exhibit, Finney turns his examination outward onto humanity, drawing distinct characters out of the crowd, each having a number of unique traits which combine to create a unique whole.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Through his fascinating combination of fantastic creatures and unique people, Charles Finney reflects not only the unique *sui generis* nature of mythological creatures, but what we often take to be the average person. He presents a world, much like the primary world, where fantasy is treated with varying forms of skepticism, before he turns his gaze outward onto the primary world of the reader, suggesting that not only does the *sui generis* and fantastic exist, but it is a part of the reader's everyday life. The reader's visit to Finney's mystical circus has the potential to change the reader, for better or worse, much as it does the residents of Abalone. The reader is encouraged to accept the fantastic and allow it to be beneficial, rather than reject it and allow it to become a detriment to them.

Finney wrote realistic characters that matched the people of his day and who are unique and detailed enough to still seem true in the present. Finney would likely find a topic of interest in the advances that have occurred since the publication of his novel, and since his death in 1984. Medical advances promise prosthetics and aids that are even greater than those unique prosthetics used to build Frank Tull. Developments in scholarly fields and university programs have made the fantastic and *sui generis* a subject of study, and popular culture has developed to a point where fantasy films and television series are considered mainstream entertainment.

Works such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* have been adapted to film with much financial and popular success. Authors like Neil Gaiman are expanding ideas of fantasy, much as Finney did, adapting existing mythologies to modern contexts while receiving both literary and popular acclaim. While the world has progressed even further from the days of mythologies that contained chimera, satyrs, unicorns, and the like, individuals may be more accepting of such creatures. Fantastic and *sui generis* works may find a fertile valley of acceptance rather than a parched desert of skepticism among contemporary readers. If Lao's circus were to roll into town today, there would still be skeptics and scoffers, but Lao might be pleased to find greater acceptance and interest in his *sui generis* circus.

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