

Charles Finney's The Circus of Dr. Lao: An Epistemological Fantasy

by

Daniel B. Creed

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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.

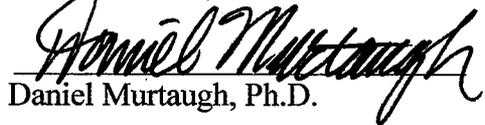
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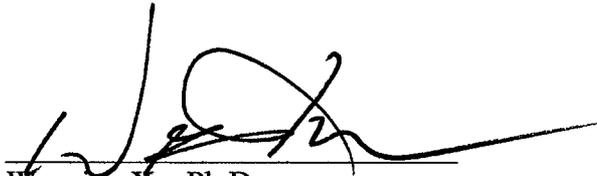
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Thesis Advisor



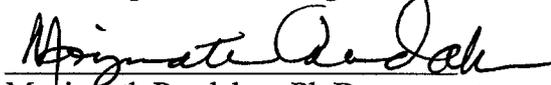
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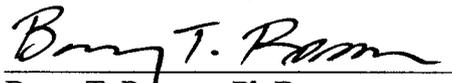
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Chair, Department of English



Manjunath Pendakur, Ph.D.
Dean, The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters



Barry T. Rosson, Ph.D.
Dean, Graduate College

July 13, 2010
Date

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Abstract

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Charles Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao*, published in 1936, has been widely read in the last eighty years and has influenced significant authors in the field of fantasy, yet it has been examined in just three critical studies in that time. This study examines Finney's novel as an epistemological fantasy, a heretofore undefined term that precipitates an epistemological crisis of knowing and certainty. The novel opens a way for fantasy literature to establish itself in a Modernist landscape by foregrounding the marvelous and extraordinary knowledge that lies just outside the realm of human experience. Finney presents Dr. Lao's circus as a surrogate model of success, and while many of the characters in the novel are unable to accept the truth offered them by the beings of fantasy, the author uses their experiences to satirize the complacencies he witnessed upon returning to America from the Far East in the 1930s.

Charles Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao*: An Epistemological Fantasy

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Chapter 1: Genre and Mode

That Charles Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao* has been mostly critically ignored is one of the great puzzles of twentieth-century fantasy literature. Since its publication in 1935, the novel has inspired just three critical studies. The novel was reviewed by major periodicals of the day and dismissed as "a licentious, irreverent, insolent, and quite amusing book" (Britten 4), "more fun than a barrel of monkeys" (Walton iv), "funny" (Benet 20), "quite painful" (Marsh 7) in the *New York Times*, and as a "crude appeal to sexual consciousness" (*Springfield Republican* 5e). These reviews address the novel at its lowest form of engagement. While the nod to the humor present in Finney's novel might have pushed scholars to ignore the work, it nonetheless has gained a large cult following, by 1974 selling over one million copies in paperback (Stoler 88). A Google search for *The Circus of Dr. Lao* results in tens of thousands of sites that reference the work.

Finney's story entered its third printing in 1936, entered and won the Most Original Novel award from the American Booksellers Association the same year, evidence of the popularity of the work upon introduction. The novel became internationally available after when Grey Walls Press (London) published a paperback edition in 1948. The British edition eschewed the original surrealistic illustrations of Boris Artzybasheff for much darker, demonic images. Even Finney's one idealized creature, the Hound of the Hedges, noted by Lao as being "without a taint of evil or hysteria" (Finney 68), has teeth bared in a snarl in this edition. The shift represents a

change in the perception of the work. The decision to present Lao as a darker work signals a change in its intended reception.¹ The British edition downplays the humor that had been noticed by American reviewers twelve years earlier, focusing on the evil that taints Lao's circus.

Finney's novel fell into obscurity until Ray Bradbury used the novella as the title work in his edited anthology *The Circus of Dr. Lao and Other Improbable Stories* in 1956, almost twenty years after the original publication presenting the novel to a new generation of readers. Its inclusion in a collection of short stories may, however, have encouraged the reading public to consider it as a work less worthy of scholarly attention.

Finney's novel passed through other incarnations before its most recent publication in 2002 by Bison. The novel serves as the basis for a 1964 Tony Randall movie, *The 7 Faces of Dr. Lao*, which deviates substantially from the original work; a cloth-bound edition was created by the Limited Edition Book Club of 2000 numbered copies in 1982. Each version of Finney's novel has altered the readership of the work, and while the text has not changed in subsequent editions, each edition reflects changing attitudes towards the work over its publication history, in part through new cover art and illustrations. In addition to enjoying popular success, the novel is responsible for the creation and development of two major tropes in today's fantasy literature: the dark circus and the epistemological fantasy.

The limited scholarship on Finney's novel centers around questions of genre. Janet Whyde asks, "Is it fantasy? Is it realism?" (Whyde 221), yet *The Circus of Dr. Lao* has previously been included in surveys covering the *100 Greatest Fantasy Works*. Finney's novel highlights one of the most pressing issues facing fantasy scholars today;

what is, and what is not, fantasy. As Finney's novel is not the high fantasy of such writers as J.R.R. Tolkien or Stephen R. Donaldson, this chapter focuses on defining the genre and mode of *The Circus of Dr. Lao*.

The novel is short by standards of modern fantasy, printable in as few as eighty pages (Bantam 1956), or as many as one hundred and fifty-four (Bison 2002). By comparison, the works canonized within the genre of fantasy from roughly the same time are more commonly five hundred pages.

Ray Bradbury's introduction to the 1956 edition begins by stating that "*The Circus of Dr. Lao* and the stories which follow are fantasies" (Bradbury vii) and continues to define it as that which "cracks it [the universe] down the middle, turns it wrong-side-out, dissolves it into invisibility, walks men through its walls, and fetches incredible circuses to town" (vii).

In *Strategies of Fantasy*, Brian Attebery explains that "Tolkien's form of fantasy, for readers in English, is our mental template; one way to characterize the genre of fantasy is the set of texts that in some way or another resemble *The Lord of the Rings*" (14). Attebery tracks how a novel is more or less like Tolkien in three fundamental ways: content, structure, and reader response. Attebery explains that in fantasy, "the essential content is the impossible, some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law" (Attebery 14). Finney's novel fits within this definition. Dr. Lao's circus arrives in "three frowzy little beast-drawn wagons" (20) that inexplicably contain an entire circus. A military man during the 1920s and 30s in Tientsin, China, Finney witnessed the arrival of United States Marines in the summer of 1928, which he described as "remind[ing] [Finney] of a circus arrival, nothing but confusion compounded" (*The Old China Hands*

[TOCH] 154). The arrival of four thousand marines and their field supplies is described as taking the better part of two days in Finney's own memoir. In *The Circus of Dr. Lao*, however, eleven thousand people are purported to take part in the spectacle of Wodlercan (Finney 11), and they arrive (along with the assortment of mythological creatures) in three beast-drawn wagons, constituting a violation of natural law as witnessed and agreed upon by the author. Finney's work then falls under Atterbery's definition of fantasy in content.

As to structure, Atterbery reasons that "the characteristic structure of fantasy is comic. It begins with a problem and ends with resolution" (15). Upon initial examination, Finney's novel is not comic in this sense. The novel's plot is simple. It describes a circus coming to a small town. The subsequent curiosity of the townspeople brings them to see the show and the circus provides the entertainment. Finney's structure more closely resembles a collection of short stories than a novel, because the narrative does not rest on a single point-of-view; it varies as the reader moves through a series of vignettes that form the core of the novel. Even taking each vignette as a singular entity, the level at which it could be said that characters find resolution to a problem is ever changing; each vignette proposes a problem and gives a resolution, though not always one that is complete or certain. Since the novel itself is composed of multiple episodes, most of them comedic in structure, resolving themselves to varying levels of satisfaction, we can see how Finney's novel works with Atterbery's structure of fantasy.

In his examination of reader response to fantasy, Atterbery borrows C.N. Manlove's definition: "a fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects with which

the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms” (Atterbery 16). Finney’s novel certainly provokes wonder. Scholars and readers are amazed at Lao’s creatures, and the creatures’ unusual natures are further detailed in the catalogue at the end of the work. Not only does Dr. Lao’s circus contain a chimera, but, as described in the catalogue, which contains a number of unanswered questions from the text (the inclusion of which acknowledges the author’s intentional use of them):

“Inasmuch as legend tells us that chimeras were invariably females, how did it happen that Doctor Lao’s was a male?” (Finney 154). The wonder here is multi-faceted. Not only does the inclusion of the chimera in the text provoke wonder, but also the biological sex of the chimera creates wonder for those who are more familiar with the fantastic creature. The wonders of Lao’s circus exist on multiple levels, and through the vignettes, characters interact with creatures of an impossible world. Through the definitions of both Atterbery and Bradbury, *The Circus of Dr. Lao* can be located within the genre of fantasy. The genre of the novel no longer in question, this study moves to an examination of the modality of Finney’s novel.

With its focus on the fantastic as a source of truth and knowledge, this novel exemplifies epistemological fantasy. In Janet Whyde’s “Fantastic disillusionment: Rupturing Narrative and Rewriting Reality in *The Circus of Dr. Lao*” the author notes the “blurring...[of] the boundary between fantasy and reality” (230). Whyde’s explains the blurring of these lines as a problem of genre, which prompts her (as mentioned previously) to question: “Is the novel a fantasy? Is it realism?” (231). Finney’s use of blurring lines is not meant to bring into question the novel’s genre but to present its mode: epistemological fantasy. Modern readers may expect fantasy to follow the *Lord of*

the Rings model, transporting them to a magical realm, another world, and explaining the lore, language, and workings of that world. Finney's novel does not provide readers with a comfortable entrance and exit to a magical realm, instead blurring the lines between this world and a secondary one to force readers to question the boundaries of reality and fantasy. Dr. Lao's circus is full of mythological beasts, is told through a comedic structure, and evokes a sense of wonder in readers. Still, it begins firmly rooted in mimetic language.

Finney's novel opens with what could be the first paragraph of a newspaper story. The paragraph answers four of the five w's explaining what, where, who, and when, while focusing on details of the actual text layout of the advertisement for the circus. From the page the advertisement appears on to the font size and column width, the first paragraph of the novel describes in objective and concrete terms all the facts known about the circus through an engagement with the typographical characteristics of the advertisement. The opening paragraph frames the description of the fantastic beings at the circus in the first three pages, while the paragraph that ends this section describes the admission charges and hours of operation (Finney 12).

Sandwiched between paragraphs of these concrete facts lies a description of a circus full of attractions that would be dismissed as nonsense by readers in their own world. Readers move into Finney's version of Abalone, Arizona, through an engagement with the language of the advertisement. The opening paragraph, with its detailed realistic description and use of concrete images and language is replaced by a drastic shift in vocabulary in the paragraphs detailing the attractions of the circus.

Unlike the first paragraph of the novel, the second through seventh paragraphs utilize abstract language, relying on the imagination of readers to complete the description. The “florid” (9) language of the advertisement is repeated in the text here as it details the “pulchritude” of the female circus cast (9); the fantastic creatures “beyond all” dreams, comprehension, and nightmares of guests (10); the “freaks born of hysterical brains rather than diseased wombs” (10); a fortuneteller that speaks only the “truth” (10); a peepshow composed of “erotic dramas and dreams of long-dead times” (11); and the appearance of a long-dead city and its deity, Yottle (12). The circus promises the “most tremendous thing ever to be staged under canvas” (12) and does so between paragraphs offering concrete facts in order to add credence to the fantastic things being presented between them. Finney creates an epistemological dilemma for readers, mixing that which they would find unbelievable with concrete realities.

This opening, presented through a third-person omniscient point of view, creates a contradiction for a reader about the notion of reality and fantasy. By framing the fantastic within paragraphs of an accessible reality, Finney encourages readers to accept the fantastic descriptions as realities, though the narrator of the novel presents them as “claims which even Phineas Taylor Barnum might have hedged at advancing” (9). Finney puts forward the idea that the circus acts are true, but uses language to discredit the ad which presents that idea, forcing readers to determine at what moment reality has been supplanted by fantasy, and questioning the reliability of the knowledge presented to them, both of which are central to questions of epistemology.

Complicating questions of truth in the novel is Finney’s use of perception and point of view. As the novel opens, the first to examine the advertisement is Mr. Etaoin,

the proofreader for the daily paper, and he does so through “astigmatic, spectacle-bolstered eyes” (12). Mr. Etaoin’s eyes, augmented by technology, are the portals through which readers are first introduced to the circus. His perception is blurred (astigmatic), and dependent upon an item outside himself for focus (spectacle-bolstered). Etaoin even adjusts his own perspective on the ad by “holding it at arm’s length to read over the bigger type again” (12) in an effort to recheck for errors. Moving the ad away from him, he notices that the ad is anonymous, but it is not until he changes his perspective by adjusting his distance from the paper. Mr. Etaoin is “the first person to notice anything queer about the ad, aside from its outrageous claims” (12), and he does so only at a distance, through the forced focus of his glasses.

Readers’ perception and engagement with the text change as the point of view switches multiple times within the novel (often more than twice per page in the opening pages). The next person to “notice something unusual” is English teacher Agnes Birdsong, whose focus on the advertisement is on language she does not understand in context. Unable to discern, or not trusting her initial responses to the terms “hermaphroditic and pornographic” (14), “she pondered a little, then reached for her dictionary” (14), in an effort to elicit meaning from the text by consulting a trusted source of knowledge. Her discovery of the words’ meanings leaves her “wiser but not sadder” (14). Birdsong’s confrontation with the “outrageous claims” of the advertisement and the factual origins and meanings of words in her dictionary illustrate Finney’s technique of merging realism and fantasy, complicating epistemological questions in the novel by focusing on the limitations of Agnes’ epistemological source (the dictionary) with respect to the circus.

Next readers perceive the ad is through the eyes of the children of Plumber Rogers, who are excited and entranced by the idea that a circus has come to their small town. The children do not read the advertisement carefully; they are expecting “Clowns. Elephants. Tigers. Calliopes. Bands. Horses. Fanfare and pomp” (15). Yet the mere appearance of the circus changes the “yellow glare of Abalone” to a “golden glow” in their eyes. The children see nothing odd about the circus announcement. A procession of perceivers pulls readers into the story: Mr. Etaoin believes the ad is “junk” (14); Ms. Birdsong justifies her desire to view the circus as a curiosity by connecting it to her own version of truth in the dictionary; and these children accept the reality of the circus wholesale. Each presupposes what will be at the “circus,” associating the term as the signifier of an experience they have had at an earlier age or have read about and nothing more.

The next three groups of people to examine the advertisement each respond to it with realistic concerns that are rooted in the limits of their own lives. Plumber Rogers does not know if he can afford to take his excited children to the circus since he has been out of work since the beginning of the depression (15), but changes his mind after reading about “the women in the circus” (15). A police officer calls the city clerk’s office to verify that the circus has a permit, and the railroad traffic officer is upset that the circus has not come over the railroad, noting that it is “just some more business that we didn’t get” (17). These perceivers have not engaged the advertisement as reality or fantasy, but relate it to problems and concerns of their own lives.

The next encounter with the ad is by two state quarantine inspectors, identified in the text only by their jobs, neither of whom have seen the circus come by their station.

They agree to go to the circus together because they “ain’t got nothing to do this afternoon” (17) and, for inspector number two at least, they “like the goddamn things” (17). The quarantine inspectors have not read the ad carefully. By stating that he likes the things, inspector two is like the Rogers children, yet he is not excited by the prospect of the circus, he is merely attending because there is little else in the town to divert his attention.

The next reader is a “lawyer who prided himself on his knowledge of history and religion” (17), who questions the “long dead city of Woldercan” and “Great God Yottle’s” existence. In an effort to “refresh his memory” (18), he turns to his encyclopedia and cannot find an entry for either. He immediately discounts the circus as “baloney” and states that “someone has been making up a lot of stuff” (18) when he cannot find entries for the city and deity. In discounting the advertisement, he aligns himself with what he believes are realities; he discredits that which he believes is fantasy, trusting in the knowledge presented to him by “reliable” sources. Yet, he does decide to attend the circus because it “can’t do any worse than bore [him] to death” (18).

Mrs. Cassan, a widow, engages the fantastic on yet a different level, as she “always went to fortunetellers” (18) and ponders her future on her own through tarot cards and ouija boards. Unlike the children, who have their own presuppositions, or the English teacher’s desire for an encounter with the fantastic, Mrs. Cassan only wants to have her beliefs and dreams confirmed as true. Like the Rogers children, she is not searching for truth. She wholesale denies truth when she is told anything that differs from her desired “fortune” (love and money, as described later in this study), and represents a wholesale denial of the truth as offered within fantasy.

The next readers are the only non-residents of Abalone to be mentioned. The “two college kids from back East” (18) decide they should go to the circus to see the peepshow, and since the ad explains that no inebriated men will be allowed entrance, they plan to go “cockeyed drunk” (18). The refusal of Dr. Lao to admit people under the influence of alcohol is a clear examination of the importance of perception in the novel. Under the influence of alcohol, attendees are able to dismiss the visions of fantasy as hallucinations brought about by drinking, as opposed to dealing with them as real. In addition, the peepshow itself is viewed through holes cut into the tent at different heights that accommodate one eye only. The forced perspective created by the viewing holes is designed to block out the “real world” and force attendees to focus solely on the fantastic.

The last to see the ad and decide to attend is Larry Kamper, a military veteran of Tietsin, China and the 15th infantry. Larry Kamper’s world experience is that of the author. Charles Finney was stationed with the 15th infantry in Tietsin, China from 1927 to 1929, though in other ways the backgrounds differ greatly. Kamper longs to return to his boyhood by attending the circus, hoping to “recapture the sense of wonderment” (20) that he has lost over the years. While Kamper searches for his lost youth, he has certain expectations for the fantasy that he feels the circus does not deliver.

Finney’s reliance on perception cannot be overstated. As each attendee enters Dr. Lao’s circus through their own presuppositions and modified perceptions, readers are forced to view the acts through these characters (like holes in a circus tent cut at eye-level). As the novel progresses, readers view the circus through the analytic yet blurred vision of Mr. Etaoin, the drunken perceptions of the fraternity boys from back East, the logically dictated analyses of the English teacher and lawyer, and the over-eager children

of the Rogers family. Finney's novel is not plot-driven, but instead follows the procession of perceivers as they encounter the fantastic creatures of Dr. Lao's circus.

Finney's novel has influenced a number of twentieth century authors of fantasy, in addition to inventing the dark carnival trope and the epistemological fantasy mode. *The Circus of Dr. Lao* is a foundational text for fantasy literature. Presenting the beings of fantasy as valid epistemological sources, Finney forms the basis for ontological questions by later authors. Since ontological questions deal with the nature of being, or the differences between appearance and reality, Finney's creatures of fantasy, when presented as sources of knowledge and truth, invite later ontological comparisons. Finney depicts the beings of the fantastic as true but beyond human classification, and Peter S. Beagle and Ray Bradbury, two notable authors of twentieth century fantasy, use the tropes and modes prepared by Finney's novel in their own most notable works.

In Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*, the title animal's lore is known "only from books and tales and songs" (Beagle 3) and the unicorn appears to humans to be a mere "mare" (8). Because it is *sui generis*, the unicorn cannot be classified within scientific taxonomy. Yet, a butterfly that the unicorn encounters while searching for others of her kind is able to recognize her as a unicorn, for the natural world needs no explanation and classification, no taxonomy for the unicorn that it sees before it. When prodded by the unicorn to prove that it knows her name, the butterfly responds by reciting the etymology of her classification name, unicorn (12). In doing so the butterfly first encounters and responds to the fantastic, here represented by the unicorn, through language, a means of creating reference that is a direct homage to Charles Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao*.

As discussed earlier, Finney's novel opens with a description of the circus advertisement that pulls the proofreader of the newspaper beyond the limits of his world and into the idea of the circus. Mr. Etaoin examines the advertisement and notices that it is anonymous. In this way Dr. Lao's circus resists classification and appears *sui generis* like the unicorn because it is not named. Mr. Etaoin, the "corrector of errors" according to the novel's catalogue, sees the circus' advertisement as the men in Beagle's *The Last Unicorn* see the unicorn, as a mundane, easily recognizable and classifiable part of the world they know.

Like the butterfly that recognizes and recites a dictionary definition of unicorn, the high school teacher encounters the published advertisement and engages it first through etymology. Birdsong engages the fantastic through the modality of language in the same manner as the butterfly engages the fantastic unicorn. By addressing the fantastic through language, the creatures of fantasy in both novels become more concrete. The dictionary definitions allow Finney and Beagle to anchor their mythological creatures in an epistemological source that is familiar and mundane to readers. By providing dictionary definitions of the words being used to describe the creatures (or of the creatures themselves), the authors give the fantasy worlds and creatures of their novels a hint of realism.

Beagle's novel, a significant work of fantasy that has enjoyed popular and critical reception since its original publication, spends a significant amount of time working through many of the same epistemological questions that are addressed in Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao*. However, the homage to Finney, and the borrowing of the structure, theme, and meanings of the circus do not dominate Beagle's text. The larger portion of

the story follows the unicorn after she escapes from the circus and continues her search for other unicorns, but Beagle certainly designs the first one hundred pages as a tie into Finney's novel. The importance of Finney's influence on major names and works within the genre illustrates the need for scholars to take a closer look at Finney's novel. While this connection alone would justify further study into Finney's work.

The opening progression of perceivers in Finney's and Beagle's novels are identical. Finney's proofreader attempts to arrange and correct the unusual text he sees in front of him, but does not grasp the advertisement's meaning because he has not sought any. In the same manner, Beagle's unicorn is first encountered by a man who wishes only to harness it, for he sees her as a beast of burden, never pausing to address that what appears before him is a fantastic creature. Beagle's butterfly and Finney's English teacher encounter the fantastic at the level of language, and through a knowledge of the etymology of the operative term that describes the thing in front of them recognize the fantastic when it appears, whether it appears familiar to them or not.

Readers engage the fantastic in the same manner in each novel, yet the most obvious similarity between the novels is that each features a traveling circus. The comparisons between Finney's circus and Beagle's carnival can be traced through the acts themselves, the ringmasters, and the exhibition of both a real and fantasy dimension within each act. As noted by David Miller, the exhibits of Mommy Fortuna's carnival each have "a real and a fantasy dimension" (Miller 208). In *The Last Unicorn* the false fantastic exhibits form the outer "circle" of the carnival. The animals on display are viewed by the unicorn and revealed in their true form: lion, boa constrictor, ape, crocodile, and dog. Yet they appear to more susceptible audiences as manticore, Midgard

serpent, satyr, dragon, and Cerberus. The ring mistress, Mommy Fortuna, turns fantasy into the fantastic. The fantasy that exists within her circus is that of the patrons. Visitors to Mommy Fortuna's circus come to be amazed at the sights, and because she cannot provide the true beasts that they desire (fantasy), she presents the fantastic. Mommy Fortuna uses illusion to trick people into seeing creatures of their own world as creatures of fantasy, presenting a falsified version of their existence that is fantastic because the images of seeming argue with the epistemological realities of the acts. In Lao's circus this paradox is reversed, as his creatures are truly fantastic, but are rejected by the audience because they insist on their own rules regarding reality.

Lao's circus acts--Satyr, Apollonius of Tyana, Sea Serpent, Mermaid, Hound of the Hedges, Chimera, Medusa, Roc, and Mumbo Jumbo-- exist within the world of the circus. Fortuna's creatures are falsehoods cloaked as realities, but the acts of Lao's circus become fantasies not by the magic of the ringmaster, but by desires of the attendees when they successfully "see" them. The existence of Lao's circus creatures, however, is no less true when attendees reject or challenge them. Lao's satyr is a satyr, but Agnes Birdsong comes looking for "Pan" (43), the Greek god of fertility, and as she becomes entranced by the syrinx playing and dancing of the satyr, she finds the fantasy she has come to the circus seeking.

Where the satyr in Beagle's text is really an ape, in Finney's text the satyr is a satyr, and the fantasies (satyr in Beagle's text and Pan in Finney's) are manifestations of the desires and expectations of the audience. In *The Circus of Dr. Lao* readers are not told if anyone else visited the satyr. Agnes' vignette is the lone example, but the fantasy is as much a reality to Agnes as the ape appearing as a satyr is to those attending Mommy

Fortuna's carnival. The characterizations of the ringmasters within each text provide further evidence of the blurring of epistemological boundaries.

In Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*, Mommy Fortuna is ringmaster and provides the center of the mandala of exhibits available to attendees. The "Elli" attraction features Fortuna in magical disguise, which represents a truth of man's existence, old age. As Miller notes, "Fortuna...seems to be the only creature in the carnival who can turn her act on and off, [she] really has no act, no pretense" (Miller 213). Elli is old age, and old age has Fortuna in her grip. There is no magical escape.

By comparison, Dr. Lao, ringmaster in Finney's novel, exhibits distinctly different personas. Dr. Lao's mastery over the English language is evident when he recites his ballyhoo speech to draw attendees into his circus and when he explains the detailed history of the satyr to Agnes, as well as when he discusses the creation of his world during the main event. Lao speaks as an educated man to an educated woman, but not when confronted by the Rogers family, who merely ask the true nature of the "man, bear, or Russian" (Finney 38). Lao speaks in a pidgin dialect of English. The very little language he offers is broken and seems sarcastic following his erudite oration concerning the satyr; he is possibly a caricature of Asian immigrants learning the English language. The periodic shift from a proper English to a pidgin dialect suggests the similar duplicity in Mommy Fortuna. One is not more real than the other; each are parts of Lao's character as he epitomizes both the stereotype of the chinaman that even he cannot escape within the confines of the small town of Abalone, Arizona, and the ringmaster/owner/creator of the fantastic circus. Mommy Fortuna likewise cannot escape Elli, old age. Lao too becomes that which people expect when he is confronted on a personal level, part of the

fantasy. He personifies the stereotype of an Asian immigrant when he is asked about some aspects of his fantasy, and a skilled orator when he is speaking of the fantastic creatures within the circus.

Beagle is only able to proceed to focus on ontological problems in Mommy Fortuna's circus because Finney focused on epistemological questions within Dr. Lao's. Finney's creatures of fantasy are presented as real. They exist altogether separately from Dr. Lao, and because they do they can form the basis for Beagle's later ontological comparison. Thus, when Beagle presents Mommy Fortuna's circus as an ontological problem that concerns itself with the difference of appearance and reality, the reality in the comparison has been created within Finney's novel. Finney's novel asserts the truth behind the existence of creatures of fantasy, which allows Beagle to compare Mommy Fortuna's illusions to beings that are considered true in the meta-text of fantasy. Finney's work provides a necessary precursor to the fantasies of mythological beings and creatures because he not only asserts their reality, but also creates them as the **only** source of truth within the novel.

In his introduction to the 1956 edition of the collection that includes Finney's novel, Bradbury begins by stating that "*The Circus of Dr. Lao* and the stories which follow are fantasies" and explains that he defines fantasy as that which "cracks it [the universe] down the middle, turns it wrong-side-out, dissolves it into invisibility, walks men through its walls, and fetches incredible circuses to town" (vii). Finney pulls the city of Woldercan into the reader's universe within the confines of a circus tent, creates an ancient god that responds to the sacrifices of its people, and dissolves into nothingness when the circus tent folds down at the conclusion of the act. The quote illustrates

Bradbury's familiarity with Finney's novel and the "incredible circus" that comes to the small town of Abalone, Arizona.

Finney's novel creates its own space within the universe by refusing to follow the traditional laws of the natural and literary worlds. The mermaid provides evidence of Finney's version of Abalone, Arizona, as a universe split and recombined in a wrong-side-out manner, as she lies in a tank of saltwater, but is surrounded by "the goldfish that swam with her in the tank poised on their nervous fins to listen" (71) to her singing. In the reader's universe there are no goldfish that can survive in saltwater. In addition to the mermaid, there is the existence of Woldercan and the great god Yottle in Finney's text, neither of which can be found in reference to anything outside of Finney's work, and the fact that Dr. Lao's chimera was male, when "legend tells us that chimeras were invariably females" (154) according to the catalog. These are not errors by Finney, but new folds in the universe that are the unmistakable characteristic of fantasy.

Finney's novel also presents a universe that is able to disappear at multiple levels, most poignantly as the novel ends with the "ends of the tent [falling] outward and down" (134); the circus ending in conjunction with the novel. There is no explication that follows the remark. The people of Abalone go back to their lives, but there is nothing more said about the circus. Yet, Dr. Lao's circus is more than merely a combination of acts. Lao explains, "the world is my idea; as such I present it to you" (126). The end of the circus is the end of the universe that Lao has created, and as the circus tent falls outward and down, Lao's universe unfolds into seeming invisibility. The people of Abalone move "into the dust and sunshine, homewards or wherever else they were going" (134). The lack of epilogical information as it pertains to the circus, coupled with

its exclusion from the final sentence of the work illustrate that the strange circus has disappeared as suddenly and improbably as it appeared in *Abalone*. In addition to *The Circus of Dr. Lao* being central to Bradbury's definition of fantasy, the author pays homage to Finney's novel in his own story of a dark carnival, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. Bradbury's homage, first published in 1962, uses the trope of the dark carnival to illustrate a story very different, but the carnival again separates reality and fantasy. Through the setting of the novel, the characters of Mr. Dark (Bradbury's ringmaster) and Charles Halloway (the protagonist Will's father who works in the library), are reminiscent of Finney's work.

In Bradbury's novel, Cooger and Dark's Pandemonium Shadow Show arrives in Green Town, Illinois; a town where "all carnivals stop after Labor Day" (Bradbury 31). The town is eerily similar to Finney's *Abalone*, Arizona. James Cawthorn and Michael Moorcock note the resemblance of Finney's small town to Bradbury's in *The Martian Chronicles*. They write, "Ray Bradbury, an admirer of Finney's work, was so besotted with the small-town environment that he transplanted it to Mars to reveal its horrors" (Moorcock 105). Though noting the use of the small-town in Bradbury's science fiction, as opposed to the fantasy novel being examined, the connection is identical. Bradbury's Green Town, Illinois, owes much to Finney's version of *Abalone*, Arizona. Each town seems an unlikely entrance point for the fantastic. The townsfolk of *Abalone* seem stuck in their humdrum existences, the characters in Bradbury's novel (Jim Nightshade, Will Halloway, and his father Charles Halloway) repeat the same actions on a nightly basis. While Jim and Will escape their homes at night and explore the surrounding areas, their summer evening excursions are common enough that they have developed encoded

rhythms to signal one another utilizing the loosened and re-nailed boards of the boardwalk (Bradbury 93). Small town American life creates the perfect incongruous setting for an engagement with the fantastic, as the wonders of fantasy become all the more amazing when the imagination of their characters rarely extends beyond the physical borders of their towns.

Like Finney's Dr. Lao, Bradbury's Mr. Dark is a charismatic leader able to promise, and deliver, what characters in the novel desire. Mr. Dark enables people to relive their dreams: as the aged woman regains her youth and beauty and a former football star that has lost his leg regains the glory and wholeness of his youth. Yet, each ultimately pays a price for his or her dreams. Dr. Lao's circus offers an opportunity to live fantasies and gain knowledge, but there is no punishment for doing so successfully. Yet, where Dr. Lao presents attendees of the circus with epistemological issues, Bradbury's novel presents them with ontological ones; appearance is different from reality.

The ringmasters are not the only characters that bear a striking similarity to one another. In Bradbury's novel, Charles Halloway is like Finney's proofreader and English teacher, entrenched in words. Halloway, who works late into the night as a janitor at the library, finds the information that allows him to save his town from the carnival while researching in the library. The use of the keepers of language as heroes in each novel illustrates a further connection to Finney's novel.

While numerous small details call attention to Finney's novel, none is more prevalent than Bradbury's repeated image of "The Most Beautiful Woman in the World" (25). The repeated promise of this woman draws more than a few men into the carnival

(and its outlying traps), and the exact words are repeated every time a man reads the advertisement in Bradbury's work. The actual figure of the woman does not appear in Finney's text, but the advertisement for Dr. Lao's circus promises "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" (Finney 9). Finney's male characters are often drawn to the circus by the prospect of viewing these beautiful women, though few admit it to their wives and/or children.

Cooger and Dark's carnival features Mephistopheles (Bradbury 31) to Dr. Lao's Satan Metrakig, Mademoiselle Tarot (31) to Dr. Lao's Apollonius, and the carnival that Will and Jim believe should be all "growls, explosions of lion dust, horse buckles, elephants, and zebras" (31) is reminiscent of the Rogers' childrens belief that Dr. Lao's circus will contain "Clowns. Elephants. Tigers. Calliopes. Bands. Horses" (Finney 15). The lines of influence between Bradbury and Finney are clear. Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao* has influenced two important writers within the genre of fantasy. The lines of influence that show an homage to Finney by Beagle and Bradbury point towards a novel that has, thus far, been underrepresented within scholarship on the fantastic, and is deserving of detailed examination.

Chapter 2: Vignettes

It is perhaps because Finney's novel is a fantasy that it has remained relatively unstudied over the course of the last seventy years. Fantasy scholarship, which came into its own in the 1990s, is a new and still emerging field when compared to the serious study of other literatures. Finney's novel was out of print during the increase of scholarship on the fantastic that occurred in the 1990s, making it much less available as the focus of scholarly discussion. Further, as this chapter will address, the very episodic structure of Finney's novel makes its artifice less obvious, and the novel less likely to become the focus of serious critical study.

The Circus of Dr. Lao is written in a "series of brief vignettes" (Wolfe 283) and the point of engagement between reader and text is constantly changing. Lacking a central plot element, the novel forces readers to focus on the characters and their interactions with the fantastic as opposed to any over-arching framework. The episodes that form the body of the novel illuminate a "heavily satiric dissatisfaction with the hypocrisies and complacencies" (283) of 1930s America while commenting on the lessened piety and belief in natural things as sources of knowledge and truth in the dawn of American industrialism. Though some scholars have argued that the novel is filled with a "sexual leitmotiv" (Whyde 234), and "sexual narratives" (234), further examination complicates these readings. Finney describes the residents of Abalone, Arizona in communication with the mythological beings of Lao's circus in order to

comment on fantasy as a source of both wonder and truth. When the attendees are successful in accepting the epistemological position of the creatures of fantasy that Lao brings to town, their perception of their own lives is changed positively.

The town's name, Abalone, provides another key to the understanding of Finney's novel. Abalones are "a genus of rock-clinging gastropod organisms having a flattened shell of slightly spiral form lined with mother-of-pearl with a row of apertures along its edge" ("abalone"), and the residents of Abalone often cling to what they know. The townspeople are a shell that is difficult for even Dr. Lao to crack. As readers peer through the openings in Abalone, through the eyes of the residents themselves, they are able to glean knowledge of what lies both inside and outside the character's "shells." The openings into the world of the abalone are the apertures in the shell, and for readers of Finney's novel, the vignettes offer multiple apertures through which to view Dr. Lao's marvelous circus.

The first resident of Abalone to enter the circus is Miss Agnes Birdsong, the high-school English teacher, who "arrived at the circus at ten minutes after two" (Finney 41). The nature of the description of her arrival, and the precision illustrated by her precise arrival time, as opposed to around two o'clock, depicts her as punctual, detail oriented, and precise. Nothing in her life falls irregularly, out of order, or comes as a surprise. To reinforce this characterization, Agnes parks her "neat little coupe" (41) on the "opposite side of the street" (41), "raises the windows" (41), "gets out" (41), "locks the doors" (41), and walks across the street. She does not take risks. Yet, Dr. Lao's circus advertisement has drawn her to do exactly that. The description presented here depicts a woman who prefers to play it safe. She drives a neat car, parks safely, raises the windows, and locks

the doors in a small town where everyone is congenial with one another. The extremely detailed description of her arrival is the only example of such in the novel. Other characters merely show up, and the attention to detail in Finney's description of her echoes the attention to detail of her character. While Miss Birdsong does not have the most detail-oriented job in the novel (it could be argued that a proofreader deals explicitly in details, where an English teacher would also deal with larger concepts), she is the character whose arrival is the most detailed. Finney's depiction of her is an attempt to personify order and precision, and is done masterfully, not by describing her personality directly but by depicting her actions.

In doing so, Finney sets Birdsong for her experience at the circus. Characters in the novel rarely get exactly what they want, but are always presented with the opportunity to receive the knowledge they need. Birdsong, who is entranced by the idea of meeting a satyr the moment she sees the circus parade entering the town, actively searches for the satyr when she arrives at the circus. She does not wait for Dr. Lao's ballyhoo speech—she thinks it is “the poorest she had heard in her life” (41)-- because she is already drawn into Lao's fantasy. She is already self-motivated to take what may be the first risk in her life. For Agnes, the satyr is the circus.

Gary Wolfe argues that “what Miss Birdsong is seeking, apparently, is sex” (284), though her characterization stands in opposition to this idea. She enters the circus seeking “Pan” (Finney 43), and though Pan is often depicted as a god of procreation and sexual freedom, he also represents uninhibited nature. In the controlled and programmatic existence of Agnes Birdsong, nature is a wild force that attracts her, not merely in a physical, but a spiritual sense. Upon entering the tent, the satyr seduces Agnes, yet this

Dionysian moment ends before actual coitus begins. Dr. Lao appears inside the tent at the moment where it appears the seduction will culminate in intercourse, and if a truly sexual act occurs between Agnes and the satyr, it does so only in the minds of readers. Dr. Lao proceeds to explain the behavior and history of the satyr before removing Agnes to another tent, and readers hear of her again only briefly during the main event, and finally in the catalog that occurs at the end of the work.

Agnes' catalog entry explains that "the boys all said she was damned good company after she learned to smoke and drink" and that the circus had "broadened her outlook" (142). This stands in sharp contrast to her depiction within the text. Her interaction with the fantastic turns her into a more open-minded woman, opposing the characterization of an uptight teacher within the text, but her sexual promiscuity and desires are not discussed. In a work that vividly describes the sexual desires and habits of other characters, the author's avoidance of the subject of Agnes' sexuality is a direct clue into how he hopes readers will interpret the scene. Agnes' encounter with the satyr provides her with a truth about herself. She learns that "pain and passion were akin" (45) and, in the moment where she is seemingly seconds from having intercourse with the satyr, that "life was beginning" (45). Agnes' outlook is broadened by confronting her own sexual nature, which apparently she does for the first time at Lao's circus, where the spectacle seduces her, freeing her from small-town social norms of the 1930s.

It is important to note that Miss Birdsong's vignette stands out as very different from others within the novel. Her interaction with the satyr is just two pages long, and Dr. Lao's lecture on the satyr encompasses as much, if not more, of the vignette than Miss Birdsong's actual experience. Lao's speech about the satyr covers the history and

belief about the satyr in Ancient Greece, but also passes judgment on the treatment of pagan traditions by Christianity. Lao states that if the satyr could talk, he could tell of “how the encroachment of the hostile Christians drove him and his kind out to seek refuge in unamiable lands” (46) and of his “journey into China” (47), the last homeland of the satyr. Dr. Lao explains that the satyr was captured in North China, years after “his relatives went north into Europe to become strange gods, like Adonis becoming Balder, or Circe becoming one of the Lorelei, or the Lares Domestici becoming cuckoo clocks and mantle statuettes” (47). Lao’s lecture on the evils of Christianity and the displacement of old gods is perhaps the genesis of Finney’s comment that, while the novel was begun in China, he put it away because “it had become too lecture-y” (Hoagland iii). It is one of just two soliloquies in the novel by Dr. Lao, the other being the episode regarding Wodlercan and Yottle, examined later in this work.

The self-described lecture-y tone of Miss Birdsong’s vignette is of special importance when examining the novel as a scholar. In lecturing Agnes, Lao also provides a mouthpiece for Finney to lecture his readers, establishing one of many meta-fictional moments within this text. Birdsong has found knowledge during her encounter with the fantastic, and readers have found knowledge in their interaction with the fantasy novel. Finney describes the exile of mythological figures from Christian realms to provide readers with knowledge that broadens their outlook at the same time as Birdsong’s. While the vignette proves successful in educating both Miss Birdsong and readers, Finney’s characters are not often as successful or accepting of the truth available within the fantastic.

Finney's comment on the exile of the pagan gods by Christianity, and their subsequent appropriation by other cultures, is also a comment on the nature of fantasy. The realism prevalent in the literature of the early twentieth century had pushed the mythological stories and creatures appropriated by fantasy authors to the background, and as people had stopped believing in the world itself as a fantastic realm due to the decrease in unexplored areas of the planet. As transportation made world travel possible, the only place the fantastic continued to exist was in the words of fantasy authors.

The second vignette in the novel involves the Rogers family. John Rogers, an unemployed plumber is reluctant to take his children to the circus. He cites financial reasons (lack of employment), and follows with a rejection of the fantastic when reading though the ad. Rogers, a man who deals with singular, logical paths by trade (as a plumber) cannot accept the possibility of the spectacle of Woldercan as advertised because it violates his idea of logic. The advertisement states that "eleven thousand people would take part in the spectacle" (15), which he rejects by saying that "there ain't hardly that many people in Abalone" (15). Mr. Rogers expresses the limits of his acceptance to his known world, unable to imagine that a circus he witnessed rolling into town on three carts could contain such a large number of people. He changes his mind and agrees to take the children (he has three) to the circus because his kids "haven't seen anything in a long time" (15).

The Rogers family is not described in detail until they enter Dr. Lao's circus. The children who are warned to "not get excited" (15) by their father, are "excited" (48) when they arrive, and are "unable to make up their minds" (48) about which attraction they wish to see. Their depiction is important because they are receptive to the fantastic where

their parents are not. Their lives are not the regimental existence of the adults around them. As three of fewer than ten children depicted within the text, their awed and excited response to the circus is representative of the children of Abalone.

In contrast to her children, Mrs. Rogers (who is unnamed within the text or catalogue beyond being the wife of John Rogers and the mother of three children) is “buoyant because her husband [has] a job again” (48), but not because of the circus. This response is in tune with her catalogue description. Even her excitement is not her own; she is happy for her husband and their children, but never once for herself within the text. The catalog cites her as a good mother and wife that “fretted when it was time to fret, [and] laughed when it was time to laugh” (142). Her description reinforces the logic that resounds in the existence of John Rogers, as even his wife always follows the expected path in life, and illustrates that the adults of the Rogers family do not dismiss the fantastic, but are simply unable to recognize it.

They inquire about the “big bear” (48) upon entering the circus, but are repeatedly told “me no savvee bear business” (49) by Dr. Lao, and reluctantly decide to “watch the magician” (51) Apollonius. The mage performs magic by request, moving from the usual performance magician fare of pulling a pig from a candy sack (rabbit out of a hat), to card tricks (which he dismisses as “not magic, only manual dexterity” (52)), and then a Judeo-Christian alchemical reaction of turning water to wine. Through these basic magical demonstrations Apollonius illustrates his proficiency in the slight-of-hand magic the Rogers family understands.

For his final three events, however, the mage stages the creation story from a variety of cultural viewpoints. He creates flowers first, of all kinds, even a “big brute”

(53) of a flower that Apollonius himself does not recognize. The creation of the earthly echoes the opening of Genesis, where God creates the heavens and the earth. The flowers that grow from around their feet represent the earthly, and the “pink rose petals [that] fell about the family” (53) illustrate the existence of a heaven from which the petals have descended.

Apollonius’ next event of magic involves the creation of a turtle, which he molds from “the earth between his fingers, smoothing it and shaping it and patting it and rubbing it” (54) until it takes shape. Yet, this turtle is unlike those the Rogers family has seen before. This turtle has two heads, and “each head trie[s] to start in a different direction” (54). While Apollonius states that he is “ashamed at his ineptitude” (54) in producing the two-headed turtle, the episode follows his explanation of the truth in magic, and readers would be fools to believe that the turtle had been given two heads in error. The two-headed turtle accurately represents the Rogers family, as both the parents and the children become pairs that seemingly have no direction.

Not only does the family seem undecided about which exhibit to see, but, as evidenced in the catalog, the children are also directionless. And while there are three children when the family attends the circus, the catalog informs readers that Edna, the prettiest of the Rogers children, dies just two months after the circus in a traffic accident (145). The two remaining children amount to little. Alice “stood first in her class but married while she was still so young that she never amounted to anything” (145), and Willie “operated a filling station” (145). These portrayals seem to illustrate the two-headed turtle. Alice illustrates a duality and inability to genuinely discern a direction for her future. She receives the highest marks all through school, but chooses love or

security-- readers are not told why she marries so young-- over her own education and career. If this had been her plan all along, it would have made little sense to put forth the work required to be the head of her class throughout all of public school.

The turtle also represents the fantasy/realism paradigm on a meta-fictional level. In a discussion about itself, Finney illustrates here (as he does more completely in the depiction of the Hound of the Hedges) the merger of two opposing sides. The two-headed turtle was “always quarreling with itself at feeding time” (149), as each head desires to do all of the eating for the body. The heads of the turtle each believe that they must provide sustenance for the body that they share, as they are either gluttonous in their desire for food or stand ignorant of the fact that they are each part of a larger being. In this way the turtle may represent the traditions of fantasy and realism in the early twentieth century. While realist authors rarely approved of any fantasy literature, inasmuch as Finney represents the authors of his genre they were very fond of novels of realism. Finney seems to be calling for a unification of these two opposing traditions, both within the novel, and in the depiction of the turtle that “nearly [tears] itself in two” (149) while competing for the attention of two female turtles, a symbolic representation of two literary genres competing for readership.

For his last act of magic, Apollonius raises a man from the dead, illustrating the power over death. The risen man is not amazed at his sudden reanimation but merely rushes off because he has “business to attend to” (56). The reaction is a shared one, as none of the witnesses of the miracle (The Rogers family, along with Luther and Kate) seem impressed. However, as an echo of the real life of John Rogers, the reaction of the dead man seems logical for the purposes of interpretation. John Rogers is also a man

returned from the dead. He is employed and working again for the first time since the onset of the Depression, and while new life has been breathed into him, he is more focused on pragmatics even when confronted by the miraculous. His attitude at the circus remains focused on the financial impact of the visit. He tells the family they can see a sideshow or two and then the main act due to his limited financial resources (48). Like the dead man, he finds himself at a circus but plans to rush off to attend to business.

The dead man's catalog entry illustrates how Apollonius' character merges multiple mythological traditions. Finney refers to the dead man's "clay" being reclaimed by Apollonius, an obvious point towards the Promethean story of creation, and to the parallel of Christ bringing a man back from the dead. In addition, the man is said to be wearing "army shoes" (56), a cowboy hat with the letters "R.K." engraved into the leather sweatband. The knots in his shoelaces "looked as if they might have been done by a seafaring man" (56). While beyond the scope of this examination, the character of the dead man may be an homage to Rudyard Kipling. While Kipling did not die until 1936 (after the novel's printing), the man is named Arnold R. Todhunter, and the combination of soldier (army) and sailor (seafaring) is reminiscent of the Kipling poem "Soldier an' Sailor Too," for Kipling is listed by Edward Hoagland as one of Finney's favorite authors in his introduction to the Limited Editions Club edition of Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao* (Hoagland iii).

Echoes of the inability of the fantastic to make an impression on the Rogers family are evident in the catalogue, as John Rogers "never made a hell of a lot of money at [the plumbing business]" but was "a good union man" all of his life (136). His wife "dreamed of no miracles" and "desired no victories" (142) but continued to provide the

expected reaction for all things throughout her life. As noted earlier, even their children, who were excited about the circus, fail to have their lives changed by the revelations offered by Apollonius. If water can become wine and a man can be raised from the dead, then there is a place in the world for dreams and dreamers, a place that the Rogers family all fail to find. Though they are told that magic is true (and see it for themselves), the Rogers family never accepts the truth of fantasy, and it has no impact on their lives. Their perception of the world never extends beyond the horizon of Abalone, Arizona.

Many characters, both minor and major, interact with the “unbiological beings” (59) of Dr. Lao’s circus. An unbiological order, we are told “obey[s] none of the natural laws of hereditary and environmental change, pays no attention to the survival of the fittest, [and] positively sneers at any attempt on the part of man to work out a rational life cycle” (60), representing an order that exists outside the natural laws that apply to man. The purely fantastic creatures of the circus (the chimera, the unicorn, the sphinx, the werewolf, the hound of the hedges and the sea serpent) are depicted as primordial to man, “the weird children of the lust of the spheres” (60) and the product of the “primal womb-thing” (60) that gave birth to all creation. Dr. Lao creates a metaphysical scale for these creatures by placing them outside the biological universe, which locates them somewhere between the realms of God and man.

Luther and Kate (not introduced reviewing the advertisement or viewing the circus parade) witness the raising of the dead man with the Rogers family, but their primary place in the novel is centered on their encounter with the medusa. Their characters are not round and dynamic characters, but one-dimensional and flat. Their catalog entries explain further, with Luther being described as “a voice, not a face” (136),

and Kate as “a sad memory” (142), each reinforcing the idea that these are minor characters meant to act as tropes.

The couple comes to the forefront in the scene with the medusa because Kate rejects the true fantastic. Finney uses her character to reiterate the truth of Lao’s world. Kate’s response to Dr. Lao’s learned lecture on the power of the medusa is to deny the fantastic dominion over her: “I don’t believe a word you say. I have never heard so much nonsense in all my living days. Turning people to stone!” (63). Crossing the roped off threshold of the cubicle housing the medusa, she bends under the guard rope and is promptly turned to “solid chalcedony” (64). Her rejection of the fantastic illustrates the very real danger that the residents of Abalone face in rejecting knowledge they are not willing to accept as true. Finney uses the cause/effect relationship of Kate’s turning to stone in order to make a comment on the power of fantasy to act on those who would seek to disenfranchise it. Even when man refuses to believe that the fantastic exists, its knowledge and power is still as true as if they did believe in it. In the world of Finney, the fantastic can be captured but not controlled, and it has a very real power over mankind.

Ed, Martha, and their children (the railroad officer and his family) enter the circus at exactly two twenty-five (64) according to the text. The exact time of their arrival is eerily similar to the detail revealed of Agnes Birdsong’s entrance, though in this instance, the detail reinforces characterization. The timed arrival of this family is an allusion to the father’s job as a railroad traffic officer, one of whose primary jobs is to monitor the timeliness of train arrivals. The detail also serves to reinforce the reality of the circus, as the first comment from the family is the wife asking if “we are at the right place” (64).

Once they decide to view some of the sideshows, they begin determining which show they will see first. When the wife suggests the mermaid, the husband proclaims that it is “obviously a fake” (64), and he dismisses the suggestion of seeing the hound of the hedges by saying that it is “only a dog painted green” (65). The father is repeating what he believes to be the truth, though he is consistently wrong. Upon entering the Roc’s tent at the behest of Dr. Lao, the father proclaims that “its preposterous that any egg could be so big” (66) and believes it to be made of concrete. When asked by his son if he knows everything, the man calmly responds that he can tell the true from false (in relation to the egg). He is shown to be incorrect, however, when the egg begins to hatch. Confronted with reality in the fantastic, the man becomes entwined in an epistemological dilemma, but instead of admitting their mistake, the family simply leaves the circus. In doing so, they deny fantasy’s epistemological position within the novel by refusing to admit that the father (heretofore the dominant source of knowledge) was wrong. The fantastic makes no impression on their lives and they return to their home rather than face the reality presented to them.

The next people to arrive are two policemen, described as “ignorant-looking” and “ugly” (57). They have entered the circus to “see that nothing inimical to the public interest took place” (57). Readers are only given a physical description of the policemen. Beyond which the policemen are described only in terms of their uniforms, “Sam Browne belts, sidearms, and shiny, brassy badges” (57). Finney implies that they are their jobs, police first, and men later. The description matches the characterization of the officers, as they are looking for violations of rules.

In their search around the grounds the policemen are described as “peering in tents and nodding to their friends” (57). They accost a “little boy sneaking in under a tent” (57), which they consider a violation of the law, and berate him until he runs home in tears. The policemen illustrate that the circus performers are in fact real, because fakes would have been grounds for fraud, a violation of law. They hint that Finney’s Abalone, Arizona does not exist in the primary world of the reader but within a secondary world that retains some semblance to the reader’s primary one. The cops decide to see a sideshow or two but are not mentioned later in the narrative in an official capacity. Their catalog description illustrates that they feel they must look out for themselves, and because their ideas about the world are dependent upon an epistemological scale rooted in humanity’s laws they are not affected by their visit to the circus. The policemen serve as a trope for those who cannot interact with the fantastic because of their attachment to their roles in the world outside of the circus. This theme of employees who resist the fantastic extends into the interaction of two quarantine inspectors with the Hound of the hedges, the mermaid, and the sphinx.

Leaving the medusa’s tent, the quarantine inspectors and police officers encounter the Hound of the Hedges. This vignette is dominated by a lecture from Dr. Lao himself. Lao explains that the hound is “unique in the mysterious lexicon of life” (68), because unlike “most of the other curiosities of [the] circus [the Hound does not] have a taint of evil or hysteria about [him]” (68). The hound stands alone as a representation of the purity of life in balance, as he is “neither plant nor animal but a perfect balance of both” (69). The captured hound represents a pure natural element, one that makes the humans surrounding it seem artificial by comparison. Lao explains that the hound is so

completely perfect that it is the “apogee of all that life could ever promise, beauty and gentleness and grace, [with] only ferocity and guile lacking” (70). He believes that the hound is the goal to which the world (unlike the humans inhabiting it) is striving, but all creatures of this realm (save the hound) have a degree of evil that taints them, and he elevates this pure being above the other curiosities of his circus. What humanity should be striving for is found in the fantastic hound, but those present ignore this truth.

The reaction of the minor characters is limited to that of Quarantine Inspector Number Two, who denies the beauty of the hound of the hedges, and of nature, saying, “that goddamn dog looks like a fake to me, somehow” (71). If the hound appears fake to the quarantine inspector, it is because it is too real for their minds to process without rejection. The purity of the hound is such that men of a fallen world cannot believe it exists. When Dr. Lao pets the beast, it begins to “sough like the murmur of wind in the sycamore leaves” (71). The hound is depicted as more pure than other acts within the circus, as the other creatures show various levels of contempt towards their captor.

Moving away from the Hound of the Hedges, and being led by Dr. Lao, the quarantine inspectors move next into the tent with a mermaid. In his description of the mermaid, Finney focuses on her tail, “sea-green” and “sleek scaled” with a “fanlike fin on the end pink as a trout’s” (71). Her fishtail also stirs “salty bubbles that froth and foam about her slight breasts” (71). Though Finney notes her nudity from the waist up, he is careful to describe the foam and froth of the saltwater that would make the water somewhat opaque if visitors were there to view her in a sexual manner. It is also worth noting that there is no age limit on viewing the mermaid, although there is for the “peep show” that features naked virgins elsewhere in the work. For Finney, the focus on the

mermaid should be on the unity of man and nature (representing reality and fantasy), noted in her tail and her beauty. The quarantine inspectors are not shocked at her tail, but “because she wore no bathing suit” (71). The quarantine inspectors refute the fantastic by neglecting to accept the beauty and unity that exists in the mermaid, and see only the nakedness of her human half.

Dr. Lao’s lecture on the mermaid contains one of the few clues into his own characterization. For, while Dr. Lao behaves as an expert on the fantastic creatures of his circus, he states that the mermaid contains a beauty that he could “touch and see but never completely comprehend” (72). His reasoning is that he has met her at too advanced an age but feels as though “the contemplation of her beauty might have changed [his] whole life” (72). While readers are never clued into Dr. Lao’s past, it can be inferred from this passage that he wishes his life had contained more beauty, and that he, too, wishes he could have had access to the fantastic early enough in life to alter his existence in an ugly world. In contrast to Lao’s moving speech, the quarantine inspectors seem unaffected by the beauty of the mermaid and are only interested in her diet.

Dr. Lao then leads the quarantine inspectors into the tent that contains the Sphinx, at which point the Sphinx complains that Dr. Lao “bring[s] the queerest people in [his tent]” (73). The inspectors’ interest in the sphinx is piqued when it speaks, and they inquire as to its sex, at which point Lao leads them outside the tent. While Lao states that he has led the inspectors outside to explain that the sphinx is a hermaphrodite, further examination reveals that Lao is not embarrassed to speak about the sexual ambiguity of the sphinx inside the tent because it would embarrass the fantastic creature, but because Dr. Lao is embarrassed by his scientifically biological equals. The quarantine inspectors’

interest in the sex of a sphinx, as opposed to its origin or story, embarrasses Dr. Lao because it emphasizes how little man derives from his encounter with fantasy. While Dr. Lao hopes to broaden the horizons of the townsfolk of Abalone, Arizona, the quarantine inspectors' decision to analyze and query the biological sex of the sphinx, the diet of the mermaid, and their disbelief in the fantastic nature of the hound of the hedges illustrates that for some residents, the fantastic has no impact on their lives because their ideas about biology, and about life in general, are rooted in taxonomy.

The episode concerning the lawyer, Frank Tull, and the chimera is designed to reiterate fantasy's epistemological position and illustrate the mechanical nature of mankind's existence. The lawyer heads out to the circus alone, figuring that it "can't do any worse than bore [him] to death" (18). As Frank Tull arrives, the text describes him as "a man of many artificial parts" (75). His cyborg like body has been augmented or repaired using man-made materials: he has false teeth, wears bifocals, has a plate in his skull, a prosthetic leg of metal and fiber, a platinum wire replacing his humerus, and receives bi-weekly injections of mercury or salvarsan, etc (75). His catalog entry explains that he is "a good man before a jury" (137), which puns on two separate ideas. Tull is a lawyer and the catalog explains that he was good at his job. The description also notes however, that Frank "could not wrest a living from the plants of the field nor could he compete with the beasts thereof" (76), which portrays Frank as estranged from nature. Yet before the jury of his peers, before mankind, he was "taken care of and lived on, surviving because he was fit" (76). The good man before a jury of mankind, a successful lawyer, is irrelevant in the natural world.

Tull's interaction with the fantastic occurs when he "walks across the street to look at [the circus'] freaks" (76) and is incorporated into the scene where Dr. Lao lectures on the chimera. The artificial man is confronted with a symbol of the power of nature. The chimera's "belching asphyxiated the gnats that swarmed about its head" (76), its "great claws lacerated the clay upon which he slept" (76), as his body decomposes due to a "colony of parasites" (76) and ticks that live in his hide. The vile depiction of raw nature in the chimera is set in opposition to the artificial nature of Frank Tull. Coming to the circus anticipating the false fantastic, he is "horrified to perceive that [the chimera] was not a fake after all" (77). The encyclopedic Frank Tull, a man both created by and dependent upon science for defining his world, queries Dr. Lao as to the origins of the chimera. Lao answers, "no one knows" (82). To Dr. Lao, science is just "classification, tagging a name to everything" (82); there is more to the chimera than science could explain with a definition, and more to the fantastic creatures of his circus than many residents of Abalone are willing to accept. Again in this episode, Frank's (and man's) artificiality is in contrast to the truly natural fantastic, along with his supposedly superior epistemological position, each proving inferior when directly examined.

Mrs. Howard T. Cassan, a widow, appears at the circus to have her fortune told by Apollonius, "to hear the kind of bromidic forecasts she is accustomed to hearing from such people" (Wolfe 284); but she is thwarted by Apollonius' inability to lie. Mrs. Cassan has dreams of wealth and happiness, the hopes of a simple woman living in a small town. Her "flimsy brown dress and low shoes" (Finney 84) emphasize that she is a woman of small means, and even less glamour.

She first asks Apollonius to tell her how soon oil will be found on the twenty acres of land she owns in New Mexico, dreaming of wealth that she could find happiness in, but he answers that it will never happen. Her dreams of becoming wealthy on her own dashed, she asks about her love life and how soon she will be married again, a dream Apollonius also destroys when he responds that she will never remarry. Finding she will never be “rich,” or “married again,” or “know any more men” (84), Mrs. Cassan asks Apollonius what the use is of her existence, which initiates a diatribe about the banal and horrid future that awaits her, where nothing ever changes. Apollonius’ description of Mrs. Cassan’s life may also provide a metacomment on literary genres and traditions, for as she rejects the truth and knowledge of the fantastic, she remains rooted in her own version of reality, which may again depict the paradigmatic relationship of fantasy and realism as literary traditions.

Apollonius tells her that “Tomorrow will be like today, and the day after tomorrow will be like the day before yesterday” (84). Her routine will never change, her horizons never broaden, and her hopes for the future will never be achieved. She is confronted by the truth of the uselessness of her existence. She will change nothing, neither becoming a creature that “create[s] or destroy[s]” (85), and survive on the false sustenance that are her dreams and hopes for a future that she “would like to have happen, but which will never happen” (85). The “brutal truth” (Wolfe 284) of her existence is so unfathomable to her that she tries to befriend Apollonius in the hopes that she will again be loved, the one, token, crowning achievement in her life according to the fortune-teller. Mrs. Cassan’s desire to know the future is hypocritical because she does

not wish to know the truth. She is not swayed in her dreams by a confrontation with reality, and she remains steadfast in the beliefs with which she entered the circus.

The next vignette features the advertised “peepshow” (11) for “men only” (11). It is stated in the advertisement for the circus that the show is intended to be “educational rather than pornographic” (11), yet scholars looking into *The Circus of Dr. Lao* have declared the peepshow “another erotic episode” (Wolfe 285) and evidence of a “leitmotif [of sexuality] that binds the isolated experiences of characters” (Whyde 234). If, on the surface, the peepshow seems erotic and somewhat perverse, this is due to the perceptions of the scholars examining the episode rather than the details of the episode itself. The peepshow does feature nudity, but only as part of an examination, akin to a doctor’s physical. It is not of a sexual nature.

At the peepshow, an old man, one of the quarantine inspectors, and two young college men are viewing the show through a “curtain in the tent that had holes punched in it” (88), designed at different heights so that those wishing to view the show can select a hole that “suit[s] his ocular altitude” (89). Through the peepholes in the circus tent, the circus controls perspective, though it remains the choice of the attendees to select a hole appropriate to them. In this way the peepholes both sharpen focus on the fantasy, and occlude the vision of the small town outside the circus. The comment on men viewing the show through holes that are comfortable to the height of their eyes is also designed to provide different viewing experiences for readers, too, who find the show pornographic are viewing it from a lower “ocular altitude” (89), forcing their own presuppositions on what a peepshow is in their own world, as opposed to the actual depiction in the novel.

The opening sequence of the peepshow features “three Negro priests...dancing [nude] beneath a symbol of striking masculinity” (89) who are then joined by five maidens, “lean and virginal and luscious” (89). Instead of writhing in a sexual manner, the girls are described as “stumbling and limping” (89). That their nudity during the rain dance, and the whipping of the men with willow branches by the women, is seen as overtly sexual is evidence of readers and scholars forcing their own presuppositions on the ceremonies of another culture. Evidence of the ceremonial nature of the dance is furthered when “Mumbo Jumbo” (90) appears and the priests grovel, salaam, and genuflect in his presence (90). As Mumbo Jumbo approaches the maidens before him, he “examined them carefully, felt and prodded and punched and pinched them” (90). He explores their bodies, but not in a sexual manner. Finney notes that the maidens “endured it all and snuggled up to him and warmed against him. But they pleased him not” (90). The examination, as Finney depicts it, is one to decide value and worth, in a physical sense, and is not a sexual scene. The sexual nature of the scene derives from the perceptions and presuppositions of readers and viewers.

The second episode of the peepshow involves a group of “fat young nymphs with stomachs like washerwomen’s and hips like horses” (91) and a “pink and white and young” (91) faun watching them from the edge of the sea. The faun is only interested in watching the nymphs (he repeatedly refuses to join them) and is ultimately cornered by the maidens, who “enclose him in a circle of their riotous flesh, touching their uncleanness against his white skin, pawing him with lascivious fingers,” hoping to “kiss his mouth with a kiss of lust and shame” (93). The faun fights against their desire to corrupt his flesh, but is ultimately overpowered. He then places his hand onto one of the

“pretty nymph’s round bosoms” (94) in a sign of acquiescence. Dr. Lao interrupts the scene as he has the drunken college youths removed from the circus, and the quarantine inspector announces his decision to return to the peepshow scene, stating “some of that stuff is kinda interesting” (94).

The peepshow scenes are designed to broaden the horizons of those who either view or read them, but, like some Finney scholars, the quarantine inspector and the old man cannot see past the nudity in the scenes to understand their meaning. The narrow world-view of the residents of Abalone, is not so alien even seventy years later. Readers fail to see the first scene (with Mumbo Jumbo) as an opportunity to broaden their understanding of other cultures and traditions. The comments that “the citizens of Abalone refuse to modify their preconceptions” (Wolfe 284) is equally applied to the approach of scholars. As humans dwelling in the primary world, where such traditions are alien and nudity is taboo, the ritual calling to Mumbo Jumbo seems pornographic and lewd. Much as the fantastic argues for realms other than this one that are more natural and less tainted, there are traditions, existing outside their own fantasies, that have equal significance to those who believe in them.

The second scene’s meaning can be interpreted through the fact that the advertisement states that the peepshow is for “men only” (Finney 11). The triumph of the lust of the body allows the faun to be manipulated and begin to accept the advances of the nymphs that he is repulsed by early in the scene. What has appealed to the fawn, because of the impurity and filth associated with the nymphs in their description, ultimately causes his downfall. He is no longer the pure fawn described in the text; the perfect marble statue alluded to in the catalogue entry that states only “see Praxiteles”

(137), because he has allowed lust to overtake him. While the episode appears to express the dangers of viewing pornography, it may instead depict the ugliness of humanity through the eyes of the fantastic. As noted by Gary Wolfe, *The Circus of Dr. Lao* is a “text that calls attention to itself” (Wolfe 285), and this segment of the peepshow is no exception. The quarantine inspector and old man represent humanity, and the faun in the scene represents the fantastic.

Mr. Etaoin, “the *Tribune* proofreader” (Finney 19), decides to attend the circus the day after proofreading its printed advertisement. In the ad, “the sense of what he looked at piqued him” (19), and when readers are introduced to Mr. Etaoin in the sea serpent vignette, he “contemplat[es] the sea serpent, and the sea serpent contemplat[es] Mr. Etaoin” (94). The parallelism of Mr. Etaoin and the sea serpent extend to their characterization; his smoke is described as the sea serpent’s tongue, and the “dull, muscle-bound green eyes of Etaoin” are (95) offset by the “somber, rare, and wicked jewels” (95) that reside in the head of the serpent. The serpent notes that he and Mr. Etaoin have “nothing in common except [their] hatred of each other” (95), though he later remarks that they are both caged creatures, testing their mutual bonds regularly.

The serpent and Mr. Etaoin engage in conversation concerning their diets, with the serpent telling a story of eating a “coffee-colored fat boy” (99), who resided in a village full of folk “loafing around near the river bank, listening to one of their medicine men tell a most atrocious lie” (98). The depiction of the boy is paralleled by Mr. Etaoin’s description of a meal he has eaten recently, that of a “Duroc Jersey pig” (100) that had “scampered around in its sty, eating slop and entertaining no spiritual conflicts” (100), growing fatter by the day. Mr. Etaoin’s description of the pig could also be the Sea

Serpent's description of the village folk, and is not far removed from the residents of Abalone themselves. The two meals, each offsetting the other, both represent lives of creatures whose existences serve only to sustain larger and greater beings. As man believes himself the supreme species of his world, having dominion over all other beasts, the sea serpent illustrates his dominion over man. In each of the tales within this vignette, the consumption of a lesser creature leads to a philosophical dilemma in which the consumer examines the purposefulness of existence.

The conversation that follows concerns the nature of love for man and serpent, where the serpent explains how he journeyed far to find his mate, and then asks questions concerning the habits of man in courtship, mating, and relationships. In each instance Mr. Etaoin answers "sometimes" (102) to the questions of the serpent, and the serpent responds, "So do we" (102). The vivid depiction of the similarities between the serpent and Mr. Etaoin illustrate that the "corrector of errors" (136) in the town of Abalone is one of the few to realize the lessons that can be learned from the fantastic. Mr. Etaoin realizes through his discourse with the serpent that he is confined in his town as the serpent is in his actual cage. When the serpent says that he will see the "Obelia and nautilus and squid and elasmobranch shark again" (105) as he travels the sea when he is free, Mr. Etaoin simply responds, "I would like to go with you" (105). The realization that mankind and the fantastic are not so different and are not meant to disdain one another, but embrace their similarities and realize the universality of their existence is what Dr. Lao hopes to give all the visitors to his circus. Mr. Etaoin, the corrector of errors, has corrected one for his entire town in his acceptance of the truth available from the fantastic.

The last vignette concerning a sideshow attraction involves Larry Kamper, a former military man that had been stationed in Tientsin, China who is now directionless: “waiting for a freight train to leave Abalone. Larry knew not what train he was waiting for, nor in which direction it might be going, nor where he would get off” (19). Kamper is drawn to the advertisement in the paper about the circus. He hopes to “be like a little boy again; to tremble at the sight of strange animals; to recapture the simple thrill of wonderment” (20) that escaped him as he grew older. Larry’s disdain for the town of Abalone is based in his desire to be free and roaming the world instead of cooped up. Before heading to the circus, Larry explains his disdain for Arizona in an episode with an old friend, explaining that he “put in six years among the heathen and [he] c[a]me home to get civilized all over again” (106).

Entering the circus, Dr. Lao greets Larry in Chinese, and they talk “as two strangers finding themselves in a foreign land with the bridge of a common language between them” (110). Larry, the only resident of Abalone that has traveled the world, brings a friend to the circus in order to “show him something” (110). The “something” they witness is the transformation of a werewolf back into her human form, which Lao believes they will see as a “miracle” (112). Yet, they are not impressed by the transformation. The only pleasure Larry and his friend are seeking in the werewolf sideshow is “carnal” (112) as defined by Dr. Lao, and he labels them sensualists in disdain. In this episode members of his own species again embarrass Dr. Lao, but Larry’s failure is more personal for him because he sees a bond in their shared language and traveling experience. Even when Dr. Lao explains that the werewolf is three hundred years old, Larry’s response is to exclaim that he thought he was “going to see a chicken”

(112) and remain completely unimpressed by the spectacle. Larry refuses to accept the “un-biological” nature of the werewolf, believing that she will be a beautiful and young as opposed to the three-hundred-year-old woman that she becomes.

In the main (and final) event of the circus, Dr. Lao begins by parading the fantastic creatures into the main tent, and “it was the damnedest collection Abalone, Arizona, had ever seen” (114). The collection of fantastic creatures quickly turns into a scene of chaos as a fight erupts when “the sphinx accidentally nuzzled [the unicorn’s] rump; and the unicorn exploded with a tremendous kick” (114), beginning a melee that only the Hound of the Hedges avoids by “curl[ing] into a tight ball, looking like a stray grass hummock” (114). Dr. Lao, acting as a master of ceremonies, exclaims, “Why do they have to fight when there is nothing to fight about? They are as stupid as humans” (115), Finney’s most direct attack on humanity in the novel.

The fight is evidence that the fantastic cannot be fully controlled. Despite Lao’s desire to present the “world as [his] idea” (126), the creatures revert to a primal state, in which they embrace the “taint of evil or hysteria” (68) that Dr. Lao admits that each possesses. Moreover, the fantastic creatures are similar to man and can serve as mirrors of human nature. The creatures revert to a state that is not to be revered here, assaulting one another (and in the serpent’s case Dr. Lao himself), and behaving as humans fighting over nothing. The author’s comment on his own world is evident, as the sources of knowledge and truth within the text do what he had seen men do in China, fighting over nothing.²

Once the fighting ends, Dr. Lao call upon Apollonius to “recreate the creation, the fall of Satan, and the redemption of Christ within the time frame of a brief circus act”

(Whyde 236). The act is staged as a “witches’ Sabbath” (Finney 119) featuring real witches and an appearance by Satan himself, which Apollonius is forced to banish with a crucifix. Whether the ability of the image of Christ on the crucifix to banish Satan illustrates the redemption is questionable. The invocation of the “God” current in Abalone is important because it prefigures the final scene in which Dr. Lao presents “the spectacle of the people of...Woldercan worshipping their god Yottle, the first and mightiest and least forgiving of all gods” (126).

Scholars have overlooked the importance of the Woldercan scene as an echo of Abalone, Arizona. In the scene “Woldercan was in the midst of a drought” (126), and Abalone is both in the desert and in the midst of the great depression. Dr. Lao tells the attendees of the event that “one man among them did something” to alleviate the suffering of the town: this is “the high priest of Yottle” (127). Meanwhile, in Abalone, Arizona, no one has done anything to alleviate the suffering of the residents, except Dr. Lao. Lao brings forth fantastic creatures and miracles of the ancient world in the same manner that the high priest brings forth the most ancient of all gods in order to reform perspective, confound prejudices, and renew desire and relish for the world.

The event features the sacrifice of a virgin. It depicts “simple, trusting faith” and “piety” such as “exists no more” (126), according to Dr. Lao. While Lao has brought forth the ancient wonders and miracles of the fantastic world, the townsfolk of Abalone (with few exceptions) have ignored its power to change their lives. The priest instructs the people of Woldercan to pray to Yottle, and “all Woldercan, having naught else to do, went to Yottle’s temple to pray” (127). Almost all of Abalone likewise appears at the circus because they have little else to do. The difference in some of Abalone appearing

and all of Woldercan appearing can be explained by Lao's comment that the Woldercanese exemplify piety that no longer exists.. The embarrassment of Dr. Lao in the face of his fantastic creatures is echoed as the priest exclaims that "you criticize and humiliate me before the very eyes of Yottle! You tell me, your high priest, how to pray" (129).

In the novel, attendees of the circus have repeatedly sought out what they wish; they have chided Lao when the acts have resulted in anything not matching their preconceptions, and they have embarrassed him by often seeking the satisfaction only of carnal desires. Unlike Woldercan, the people of Abalone, Arizona, will not, and indeed cannot, offer an untainted sacrifice to end their troubles. There is nothing new or unspoiled in their spirits that would allow them to respond to the truly marvelous. While the Woldercanese receive "loaves of manna" (133) and "a thin wispy rain" (134) as the episode ends, there is nothing further for the residents of Abalone: they have failed to believe, failed to express piety in the face of the miraculous. "Into the dust and sunshine the people of Abalone went homewards or wherever else they were going" (134), much the same as they were before Dr. Lao's circus came to town.

Finney's novel exposes what he believes is a flaw in humanity; the belief that humans are the primary (and only reliable) source of knowledge in the universe. This supposed superiority of man over fantastic and un-fantastic beings leads many of the residents of Abalone to leave the circus much the same people they were when they entered. Yet, that the most successful characters are genuinely changed by the fantastic. Both Agnes Birdsong and Mr. Etaoin are discussed in positive terms within the catalogue that ends the work; the others return to varying degrees of nondescript existence once the

circus leaves town. While Whyde contends that Finney's text "exposes cultural origins or myths to **deny** [emphasis added] their meaningfulness" (Whyde 231), Finney is in fact expressing their meaningfulness. Through Lao, Finney brings the most fantastic circus in history to the small town of Abalone, but he cannot force its citizens to accept the knowledge offered by the fantastic, any more than he can force readers and critics to view these sideshow attractions as a fantastic source of truth.

Just as the circus is not able to broaden the horizons of many of the residents of Abalone, *The Circus of Dr. Lao* has failed to change the perceptions of many scholars. The carnal desire and sensualist nature of Larry Kamper that upsets Dr. Lao in the episode with the mermaid is the same fault many critics display in their approach to the text. Calling a "sexual leitmotiv" (Whyde 234) the unifying factor or seeing Agnes Birdsong as a "sexually repressed high-school English teacher (Wolfe 283-284), is a shallow reaction to a text that Wolfe notes has a "texture and density rare among short fantasies" (283), and the perceptions of the critics have been unfairly presented as Finney's own.

Finney's novel is not simply and exclusively eroticism, but it does engage it at a primordial level. Through their interactions with the fantastic, the residents of Abalone, (and readers of the text) tap into a desire to commune with creatures of nature that are more powerful, more pure, and more fantastic. They; traverse space and time, examining their lives from an immortal point of view. Here is a secondary world, where man is artificial (Frank Tull provides a very thorough example) and the fantastic is natural (the Hound of the Hedges). The structure of the novel echoes the multiple acts of the circus, and readers confronting the text need to imagine themselves in the auditorium of a

modern circus, where acts enter, perform, and leave, culminating in the main event, where the short acts they have witnessed previously converge into something grander. In the small acts Finney expresses his displeasure with the hypocrisy and complacency of American society in the 1930s, and in the main event (Woldercan) his attitude about his primary world is evident. For what saves Woldercan fails in Abalone, not because the myth is weaker, but because people refuse to believe, to sacrifice their preconceptions and prejudices and embrace the miraculous when they are presented with it.

Chapter 3: Conclusion

Charles Finney's novel has enjoyed popular success and remained in print for close to seventy years. Though listed by multiple authors as one of the greatest works of fantasy, the book has remained outside the lens of scholarship because its structure and tone lie outside the realm of what critics might have expected. A novel composed of vignettes, the book ostensibly has more in common with a collection of short stories than the epic fantasies that have dominated the genre since Tolkien. Coupled with an undercurrent of comedy, the book's serious philosophical concerns are easy to overlook. Yet, the comedic tone of the work has been almost as influential on the genre as the dark carnival trope.

Each reviewer of Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao*, highlights the comedy present in the novel. Dr. Lao is polite but sarcastic, finds his patrons in compromising positions and seems to overlook them, and when searching for a sacrifice for the great god Yottle in the final scene of the book, the group of women to pick from is small because, "one of the specifications was the count of true maidenhood" (Finney 131). Finney's often-irreverent humor is the first example of its kind within the genre of fantasy, and is the most likely line of influence for comedic fantasy authors that have been successful in current times. Echoes of Finney's sardonic humor can be found in the dark humor of Kurt Vonnegut Jr., Robert Aspirin, and Terry Pratchett.

At one level, Finney's novel is concerned with the complacency he found upon returning to the United States in the 1930s from his military service in China. In his memoir of his stint in the 15th infantry, Charles Finney speaks poetically about China. The people, the culture, and the wonders of China are elevated in his prose, while his hometown in Arizona is depicted in harsh, realistic terms. The China that Charles Finney depicts in *The Old China Hands* is a place of magic and mystery, where cultures mesh with one another at length. His experience in China opened his eyes to the world, and upon returning to Arizona, the same feelings that had driven him to enlist in the army to get as far away as possible from the railroad shops crept up again.

As Finney's mouthpiece, Dr. Lao is often critical of the townspeople of Abalone, a town reflecting the small-town life and attitudes he despised. While Lao brings forth perhaps the greatest cast of mythological beings ever to grace the pages of one short novel, the people of Abalone rarely react to them. These simple, small town people are much more interested in the "man, bear, or Russian" (Finney 38) than they are with the medusa, the satyr, the werewolf, or the chimera. Though scholars have explained that the townspeople's ignorance of the fantastic is Finney's way of highlighting how unimportant myths and cultural origins are to the world of the twentieth century, Finney is depicting the exact opposite. In each vignette, where people are exposed to the importance of the fantastic (as bearers of truth within the novel), and deny its meaningfulness, their lives are affected negatively. The clearest example is Kate, who challenges the medusa as fake and is immediately turned into a block of carnelian chalcedony. Those who succeed in the catalog are those who embrace the truth of the fantastic and find knowledge through their new experiences. Agnes Birdsong and Mr.

Etaoin, whose interactions are the successful encounters depicted, each have their horizons broadened, and though neither is ever depicted as leaving Abalone in person, each is able to leave it in spirit.

Finney's novel is pointing out what can be learned from cultural origins and myths. He brings them to small town Arizona to exemplify the truth that these myths hold for man even in the modern age. His work is arguably a more poignant version of the case made by the modernist movement. While T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and W.B. Yeats use myths and origins in reference to modern times, Finney pulls the myths directly into the lives of Twentieth Century America.

Instead of presenting myths as fable, Finney brings the characters and beings of myth to life in Dr. Lao's circus. In doing so, Finney presents the myths without bias as to their meaning, but with an indisputable indication that the beings do exist. While the interpretation of the text where the beings of Lao's circus are merely reflections of Lao himself has been popularized in the Tony Randall version of the film, and in Janet Whyde's article, the cause and effect relationship depicted by Finney refutes it. Finney's novel is not one that is concerned primarily with ontological questions, rather epistemological ones. Questions of appearance and reality are answered most poignantly in the vignettes involving Kate and the Medusa and Apollonius and the Rogers family. These creatures are not tricks; they are true magic. That magic is lost on the majority of the population of Abalone, and seemingly upon scholars of the work.

Finney's use of the fantastic as an origin of meaning and truth are a commentary on the need for fantasy in a time dominated by realism. While the "real world" of Abalone offers little in the way of entertainment and truth, Dr. Lao's fantastic circus

offers both for a low admission price, and the same can be said for Finney's novel.

Written during a time when fantasy was not taken seriously, Finney introduces a circus filled with fantastic creatures who are the only sources of truth.

While many of the Abalonians believe themselves to be telling the truth, their beliefs and truths are consistently refuted. Frank Tull's faith in the encyclopedia (when it doesn't contain an entry for Yottle or Woldercan), and John Rogers' proclamation that there aren't enough people in Abalone to present a spectacle of 30,000 Woldercanese (as is advertised), are both refuted in the final episode when Yottle and Woldercan are brought to life under the circus tent. Every time the epistemological position of the fantasy is questioned, the fantasy is vindicated.

Finney's novel is one of the most important works in the genre of fantasy literature. The canonized works of many authors in the genre have used Finney's dark carnival. In tone, Finney's novel paves the way for authors that have used humor in an effort to offset the controversial or depressing themes of their works. As mentioned, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Terry Pratchett, and Robert Asprin reflect the importance of Finney's interjection of humor into the genre of fantasy. Ultimately, though, Finney's novel is remarkable because it creates a world where only the fantastic speaks the truth and mankind's judgment and perception of the truth is always flawed. Finney challenges the idea that fantasy is childish and escapist literature. As noted by L.L. Lee, "fantasies like circuses whose basis is in reality are not escape; they are ways of facing the real world with rose-colored glasses, but glasses that correct our vision" (Lee 56). *The Circus of Dr. Lao*, with just "three frowzy little beast-drawn wagons" (Finney 20), blazes the path for

fantasy literature and fantasy scholarship by foregrounding the marvelous and extraordinary knowledge that lies just outside the classifications of human experience.

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¹ There is also a strong possibility that the change in the illustrations could be tied to anti-Asian sentiment in the wake of World War II.

² Finney may be pointing toward the guarding of Black Cow Village in China by three companies of American soldiers and a battery of artillery in *The Old China Hands*.