

# Postgraduate English

[www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english](http://www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english)

ISSN 1756-9761

---

Issue 09

March 2004

Editors: Anita O'Connell and Michael Huxtable

---

## *Veni, Vidi, Vici: The Goddess Athena in Vonnegut, Irving, and King Stories*

**Heidi Strengell\***

\* University of Lapland

# Veni, Vidi, Vici: The Goddess Athena in Vonnegut, Irving, and King Stories

*Heidi Strengell*  
*University of Lapland*

Postgraduate English, Issue 09, March 2004

---

## 1. Introduction: Three Bestselling Writers and Athena

This essay is about female intellect and wisdom as these qualities have been viewed by three, white male authors: Kurt Vonnegut, John Irving, and Stephen King. In all of the three writers' fiction, intuitive knowledge and instincts are always more than mere intellect. As children of our times, Vonnegut (1922-), Irving (1942-), and King (1947-) are influenced by the cultural norms and the female roles in American society, which are then reflected in their fiction. All three are phenomenal writers within their own genres, who avail themselves of myths in their fiction.

An essential feature of fiction is that it produces, reinforces, and dissolves values. It has undergone and undergoes a motivated process of revision, reordering, and refinement. Because of their seemingly innocent, harmless, and natural appearance, for instance myths and fairy tales have undergone the process of duplication and spread throughout the world in various forms of presentation, such as books, films, and musicals. The act of doubling something imitates the original and reinforces the traditional modes of thinking that provide our lives with structure. The audiences are not threatened, challenged, excited, or shocked by the duplications, and their socially conservative worldview is confirmed. Revisions, however, are different, because the purpose of producing a revised story is to create something new that incorporates the critical thinking of the producer and corresponds to the changed demands of audiences or may even seek to alter their views of traditional patterns (Zipes 8-10). Both duplication and revision also feature in Vonnegut's, Irving's, and King's use of the wise woman archetype, as I attempt to show in my analyses below. Some of their

representations of female characters produce and reinforce stereotypes, whereas others dissolve them. In the final analysis, we as readers are confronted with the reality of American society, its views of western women, the practices of everyday life, and the culture it cherishes.

Athena's parthenogenetic birth from Zeus contains the seeds of the essential polarity, tension, and tragedy of the goddess of war, wisdom, and success: although a female herself and the only possible threat to Zeus's kingship (Warner 122), the wise and just Athena always seeks the approval and acceptance of her unpredictable and lustful father, thus defending the male sex against her own sex. In order to annul a prophesy, according to which the child Metis was pregnant with would surpass his father, Zeus, swallowed his latest progeny. He then developed a headache which was only relieved when Hephaestus split his forehead, and Athena emerged fully grown and armed to the teeth (Forty 256). At the end of the *Oresteia*, when Orestes is on trial for matricide, Athena descends *ex machina* to dispense justice. The Athenians vote on Orestes' fate: his mother Clytemnestra has killed his father Agamemnon, and he has avenged the murder by killing her. The decision involves the status in law of fathers and mothers. Who takes precedence morally? Athena exhorts the jury to moderation, but she then declares that she herself takes Orestes' part:

“Orestes, I will cast my lot for you.  
No mother gave me birth.  
I honour the male, in all things but marriage.  
Yes, with all my heart I am my father's child.”  
(Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 735-738, p. 264)

Her male preference becomes equally obvious when she catches Poseidon and Medusa in the act of lovemaking. According to a version of the myth, Medusa was an attractive Amazon queen, who was seduced by Poseidon in Athena's temple. Accusing Medusa of the crime and transforming her into a monster, whose hair was of snakes and the look of her eyes turned men to stone – and

whose head Athena wears on her shield – Athena in a sense rejects her own femininity (Baring and Cashford 340-344; Warner 108-114).

“Pallas,” Athena’s other name, means ‘maiden’ as does Parthenon, the maiden’s chamber that still stands as her temple on the Acropolis (Baring & Cashford 337). Fittingly, she is also called “Athena Parthenos,” ‘virgin-born’ and ‘virgin herself,’ who cannot have issue from her own body and who is not a soil from which life can spring. In a failed attempt to rape Athena, Hephaestus ejaculates against her leg. Disgusted, she wipes the loom and throws it away. Gaia, Greek for the earth as both matter and goddess, then receives the seed, which sprouts, is born, and is named Erechtheus/Erichthonius (Warner 119). The compassionate Athena takes the chthonic child of the earth in as her own child and places him in no other cradle than her aegis – an accurate image of a modern career woman with her practical baby-sling.

The aegis belongs originally to Zeus; Hephaestus gave it to him “to strike panic into men” (Homer, *Iliad* 15, 308-310, p. 279). But Athena is also born wearing it. Furthermore, in her craftsmanship and cunning, she is equal to Hephaestus, Hera’s parthenogenetic son (Homer, *Odyssey* 8, 295-366, pp. 131-132). But Hephaestus is crippled, and so, despite his cleverness and his powers over Zeus’s arsenal and armaments, he could never threaten Zeus, whereas Athena represents so many beneficent aspects of Zeus’s rule, as well as his potency as protector, that she could have become his threat, were she not a woman – and a daughter (Warner 122). The owl symbolizes Athena’s wisdom and clear vision of justice, which make her more suitable for the role of the goddess of war than Ares, the violent warmonger, would be for the god of war – victories are achieved and cities are protected by negotiating and making effective strategies rather than by mere violence. Marina Warner points out that Athena’s semi-masculine appearance, her enthusiastic participation in battle, her surrender of the interior and secret womb to the external and open control of society; her armour in general and her aegis in particular represent the legitimacy of authority administered by males, invested in her as the symbolic fountainhead of the city’s identity (Warner 124).

“Nike” was an epithet of Athena: the goddess of the polis was the bringer of victory. However, Nike was not Athena’s exclusive boon; Zeus’ colossal statue of Olympia also carried a statue of the goddess of victory in the palm of her hand, thus once again uniting father and daughter (Warner 129). As Warner aptly maintains, Nike is a goddess without story. She has neither individuality nor face, but is pure personification of the desire for success and its realization. By the side of Athena and Zeus, she personifies the power they have to change human fortunes, and when she crosses the barrier from the divine universe into the human, she signifies that those fortunes have changed for the best, for the person at whose side she stands or whose head she crowns, for the state or whose beaked head she alights (Warner 130).

In what follows I will focus on three central aspects of Athena: Athena as the warrior, Athena as the wise woman, and Athena as the goddess of success.

## **2. Warriors**

John Irving’s Jenny Fields of *The World According to Garp* (1976) can be considered a modern Athena fighting for justice, equality, and women’s rights. Independent and virginal, Jenny drops out of Wellesley, which, in her view, only prepares for marriage to the right man. Determined to go her own way, Jenny begins her career as a nurse in Boston Mercy, much to the dismay of her wealthy family. Boston Mercy is also where her son, T. S.Garp, is conceived or, rather, where Jenny rapes the dying Technical Sergeant Garp. Although the sex act technically requires two parties, the rape scene alludes to the parthenogenetic production of Erechtheus/Erichthonius, where no sexual fulfilment is achieved. The hospital provides a fitting setting for the practical Jenny, who classifies the injured of World War II as the Externals, the Vital Organs, the Absentees, and the Goners. Her pragmatic approach to the wounded and dying allows Irving to demonstrate the fluidity with which he moves between comedy and tragedy and to show how these two poles are represented in a single character. As regards her obsession with independence and life without lust, Jenny Fields can be regarded

as a comic character, but her sound judgment in the matters of life and death resembles the fatal, tragic, and merciless aspect of her mythical predecessor.

Like Athena, Jenny raises her son as a single mother. As an independent career woman, she never changes her name, nor does she explain herself and her actions to anybody. Until her son marries, she devotes her life to him, considering it her duty and making it her second job besides her paid job as the school nurse at Steering Academy. As a kind of pragmatic intellectualist, she sits in on all the courses at Steering in order to choose the best ones for Garp. When mother and son spend a year in Vienna to advance Garp's writing career, it is Jenny who starts and completes her autobiography, *A Sexual Suspect*, which makes her a celebrity. With a sense of irony, Irving compares Garp's artistic and ever-too-painful efforts to Jenny's ease to compile her story. Enviously, Garp considers his mother's autobiography lacking in style and cohesion, without realizing that she aims at no artistic fulfilment but only wants to tell her story. The work sums up who Jenny Fields is and how she experiences the world. She writes that she wanted both a career and a baby, but that she did not want or need a husband in her life. This makes her a "sexual suspect" (Irving, *The World According to Garp* 26), but it also makes her famous and even wealthier than she already is.

What makes Jenny Fields primarily a warrior is her clear vision to steer the course of her own life. She does not need a man to make her happy. Instead, her own notoriety makes her both loved and hated by a large public, gives her a credible voice, and ultimately gets her killed. Just as Athena comes to the side of Achilles when he needs self-discipline, and to Odysseus when he needs strategy and foresight (Baring & Cashford 338), the controlled and calm Jenny Fields supports Garp and his wife financially after their marriage so that Garp can continue to write (Irving, *The World According to Garp* 187), runs Dog's Harbour for women, and takes in her son and family to nurse them to health after the tragic car accident. Always a nurse, she leaves the money and her house to Garp after her death with a clear purpose in mind: "I want to leave a place where worthy women can go to collect themselves and *just be themselves, by themselves*" (*Ibid.* 494; italics)

original). Of course, Jenny's maxim reveals the goddess Athena, a pragmatic, intelligent, resourceful, and compassionate fighter.

The same epithets also characterize Helen Dole in Vonnegut's *Hocus Pocus* (1990). The unmarried, 26-year-old teacher holds a Doctorate in physics and embodies the warrior aspect of Athena due to her difficult background. The protagonist, Eugene Debs Hartke, encounters Helen at the end of the novel when both witness a hostage incident at Tarkington College, where they teach learning-disabled students. Hartke notes that his unexpected company is small and so black that "[if] she had been a man at Athena [a prison], skin that color would have put her in the lowest social caste" (*Ibid.* 232). Born in South Korea, Helen has spent her childhood in (West) Berlin. Her father is a Master Sergeant in the Quartermaster Corps of the Regular Army, serving both in Korea and Berlin. When her father retires after thirty years, "to a nice enough little house in a nice enough little neighborhood in Cincinnati," and she sees the terrible squalor and desperation into which most black people were born there, she returns to what has become just plain Berlin, earns her doctorate, and devotes her life to correcting social wrongs in her personal microcosm (*Ibid.* 233). Badly treated by many people in Berlin as she would have been in Cincinnati, Helen Dole is prepared to teach her students how to treat others in a civilized manner.

When she arrives at Tarkington, the fact that she is female, black, and holds a Doctorate appears to be "absolutely beautiful" (*Ibid.* 233). However, this declaration of equality turns out to be nothing but a veneer: the Board of Trustees asks her to promise that she will never, whether in class or on social occasions, discuss politics, history, economics, or sociology with students (*Ibid.* 233). Of course, Helen Dole refuses to follow the orders that so profoundly contradict her conviction and, instead, gives the Board a long lecture on European colonialism. She also points out that Americans, if they have reached the top or been born at the top, regard ordinary Americans as "foreigners" (*Ibid.* 235). Nevertheless, she does not think much of ordinary Americans either, but is "appalled by how ignorant so many American tourists and soldiers [are] of geography and history,

and the languages and customs of other countries” (*Ibid.* 239). Her main point, however, is to underscore the racial inequality of her home country, The United States of America. Disappointed and frustrated, Helen returns to Berlin, which indicates that Vonnegut does not give much hope for humanity or trust in its ability to respect human values.

Vonnegut comments on racial prejudices and injustice through the warrior aspect of Athena, whereas Irving analyzes gender boundaries and the role of the single mother and career woman in his depiction of Jenny Fields. The writers emphasize the importance of taking a moral stand and responsibility for one’s own actions and at times even those of others. Although bravery does not necessarily lead to a victory in Irving and Vonnegut, it is man’s only chance, because not taking responsibility for one’s actions always leads to destruction. Irving’s Jenny Fields reaches her goal by determination and wit, but is assassinated at the end of the novel; Vonnegut’s Helen Dole remains true to herself, but cannot change the unjust rules and prejudices of American society.

In the following section, I enlarge the scope of the goddess Athena by focusing on wisdom and justice as her defining features. What roles and functions do the wise women play in Vonnegut’s, Irving’s, and King’s fiction will be outlined in the following.

### **3. Ladies of Wisdom and Justice**

King distinguishes intellect from wisdom and considers the former inferior to the latter. For instance, intellect combined with hubris (that is, false pride and defiance) leads to the destruction of Bobbi Anderson in *The Tommyknockers* (1987), whereas the deep wisdom of her essence of being and the trust in her instincts enable Judy Marshall to save her son’s life in *Black House* (2001). In King’s fiction, intuitive knowledge and instincts are worth of more than mere intellect, because the former combined with imagination enables his characters to link up with their childhood past and the powers therein. This holds true as regards his child -, adult -, and senior characters.



“The Reach” (*Skeleton Crew*, 1985) introduces as its protagonist the ninety-five-year-old Stella Flanders, whose imagined conversations with her great-grandchildren carry the narrative forward (the third-person narrator interprets Stella’s feminine consciousness to the reader). The title of King’s story refers to the body of water between an island and the mainland and becomes the story’s controlling symbol. The story begins in the summer before the death of Stella Flanders, who has never left her home island, Goat Island, even to visit the mainland. After her 95<sup>th</sup> birthday, Stella begins to see the ghost of her husband, Bill, who keep asking her “when you comin’ across the mainland” (King, “Reach” 548). In March, while the reach is still frozen, Stella realizes that the cancer which she had always suspected of growing inside her is getting worse and decides to cross the reach to the mainland. She loses her way, but encounters Bill and ghosts of their friends. They lovingly take her hands and lead her across the reach where she dies.

What makes Stella the obvious leader of Goat Island is her old age but also her intuitive knowledge of the matters of life and death, which is rendered through the female body and its functions, mainly childbirth. André DeCuir aptly argues that although she holds no political office that legislates the behavior of the island community, her unobtrusive authority seems anchored in female sexuality as her pregnancy, midwifery, deliveries and births, a miscarriage, and deaths of ill newborns (King, “Reach” 83). King does not define Goat Island as a feminist utopia “ruled by women” (Showalter 191), but the fear and horror experienced by the male is primarily generated by a confrontation with the changes undergone by the female body culminating in actual reproduction (DeCuir 84). Stella, for instance, recalls that after her husband, Bill, delivered their daughter himself, he went “*into the bathroom and first puked and then wept like a hysterical woman who had her monthlies p’ticularly bad*” (King, “Reach” 553; italics original). In other words, the very act of childbirth has the power to transform Bill into “an unman,” to feminize him. Thus, despite the silence of her narrative, Stella’s female dominance over the male gender becomes obvious.

DeCuir claims that through the imagined conversations Stella has with her great-grandchildren, King maps out the cultural suppression of the female voice, but also the subsequent and inevitable resurfacing of the feminine, when the voice is rendered inaudible, through the female body (King, "Reach" 79-80). In fact, Stella seems to be realizing what Jung calls the process of individualization; she attempts to live up to her life ideals in the framework of her socio-cultural environment and to become herself. Gerhard Schmitt in *Text als Psyche* [*Text as Psyche*] (1999) fittingly emphasizes that Jung's term of *individualization* signifies a creative process – both in the realization of one's personal life and in the creation of a work of art. The creative process, in turn, is brought about by working out the archetype of the personal unconscious (Schmitt 11). Remarkably, then, by reworking and modifying the archetype of the goddess Athena, King, on the one hand, creates a work of art, and Stella Flanders, on the other hand, recreates her life. Stella's imagined conversations become her audible voice when she recalls painful memories of the communal past, such as the joint lynching of George Dinsmore, a child molester, and the killing of Norman and Ettie Wilson's baby that was born mongoloid (King, "The Reach" 558-560). In fact, her memory of the Wilson baby, "*swimming that interior Reach,*" further establishes the reach as a metaphorical womb [King "Reach" 558; DeCuir 85]). DeCuir aptly maintains that by positing the reach as a metaphorical body of amniotic fluid produced by the feminine entity, Goat Island, King sets the stage for a demonstration of the "explosive, *utterly* destructive" return of the repressed or "silenced" power of the feminine that is particularly horrifying to the male who seeks to subdue the female body (DeCuir 85; Cixous 886; italics original).

By revealing the shared and hidden guilt of the microcosm of Goat Island, Stella recreates her life and prepares for her impending death, even attempts to reconcile herself and her close-knit community with the past. Just as Athena is the symbolic fountainhead of the city's identity, Stella emphasizes the unity of the island by maintaining that "*we always watched out for our own*" (King, "Reach" 558; italics original). Although pulling together is not always for the common good

(King, *Storm of the Century* ix), King's wise women frequently have a common good to protect or a destiny to fulfil. In his fiction, wisdom and justice work in close interaction for the good of his ordinary and basically decent characters, whereas cold intellect as such often leads to misery and disaster. King has repeatedly acknowledged the superiority of the female gender to the male one and even claimed that women are "the only ones to use their brains" (King, *Danse Macabre* 102). Apparently, he is referring to the violent impulses and war-mongering that he traces to his own sex. Therefore, King seems to attach wisdom and justice to females rather than males. Ironically, however, wisdom and war are united in the goddess Athena, which seems to imply that war has been justified by reason and intellect long before modern days.

Irving, to be sure, does not offer intellect as a solution to the problems of his characters. In his fiction, intuition and instincts are frequently equated with wisdom and can best be found in the depiction of his Aphrodite- and Demeter-type of females. Candy Kendall of *The Cider House Rules* (1985), for example, can be considered a combination of both, and, despite her recurring maxim "wait and see," she is both able and determined to steer the course of her own life – and the lives of her two lovers, Wally Worthington and Homer Wells. First, she regards herself as too young to keep Wally's baby and has an abortion. She then feels that it is her responsibility to marry Wally when he returns badly wounded from Vietnam. The marriage does not stop her from seeing Homer from time to time, but she does not feel it fit to reveal the two of them have a mutual child. When she feels it fit, on the other hand, she ends her relationship with Homer, who has spent most of his adult life living by her rules. Candy herself pays little attention to traditional morality, but makes her own rules. In Irving, wisdom is often equated with the ability and strength to follow one's heart and to trust in one's feelings, despite external pressure or seemingly overwhelming obstacles. In a similar vein, Sue "Biggie" Kunt and Tulpen, who embody maternal care in *The Water-Method Man* (1972), survive and find personal happiness by remaining true to themselves. By not succumbing to the male protagonist's whims, these two

women are able to retain their self-respect and act accordingly. Similarly, too, by finally listening to her inner voice and its warnings about the destructive spouse-swapping of the two couples in *The 158-Pound Marriage* (1973), Anna Agati Thalhammar “Utch” finds strength to free herself both from her egoistic husband and her indifferent lover. In Irving, wisdom is typically found after a long road of trials, since virtually all of his novels follow the formula of the Bildungsroman.

Although wise – or at least wiser – at the end of their adventures, Irving’s female characters can rather seldom be placed in the category of Athena. Apparently, Irving draws parallels between wisdom and soft femininity, whereas his intellectual female characters are often either egoistic or ridiculous. As a kind of parody of a modern career woman, he introduces the beautiful, greedy, and ambitious Mary Shanahan, who also embodies the vamp aspect of Aphrodite in *The Fourth Hand* (2001). In her quest for advancements and higher positions, Mary readily sacrifices anything and everything regarded as important in a traditional sense. Ready to sacrifice her dignity, honesty, and pride, she plots to deprive the protagonist, Patrick Wallingford, of his job and home. Unlike Athena, who relents and takes Erechtheus/Erichthonius as her own son when Gaia refuses to mother her incidental offspring, Mary relentlessly pursues Patrick in hopes of being impregnated by him. When she fails in all of her manipulative efforts, this fiercely competitive woman is transformed into a weeping child, who cannot face the consequences of her own actions.

Irving clearly disapproves of the self-centred and covetous Mary Shanahan, whereas he regards the American author and radical feminist Evelyn Arbuthnot and Professor Sarah Williams with amused contempt in *The Fourth Hand*. On the plane to a conference on “The Future of Women” in Japan, Patrick Wallingford, a well-known TV journalist, becomes acquainted with Evelyn, with whom he will have a brief relationship. “[A] short, firm handshake” reveals an outspoken, determined, and honest personality (Irving, *The Fourth Hand* 86). In fact, the depiction of the middle-aged, widowed Evelyn largely conforms to our general impression of the sensible and rational Athena:

He began to like her face, which was square with a high forehead and a broad jaw – her short gray hair sat on her head like a no-nonsense helmet. Her body was squat and sturdy-looking, and not at all revealed; [...]. Judging by what Wallingford could see, which was not much, she seemed to be small-breasted – she didn't bother to wear a bra. [---] She wore no makeup and no nail polish, and no rings or other jewelry. (*Ibid.* 87-88)

As a woman who travels with more books than clothes (*Ibid.* 88), Evelyn appears to be a rare jewel in Wallingford's collection of assorted women. She offers no flattering views of the handsome Wallingford, but takes a defensive attitude toward him from the beginning.

Ironically, however, the self-assured and androgynous Evelyn Arbuthnot is unable to resist Wallingford's notorious charms, and Patrick can but acquiesce when she turns out to be far from "lesbian" (*Ibid.* 107). "Wretched hormones," Evelyn academically explains and is submerged in a passion that is out of her control (*Ibid.* 108). Despite the obvious irony that Irving links with the sexuality of the rational Evelyn, she plays the role of the original Athena by telling the truth of Patrick Wallingford's life and thus inaugurating a fresh start: "Your career is unsatisfying, but what's more important is you don't have a *life*. You might as well be lost at sea, dear" (*Ibid.* 110; italics original). By telling "quite a lot about himself," this wise Athena makes Wallingford realize that he should find a deeper meaning for his life and take the responsibility for his actions (*Ibid.* 112). When Evelyn dies of breast cancer, Wallingford sends his condolences to her children, thus cherishing the memory of this wise woman, whose honesty and sound judgment her has learned to respect.

"Did every woman of a certain age have a version of Evelyn Arbuthnot's story?" Patrick Wallingford thinks when Professor Sarah Williams reveals her past to him (*Ibid.* 221). The fifty-one-year-old Sarah has been married twice, but unlike the controlled Evelyn, she is pregnant. She has come to Boston to have an abortion, but reschedules the appointment to reconsider her decision. Since Wallingford has

also made an appointment with his doctor, they meet at a kind of decisive crossroads of their personal lives. As a blend of Demeter and Athena, Sarah Williams notes that Patrick Wallingford is in need of mothering and starts reading aloud to him. They spend a weekend at a hotel reading aloud *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little* to each other and making love. When Sarah asks Wallingford to follow her to the abortion clinic, he hesitates too long in his answer, and she leaves. When he attempts to trace her later, he finds out that no one named Sarah Williams is registered in the hotel. Despite her seeming helplessness and indecision, Sarah plays a role of the wise Athena in Wallingford's life: she points the way to a more mature and responsible attitude to others. However, both Evelyn and Sarah remain pawns in the hands of fate that guides the male protagonist to his destiny and true love, Doris Clausen. Significantly, the woman of Patrick's dreams is a sexy Aphrodite, whereas the goddesses of wisdom are depicted as elderly women.

As regards Vonnegut's only clear-cut representation of Athena, this statement holds also true. In *Galápagos* (1985), we encounter the fifty-one-year-old Mary Hepburn, whose husband has recently died of cancer and who is contemplating suicide at the Hotel El Dorado in November 1986. As the omniscient narrator, Leon Trout, reveals, instead of committing one, she becomes a kind of god of humanity, "the most important experimenter in the history of the human race" (Vonnegut, *Galápagos* 44). By participating in the "Nature Cruise of Century" and ending up in the Galápagos Islands (made famous by Charles Darwin, who had been inspired by the creatures of these islands), Mary Hepburn secures the continuity a kind of human existence on earth. The novel is partly set a million years on when the human survivors of the "Nature Cruise of Century" have quietly evolved into sleek, furry creatures with flippers and small brains. All other forms of humankind have ceased to exist, finally made redundant by their own inventions or, rather, their big brains, as Vonnegut repeatedly emphasizes. It is the childless biology teacher, Mary Hepburn, who, by stealing sperm of her lover, Captain Adolf von Kleist, attempts to "keep life going on and on and on" (*Ibid.*

81). In fact, she was called “Mother Nature Personified” by her students in the public high school in Ilium, New York (*Ibid.* 81).

The epithet does not refer to Mary Hepburn’s natural instincts, but, rather, to her experimental work in the service of the Darwinian development of species. Like King and Irving, Vonnegut makes a distinction between wisdom and intellect. The former is a rare specimen in his fiction and primarily expressed by such Aphrodites as Mona Aamons Monzano (*Cat’s Cradle*) and Resi Noth (*Mother Night*), who dare to live by their own rules and follow their own moral codes, whether in accordance or in contradiction with society. Similarly, in *The Sirens of Titan*, the spoilt and bold incarnation of Hera, Beatrice Rumfoord, develops into a wise, old woman in the course of her intergalactic adventures. Besides the witch-like, sensitive, and wise Circe Berman (*Bluebeard*), Mary Hepburn remains one of Vonnegut’s most memorable and well-developed characters and his only female protagonist. In fact, *Galápagos* has several protagonists, but Mary stands out because of her central role as an initiator of a new race and because of her pragmatic intellect. Significantly, too, Vonnegut’s latter-day Darwin appears to be a female. In his fiction, both males and females remain playthings at the mercy of the indifferent fate, regardless of their intellect or the lack of it.

As a natural leader, Athena guides her troops to victory after victory. Since Vonnegut’s version of the goddess Athena has “ceased ovulating,” she cannot become Eve to “the latter-day Adam,” Adolf von Kleist (Vonnegut, *Galápagos* 47). Instead, “she ha[s] to be more like a god[...].” (*Ibid.* 47). In this role, she persuades a number of female survivors to “take part in her unauthorized experiments on Santa Rosalia with the Captain’s sperm” (*Ibid.* 63). Unbeknownst to him, Adolf von Kleist thus becomes “the common sire of the entire human race” (*Ibid.* 73). Just as Athena aided her male protégés in their battles and difficulties, the diligent and handy Mary Hepburn helps the Captain to run the cruiser aground on Santa Rosalia. The intelligent Mary also organizes the primitive society of the survivors, because as a biology teacher she has the best knowledge of the island, its flora and fauna. Somewhat ironically, she is devoured by a great white shark at

the age of eighty-one, as the omniscient narrator reveals at the outset of the novel (*Ibid.* 37). Whether Mary Hepburn or any other character of the Athena type can be regarded as the goddess of success will be surveyed in the following.

#### **4. Goddesses of Success**

In Vonnegut, personal victories are seldom achieved, and his characters remain listless playthings of enormous forces beyond their control. In *The World According to Kurt Vonnegut* (1994), Bo Pettersson points out that just as no absolute distinction between fact and fiction holds in Vonnegut's world, this science-fiction notion helps its inhabitants to find a compensatory illusion (Mary Hepburn) or teaches them gratitude (Beatrice Rumfoord) and social concern (Circe Berman) (*Ibid.* 143). In *Galápagos*, for instance, by interfering the natural evolution of species, Mary Hepburn is able to change its course. Ultimately, however, fate in the form of Roy Hepburn makes her participate in the "Nature Cruise of Century" and thus enables a kind of human existence on earth. In other words, the victories of Vonnegut's characters turn out to be nothing but whims of fate.

But what good would morals do, if man were totally at the mercy of determinism and fate? If, indeed, people are "bugs trapped in amber" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 62) how can Vonnegut demand them to act morally or how can they achieve moral victories of any kind? Despite their restricted degree of free will, Vonnegut's characters do not have to succumb to the cynicism that seems a logical conclusion in literary naturalism. Some of his characters, as Pettersson notes, set examples for moral behaviour (Pettersson 143-144). In *Bluebeard* (1987) Circe Berman, for instance, takes responsibility for reviving her ageing Cyclops, Rabo Karabekian, thus also contributing to her own ability to survive after the death of her beloved husband. This somewhat peculiar friendship of Circe Berman and Rabo Karabekian demonstrates that Vonnegut has kept his faith in the dignity of man and close-knit communities, within which emotional needs can be fulfilled and responsible acts committed.



There are no winners in Vonnegut's fiction, but the moral survivors of his works adhere to the tenet that responsibility for others calls for moral action without the assurance of survival. Most of his characters finally realize that there is very little they can do about their situations and seek compensation in various ways: some create escapist illusions of love (Helga and Resi Noth), religion (Mona Aamons Monzano), insanity (Sylvia Rosewater, Emma Waltz), and the past (Mary Hepburn). However, as Pettersson points out, the most soothing analgesic for Vonnegut is a recognition of the humour inherent in the human plight (Pettersson 145). In fact, Vonnegut's view of irony is combined with a moral stance in a way that is typical of his own writing as well: "In order to be good readers, we must [...] recognize irony – which is when a writer says one thing and really means another, contradicting himself in what believes to be a beguiling cause (Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday* 159). By taking life as an existential joke, some of Vonnegut's characters attain a kind of peace of mind, even if victories cannot be achieved.

In the same way, Irving's characters are also humbled by fate. In his works, personal victories cannot be achieved without personal growth and a long road of trials, but he holds a more positive view of man's capability to change and learn than Vonnegut. Although Irving's characters frequently remain playthings of indifferent and inscrutable forces, females seem to have more control over their destinies than males, who are overpowered both by the inscrutable and indifferent fate and the overwhelming influence of the woman in their lives. Just as no absolute distinction between fact and fairy tale holds in Irving's world, this fairy-tale notion helps its inhabitants to find a compensatory illusion of love as a safeguard against the twists of fate. Although deep and real, love cannot prevent accidents from happening and the two parties from being separated from each other in *The Hotel New Hampshire* (Will Barry and Mary Bates), *The World According to Garp* (T. S. Garp and Helen Holm), and in *The Cider House Rules* (Candy Kendall and Homer Wells). Despite the tragic element in life, Irving has kept his faith in happy endings in some of his stories. His latest novels, *A Widow for One Year* and *The Fourth Hand*, show that microcosmic victories and personal

happiness can be achieved when the protagonists have made themselves worthy of love and earned their happiness.

In Irving, man is not totally determined, but possesses free will to choose between good and evil, right and wrong. In *Setting Free the Bears* (1968), the young Gallen takes responsibility for her boyfriend, Hannes Graff, when he runs into trouble after trouble, nurtures him when he is ill, and even sells her beautiful hair to support him. However, free will and responsibility cannot be separated from each other; when Gallen realizes that Graff has no intentions to change his wayward habits, she leaves him. Throughout Irving, females seem to make the decisions, whereas males are left to gather the pieces. Although Graff claims that he will see Gallen again, she – and the reader, as Josie P. Campbell notes – knows better (*Ibid.*23). Sickened by the violence and chaos around Graff, Gallen takes a moral stand and leaves him, thus making herself worthy of an independent life, if not a victory. Similarly, in *The Water-Method Man*, Sue “Biggie” Kunt and Tulpen appear to be stronger than the protagonist, Fred “Bogus” Trumper. Throughout his life, Trumper has drifted from one exciting experience to another, whereas Biggie and Tulpen shoulder responsibility for their children and make the difficult decisions that affect the rest of their lives. By her love and responsibility, Tulpen, for instance, refuses to succumb to Trumper’s childish whims and thus forces him to grow as a person. By remaining true to herself and not faltering when responsibility should be taken, she earns her happiness in the form of a healthy, adult relationship with the matured Trumper.

Just as in Dickens well over a century earlier, the difficulties Irving’s characters confront may seem overpowering and their alternatives severely limited, but free will can dictate the degree of evil and even change the future. In *The 158-Pound Marriage*, it is the sensitive and ill-treated Utch who finally leaves the group of people who abuses her mentally and sexually. Despised by her husband and the Winter couple, she has agreed on a spouse-swapping experiment, which results in her falling in love with Severin Winter and her husband’s falling in love with Edith Winter. Desperate but determined, she leaves for Vienna, thus shouldering

responsibility for her children, who follow her, and making a deliberate choice in the rejection of evil and destructive influences in her life. By demonstrating free will, Utch is able to break the evil bond created by the two couples and triumph over her arrogant humiliators. However, she can hardly be characterized as the goddess of success. In fact, victories are continuously thwarted by fate in Irving. Not even Jenny Fields, his only clear-cut representation of Athena, is able to avoid her inescapable demise: this devoted mother and career woman, who has succeeded in everything she has taken up, is assassinated by a maniac. Fittingly, however, she dies on a kind of battlefield, while giving a speech on women's rights. By taking a moral stand and fighting for the values she respects, Jenny Fields achieves her goals and dies a happy woman.

In a similar vein, the goddess of success is rather seldom found in King. Placed in a difficult situation, his characters have to take a moral stand: either to fight evil simply because it exists as a threatening force or succumb to it. King's faith is that of the Old Testament, which means that sins and wrongdoings are severely punished without any hope of mercy. As with Job, righteous and innocent people also suffer, and the only way to be rid of this suffering is to fight the evil forces (Strengell 161-162). Anthony Magistrale notes that

King's faith in the endurance of a traditional morality, based on the values of love and the resiliency of the human spirit, power whatever light remains in a world actively pursuing the destruction of itself and everything within it. (*Ibid.* 26)

Acting morally, taking responsibility for one's fellow men, and taking a moral stand remains man's only chance to triumph over determinism and fate. Evil, argues King, grows in isolation from other human beings, whereas good and love connects people. Although the members of the Losers' Club might alone fall an easy prey to the monster, together they constitute a serious threat to the monster by completing their circle of love and friendship in *It*.

In its focus on human fate and destiny, *Insomnia* (1994) can be considered one of King's distinctly cosmological novels. As my concluding example of the goddess of success, it introduces Lois Chasse, a senior citizen and a victorious Athena, who will shortly learn how tenuous happiness can be in King's world. Ralph Brentner and Lois Chasse have been cursed with insomnia to prepare them to act as human agents of the Purpose, that is, universal good. In *Insomnia*, if the Wheel of the Universe is in balance, good triumphs over evil, which indicates that this recurring symbol represents Necessity or the Purpose. Both poles have their preordained destinies to fulfil, but at times the Random, that is, universal evil attempts to interfere in human events and earthly matters. In *Insomnia*, Atropos, an agent of the Random, uses Ed Deepneau, a research scientist at Hawking Labs, as his pawn in order to kill Patrick Danville, a young boy who is predestined to save Roland the Gunslinger's life later in *The Dark Tower* series. Ralph Brentner and Lois Chasse, in turn, work together in order to save Patrick and gather their forces with Clotho and Lachetes, two agents of the Purpose.

As a determined and unprejudiced woman, Lois is the right woman to become Ralph's partner in the fight against the Random. Just as Athena assisted her male protégés to achieve victories in their battles, Lois at once complements and completes Ralph (Wiater, Golden and Wagner 115). Over time, Lois progresses from being Ralph's friend and fellow insomniac to becoming his co-adventurer and his second wife. As Wiater, Wagner and Golden point out, due to the intensity of their supernatural experiences, their mutual admiration quickly deepens into love (*Ibid.* 115). As a strong and courageous fighter, Lois never hesitates in her mission; through her calm reasoning, she even encourages Ralph to complete it victoriously. Following the conclusion of their adventures, Lois and Ralph lose their memories of these experiences. Lois's memories are reawakened, however, on the day Ralph dies. He has made a pact with the Purpose in order to save a life of Nathalie Deepneau. The child's destiny would have been to die in a car accident, but having fulfilled his own purpose, Ralph sacrifices himself to save her life. Like most of King's characters, such as Polly Chalmers, the independent

and stubborn Athena of *Needful Things* (1991), and the sensitive and brave Jo Noonan on *Bag of Bones* (1998), Lois Chasse must learn how easily one can lose the gains recently achieved.

### Works Cited

- Aeschylus. *Suppliant Maidens, Persians, Prometheus, Seven Against Thebes; Agamemnon, The Libatian Bearers, Eumenides, Fragments*. Ed. Herbert Weir Smith. Rev ed. Hugh Lloyd-Jones. 2 vols. London, New York, 1922, 1963.
- Apollodorus. *The Library*. Trans. J. G. Frazer. 2 vols. London, 1921.
- Badley, Linda. "Stephen King: Viewing the Body." In Bloom, Harold (ed.), *Modern Critical Views: Stephen King*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1998: 163-190.
- Baring, Anne and Jules Cashford. *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*. London: Arkana, 1993 [1991].
- Bosky, Bernadette Lynn. "Stephen King and Peter Straub: Fear and Friendship." In Schweitzer, Darrell (ed.), *Discovering Stephen King*. Mercer Island, Washington: Starport House, 1985: 55-82.
- Campbell, Josie P. *John Irving: A Critical Companion*. Westport, Connecticut; London: Greenwood Press, 1998.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1 (1976): 875-893.
- DeCuir, André L. "The Power of the Feminine and the Gendered Construction of Horror in Stephen King's

‘The Reach.’ “ In Lant, Kathleen Margaret and Theresa Thompson (eds.),  
Imagining the Worst:

*Stephen King and the Representation of Women*. Westport, Connecticut and  
London:

Greenwood Press, 1988: 79-89.

Forty, Jo. *Mythology: A Visual Encyclopedia*. London: PRC Publishing, 1999.

Franz, Marie-Louise von. *The Feminine in Fairy Tales*. Boston & London:  
Shambala, 1993 [1972].

Grant, Charles L. “Grey Arena.” In Underwood, Tim & Chuck Miller (eds.), *Fear  
Itself: The Horror Fiction*

*of Stephen King*. New York: New American Library, 1985 [1982]: 165-171.

Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. E. V. Rieu (1950). PC, 1976.

---. *The Odyssey*. Trans. E. V. Rieu (1946). PC, 1982.

Irving, John. *The Cider House Rules*. London: Black Swan, 1986 [1985].

---. *The Fourth Hand*. London: Black Swan, 2002 [2001].

---. *The World According to Garp*. London: Black Swan, 1986 [1976].

King, Stephen. *Danse Macabre*. New York: Berkley Books, 1983 [1981].

---. *Skeleton Crew*. New York: Signet, 1986 [1985].

---. *Storm of the Century*. New York: Pocket Books, 1999.

Magistrale, Tony. *The Moral Voyages of Stephen King*. Mercer Island,  
Washington: Starmont Studies, 1989.

Pettersson, Bo. *The World According to Kurt Vonnegut: Moral Paradox and  
Narrative Form*. Åbo: Åbo

Akademi University Press, 1994.

Schmitt, Gerhard. Text als Psyche: Eine Einführung in die Analytische Psychologie C. G. Jungs für Literaturwissenschaftler. Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 1999.

Showalter, Elaine. A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists *From Brontë*

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. London: Penguin Books, 1994 [1886].

Strengell, Heidi. *The Multiverse of Stephen King: A Study of Genres*. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2002.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Galápagos*. London: Flamingo 1994 [1985].

---*Hocus Pocus*. London: Vintage, 2000 [1990].

---*Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage*. London: Vintage, 1994 [1981].

---*Player Piano*. Frogmore, St. Albans: Granada/panther, 1973 [1952].

---*Slaughterhouse-Five; or, The Children's Crusade*. London: Vintage, 2000 [1969].

Warner, Marina. *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. London: Vintage, 1995 [1994].

---*Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*. Berkley and Los Angeles. University of California Press, 2000.

Wiater, Stanley, Christopher Golden & Hank Wagner. *The Stephen King Universe: A Guide to the Worlds of the King of Horror*. Los Angeles: Renaissance, 2001.

Winter, Douglas E. *Stephen King: The Art of Darkness*. New York: Signet, 1986 [1984 ].

Zipes, Jack. *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*. Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994.

### **First Response**

"Vene, Vidi, Vici" is bold and thought-provoking: it positions post-war American writers (Vonnegut, Irving, and King) around the classical figure of Athena. Fluent and persuasive, it exhibits much that is best in the timehonoured tradition of thematic reading whilst enlivening the approach through an astute feminist perspective. Given that the three authors considered are male, the article belongs more with the ethos of *écriture féminine* than with traditional feminist models. The research is of the highest standard and incorporates Aeschylus into its powerful argument in a seamless and cogent fashion. Though it might have pushed rather farther in conclusion, this journey between tragic Greece and post-war American fiction is compelling and enacts a subtle dialectic between similarity and singularity in the three authors it considers.