

Postmodern Literary Madness: A Study of Style and Technique in Jeffery Renard Allen's *Rails Under My Back*

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As a college teacher of literature, I often have the challenge of deciphering a text for my students. Many of them equate reading with torture, especially when they could be watching *Survivor* instead. Now, imagine assigning a tome over 500 pages, something that I, myself, haven't totally figured out, even after several close readings. It's tricky, at best. On the first day of class, when I introduce apprehensive students to Jeffery Renard Allen's novel, *Rails Under My Back*, I empathize with those not wanting to read nor write, yet needing the credit. I confess to the bewildered-looking students that it is a provocative book raising more questions than it answers, that if they expect a neat, linear narrative with a happy, concrete closure, they will not be satisfied. However, if they view the novel as some reflection and version of real life, similar to reality Television but realer, then they may enjoy what Allen has in store for them.

To read *Rails*, you must bring a sense of humor, and the enthusiasm and tolerance of Sam Spade, P.I. Otherwise, you'd ask yourself, as Porsha asks on page 540, while reading a letter written by R.L., her deceased uncle, whom she's never met, ". . ." "How am I sposed to read this?" In the voice of R.L., Allen tells you, *Read my little tale with reverence* (540). *Rails* is anything but a little tale, which demands the time and energy of a private eye looking steadily for clues to who done it. And the clues are often elusive and misleading. Nonetheless, you must pay strict attention. Allen sends this message when he deliberately messes with the reader's mind from Jump Street. He begins *Rails* with the following epigraph:

Hit me in the eye
Maybe then maybe then
I'll be better
- Traditional Blues Verse

So, gentle reader, beware: Keep your eyes wide open despite any obstruction, because whatever may hit you may reveal the answer. The novel is an amalgamation of crime mystery, blues-jazz-rock flavored prose, epic poetry, folk tales, Jungian psychology, mythology, history, and Biblical and Shakespearian allusions, among other things. This convergence of high culture and popular culture, of social science and art, demonstrates a rejection of boundaries and dispels the notion of discrete genres. Ihab Hassan defines such a technique as *hybridization*. In his essay, "Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective" (1986), Hassan theorizes that postmodernism in literature entails a *catena* (i.e., a chain of connected subjects) of postmodern theory and experience. In addition to hybridization, the *catena* includes: indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, selflessness, the unrepresentable, carnivalization, and participation (Barton 147). While each of these postmodern elements are present in *Rails*, hybridization, indeterminacy, selflessness, carnivalization, and participation are particularly evident in the novel.

Participation, the reader's active involvement, is *de rigueur* in reading Allen's novel. As Hassan points out, "postmodern text . . . [like *Rails*] invites performance; it wants to be written, revised, answered, acted out. Gaps must be filled" (qtd. in Barton and Hudson 148). Upon reading Part One, "Seasonal Travel," one will note immediately the intrigue Allen builds. Beginning on page one, the story is sketchy and demands that the reader take the investigative trail to understand the direction the story is about to take. For instance, the narrative begins in the following manner:

Before Jesus entered the world, blades of southern grass sliced up the soles of his grandmother's feet. Her blood leaped from the danger, drew back into the farthest reaches of her heart, and the roots of her soul pulled away from the sharp earth which had nurtured her. But nothing escapes the law of gravity. We martyr to motion. In step with the flowing sweep of her garments, an undercurrent of rhythm, she cut the final strings of attachment, her children, and on a rich spring day cut a red path to New Mexico—(Allen 3).

Who is Jesus? Who is his grandmother? Why did she abandon her children, seeking refuge in the West? The beginning of Allen's passage is reminiscent of Dashiell Hammett's first published short story, "Parthian Shot." Note the similar structure, content, plotting, and characterization in the two works:

When the boy was six months Paulette Key acknowledge that her hopes and efforts had been futile, that the baby was indubitably and irredeemably a replica of its father. She could not have endured the physical resemblance, but the duplication of Harold Key's stupid obstinacy--- mistakable in the fixity of the child's inarticulate demands of its food, its toys---was too much for Paulette. She knew she could not go on living with two such natures! A year and a half of Harold's domination had not subdued her entirely. She took the little boy to church, had him christened Don, sent him home by his nurse, and boarded a train for the West. (Hammett 68)

In the one-paragraph story, Hammett's narrator reveals in an unexpected blow Paulette Key's reason for deserting her child. The short story ends mysteriously just as the plot appears to thicken. Unlike Hammett's narrator, Allen's narrator withholds the reason Jesus Jones's grandmother deserts her children, but creates suspense in the novel from the very first sentence. The convergence of low-brow and high-brow fiction, the Hammett effect on Allen's work, can be discerned. Joe Gores asserts the following in making a case for Hammett's influence on literary novelists:

Hammett's fiction has affected almost all subsequent American writers' work, whether they know it or not. I am sure that most don't know it. . . . We only have to think of Hammett's objective approach, style, vocabulary, spare, lean dialogue, plotting, characters, and superb sense of irony to know that murder in the night need not be the theme of a work for it to show Hammett influences. John O'Hara and William Saroyan and John Steinbeck and J. D. Salinger and Margaret Atwood spring immediately to mind. (Gores 15-17).

As the two examples demonstrate, a case can be made for Hammett's influence on Allen's writing, slight or considerable, whether or not he knows it. In Hammett-like fashion, Allen creates a suspenseful quality in his work that pulls the reader into the caverns of his fragmentary story. In postmodern fashion, Allen establishes ambiguity in the beginning of *Rails* that continues to grow in Part Two, "Chosen," when John Jones, Jesus's father, leaves town for Washington, D.C. and New York. Although John tells Lucifer, his brother, where he is headed, chapter two ends on an ominous note: "Lucifer and John embraced in a tight knot. John didn't seem to want to let go" (Allen 77). The reader wonders if John is planning to return and, if not, why not? Where is he really going?

The reader learns quickly that she has to gather what appears to be incongruent information, keeping track of details, characters, and situations that often are causally unrelated. If you read *Rails* closely enough, you will detect that an element of Jungian synchronicity occurs in the novel: "a 'meaningful coincidence' of outer and inner events that are not themselves causally connected" (von Franz 211). Allen depicts scenes in different chapters that seem disconnected but eventually the reader sees the relationship to the overall plot. In chapter 10, for instance, Allen depicts a curious scene. One day while waiting for the train, Lucifer's wife, Sheila, notices that a woman makes direct eye contact with her before leaping before a moving train: "The Oriental Asian woman looking both ways . . . and for a second that was more or less than a second, holding Sheila in her gaze . . ." (Allen 175). Of course, the image of the woman leaping to her death stays on Sheila's mind, and she wonders why the woman looked directly at her before she jumps. Later in chapter 19, Lucifer dreams of falling through thin ice: "Not worried about drowning; in fact, he can breathe pretty well. It is the falling, the lack of ground beneath his feet that's troubling" (240). Then in chapters 35 and 37, a man wades out into the Atlantic Ocean, drowning himself. Based on events leading up to this point, the man appears to be Lucifer in Chapter 35, though the character is only identified as "he" in Chapter 37.

The four scenes are synchronous, causally related: "Synchronicity consists of two factors: an unconscious image that comes into consciousness either directly or indirectly and an objective situation that coincides with this content" (Informational Planning Associates, Inc. 87). When witnessing the woman's suicide, Sheila unconsciously becomes aware of Lucifer's impending death. When Lucifer dreams of drowning, he is unconsciously aware of his imminent suicide, or his unconscious desire to die reveals itself in his dream. The common denomination of the four scenes is the symbolically expressed message about Lucifer's death. Given such twists and turns, you cannot read this novel in a casual manner or you will be thoroughly confused as you move from one chapter to the next. Unlike Hammett, who puts the onus on Spade, P.I., to do the shadowing and solving, Allen leaves the work for the reader-cum-private eye to steadily track the clues and crack the case.

Given such a high degree of reader involvement, the reader must be comfortable with *indeterminacy*. Barton and Hudson explain that in using the term, “Hassan refers to the growth of relativism, the notion that truth is subject to time, place, and context” (147). Indeterminacy makes tracking clues an arduous task: as the reader delves deeper into the novel, she realizes it’s difficult to separate veracity from mendacity, reality from fantasy, and fact from fable. The narrative flows back and forth in time, often merging disparate points of views and blending past with present, nightmares with daydreams, and dreams with actuality. As Allen explains in an interview with this reader, “. . . I wanted the book to move in many directions at once, backwards and forwards in time, sideways and up and down. This means that the various themes would get played out across various narratives and through various characters, through parallel and counterpoint, riffs and set pieces” (Allen, Jeffery. “Blind Tom and Rails.” Message to the author. 22 Feb. 2005. E-Mail).

One major theme that reoccurs through various characters and through different points of view is the emotional pain of abandonment. Jesus’s grandmother, Lula Mae McShan, deserts her children, Sheila and Gracie. When Jesus is a child, his parents’ marriage is disrupted when John Jones deserts Gracie. Later, when Jesus is 17, he remembers this day, and his memory converges with his mother’s: “Your seventh birthday John stormed out the front door, you and Hatch two in kind, seated in a high-back chair, clutching armrests . . . Every hair on your head is counted, she said. Each strand has a name. Well, John said. You ain’t got to worry. I ain’t coming back. He let the door close” (Allen 14). Jesus’ memory of this day seems to come out of the blue as he recollects some pleasant childhood moments he had shared with his father and his cousin, Hatch. Then, suddenly Gracie’s point of view becomes layered with Jesus’ memory. As the reader moves further into the novel, she realizes that this passage shows the current state of affairs between Gracie and John. Although the couple is no longer living together, John comes to Gracie at night and leaves her in the morning. Gracie, apparently accustomed to being abandoned, accepts the nontraditional arrangement while Jesus appears rather upset about his parents’ complicated interaction. Such intersecting points of view are commonplace in the novel, advancing the story and plot, and lending a surreal quality to the overall narrative.

Part I, “Seasonal Travel,” reveals Jesus’s rage and deep sense of alienation, which are foundational to the novel’s story and plot, and start the spinning of the tale. The section’s title reflects Jesus’s attitude, “Now is the season of my discontent,” a riff on Richard’s opening soliloquy in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*: “Now is the winter of our discontent . . .” Richard and Jesus are similar in feeling disconnected and unloved; both harbor malicious thoughts that eventually lead to evil doing. While Richard feels unloved due to his physical deformity, Jesus feels unloved due to Lula Mae’s “ancient wrongs” (Allen 8), which have disfigured him emotionally and spiritually. As the narrator explains, “Jesus thought he could never recover from his grandmother’s betrayal. While his mother and aunt had long purged their thoughts and feelings of the act—it escaping through the back of their heads, into space—it continued to haunt him . . .” (3). His fury creates fantasies of murdering Lula Mae: “What would he do? What could satisfy him . . . Today might be the day. Board a train for West Memphis. Better yet fly down there swift as thought and serve a death sentence” (8). Possessing such a mindset, Jesus travels on the subway from one part of town to another and soon reaches a crossroad.

In Black oral tradition, particularly in the blues, the crossroads represents a point of confrontation, where the natural and the spiritual worlds meet, where the traveler encounters a spirit that challenges the traveler’s soul. Freeze represents such a spiritual challenge to Jesus:

Freeze watched the lit cigarette end. Where yo daddy?
 Hey, you don’t know me. Why you askin bout my daddy?
 We got something to settle.
 You must mean somebody else. He don’t even know you.
 He stole a bird from me.
 Sound strikes what skin is meant to shield. Jesus wobbles.
 What?
 He stole a bird from me . . .
 Jesus let the truth move inside him . . .
 So now you know.
 Yes.
 And you believe?
 Yes.
 Good. So then you know. Know what I need you to do . . .
 Yes. Yes I will. Yes, I’ll do it. (47-48)

Given his unhappiness and isolation from his family, Jesus agrees to even the score for Freeze.

Even though Freeze tells Jesus that he can choose whether or not to act, Jesus really has no choice. And, in his estimation, Jesus must exhibit bravado and a self-possession that separates himself from everyone else, including his family. To demonstrate to Freeze and to others that he is “stone” (5), Jesus will commit the forbidden act of patricide. As Part I concludes, Jesus’s sense of alienation is supplanted by a perverted sense of purpose. Notably, the stolen bird that sets the plot rolling appears to be another nod to Hammett. In the crime mystery, *The Maltese Falcon*, Spade is hired to track down a stolen foot-high jeweled falcon currently in the hands of a thief who may not even know the true value of the stolen treasure. Freeze, however, doesn’t send Jesus to find the bird, nor does he promise Jesus a payment or reward. Instead, Freeze sends Jesus, a susceptible and emotionally disturbed kid, on a violent mission.

Jesus’s general sense of dejection may be perceived as representative of the postmodern condition of many Black male youth steeped in nihilism. Hassan’s postmodern theory regarding selflessness pertains directly to Jesus’ angst. According to Barton and Hudson, “Selflessness belies the notion that an individual exists in a way that is knowable and stable: what one thinks of oneself is an illusion or misunderstanding that one believes to avoid fears of nothingness and chaos” (Barton and Hudson 148). Besieged with an indestructible and treacherously grandiose sense of self, Jesus displays this nihilistic mentality in the following way: “He had heart, a lot of it—fires could not burn it, water could not drown it, winds could not bend it—and would sport his jewelry. He thought *Cut-throats. Praise them. Got to have heart to cut mine out. But ain’t nobody gon fuck wit me. Jesus Jones. They are clay. I am stone.* (Allen 5)

In discussing the nihilistic threat facing Black America, Cornel West asserts the following in *Race Matters*:

Nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophical doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaningless, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness. The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world. Life without meaning, hope, and love breeds a cold-hearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others. (22-23)

At 17, feeling aimless, uncertain, and unloved, Jesus seeks direction and meaning through his choice to commit an evil act:

Empty, the mission had filled him like city wind. And he expanded from within, for Freeze had chosen him—truth to tell, it is not clear to him if either of them had made a choice; circumstances had chosen them, commanded them—faith in knowing he would never disappoint. And he felt the gathering, his moving toward, growing closer toward his terminal point, where choices of destination narrowed to one, and where all possible movements and gestures become a single definitive act. He smiles more now than he had in the year previous, though he knows that he has done nothing to earn joy. He will. Better days are coming. Never has he been so certain about anything. Certainty moves red through his body like lasers. (Allen 486)

Jesus now believes that the completion of the mission will end his feeling of uncertainty and his loss of ground. Better yet, it will empower him.

Earlier, when Freeze informs Jesus of John’s transgression and Jesus’s responsibility to settle the score, it appears that Jesus may have accepted the charge to prevent any harm from happening to his family. Although Freeze doesn’t state explicitly the implications of Jesus’s refusal to do the deed, Freeze gives Jesus an alternative: “You can always choose---. Wait, Jesus said. He halted Freeze’s words with his palms. Pushed them back. Wait. Feet carried him away. He didn’t want to hear any more” (48). At this point, the reader considers the author’s reason for naming the young villainous character “Jesus.” Does he really consider himself some kind of redeemer? In Allen’s upside-down universe, Jesus Jones is, after all, the *chosen* one. Even Hatch reluctantly acknowledges Jesus’s unique position when Hatch learns that Freeze has set Jesus on the mission: “Jesus? Why Jesus? Ask yourself. Hatch looked outside himself, like a passenger in a car. Yes, he thought. Yes, Jesus. No one else. It made perfect sense” (352).

In Jungian psychology, the Christ child is a manifestation of the child archetype, representing the future, rebirth, and salvation. The child archetype often works in conjunction with the hero archetype to create the child-hero. As a little boy, Jesus considers himself a savior: “I’m gon be baptized, Jesus said. Why? Hatch said. So I can save. Save what?” (536). Initially, it appears as if the young Jesus is confused, thinking that through the submergence he will receive the power to save rather than become saved. Yet, given the placement of this passage in “City Dream,” the last section of the novel, coming through Gracie’s memory, the young Jesus’s assertion is quite significant.

In “City Dream,” Jesus completes the mission; yet, the reader has to constantly put all the disparate parts together to make sense of why Jesus views his action as redemptive. One of the clues to the mystery begins to unfold early: at the very end of the first section, “Seasonal Travel,” Jesus, after agreeing to commit murder for Freeze, wonders, “But would [Freeze] accept any color or shape of pay?” (48). Although Freeze has fingered John, Jesus’s father, Jesus wonders if a substitute for John would suffice. In “City Dream,” it becomes clear that Lucifer, John’s brother and Jesus’s uncle, becomes the surrogate father, if you will, the new target. But why? In “Chosen,” the second section of *Rails*, John and Lucifer meet at the train station before John departs for Washington, D.C. and then New York. John tells his wife that it will be a short trip, that he’ll call her when he arrives in D.C. However, his small suitcase is too heavy for such a short trip. Consequently, Gracie believes John has disappeared and sends Lucifer to find him. Jesus, though, is not aware that John is missing, as he’s not even aware that John has left town. The last time they saw each other was on that fateful Christmas night when Jesus and Lucifer had an altercation, which caused Hatch to call the police.

That Christmas evening, the tension coming through the door with Jesus is palpable:

“No one had seen him in almost a month, since Thanksgiving, the scorched form of his body imprinted on Gracie’s couch, her kitchen chair. His presence lay on Gracie’s house . . . thick and black. But his termite absence had eaten into the carved wooden armrests of couch and chairs” (361). Soon Jesus takes offense to Lucifer’s referring to him as a boy: “You see a boy you slap a boy. Sarcastic motherfucker” (367). And, this remark leads Lucifer to punch Jesus, knocking him to the other side of the room. Jesus then leaps up and charges Lucifer.

Even though Lucifer throws the first punch, Hatch tells the police that Jesus started the fight. This scene is a riff on the Biblical scene of Jesus of Nazareth in the Garden of Gethsemane when Judas Iscariot appears with the guards of the chief priests and elders: “Now he that betrayed him gave them a sign, saying, Whomsoever I shall kiss, that same is he: hold him fast. And forthwith he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, master; And kissed him. And Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come? Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus, and took him away” (Matthew 26: 48-50). Just as Judas betrays Jesus of Nazareth in the Garden of Gethsemane, Hatch betrays Jesus Jones in his mother’s house: “Transformer, Jesus says when he can speak” (Allen 368). In this statement, Jesus accuses Hatch, his dear childhood friend, “kin in will and act” (14), of becoming his enemy. Moreover, in anger, Jesus’s parents tell the police to arrest him. The police officer’s response, “There (sic) real crime out there” (369) is a riff on what Governor Pontius Pilate says to the crowd regarding Jesus of Nazareth, “Why, what evil hath he done?” (Matthew 27: 23). In this scene, the reader detects a dubious reason for Jesus’s decision to sacrifice his uncle Lucifer to spare his father, John.

In using the names Jesus and Lucifer, Allen stirs up the emotions of mainstream Christians—most of my students grappled with Allen’s intention. Doesn’t the Bible contain *indisputable truth*? Why would the author mess with the sacredness of Jesus’s name? Why would Allen give such a holy name to such an unholy character? And, in compounded confusion, the students wondered why Allen would use the name Lucifer for a character who seems rather harmless and insignificant? They are incredulous to learn that Allen views the Bible as some sort of mythology, which he chooses to subvert with his own notions. Yet, Allen’s curious use of the name “Lucifer” has little to do with mainstream Christians’ understanding of its origin. As a matter of fact, according to Biblical scholars, “*lucem ferre*,” the Latin term for “Lucifer,” is an ancient name for “bearer of light.” In *A Pilgrim’s Path: Freemasonry and the Religious Right*, John J. Robinson writes:

In the original Hebrew text, the fourteenth chapter of Isaiah is not about a fallen angel, but about a fallen Babylonian king, who during his lifetime had persecuted the children of Israel. It contains no mention of Satan, either by name or reference. The Hebrew scholar could only speculate that some early Christian scribes, writing in the Latin tongue used by the Church, had decided for themselves that they wanted the story to be about a fallen angel, a creature not even mentioned in the original Hebrew text, and to whom they gave the name, “Lucifer.” Why Lucifer? . . . In the Hebrew text the expression used to describe the Babylonian king before his death is Helal, son of Shahaar, which can best be translated as “Day star, son of the Dawn.” The name evokes the golden glitter of a proud king’s dress and court . . . (47-48)

Subsequently, scholars, authorized by King James I to translate the Bible, didn’t use the original Hebrew text, but based their translations on the work of St. Jerome of the fourth century. Therefore, over the centuries, Lucifer, whom St. Jerome referred to as “Day star, son of the Dawn,” erroneously became known as Satan, the Devil, and the Prince of Darkness, who reigns in hell (47-48).

Allen, probably knowing full well that he'd upset and confuse Christian readers with his use of the names Jesus and Lucifer, cleverly conflates Christ known as *the* "bright morning star" (Revelations 22:16) with Lucifer, known as the *fallen* "bright morning star" (Isaiah 14:12). In this conflation, Allen complicates the plot, causing the reader to wonder about the real meaning of Freeze's mission. Three questions abound: Now that Jesus has decided to sacrifice Lucifer to appease Freeze, what or who does Lucifer represent? If Jesus is the "hero," is Lucifer the "shadow" at war with Jesus? Or, are Jesus and Lucifer one and the same, engaged in self-conflict? On the one hand, the conflict between Jesus and Lucifer could be symbolic of good versus evil (even reminiscent of Satan tempting Jesus for 40 days and nights, Matthew 4:1-11). On the other hand, the conflict could actually stem from an unconscious war between father and son. Early in *Rails*, Jesus's red hair is vividly described: ". . . red hair: high and crenellated, a rooster's comb" (Allen 8). Similarly, Lucifer has a ". . . red widow's peak, a blade so sharp it would surely wound . . ." (519). In his childhood memories, Jesus identifies John as, ". . . this man [I] knew as [my] father . . ." (12) and refers to Lucifer as, ". . . my uncle, so-claimed . . ." (13). Moreover, the reader wonders if Freeze is really referring to Lucifer as Jesus's father, for Freeze doesn't mention a name.

Although, Lucifer considers Gracie ugly, it is quite possible that the two had a brief affair 17 years prior while the two couples shared an apartment for a year before the brothers left for Viet Nam. The couples continued to share the same apartment for seven more years after the brothers returned from the war. If such a thing had happened, perhaps Sheila may have some inkling of their infidelity, for she knows that "Gracie liked to graze in other people's meadows" (163). And, perhaps, unconsciously, Jesus knows that Lucifer is his biological father and sets out to kill him; perhaps, his anger stems from the lie Lucifer, John, and their wives have conspired to tell Jesus regarding his father's true identity. As Jesus contemplates his mission to kill "his father," he recalls: "For years [he] lain awake at night and breathed the colors of Lula Mae's hair on the pillow. And for the length of this day, he heard Lucifer's grave voice broadcasting from another world, dreamed Lucifer's red widow's peak . . . inside his plagued sleep" (519). According to Jungian dream theory, the color red may symbolize the true connection between Jesus and Lucifer (Jung 55). When mentioning Jesus to John, Lucifer recalls "the boy's birth, noises like an angry cat" (62). Lucifer's thoughts reveal an ambiguous but pointed remark: "red curse of a son" (62). Whose son, his or John's? Perhaps the source of Jesus's plagued sleep is his grief over his being considered the pariah of the Jones family. The mystery surrounding Jesus evokes the mystery of Lula Mae's past.

Jesus is gravely preoccupied with the history of Lula Mae's desertion of her young daughters, Sheila and Gracie. His grandmother has clearly set the tone for the estranged relationships that the Jones family perpetuates. The past has determined the future. Gracie and John are married in name only, resulting in John's coming and going for ten years, as if he's a visitor. In addition, John and Jesus have no emotional connection; in fact, John is closer to Hatch, his nephew, Lucifer's *acknowledged* son. If Lucifer is actually Jesus's father, then Lucifer has abandoned Jesus, just as Lula Mae had abandoned her children. Consequently, being a victim of her mother's emotional distance, apparently Gracie cannot connect emotionally to her own child: "Jesus was convinced that [Lula Mae's] exodus had strangled any impulse her surviving children—his mother and aunt—had to get close to her, and had ripped open his life, for an eye, like a shattered mirror, multiplies the images of sorrow" (3). In his grief and confusion regarding the emotional, familial disconnection he feels, Jesus responds too readily to Freeze, who fosters insight and a new identity:

Now Freeze had shown him how to circle back . . . There floods on Jesus an extraordinary understanding. His blood flows through the bodies of forty-four generations. Whenever he looks at any family photograph, he sees replicas of himself, Hatch, Lucifer, and John. All from the same wet vine, the circular of God's (or the devil's) dick. His new understanding does nothing to lessen his rage . . . Remembers the future that will forever erase his past. Knows that his red will put him on the map, red lines red places. Large, out there: a red astronaut cut free from his ship, enough oxygen only for himself, floating in blackness. (519-520)

Anticipating autonomy from his family, Jesus believes that in his own fashion, he will redeem his sordid family history, erect a better future for himself and, in the process, create a legend. The most fascinating aspect of *Rails* is its deliberate inscrutability. Allen admits "the primary mysteries of the novel are never truly resolved but remain at the novel's end" (Allen, Jeffery. "Blind Tom and Rails." Message to author. 22 Feb. 2005. E-mail.). Clearly, Jesus kills someone in "City Dream," chapter 49. Yet, is it Lucifer, or is it someone whom Jesus conveniently identifies as Lucifer, yielding a symbolic execution for his own benefit and the requisite sacrifice for Freeze? Allen writes, "A red shape flickers across his path.

That's him. Where? Right there. Where? Right there. The words fly from his mouth, magnetic, migratory. That don't look like—How you know what he look like" (520-521). Earlier, on page 490, Freeze tells Jesus that his family is back in town, and Jesus thinks: *So they decided to return. The bird thieves. Lucifer and John.* The men's wives, however, have yet to see their husbands and believe that the men are still missing. Later in chapter 49, in the same scene, the narrator says that Jesus ran up to *Lucifer* (emphasis mine) and "was close enough to recognize the bones of his uncle's red skull" (521). The media, though, reports the killing as a drug/gang-related drive-by shooting of an unidentified man. Perhaps Lucifer returned to town, but Jesus murdered him before he got home. And, if Jesus actually killed Lucifer, then who drowned in the Atlantic Ocean in chapter 37? Chapter 35 clearly identifies Lucifer as the person at Coney Island, wading in the water fully clothed, leading to the two-paragraph chapter 37 that reads: "He looked down at his feet . . . under the black water. He felt himself slipping away in the dead moment before dawn . . . He was going home. A forbidden city" (415). Allen's use of *dead* in this sentence conveys poetically and poignantly that Lucifer is drowning. The phrase *A forbidden city* seems to imply that Lucifer is committing a forbidden act (i.e., suicide), which will lead him to hell. And, being the mythological "Prince of Darkness," hell is where he naturally resides.

In the one-paragraph chapter 50 on page 522, someone leaves a will in the following wisecrack manner: Sound of limb and mind, I leave:

1. My heart to my mother (Hope you deserve it)
2. My feet to my brother (Errand runner, keep humping!)
3. My penis to my wife
4. My mouth to my son (Sing poems)
5. My eyes to my daughter (See wisely)
6. My arms (for strength) to my grandchildren still unborn
7. My head to my sister-in-law (sorely in need of brains)
8. My teeth to my nephew (Eat and put on some meat)
9. My nose to the taxman (no other use for it)
10. My ass to my casket

All indicators point to Lucifer, who has both a son (Hatch) and a daughter (Porsha), and who feels disgust for his sister-in-law, Gracie. The nephew reference implies Jesus, whom Lucifer deems "all bone . . . a red river" (64). Consequently, there is no doubt that this will belongs to Lucifer; the question, though, is when did he write it? It appears as if he wrote it decades after he returned from the Viet Nam war. But, did he write it recently before he left to go to the East coast in search of John? If so, why would he write it before taking that trip? Did he anticipate not finding John and then feeling no reason to live if his brother had disappeared?

The brothers have a curious relationship, for their family knows that they are not close, or they don't appear to be. Yet, when John calls Lucifer in distress, Lucifer rushes away, according to Sheila, "like a dog returning his master's stick" (162). Oddly, Lucifer also keeps a photo of John diving in Viet Nam (his favorite photo, to his wife's chagrin). Initially, Lucifer had kept the photo in the corner of his bedroom mirror, but he placed it in his wallet before leaving to search for John. Moreover, despite having spent time together in Viet Nam, the brothers never exchanged war stories. John, though, shared his vivid memories with other veterans while Lucifer, feeling apart, listened on the sidelines. Furthermore, the brothers married sisters; Lucifer decided to date Sheila after John began dating Gracie. Although John is two years younger than Lucifer, John takes the lead and Lucifer follows, indicating that Lucifer is highly dependent on his brother for his sense of identity. When Sheila calls Gracie in frantic search of Lucifer, Gracie tells her: "I told him about John . . . Don't worry . . . Blood is thicker than love" (289). And, this apparent lack of familial love appears to be the foundation of the animosity that Jesus feels toward Lucifer and Lula Mae.

While Jesus feels compelled to erase Lula Mae's betrayal from the family history, Spokesman, a long-time friend of John and Lucifer, knows that such erasure cannot be done: "History is all matter, and matter cannot be destroyed. The moon pulls on the tides. The earth on a passing comet. But the object itself is not changed. Simply its path, the track or trace. And that track is external, nonessential to the object itself" (394). The family's history is set, though it has a powerful influence on the family's future. Although Jesus attempts to do whatever he deems necessary to physically separate himself from the family, he cannot emotionally and spiritually separate himself from his kin. Even while he fantasizes about murdering Lula Mae and plans to kill Lucifer, he takes numerous trips to the family memory bank, recollecting both fond and foul times regarding his uncle and grandmother. These memories are wrapped around the place of Lula Mae's home in the south, West Memphis, where Jesus and Hatch visited as children: "Her rhythm inside him, is what he is" (8). Part Three, "South," takes the reader and part of the Jones' family to Tennessee for Lula Mae's funeral, where "Great flocks of memories.

Flurry of craws” await (428). Gracie, Sheila, Porsha, and Hatch travel to West Memphis and encounter mysteries that they cannot solve, even though Lula Mae leaves clues in her Bible: “[She] had inserted strips of white paper throughout the Bible, perhaps to catalogue important sections, clue her to crucial passages . . . She left it here for me to find, [Sheila] said to herself . . .” (435). Meanwhile, the mysteries of the past relating to Lula Mae’s disappearance converge with the mysteries of the present, relating to the disappearance of John, Lucifer, and Jesus. Hatch had attempted to find and tell Jesus of their grandmother’s death, but he couldn’t find his cousin anywhere. Before dying, Lula Mae had hidden her cancer for five years and patiently awaited death while her grandson, Jesus, ironically, dreamed of killing her. For some reason, Hatch’s response to Lula Mae’s desertion is quite opposite from his cousin’s. As Hatch roams around Lula Mae’s house and adjoining property in remembrance, he takes numerous photographs with a Polaroid instant camera. Hatch realizes, unlike Jesus, that the past is precious, despite the intertwining pain. The family history belongs to him, so he takes remnants of it: “He had what he needed, unyellowing artifacts” (479). And, like Jesus, who acknowledges that he and Lula Mae are one and the same (8), Hatch studies his face in Lula Mae’s bathroom mirror and notices “his skin pressed Lula Mae’s outline” (481). In regards to Lula Mae’s disappearance, the young men experience grief differently. While Jesus’s grief lives inside his soul throughout his young life, leading to murderous rage, Hatch’s grief comes only when Lula Mae dies: “He became aware all at once . . . His tears were selfish.

He was crying not for Lula Mae but for himself. Not her death but what he had lost, what was forever beyond him now because she was gone. *Summer. Her house. Her kerosene lamps. Her lil house. Her trees . . . This bridge. West Memphis. The South . . .* He would never cry again” (481). Lula Mae is the bridge between the North and the South, between the past and the present, between her grandsons and their mothers, between her grandsons and herself. Clearly, she offered some nurturance to her grandsons that they didn’t receive from their own “unmothered” mothers. In his remembrance, Hatch associates such mothering with a keen sense of self. In the midst of his mourning, he fashions himself a man, burying the boy Lula Mae helped to raise. Ironically, though, his tears become the vehicle for his change. Hatch, the sole male character who seems most in touch with his complexity as a person, the artist who can meld his masculine and feminine aspects, the male who is empathetic toward females, unfortunately, decides to limit his emotional expressions. Now, Hatch has decided that cutting off pain will make it disappear. He resolves to hide any display of emotional vulnerability, even from himself, truncating an essential part of his humanity. Therefore, it appears that in his mournful self-protection, Hatch associates Lula Mae’s death with some loss of self along with the loss of his symbolic mother.

Since Jesus is unaware of Lula Mae’s death, he continues to associate her mothering with contemptuous childhood memories: “[He] was afraid of her white skin, the smell, the touch” (6). Yet, he fondly remembers that annual train ride to West Memphis: “Each rail demands attention. The conductor would shout out a litany of stops. And you and Hatch would get happy” (6). Jesus’s ambivalence about Lula Mae’s mothering seems to give him a depraved reason for living: to “right the ancient wrongs” (8). What is *the* major ancient wrong that plagues Jesus’s sense of self? It seems to be the loss of mothers in his and his family’s lives. Jesus and Hatch appear to have no significant relationship to their own mothers, as there is little or no mention of any interaction between mothers and sons, just as there is little or no mention of any interaction between the young McShan sisters and their mother. Yet, images, emotions, interactions, and memories regarding Lula Mae proliferate in the young men’s minds. The strong, varied feelings; the ambivalence; and, the attachment children often feel for their mothers these young men reserve for Lula Mae, not for their own mothers. As a result, Jesus and Hatch have a similar response to the mother loss they feel: they both shut down emotionally. As mentioned earlier, when he is around 17 years old, Hatch decides to resist the mourning of such loss.

Upon learning of the mother loss in his mother’s and aunt’s lives, Jesus, however, being the more emotionally sensitive child of the two children, feels the emotional fallout of the past and represses his feelings of pain while he is a little boy. And, his profound sense of disconnection apparently has an adverse effect on his formative years, creating a dangerous personality that wreaks havoc on the Jones family. As the novel concludes in Part Four, “City Dream,” the reader-cum-detective enters a sort of fun house, where fantasy and reality, fiction and science fiction, truth and myth converge and distort. So, what is really happening in the world of *Rails*? Any lead that the reader has been following seems to go off track somehow when she ventures inside the city dream. In the beginning of *Rails*, Freeze accuses John of stealing his bird, setting up the central plot of the novel. And, from this point, Allen establishes a flight motif, making references to birds of various types—they become ubiquitous. But, the bird supposedly in John’s possession is never identified. Therefore, the reader has to ascertain whether it is an actual bird, a woman, jewels, drugs, a missile cruiser, a 130mm gun, or some aircraft. But, in the final analysis, one wonders if it really matters what form the bird ultimately takes.

Whatever the bird is, it seems to serve as a symbol of Jesus's self-actualization. Psychic mysteries abound in the end: Does Jesus actually kill someone or does he dream of doing so? Or, are Jesus and Lucifer one and the same and, if so, is he engaged in a self-battle to achieve his true nature? And, who is Birdleg? He "would clean his hands in dog slobber. Walk right up to a dog and put his hands under the slobbering faucet of mouth" (506). This grotesque character is an example of Hassan's theory of *carnivalization*, which Barton and Hudson describe as "the postmodern tendency to revel in absurdity, travesty, grotesquerie, and parody" (Barton and Hudson 148). Is he an alter ego serving as wise guide and messenger in the Afterlife or a nasty figment of Jesus' imagination? If Birdleg is Jesus' alter ego, then when Jesus opens the casket, does he pay homage to himself, anticipating his imminent death and resurrection? Allen writes in the last chapter of the novel, "You approached the closed casket, cautious, keeping your distance . . . your mind moving, telling you what you had to do. Pay respect. Pay homage to a fallen flyer . . . You pushed the casket open. Rising steam drew you back. He, the remembered, the departed, sloshed around, a soup of ash, shit, and blood" (562). Is Jesus the fallen flyer? In mythology, immortality has been metaphorically tied to birds. In Egyptian mythology, it is believed that when a person dies his soul leaves the body in the form of a hawk. In addition, according to the legend of the Bird of Arabia, people believed in the legendary 500-year-old bird, the Phoenix. As the story goes, at the end of its life, the Phoenix builds a funeral pyre for itself and as it began to die, it lies down on the pyre, which then burst into flames. After its death, a new bird rises from the ashes and lives for another 500 years. Perhaps, Jesus is being resurrected like the Phoenix as he prepares to fly Red Hook Project like a rocket ship, a version of a soul/bird:

He is surprised at the ease it takes him to return to Birdleg's secret nest . . . He finds clean clothes—red—on the bare steel floor . . . He removes his old clothes . . . Naked, burns them in the center of the steel floor. Blood angers the fire. Flame rises tall and ragged, bear and claws. His body swells in the open space around him. Red giant . . . He wraps himself in the new clothes . . . All possibilities and probabilities . . . Red Hook pulls away from the earth. (563)

This last scene ends the story on a surreal note, leaving the reader caught up in what appears to be the throes of Jesus's unconscious state as he becomes transformed. Becoming a participant in Allen's elaborate scheme, the reader has little choice but to make a concerted effort to understand a complex family history that instigates a character's construction of a peculiar worldview and a reconstruction of self-hood. While teaching the novel in three different courses, I encountered a majority of students in each course who complained about Allen's deliberate loose ends, finding little payoff for their hard work. The anticipation of a fairy tale ending dies hard. Nonetheless, most agreed that the novel's slices of realism casts a high beam on the pain, challenges, and conundrums of real familial life and love.

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