

**‘YOU CAN’T IMPROVE UPON THE CLASSICS, MAN’: CLASSICAL ALLUSIONS IN TIM BLAKE NELSON’S FILM *LEAVES OF GRASS* (2009)**

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In Tim Blake Nelson’s film *Leaves of grass* (2009), Bill Kincaid (Edward Norton), a successful professor of Classics at Brown University is lured back to his native Oklahoma when he receives word that his identical twin brother Brady (also Edward Norton) has been murdered. Although he has deliberately distanced himself from his ‘eccentric’ family for over a decade, Bill dutifully flies home, only to find his ‘dead’ twin very much alive and planning to use Bill as his alibi for a murder he and his sidekick Bolger (Tim Blake Nelson) intend to commit. While Bill has been diligently crafting his academic career, Brady has instead channelled his genius into growing marijuana hydroponically — part of the reason for the film’s title. Brady is in a double bind, having borrowed a substantial sum of money from a Tulsa drug-lord called Pug Rothbaum (Richard Dreyfuss), and being at the same time under considerable pressure to quit the drug business, as his girlfriend is pregnant. This article explores the numerous allusions to ancient Greek and Latin literature, philosophy and culture that the film’s director Tim Blake Nelson, who himself majored in Classics at Brown, has confessed to putting into almost every scene. A major focus of this ‘tonally varied’ film is its exploration of the interface between the two main forms of drama derived from Ancient Greece — tragedy and comedy.

‘This is the Classics Department; no one is more gossipy than you people!’, exclaims a female co-worker to Professor Bill Kincaid (Edward Norton) near the beginning of Tim Blake Nelson’s 2009 movie *Leaves of grass*. The speaker is Maggie Harman (Amelia Campbell), who has come to sound Bill out about a rumour that he, a successful young professor of Classical Philosophy at Brown University, is being head-hunted by Harvard. The rational Bill will only confirm that he is having lunch in Cambridge the following day, but that it is ‘just a lunch’. Unfortunately, Maggie has caught him in an apparently compromising position: we have just witnessed a young, pretty, clearly infatuated female student, Anne Greenstein (Lucy DeVito), making a very determined pass at Bill in his office. Although Bill has valiantly tried to resist the student’s advances, this is not what it ends up looking like to the busybody Maggie Harman.

Previously we see the student, one among many, sighing with passion as she listens to Bill’s lecture on Plato; next, all large, dark eyes and heaving breasts,

Anne Greenstein is consulting Bill in his office, purportedly about a project she is proposing to research. She asks him out on a date and he declines politely, the manner in which he does so suggesting that they have been through all this before, perhaps several times. Although Anne has written Bill a suggestive ‘note’ in Latin, in which she claims to have parodied Cicero, he tries to point out that it is inappropriate for a lecturer and a student to fraternise in this fashion. However, ‘Miss Greenstein’, as the panicked Bill formally terms her, will not take no for an answer. In a scene that is extremely amusing for Latin students, Anne decisively shuts Bill’s office-door from the inside and starts doing a striptease as she recites in Latin from the Roman poet Catullus 51.9-12, lines of verse that, derived from Sappho fragment 31, aptly describe the effects of love: *lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus / flamma demanat, sonitu suopte / tintinant aures, gemina teguntur / lumina nocte*.<sup>1</sup> Having removed her shirt halfway through the Catullan verses she quotes, and presently clad only in her push-up bra and trousers, Anne launches herself at the protesting Bill, at which point Maggie Harman arrives, looking completely shocked at the scene which greets her. Bill assures Maggie that ‘Miss Greenstein’ was on the point of leaving; he firmly hands Anne her possessions, and she, entirely unperturbed by his rejection, takes one last smouldering look at him as she leaves.<sup>2</sup>

Since the film’s main protagonist, Bill Kincaid, is a professor of Classical Philosophy, it seems entirely natural that the first few scenes should be peppered with references to Classical antiquity. However, it is not merely the first few scenes set in the Classics department at Brown, but the entire film that is filled with sometimes quite subtle Classical nuances and references. There is an underlying

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<sup>1</sup> ‘But my tongue grows sluggish, a slender flame runs down my limbs, my ears ring with their own sound, both my eyes are covered in darkness’ (my translation). These lines describe the extremely intense but simultaneously numbing effects of love as being similar to the deprivation of the senses experienced by the dying Homeric warrior on the battlefield. Anne Greenstein’s appropriation of Catullus’ adaptation of Sappho interestingly reclaims these lines for the female voice.

<sup>2</sup> As well-suited as she may be for the role of a predatory Lesbia / Clodia from Catullus, Anne Greenstein’s closest parallel is ironically the fictional representation of the otherwise real historical person Alcibiades who appears in Plato’s *Symposium*, a dialogue devoted to understanding *eros* or sexual love, and a text specifically referred to by Bill in his lecture at the movie’s start. Described by Bill as ‘a beautiful man, hopelessly in love with his mentor’, Plato’s Alcibiades is made to recount at length how he attempted to seduce Socrates, but failed to do so because of the latter’s extraordinary philosophical self-control (Plato *Symposium* 214d-222b). The attractive, infatuated Anne likewise tries to seduce Bill, her mentor, but does not succeed due to his philosophical approach to life and his sense of propriety and control (to Anne’s amusement, Bill speaks in Ciceronian terms of *mores* and of ‘lines that we don’t cross’, assuring her that he is serious about this).

reason for this: Tim Blake Nelson, who wrote the screenplay, directed the film, and in addition acted in *Leaves of grass* in a supporting role, majored in Classics at Brown University and remains passionate about Classical literature. Nelson is best known for his portrayal of the Southern simpleton Delmar O'Donnell in the Coen brothers' *O brother, where art thou?* (2000), a film loosely based on Homer's *Odyssey*.<sup>3</sup> There are many aspects of *Leaves of grass* that emerge from Nelson's own autobiographical background: he grew up in the Jewish community in Tulsa, Oklahoma, before going to Brown. Most of *Leaves of grass* is set in rural Oklahoma as well as in Tulsa, when Bill is unexpectedly summoned home due to a family 'tragedy'. A fictional version of the Tulsa Jewish community also features in the film. In an interview, Nelson revealed that in almost every scene of the movie he has deliberately hidden 'Easter eggs',<sup>4</sup> references to Classical and later literature, which have to be hunted for, unwrapped and devoured. Given Nelson's high level of learning, *Leaves of grass* exhibits a very self-conscious and deliberate form of Classical reception.<sup>5</sup> It is necessary to go through almost every scene in the movie to appreciate fully the extent of the Classical references, which are almost inseparable from the film as a whole. In my reading, these references are not simply allusions but the keys to understanding and fully appreciating this superbly intertextual film. In addition, *Leaves of grass* explores the nature, genesis and relationship between the two primary forms of drama which go back to Ancient Greece — tragedy and comedy.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> We should perhaps be cautious about believing disclaimers made by Joel and Ethan Coen that Tim Blake Nelson was the only one on the set to have read the *Odyssey* (see Siegel 2007: 213-214; Toscano 2009: 51 n. 6). It is also possible, however, that Nelson, who knows both Coen brothers relatively well, acted as their primary Classical consultant in the making of *O brother, where art thou?* (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Kung 2010. The nature of these references may mean that the film is in danger of seeming too intellectual an exercise, where spotting the Classical allusions gains one 'bonus points' in the manner of a computer game.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of this rapidly growing area of Classical studies in relation to film, see Hardwick 2003:71-85. *Leaves of grass* is perhaps most comparable to the film *The Browning version* (1994), where the chief protagonist is a Classics teacher.

<sup>6</sup> It is striking how often 'tragedy' and 'comedy' are referred to in the film. In her interview with Bill in his office, Anne Greenstein is proposing to do a project on Sophoclean tragedy. When Bill advises her to investigate Nietzsche's theory of tragedy, Anne comically turns the tables on Bill, and lowering the register, asks him out on a date: 'I like comedies; do you want to see a movie?' On the flight to Tulsa, Ken Feinman (Josh Pais) tells Bill: 'I hope it's not Tragedy that brings you home'. The film, as I shall argue, constantly plays with the idea of the two genres and their essential opposition.

When we first meet him, Professor Bill Kincaid is reaching the pinnacle of his ‘diligently crafted’ academic career.<sup>7</sup> He is about to be courted by Harvard, represented visually by two men in grey suits, whom we witness Bill meeting for lunch. Bill’s friend, the clearly influential Professor Nathan Levy (Lee Wilkof), and Dean Sorenson (Ty Burrell), offer him a chance to open his own Institute within the Harvard Law School in order to introduce more philosophy into the legal curriculum. When Bill does not know what to say, Professor Levy advises him to ‘savour’ the offer, as opportunities like this do not come often. Ironically, just like the mythical Icarus whom he mentions in his lecture at the movie’s start, Bill is about to crash.<sup>8</sup> Like the hero of a Greek tragedy, he is about to undergo a reversal of fortune. This *peripeteia* occurs when Bill’s refined wood-panelled academic existence is shattered by being invaded by his crude rural past, from which he has done his best to distance himself, just as studiously as he has shed his Oklahoma accent.

During the interview with the Harvard representatives, when Bill’s impressive list of publications is mentioned, we find out that, among other things, in the previous year Bill published a translation of one of Plautus’ plays, the *Menaechmi*, through Oxford University Press. Plautus’ *Menaechmi* is a comedy which examines what happens when identical twin brothers, accidentally separated in childhood, find themselves in the same city as adults. In the play, the brothers are repeatedly mistaken for each other, causing chaos and humour. As Nelson revealed in an interview, this is a ‘wink’ to the story,<sup>9</sup> as Bill himself has an identical twin brother, Brady (also played by Edward Norton). Brady, in contrast to Bill, has remained in Oklahoma and has channelled his genius (which is in fact superior to his brother’s, according to their mother) into growing marijuana hydroponically — part of the reason for the film’s title *Leaves of grass*. Brady is also facing an expansion of his career, one that he expressly does not want. Having borrowed heavily from a Tulsa drug-lord called Pug Rothbaum (Richard Dreyfuss) in order to fund his elaborate horticultural enterprise, Brady now finds himself

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<sup>7</sup> Like the ideal tragic hero, as a college professor Bill is someone of high social status and good character who nevertheless falls from grace in the course of the movie (Aristotle *Poetics* 1454b).

<sup>8</sup> Bill suffers from *hubris*, arrogance in the face of the gods. His problem, alluded to several times in the film, is that he thinks he has all the answers to how life should be lived.

<sup>9</sup> Kung 2010. *Leaves of grass* falls into that category of films, which, according to Winkler (2001:7), ‘reveal narrative structures or archetypal themes familiar since antiquity’. The comedy of the film depends on three ‘mistaken identity’ scenes where one twin is mistaken for the other (as in Plautus’ *Menaechmi*); tragedy only fully comes into play when one of the other characters (Feinman) experiences a realisation or recognition (*anagnorisis*) that the confusion has been caused by a pair of twins.

being pressurised by Pug's agents into selling other types of drugs in order to repay the amount he owes.

In the second monologue near the start of the film — the first being his brother's lecture on Plato to his students<sup>10</sup> — and the first time we see Brady, we listen to Bill's twin expound on the virtues of 'natural' marijuana as against artificially manufactured drugs. The scene, a stark contrast to the rarefied atmosphere of Bill's lecture theatre and office at Brown, is a diner at a truck-stop in Oklahoma, where Brady and his sidekick Bolger (Tim Blake Nelson) are meeting with two of Pug Rothbaum's bodyguards and agents. The mercurial Brady, played by Norton in a shoulder-length wig, with a few days' growth on his chin, spits into his glass to emphasise his rejection of Pug Rothbaum's proposal (a stark contrast to Professor Levy's exhortation to Bill to 'savour' the pleasant offer Harvard is making him). Later Brady's sidekick Bolger lectures him that he knew what he was getting into when he went to Pug Rothbaum for funding. Bolger in many ways resembles the *servus callidus* or 'clever slave' of Roman comedy acting as mentor to his young master, who is invariably in some sort of trouble.<sup>11</sup> Brady is in a serious double bind, since he is at the same time under considerable pressure to quit the drug business because his girlfriend is pregnant. When he is summoned to see Pug Rothbaum a short while later, Brady realises that he needs to come up with a plan to escape this difficult situation.

Brady visits his mother Daisy (Susan Sarandon) in the retirement home where she has prematurely sequestered herself and gives her a journal featuring articles on and by his brother Bill ('The new face of Classical thought'). When Daisy unfavourably contrasts him with the over-achieving Bill, Brady decides to leave. We see Brady getting into his vehicle, having a silent tantrum and punching the roof of his truck in frustration. Looking hopeless and defeated, he starts smoking marijuana in his car, supposedly to calm himself down. As we see him drifting off into oblivion, changes and shifts in the shadows on the car window

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<sup>10</sup> In Roman comedy it was usual for the chief actor to deliver a speech in the prologue, explaining the background to the drama. The start of *Leaves of grass* has twin speeches, one monologue assigned to each brother.

<sup>11</sup> Later in the movie, after Brady's death, we find out why Bolger is so tied to Brady, assisting him at every turn: Brady had saved Bolger's life when they were in prison together, and he clearly feels indebted to him. This feeling of indebtedness binds him as closely to Brady as if he were a real slave. Bolger is only finally 'liberated' once he is able to 'repay the favour' by saving not Brady's life (he fails to do this), but, in a case of poetic irony, that of his twin brother Bill when, towards the end of the film, the latter is shot with a crossbow, and only survives because of Bolger's rushing him to hospital. When the doctor reveals this, we see an amazed but satisfied look come over Bolger's face. Released from his servitude, Bolger does not appear in the movie's final scene, indicating that he has at last gone his own way.

indicate that some time passes. Suddenly, however, we see Brady look up in a somewhat startled manner as an idea occurs to him. Later he will describe this epiphany to Bill: ‘Like when all of a sudden, you get hit with the answer to a mess you’ve been in. And as soon as it hit ye, you can’t hardly believe you didn’t think of it before’. Brady’s solution has been prompted by the idea he has just expressed to Daisy that his twin would only return to Oklahoma if one of them were to die.<sup>12</sup> He plans to lure his estranged brother home with the false news that he has been murdered by being shot with a crossbow, a common weapon of choice for Oklahoma: as a clearly shocked and upset Bill explains to Maggie Harman after he’s learned of his brother’s ‘death’, crossbows are ‘inexplicably popular’ where he comes from. The seriousness of the ‘event’ causes Bill to decide that it is time to go home.

As we witness Bill catching a flight to Tulsa, the audience is encouraged to believe, along with Bill, that Brady really is dead. On the plane, Bill is seated beside an intrusive Tulsa orthodontist called Ken Feinman (Josh Pais). Clearly bothered but too polite to show his irritation, Bill patiently answers all of Feinman’s questions, while at the same time not giving too much away. When Feinman hears that his interlocutor is a professor of Classical Philosophy, he observes that there cannot be much need for Bill’s subject nowadays. ‘Humanity hasn’t changed that much, actually’, Bill assures him, with words which will come back to haunt him. The garrulous Feinman explains to Bill that he is starting a new orthodontic practice in Tulsa, having returned to his native Oklahoma from New York, but that he is having severe financial difficulties trying to pay the costs of both his new business and the debts from his prior practice. Feinman maintains that he can tell that Bill hasn’t had any orthodontal ‘work done’, but adds that Bill has ‘a nice face’.<sup>13</sup> At the airport in Tulsa, the unbelievably persistent Feinman runs after Bill again on his way out, and gives him his business card, in case he has any ‘nephews and nieces’ who could benefit from his skills in orthodontistry. Finally, as his wife calls him repeatedly, presumably from the baggage section, Feinman stands momentarily in Bill’s path, adding: ‘I never take accidental encounters for granted’. The interaction between Bill and Ken Feinman has much in common with the famous scenario sketched by the Roman poet Horace in his ninth satire, where he describes himself being pursued relentlessly through the streets of Rome by an ambitious social climber known to scholars as the ‘Bore’ or the ‘Pest’. Like Horace’s character in *Satires* 1.9, Bill is essentially too polite to tell Feinman to

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<sup>12</sup> Brady tells Daisy: ‘I think it gonna take one of us dyin’ to get him to come back down here’.

<sup>13</sup> The financial crisis facing the Feinman family will later prove to be a deciding factor at a crucial point in the plot. Likewise, Feinman’s scrutiny of Bill’s visage will turn out to be of significance later in the movie.

leave him alone. This is not the last Bill will see of the irritating but seemingly innocuous Feinman, as this character will later return at two critical moments in the plot.

Just outside the airport, Bill is met by Bolger, who is to drive him to Idabel in McCurtain County, Little Dixie, in the extreme south-eastern corner of Oklahoma. Bolger remarks on the rapid building that is taking place all around Tulsa: 'It's crazy how much buildin' they got goin' on up here; folks just don't take to the country no more, I guess. You figure?' Bill agrees that it is a mystery. Excessive building was regarded as a vice in Latin poetry, particularly in Horace's lyric poems, where the city-country dichotomy was also often highlighted, the country being seen as superior to the urban landscape.<sup>14</sup> The contrast between the world he has just come from and the once-familiar but now alien one he is suddenly experiencing again, is clearly exhausting for Bill: we see him falling asleep in the car.

En route to Idabel, Bill wakes up with Bolger suggesting a stop at Broken Bow. There is a reason for this, we later discover: the stop at Broken Bow is an experiment to see whether people will still mistake Bill for Brady. It proves successful, as the astonished, protesting Bill is unexpectedly attacked and eventually knocked unconscious by rival drug-dealers Jimmy and Buddy Fuller who mistake the short-haired, clean-shaven Bill for a 'cleaned-up' Brady. Bolger plays his part in this 'mistaken identity' scene by manipulating Bill into wearing one of Brady's caps when he walks into the 'Me-tote-em' refreshment store run by the Fuller brothers. While Bolger implies that Bill should wear the cap as a memento of his supposedly 'deceased' twin, the effect is to make him look even more like his brother than ever. Bolger also conveniently disappears off to the restroom, and returns only when Bill is in serious trouble, with the arrival of the stronger of the two Fuller brothers, Buddy (Steve Earle). Bolger also encourages the impression that Bill is Brady by means of his verbal exchange with Buddy Fuller, and by the fact that he warns Bill to say as little as possible to 'these two in-breds'.<sup>15</sup>

When Bill regains consciousness, he at first seems to believe he is in some sort of Afterlife, because his brother is there looking over him (initially out of focus). Brady says, comically: 'I guess I kind of got resurrected!', but Bill becomes furious upon discovery that the 'murder by crossbow' story was merely a ruse to

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<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Horace *Odes* 2.15, 18. This is the second reference to Horace within a short space.

<sup>15</sup> The Kincaid twins, it is revealed in a number of places in the movie, grew up in another town some distance away (in Hugo, the chief town of Choctaw County to the West), which explains why nobody in the Tulsa or Idabel areas is aware that Brady has an identical twin.

lure him back to Oklahoma.<sup>16</sup> Bill's reunion with his brother encourages the audience to compare and contrast the fascinatingly similar but simultaneously very different pair. The Kincaid brothers are mirrors of each other, and not just physically. Both are extremely intelligent and do not suffer fools gladly, something that does not always endear them to those with whom they interact.<sup>17</sup> In spite of his lack of a college education and his failure to pursue a successful career on the right side of the law, Brady, the movie makes clear, is his brother's intellectual superior. Not only is Brady's 'Taj Mahal of Hydroponics' a brilliantly designed and executed scientific project, but all the more so since it is perforce a clandestine operation. A careful analysis of the plot of *Leaves of grass* suggests that Brady's whole modus operandi in having his identical twin brother act as his alibi in Idabel while he goes up north to Tulsa to murder Pug Rothbaum is meticulously planned. In both his strategy and his shameless psychological manipulation of Bill, Brady demonstrates that he is light-years ahead of his twin.<sup>18</sup>

Twins appear in many world mythologies, as well as in Hollywood lore, as symbols of good and evil: frequently, one of the twins is viewed as 'the good twin'

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<sup>16</sup> This type of cunning, deceptive, self-seeking behaviour, we learn, is typical of Brady, who is very much in the tradition of the 'trickster' figure in mythology.

<sup>17</sup> For example, when Maggie Harman asks if the 'killing' of Bill's brother by crossbow was accidental, Bill impatiently points out that if it were an accident, he would not have called it a 'murder'; likewise, when one of Pug Rothbaum's agents Brady is addressing in his speech at the film's beginning asks what is meant by 'hydroponics', Brady, exasperated by his interlocutor's ignorance, snaps: 'Germinatin' seeds in water, you shit-for-brains!' When Bill arrives at the airport in Tulsa, still under the impression that his brother is dead, and Bolger, who is there to meet him, exclaims, 'You sure do look like him!', Bill responds, somewhat condescendingly, 'I think that's what they mean by 'identical''; Bolger, however, is either too slow or too good-natured to take offence, and in any case, as he is deeply involved in Brady's plot to trick Bill, he has other things on his mind.

<sup>18</sup> After Brady's revelation that he is not in fact dead, the horrified Bill indicates that he wants to leave at once. But in order for Brady's plans to come to fruition, he has somehow to persuade his brother to stay for a few days in Idabel, during which time Brady and Bolger, using Bill as Brady's alibi, will have the chance to kill Pug Rothbaum in Tulsa. To achieve this, Brady puts an elaborate and carefully calculated guilt trip on Bill, confronting him with the fact that he has not bothered to visit his family, including his mother, for over a decade. When Bill finally relents and agrees to spend the weekend in Idabel, we see first Bolger, then Brady look at each other and smile. Part One of their plan is now in place. The second phase of Brady's manipulation of Bill involves calming his brother down and courting his sympathy so that he will be more amenable to the 'switcheroo' scheme that Brady has in mind for the following day. Here Brady's modus operandi includes flattering Bill by discussing his career with him, and 'softening' him up by plying him with drugs.

and the other as ‘the evil twin’.<sup>19</sup> They are symbols of two opposing sides of human identity, encouraged by the fact that the twins in this film, as in many in the past, are both played by a single actor.<sup>20</sup> It would be easy to view the successful clean-living Bill as the ‘good twin’, and the drug-dealer Brady, who is sporting the beginnings of a goatee, as the ‘bad twin’. But the stark dichotomy of good versus evil does not fit Bill and Brady, who both exhibit faults and good points, strengths and weaknesses. For a real clue to the brothers’ contrasting characters, we need to look beyond good and evil, to Nietzsche’s famous theory expounded in *The birth of tragedy*, that tragedy arises from the clash of two main principles, the Apollonian and the Dionysian.<sup>21</sup> Significantly, Bill himself recommends Nietzsche’s theory to his student Anne Greenstein when she consults him in his office near the start of the movie. In *Leaves of grass*, Bill is Apollo, the ordered, serious, successful but perhaps too controlled of the brothers (representing *nomos*, the law or the *mores* of the civilised, organised world). Bill is industrious, but admits to his Harvard colleagues that he does so much work because he does not ‘have a life’.

The hedonist Brady, by contrast, is Dionysus, the god of wine, madness, and excess (he is, after all, a drug-producer), representing the wild side of nature (*phusis*).<sup>22</sup> Brady nurtures small plants (which he describes as ‘all my special little children’) and is also about to become a father: like a god of nature, Brady is a generator and protector of growing things. Dionysus’ associations with fertility and resurrection gods such as Osiris of Egypt and the Babylonian Tammuz, are likewise recalled when Brady jokingly tells his brother that he has ‘resurrected’ after his fake death is exposed as a lie.<sup>23</sup> Although Bill at first refuses to indulge in any of Brady’s ‘leaves of grass’, in the end it is Brady’s ability to ‘read’ his twin’s facial expressions that enables him to tempt his brother successfully. As they sit on the back porch together, Brady mocks his intellectual brother with an ingeniously

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<sup>19</sup> See Hankoff 1977:307; Garry 2005:459; Peternel 2005:453.

<sup>20</sup> The cover of the DVD release for *Leaves of grass* (2010) exploits the concept of this dichotomy, as the top half of the image has a white background and shows Edward Norton as Bill, the clean-shaven, serious, studious twin in a suit with a book in his hand, whereas the bottom half has a black background and shows Norton as Brady with a beard, wearing jeans, a plaid-shirt and T-shirt combination, and carrying a crossbow. The bottom image looks like an altered reflection of the top one.

<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche 2000:19.

<sup>22</sup> In his monologue at the movie’s start Brady describes the backyard enterprises of his bootlegging forebears, noting with approval that they ‘did it natural’.

<sup>23</sup> For Dionysus as a fertility and resurrection or ‘dying and reviving’ god, with parallels in the Near East, see Frazer 1922:370-377; Kerényi 1976; Mettinger 2001; Stookey 2004:99; Seaford 2006.

humorous take on academia,<sup>24</sup> while at the same time clouding and numbing Bill's rational side with a dose of his supercharged hybridized 'varietals' of grass. One interesting Classical allusion occurs when Bill complains that everything that has happened that day has only confirmed why he stays away from his family. Brady then suggests to Bill that the receptacle he is holding in his hands (which Brady terms a 'goblet of goodness') must have made him happy. When Bill denies this and questions the drug's composition, Brady insists, 'That's ambrosia, Billy, that's pure ambrosia'. In Classical mythology ambrosia is the food of the gods, a divine restorative believed to contain the essence of immortality.<sup>25</sup>

The Dionysian Brady has organised a party that evening at his house,<sup>26</sup> and he introduces his brother to a strong, intellectual woman called Janet (Keri Russell) he knows Bill will like.<sup>27</sup> It is worth comparing Janet to Bill's other potential love interest in the film, Anne Greenstein, the Classics student that we witnessed making a pass at him near the beginning of the movie.<sup>28</sup> Janet and Anne are both intellectual, confident women, and in different ways, each represents the passion that is lacking in Bill's supposedly rational, controlled existence. Brady, who rather fancies Janet himself, relates to Bill that Janet is both a poet and a ladies' noodling champion.<sup>29</sup> Janet, we learn, has of her own accord left a university tenure-track

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<sup>24</sup> Previously Brady tells Bill that he has read all the articles he wrote, including one of 'fifty pages on the interpretation of one word in Aristotle'; Brady relates that he sat there all day reading, armed with an English dictionary in order to look up words he did not know. Brady adds that this dictionary was 'not just the Merriam-Webster, either — the mother-fuckin' *OED!*' Edward Norton related in an interview that it was this hysterically funny line that made him decide to accept the role of Bill / Brady in *Leaves of grass* (Wharton 2010).

<sup>25</sup> See *Odyssey* 5.93; the ancient Greek term *ambrosia* literally means that which is 'not mortal'.

<sup>26</sup> There is some indication that this social event is organised in order to celebrate Brady's marriage to his girlfriend Colleen (Melanie Lynskey).

<sup>27</sup> That this is part of the Dionysian Brady's arsenal of pleasurable temptations used to seduce Bill into staying in Idabel and co-operating with his plans, is confirmed when Brady chides his brother the following morning: 'Ain't I set you up with Janet? And didn't you like her?'

<sup>28</sup> In early versions of the script, Nelson had Anne and Bill sleep together, but this was eventually changed, due to the fact that, as Nelson explains, he needed the audience to root for Bill and to have him sleep with one of his students right at the start of the film could make many audience members lose their sympathy for the main protagonist (Giroux 2010). Bill's rejection of Anne's attempt at seduction also fits well with his characterisation as a person for whom self-control and rules are important: Bill does everything by the book.

<sup>29</sup> Noodling is an Oklahoma pastime that involves wading around in rivers and catching catfish with one's bare hands. Since she is also a poet, Janet has strengths both in the intellectual and physical spheres.

position to return to her native Oklahoma to be a writer, and she teaches English at a local high school simply to earn money.

Nelson has said in an interview that he considers Janet to be the wisest person in the film,<sup>30</sup> whereas Brady is the most intelligent. Janet is not afraid to tell Bill that it is not good to have unresolved issues with his mother. When Bill asks her why, she explains: 'Because someday she'll be gone, and then where'll you be?' Bill answers: 'I'll be in the same place I am right now', to which Janet replies: 'Exactly'. She has the wisdom to see that Bill is not, as he has assumed, in a good place in his life; in spite of all his achievements and self-control, he is not happy. And where the self-assured Anne Greenstein made a pass at Bill in his office, Janet has the confidence to turn Bill down when he first makes advances towards her. Instead, she invites him to go 'noodling' with her the following day. Where Anne Greenstein recited centuries-old, derived verse at Bill in Latin metre, Janet writes her own free verse, without rhyme or metre, in the manner first championed by the great American poet Walt Whitman, whose life work *Leaves of grass* inspired the film's title. Janet will recite both Whitman and poetry she wrote herself during her outing with Bill the next day. For now she leaves, wishing Bill 'Sweet dreams'.

When Bill is finally too tired from all his unaccustomed indulgences, Brady puts his brother to bed in a room he decorated while still a bachelor with psychedelic paintings ('all originals, no knock-offs') that glow under ultra-violet or 'dark' light. He gets Bill to lie down on a waterbed which he says was his 'deal-closer' before he met his partner Colleen. The room is decorated in a myriad of interesting ways that appeal to all the senses. When we see the grinning Brady's teeth glowing white in the ultra-violet light, and his eyes looking strangely pale, he seems quite emphatically to embody the physical and the carnal, the Dionysian principle.<sup>31</sup> The connoisseur Brady also has a large collection of music on vinyl: 'I don't go in for no digital,' he proudly tells Bill, 'You can't improve upon the Classics, man'. This encourages us to make a link between Bill's interests in Classical philosophy and literature, and his brother's interest in his classic music collection. The music is part of the soothing atmosphere that lulls Bill to sleep.

Both Bill and Brady are unbalanced, but in different ways; both of them need the other twin's virtues and strengths to compensate for their own faults and weaknesses. Like two halves of the same person (both, after all, are played by Edward Norton), each of the brothers completes his twin and is in some way only half a person without the other. At the same time, however, in true Nietzschean

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<sup>30</sup> See Giroux 2010. It is noteworthy that Janet wears a pendant in the shape of an owl, a bird often associated with wisdom and with Athena, the goddess of wisdom.

<sup>31</sup> After Brady turns out the room's main light so that Bill can appreciate the 'best part' — the features visible only under the ultra-violet or 'dark' light — for a moment the brothers look like two figures on a Greek black figure vase.

fashion, it is the juxtaposition of these two opposing forces, the controlled Apollonian principle (*nomos*), which depends on the rules and limits imposed by law and society, on the one hand, and the unbridled, passionate Dionysian principle (*phusis*), which is wild, natural and completely uncontainable, that provides the opportunity for violence and tragedy to come into play.

Some critics have bemoaned the violence which erupts approximately two thirds of the way into the movie, arguing that the film is not able to support this sudden and surprising bloodshed.<sup>32</sup> I sense that their problem is a question of genre: the movie has not been a violent affair from the start, but appeared to all intents and purposes to be a (possibly 'black') comedy. Generically, critics are not prepared for the plot's rapid evolution into tragedy. This may be because Nelson is experimenting with the interface between comedy and tragedy, and in *Leaves of grass* is examining what happens when the former evolves into the latter. The Death of Comedy occurs when Bolger and Brady go north to Tulsa the next day, Saturday morning. We see Bolger and Brady en route to Tulsa in Bolger's vehicle. The *servus callidus* Bolger feels obliged to point out to Brady that Saturday is the Jewish Sabbath: 'Ain't it Saturday? I think the Jews is in Church Saturday. Do you know where it's at?' They realise they will have to look for Pug Rothbaum in the local synagogue or temple, assuming that there is only one Jewish place of worship in Tulsa.

Perhaps because their discussion has been touching on religious worship, and perhaps also because the mission they are on involves taking another human life, Bolger is compelled to ask Brady a serious personal question: 'Do you believe in a Higher Power?' Brady at once replies in the affirmative. Bolger tests the conventionality of Brady's belief, asking him if he believes that God created humans and judges us. Brady replies that he thinks it's more like parallel lines. 'Parallel lines?' asks Bolger incredulously. Brady then advances a philosophy that sounds a great deal like the ancient Greek philosopher Plato's concept of the Forms.<sup>33</sup> He explains to Bolger the mathematical idea of lines that go on and on forever an equal distance away from each other, but 'don't never touch', as Brady

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<sup>32</sup> See Harvey 2009; Reed 2010. In interviews, Tim Blake Nelson and Edward Norton have both defended the sudden eruption of violence in the film, citing Greek tragedies as a comparable and usually much more violent example (Giroux 2010, Chew-Bose 2010). Nelson has defended the film's 'tonal variety' (Wharton 2010). He has pointed out that murder by crossbow is mentioned within the first ten minutes, and with all the references to Classical literature, *Leaves of grass* is 'setting itself up to get ugly the way classical narratives get ugly' (Giroux 2010). It may be worth noting that *Fargo* (1996), a film by Nelson's mentors Joel and Ethan Coen, also turns suddenly violent.

<sup>33</sup> See Plato *Republic* 514-521; cf. 510c-d, for the relevance of the Forms to students of geometry.

puts it. He explains that this is more of a concept than anything, since such things do not occur in nature, and ‘man can’t create no true parallel’. Brady explains to Bolger that he thinks the perfection of parallel lines, that we know exists, and we think about, but cannot ever attain ourselves, is God. This is very similar to Plato’s concept, since for him the Form is the true reality, whereas the earthly object is merely a pale copy of this reality.

The sequences of Bolger and Brady going to Tulsa are interspersed with scenes showing what is happening back in Idabel. We see Bill and Janet noodling (catching catfish) in a river. As Janet is gutting the catfish, they have a discussion about poetry, where Janet quotes and endorses the free verse of Walt Whitman but Bill argues that even poetry should have rules. Once again the ‘passion’ Janet appreciates in the unstructured works of the Father of Free Verse is set against the order and control Bill argues for. Janet suggests that one could make up one’s own rules. Bill submits that if everyone runs around making their own rules, it will be difficult to find what is true. Janet quotes her own poetry: ‘One night, I split my cicada skin, devoured your leaves, knowing no poison, no love nourishment; in that larval blindness, a hunger finally true’.<sup>34</sup> Like many other characters in the movie, Janet is given the chance to express her philosophy of life: she suggests to Bill that we may be moving toward truth and perfection, but we don’t even know that it’s there. ‘Once you think you’ve got it all solved, what’s left?’ she asks.<sup>35</sup> We then see them kissing for the first time, and the impression is given that they sleep together.

The scene then shifts back to Tulsa, where we see Bolger and Brady finally entering the Temple Neve Kodesh (‘Oasis of Holiness’), dressed rather comically in ill-fitting prayer shawls and yarmilkas. Both Pug Rothbaum and Ken Feinman, the person Bill was seated next to on the aircraft, are among the congregants. Ken Feinman waves at (what he assumes is) Bill, points at his teeth, and cannot understand why ‘Bill’ does not recognise him. This second ‘mistaken identity’ scene is significant, as it helps Feinman conclude later that all is not as it seems.<sup>36</sup> Rabbi Renannah Zimmerman (Maggie Siff) is meanwhile conducting a sermon which focuses on the need for law and duty, arguing that without these things, the

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<sup>34</sup> My suspicion about this poem (written by Tim Blake Nelson), is that it refers to an occasion on which Janet slept with Brady, and that it’s her subtle way of telling Bill about this.

<sup>35</sup> This statement will be echoed shortly by what the twins’ mother Daisy Kincaid will tell Bill, somewhat bitterly, when, on his first visit to see her in many years, he has finished intellectually analysing and explaining everything that was wrong with their childhood, ‘As usual, you’ve got it all figured out’.

<sup>36</sup> Of the three ‘mistaken identity’ scenes in the film, this is the only one where Brady is mistaken for Bill.

violence and anarchy of the world threaten to engulf us (once again, *nomos* versus *phusis*, the Apollonian against the Dionysian).<sup>37</sup>

Back in Idabel, Janet drops Bill off at the old age home where the Kincaid twins' mother is living. Bill is to walk into the reception area of the rest home, disguised as Brady in one of his plaid shirts, his jeans, and his cap, in order to fool Sheriff 'Big Joe' Sharpe (Pruitt Taylor Vince) who habitually sits there, into thinking that he is Brady and thus provide an alibi for his brother. Brady told Bill that all he need do is greet the receptionist as he walks past her. However, the alibi works better than it should because the Sheriff has other ideas: he grabs what he assumes is Brady, and hauls him outside to give him a talking-to. In this third 'mistaken identity' scene, the Sheriff confronts 'Brady' with the fact that some of the staff had caught his mother smoking marijuana recently. He threatens 'Brady' that he is going to find all the marijuana he is growing on his property, no matter how many of the police he is bribing. The perhaps inappropriately named Sheriff Sharpe laughs at what he assumes is Brady's 'new' hairstyle, saying ironically, as he is in fact addressing the wrong person: 'You ain't foolin' a soul by cleanin' up; I know just what you is'.

We then see Bolger and Brady meeting Pug Rothbaum at his office at the amusingly named Maccabee Pipe and Supply, from where Rothbaum runs his empire. Rothbaum's bodyguards, Shaver and Waddell, stand behind their boss as he lectures the two renegade drug growers Bolger and Brady on their situation, and reminisces (to the bodyguards' utter boredom — we see them rolling their eyes) on how his grandfather came to Oklahoma because of the pogroms in Russia. As Nelson has revealed, Pug Rothbaum is actually a Shylock figure from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*,<sup>38</sup> the Jewish usurer demanding his money back from the hero who is his debtor: 'Who is paying me back my money?' he asks repeatedly. Pug Rothbaum becomes enraged when Brady explains that he is giving up the drug growing business because he is having a family and wants to be a good

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<sup>37</sup> Although Zimmerman is preaching about the concept of the *Halacha*, or Jewish law, the concepts she addresses are relevant for the concerns of the film as a whole. She says that in every generation, anarchy and slavery threaten to engulf the Jews once again. She specifically discusses the case where the Jews, while waiting for Moses to return from the mountain where he is receiving the law from God, dance ecstatically in their worship of the Golden Calf idol. It is interesting that in Pug Rothbaum's office, where he asks Brady and Bolger to meet him instead of at the synagogue, there is a painting of the Jews worshipping the Golden Calf on the wall behind where Brady sits. The implication may be that Rothbaum is also a worshipper of the Golden Calf, since he puts money above morals. Rothbaum tricks and hides from the law of the state: as he reveals to Brady and Bolger, the law does not usually mark out a Jew as a drug-dealer, so to a large extent his ethnic origins afford him some invisibility in evading justice.

<sup>38</sup> See Kung 2010.

father, unlike his own absentee father who died in Vietnam. Rothbaum orders his bodyguards to check the bag that Bolger has on his lap, and if it does not contain his money, to ‘kill those sons of bitches’. This is the cue for Bolger, who quickly draws a gun from the bag and accurately shoots the larger of the bodyguards, Shaver, in the head, followed by Waddell. With those two dead, Rothbaum is vulnerable, and as he reaches for his drawer, presumably to locate his own handgun, Brady stops him, and says: ‘Now, Pug, it ain’t gotta go this way’. But the pugnacious Pug refuses to back down. Armed only with a menorah, he runs at the knife-wielding Brady, echoing Shylock in the *Merchant of Venice*: ‘Prick me, motherfucker, and I sure as shit gonna bleed!’<sup>39</sup> We witness his agonising death throes as Brady fatally stabs him.<sup>40</sup> ‘Get the spray-paint’, Brady orders Bolger, confirming that the whole thing was planned.

As the camera lingers over the bloodied photographs on Pug’s wall (apparently a reference to one of *The Godfather* movies), we hear the voice-over of the Christian preacher at the rest home back in Idabel where Bill is visiting his mother for the first time in many years: ‘Because Jesus is a loving and forgiving God ...’. The preacher relates the well-worn tale about the man walking on the beach who senses someone walking behind him, turns around and sees Jesus. This image is at once echoed when Daisy Kincaid (Susan Sarandon), sitting in the congregation, becomes aware of someone standing behind her. Bill only has to say ‘Hi, mom’ before she knows that it is not Brady but her other son, the prodigal Billy, who has finally returned. She looks around and up at him in joy and amazement. In the scene that follows, Bill explains to her why he has distanced himself from his family: he felt that she gave them no discipline as children, and while she tried to be their friend, who did drugs with them, what they really needed was discipline and ‘something resembling a normal and rational life’, as Bill puts it. Daisy maintains that Bill never needed anything, since he was always disciplined enough, although she admits that the same cannot be said for Brady. The dichotomy in the fact that Bill craves discipline, whereas Brady delights in anarchy, is again emphasised. Daisy’s chaotic way of raising children has not

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<sup>39</sup> This is a reference to Shylock’s famous speech in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, Act 3, Scene 1, especially lines 60-62: ‘If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?’ The mention of death soon after the pricking and bleeding image in Shakespeare’s text seems appropriate to the film as well, as Pug Rothbaum is just about to die.

<sup>40</sup> Nelson has indicated that Brady makes a mistake in killing Pug Rothbaum, suggesting the Classical idea of *hamartia* or a fatal error (Aristotle *Poetics* 1453a): ‘That is part of Brady’s problem: he’s impetuous, violent, and resorts to primitive extremes’ (Giroux 2010). He does allow that Pug was going to kill Brady and Bolger, and that Brady does give the drug-lord a chance to back down.

harmed Bill, but it has not helped Brady. Daisy apologises to Bill for not being the mother he wanted, and Bill indicates that he probably will never see her again.

Meanwhile, we see Brady and Bolger going to Broken Bow, and beating up Jimmy Fuller in a supposed 'revenge' attack for the Fuller Boys' assault on Bill. The stronger brother Buddy Fuller arrives, just as the two are leaving, rushing back to Idabel. Just then Bill, Janet and Colleen are having a lunch of catfish and chips, when suddenly the report of Pug Rothbaum's death comes on the television. Although Brady constantly emphasises that Colleen, who is heavily pregnant, should not be disturbed by all his adventures, in fact Colleen knows far more about his activities than he thinks. She is the first to realise what has happened, and she simply mutters 'Uh-oh!' when the 'breaking' news appears. We see Rabbi Renannah Zimmerman, looking devastated, being interviewed by a journalist about Pug Rothbaum's character. Anti-Semitic slogans and swastikas have been spray-painted all over Rothbaum's business, but the fact that the swastikas have been drawn backwards suggests, according to the reporter, either 'unfamiliarity with this most infamous of symbols, or perhaps more implausibly, that Hindus were involved'.<sup>41</sup> Just then Bolger and Brady return from Tulsa, and Bill confronts them with the evidence that they have been responsible for the murder. We see Bolger drawing in the air, trying to work out which way a swastika should go: 'I ain't no Hindu, man; I been with Bolger all day', protests Brady. 'That Jew up in Tulsa, the one you owed money to' says Bill, 'Tell me you didn't do this.' Brady insists that they leave the room in order not to disturb Colleen.

In the kitchen we witness a confrontation between the evenly-matched twin brothers that soon escalates into violence.<sup>42</sup> Desperate to believe that his twin is not a murderer, Bill is horrified when Brady confirms his suspicions by confessing: 'He was going to kill us and I had no choice'. Rejecting a number of rational alternatives, Brady claims that if Bill had been in the same situation, he would have acted just as he did. Ironically, Bill will find himself in just such a situation sooner than he realises, and, as we shall see, he reacts just as Brady predicts. Brady reveals that Bill acted as his alibi in Idabel while he was in Tulsa (and is thus an accessory to the murder). Infuriated, Bill rushes at Brady and tries to throttle him,

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<sup>41</sup> Brady reveals that the reason for the anti-Semitic symbols and slogans is to disguise the fact that the murder of Rothbaum is a drug-related crime. Bill's previous criticisms of what he perceived as anti-Semitism in Brady have arguably given the latter the idea of making Rothbaum's murder look like a hate crime.

<sup>42</sup> There is a strong mythological tradition for violence between twins (Girard 1988:65-69): well-known Classical examples are Eteocles and Polyneices, and Romulus and Remus. The fascination lies partly in the fact that identical twins are evenly matched, so if one overcomes the other this has to be ascribed to an additional factor, like determination or outrage.

yelling ‘You are going to ruin my life!’ ‘Ain’t nobody gonna know’, Brady gasps. The brothers wrestle in earnest, as Brady attempts to free his neck from Bill’s vice-like grip. Just then the phone rings. The caller is Bill’s friend Professor Nathan Levy from Harvard, who, as we have previously seen, is the type of person who will warn Bill if he has a dollop of sauce on his chin; now he warns Bill that he is about to be ambushed by allegations of sexual misconduct at the workplace. Nathan reveals that there was a witness to this misconduct, something to do with ‘a co-ed and a poem’ (shades of the Ovidian *carmen et error?*). Nathan informs Bill that until the scandal blows over, Harvard cannot make him any public offers.

On a high bridge out of town in the late afternoon, we see Bill calling Anne Greenstein on his mobile phone. We hear her explaining to Bill that she wrote a poem for him in Latin for when he got back, which she describes as ‘a send-up of Vergil in dactylic hexameter’, in which both she and Bill appear as characters in the *Aeneid*. A scenario involving Dido and Aeneas, the great and tragic love affair of the first four books of the *Aeneid*, is perhaps the first possibility that springs to mind.<sup>43</sup> Anne relates how another student, Mark Loeb,<sup>44</sup> read the story over her shoulder in the library, translating it on sight, despite the fact that it had five hortatory subjunctives.<sup>45</sup> Mark Loeb was apparently furious about a relatively low mark for a Lucretius paper that Bill had given him, so deducing from the poem that Anne and Bill had a relationship, he went to the department to complain.<sup>46</sup> Maggie

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<sup>43</sup> There are interesting parallels here: not only is Dido (Anne) more enamoured of Aeneas (Bill) and more enthusiastic about the relationship than the latter is, but just as in Vergil’s epic Aeneas is compelled to desert Dido because his destiny lies elsewhere, Bill will not be returning to Anne, because, as the film seems to suggest, his destiny lies not on the East Coast but in Oklahoma; likewise, just as Aeneas is fated to marry Lavinia, the famously blushing princess of the Latins, so Bill finds himself in Janet a more modest consort rooted in the land of his destiny.

<sup>44</sup> It is hard to believe, given Nelson’s Classical background, that this is not a reference to the Loeb Classical Library, a collection of parallel translations of Greek and Latin texts in English; it is amusing, moreover, that Mark Loeb is said to be such a good translator since the Loeb books are a series of translations.

<sup>45</sup> The incidence of hortatory or jussive subjunctives in Anne’s poem indicates that, in spite of the Vergilian context, it may be similar to Catullus 5, where the poet exhorts his mistress to live and love with him and not to value the gossip of disapprovers highly: *vivamus ... amemus ... aestimemus ...* (1-3).

<sup>46</sup> What follows is an oblique but compelling reference to Persona Theory, which has been a popular critical approach to Latin poetry in recent years. A reaction against prior biographical approaches where everything the poet said about himself was taken literally, Persona Theory posits the deliberate adoption by the poet of a *persona* or mask that does not necessarily correlate or even overlap with the writer’s historical identity. This reference to Persona Theory arguably occurs when Bill demands: ‘Anne, didn’t you tell him that it was just a fucking poem - that it never happened?’, and the natural

Harman then came forward with the story of how she caught Anne and Bill together in his office. Anne explains how she went to the department and told Maggie Harman that the allegations were not true, but that Harman<sup>47</sup> did not believe her, given that Anne was partly undressed that day in Bill's office. Eventually, after hearing about everything that was going on in the department, Bill says, 'I don't want to hear any more.' Anne shouts, 'Bill, when are you coming home?'

The scene immediately changes to Ken Feinman's car, where his wife is reprimanding their children who are fighting loudly on their way home from a Sabbath outing. Frustrated, Ken switches on his car radio and at once asks his family to be quiet when the news of Pug Rothbaum's murder is announced. When the news reader relates that Rothbaum was last seen alive by worshippers at the Neve Kodesh synagogue in Tulsa, Ken Feinman's mind starts to turn over the unusual events in the synagogue that morning — the fact that he had seen Bill Kincaid, the professor he had met on the plane to Oklahoma, again that day in an unexpected context, but that Kincaid had not seemed to recognise him. We see Feinman arriving at home and, in spite of his wife's protests, rushing to use the Internet in order to find out the truth about Bill Kincaid. He first navigates to Bill's own website, but finally we see him downloading an image of the twins Bill and Brady together from the Hugo Central High School 1984 Yearbook. In a contemporary, online version of the 'recognition scene' of ancient Greek tragedy,<sup>48</sup> Feinman, to his own amazement, has solved the mystery. We then see him going to a gun store, where he reluctantly buys a gun and 'hollow point' bullets, and then heading out to drive to Idabel. Ken Feinman, it is clear, is on a mission.

Meanwhile we see Sheriff Sharpe interviewing the Fuller boys of Broken Bow about the recent appearance of Brady Kincaid and Bolger at the 'Me-tote-em'. The Sheriff finds it hard to believe that Brady was at Broken Bow at the time

scepticism with which Persona Theory is often received is parodied in Anne's tearful response: 'Yes, but he didn't believe me'.

<sup>47</sup> I think that it is not accidental that this character's surname is Harman (harm + man), since she intentionally harms Bill or at least his career by revealing what she saw when she interrupted Anne Greenstein's attempt to seduce him. Greenstein's surname, on the other hand, underlines her naivety (being 'green' or inexperienced) — despite her adult seductiveness, Anne is still young, a mere child, who does not anticipate her actions backfiring. Although she tells the truth, she does not see that other people may be motivated by jealousy or bitterness, and may thus want to believe the worst about Bill.

<sup>48</sup> Aristotle at *Poetics* 1452a defines 'recognition' (*anagnorisis*) as 'a change from ignorance to knowledge'. Although Feinman's story is also potentially tragic, his motives are ultimately base (he wants to blackmail the Kincaid brothers in order to restore his own financial fortunes) and as a result he does not evoke much sympathy from the audience.

when he himself saw him 'as plain as day' at the rest home in Idabel. Buddy Fuller explains that Brady and Bolger were in Tulsa before they were at Broken Bow. All the other Fuller, who is weaker in both mind and body, can do is to nod at whatever Buddy is saying, despite looking utterly bewildered. Finally, what convinces the Sheriff to investigate further is the motive that Buddy furnishes for Brady Kincaid to have murdered Pug Rothbaum — he owed more than \$200,000 to the Tulsa drug-lord for all the state-of-the-art equipment in his 'grow-house'. Furthermore, Buddy reveals to the Sheriff that the person who told him this was none other than Pug Rothbaum himself; Buddy relates that Rothbaum was planning to expand Brady's business and push the Fuller brothers out of Broken Bow.

The scene is now set for a show-down. On the Kincaid property the sun begins to rise over a fence still decorated with festive lights from the celebration two days previously. Unbeknown to any of them, this will be the last day of Brady's life. Bill is sitting on the back porch with Janet, saying good-bye to her before he heads to the airport with Bolger. Brady is holding a watering-can, tending to plants around the house and porch; as we have seen, his Dionysian aspects overlap with the nurturing gods of fertility and cultivation. Suddenly they are interrupted by the arrival of Ken Feinman, who, seeing the brothers together for the first time, immediately reveals to them that he knows that Bill, the one he met on the aeroplane, acted as an alibi for Brady when he murdered Pug Rothbaum. On hearing this, the ever-ready Bolger instantly reaches for his rifle, which he always keeps mounted on the back of his truck, but Feinman draws his own newly-acquired gun and stops him; he takes the rifle away, and places it out of the way behind Bolger's truck.

It soon emerges that Feinman plans to blackmail the brothers and thus solve his family's financial woes. He herds Brady, Bolger, Colleen, Janet and finally a reluctant Bill into a 'cluster'. Bill at first takes the logical, rational approach and attempts to reason with Feinman. When this fails, Bill bravely unnerves Feinman by refusing to stay in the cluster. He moves forward towards Feinman and invites the orthodontist to shoot him: 'Pull the trigger. Put a bullet in my skull. I give up: it's perfect'. Bill succeeds in calling Feinman's bluff. Unable to shoot Bill, as the latter must have foreseen, Feinman allows Bill to take the gun away from him and has a pathetic tantrum on the ground in frustration. When Brady points out that they cannot let Feinman go now, knowing what he knows, the rational Bill insists that they *are* letting him go and invites everybody to go home. As Feinman moves away, Brady steps forward, saying, 'Where do you think you're going?' Brady has realised that Feinman is heading for the other gun, Bolger's rifle that he had earlier placed on the other side of the truck. But Feinman has already located the gun and

fires at Brady, who is walking toward him. Brady is hit in the chest at relatively close range and collapses.<sup>49</sup>

Bill, who still has the other gun in his hands, instantly retaliates, shooting Feinman dead. Bill stands still, shocked that he has just killed someone. Colleen, Bolger and Janet flock around Brady, who is lying on the ground and bleeding profusely. Suddenly the sound of sirens announces the imminent arrival of the police. With the help of the others, the dying Brady manages to summon Bill. He asks him to visit ‘that Rabbi up in Tulsa’ and explain to her that he and Bolger did not mean all the anti-Semitic symbols they drew all over Rothbaum’s premises. Even in his dying moments, Brady has the presence of mind to take Feinman’s gun away from Bill and ensure that his own fingerprints are on it: ‘Now you ain’t killed nobody’.

As the camera rises over the tragic scene, which includes two dead bodies, one mourned over and the other deserted,<sup>50</sup> we hear the solemn voice-over of Bill delivering the eulogy at his brother’s funeral. Ever the Classical philosopher, Bill is expounding on the rational Epicurean view that death is ‘nothing’ to us and therefore should not be feared: ‘Diogenes Laertius has recorded for us the Greek philosopher Epicurus’ thoughts on death. It is irrational to fear an event, if when that event occurs, we’re not in existence; and since when death is, we are not, and when we are, death is not, then it’s irrational to fear death. One might just as well, Epicurus argued, fear birth.’<sup>51</sup> Bill’s eyes are red and he struggles to hold back his tears as he addresses those present at the funeral. Surprisingly, it is not the issue of death, but that of fear that Bill has chosen as his theme. Brady, he says, lived life on his own terms, indifferent to fear. By any normal measure, Bill admits, his brother was ‘a criminal and a colossal fuck-up’ (this raises a few laughs from Brady’s otherwise weeping friends), yet in the years that they were together, while they were growing up, Bill says, Brady gave him ‘the happiest, freest times’ that he

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<sup>49</sup> It is this disagreement between Bill and Brady on how to deal with the situation with Feinman that immediately precipitates the tragic death of Brady; following Nietzsche’s theory, the clash between the logical, controlled approach of the Apollonian Bill and the more instinctive one of the Dionysian Brady results in tragedy.

<sup>50</sup> This image reminded me of the contrasting fates of the corpses of the embattled Theban royal twins Eteocles and Polyneices at the start of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, where Eteocles is given burial rights, but Polyneices is left to rot. While not as extreme a scenario (Feinman’s corpse is deserted because none of his family are there, although one wonders how upset they would have been), the image is striking in the context of a movie which has focused on the dramatic confrontation between a similar (but also dissimilar) pair of twins.

<sup>51</sup> See Diogenes Laertius 10.125; cf. Lucretius *DRN* 3.830-1094, the so-called ‘diatribe on the fear of death’.

would ever know. Bill contrasts Brady's fearlessness and freedom with his own life, which has been motivated, he admits, by fear.<sup>52</sup>

We next see Bill and Bolger in Bolger's truck. We subsequently discover that they are on the third and final journey to Tulsa and back to Idabel via Broken Bow that occurs in the film. Bill asks Bolger about scars that he has on his face; Bolger reveals that he got them in prison when three men attacked him with box-cutters, but Brady saved his life. When Bill protests that his brother was never in prison, Bolger confirms that Brady was in fact in prison for two years on possession of marijuana, adding, 'I think he ain't wanted you to know that'. Bolger reveals that he regrets not having been able to save Brady's life in return, a comment which will prove significant in the final section of the film. Brady and Bolger are on their way to visit Rabbi Renannah Zimmerman at the Neve Kodesh synagogue in Tulsa, just as the dying Brady had requested of them. We see Bolger's truck parked outside the synagogue; then we see Bolger himself sitting inside, taking in, with a certain degree of awe, the huge copper design of a tree on the inner walls of the temple.<sup>53</sup>

Rabbi Zimmerman's office is the third one we have visited in this movie, the others having been Bill's office near the start of the movie, and Pug Rothbaum's office at the Maccabee Pipe and Supply in Tulsa. Zimmerman's office has the nicest, cleanest feel; in contrast to the exciting scenes which occur in the two other offices — one amorous, but frustrated, the other extremely violent — in this office a wistful, but constructive interaction takes place.<sup>54</sup> Bill explains to an incredulous Rabbi Zimmerman that despite all the drawings with which his brother 'decorated' Rothbaum's offices, he was not anti-Semitic. After a pause, Zimmerman asks: 'Was there something else?', as Bill is clearly wrestling with the senselessness of all the killing. Like many other characters in the movie, Rabbi Zimmerman is given a chance to express her ideological viewpoint, in this case one informed by Judaism. The film thus demonstrates some of the qualities of a Platonic dialogue, allowing almost everyone to explain their ideological positions. 'Why, do you think ...?' Bill begins. 'We're animals, Professor Kincaid', she asserts, 'with brains that trick us into thinking we aren't'. 'What, what can I do with that?' Bill asks, despairing. 'Repair', says Rabbi Zimmerman. 'What?' Bill asks, aghast. Rabbi Zimmerman then explains to him the Jewish injunction known

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<sup>52</sup> Nelson has commented in an interview that Bill is ironically a more 'tragic' character than Brady is (Giroux 2010): not only does his *hubris* encourage him to think that he has all the answers to how life should be lived but his fear prevents him from enjoying life.

<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, the meaning of 'Rothbaum' in German / Yiddish is 'red tree'.

<sup>54</sup> Rabbi Zimmerman's first name 'Renannah' appropriately means 'serene grace' in Hebrew.

as *Tikkun Olam*, or ‘Repair the world’: ‘All of us, you, me, your brother, Pug ...’ explains Zimmerman, ‘We break the world. Help repair it’.

Like the two previous trips that he takes to Tulsa in this movie,<sup>55</sup> Bolger’s third homeward trip back to Idabel involves the inevitable stop at the ‘Me-tote-em’ in Broken Bow, and as usual, trouble erupts. This time Bolger and Bill are meeting Buddy Fuller to discuss a business proposition. Buddy is seated at a desk in the middle of a large, empty warehouse. In order to repay all his brother’s debts and leave something over for his family, Bill is proposing that they sell all the equipment in Brady’s ‘grow-house’ to Buddy Fuller. Buddy Fuller, however, does not quite see it like that; he reckons that since Brady never paid Rothbaum for the equipment, and since Brady and Bolger, once released from prison, had replaced him as Rothbaum’s preferred agent for marijuana in south-eastern Oklahoma, Bill should simply give him the equipment. Their exchange quickly develops into a heated argument, and Bill and Bolger decide to leave.

As Bill and Bolger are walking away, however, Buddy Fuller fires an arrow from his crossbow which pierces Bill right through the chest. Bill stumbles and falls. Bolger immediately turns and shoots Buddy Fuller dead. In terrible pain and barely able to speak, Bill begs Bolger to remove the arrow, but Bolger explains he will have to get him to the nearest hospital. Bolger carries him to the truck. Unfortunately, when they get to it, they find the weaker Fuller brother, Jimmy, waiting to ambush them there. Bolger throws him out, and places Bill in the back of the truck. Injured, Jimmy Fuller still manages to shoot an arrow from his crossbow into one of their tyres. The police are on the scene, however, and assist Bolger in getting Bill to hospital. Once there, Bill is rushed to an emergency operation; we witness the excruciating ordeal that he has to endure and hear the sawing that is involved in removing the pieces of the arrow that are protruding on either side of his body. The hospital staff, however, seem to know what they are doing; as Bill told Maggie Harman near the start of the movie, crossbows are ‘inexplicably popular’ where he comes from.

Sometime later, Bolger, Colleen and Janet are in the visitors’ waiting-room at Broken Bow Hospital.<sup>56</sup> The doctor explains to Bill’s anxious friends that the arrow narrowly missed his heart and spine, and that recovery will be slow. He then specifically addresses Bolger, saying, ‘I guess I don’t need to tell you this, but you saved his life’. We see a look of both amazement and peace come over Bolger. He

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<sup>55</sup> The first was Bolger’s trip to fetch Bill from the airport after his flight to Oklahoma, and the second his trip undertaken with Brady on a mission to kill Pug Rothbaum.

<sup>56</sup> It is indeed ironic that the place is called Broken Bow, given all the problems that crossbows have caused Bill, both because of the lie (that his brother had been murdered by crossbow) that lured him back to Oklahoma in the first place and because of the broken arrow that has nearly claimed his own life.

had previously explained to Bill his regret at not being able to repay the favour of saving Brady's life as Brady once saved him in prison. However, the film exhibits, as Nelson has himself observed, a sense of 'Classical balance':<sup>57</sup> Bolger did not save Brady's life, but he did the next best thing by saving the life of his identical twin brother.<sup>58</sup>

In the final scene of the movie, we see Bill and Janet sitting outside the Kincaid house, on the front lawn, drinking lemonade. Bill is well on his way to making a recovery; wearing a plaid shirt and jeans, like Brady often did, and being barefoot and unshaven, he looks far more relaxed than at the movie's start. We hear the crying of a baby, and to our surprise, Daisy Kincaid comes out onto the porch with Colleen and Brady's little girl. She warns Bill that it is going to rain shortly, and then takes the baby to Colleen, who is seated on a porch-swing. They are all clearly living together in one house, at least for the moment.<sup>59</sup> As the first few drops of rain start to plop into the pitcher of lemonade, Bill tells Janet that he plans to continue sitting out there for a while. He relates how scared he used to be of the Oklahoma summer storms, how he hated the fact that he would hide in the closet and cover his ears. So, he says, he went to the library and studied the storms, found out how and why they occurred, learnt the name of every cloud. Janet asks: 'And?' Bill says: 'They still happened'. Janet asks Bill if he minds if she stays out there with him. He says: 'I wish you would'. Bill holds out his hand over a volume of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of grass* that they have on a small table between them, and Janet places her hand in his, as it begins to rain. This final scene contains the most Classical lesson of all, and one of the most significant revelations of ancient Greek tragedy: that no amount of rational philosophy can spare us from the

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<sup>57</sup> Giroux 2010.

<sup>58</sup> Towards the end of the movie, especially after Brady's death, Bill's identity starts to mirror and merge with that of his brother. It is ironic that Bill gets shot with a crossbow, when this was very scenario that Brady had Bolger pretend had happened to him when he phoned Bill near the start of the movie with the premature (and at that stage, deliberately false) news that Brady was dead. Bill, however, survives his real-life crossbow attack. After Brady's death, Bill adopts many physical characteristics that were previously more typical of his brother: he starts to grow a beard, and takes to wearing Brady's clothes. The twin metaphor is no longer just a reflection, but a fully integrated part of the self.

<sup>59</sup> This last scene resembles the typically positive ending of New or Roman Comedy rather than Tragedy. Not only has the slave Bolger been 'freed' from his obligations to Brady's family, as often at the end of ancient comedies (like Messenio in Plautus' *Menaechmi*), but there is also a 'marriage', or at least a long-term relationship, established between Bill and Janet, and a baby.

vicissitudes of life, the ups and downs of fortune. We should call no one happy until his life is over.<sup>60</sup>

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