The Underbelly of the Pursuit of Immortality: Pro-Life Lessons of Select Short Stories

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Abstract: The theme of the search for immortality has been a staple of literature since the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and probably before. Though there have been some noteworthy exceptions, the achievement of immortality without divine intervention or resurrection has largely been viewed by writers of fiction as understandable but misguided and perhaps even catastrophic. There have been dozens of novels and short stories that have imagined such an immortality. This paper will examine a number of these short works of fiction, especially ones by Mary Shelley, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and contemporary writer Wang Jinkang, that imaginatively depict the problems of such a search. Authors such as Shelley and Hawthorne do the service of presenting how a magically or technologically gained immortality of this present body would be a horror to the person; authors such as Wang use images that demonstrate how such a search inevitably connects to abortion and the view that a baby is a product. The paper will draw connections between these stories and what is already happening today.

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THE THEME OF THE SEARCH FOR IMMORTALITY has been a staple of literature since the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and probably before. There is good reason for this obsession. Poor banished children of Eve that we are, the human race understand deep in our

hearts that we were meant to have access to the Tree of Life and that death is, as St. Paul puts it in his treatise on Christ's Resurrection and ours, "the last enemy"—an enemy to be conquered. God "has made everything beautiful in its time; also, he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." So says the Preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes chapter 3, verse 11. We have, however, a deep uncertainty that can beset us, such that the same Preacher can speak ambivalently about our fate only a few verses later in chapter 3, verses 19-21:

> For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth?

While the Preacher may end his book with the certainty that while "the dust returns to the earth as it was," nevertheless "the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Ecc. 12:7) and while St. Paul may tell us that everything will be changed in the twinkling of an eye, uninstructed humanity is not so sure. In our modern myth of an empty universe, the silence of the tomb is not the silence in which God is reversing the course of death; at best it is the silence of a process by which one carbon-based life form disassembles, only to give way to a new form. Immortality can only be found in assimilation to the rest of the universe and we can only say, as do Buddhists and other pantheists to the hot dog vendor, "Make me one with everything."

And yet, modern myths of the universe aside, humans cannot get past that pregnant sense of eternity in their hearts, a sense that cannot stand the idea that our immortality might be simply that of a collective soul. Sammy Davis, Jr., spoke—or, rather, sang—for all of us when he warbled, "I gotta be me." Even the various myths of reincarnation only capture those who believe they have remembered their own past lives—past lives that seem, we might add, to be always those of nobility and adventure rather than of ordinary, likely Chinese, peasantry that surely constitutes the vast bulk of human existence. God may like ordinary people, having created so many of them, but as humans, under the spell of the pride of the eyes and the flesh,

we count our past-life blessings only when they are worthy of a Netflix series.

Yet for those who have not faith in God to whom spirits return and from whom the body is returned in a glorious resurrection, whose glories are such that eye has not seen nor ear heard nor the heart of man conceived of them, nor belief in a benevolent Karma turning us from Egyptian royalty to Shirley MacLaine, the eternity placed in our hearts has always spurred the imagination to imagine seizing such immortality in bodily fashion. And, throughout history, though there have been some noteworthy exceptions, the achievement of immortality without divine intervention or resurrection has largely been viewed by tellers of tales and writers of fiction as understandable but misguided, perhaps even catastrophic. In the modern age, under the spell of scientific medicine that has lengthened lifespans in such a dramatic fashion, there have been dozens of novels and short stories imagining the achievements of immortality and possible immortality.

In this paper I wish to examine just a very few of these stories and their doubts about our ancient and modern quest for a purely human immortality. Two are from writers you have likely heard of—Mary Shelley and Nathaniel Hawthorne. One is from a contemporary Chinese writer named Wang Jinkang, of whom you may not have heard. Shelley's and Hawthorne's brief tales give some fragmentary lessons about the underbelly of even the best-case scenarios of a successful continuation or return to youth, while Wang Jinkang's "The Reincarnated Giant" shows in a more brutal way the price of our search for immortality.

Mary Shelley's "The Mortal Immortal"[1]

Shelley's fascination with scientific power over life-and-death is best known from her tale of Viktor Frankenstein and his eponymous monster, the lessons of which concerning artificial reproductive technologies I spoke a few years ago at this conference. The tale in question, found in her collected stories, is not as rich as her adolescent novel, but it is certainly suggestive.

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[1] Mary Shelley, "The Mortal Immortal," in *Collected Tales and Stories*, edited and introduced by Charles E. Robinson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 219–30.

The story begins on July 16, 1833, with its narrator, referred to in the story as Winzy, celebrating his 323rd birthday. Cutting off the reader's implicit question, he discounts the suggestion that he is the famed Wandering Jew of medieval legend—that figure is over eighteen centuries old. He is himself not sure that he is immortal but suspects that he is. His tale is told in order to "pass some hours of long eternity, become so wearisome to me." He brings up the tales of those whose renewed youth came after a century's long sleep, noting that "thus to be immortal would not be so burthensome: but, oh! The weight of never-ending time—the tedious passage of the still-succeeding hours!"[2]

His tale is that of a young, poor man who had been a student of the famed Renaissance scientist and occult writer Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535). Though he had wished to stop for fear of spiritual darkness, Bertha, the beautiful young orphan who was the love of his childhood, shames him: "You pretend to love, and you fear to face the Devil for my sake!" (220). Entering once again into service, he becomes possessed of a large sum of money. Despite this, Bertha gives her attention to Albert Hoffer, the man whom the lady of the local castle and her protectress has singled out for her future husband.

Consumed with hate, Winzy is told by Cornelius Agrippa that he is working on a cure to love. He instructs Winzy to watch the potion and wake him when certain signs occur. Rather than do so, Winzy, obsessed with the notion of curing his own love for Bertha, takes the potion. When Agrippa awakes, he drops the potion—but does not tell the master he has drunk from it when told that this potion was "the labour of my life."[3]

Rather than having his love cured, the potion buoys him up and he takes Bertha as his wife. Only when Agrippa is near death does Winzy learn the truth. Agrippa has recreated the original potion, to which Winzy asks the obvious question: "How, revered master, can a cure for love restore you to life?"[4] The answer is that this was an "Elixir of Immortality" which is "A cure for love and all things."[5] But as Cornelius Agrippa reaches out to take

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[2] Ibid., 219.
[3] Ibid., 222.
[4] Ibid., 224.
[5] Ibid.

the elixir, fire shoots from it and the vessel is destroyed. The master breathes his last, and Winzy reflects on the possibility that his master's merely "human science" could ever "conquer nature's laws so far as to imprison the soul forever in its carnal habitation."[6]

The fear that it is true, however, had begun to dawn on Winzy, for as he recounts, despite the early joy, Bertha "grew uneasy," becoming "jealous and peevish, and at length began to question me." Her "vivacious spirit became a little allied to ill-temper, and her beauty sadly diminished" as she continues to grow old and he remains a youth. She is fifty, he still twenty. Things become intolerable, and the pair moves finally to western France to escape the eyes of the village. But she dies and Winzy weeps "to feel that I had lost all that really bound me to humanity" (229).

Thus, the more-than-quarter-of-a-millennium he has spent since this tale has afforded Winzy time to wonder continually if he is immortal, fearing that he is—yet too afraid to die. "Yes, the fear of age and death often creeps coldly into my heart; and the more I live, the more I dread death, even while I abhor life."[7] Not willing to become a suicide or even take his chance as a duellist, he closes his tale with the revelation that he will take on an expedition to a place of cold, "warring with the powers of frost in their home," that will test his mortal immortal frame.[8]

Immortality in this life, it is clear from Shelley's story, is a terrible thing. Several details of the story show the difficulty. For one, such an immortality could only be a gift if those we love could share it. Without this, we would indeed be chained to a life without the proper bond to humanity. Though the great joy of this mortal immortality is a body that still courses with life, it comes to seem a prison nonetheless. Second, such immortality is connected, it seems, to sterility. "We had no children; we were all in all to each other," Winzy remarks of Bertha.[9] This is a theme that fits a great many of the modern stories of immortality such as the Highlander movies

[6] Ibid., 226.
[7] Ibid., 229.
[8] Ibid., 230.
[9] Ibid., 227.

and television series and the film The Age of Adaline. And third, there is the fear of both life and death that Winzy experiences.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment"[10]

Hawthorne's brief tale does not extend the story enough to have quite the romantic pathos found in Mary Shelley's tale of immortality. Instead, it is a snapshot of what the return of youth might look like. But it adds an element of realism that is perhaps absent from her story. Dr. Heidegger is an old man known for the death of his fiancée on the eve of marriage a half-century ago. She had swallowed a prescription made by him that led to her death. He now has invited three old men who were once rivals for the hand of the Widow Wycherly, who is also invited.

He wants to experiment on them with waters taken from the famed Fountain of Youth that Ponce de Leon had searched for in vain. He warns them in advance that they must be prepared for youth: "Think what a sin and shame it would be, if, with your peculiar advantages, you should not become patterns of virtue and wisdom to all the young people of the age!" Their "feeble and tremulous laugh" in reply, assuming—or, rather, as they think, "knowing how closely repentance treads behind the steps of error, they should ever go astray again."[11]

Alas, as the quartet drink from the goblets of enchanted water, they grow younger and younger until they are themselves the age at which they fought with each other for the hand of the young woman in their midst. Beginning to frolic and play, with the amusing vision of young people in old people's clothing, there is a foreshadowing in the narrator's revelation that "the tall mirror is said to have reflected the figures of the three old, gray, withered grandsires, ridiculously contending for the skinny ugliness of a shrivelled grandam."[12]

Like the mirror of Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, there is a revelation of the inner state of the group. Despite their purported "knowing," repentance

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[10] Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Doctor Heidegger's Experiment," in *The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, edited and introduced by Norman Holmes Pearson. (New York: The Modern Library, 1937), 945-52.

[11] Ibid., 948.

[12] Ibid., 950.

treads much farther behind than they imagined. Soon the widow is practicing the same "coquetry" that distinguished in a negative way her youth. "Threatening glances" becomes quickly a situation in which, "Still keeping hold of the fair prize, they grappled fiercely at one another's throats."[13] In the melee that ensues, the table is toppled. "The precious Water of Youth flowed in a bright stream across the floor, moistening the wings of a butterfly, which, grown old in the decline of summer, had alighted there to die."[14]

This story, brief, but pregnant with meaning, gives us something that comes from Hawthorne's more Christian outlook: the natural state of mankind under sin is one that prevents any easy understanding of virtue as dispensed by mere experience or old age. The return of youth to those who have not learned to live with virtue will only be a return, perhaps worse, of the same "burning passions"—sexual, jealous, violent—that the narrator says cause them to attack each other's throats.

Wang Jinkang's "The Reincarnated Giant"[15]

Wang's tale is set in the twenty-first century in "J-Nation," a clear stand-in for Japan. Imagai Nashihiko, 72 years old, the CEO of Western Steel Group, and the richest man in the country with one-sixth of the country's land in his possession, makes a somewhat puzzling legal move. His personal lawyer, Kiminao Ninzen, petitions the nation's court in the year 2012 for an "uncontested, preemptive guarantee of rights" on behalf of his client.[16] When asked what this is about, the lawyer explains that Mr. Imagai has a tumor in his right arm that will need to be removed, meaning that a new arm that will be attached will have different fingerprints. While the judge laughs off the petition, observing that "a few simple technical adjustments will suffice" to take care of such a situation, Kiminao notes that there is no "precise definition for the term 'person,'" so Imagai wants to make clear that even if it were only his brain that were left, he would still have his rights.[17] The judge

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 950-1.

[15] Wang Jinkang, "The Reincarnated Giant," in *The Reincarnated Giant: An Anthology of Twenty-First Century Chinese Science Fiction*, edited by Mingwei Song and Theodore Huters (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 313-53.

[16] Ibid., 314.

[17] Ibid.

grants the petition, making clear that Imagai's "brain is the only determinant of his identity."[18] The reader soon learns who is telling this story: Mr. Imagai's surgeon.

The surgeon continues the tale, recounting how soon a certain Mrs. Yamaguchi has been diagnosed with an anencephalic child in her womb. Mr. Kiminao approaches the Yamaguchis, some poor fisher-people, offering them twenty million J-dollars if they will not abort the fetus, but instead give it over to Mr. Imagai for six months so that he may see if a cure can be found. If at the end of the six months no cure is to be found, the child's organs will all be donated.

Despite Mrs. Yamaguchi's objections, her husband's desire for the money ends up winning out. The child is delivered by C-section at seven months, and the six months elapse with no cure. We now find out that Mr. Imagai's surgery is going to be a brain transplant, or rather, as Kiminao explains to an incredulous journalist: "That is incorrect; you have mixed up subject and object. As everyone knows, an anencephalic infant cannot be viewed as an actual person. It doesn't have an identity, and in Christian nations priests don't perform mass for them when they die."[19]

This claim by the lawyer is false. The USCCB's page states quite accurately the Catholic Church's teaching on the personhood of such children: "Doubts about the human dignity of the anencephalic infant, however, have no solid ground, and the benefit of any doubt must be in the child's favour. As a general rule, conditions of the human body, regardless of severity, in no way compromise human dignity or human rights."[20]

But this is a matter of Mr. Imagai's own immortality. We learn that the narrator, Dr. Motose Zeku, was hired over twenty years before under the idea that a young body that had been grafted onto a brain would thus reset the aging and deteriorating brain. Immortality by scientific reincarnation. Motose was promised that if he were able to accomplish this such that Mr.

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[18] Ibid., 315.

[19] Ibid., 320.

[20] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Moral Principles Concerning Infants with Anencephaly," September 19, 1996. https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/end-of-life/moral-principles-concerning-infants-with-anencephal

Imagai survived for one year in a new body, the doctor would receive a twenty percent stake in Western Steel Group, immediately catapulting him into the Forbes 500.

The transplant works. Soon Mr. Imagai is speaking from the body of the infant, yet his needs and desires are still that of the powerful and debauched old businessman. Wet nurses are procured to feed the child. The appetites of Mr. Imagai are, however, enormous. From three wet nurses to thousands, he conducts businesses and drinks milk from young women. Yet from the beginning Dr. Motose sees something different: "There was a trace of evil in his gaze, which was definitely unlike the way a normal infant would view its mother's 'nursies' (breasts)."[21] The famously promiscuous old man's instincts are alight from the beginning in this infant body.

As the story continues, Imagai continues to grow without limits. Something has gone wrong with his pituitary gland that cannot be fixed. Eventually the giant must be placed in the ocean in order to accommodate his gigantic weight—gravity on land would mean that he would simply be crushed. Women are now too small, and the giant must nurse from blue whales. This terrifying giant baby produces massive amounts of waste that pollute the ocean area in which he is floating. As the time comes for the one-year celebration of this operation, the second in charge at Western Steel is discovered to have committed all sorts of fraudulent acts. He commits suicide, and the Prime Minister backs away from Mr. Imagai.

Because this story is less well known, there will be no spoilers for those who want to know what happens. But it is sufficient to say that Imagai's powerful and destructive traits are brought out in terrifying ways that befit a man who would take a child's body for his own use.

Wang's story is often interpreted in economic and political terms as a tale of modern east Asia. There is no doubt that it can be read this way, but it is a story that takes as its baseline the modern desire for immortality and what this generally costs. Mary Shelley's story, bright and cheery in contrast to this one, shows the misery that immortality would be. Hawthorne's tale penetrates deeper into the reasons why such misery would, on average, be much greater than anything the faithful spouse of Bertha experienced.

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[21] "The Reincarnated Giant," 328.

Wang's tale, written within the last ten years, shows us the true dark underbelly of what the search for immortality entails today. It is a search that will involve not merely potions, but the use of humans as products. We have long known about the use of aborted children and stem-cell lines derived from them. We know about the purposeful production of children in order to donate organs to another family member. And an article just last month detailed how 45-year-old technology executive Bryan Johnson spends two million dollars per year on "de-aging" himself, including the trading of blood and plasma with his teenage son, Talmage.[22]

It is a pursuit that seems harmless until one considers the problems with it. Longer life is only a good conditionally. Perpetual life would be a torment without others. It would be doubly tormenting due to the burning passions and evil desires that require something much more powerful than old age and regret to expunge. And the means that will be used to gain such a life will almost always involve the de-personing of some so that other persons might gain—the anencephalic child is not a person, we are told, as "everybody knows." Just as with the legends of vampires and zombies, mortal immortality seems always to be a matter of taking life from other—usually young—people in order that the old might live longer. It is a form of death in life that is not appealing at best and horrifying at worst. We do well to listen to the storytellers.

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[22] Tim Newcomb, "This Guy Is Trying to De-Age by 17 Years. So He's Trading Blood With His Son," *Popular Mechanics*, June 1, 2023. https://www.popularmechanics.com/science/health/a43992798/man-anti-aging-swapping-blood-with-son