

# **Place and Identity in William H. Gass' *Middle C***

Juuso Mäntykivi

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The thesis examines *Middle C* (2013) by the postmodern author William H. Gass and analyzes notions of place and identity in relation to the novel. The theoretical framework of the thesis relies on the definitions of place devised by humanistic geography from the 1970s onwards. The analysis presented in this thesis is based on the view that place and identity are intricately connected and mutually constitutive concepts. The thesis argues that the identities of the main characters in *Middle C* are shaped in relation to their experiences of the personally significant places they inhabit.

The thesis is divided into four main sections. The first section is the introduction, which offers context and background to Gass and *Middle C* and clarifies the concepts of place and identity as they are understood in the thesis. The second section examines how the characters adapt to their changing environments by employing contextually desirable social roles. Particular attention is given to the protagonist Joseph Skizzen and how he manages to pass himself as an esteemed music professor despite lacking actual credentials for the position. The third section considers Joseph as a character and offers further analysis of the motivational factors underlying his behavior. Finally, the fourth section analyzes the significance of domestic places in the novel and how they are linked to the identity development of the characters.

Keywords: place, identity, role, postmodernism, home

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## 1. Introduction

In this thesis, I examine the connection between place and identity in *Middle C* (2013), the third and final novel by the American postmodern author William Howard Gass (1924-2017). Gass worked for 30 years as a philosophy professor at Washington University in St. Louis. He was a prolific writer who in addition to his academic career left behind a body of work, including three novels, four collections of shorter fiction, nine collections of nonfiction, and seven volumes of essays. Gass earned his PhD in philosophy from Cornell University in 1954. His dissertation, titled "A Philosophical Investigation of Metaphor", was completed under the supervision of the famous analytic philosopher Max Black. Other notable teachers present in Cornell during Gass's time there were Ludwig Wittgenstein and Vladimir Nabokov, and while Gass did not study with either of them, the work of both men was influential for Gass' writing (Hix 2002: 4). Gass' passion for the philosophy of language is perceptible in his writing. The majority of his nonfictional works, for instance *The World within the Word* (1978), *Finding a Form* (1996), and *A Temple of Texts* (2006) deal mostly with the intricacies of language and literature.

In terms of setting, Gass' fiction predominantly takes place in the American Midwest. Gass' first two novels, namely *Omensetter's Luck* (1966) and *The Tunnel* (1995) are both set in rural Ohio. His short stories, including his perhaps most famous story *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* (1968) and all four stories from *Cartesian Sonata* (1998) are likewise set in the Midwest. Gass himself remained a Midwest resident all his life. Although the majority of *Middle C* occurs in fictitious Ohioan towns, the novel begins in Western Europe. The old continent remains significant for the development of the characters' identities as I will explain in later sections.

The narrative structure of *Middle C* is nonlinear and shifts constantly between the different stages in the life of the protagonist Joseph Skizzen. The first part of the novel describes a time period before Joseph is born. In late 1930s Austria, Joseph's father Rudi Skizzen senses that life in his native country under the impending totalitarian rule would soon grow intolerable. In order to escape complicity with the Nazi regime, Rudi convinces his wife Nita that they, originally a Catholic family, must disguise themselves as Jewish refugees in order to get themselves smuggled to England. Once they settle down in London, they once again assume new public identities to fit in with their new

surroundings. One day Rudi, then using the alias Raymond Scofield, wins a large sum of money at the racetrack and disappears, leaving his wife Miriam (formerly Nita) and their two young children Joseph and Debbie to fend for themselves. Unable to survive on their own in wartorn London, they seek asylum in the United States and settle down in the fictional town of Woodbine, Ohio.

The majority of the novel's narrative depicts Joseph's journey from his youth to mature adulthood. After high school and a brief stint in college, Joseph finds work at a record store and a public library in Urichstown, a neighboring town. Eventually, he moves back to Woodbine to live with his mother. He reinvents himself as Professor Skizzen, an eccentric academic with roots in the cultural sphere of Vienna, and lies about his credentials to gain employment as a music professor at the local Whittlebauer College. He and Miriam move into an old mansion donated to them by the college. Miriam immerses herself in gardening, while Joseph turn one of their attic rooms into an "Inhumanity Museum" (henceforth referred to as the Museum), a collection of flypapered news clippings that chronicle human atrocities throughout history.

The narrator refers to Joseph as either Joey (in his youth), Joseph, or Professor Skizzen, depending on the social context and time period depicted. In this thesis, the emphasis is placed exclusively on the analysis of Joseph the adult. Thus, the name Joey will not be used. The name Professor Skizzen will be utilized to emphasize Joseph's academic role.

Before continuing to the main sections of analysis, it is necessary to establish a working definition of *place*. Because of the ordinariness of the word, it is necessary to consider its meaning beyond colloquial connotations. The theoretical framework of 'place' that is utilized in this thesis is rooted in the interest raised from the 1970s onwards by humanistic geographers such as Edward Relph (2008) and Yi-Fu Tuan (2001). They emphasized the living experience of the human subject to oppose the positivist scientific thinking of the time, and reinstated the analysis of *place* as a significant academic pursuit. Humanistic geography, unlike other then-prevalent strands of geography, drew inspiration from (and engaged with) continental European philosophers, most notably phenomenologists such as Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Cresswell 2015). To the humanistic geographers, *place* was "a universal and transhistorical part of the human condition" (Cresswell 2015: 35) that was not understood in the everyday sense of the word, but rather "as an idea, concept, and way of being-in-the-world" (*ibid.*).

It is also necessary to clarify the difference between the terms *space* and *place*. *Space* is commonly understood as “abstract, unlimited, universalizing, and continuous” (Giesecking *et al.* 2014: xix), whereas *place* refers to a specific location laden with meaning. Tuan (2001) writes that “[w]hat begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (Tuan 2001: 6). Space is ever-present and impersonal, whereas places are created by human experiences.

Construction of human identity is tied to the way individuals experience place. The philosopher of place Edward S. Casey writes that place is “constitutive of one’s sense of self” (Casey 1997: 684) and this relationship is reciprocal in that place and identity cannot exist without one another (*ibid.*). An increasing awareness of the interconnectedness of place and identity is reflected in the way that discussion of identity has “moved away from traditional queries into who I am, to progressively become a question of when, where and who I am” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 105). In other words, human identity is not a self-contained process, but is formed in relation to individual experiences of place and time.

Identity is certainly an elusive term, with a wide range of possible explanations depending on the disciplinary context, or whether we discuss the term’s personal, social, or for instance national dimension. Katzenstein (1996) writes that the term identity refers to “mutually constructed and evolving images of self and other” (Katzenstein 1996, 14). Thus, identity is understood not as fixed, but as a constant, dynamic process created interactively. Identities can also be defined as “relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self” (Wendt 1992: 397). Identity is negotiated in a cooperation with other people. However, it is important to understand the difference between identity and role: the former refers to an internal experience, while the latter is determined by social context.

In this thesis, I argue that the identities of the characters in Gass’ *Middle C* are negotiated according to the ways they experience the places they inhabit. The academic research of Gass’ fiction has mainly focused on his earlier works, and *Middle C* has largely been overlooked. In my view, the novel renders itself well to the examination of place and identity. In section 2, I analyze how the characters in the novel embody social roles to manipulate the impressions of other people in any environment. In section 3, the focus is on Joseph the protagonist. I examine how his early life in London affects his identity as an adult, and how his traumatic experiences are manifested in the places he creates and

occupies. Finally, in section 4, I consider the significance of home. Specifically, I delve into the way that the individuality of the characters, namely Miriam and Joseph, are bound in the domestic places they construct and cultivate.



## 2. Social roles and place in *Middle C*

The characters in *Middle C*, especially Joseph and his father Rudi, display the capacity to reinvent themselves in order to meet the social expectations of their community. Rudi and Joseph understand that identity is a construct, and are thus able to succeed socially by portraying themselves in a desirable way in any context. It is stated that Rudi believes that “people could choose to be otherwise than the selves that neighbors and the nation had shaped them” (*Middle C*: 13). Rudi, who is described as a person with “as many colors as a chameleon” (*Middle C*: 7), combines his innate acting abilities with a willingness to transform himself to meet the cultural norms of the localities in which he resides. When Joseph grows up, he follows in his father’s footsteps and creates the persona of Professor Skizzen to advance himself in society. While working in the Urichstown library, Joseph comes across a book which contains the famous lines from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, in which the character of Jaques declares: “[a]ll the world’s a stage / and all the men and women merely players” (2.7.138-139).

The famous metaphor of social life as a stage serves as an important motif in *Middle C*. In this section I examine the connection of social roles and places in the novel and how the characters fashion themselves. In the first subsection, 2.1., I apply the dramaturgical theory of American sociologist Ervin Goffman (1959) to examine how the characters manipulate their social roles according to the standards of the cultural and national environments they inhabit. Subsection 2.2. examines Joseph’s role as Professor Skizzen.

The transformations of Joseph and Rudi, his father, can be viewed as self-fashioning, a term coined by the New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt (1980) to describe how social standards dictated the way people portrayed themselves during the Early Modern period. During the sixteenth century, people were becoming increasingly aware of the malleability of identity. Consequently, people modified their public personas according to what was deemed socially acceptable or desirable. In times prior, the ideal had been to model oneself purely in the likeness of God, and although this was still the primary direction of self-fashioning, a new set of possibilities appeared as individuals increasingly began to model themselves according to other people. As Greenblatt writes:

Thus separated from the imitation of Christ [...] self-fashioning acquires a new range of meanings: it describes the practice of parents and teachers; it is linked to manners or demeanor, particularly that of the elite; it may suggest hypocrisy

or deception, an adherence to mere outward ceremony; it suggests representation of one's nature or intention in speech or actions (Greenblatt 1980: 3).

In this excerpt, the social dimension of self-fashioning is highlighted. From the sixteenth century onwards, a shift occurred in people's source of identification towards the social stage. Social roles such as that of a teacher, which Joseph fashions himself into, demand a person to establish themselves as someone with authority in order to successfully meet the demands of the position. Yet this demand to meet expectations also enables one to commit acts of fraudulence – the person may deliberately act in a manner designed to gain leverage over others. Fashioning oneself according to social standards gives rise to “mere outward ceremony” (Greenblatt 1980: 3), and thus the possibility of deceit. Social interactions therefore can be thought of as an act, in which all participants are effectively playing a role they deem suitable to the situation.

## **2.1. Social front**

There is a notable degree of theatricality in the way that Rudi and Joseph behave in a social context. According to Goffman's socio-dramaturgical theory (1959), the face-to-face social interactions that occur in daily life resemble acting performances. Goffman's idea applies especially to closed workplaces such as plants and buildings, but can also be applied to clearly demarcated social interactions in general. In this model, the participants of a social exchange try to (consciously or not) manage and guide the impression that their correspondents have of them. This includes establishing a desired social ‘front’, which is divided into three parts: setting, appearance, and manner. All three parts occur simultaneously, in cooperation with one another. However, I will analyze each part and their connection to *Middle C* separately for the sake of clarity.

The first part of social front, ‘setting’, is used to refer to the physical backdrop and objects of a place which function as “the scenery and stage props” (Goffman 1959: 32) of the social interaction. A setting can also involve other things that pertain to personal “expressive equipment” (Goffman 1959: 34), such as insignia of office or rank, looks, clothing, body gestures, and speech patterns. These equipment might also be referred to as ‘personal front’, and they include “the items that we most intimately identify with the performer himself and that we naturally expect to follow the performer wherever he goes” (*ibid.*). An understanding of the importance of ‘setting’ is what enables Rudi and Joseph to assimilate into the daily life of the different places they inhabit.

When Rudi assumes the role of a Jewish man named Yankel Fixel, he begins to wear a yarmulke on his head, and makes a point of following kosher in public. As the Englishman Raymond Scofield in London, he molds himself into what to him represents a quintessentially English person: he gets a job at a betting track, grows a “tentative slim mustache” (*Middle C*: 13), and practices raising a finger to the bill of his newly-bought cloth cap. He also begins to sneak cues of his innate cultural familiarity into conversations, referencing popular English culture ranging from music-hall songs to the Victorian-era comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan (*ibid.*). The Jewish yarmulke and the ‘quintessentially English’ attire that Rudi dons allow him to disappear into the crowd.

Joseph in his professorial role begins to carry a pair of dice which he would “roll across the desktop as if shooting craps” (*Middle C*: 314) to mockingly decide which topics the lecture would include. He grows a goatee, purchases “a pair of funny trousers” (*ibid.*) and begins to wear a cap which, as it is described by the narrator, “could have come from a Fitzgerald novel and looked most at home on the golf course” (*Middle C*: 314). Joseph uses ‘setting’ to his advantage by wearing an attire that is congruent with his idea of an eccentric academic. Clothes in general offer visual cues about a person’s identity. They are not only objects, but also images which, as Elizabeth Wilson remarks, “become associated with or symbolically represent the person who wore them” (Wilson 2003: 2). The people in Whittlebauer college come to associate Professor Skizzen with his strange clothes and objects he carries. Thus, the clothes Joseph wears and the equipment he carries with him are a way for him to embody his desired social role.

The second part of social front, ‘appearance’, relates to the stimuli which imply the social statuses of the person. These stimuli also indicate the person’s “temporary ritual state, that is, whether he is engaging in formal social activity, work, or informal recreation” (Goffman 1959: 34). Thus, appearance is inevitably tied together with ‘setting’ to a certain extent. For instance, the clothes and props that Joseph displays in his role as a professor are also a part of his appearance at a formal workplace environment. For Rudi and Joseph, there is a clear demarcation between their private and public state. Rudi keeps a tight rein on his desired front and maintains his appearance as an exaggerated, stereotypical median citizen. However, in private he still sees himself as “the same young man who had walked along that rock-gardened country lane near Graz” (*Middle C*: 13) where he had first courted Miriam, his future wife. Joseph contends that his true identity is his private affair, that “the best security for that secret self was the creation of a faux

one, a substitute, a peephole pay-for-view person” (*Middle C*: 141). Both Rudi and Joseph maintain a desired front in public, yet drop the act in an informal context, thus indicating the deliberate dishonesty in their process of fitting in with their surrounding societies.

The third and final part of front is ‘manner’, which is used to refer to the stimuli that function as a warning of the “interaction role that the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation” (Goffman 1959: 35). For instance, a person with a superior status is more likely to perform in an arrogant or overbearing manner than someone in a subservient role, who is in turn expected to allow other people to lead the interaction. When Rudi turns into Yankel, Miriam notes that the “deferential, shy, [and] calm” (*Middle C*: 6) boy that Rudi once was becomes a hard, intimidating person. According to Miriam, this behavioral change occurred because Rudi viewed patriarchy as “essentially Jewish” (*ibid.*). Thus, Rudi hardens his manner to meet what he deems as the social expectations of a Jewish family man. Joseph, in the role of Professor Skizzen, models himself after his idea of an offbeat professor. He fakes a slight German accent and behaves in an arrogant manner toward his students. For instance, he reprimands a class who fail to grasp his obscure references: “ah, yes, no surprise to me ... ignorance ... ignorance is an epidemic” (*Middle C*: 238, punctuation as in the original). He also habitually enters the classroom in a manner described as “a look that said, I am listening to distant music” (*Middle C*: 314). Joseph’s arrogance can be interpreted as a way to protect his private identity by establishing himself as an intellectually superior authority figure.

Besides Rudi and Joseph, there are a few peripheral characters who preserve a specific social front in front of other people. Many of them are similar to Joseph’s role as a teacher in that they are able to utilize an existent trope character as a model for their behavior. When the Skizzens relocate from London to Woodbine, Joseph’s sister Debbie quickly adopts the habits of the American girls in her class. Joseph is perplexed by her swift transformation into what he dismissively calls a “vain and zealous cheerleader” (*Middle C*: 164). After marrying and moving into her husband’s farmhouse, she settles down into the role of a doting wife and mother. The two women who work in the Urichstown library, namely Marjorie (also referred to as Miss Bruss) and Miss Moss, uphold stereotypical notions of librarians as somewhat outdated characters, who are either timid or uptight by nature. Miss Moss is described as a pale, silver-haired figure who speaks in a barely audible whisper and is known for “floating about in the dark lanes and corners of the library” (*Middle C*: 168). The similarly silver-haired Marjorie is the strict manager of the

repository, who values silence and order above all else. She acknowledges the familiarity of the social front she maintains. As she tells Joseph: “I know the jokes. Do I have my hair in a bun? With a pencil thrust through it? But we have to admonish; we have to shush. We have few funds and can’t replace books easily, so we must be particular” (*Middle C*: 173). In order to succeed as the head of a small, financially deprived town library, Marjorie feels she must approach her duties with an unwavering determination. She must conserve her social front as the somewhat intimidating librarian to protect the library’s valued resources. Underlying Marjorie’s thinking seems to be the idea of the library as a mere place of storage, instead of perceiving it as a social center for the Urichstown community.

The only character who displays an unwillingness to establish a deliberate social front is Miriam. Contrary to Rudi and Joseph, she seems to value integrity of character. Although she grudgingly complies with Rudi’s demand that they must fake being Jewish, she initially protests and states: “I am not a fake” (*Middle C*: 13). She becomes annoyed when the young Joseph questions the stability of identity, stating how “you knew for a lifetime, and a lifetime before that, because you could perceive it in the grandparents, provided you knew them, who someone was” (*Middle C*: 31). To Miriam, one’s sense of self is something which is seeped into the genes, passed on in a transgenerational way. The idea of a shifting, multifaceted personal identity seems preposterous to her because her self-perception is so rooted in the history of her and her family in Graz. Miriam’s emotional connection to Graz is examined in greater detail in section 4.1.

## **2.2. Joseph in the role of Professor Skizzen**

Joseph decides that to protect himself, he must “define himself as an au courant guy, someone hard-edged and up-to-date, as well as a bit menacing” (*Middle C*: 301). He realizes that in order to pass convincingly as an esteemed expert in his field, his life must become routine. As it is stated in the novel: “[h]e began to realize that repetition was a principle element in his nature. He was constantly revising the habits of his life, his thinking. It was like learning to play the piano” (*Middle C*: 349). Since Professor Skizzen is a fabrication, Joseph must not draw attention to inconsistencies in his demeanor. Therefore, the professorial role cannot be merely a superficial act, but to become muscle memory.

Joseph's choice of specialization reflects his goal of protecting himself. He decides to specialize in the works of the Austrian-American composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951), not because he genuinely appreciates it, but because he deems Schoenberg to be a subject of research that would be intimidating enough to prevent anyone in the college from confronting Joseph about his work. Schoenberg was the leader of the so-called Second Viennese School of composers who strove to expand the boundaries of classical music in the early twentieth century. In particular, they focused on reconstructing the concept of tonality (Simms 2000). This led to the invention of so-called 'atonal' classical music. Atonality generally refers to music that unlike most of Western music does not revolve around a single tonal center, i.e. any of the twelve keys (Simms 2000: 4). In other words, atonal music defies the expectations of the Western ear, which can make it challenging for the listener to understand or enjoy. As Professor Skizzen explains the concept to his students: "what has been disrupted is an entire tradition of sonic suitability, century-old habits of the ear" (*Middle C*: 245). Specializing in Schoenberg allows Joseph to distance himself from others. Consequently, he is left in peace with his fabricated persona intact.

Schoenberg's atonal period was followed in the 1920s by his 'twelve-tone technique', a new method in which all twelve tones of the chromatic scale were given equal importance, instead of basing the composition around a given tone (Hyde 1985). The influence that the twelve-tone method has on Joseph is apparent in the final, complete form of the Sentence: "[f]irst Skizzen felt mankind must perish, then he feared it might survive. Twelve tones, twelve words, twelve hours from twilight to dawn" (*Middle C*: 352, italics added). If any of the twelve words were removed from the sentence, it would not be intelligible. As in twelve-tonal music, each word of the Sentence has an equally significant function. The significance of the Sentence will be analyzed further in section 3.2..

Joseph creates Professor Skizzen by imitating the sort of taste that he believes suits the role. Choosing classical music as his field of study is connected with his desire to associate himself with high culture. As Yoshihara (2007) writes: "[t]he appreciation of classical music itself is a mark of distinction and of sophisticated taste in the modern world. Patrons of classical music generally represent a small, well-educated, affluent segment of the population (Yoshihara 2007: 132). However, Joseph lacks *cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1986), i.e. the non-monetary assets which affect social mobility. He is not

highly educated nor is he rooted in the cultural sphere of Vienna as he claims. Joseph embodying the role of an eccentric academic can be viewed as self-fashioning (Greenblatt 1980) because he is creating himself by mimicking the preferred cultural patterns of the dominant class. By dedicating himself to the work of Schoenberg, a particularly challenging composer, he is hoping to produce the impression that he is someone with exquisite taste. Since a person's taste in music is the most unerring indicator of social class (Bourdieu 1984: 18), faking a deep interest in unorthodox classical music enables him to pass as a member of the upper class.

It has been shown that there is a connection between classical music and class difference. Socio-economic factors correlate strongly with musical taste (Savage 2006) and the genre still remains "the clearest marker of 'educated' musical taste" (Savage 2006: 173). In the UK, university graduates are six times more likely to enjoy classical music than the rest of the population (*ibid.*). In another study concerning the attitudes that middle-class families have towards classical music, the genre was implicitly attributed with a gravity and depth of meaning deemed missing from other forms of music (Bull & Scharff 2017). The perceived superior significance of the genre was evident in the way that the people related to it: classical music was not seen as entertainment or background music designed to accompany other activities, but an inherently valuable art form connected with "people's identities and sense of self" (Bull & Scharff 2017: 296). These identities were firmly rooted in middle-class values, and the appreciation of classical music was seen as a natural part of life. This purely aesthetic value placed on classical music can be viewed as an emulation of the lifestyle preferences of the upper class (Bourdieu 1984).

The association of classical music with high culture inevitably draws accusations of the inaccessibility of the genre. Classical music is often opposed as "a bastion of elitism and privilege", as put by Estelle Jorgensen (2003: 130). The claims of elitism are not only based on class differences, they also consider the spatial requirements of the artform. As live classical music tends to be performed in grandiose spaces such as concert halls, the formality and coded practices serve to intimidate the uninitiated. Appreciating classical music performances necessitates that the audience members grow accustomed to the prestigious venues used as places of live performance (Bull & Scharff 2017: 292). There are certain resources and a level of familiarity that are demanded of a person for them to gain access to these spaces or to inhabit them comfortably.

It must be emphasized that while his love for Schoenberg is a fabrication, Joseph displays an affinity for music before he assumes the role of Professor Skizzen. Throughout his journey through small Ohioan towns, Joseph finds solace in music. While he works at the High Note record store in Woodbine, he prefers to stay at the store after closing hours, listening to classical records. He is also an amateur pianist, and while he lacks a piano of his own, the moments he spends in rooms equipped with the instrument provide him with meaningful experiences. By immersing himself into the sound he creates on borrowed pianos, Joseph is momentarily enclosed in an aural space of his own creation. The young Joseph's (Joey's) piano teacher Mr. Hirk affirms this idea to him during one of their lessons: "Do D. [...] [h]ear? The note is everywhere again. Not at the end of your finger. In its own space! That's where it is, filling us up with it, making a world of its own on its own. [...] But when we listen to music we enter a singular space Joey, a space not of this room or any road" (*Middle C*: 48-49). Mr. Hirk affirms the notion that music can be thought of as a sonic space in which one can enclose oneself and find momentary solace. Once Joseph turns into Professor Skizzen, he loses this connection with music. Instead, he begins to flaunt himself as a haughty caricature of a music professor, a parody of his former passions. The underlying motivations of Joseph's behavior are examined more thoroughly in the next section.



### 3. Joseph as a character: Introduction

*Middle C* is mostly narrated from a third-person perspective, and despite extensive descriptions of Joseph's thoughts and behavior, his inner life is never disclosed from his personal perspective. There is an inevitable distance between the reader and the protagonist. Furthermore, Joseph is a deeply contradictory character. On the one hand, he wishes to be "so ordinary as to not count" (*Middle C*: 303). On the other hand, he deliberately presents himself as an erratic, unorthodox outsider. Besides Joseph's wish to extricate himself from human heinousness, no conclusive explanation is offered as to why he devotes such a vast amount of energy to a life of pretense.

In my view, Joseph's alleged goal of moral neutrality is not an adequate explanation for his idiosyncratic behavior. He pretends to live his life according to a moral code which extricates him from the crimes of humanity, yet he simultaneously commits morally questionable acts and rationalizes them to himself to avoid feelings of shame. He convinces himself that his wrongdoings are not his own fault, but a product of unfavorable circumstances. For instance, he justifies his lying about his qualifications by asking: "is it my fault if I had no training and had been denied by circumstances the tutorial skills of the great Gerhardt Rolfe?" (*Middle C*: 351). The wry humor infused in the narrative, combined with Joseph's conflicted accounts of his own motivations further serve to prevent the reader from realizing the extent of Joseph's estrangement. As a consequence, the reader might be inclined to accept Joseph's perspective as genuine. I argue that there is a deeper cause that underlies his actions, namely his traumatic past. Having been abandoned by his father as a child, Joseph is operating from a fundamentally wounded position.

In this section, the focus will be on Joseph. First, I examine the psychological factors which underlie Joseph's behavior. In my view, Joseph's traumatic childhood experiences are the primary attribution to his behavior. Secondly, I analyze how these traumatic experiences are manifested in Joseph's obsessive interests, namely the curating of the Inhumanity Museum and the reworking of the Sentence. Finally, I consider Joseph as a fictional creation in context with the characters from Gass' other works, mainly his 1995 magnum opus *The Tunnel*.

### 3.1. Trauma: London and displacement

The narrator in the novel does not explicitly state that Joseph is affected by his past. However, my contention is that Joseph is operating from a fundamentally wounded position due to traumatic events in his past. By referring to Joseph's trauma, I specifically refer to *post-traumatic stress disorder*, or PTSD. Cathy Caruth (1995), one of the most prominent scholars on the relations of trauma and literature, points out that while the term was initially used to describe the delayed onset of trauma-related ailments that soldiers struggled with after returning from the battlefield, the term has since been extended to describe a much wider range of trauma-related phenomena (Caruth 1995: 3). PTSD is difficult to define in precise terms because of the complex nature of the disorder, but it is generally agreed to include "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event" (Caruth 1995: 4). In my view, there are two sources of trauma that affect Joseph according to his thoughts and behavior.

The first source of Joseph's trauma is rather apparent: the unforeseen disappearance of his father Rudi when Joseph was a child. Joseph is evidently traumatized by the abandonment. The regularity in which his thoughts return to his father indicate that he is emotionally wounded by the event. Rudi remains a looming figure in Joseph's mind, and he relates to his father in a conflicting manner. On the one hand, Joseph confesses to a feeling of hatred towards his father, and he and Miriam often discuss Rudi's disappearance. During one of these discussions, Miriam states that she is glad Rudi is gone, to which Joseph replies that he feels the same way (*Middle C*: 332). On the other hand, despite his resentment, Joseph also seems to identify himself with Rudi, and accepts his father's quest of moral inculpability as the guiding principle in his own life. He tells Miriam that he wants to imagine that Rudi "ran away from more than blame, [...] that he tried to do no harm when harm was a universal habit" (*Middle C*: 106). Joseph's own worldview mirrors that of his father; he views himself likewise as a person striving to remain "unspoiled by the terrible history of the earth" (*Middle C*: 321). In my view, this shirking from responsibility is an expression of Joseph's inability to cope with the reality of his father's disappearance. He is continually attempting to reframe Rudi's leaving in some sort of honorable light. The pathological devotion to his father's memory implies an underlying trauma. As Caruth (1995) writes:

[t]he [traumatic] event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event (Caruth 1995: 4-5, original italics).

Caruth's point about the persistence of trauma applies to Joseph, who is unable to move on; his life revolves around the mystery of Rudi's vanishing. The sense of being abandoned continues to distress him decades after the fact. Joseph is trying to sublimate the traumatic event by assigning positive attributes to Rudi's character. In doing so, he fortifies the image of his father as an admirable person of moral character. It can be stated, in Caruth's fashion, that Joseph is 'possessed' by Rudi's betrayal. Joseph's musings on his father can be viewed as a way to sublimate the pain of abandonment.

The second trauma that I argue Joseph is inflicted by is related to his formative experiences in Europe. In order to evade the influence of the Nazis, Rudi gets himself, Miriam and Debbie smuggled to London, where Joseph is born. The Skizzens become the Scofields, yet the family soon find themselves on the receiving end of an aerial invasion orchestrated by the fascist regime they sought to escape.

The year of Joseph's birth is not specified, but since the Blitz began in the autumn of 1940, it can be estimated that he was either born earlier that year, or during the final years of the 1930s. The world he is brought into is a war-torn hellscape, one which the grown-up Joseph comes to remember as "a nighttime world of noise and fear and fire" (*Middle C*: 5). The family makes their lodging "more in a pile of rubble than a building" (*ibid.*), in a three-wall tenement with collapsed stairs and many shattered windows. Considering that London is also where Rudi disappears, the city as a place is inarguably significant to the formation of Joseph's identity. His memories of his early childhood are described as thus:

[m]ostly, when he recalled parental faces, he saw anguished eyes and swollen cheeks, voices tired beyond terror – bodies that could scarcely bear their clothes: these were the companions of his every moment [...] (*Middle C*: 33).

Joseph is evidently haunted by memories from the time of the invasion. His early existence during the destruction of London inevitably affects his later development. The mention of weary, anguished faces accompanying him constantly years after the fact points to an unresolved trauma. The fact that the memories are connected with 'parental faces' can be interpreted as a loss of the fundamental source of stability and security

which a parent is supposed to provide a child. The fact that Joseph is abandoned by his father Rudi only serves to intensify the images of despair Joseph associates with his childhood.

A central feature of PTSD is the way the person is habitually overcome by the traumatic event. The disorder thus involves, in Caruth's words, a "literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits" (Caruth 1995: 5). In Joseph's case, his London past returns to him through visceral sensory experiences. He mistakes objects for deceased people, viewing a misplaced grocery sack as "a bit of body he had encountered in the rubble when he was barely old enough to walk" (*Middle C*: 33). Furthermore, certain food smells are associated with childhood in his mind, and these smells cause him to "push his present plate away as if it were a threat to his life" (*ibid.*). Because Joseph's mind is depicted from the outside by a third-person narrator with limited omniscience, the extent or intensity of these intrusive recollections is not made explicit. It is not clear whether Joseph has a minor, ephemeral impression of the traumatic events or whether he experiences the less common symptom of trauma, i.e. a flashback, during which the traumatic event grips a person with an intensity that causes them to dissociate and to "[feel] as if they are back at the time of the trauma" (Bourne, Holmes, and Mackay 2013: 1521). However, the above excerpts indicate that Joseph is afflicted by memories of traumatic events, which occupy him against his will.

The instability of Joseph's early life and his consequent displacement must also be noted as a significant factor for the formation of his identity. In the following excerpt, Joseph reflects on the confusion which arose in him as consequence of the Skizzen family's perpetual relocating:

For how many months of his short life had he been poorly dressed, hungry, and generally uncomfortable, sometimes seriously sick, full of fear for the future, scrunched in a crowded railroad car, staring out of smudged windows at dim meadows, [...] or how many hours had he passed standing in the aisles of buses under the elbows of adults or spent being borne about in a blanket, eyes on an unrecognized sky, helpless and in ignorance of every outcome (*Middle C*: 32-33).

The imagery of vehicles can be viewed as an analogy to Joseph's lack of rootedness in a certain place. Trains, for instance, dissolve the borders between places. They run past different locales and national borders, shaping the scenery outside the railcar with the same sense of transience. Joseph was born amidst a war, and the world he experienced from the beginning was one with no sense of security. Thus, his formative years are

inevitably characterized by displacement: the possibility of a safe attachment to place is eradicated. As a consequence, Joseph grows up to be a person who lacks any sense of a 'true center'. The adult Joseph has "hidden his ego [...] beneath the layers of his cultivated public selves" (*Middle C*: 271) to the extent that he notes: "I have no more 'me'" (*Middle C*: 354). This lack of self-integrity is a common feature of the post-traumatic experience. In the words of psychiatrist and Holocaust trauma expert Henry Krystal, the post-traumatic state involves "an impoverishment of the areas of one's mind to which the "I" feeling of self-sameness is extended, and a hypertrophy of the "not-I" alienated areas" (Krystal 1995, 85). The entirety of the person's experience of life, including their inner life, is dictated by phenomena that exist outside of themselves, their sense of connection with their authentic self. In the case of Joseph, he identifies so strongly with his role as a fabrication that he loses contact with the self behind the façade.

### **3.2. Joseph's attic: The Museum and the Sentence**

Joseph's life outside of work is not one which embraces a wide range of complexity. On the contrary, he seems to negotiate his relationship with reality through two activities: the curating of the Inhumanity Museum, a self-curated room in his attic, and the redrafting of the Sentence, combining the fear of humanity's inevitable doom with the dread of its survival. In my view, Joseph's obsessive interest in the two can be interpreted as a symptom of the traumatic experiences discussed in the previous subsection. I argue that the Museum and the Sentence are both projects driven by Joseph's need to cope with his harrowing past. Furthermore, they serve a metafictional function in that they offer commentary on the craft of writing itself.

While Joseph does manage to revise the sentence to his liking, the museum remains a seemingly endless project. The museum is a compulsion that he cannot keep from feeding. Throughout his writing career, Gass has mentioned in interviews (LeClair 1977, Schenkenberg 2014) how the works of the modernist author Gertrude Stein, and specifically the sentence "[i]t looks like a garden but he had hurt himself by accident" (Stein 1935: 226), has influenced his own writing. In *Middle C*, Joseph's traumatic childhood is the 'accident' which results in the creation of the inadvertent 'garden', i.e. the attic lined with news articles of inhuman acts and atrocities.

Joseph's obsession with the Museum is evident in the way he continues to conserve it even after losing heart with the project. Joseph converts one room of his attic into a

museum as a way to discover "an unrequited urge at the center of the species, a seed or genetic quirk, an impulse, bent for destruction" (*Middle C*: 269) which would help explain the shortcomings of humanity. He initially hopes that the Museum would be discovered after his death and his work would be accessible to visitors. However, he grows disillusioned with the whole enterprise and he reprimands himself: "wasn't the museum designed to the specifications of your pleasure, and your pleasure alone?" (*Middle C*: 352). He comes to realize that the museum has brought him no closer to any deeper understanding; that "[o]nly his madness progressed, along with the museum that was its most persuasive evidence" (*Middle C*: 268). Despite his disillusionment, Joseph cannot help but continue expanding his collection.

There is of course a discrepancy between Joseph's lofty initial intentions for his Museum and the actual end result. It can be argued that a single room filled with disparate newspaper articles on a loosely defined theme is not an adequate basis to warrant the use of the term 'museum'. Furthermore, the Museum fails to meet the demands that a museum is expected to fulfill. Museums as places should have a communal function: they should not be understood as mere collections of objects, but in relation to its visitors (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 138). In addition to their documentative value, museums should function as "agents of well-being and as vehicles of social change" (Silverman 2010: 2-3). While Joseph may have endowed the project with a future audience (and posthumous personal recognition) in mind, his exhibition lacks any interactive elements that would render the experience meaningful for the possible visitors. The Museum is thus disconnected from the social responsibility commonly bestowed on the institution. Joseph's room in the attic of his rundown mansion is less a museum than a manifestation of his attempt to cope with his traumatic past.

The museum is not cut off from outside influence; the windows of the attic give to the large yard. The windows enable Joseph to observe and to construe the outside world from the safety of his preferred environment, without a need to participate. Thus, Joseph is not cut off from the world even in his apparent solitude. As Matthew Bowker (2016) asserts: "being alone is coincidental with, and not contradictory to, being oneself among others and relating to others as a separate self" (Bowker 2016: 108). The Museum as a project is built on the basis of the fact that Joseph is a constituent of the larger whole of humanity. The fact that Joseph strives to find attributions to the failings of his species indicates that his life is still negotiated in interaction with others.

Windows as a literary motif are frequently used to ponder metafictional questions (Zocco 2013). In the works of William H. Gass, who coined the term metafiction (Gass 1970: 24-25), windows are commonly used to highlight a range of ideas, including the open-ended nature of perception (Pence 2000). Gass' magnum opus *The Tunnel* (1995) contains a chapter titled "Why Windows are Important to Me", and his early short story "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country" (1968) features a downhearted protagonist gazing at a dismal Midwestern landscape. In another short story "Icicles" (Gass 1968b), a character by the name Fender is fascinated by what he observes through his window, yet paralyzed by the awareness that he himself is simultaneously exposed to the world.

Windows inevitably offer a limited viewpoint in that they frame only a narrow selection of the world. As a consequence, windows, as argued by Gianna Zocco (2013: 10) "[transform] reality into an artificial space that does not exist independently from the window". Thus, windows provide a suitable metaphor for the examination of writing and the writer's life as a whole. A window, like a piece of writing, is a medium which organizes our observations. Joseph as a character then becomes the screen through which the course of the novel is mediated, and the distortions of his mind guide the reader's interpretations of a manufactured reality. When considering Joseph's (and his family's) status as fictional creations, it might be worth noting that the word *Skizzen* is German for 'sketches'. The family name of the major characters thus contains the intimation that, after all, they function as outlines for authorial ruminations.

Although a window in Gass' fiction may have multiple functions, Hix (2002: 126) maintains that it "always advances a metaphorical ideal for lucidity in writing". In *The Tunnel*, the protagonist William Kohler is writing an introduction to his major work *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*. The project soon deviates from its original purpose and morphs into *The Tunnel*, an unrelentingly spiteful and personal account of Kohler's and his wife Martha's life. Kohler is notably similar to Joseph: both characters work as professors in the US Midwest, relate to humanity in a bleak manner, and devote their time to the examination of the atrocities of history. Meditating on windows, Kohler states: "[t]hree spaces matter in my life; they are my trinity; the pane of the window, the white of the page, and the black of the board" (Gass 1995: 311). The spaces of the page and the blackboard frame structure his experiences similarly to the window. In *Middle C*, Joseph perceives his reality through the same mediums. The single most significant activity

which frames Joseph's worldview is the Sentence which he meticulously works on in the solitude of his attic.

The Sentence serves two important purposes in the novel. First of all, it has a similar function to the Museum in that it offers structure and meaning to Joseph's life. Secondly, it can be viewed as a metafictional way to comment on, if not indeed to ironize, the unremitting dedication to detail demanded of an author. In the beginning of the novel, Joseph observes the Sentence in its incipient form: "[t]he fear that the human race might not survive has been replaced by the fear that it will endure" (*Middle C*: 22). Driven by a dissatisfaction with the proper phrasing of the Sentence, he continues to modify it. The initial nineteen-word declaration slowly transforms into a full-page account of the corruption of humanity, before reverting to a shorter form. In its final stage, the Sentence reads: "[f]irst Skizzen felt mankind must perish, then he feared it might survive" (*Middle C*: 352). As I mentioned in section 2.2., this twelve-word formulation is designed to imitate the twelve-tone technique of the expressionist composer Arnold Schoenberg, whose work Joseph as Professor Skizzen chooses as his specialty.

The moment that Joseph finally manages to get the wording of his Sentence right is the closest *Middle C* gets to a climax. The Sentence is the only plot element in the novel which is definitively resolved. However, the motivation behind Joseph's interest in the Sentence remains unclear. The origin of the Sentence is described in the following way:

Since he couldn't be sure whether the sentence was a war wound or a tapeworm, he didn't know what to do. [...] The sentence had slowly appeared, gradually shaped itself, and as it had, so had the compulsion to perfect it overcome him, filled and overflowed him as if he were a tub. Enough, he had cried, yet there the flood came, out of nowhere, rolling down stairs like a rapids" (*Middle C*: 28).

Although the underlying reason for Joseph's obsession with the Sentence is not known to him, I argue that it is prompted by his traumatic past. The reference of a 'war wound' suggests that the Sentence is rooted in his childhood experiences in London. There is a helpless quality to the whole undertaking. The rewriting of the sentence seems less like a deliberate attempt to convey an idea and more like a desperate search for something Joseph himself cannot name. Both the sentence and the museum enable Joseph to direct his attention away from himself and toward a compulsive observation of the baseness of his own species. By fixating on how degraded the whole of humanity appears to him, the issues inside his own mind can be escape scrutiny. As a result of his attempt to cope with



trauma, he mentally separates himself from the rest of humanity and thus actively reinforces his own isolation. It is in the attic of his mansion that Joseph creates a place where he can endeavor to come to grips with himself and his past. In the next section, I will analyze the significance of the mansion, and the broader notions of home in relation to the characters of Joseph and his mother Miriam.

#### 4. Home as a place

The idea of home as the place of comfort and belonging is instilled into our cultural consciousness, as popular idioms such as "there is no place like home" suggest. When thinking of home, the word 'house' is an inevitable connotation. Yet home as an abstract concept implies more than a fixed physical location to which we are attached. As Edward Relph (2008) writes: "[h]ome is the foundation of our identity as individuals and as members of a community, the dwelling-place of being. Home is not just the house you happen to live in, it is not something that can be anywhere, that can be exchanged, but an irreplaceable centre of significance" (Relph 2008: 39). The idea of home as a place of 'dwelling' stems from Heidegger (2001), who traces the etymologies of the words 'dwelling' and 'building' back to their shared Old English or High German root: the word *buan*, which means 'to dwell'. He writes: "the way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is *buan*, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell" (Heidegger 2001: 145). Dwelling to Heidegger is what constitutes our 'being' on earth. Places become homes through our way of dwelling, but dwelling is also tied to the process of building. Home is therefore something that is actively made. As Tim Ingold (2000: 57) notes, dwelling in a place for an extended period of time familiarizes us with its characteristics, which are integrated into our daily lives to the extent that the place becomes home.

The significance of the familiar representations of home in a world of globalization and mass migration can be called into question. However, on a local level the traditional idea of the home as a safe and secure haven endures despite the shifting interest in geography to examine mobility instead of stasis (McDowell 2007: 130). In *Middle C*, home stands for a specific physical place of security. Throughout the course of their journey, the Skizzen family has many interim homes, the crudest one being the partly destroyed apartment they occupy in London, which is described as "more rubble than a building" (*Middle C*: 5). It is only after Rudi disappears and the rest of the family relocates to Ohio that they finally manage to establish a steadfast connection with a particular environment.

As for Joseph, there are two homes that can be viewed as particularly influential to the development of his identity. The first place is Urichstown, where the nineteen-year-old Joseph is employed in the town's library. He makes his abode in a furnished garage, which is attached to his employer Miss Bruss' house. While Miriam reprimands him for

accepting a job that pays poorly (“they pay in book paste, those people – in fines and petty change, dime a day for overdue” (*Middle C*: 166)), the garage becomes his home. Joseph is jubilant after signing the contract with Miss Bruss. He has a room of his own, a place to go to work to, and a car that runs well enough to transport him between the garage and his mother’s home in Woodbine. It is in Urichstown that Joseph notes that he feels “encouraged to approach his future with a confidence and an enthusiasm he had rarely known. He wasn’t fleeing from, he was running toward” (*Middle C*: 136). The concept of change had more negative than positive connotations in Joseph’s earlier life. Change has involved him huddling in various vehicles of transportation, poor and fearful, heading to some unknown destination. In Urichstown Joseph gains, for the first time in his life, a sense of control over his surroundings.

The second noteworthy home for Joseph is also the single most important home in the novel: the old Victorian mansion where he lives with his mother Miriam. The vacant mansion is granted to Joseph by the Whittlebauer college both as a token of appreciation and as an incentive to keep Joseph from relocating elsewhere. Joseph is pleased to leave behind their previous Woodbine apartment, which is described as an “itty-bitty box all covered in vines like an arbor, buried in bloom, a butt of jokes, a place that passing cars slowed for” (*Middle C*: 329). Miriam is delighted about the huge yard which she can turn into a garden, and the basement where her plants can winter over. Even if the house and the furniture that come with it are a bit worn, Joseph and Miriam appreciate it due to their past familiarity with poverty and lousy living conditions. The spacious mansion allows Joseph and Miriam to pursue their interests free of financial concerns, and conceals their eccentric ways and unusual living arrangement.

The house is often thought of as analogous with the human body. As noted by Marjorie Garber (2012: 123), the representations of the house and the body in history have often underlined either “proportion, function, or sex and gender roles”. The first element refers to the tendency to model constructions on ‘natural’ proportions. This habit dates to Roman architecture, specifically the work of Vitruvius, who conceived the idea of using the symmetry of the human body as an architectural model. Garber also notes that there are “natural measurements” included in the Bible, for instance ‘the cubit’, a measurement which was “equal to the length of the forearm from the tip of the middle finger to the elbow” (Garber 2012: 124). The second element is the widespread idea during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance that the house, much like the body, has certain ‘functions’,

which must be kept separate from one other to avoid disturbing the 'organic wholeness' of the entity (*ibid.*). Therefore, the sections of the house associated with 'lower' functions such as the manger, where animals are kept, must be located far from places associated with the 'higher' functions such as the chambers where more cerebral activities occur. Although this hierarchy otherwise refers to a generic 'body' unmarked by gender differences, the 'head' of the house, which controls all of these functions, still refers to "both man (husband, patriarch) and mind" (Garber 2012: 124). In the third element, the 'sex-gender', the difference between male and female bodies is emphasized. Man is again thought of as 'the head', but this time his objective is to keep the woman, 'the heart', enclosed in the house to protect her moral virtue.

According to the patriarchal idea of home, the woman is seen as an auxiliary character who has value in relation to the identity of her husband but is otherwise stricken from the narrative. However, in *Middle C* this idea does not hold true, mainly due to fiscal reasons. Before Rudi disappears, Miriam is working in equal measure to her husband. Should it be financially possible, Rudi would likely constrain Miriam to a largely indoor domestic life. It is evident that Rudi has little regard for Miriam or his children, for he abandons them soon as luck strikes at the racetrack. Before disappearing, he relates to his family in an unkind way. He is shown to be a caustic man whose domineering antics cause Miriam to fear him. Miriam later recalls how "his frowns could silence her in mid-sentence; even his smiles were curved in condescension" (*Middle C*: 3). When she would answer him in a sarcastic tone, he would get aggravated and shoot her with "a glare to bubble paint" (*ibid.*) that would not relent until her "uneasy expression sank into the bottom of her bowl, and the guilty head was bowed in an attitude of apology and submission" (*Middle C*: 4). While they live together, Rudi subjects Miriam to emotional abuse. Once Joseph and Miriam move into the mansion, Miriam is not only free of financial concerns, but also of the unnerving presence of his former husband.

The feminist phenomenologist Iris Marion Young (2005) writes that while she acknowledges that the idea of home is inescapably associated with the oppression of women, she questions "the yearning for a whole and stable identity that the idea of home often represents" (Young 2005: 123). However, she maintains that the significance of home should not be neglected merely on the basis of the historical oppressive weight of the idea. According to Young, home also includes "critical liberating potential because it expresses uniquely human values" (*ibid.*). Although she agrees with Simone de Beauvoir

that home from a patriarchal viewpoint involves the woman being deprived of her subjectivity, she criticizes de Beauvoir's notion that all domestic work is self-sacrificing drudgery (Young 2005: 124). Homemaking then can also be a meaningful activity which has an important function in the perpetual process of constructing one's personal identity. Home can also become, as bell hooks writes, a "place of resistance" for the marginalized, a "space where we return for renewal and self-discovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole" (hooks 1990: 49). To Miriam, the mansion home represents an emancipation from oppressive circumstances and an opportunity for greater self-expression.

Neither Miriam nor Joseph seem to be concerned about the general upkeep of the house. All household objects are scattered around the rooms in an arbitrary manner; nothing seems to have a designated place of storage. Their style of living is described in the following excerpt:

the idea for a possession that was utterly impersonal in its demand for order remained to the pair more foreign than French: that the crayons belong in their box, that pins should be put in their cushion, that plates need to be stacked in the cupboard; or even that states of affairs had their initial conditions to which they should returned" (*Middle C*: 333).

The house is in a state of disarray because they lack the intuitive knowledge as to how their belongings should be organized. Their incompetence in maintaining any semblance of order inside the house indicates that they have grown accustomed to penury prior to moving into the mansion. For the first time in their lives, they live in a building with ample room; they simply are not familiar with such comfortable conditions. Since they no longer need to concern themselves with money, with Joseph gainfully employed and the house rent-free, Miriam is able to retire. This gives her the opportunity to devote herself fulltime to the cultivation of the yard. Eventually the passing cars no longer stop to jeer at their house, but to admire its astonishing garden, which will be discussed in the next section.

#### **4.1. The garden as Miriam's center**

A common way to think of the home garden is to think of it as a miniature paradise, an Eden in one's backyard. The mental benefits of gardening have been well-documented: gardening can provide clinically depressed people with a sense of meaning otherwise missing from their lives (Thorsen & Gonzalez: 2011) and it has been shown to alleviate

the symptoms of some chronic mental illnesses (Perrins-Margalis: 2000). In *Middle C*, Joseph notes that gardening has a reputation of being a superior pursuit in terms of the psychological benefits it offers to humans (*Middle C*: 271). As I display in this subsection, these benefits are reflected in the behavior of his mother Miriam.

According to Catherine Alexander (2002: 868), the garden can be viewed as “a liminal space between the inside and the greater outside, the wilderness”. It can also be a liminal space in the sense that it is, like Miriam’s mansion garden, attached to the privacy of home, yet simultaneously visible to the public. The garden can also be thought of as a place where nature and culture intersect. It has long been seen as “the balancing point between human control on the one hand and wild nature on the other” (Francis & Hester 1990: 2). Another similar view is that gardens are nature that has been enhanced or idealized through human activity. David Cooper (2006: 24) writes that “[t]he best gardens [...] are to be enjoyed or admired as approximations, not to the empirical world, but to an ‘ideal’ nature from which ‘rude’ nature makes a ‘fall’”. He also states that while gardens are designed to resemble natural places, they can also be thought of as works of art. All these ideas of the home garden derive from a medieval idea of home gardens, *hortus conclusus*, which according to Dale & Burrell (2008) referred to “the enclosed private space for contemplation which included hints of the wilderness but all under very firm control” (Dale & Burrell 2008: 261). It is evident that the garden is viewed mainly as a positive place, one which invokes images of a somewhat noble pursuit of humanmade harmony with the natural world.

Once Miriam settles into the mansion, she becomes increasingly immersed in the craft of gardening. The land she cultivates reflects her personal growth. As the narrator states: “[f]or Miriam, as [her] proficiencies grew, the garden grew, and as the garden grew, she flourished” (*Middle C*: 268). Even Joseph notes an improvement in his mother’s demeanor once the garden begins to take form, and he is pleased that Miriam at long last finds joy and meaning as the direct result of her devotion to gardening. In relation to the garden, Miriam displays what Relph (2008) calls an ‘authentic attitude to place’, i.e. “a direct and genuine experience” which originates from “a profound and unselfconscious identity with place” (Relph 2008: 63). Miriam habitually loses herself into the craft of gardening, kneeling in the dirt for hours on end, fostering the plot to her liking. There are tangible changes happening constantly as a result of her efforts and the beauty that people stop to stare at is a direct result of her vision. To Miriam, the garden is the place where

she most demonstrates a sense of authority over her life. Whereas previously she has either lived on her husband's or otherwise struggled for material reasons, the garden is solely under her command. The noticeable improvement in her quality of life is testament to the idea that gardening is an activity which has the potential to provide one with a sense of meaning. The garden is not a place that exists independently of Miriam's influence, it is created through constant effort on her part. It is worth emphasizing that the mental benefits Miriam gains through gardening are entirely dependent on her own activity - she is an active agent engaged in a concrete process of turning her visions of the yard into reality.

The garden is a place of peace for Miriam; it presents her with the opportunity to escape from the society surrounding her. Her need of escape is largely motivated by the fact that she misses her hometown Graz. In her mind, Graz is a paradise from which she has been banished against her will, compared to which all other towns feel inauthentic and inferior. She compares Woodbine to Graz to Joseph, stating that "[m]y hometown was a town; there were mountains, a river, good bread; these towns are chicken coops; these towns are slower than ooze; they have no inner character" (*Middle C*: 107). In another conversation she complains that "[h]ere everything is plastic, my job is plastic, spoons are plastic" (*Middle C*: 251). In contrast to the garden, Miriam's attitude towards Woodbine as a place can be seen as 'inauthentic', meaning that she lacks awareness of the "deep and symbolic significances" (Relph 2008: 82) that constitute the identity of the town. Instead, her view of it is informed by some prior frame of reference which leads her to approach the town in a dismissive manner. The town will inevitably be a disappointment to her because she fails to see it 'as itself', as an inherently different kind of place than the Austria of the past, which she holds as the pinnacle of authenticity. Her describing American towns as 'plastic' indicates that she views them as somehow artificial and insubstantial, as opposed to Graz which to her represents the ideal city. Her criticism of American life implies that Miriam views the old Western European lifestyle she has grown familiar with as inherently superior to the new standards she encounters in the United States.

It is hardly surprising that Miriam has a nostalgic relationship with Austria, as it is of course common to be emotionally attached to one's land of birth. As Tuan (2001) points out, most people regardless of nationality "tend to regard their own homeland as the center of the world" (Tuan 2001: 149). He describes the attachment to home in the following

way: “[t]he stars are perceived to move around one’s abode; home is the focal point of a cosmic structure. Such a conception of place ought to give it a supreme value; to abandon it would be hard to imagine” (*ibid.*). Tuan’s reference to home as the center of a celestial order emphasizes the immensity of the affection that individuals form with their place of origin, as well as the difficulty of leaving that inevitably follows. In *Middle C*, Miriam is driven permanently out of the homeland she adores due to circumstances beyond her control. It is in the garden that she finds a way to reconnect with her past.

For Miriam, Graz represents her youth and the times when Rudi was still the gentle boy she fell in love with. Graz is a repository of fond memories of the walks they took in the countryside, of the green lanes lined with various flowers. She demonstrates an early interest in gardening during those walks. The narrator states how she “frequently stooped to inspect those [flowers] that forced their stems up between the many rocks to bloom yellow, blue, and white like bursts of pleasure” (*Middle C*: 6). The garden offers her a glimpse into the days of her youth in Graz, the only place which in her mind appears in living color. The garden offers her “not only reprieve and renewal but romantic transportation to the old days [...] when Rudi Skizzen had begun his love affair with her round wet eyes and when, as Nita Rouse, she had barely recovered from her childhood” (*Middle C*: 267). Thus, the garden has an extrinsic value to her: it is an expression of her longing for home, as well as an example of how exile and homesickness are included in the idea of home. A significant aspect of Miriam’s attitude to her surroundings is dictated not by what can be found, but what appears missing. Garden allows her to forget that she is not where she desires to be. As the narrator maintains: “Miriam began to reflect confidence in all her actions, because the world had been shrunk to the size of her garden, while the principles and problems of gardening became universal” (*Middle C*: 160). The garden is her center, a place which instills in her the sense of solace and meaning that the vocation of gardening commonly provides (Thorsen & Gonzalez 2011; Perrins-Margalis 2000).

#### **4.2. The garden and the Museum**

Miriam’s devotion to gardening is similar to Joseph’s dedication to the Museum. Both of the two places can be viewed as attempts to gain a modicum of control over a seemingly incomprehensible world. The garden and the Museum can therefore be thought of as parallel places, which both instill a sense of purpose in their upkeepers. However, the



manner in which Miriam and Joseph relate to the two places is markedly different. In my view, the characters' differing attitudes towards the garden and the Museum reveal fundamental differences in their temperaments and the way they relate to the world. As I explained in section 3.1., Joseph's thoughts and perceptions are affected by his traumatic past. The Museum is a spatial manifestation of his notion of history as a perpetual series of human atrocities. Joseph extricates himself from others and focuses his attention on the worst aspects of humanity. Miriam, on the other hand, devotes her attention outwards, and the activity of gardening reconnects her with nature, the Woodbine community, and the memories of her joyous youth in the city of Graz.

In the garden, Miriam finds a renewed sense of connection with the natural world. She learns about various seeds, plants, and fertilizers and learns to recognize the behavioral patterns of different animals that frequent the garden. It is stated that she would "work hard on behalf of her friends, moving her ministrations from shade to shade" (*Middle C*: 265). She is not merely dabbling in her hobby, she is emotionally invested in the wellbeing of the plants in the garden. She also views some creatures as her 'allies', some as enemies. Each species serves a specific function in the garden. For instance, there are "ladybugs to eat aphids, lacewings to go after whiteflies" (*ibid.*) and bees that pollinate a wide assortment of flowers. After an outbreak in the local rabbit population, she laments that "[t]hey are eating my petunias; they decapitate [sic] my zinnias; it is massacre season for my marigolds" (*Middle C*: 264) and threatens to kill and eat the encroaching intruders.

A similar listing of species can be found in "Order of Insects", Gass' short story about an unnamed woman who begins to discover dead cockroaches lying around her usually exemplary tidy house (Gass 1968c). As a result of her findings, she develops a general fascination with insects. It is stated that she "sought out spiders and gave them sanctuary; played host to worms of every kind; was generous to katydids and lacewings, aphids, ants and various grubs" (Gass 1968c: 170). In the story, as well as in *Middle C*, the characters caring for the insects can be viewed not only as a way to structure their experience with the natural world, but also as a comment about the ambivalence of language. According to Paul March-Russell (2007: 514), Gass' use of graceful words to describe the lowly insects is a way to highlight the inherent difference between words and the reality they convey. Thus, the naming and listing can be seen as the character's attempt to set limits to the chaos of nature, to understand the world which they as human characters can define only through language.

It is likewise language choices which indicate that the garden and the Museum can be viewed as parallel places. The language that is used to describe the museum is similar to the language of the garden. Joseph describes the museum as “his own field to plow” (*Middle C*: 337) and states that his life is “climbing around his obsessive sentence like a predatory vine” (*Middle C*: 160). The Museum’s original purpose, to discover an “underlying evil working away in the dirt of each life like the sod webworm” (*Middle C*: 268) also implies a connection to garden through the use of earthly language.

Joseph relates to the garden in a more negative manner, partly because of his own temperament and partly to aggravate his mother. Much of their exchanges are playful verbal battles where both are trying to gain the upper hand. In his most extreme Joseph holds the view that the garden is “like a fascist state: ruled like an orchestra, ordered as an army, eugenically ruthless and hateful to the handicapped, relentless in their pursuit of its enemies, jealous of its borders, favoring obedient masses in which every stem is inclined to appease its leader” (*Middle C*: 271). This is an especially spiteful allegory considering Miriam’s Austrian origins and the fact that the simple life she most desired was crushed under the boot heels of the actual fascists marching into her homeland. Joseph also states that the weeds growing in the garden resemble “immigrants who multiply like rabbits, inconsiderately sucking up nutrients and choking the natives in the throats of their stems” (*Middle C*: 307). Again, Joseph is deliberately placing his strikes to sensitive areas, using his family’s exile as a weapon to arouse his mother’s anger. Despite the playfulness, Joseph comparing the garden to a totalitarian regime or people to weeds demonstrates the bleakness of his worldview; he finds depravity even in a garden, a place designed for the cultivation of beauty.

Miriam, for whom the garden is a wholly benevolent place, has to constantly protest against Joseph’s remarks. During one of their exchanges, she tells him: “no one can go against gardens. So let me be with my beauties, at peace with nature and all this world’s tossing and yearning” (*Middle C*: 271). When Joseph argues that the earth is no more than an intersection for the living and the dead, Miriam replies that to her, “[t]he earth is as lively as you or I” (*Middle C*: 262). Whereas Joseph sees the baseness in everything and goes to great lengths to extricate himself from outside influences, Miriam fosters beauty and seeks to connect with the world outside herself. For Joseph, “the satisfaction he felt at being to the world an artifice was the deepest he knew” (*Middle C*: 323), while Miriam values integrity and yearns for an authentic life.

Compared with Gass' other works, Miriam is a rather atypical character. The parental figures in Gass' fiction tend to be depicted in a decidedly negative light as either bigots or alcoholics (Hix 2002: 2). Miriam, in contrast, can be described as a rather wholesome character without any significant personal flaws. Miriam is not Joseph's antagonist, quite the contrary: she seems to be the only genuine source of companionship for her son. Excluding Miriam, Joseph has no real connection with other people. Joseph refers to the desk at his attic as a "haven" (Middle C: 238) where the noises coming from outside can safely be ignored - except the voice of Miriam, which Joseph will gravitate towards "as if it were a beacon" (*ibid.*). The image functions as an analogy for their different personalities, as well as their mutual relationship beneath the jestful banter. Miriam as the amiable maternal character represents light, which prevents Joseph the pessimist from completely losing his way in the darkness.

In the final pages of the novel, it is hinted that Joseph, despite his cynicism and deception, might find a genuine sense of belonging in the reality he has created. After Joseph realizes that the Professor Skizzen he has invented would likely never be denounced, the narrator states: "he knew his students were now actually his, and that what he was giving them was his own hard-won lie-soaked example of fathering" (*Middle C*: 394). Despite the implication that Joseph begins to feel at home in the role he has created, the curating of the Museum remains his central concern. The novel concludes Joseph musing on the extended absence of Miriam. He speculates that she is likely working somewhere in the garden, and proceeds to plan the construction of the Museum, pulled irresistibly toward his singular obsession.

## 5. Conclusion

In *Middle C*, the identities of the characters are intimately tied to their personal experience of place. There is a marked difference in the way that the public roles and the private identities of the characters are depicted in the novel. On the one hand, the members of the Skizzen family display an ability to cultivate suitable social fronts to conform to the expectations of any locale they inhabit. The most notable example of this is the protagonist Joseph Skizzen establishing himself as an appropriately enigmatic academic to cover up his lack of credentials for his professorial position. On the other hand, the characters negotiate their private identities in relation to personally significant places that function as their centers of meaning. These places, namely Joseph's attic and Miriam's garden, are both contained in the mansion they cohabit. I have argued that the obsessive curating of the Museum can be seen as a manifestation of Joseph's attempt to cope with the traumas of his father's abandonment and his early childhood in wartime Europe. For Miriam, the mansion is not a unit of patriarchal oppression, but instead represents freedom to pursue her interests free of marital and financial concerns. Furthermore, the universal placelessness of the garden enables her to dissociate from her Midwestern surroundings and revel in the nostalgic memories of her past life in Graz, Austria.

The way the characters in the novel tie their identities to specific places of meaning affirms the notion that place has a constitutive function to the formation of an individual's sense of self (Casey 1997: 684). Furthermore, the implication that Joseph begins to grow comfortable in his role as Professor Skizzen invites questions about the demarcation between role and identity in the novel. If Joseph embodies the qualities of the role he has constructed, and continually fulfills the social expectations placed upon himself in a satisfactory manner, does his lack of formal credentials make a difference? If identity is understood as a dynamic, ongoing process, Joseph might identify so strongly with the persona of Professor Skizzen that public role and private identity are ultimately integrated.

Research on the fiction of William H. Gass has largely neglected *Middle C* in favor of *The Tunnel* or his earlier work. Because the concept of place is dependent on human subjects assigning meanings to the physical space surrounding them, the humanness of

the characters has been emphasized in this thesis. My analysis has been inevitably based on the presupposition that fictional human characters can be assigned with similar cognitive faculties to those of a living, breathing person. Although I have reflected briefly on the metafictional ramifications of the narrative in relation to Joseph's attic and Miriam's garden, the novel could be considered from a less character-oriented perspective as well. Finally, it must be maintained that while I have presented plausible attributions to the behavior of the characters, there are no final answers. The contradictory nature of a protagonist like Joseph Skizzen invites a range of possible interpretations besides those presented in this thesis. There remains a wealth of potential for further analysis of the novel.

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## Appendix 1: Finnish summary

Tutkielmani käsittelee William H. Gassin romaania *Middle C* (2013), joka on Gassin neljästä romaanista viimeinen. *Middle C* on teos, jonka non-lineaarinen kerronta kuvaa päähenkilö Joseph Skizzenin kehityskaarta syntymästä myöhäisaikaisuuteen. Romaani alkaa 1930-luvun Itävallassa, missä Josephin katoliset vanhemmat Rudi ja Nita Skizzen muuttavat nimensä ja tekeytyvät juutalaisiksi paetakseen kotimaassaan nousevaa totalitarismin aaltoa. Heidät salakuljetetaan Englantiin, missä Joseph syntyy, he muuttavat nimensä jälleen ja joutuvat keskelle Lontoon pommituksia. Isä Rudi, tunnettu Lontoossa nimellä Raymond Scofield, katoaa ja hänen vaimonsa Miriam (Nita) joutuu huolehtimaan yksin lapsistaan Josephista ja Debbiestä. He saavat turvapaikan Yhdysvalloista ja päätyvät lopulta Ohion osavaltioon fiktiiviseen Woodbinen kaupunkiin, mihin valtaosa tarinasta sijoittuu.

Korkeakoulunsa todellisuudessa kesken jättänyt Joseph saa viran paikallisen Whittlebauerin yliopiston musiikin professorina valehdeltuaan pätevyystään ja työkokemuksestaan. Hän luo itselleen uran omaleimaisena akateemikkona ja asettuu asumaan yliopiston hänelle lahjoittamaan vanhaan kartanoon äitinsä Miriamin kanssa. Miriam löytää elämälleen uuden merkityksen puutarhanhoidon kautta, kun taas Joseph eristäytyy kartanon ullakolle kuratoimaan Epäinhimillisyyden Museota (Inhumanity Museum), ihmisen toisille aiheuttamista julmuuksista kertovien uutisleikkeiden kokoelmaa.

Tutkielmani keskiössä ovat paikan ja identiteetin käsitteet. Hyödyntämäni paikan käsite pohjautuu 1970-luvun humanististen maantieteilijöiden herättämään kiinnostukseen paikan tutkimusta kohtaan, sekä laajemmin fenomenologisen filosofian perinteeseen, josta kyseiset maantieteilijät ammensivat inspiraatiota. Tässä viitekehyksessä paikan käsite on erotettu sanan arkisista konnotaatioista ja merkitsee tiettyä tilaa jolle on annettu inhimillinen merkitys. Paikan tuntu pohjautuu siis aina ihmisen luomiin merkityksiin. Yksilön identiteetin muodostumisen voidaan puolestaan ajatella olevan riippuvainen siitä miten yksilö suhtautuu paikkaan. Tutkielmani pohjautuu täten paikan tutkimuksen kannalta vaikutusvaltaisen filosofi Edward S. Casey'n ajatukseen siitä että paikan kokemus ja yksilön minäkuvan muodostuminen ovat toisistaan riippuvaisia. Yksilön identiteetti ymmärretään tässä tutkielmassa jatkuvana ja dynaamisena prosessina, joka on riippuvainen vuorovaikutuksesta muiden ihmisten kanssa. Identiteetti koostuu suhteellisen pysyvistä ja roolisidonnaisista ajatuksista ja odotuksista, jotka

kohdistuvat yksilön minuuden kokemukseen. Tutkielmassani tarkastelen *Middle C*:n hahmojen identiteettien muotoutumisen riippuvaisuutta heidän suhteestaan heille henkilökohtaisesti merkityksellisten paikkojen kokemukseen.

*Middle C*:n hahmojen olemusta analysoidessa on tärkeää painottaa identiteetin ja sosiaalisen roolin eroa. Identiteetin käsitteellä viitataan yksityiseen, sisäiseen kokemukseen, kun taas rooli on yksilön omaksuma ja määrittyy sosiaalisen kontekstin perusteella. *Middle C*:ssä Skizzenin perheen jäsenet muuttavat nimiään ja roolejaan useaan otteeseen, mutta heidän sisäinen minuuden kokemuksena on suhteessa pysyvämpää. Heidän kykynsä manipuloida sosiaalisia odotuksia auttaa heitä mukautumaan mihin tahansa kulttuuriseen ympäristöön. Huomionarvoisin muutos tapahtuu kun Joseph omaksuu professorin roolin ja alkaa tietoisesti rakentaa itselleen korkeaan akateemiseen asemaansa sopivaa roolia. Itävaltalais-Amerikkalaisen säveltäjän Arnold Schoenbergin tuotantoon erikoistumisen taustalla on Josephin tarve suojella itseään paljastumiselta esittämällä itsensä älyllisesti ylevänä ja uhkaavana vaikeasti ymmärrettävän klassisen musiikin asiantuntijana. Professori Skizzenin roolin voi täten nähdä Josephin tavoitteena imitoida arvokkaina pidettyjä kulttuurisia tottumuksia ja täten asemoida itsensä muiden silmissä ylemmän sosiaaliluokan edustajaksi.

*Middle C* on kerrottu enimmäkseen yksikön kolmannessa persoonassa, eikä syitä Josephin merkilliseen käytökseen ole selitetty tyhjentävästi. Joseph on syvästi ristiriitainen hahmo. Toisaalta hän haluaa olla mahdollisimman huomaamaton ja sulkeutuu ullakolleen, kun taas toisaalta hän tietoisesti esiintyy professorin roolissa idiosynkraattisella, huomiota herättävällä tavalla. Tulkintani mukaan Josephin toiminta ohjautuu pohjimmiltaan traumaattisten kokemusten kautta. Mielestäni Josephin psykologisten vauroiden lähteet on jaettavissa kahteen erityisen merkittävään tapahtumaan.

Ensinnäkin, Rudi-isän yllättävä katoaminen on selkeästi vaikuttanut Josephin psykologiseen kehitykseen. Rudi pysyy läsnä Josephin mielessä ja hän suhtautuu isänsä muistoon yhtä epäjohdonmukaisesti kuin omiin tavoitteisiinsa. Joseph tunnustaa hautovansa vihan tunteita Rudia kohtaan, mutta toisaalta myös löytää ymmärrystä tämän katoamista kohtaan ja omaksuu mielestään isänsä moraalisen puhtoisuuden tavoittelun omaa toimintaansa ohjaavaksi tavoitteeksi. Joseph pyrkii jatkuvasti kehystämään Rudin katoamisen kunniallisena ja suorasekäisenä tekona, mikä osoittaa hänen kyvyttömyytensä kohdata omat hylätyksi tulemisen kokemuksensa.

Toinen trauman lähde joka vaikuttaa Josephin identiteetin kehittymiseen juontaa juurensa hänen kokemuksiinsa Lontoon pommituksista ja sodasta seuranneen hävityksen keskellä kasvamisesta. Varhaislapsuuden muistot perheen ilmaiskujen runtelemasta asunnosta ja aikuisten ahdistuneista kasvoista kalvavat Josephin mieltä vielä aikuisuudessakin. Sodan ajan traumaattisiin kokemuksiin liittyy myös tuhon aiheuttama jatkuvan uudelleensijoittumisen tarve ja siitä seurannut perustavanlaatuinen juurettomuuden tunne. Täten turvallista kiintymystä kotipaikkaan ei ole päässyt muodostumaan Josephin varhaisten vuosien aikana, mikä heikentää hänen identiteettinsä yhtenäisyyden kokemusta myöhemmin.

Josephin traumat ilmenevät hänen pakkomielleisissä kiinnostuksen kohteissaan. Sekä Epäinhimillisyyden Museo että Josephin väsymättä työstämä Lause, jonka mukaan pelko ihmislajin tuhoutumisesta muuntuu peloksi sen selviytymisestä, voidaan tulkita hänen yrityksinä käsitellä traumaattista menneisyyttään. Epäinhimillisyyden Museo paikkana ei täytä instituutiolle asetettuja sosiaalisen velvollisuuden vaatimuksia, vaan on lähinnä Josephin vahingoittuneen mielen ilmentymä. Josephin alkuperäisenä tavoitteena Museolle oli löytää jonkinlainen perimmäinen syy ihmiskunnan turmeltuneisuudelle, mutta hän lopulta ymmärtää hankkeen mahdottomuuden. Hän ei kuitenkaan kykene lopettamaan uutiskokoelmansa kasvattamista. Sekä Museoon että Lauseen kirjoittamiseen kohdistunut fanaattinen kiinnostus voidaan nähdä osoituksina Josephin tarpeesta paeta hänen oman menneisyytensä todellisuutta.

Joseph on yksinäisyydessäänkin jatkuvasti yhteydessä ulkomaailmaan ullakkonsa suurten ikkunoiden kautta. Ikkunat mahdollistavat tarkkailun ilman osallistumisen vaatimusta. Kuten kirjat, ne avaavat rajatun näkymän maailmaan, jota ei ole olemassa samanlaisena kehystensä ulkopuolella. Täten ikkunat toimivat myös vertauskuvana kirjoittamiselle ja kirjailijan elämälle. Gassin teoksissa ikkunoita käytetään usein vertauksena esimerkiksi kirjoittamisen selkeydelle ja havaitsemisen rajallisuudelle. *Middle C*:ssä Josephin työstämällä Lauseella on selvä metafiktiivinen ulottuvuus. Useita muotoja romaanin saatossa saava Lause voidaan nähdä Josephin trauman ilmentymän lisäksi sävyltään ironisena kommenttina kirjoittajan työhön liittyvästä pienten yksityiskohtien hiomiselle omistautumisesta.

Sekä Josephin että Miriamin identiteetin kehitysprosessi on sidottu heille henkilökohtaisesti merkityksellisiin kotipaikkoihin. Kuten paikoilla yleisestikin, myös kotipaikka syntyy yksilön aktiivisen merkitysten luomisen seurauksena. Tunneside kotiin

paikkana on oleellinen osa yksilön identiteetin perustaa, korvaamaton merkityksen keskus. Josephilla on mielestäni kaksi erityisen merkittävää kotipaikkaa. Ensimmäinen näistä on Urichstownin kaupungissa kirjastonhoitaja Marjorie Brussin asunnoksi muutettu autotalli, missä nuori Joseph ensimmäistä kertaa levottoman elämänsä aikana saavuttaa hallinnan tunteen ja kiintymyksen kotiin olemisensa keskuksena. Toinen ja kaikista huomionarvoisin koti Josephille on edellämainittu vanha kartano, jonka ullakosta muodostuu keskipiste hänen elämälleen. Kartano toimii myös Miriamin keskuksena. Siinä missä koti ja spesifimmin talo kotina on perinteisesti usein nähty patriarkaalisen sarron paikkana, kodin tekeminen on myös potentiaalisesti merkityksiä luovaa toimintaa. Koti voi siis toimia myös vastarinnan paikkana, jossa alisteisessa asemassa olevat yksilöt voivat löytää itsensä ja uudistaa omaa identiteettiään. Kartanoon muuttaessaan Miriam on vapaa kadonneen aviomiehensä Rudin määräysvallasta ja koska yliopisto ei peri asumuksesta maksua, myös rahallisista huolista.

Kartanon puutarha on Miriamille tärkein yksittäinen merkityksen keskus. Puutarha voidaan nähdä luonnon ja kulttuurin risteämiskohtana, idealisoituna ja jopa taiteenomaisena paikkana jossa ihminen tavoittelee harmoniaa ympäristönsä kanssa. Miriamin kotipuutarha on myös liminaalitila – se on samanaikaisesti näkyvillä ulkomaailmalle, mutta myös sidottu kodin yksityisyyteen. Puutarhanhoito on Miriamille aktiivinen paikan luomisen prosessi, jonka seurauksena hänen olemisensa merkityksellisyyden tunne vahvistuu. Puutarhassa Miriamilla on määräysvaltaa ympäristönsä suhteen. Universaalin ”paikattoman” olemuksensa ansiosta puutarha tarjoaa hänelle myös nostalgisen yhteyden nuoruutensa Itävaltaan ja Grazin kaupunkiin, jonka muistoa hän pitää autenttisen elämän mallina ja johon verrattuna amerikkalainen elämä tuntuu muoviselta ja ontolta.

Josephin Museo ja Miriamin puutarha paljastavat tulkintani mukaan hahmojen luonteiden välisiä oleellisia eroja. Joseph tulkitsee oletusarvoisesti asiat ja ilmiöt niiden negatiivisten tai ala-arvoisten puolien kautta ja näkee valtavasti vaivaa eristääkseen itsensä niiden korruptoivasta vaikutuksesta. Epäinhimillisyyden Museon kuratoinnin lisäksi Joseph vertaa epätoivottujen rikkaruohojen karsimista totalitarististen hallintojen etnisiin puhdistuksiin, mikä osoittaa että hän näkee synkän perustan jopa Miriamin puutarhassa, paikassa joka on suunniteltu yksinomaan esteettisen kauneuden ja harmonian tavoittelulle. Miriam puolestaan on Gassin muiden teosten äitihahmoihin, jotka kuvataan usein surumielisinä alkoholisteina, verrattuna poikkeuksellisen terve ja suotuisasti

esitetty hahmo. Miriam suhtautuu maailmaan valoisasti ja on aktiivisen toimeliaisuudensa kautta rakentanut puutarhasta rauhallisen ja merkityksellisen paikan, jonka kehitys kulkee rinnasteisesti hänen identiteettinsä vahvistumisen kanssa. Siinä missä Josephin yksityinen minäkuva ja sosiaalinen rooli on jakautunut jyrkästi vastakkaisiin osiin, Miriam arvottaa identiteettinsä eheyttä tilanteesta riippumatta ja kaipaa autenttista elämää.

Paikan ja identiteetin käsitteet liittyvät läheisesti toisiinsa. Fyysinen tila muuttuu paikaksi vasta kun sille annetaan inhimillinen merkitys. Tämän seurauksena tutkielmani keskittyy vääjäämättä fiktiivisten hahmojen sisäisten kokemusten analysointiin. Etenkin Josephin kaltainen ristiriitainen päähenkilö avaa mahdollisuuksia monenlaisiin vaihtoehtoisin tulkintoihin tässä tutkielmassa esitetyn rinnalla. Vaikka painotankin myös kerronnan metafiktiivisiä puolia, teosta voisi tutkia jatkossa myös vähemmän hahmo-orientoituneesti.