

1-1-2022

## THE ALICE ATOM COMPENDIUM

Nick Mendillo  
*University of Rhode Island, nmendillo@uri.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/theses>

---

### Recommended Citation

Mendillo, Nick, "THE ALICE ATOM COMPENDIUM" (2022). *Open Access Master's Theses*. Paper 2155.  
<https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/theses/2155>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu).

THE ALICE ATOM COMPENDIUM

BY

NICK MENDILLO

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN

ENGLISH

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

2022

MASTER OF ARTS THESIS

OF  
NICHOLAS ROCCO MENDILLO

APPROVED:

Thesis Committee:

Major Professor

Derek Nikitas

Jennifer J. Jones

David T. Howard

Brenton DeBoef

DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE  
ISLAND  
2022

**Abstract:**

Using an original work of fiction, a novel I had written titled *The Alice Atom*, I have created multiple levels of media that encompass several aspects of said novel's central theme – the desire to find meaning in not only products we create but the act of 'following one's dream.' To achieve a personal goal is to follow, chase, or accomplish their 'dreams,' but I intended to explore the question of what that pursuit can tangibly look like. The action of the novel involves the protagonist literally searching for a woman he has imbued with deep philosophical meaning. I, as the author, consider this thesis with the same regard the protagonist has towards this figure from his dreams. I used the novel as a blueprint for additional materials that can engage the reader outside of the book artifact. This allowed the reader to enter the book in their own time in their own way, creating their own path that is nonlinear. I discovered that if given multiple paths to discover meaning in a piece of art, multiple meanings can be found. I also, unexpectedly and quite enjoyably, realized the philosophical footing with which the novel operates provided a clarity to my own struggles inherent in the pursuit of the aspirations I had towards a complete, publishable, 'worthy' novel. Dreams and goals should not be without a firm understanding of multiple forms of humanities-based media. The experimentation within *The Compendium* allowed for trial and error, multiple failures, and unlocking new discoveries tangential to the vision itself. *The Compendium* is an example of such experimentation and improvisation. The final version of this compendium includes various methods that undergird the main source, the novel: visual art, poetry, and creative nonfiction.

**Acknowledgements:**

I would like to express my gratitude to my master's professor, Derek Nikitas, for his guidance and tutelage throughout this project's many revisions, as well as his firsthand advice towards creating a fluid, well-formed, and most importantly enjoyable story. In addition, I would like to show my appreciation towards my masters committee members Jennifer Jones and David T. Howard for their willingness to contribute their thoughts and support to this project, along with Jeremiah Dyehouse, who stepped up in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour as my Defense Chair. The assistance provided by Director of Graduate Studies Martha Elena Rojas and the rest of my URI graduate school cohort, namely Diana Turken, was extremely helpful; I thank them for their patience and guidance. I would also like to acknowledge URI professors John Leo and Stephen Barber for their help and guidance during my graduate application process. Finally, I say thank you to my family, friends, and colleagues who have supported this project in various ways since its inception in 2014.

## **Table of Contents**

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Critical Introduction for Thesis.....	1
Bibliography.....	21

**Nick Mendillo**

**Critical Introduction for Thesis**

*The Alice Atom* was at first just a cool idea – what if you could sell your dreams as works of art? The concept was a neat elevator pitch for publishers or movie executives, but the truth of the matter is that aside from this concept being boiled down to a logline, the implications of such a scenario gave way to a myriad of undertakings and creative avenues. The idea itself, arriving to me in a dream in 2014 after a breakup, provided an opportunity for closure for that failed relationship. I had never written a full-length novel before, and the act of doing so provided a neat sensation of fulfillment that I had not experienced before, (except for a ten-song solo album I had written and recorded in 2004 about a *different* breakup. Better an opportunistic approach to sad events than say, overeating or drugs. Be on the lookout for my second novel, by the way).

I began to wonder what type of story *The Alice Atom* – originally titled *Dreamers*, and then *Ghosts* – had to be to achieve a sense of closure. I wanted a narrative story to portray the journey of seeking closure. Upon entering The University of Rhode Island's graduate program for English, I was suddenly struck with the sensation that there was almost too much material out there, all in the form of essays, novels, poems, nonfiction, and theory, for me to absorb and imbue into my story to give it a 'proper' finish, though what I decided upon doing was involving as much as I could within *The Alice Atom* Compendium. In its totality, this work is a dream-text, and an attempt towards completion, but not without an education, and a bit of gamesmanship.

Throughout the novel's various forms over the past decade, the personal need for closure quickly manifested itself into how to write a story *about* closure. I wanted Poe Sonderman, the main character of *The Alice Atom*, to represent an everyman struggling with this need, as I am positive humanity's wish for fulfillment and meaning is a shared experience. Within that, Poe also had to grapple with the puzzling nature of dreams, life, love, and loss, all within a framework of a narrative story. I was writing a theoretical paper, but with a narrative arc, hidden meanings, and (possibly too many) fart jokes. I was writing a story about dreams and a broken psyche of a man desperate for completion. I hoped this person could be relatable and not detestable. However, through Poe's arc, we discover he is not approaching his need for closure in a healthy manner, and eventually paints himself in a corner both narratively and with the reader's perception of him.

The entire balancing act needed to take the form of *beyond* a novel, and into all areas of creative expression. In *The Compendium's* case, fiction was joined with nonfiction, poetry, and visual art. (Music, film, and academic curriculum were to be added as well, and perhaps will be later.) Even this critical introduction would serve as a fresh aspect of *The Compendium's* oeuvre – what the process of ambition and aspiration could potentially look like on its own as a piece of art. All the media attached to the *Compendium* are deeply rooted in the psychology of a person's need for completion. The goal of it is to blur the lines between author and narrator, between reader and character, to demonstrate that the art is in the searching for the art.

How does *The Alice Atom* approach and treat the concept of a 'need for closure'? Donna Webster and Arie Kruglanski coined the term in a 1994 paper titled *Individual Differences in Need for Cognitive Closure*, but for me, an immediate roadblock appeared

after reading their writing: “The need for (nonspecific) closure is assumed to be proportionate to the perceived benefits of possessing closure, the perceived costs of lacking closure, or both... [it] may arise where predictability or action seem important” (Webster 1049). Where action ‘seems’ important? ‘Possessing’ closure? These words can be frightening, and thusly, needed to frighten Poe.

Poe is eventually understood as a dangerous obsessive, yearning to *possess* a human as an object to receive fulfillment and satisfaction. While doing so *seemed* to be the most important aspect of his life – his destiny if you will, where the only option otherwise was suicide – the person he wished to possess became ultimately the most opposed to this behavior. Alice, the ‘love of Poe’s life,’ achieved her own sense of closure after moving to Homedale, ID to escape the negativity brought on by her negligent father, Wendell Fincher.

Alice’s existentialist, carefree acceptance of a suburban, pedestrian lifestyle clashes significantly with Poe’s need for meaning and purpose of dreams. While leaves die around her, Alice says, “Homedale has more to offer me than anywhere else I’d try to force myself into. Though I quickly figured out, Poe, that you can’t force your own idea of destiny” (Mendillo 250). The scene of Alice telling Poe to relax while literally surrounded by symbols of death was crucial in nailing down the dichotomy between the obsessed and the not obsessed. “Persons with a high need for closure should desire definite order and structure in their lives and abhor unconstrained chaos and disorder” (Webster 1050). Therefore, Poe’s destiny is to accept that there need not be a destiny. He will not obtain order. He would not ‘get the girl,’ and in fact, what he imagined to be fulfillment never truly was his imagination at all. The Compendium is ironic as it itself is

a representation of a ‘completed’ work, but as I previously mentioned, there is still plenty to do about ‘ending’ the story.

In a further effort to blur the lines between reader and character, first person narrative was essential. Most importantly, I needed Poe to be reliable to the reader, and to do that, Poe had to discover the world unfolding along with the reader. If Poe said anything unreliable, he would be innocent of any maleficence, as the surprise between he and the reader would be equal. Poe narrates, “I had forgotten that I don’t enjoy divulging personal information to others” (Mendillo 50-51), which is ironic in that he is trusting the reader with that information.

Terrence Murphy, in his article “Defining the Reliable Narrator: The Marked Status of First-Person Fiction” from the *Journal of Literary Semantics*, discusses major areas in a story where reliability of a narrator is obtained. Poe speaks in a middle-style of language. He is observant and reactive, and most importantly, the end of the novel is where Poe demonstrates a major retrospective re-evaluation of Alice’s decision to leave. This retrospective alone is a self-sacrifice – an act Poe believed he never had the ability for, and which is the ultimate act a human could decide to do.

Poe is telling the main story, but there’s another narrator hiding within the chapters: a third-person omniscient narrator describing the events of an unknown character the reader comes to find out is Albert Quigg. Quigg is a man who led a full life but was tragically murdered by his cousin. The murderous act – the bullet entering Albert’s brain – split his psyche into the characters Alice, Poe, Wendell, Bear, etc. I needed this separation via the narration style in Albert’s interstitial chapters (I-VII), both out of a want for a dope reveal, and because these chapters happen *outside* of the world

the reader is becoming accustomed to. There should be a feeling of uncertainty (which, when considering the physics alluded to throughout the novel, is apropos, and will be discussed later in this introduction).

I wanted this uncertainty to be akin to the feeling of retelling a dream. In interstitial chapters I-VI, characters are kept strictly to pronouns or nicknames, and the reader is forced to assume. Is what is being read happening? Is it one of Poe's flashbacks? Clues are provided within the pronouns and descriptors: *he, the wife, a grey-hooded man, his daughter*, etc. The jarring uncertainty of the narrator is like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, when on page 199 of that novel, the narrative focus shifts from Sethe's free indirect narration to a free indirect discourse of the Schoolteacher's point-of-view. For example, "He had insisted on privacy during the revelation at the slaughter yard – now he wondered whom he was protecting" (Morrison 199). Schoolteacher's point-of-view provides an entirely new landscape of the reader's thoughts and views of Sethe – a character the reader has come to know within the first part of the novel, now debased. Once the interstitial chapters are revealed to be a new character, Albert, the entire book receives a new landscape.

In continued efforts to maintain a dreamlike experience for the reader, *The Alice Atom Compendium* would drop into a stream-of-consciousness style of narration, much like Virginia Woolf's characters in her novel, *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf expertly portrays the experience of thinking, for example when Mrs. Ramsay was "raising her eyebrows at the discrepancy – that was what she was thinking, this was what she was doing – ladling out soup – she felt, more and more strongly, outside that eddy" (Woolf 83). This style of

narration keeps the reader within the mind of the thinking character, while action is still propelled forward.

Dreams are as sporadic as one's inner monologue, with thoughts and images drifting and flashing in and out of the consciousness. Carl Jung wrote, "dreams have a different texture. Images that seem contradictory and ridiculous crowd in on the dreamer, the normal sense of time is lost, and commonplace things can assume a fascinating or threatening aspect" (Jung 39). With dreaming, we are asleep, seemingly without control of what we may choose to think about. Sigmund Freud developed psychoanalysis with free association, enabling him to "use dreams as the starting point from which the unconscious problem of the patient might be explored" (Jung 27). I felt that if something could be in a dream, it could be in the narrative. Poe begins most chapters with a free association, diving into either stream-of-consciousness or free indirect style about some greater meaning to an aspect of his confusion. An example of this is in the beginning of Chapter 3 – The Earth:

*"Seeing my friend, dead, cold... I had pretty much given up on the battle. The dream of a Purple Heart, valor, and being called a hero meant nothing to me as I tried to partially bury myself in the dirt. Perhaps if I faked death like a possum, I wondered, the enemy would run past me"* (Mendillo 57).

This memory of Poe, ultimately a re-imagining of Albert's memory, drapes a false veil in front of the reader. We are being told of this event by Poe, his stream-of-consciousness seemingly reliving the moment while he associates the sensations of that moment with the feeling of earth, and we trust him. Come to find out, the memory is

merely a piece of the psyche-puzzle. Freud believed free association could potentially stir up old memories, and through Poe's chapter-to-chapter lamentations, the reader is along for the ride with Poe. Carl Jung, on the other hand, found himself disagreeing with the exercise of free association; he believed the revelation did not have to come from a dream, but that it could simply arrive with a symbol. I find a middle road to be preferable regarding the events of *The Alice Atom*. In other words, if Poe's life is a dreamlife – a broken psyche of a murdered man – where can symbols within that amorphous life be found? How might one search for them?

If there were one motif within *The Alice Atom* worth mentioning, it would be flowers. Flowers are vomited on, used to woo unsuspecting women, and used as a metaphor for fleeting life, throughout the story. Also referenced in the *Thank God for Physics* poetry piece “Postcards from Homedale,” the speaker is shown “the casket underneath a bouquet” (Mendillo 391). The use of a symbol normally associated with life, renewal, and warmth, instead for sickness, unrequitedness, and death, was a choice to ensure a symbol within the dreamlife of Poe was to motivate him towards his true destiny of self-sacrifice. Flowers, in the game aspect of this Compendium, are checkpoints, hints, or guideposts.

Most of the pieces within *The Completionist* follow the creative nonfiction format of dreamwork – what Freud said to be procedures that transform the latent dream-thought into discernible dream. Specifically, “the dream-work is at liberty to detach the occasion of an affect from its connections in the dream-thoughts, and to insert it at any other place it chooses in the dream-content” (Freud 143). They utilize, almost exclusively, free association, stream-of-thought writing that I used as a tangential arm of the novel's story.

Within *The Completionist*, stream-of-consciousness is most evident in the creative nonfiction piece “Doneness,” where the speaker says, “Is ‘doneness’ equitable to ‘plumpness?’ ‘Juiciness?’ When is my damn work *done*? Why am I so *fat*? Why am I short? Why am I bald? Why this? Why that? Why why why blah blah blahahhhh oh my god who cares” (Mendillo 369). Many readers would argue I am the speaker in this piece solely on the basis that I have labeled it as nonfiction, but about *The Alice Atom Compendium* as a whole, such a claim is futile. This is dreamwork within the Compendium.

Carl Jung provided more to the novel regarding character separation with his female element, the anima. He wrote, “[it] is this female element in every male... [that] is essentially a certain inferior kind of relatedness to the surrounding, and particularly to women, which is kept carefully concealed from others as well as from oneself” (Jung 31). Not only is Alice *literally* kept from Poe and Wendell, but she is the representation of the part of Albert’s psyche that is *not* damaged. Alice as an ideology is the voice of reason, and to Poe and Wendell, is removed from view as ‘the woman within.’

Poe’s ideology, according to Jung, was “first, the dream should be treated as a fact, about which one must make no previous assumption except that it somehow makes sense; and second, the dream is a specific expression of the unconscious” (Jung 32). I needed Poe to believe this, and I needed the reader to believe Poe believed this. Poe even admits to reading Freud and Jung “if not only for [his] own attempt to explain the reason behind [his] Dream Girl, but also because [he] was a guilty contributor to the zeitgeist” (Mendillo 21). The zeitgeist in question is the totality of Albert Quigg’s psyche, but more importantly, Poe attempts to pass the buck to Freud and Jung. He reads them in a manner

to justify his own misguided thoughts – that Alice is a person who will provide Poe’s closure.

All this psychology talk – how does it affect the narration style? I wanted to provide distance between Poe, Wendell, Alice, and Bear in narration. While they were all a part of the same psyche, Poe had difficulty finding his narrative footing. This is in high contrast to the third-person omniscient narration of Albert Quigg’s interstitial chapters. The epilogue involves third-person free indirect style, as the ghost of Albert is described visiting his living daughter’s home. “He placed his hand on the knob and turned. Locked. Good. She shouldn’t leave the front door locked” (Mendillo 354). Once the ending is revealed to both the reader and the characters, the previous narration styles which might have been confusing in the beginning should then become clearer.

Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* toyed with multiple formats of writing media and was a major source of inspiration with the Compendium’s gamesmanship. Note, for example, in *Pale Fire*, “Line 286: A jet’s pink trail above the sunset fire / I, too, was wont to draw my poets’ attention to the idyllic beauty of airplanes in the evening sky. Who could have guessed that on the very day (July 7) Shade penned this lambent line (the last one on his twenty-third card)...” Nabokov wants us to play his game by having Kinbote citing from where these notes were derived. The entire novel is a whodunnit, though Kinbote is unreliable in his deductions. I want you to play a game with The Compendium. I want the reader to read the poetry or the nonfiction and connect it to strong details of the novel. I want readers to read the novel and connect parts to the reality of the author’s journey to write it. If *The Alice Atom Compendium* is a game to be played, this critical introduction is the instruction manual.

The spirit of gamesmanship within *The Compendium* is also inspired by the ABC television program *LOST*. Set on a mysterious island, the viewing audience and characters in the show all attempt to discover the secrets and meanings of the show. *LOST* producers capitalized on the mysteriousness of the story by integrating a form of augmented reality via the show's website. *The Lost Experience* was created to engage fans and expand the storyline during the show's hiatus between seasons two and three, which ultimately spawned more alternate reality websites within the *LOST* canon. Notably, the special features hidden within the Blu-ray collection fill in potential gaps in the storyline, appeasing diehard fans who craved more information. (Journal entries from the crew of the Black Swan or cryptic instructions on the rules of the game set hidden in a miniature ankh figurine were exceptionally cool.) My goal with *The Compendium* was to not only employ similar literary gamesmanship strategies by including information within the multiple forms of media, but to again parallel the sensation of dreamwork, where dreams themselves are small fragments of information only potentially making sense when looked at overall.

Marisha Pessl's novel *Night Film* adopts this gamesmanship in a more direct way, through screenshots of author-created websites and magazine articles interspersed within the narrative context, allowing the reader to become immersed in a fictional world that bends what they perceive as reality. Further, a phone app called "Night Film Decoder" allows readers to scan the articles and images in the novel to unlock further text, PDFs, videos, and images that expand the universe Pessl has created into an augmented reality game of sorts. These sorts of exciting, playable reading experiences are precisely the product I have made with *The Compendium*, and a phone app would have been made if I

had any clue how to code. (Other works that I find ultra-intriguing in this regard are the novels *S.* by Doug Dorst and J.J. Abrams, and *House of Leaves* by Mark Danielewski.)

I believe that character names and allusions are considered a form of literary gamesmanship – at least regarding *The Alice Atom* Compendium. Names as innocuous as Wendell and Albert have major significance within the dreamscape of the novel. I always considered allusions to be riddles as I tried to figure out what a name or reference meant in the grander scope of the culture during which the piece in question was written. The education I received because of this research was a nice bonus as well.

Main character Poe Sonderman is the epitome of poor, lost soul. He is pathetically depressed, lonely, and constantly searching for his purpose in the form of a potential lover. The name Poe is a direct reference to Edgar Allen Poe, whose 1849 poem “A Dream Within a Dream” is in honest parallel to the struggles of the novel’s main character. Both the poem’s speaker and Poe Sonderman, *The Alice Atom* character, are regularly tormented by the ever-encroaching certainty of death, while witnessing that which brings them joy slip further away. Edgar Allen Poe’s speaker cries, “And I hold within my hand / Grains of the golden sand- / How few! yet how they creep / Through my fingers to the deep / While I weep – while I weep! ... / ...Is *all* that we see or seem / But a dream within a dream?” (Poe, lines 14-18, 23-24). Sonderman echoes this sentiment with the first line he speaks, “Why do I live?” (Mendillo 5).

The term ‘sonder,’ according to John Koenig’s *Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, is “the awareness that everyone has a story” (Koenig 123). Poe *Sonderman* (see what I did there?) lives his life meandering the streets of his city, Moncton, RI, believing he is in the motion picture of his life. Yet, with the invention of Dream Art, the public could now

view the psyche of civilization, eradicating the idea of a background extra. He is a sufferer of ‘protagonist disease,’ with “the feeling that [he] is the main character of his own movie” (Mendillo 19), but anyone with a Dream Capture Device is now the star of their own film. He has become effectively obsolete due to his inability to use Dream Capture Devices.

There are many other name games within *The Alice Atom*, such as Bear’s bodyguards all named after various breakfast foods for reasons not known until the final Albert Interstitial (VII). It should be noted that Carl Jung’s thoughts on symbols is important when considering *The Completionist* story “Abrv.” Jung wrote, “although [symbols] are meaningless in themselves, they have acquired a recognizable meaning through common usage or deliberate intent” (Jung 20). In “Abrv.,” I used the idea of symbols or acronyms as being forced to have meaning, even so far as convincing the reader that the abbreviation for Chicago, Illinois’ airport – ORD – was significant, because the Middle English word *oord* meant “a place of origin, beginning.” Yes, in the scope of my personal failed first attempt of traveling to Homedale, Idaho, getting stranded in O’Hare International Airport, a ‘place of origin’ was an eerie coincidence, but Alice would claim I was trying too hard to find something in nothing. Regardless, the abbreviations in “Abrv.” are of particular importance to the lore of *The Compendium*.

There is an opportunity for a suspension of disbelief with *The Alice Atom*, and *Pale Fire* was a guidepost on how to not allow my story to cancel itself out. In other words, I did not want one aspect of the *Compendium* to negate another aspect. Where Nabokov was meta-textual, *The Alice Atom* is dream-text. The dreams of Poe are ultimately engrained in the persona of a character unknowable until the final act. I must

say, *The Alice Atom* is not a formalist novel in the same regard as *Pale Fire*. To be fully formalist would require an ignoring of the entirety of Albert Quigg's existence.

However, the chapter's introductions – the free speech and free thinking of Poe – do touch upon formalist styles. In Gustav Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, multiple times does Flaubert employ a formalist style by stating an overall thought on a point or object and then embarking on long, drawn-out explanations of that point. For example, Flaubert describes “the fine summer evenings” in rich but unpleasant detail over the course of several sentences, finally finishing on Charles seeing where “beyond the roofs, spread the pure sky with the red sun setting... And he expanded his nostrils to breathe in the sweet odors of the country which did not reach him” (Flaubert 12). Charles sees the scene before him, sees his home in the distance, attempts to breath in his home, and fails. Poe performs these observations and is too met with melancholia. For example, Poe asks in the beginning of Chapter 4 – The Blood, “Why don't animals mind the taste or sight of blood” and then proceeds to conclude after two full paragraphs, “When we're in love, our hearts pump blood faster, and it sometimes feels like we're choosing to bleed out” (Mendillo 85). I approach these chapter starters with the same regard as a theoretical essay – they are musings, thoughts, ponderings of Poe – whatever helps him make sense of the alien world he has found himself in. While Flaubert utilizes his descriptions to further give weight to characters, Poe is free associating and grasping at straws to give authority to his yearnings.

Poe and his travel mate Wendell's search to find Alice is a story exemplifying the suffering many feel while searching for a purpose on the planet. When the ultimate truth reveals itself that life truly is meaningless, it is only then that the novel's characters are

free to act, echoing sentiments of Jean-Paul Sartre. They embark to Homedale, Idaho, to find Alice, and find her free-spiritedness alarming, grotesque, and unacceptable, and are crushed when she declines them her free will. Artist lives are endless trips to Homedale, Idaho, metaphorically, of course. Sartre spoke in a lecture given in 1946, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, “Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is” (Sartre, 1946). Alice reflects this persona, ultimately leaving Poe and Wendell to fend for themselves. She, as Albert’s undamaged psyche, behaves appropriately by rejecting predetermined expectations.

This search for meaning within Poe had since morphed for myself into a search for a purpose and meaning through the finality of *The Compendium*. In other words, the project is inherently metafictional as Poe and the other characters’ endeavors are reflective of my own (or any artist’s) work to create meaning *through* art. A multimedia art project is nothing new, especially the performance of using varied types of media (music, visual art, poetry, etc.). The Compendium of *The Alice Atom* is different, however, as it provides a tangible product of an artist following their dreams. The Compendium is the literal manifestation of aspirations.

I am not expanding the universe of characters within my story with *The Compendium*, but instead I am expanding the universe of what it means to seek purpose. Art, for the characters and author, is an exploration of meaning – a tangible creation that articulates purpose, despite the meaninglessness of existence. The Compendium of *The Alice Atom* is the palpable representation of one’s aspirations told through a story about the commodification of mental processes during sleep. (Dream Arts in the novel are sold for

exorbitant amounts of money –indicators of class.) Sartre continues, “In life, a man commits himself, draws his own portrait and there is nothing but that portrait... man is no other than a series of undertakings, that he is the sum, the organization, the set of relations that constitute these undertakings” (Sartre, 1946). The Compendium should stir the conversation on the visualization of our dreams – not the ones we see when asleep, but the ones we see while awake. The totality of our psyche and our ambitions, or, as Bear says of Albert’s psyche, “[the] brain made all of this. His memories of his happiest and proudest moments made the three of you... whatever Albert’s particles needed to do to get the four of us together, they did it” (Mendillo 342-343). Readers of The Compendium will have access to multiple forms of this conversation, and how they access this conversation is entirely up to them.

This quest, however, comes at a literal price. While many artists use their final creations for profit or distinction, the process itself has rarely been commodified, at least not for the artist, in real time. The Compendium will demonstrate that the artistic process is never-ending. Jodi Dean, in her essay *Enjoying Neoliberalism*, explores the lectures of philosopher Slavoj Žižek. She explains that “consumption provides the terrain within which my identity, my lifestyle, can be constructed, purchased, and made over. Yet consumption is more than a terrain - the consumer is compelled by the superego compulsion to enjoy, by the impossible demand to do more, be more, have more, change more” (Dean 62). This ties in with *The Alice Atom* in that the novel’s characters, in their search for purpose, become entangled in the consumerist capitalist animal, Bear Gallo. I am complicit in the commodification of the artistic process as I intend to sell the novel and its accompanying oeuvre. Admittedly, the selling of one’s dreams is problematic, as

sleep time is an “interval of time that cannot be colonized and harnessed to a massive engine of profitability” (Crary 11), and yet, as seen in *The Alice Atom*, dreams are absolutely sold for profit, once given form within the novel.

Jonathan Crary’s 2013 book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* brings up multiple points of capitalism’s desire to commodify all corners of human living. Crary argues capitalism has created a world where the difference between day and night has eroded, and he moves further to claim, “the denial of sleep is the violent dispossession of the self by external force, the calculated shattering of the individual” (Crary 7). While capitalists create products to keep consumers awake and pharmaceuticals to reverse the effects of sleep deprivation, technology does not allow for a consumer market of dreams. *The Alice Atom* has its own representation of rich, ‘capitalist beasts,’ who buy and sell dreams for immense amounts of money, to the point where excessive dream capturing leads to death for the dreamers. Poe explains, “The public was more infatuated with the science fiction (and the glamour of the price tag). That same public seemed to not give attention to the fairly major side-effect of overuse, what the current medical journals had titled – R.O.D. – *Risk of Death*” (Mendillo 24).

I would like to switch gears. You know what would make this introduction even more fun to read? If I gave a lesson on physics.

Poe believes “religion is an abusive relationship” (Mendillo 8), and discussions of God or a higher power are kept strictly to the story arc of Albert’s split psyche due to his murder. Characters barely bother with questioning God or any religion specifically but imbue themselves with the acceptance of an omniscient universe. Poe even says, “I

firmly believe that God did not exist” (8). Therefore, I needed to impart a knowledge of physics to objectively describe a possible answer to the happenings within the story.

In dealing with the uncertainty of character purpose or motivation, I utilized my understanding of Werner Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principal. Published in a 1927 paper entitled *Ueber den anschaulichen Inhalt der quantentheoretischen Kinematik und Mechanik*, which translates to “on the *anschaulich* content of quantum theoretical kinematics and mechanics,” (Hilgevoord) Heisenberg lays out the theory that a particle behaves differently when observed than when not observed – either as a wave or a particle – made famous by Thomas Young’s double-slit experiment in 1817. The German term *anschaulich* is roughly translated to ‘visualizable,’ but considering the term is used in needing for understanding, the words ‘intelligible’ or ‘intuitive’ are also considered. Poe’s intuition, visualization, and intelligence are consistently challenged in his pursuit of Alice. He intuits his dream as having a far different meaning when he dreams it, and when Alice is finally observable, in a town that feels foreign to Poe, Alice behaves differently. Poe’s uncertainty is directly correlated to Alice, narratively and poetically; the speaker in the Compendium poem “Thank God for Physics” says, “wakes behave as waves of light... // ...hegelian double slit exposing / autotheism now knowing / precisely where / precisely when” (Mendillo 387).

String theory, as described by physicist Brian Greene, is a “unified theory of the universe postulating that fundamental ingredients of nature are not zero-dimensional point particles, but tiny one-dimensional filaments called strings” (Greene 422). In other words, the universe is made up of tiny vibrations of energy, and how those strings of energy vibrate, that is how the universe would behave. For Poe to come to terms with the

existence of the world he lives in, Bear describes the psyche of Albert as having broken up into small aspects which behave differently – Poe, Alice, Wendell, and so on. Of course, if someone is shot in the head, we believe they die, though regarding a soul, we have no idea. This result of a splitting of the psyche due to negative input from Albert's murderer is my own conjecture, based entirely *not* in science, but as a narrative tool, and to gather some book sales from the science fiction audience, I treated the characters in Albert's psyche to be lost string particles, behaving erratically, needing to vibrate in a different manner. With the theory of multiple, unseen universes (in the shapes of six-dimensional forms called Calabi-Yau manifolds), it is not *impossible* for a narrative story to take place within these hidden universes.

The final notable phenomenon of physics that I believe should be mentioned, and another tool I used to explain behavior of characters within *The Alice Atom* is quantum entanglement. Quantum entanglement, discovered in 1935 and first published in *The Proceedings of the Cambridge Philosophical Society* by Erwin Schrödinger, is the occurrence where two particles created together maintain some sort of connection of relationship where if one changes (quantumly via spin or charge, for example) the other particle will behave the same way, even if the two particles are separated in distance. How romantic is that? At first, Poe and Alice were to be quantumly entangled, both pieces of psyche created by Albert, but with Alice proving she was indeed *not* connected to Poe, I found the best connection to be between Poe and Wendell. They are certainly both the aggressors in the pursuit for the object-Alice, and both must decide to make the ultimate sacrifice to save Albert's soul. This entanglement is most evident when Poe and Wendell both experience panic attacks and guilt at the same time.

*The Alice Atom* is science fiction, mystery, drama, comedy, essay, and road trip book all in one. Narratively, it speaks to the reader, and invites the reader to let go of preconceived notions of dreams, the afterlife, and love. At its heart, *The Alice Atom* is a love story – not the love Poe has for Alice, but the love the reader should recognize is around them in a seriously confusing, but also incredibly elegant way. The literal molecule, particle, string – whatever – that represents the love that should permeate the world is called Alice. Through this entire Compendium experience, the reader should discover the prize at the end to be the moral – all you need is love. (I just came up with that line. No one else ever said it. It’s mine. I’m calling dibs.)

Just kidding; I hate The Rolling Stones. Jokes aside, the true moral is to be discovered by the reader, as is the case with all books. I just wanted to journey itself to be a little weirder.

In closing, here is a demonstration of a neat Easter Egg within The Compendium: In *The Completionist*, the piece “If Closure Is Even A Thing.” describes a dog enjoying Idaho cattle treats to the point where she ate the whole bag in a matter of days. As a result of eating the whole bag, she indeed learned how to roll over. To roll over is of course another way of saying ‘to surrender,’ which is precisely what Poe had to do because of his trip to Homedale, ID. Poe was not entitled to closure. It wasn’t important; what was important was his self-sacrifice. But remember, *The Completionist* is nonfiction; I as the author have a personal connection to these pieces, and the story of the dog treats was true. (My dog has since forgotten how to roll over – chew on *that* cattle treat...) I obtained those dog treats from the ex-girlfriend; at the pet store she now owns in Idaho. The narrative style of this piece is exactly like the Albert interstitial chapters both in tone and

pronoun use. The interstitials I-VI are to demonstrate a scene from a beautiful, unforgettable life of Albert's, just as my reuniting with the pet store owner was equally unforgettable. Did I accomplish a sense of closure? I discovered that it never mattered. I visited Ernest Hemingway's grave and left a business card that read "Stop Talking." Call it psychoanalysis, critical analysis, a puzzle, or nonsense, but the giddiness and excitability I feel in describing the interconnectedness within *The Compendium*, after stewing with the basics of the story for over a decade are the result of this dreamwork.

## Bibliography:

Crary, Jonathan. *24/7: Terminal Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. Verso, 2013.

Dean, Jodi. "Enjoying Neoliberalism." *Cultural Politics an International Journal*, Mar. 2008, pp. 47–72.

Flaubert, Gustave, et al. *Madame Bovary: Contexts, Critical Reception*. W.W. Norton, 2005.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Third Edition. Trans. by A. A. Brill. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913; Bartleby.com, 2010.

Greene, Brian. *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory*. Vintage Books, Random House, 2000.

Hilgevoord, Jan and Jos Uffink, "The Uncertainty Principle", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/qt-uncertainty/>.

Jung, C. G. *Man and His Symbols*. Anchor Press, 1988.

Koenig, John. *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*. Simon & Schuster, 2021.

Lindleloff, Damon, et al. *LOST*, Season 1-6, ABC, 22 Sept. 2004.

Mendillo, Nick R. "The Alice Atom Compendium." *University of Rhode Island*, 2022.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. First Vintage International ed., Vintage Books, 2004.

Murphy, T. P. (2012) 'Defining the reliable narrator: The marked status of first-person fiction', *Journal of Literary Semantics* 41, 67-87

Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovič. *Pale Fire A Novel*. Vintage Books, 1989.

Pessl, Marisha. *Night Film*. Random House, 2013.

Poe, Edgar Allen. "Dream Within a Dream." *The Flag of Our Union*. Gleason, Frederick. 31 March 1849.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Meridian Publishing Company, 1989.

Webster, Donna M, and Arie W Kruglanski. "Individual Differences in Need for Cognitive Closure." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 67, no. 6, 1994, pp. 1049–1062.

Woolf, Virginia, and Eudora Welty. *To the Lighthouse*. Mariner Books, 1989.