of Jolyon's exclamation is not only a particular flower, but also a particular person, his alluringly beautiful wife, Irene: 'There she had stood by that bush of dark red roses. . . . He bent and sniffed a rose, its petals brushed his nose and trembling lips; nothing so soft as a rose-leaf's velvet, except her neck—Irene!'[17] An intriguing aspect of Jolyon's rapturous outcry is how well it fits the context of Stevens's development of evil in canto IV of 'Esthétique du Mal'. Just as Stevens's 'Spaniard of the rose' 'rescued the rose/From nature, each time he saw it, making it,/As he saw it, exist in his own especial eye',[18] Joylon 'rescues' Irene after her many years of living alone after leaving her husband, Soames. Throughout the novel, Irene functions as a symbol of natural beauty, engendering admiration and love, but like the rose with its thorns, she also seems fated to cause heartbreak and pain, not only to friends and family, but especially to Soames, whom she has never loved: "'God made me as I am,' she said; 'wicked if you like—but not so wicked that I'll give myself again to a man I hate'".[19]

Canto IV of 'Esthétique du Mal' presents a similar dualistic pattern: it begins positively but ends negatively. At first the Spainard as figurative artist or poet renews the rose every time he encounters it, bestowing fresh meaning and heightened emotion, but by the end of the canto Stevens acknowledges another force, 'That evil, that evil in the self, from which/. . . fault/Falls out on everything'.[20] Stevens's metaphorical use of a Spaniard to describe the rose is at once alluring and enigmatic. It places an aura of the cultural milieu of Spain over the perception of the rose. The odd juxtaposition of 'Spaniard' and 'rose' implies passion and ardor (the rose is 'Hot-hooded and dark-blooded'), but it also evokes intrigue and danger, darker aspects underlying Spanish culture. Just as the rose embodies beauty with its flower and pain with its thorns, the 'Spainard of the rose' contains a similar complication as the canto moves from a romantic view in the beginning, wherein the Spaniard rejuvenates the rose 'each time he saw it', creating revitalized love, to a realistic one at the end, wherein Stevens expresses a fatalistic view by introducing 'The genius of misfortune' and the inevitability of evil, whether of 'The mind, which is our being' or 'of the body, which is our world/Spent in the false engagements of the mind'.[21]

JOHN N. SERIO
Clarkson University, USA

https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjaf027
© The Author(s) (2025). Published by Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. For commercial re-use, please contact reprints@oup.com for reprints and translation rights for reprints. All other permissions can be obtained through our RightsLink service via the Permissions link on the article page on our site—for further information please contact journals.permissions@oup.com.
Advance Access publication 27 February, 2025

[17] Ibid.
[18] Collected Poetry and Prose, 279.
[19] The Forsyte Saga, 530.
[20] Collected Poetry and Prose, 279.
[21] Ibid.

ECHOES OF THOMAS CARLYLE IN PHILIP LARKIN'S POETRY

Philip Larkin was aware of Thomas Carlyle's work from as early as 28 February 1944, when his father wrote to him that 'Seeing in the press that Carlyle's "Hero[es] & hero worship" ought to be suppressed as a Nazi publication, I read it and found, inter alia, the lecture on Mahomet most inspiring'.[1] Sydney Larkin exerted a formative influence on his son's reading, shaping his literary tastes from adolescence. This reference to Carlyle is part of an ongoing dialogue about various writers.

Larkin's interest in Carlyle would endure for decades after his father died in 1948. He was referring to him in reviews as late as 1985, and among the books left at his death were a selection of Jane Carlyle's letters and an edition of Thomas Carlyle's *Reminiscences*.[2] The latter, published in 1932, was inscribed 'Sydney Larkin, 30 June 1944'. Evidently his father had continued to explore Carlyle in the same year that he had encountered *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*. It is telling that Larkin still had his father's original copy of *Reminiscences* over forty years later.

When Larkin met Monica Jones in Leicester in 1946, they soon developed a fascination with

[1] *Philip Larkin: Letters Home*, ed. James Booth (London, 2018), 563.
[2] Recorded on a handlist of Larkin's books held on deposit from the Bodleian Library at the Hull University Archives in the Hull History Centre: *Jane Welsh Carlyle: a Selection of her Letters*, ed. Trudy Bliss (Grey Arrow, 1959); Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, ed. Ernest Rhys (Everyman's Library no. 875, London and New York, 1932).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/nq/article/72/2/187/8051852 by Centre for the Study of African Economies user on 14 April 2026

Thomas and Jane Carlyle. They located a proxy for their own romantic complications in the tempestuous couple's correspondence, especially when Larkin moved to Belfast in 1950 and had to communicate with Monica mostly by letter. Their curiosity remained strong enough to prompt a visit to the author's Chelsea house over the Christmas break of 1953, as Larkin related to Patsy Strang on 23 January 1954.[3] On 5 January 1954, Monica sent him a letter alluding to their literary pilgrimage. She declared 'I shall call myself a Janeite to everybody' and thanked Larkin for the introduction. The letter reveals the extent of their burgeoning interest, especially in Jane, whose character and position Monica found resonated with her own:

> Just after I stopped writing to you Pa came, so I went down, & heated up his stew & potatoes, & made him a pot of sc*ld*ng tea of which I also partook. He came in mild as a lamb, not "corsing and schwearing" as Mrs Carlyle's German master used to say. I tell Mummy about her every day, & she thinks she is just like us. I think I should let her read her in Trudy Bliss first, it is an attractive presentation & those bits of explanation are useful... I shall call myself a Janeite to everybody... You see what a present you have made me, in putting me onto her, introducing me to her I would rather say... I loved going to Cheyne Row, & all the walk there & every bit of it.[4]

Ten days later, she referenced a letter from Jane to Thomas and informed Larkin that she was adding her own footnotes:

> JWC says unobtrusively in a letter about some "owls" being "organs": neither TC nor the editor give a note – I put in the footnote at once; it is in the ones you gid me, so I kin write it in ink if I like & I do like.[5]

Monica was still drawing parallels between herself and Jane later that month, claiming, 'I am either being a rabbit or Jane Carlyle all the time—these 2 things almost amount to serious hallucination with me. I mean this. It is not a hallucination I mind having.'[6]

Running themes emerge in the couples' parallel correspondences. On 8 May 1956, Larkin joked with Monica, quoting V. S. Pritchett's comment in the *New Statesman* that the 'worst agonies' of the famously volatile relationship between Carlyle and his wife stemmed from 'not getting letters' when expected.

> We ought to have talked about holidays more – how little time we have together! I was reading about the Carlyles tonight in V.S.P. 'Their worst agonies seem not to have come from their common hypochondria, her jealousy or his monstrous selfishness, but from not getting letters from each other on the day they were expected when they were separated.' Do you think people will write like that about us when we are dust? My dear rabbit![7]

As that final playful question suggests, Monica and Larkin were just as dependent on regular epistolary exchanges. Their relationship was predominantly sustained by thousands of letters, at least until the 1970s when they turned more to the telephone. Moreover, the quality of their communication relied on the blend of distance and intimacy afforded by the medium. It allowed them to create an imaginative world free from the potential complexities and irritations of married life. As Larkin wrote in a poem unpublished during his lifetime, 'At thirty-one, when some are rich', composed between August and September 1953 just when his preoccupation with Carlyle was growing, 'I know, none better,/The eyelessness of days without a letter'.[8]

On 14 May 1956, Monica addressed Larkin's description of the Carlyles' anguish at not communicating and continued to draw comparisons:

> Dearest, I could never leave you because I should so need to tell you at once all the minutest shades of my feelings about leaving you! It's not the same as J.W.C. needing to come back to see how T. was taking it – my compulsion wd not be curiosity, but the need to tell.[9]

[3] *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London, 1992), 221.
[4] Bodleian MS. Eng. c. 7142, ff. 2-4v.
[5] Bodleian MS. Eng. c. 7142, ff.18-23v.
[6] 29 January 1954, Bodleian MS. Eng. c. 7142, ff. 42v-44.
[7] *Philip Larkin: Letters to Monica*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London, 2010), 202.
[8] *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, ed. Archie Burnett (London, 2014), 280-81. All cited poems are from this edition.
[9] 14 May 1956, Bodleian MS. Eng. c. 7149, ff. 15-18v.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/nq/article/72/2/187/8051852 by Centre for the Study of African Economies user on 14 April 2026

It appears that Monica was referring to a temporary separation between husband and wife. Her 'need to tell' echoes Thomas' own keen desire to 'tell it all to *her*', as he put it in a letter to Jane dated 24 August 1831, in which he insists that she should 'let nothing but absolute impossibility' prevent her from writing:

> What a blessing are these franks of the Duke's! I can sit down at any moment and scribble to you, were it nothing but complaints, and thousand times repeated expressions of fondness: by this means is some image of a union face to face still kept up; we are less lonely in separation; I bear everything more easily, enjoy everything doubly, when I think I can tell it all to *her*.[10]

The Carlyles' importance to Larkin and Monica has gone almost entirely unnoticed. The literary impact has also been overlooked. Carlyle's best-known poems are 'Today', 'Cui Bono', and 'Fortuna'.[11] Each seems to echo in Larkin's work, with 'Fortuna' exerting the strongest influence. In addition, traces of Carlyle's prose work, *Sartor Resartus*, as well as various published letters, are identifiable in Larkin's verse.

Larkin's 'Days', which was completed in 1953, first published in *Listen* in 1957, and collected in *The Whitsun Weddings* in 1964, suggests that he might be recollecting elements of 'Today'. The poem opens by asking simply, 'What are days for?' In querying then reflecting on their use, including the importance of finding happiness in them ('They are to be happy in'), he reprises Carlyle's address to his reader who is asked not to pass up the opportunities they offer: 'Another blue Day:/Think wilt thou let it/Slip useless away.'[12] Larkin points out that days 'wake us/Time and time over', while Carlyle, who also evokes the dawn, observes a similarly endless pattern: 'Out of Eternity/This new Day is born;/Into Eternity,/At night, will return.' Both poets employ coastal imagery to describe profound human disappointment. For Carlyle, life is a 'thawing iceboard/On a sea with sunny shore;—/Gay we sail; it melts beneath us;/We are sunk, and seen no more', while in 'This be the Verse', Larkin conceives of misery passed down the generations which 'deepens like a coastal shelf.'

Carlyle's laconic depiction of frustrated hope in 'Cui Bono' is certainly familiar Larkin territory. The visualisation of hope as 'A smiling rainbow/Children follow through the wet' only to discover that 'Tis not here, still yonder, yonder' might prefigure, in its imagery of mediated light and interminable distance, the final verse of Larkin's 'High Windows', composed in 1965, in which 'Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:/The sun-comprehending glass,/And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows/Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.' A further possible source for this image can be found in a letter of 6 September 1842 from Thomas Carlyle to his friend John Sterling. Struck by the sublimity of Ely Cathedral, he describes how 'the yellow sunshine streamed in thro' those high windows'.[13]

Carlyle's concluding definition of man in 'Cui Bono' as 'a foolish baby' who 'Vainly strives, and fights, and frets;/Demanding all, deserving nothing;—/One small grave is what he gets' evokes Larkin's 'The Old Fools', composed in 1972 after a visit to his mother in a care home, with its similarly cruel accumulation of questions undercutting all optimism. Unaware that 'they're for it', the senile old people in the nursing home endure, like Carlyle's babyish 'Man', a 'whole hideous inverted childhood'.

Larkin's 'Wedding-Wind', composed in 1946 and included in the privately printed *XX Poems* of 1951, is generally considered to be one of his more successful early poems. Larkin himself, writing to Monica on 26 November 1950, considered that of the six poems he had sent her, 'on the whole I think *Wind* is the best', adding that 'I wish I could write more like that, fuller, richer in reference'.[14] While the influence of Dylan Thomas, Thomas Hardy, W. B. Yeats and D. H. Lawrence has been noted, there appears to be an additional richness of reference at work in the

[10] *The Carlyle Letters Online*: https://carlyleletters.dukeupress.edu/volume/5/lt-18310824-TC-JWC-01/ (accessed 11 December 2024).

[11] 'Cui Bono' was first published in 1830, and 'Today' and 'Fortuna' appeared in 1840. All three were collected together, along with five other poems, in our copy text, Thomas Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (London, 1899), I.

[12] *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, 475.

[13] *The Carlyle Letters Online*: https://carlyleletters.dukeupress.edu/volume/15/lt-18420906-TC-JOST-01 (accessed 10 December 2024).

[14] *Letters to Monica*, 25.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/nq/article/72/2/187/8051852 by Centre for the Study of African Economies user on 14 April 2026

poem—one which might be attributed to Carlyle.[15]

'Fortuna' is written in the first person, as becomes clear in the fourth stanza.[16] While the speaker's sex is unspecified, the title invokes a female deity and the line 'I must bundle my wallets and walk, walk' strongly recalls Catharina in Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World*, herself emblematic of fortune, who 'with her scanty wardrobe, packed up in a wallet [. . .] set out on her journey on foot.'[17] Rarely for Larkin, the first-person speaker in 'Wedding-Wind' is a woman, and, as in 'Fortuna', she considers questions of joy, sorrow and fate.

The idea of a relentless wind indifferent to human agency dominates the narratives of both poems. From his palindromic opening lines, 'The wind blew all my wedding-day/And my wedding-night was the night of the high wind', Larkin uses the word 'wind' insistently, while Carlyle repeats the refrain 'The wind blows east, the wind blows west' at the start of each of the first four stanzas, changing the formulation in the final fifth to 'The wind does blow as it lists alway'. Larkin mirrors Carlyle's language and rhyme schemes to develop a scenario reminiscent of that in 'Fortuna'. In the first stanza, Larkin's line 'And a stable door was banging, again and again' sets up an ensuing rhyme for the speaker 'hearing rain'. Carlyle's second line 'And the frost falls and the rain' enables a similar repeating formula: 'A weary heart went thankful to rest,/And must rise to toil again, 'gain,/ And must rise to toil again.'

The idea of rising from rest to toil is also picked up by Larkin, with the husband having to go outside on his wedding night to shut the stable door before returning to report the horses 'restless'. Each poem, moreover, explores questions of sadness and happiness. For Carlyle, 'The thriftiest man is the cheerfulest;/'Tis a thriftless thing to be sad, sad,/'Tis a thriftless thing to be sad', while Larkin's narrator 'was sad/That any man or beast that night should lack/The happiness I had.'

The question of sleep, or lack thereof, was one which preoccupied the Carlyles, with Jane doing her best to protect Thomas's rest, particularly from the crowing of cocks.[18] Thomas was also concerned on Jane's behalf about the 'villainous' cockerels, at one point attempting to have them shot but evidently failing owing to a thunderstorm.[19] In a letter of 26 June 1844, Jane writes to her husband in terms which seem familiar from Larkin's 'Wedding-Wind', including a similar mise-en-scène and a punning reference to happiness:

> Thanks Dearest for your note and the newspaper, which was the best part of my breakfast this morning—not that I had "lost my happityte"—I slept much better last night—in spite of cocks of every variety of power, a dog, and a considerable rumblement of carts! but the evil of these things was not doubled and tripled for me by the reflection that YOU were being kept awake by them and what individual evil there was in them could not get the better of my excessive weariedness.[20]

Carlyle's correspondence offers other phrases and ideas which appear to work their way into Larkin's poem. In a letter of 10 June 1851 to his sister Jean Carlyle Aitken, he reports:

> We have charming mild Summer weather here,—and *grey* enough, which is always my prayer: for example, today at 2 p.m., I am actually writing by *candle-light*,—the "*dag* of rain" is so dark otherwise! Sunday was a high wind: I went far into the solitary country; all was one huge *sough* of waving trees and verdure under the kind bright sky.[21]

Larkin's poem, partially set by candlelight, references 'the high wind' ('my wedding-night was the night of the high wind'), perhaps verbally anticipating his famous 'high windows', and just as Carlyle's scene is gathered together by the idea that 'all was one huge sough of waving trees', so in Larkin's landscape the wind is 'all' consuming.

[15] For a discussion of possible influences, see *The Complete Poems*, 359–60.

[16] *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, 475-6.

[17] Oliver Goldsmith, *The Citizen of the World: or Letters from a Chinese Philosopher, residing in London, to his Friends in the East* (London, 1793), I, 261.

[18] See the discussion in Phyllis Rose, *Parallel Lives* (New York, 1983), 246.

[19] *The Carlyle Letters Online*: https://carlyleletters.dukeupress.edu/volume/14/lt-18420428-TC-JWC-01/ (accessed 10 December 2024).

[20] *The Carlyle Letters Online*: https://carlyleletters.dukeupress.edu/volume/18/lt-18440626-JWC-TC-01 (accessed 27 October 2024).

[21] *The Carlyle Letters Online*: https://carlyleletters.dukeupress.edu/volume/26/lt-18510610-TC-JCA-01 (accessed 27 October 2024).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/nq/article/72/2/187/8051852 by Centre for the Study of African Economies user on 14 April 2026

He emphasises this twice: first, ‘All’s ravelled under the sun by the wind’s blowing’, and second (referencing trees, like Carlyle), ‘All is the wind/ Hunting through clouds and forests’.[22]

Notably, Larkin first thought of the phrase ‘the night of a high wind’ in a draft of June 1944—the same year that Sydney Larkin was communicating with him about Carlyle’s *On Heroes*, and indeed the same month that his father inscribed the *Reminiscences* which he still held in possession upon his death in 1985. The imagery of night-time, wind and trees blowing so that they are ‘talking’ anticipates his later poem, as illustrated by the first four lines:

> Why should I be out walking
> On the night of a high wind?
> Why should I understand
> The trees in their talking?

In a letter of 9 September 1948, Larkin wrote to his school friend J. B. Sutton and described his lunch-break in similar elemental language: ‘the wind blows & the high trees softly convulse all their involved sunlit leaves with a long wave breaking noise’. It is worth observing that Sutton shared his devotion for D. H. Lawrence, who in turn was heavily influenced by Carlyle.

When the bride of ‘Wedding-Wind’ is left alone, Larkin introduces the curious image of her ‘Seeing my face in the twisted candlestick,/Yet seeing nothing.’ There is no correlative in ‘Fortuna’, but the language does recall a passage in Carlyle’s novel *Sartor Resartus*, in which ‘All visible things are Emblems; what thou seest is not there on its own account; strictly taken, is not there at all’.[23] The similarity of these ideas might seem tenuous were it not for the way in which Carlyle completes his sentence, drawing upon the novel’s central metaphor of clothing: ‘Matter exists only spiritually, and to represent some Idea, and *body* it forth. Hence Clothes, as despicable as we think them, are so unspeakably significant.’ The notion that the abstract—be that spirit, thought or emotion—must necessarily take some form, be clothed, is revisited by Larkin in the series of metaphysical questions the speaker puts by way of concluding the poem. The woman is undertaking domestic tasks outside (like Carlyle’s ‘toil’) while the wind is ‘thrashing’ the ‘apron and the hanging cloths on the line’, leading her to reflect:

> Can it be borne, this bodying-forth by wind
> Of joy my actions turn on, like a thread
> Carrying beads?

The ‘bodying-forth’ of joy directly echoes Carlyle’s language and is associated with the image of the wind taking on shape through billowing clothes on the line. Carlyle’s question in the final stanza ‘Canst thou change the world to thy mind?’ is answered by the conclusion that ‘The world will wander its own wise way’ and ‘I also will wander mine’. This is perhaps reflected in Larkin’s penultimate question, which puts nature’s implacable course in opposition to the daily needs of humans: ‘Shall I be let to sleep/Now this perpetual morning shares my bed?’ Even so, the sense of tempered optimism which runs throughout Carlyle’s poem finds an equivalence in Larkin’s parabolic conclusion: ‘Can even death dry up/These new delighted lakes, conclude/Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters?’

In some respects, the trajectory of Larkin’s poem—from a speaker whose very happiness causes sadness, to one who apprehends a sense of the sublime—enacts the revelatory philosophy at the heart of *Sartor Resartus*, in which spiritual enlightenment is found in the progress from the ‘Everlasting No’ to the ‘Everlasting Yea, wherein all contradiction is solved’.[24] Larkin would have been aware of D. H. Lawrence’s explicit reference to this idea in ‘Death is not Evil, Evil is Mechanical’. The poem enjoins the reader to consider that they are ‘a mixture of yea and nay/a rainbow of love and hate/a wind that blows back and forth’: surely an echo of Carlyle’s ‘The wind blows east, the wind blows west’.[25] It was published in *Last Poems*, of which Larkin possessed a 1933 edition at the time of his death in 1985. Was Larkin remembering the ‘Everlasting Yea’ in his poem ‘For Sidney Bechet’?[26] The ‘voice’, in

[22] Larkin’s choice of the word ‘ravelled’ is perhaps noteworthy in this context. *The Carlyle Letters Online* records Thomas’ fondness for the term, with some nineteen uses of it, or variants upon it.

[23] Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (University of California Press, 2000), 55.

[24] *Sartor Resartus*, 120–46.

[25] *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts (London, 1964), II, 13–14.

[26] The only specific reference we have identified to Carlyle’s possible influence on Larkin’s poetry is made by Archie Burnett in his notes on ‘For Sidney Bechet’ in *The Complete Poems*, where he briefly draws attention to Carlyle’s ‘Everlasting Yea’.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/nq/article/72/2/187/8051852 by Centre for the Study of African Economies user on 14 April 2026

contrast to the 'appropriate falsehoods' it awakens in others, falls upon him 'as they say love should,/ Like an enormous yes'.

CHRISTOPHER FLETCHER
University of Oxford, UK
CLARISSA HARD
University of Cambridge, UK

https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjaf029
© The Author(s) (2025). Published by Oxford University Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
Advance Access publication 4 March, 2025

ATOMIC ALLUSION: *HAMLET*, OPPENHEIMER, AND CORMAC MCCARTHY'S LAST NOVELS

Given their concern with madness, guilt, suicide, and a retreat from decisive action, it is perhaps unsurprising that Cormac McCarthy's twinned final works, *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, make obsessive reference to *Hamlet*. The grave Dane emerges as a kindred spirit for the novels' sibling prodigies, Bobby and Alicia Western, who are troubled in their own way by the ghost of a father—one whose contribution to the Manhattan Project rests on their shoulders like a curse.

Bobby obliquely seeks to atone for the inherited sins of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by renouncing physics for activities with a redemptive if not restorative purpose: salvage diving and, later, the life of a hermit. A close friend regards his central flaw as that of the 'nonparticipant', expressly yoking him with Shakespeare's notoriously noncommittal young prince: 'There's something in life which you've forsworn, Squire. And while it may be true that I in turn envy you your classic stance, I dont envy it much. Trimalchio is wiser than Hamlet.'[1] Alicia, a mathematician *manqué* who contemplates and eventually commits the ultimate abdication, appears to have Hamlet's grim cast of mind. Her plan to disappear without a trace ('Plan 2-A') is subtitled 'or not 2-B'.[2] At another point, with less humour in her gallows talk, she again nods to Hamlet's soliloquy on suicide: 'To wish oneself never to have been. Again, not the same as *no longer to be*.'[3]And her principal hallucination, the Thalidomide Kid, also recalls this speech when Alicia hints that she will not be around for much longer: 'Off to the bourne from whence no traveler whatever the fuck.'[4] But it is another of the Kid's allusions that is my main concern here, since it triangulates *Hamlet*, McCarthy's last novels, and their preoccupation with the 'father of the atomic bomb', J. Robert Oppenheimer.

Readers of *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* will be aware that Oppenheimer is a peripheral but persistent presence in the novels. Bobby and Alicia's father, we are told, 'was with Oppenheimer at Trinity'—that is, the first ever nuclear test, which was carried out at Alamogordo, New Mexico, on 16 July, 1945.[5] The well-known features of the renowned physicist are here described in detail, while his equally well-known reputation for unmatched incisiveness is subsequently relayed.[6] There are further references to the Atomic Energy Commission's infamous hearings of 1954 (recently dramatized in Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*), and also to the questionable question of Oppenheimer's 'Satanic' character.[7] The latter imputation is made by Alicia's psychiatrist, who is determined to link her psychological afflictions with her father's—and by extension, Oppenheimer's—attempts at 'blowing up the world'.[8]

What emerges collectively from the Oppenheimer references is a mixture of awe and projected guilt—of admiration for his genius and, simultaneously, pity for his 'tragic intellect'.[9] It would be fair to say that this tension is a commonplace of the growing Oppenheimer mythology. We find it in John Adams's opera, *Doctor Atomic*, where allusions to Baudelaire's 'The Generous Player' cement a Faustian connection[10]; we find it in Tom Morton-Smith's drama, *Oppenheimer*, which plays up the title figure as traitor to his

[1] Cormac McCarthy, *The Passenger* (London, 2023 [2022]), 336, 160.

[2] Cormac McCarthy, *Stella Maris* (London, 2023 [2022], 190.

[3] McCarthy, *Stella Maris*, 29 (my italics); and for Hamlet's soliloquy, see William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. John Dover Wilson (Cambridge, 1969), III. i. 56-89.

[4] McCarthy, *The Passenger*, 8 (italics removed).

[5] McCarthy, *The Passenger*, 128.

[6] See McCarthy, *The Passenger*, 410.

[7] See McCarthy, *Stella Maris*, 35.

[8] McCarthy, *Stella Maris*, 116–7.

[9] On this tension, see Charles Thorpe, *Oppenheimer: The Tragic Intellect* (Chicago, 2006), 289.

[10] John Adams and Peter Sellars, *Doctor Atomic* (2007), accessed online: https://www.opera-arias.com/adams/doctor-atomic/libretto/: 'The soul is a thing so impalpable...' ; see Charles Baudelaire, 'The Generous Player', in *Baudelaire: His Prose and Poetry*, ed. T.R. Smith (New York, 1919), 81.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/nq/article/72/2/187/8051852 by Centre for the Study of African Economies user on 14 April 2026