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# Libraries in Battle: An Analysis of the Image of the Library in Texts by Swift, Borges, and Sloan

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LIBRARIES IN BATTLE:  
AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMAGE OF THE LIBRARY IN  
TEXTS BY SWIFT, BORGES, AND SLOAN

By

Elyssa M. Gould

THESIS

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Title of Thesis: Libraries in Battle: An Analysis of the Image of the Library in Texts by Swift, Borges, and Sloan

This thesis by Elyssa M. Gould is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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## ABSTRACT

### LIBRARIES IN BATTLE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMAGE OF THE LIBRARY IN TEXTS BY SWIFT, BORGES, AND SLOAN

By

Elyssa M. Gould

This essay examines the image of the library in texts by Jonathan Swift, Jorge Luis Borges, and Robin Sloan. Libraries are prevalent institutions in many cultures throughout the world, often known through positive or negative stereotypes. By studying texts whose time periods, subject matter, and genre all differ, an image of the library appears that takes into account both positive and negative aspects to create a holistic image. The methods used to evaluate the texts include close reading, Frye's archetypal theory, and approaches to the semiotic method championed by both Tancheva and Stelmakh. This study found that each story reveals a battle that occurs as a result of an element of fear within the library. These battles, internal or external, cause the characters to confront their emotional responses to libraries, work through their ambivalence, reflection, and ultimately make a choice about their response to the library. The resulting image of the library is a positive one, one that has survived a battle of conflicting emotions and emerged full of hope.

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, for being my cornerstone of support and encouragement through many years of school in my continual pursuit of knowledge, and to my husband, for always encouraging and supporting me.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Northern Michigan University Department of English.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis shows that a significant part of the image of the library remains the same over time. The three texts by Jonathan Swift, Jorge Luis Borges, and Robin Sloan reveal that people think about and respond to libraries in ways that produce conflict, whether in individual or group settings. This is a consistent pattern throughout all three texts, regardless of time, geographic origin, or genre of the story. What an individual or group discovers within a library or as a result of expectations towards a library causes an internal or external conflict of emotions, often driven by an element of fear. In the three texts examined, this fear manifests as the fear of one type of book being better than another; the fear of not having a purpose; and the fear of providing broad access to information – potentially powerful information that could transfer power from a select few to numerous individuals. This fear and conflict first causes ambivalence, followed by reflection and contemplation, and ultimately a choice.

The topic for this thesis grew out of my interest in my own field of librarianship. As I sought for a way to tie my studies and interest in literature into my professional life, I stumbled across the subject heading “Libraries in literature.” While browsing this heading in WorldCat, an online database that lists millions of library holdings throughout the world, I discovered that some fiction novels were labeled with this subject heading, but so were research books and articles. Many of the critical texts focus on a few specific titles, most notably Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*. I began to wonder what other literary texts included images of the library. In librarianship, the concept of “serendipity,” meaning the fortuitous discovery of materials by chance, is oft discussed as

a legitimate research method, and I began to experience serendipity *en mass*. I started noticing titles in my professional journals, news stories, blog reader, and Amazon reviews that might be candidates for further study, as well as theoretical pieces that might provide the framework for a thesis. Before long, my list of possible sources of fodder was very long.

The origins of the institution of the library can be traced back to the third millennium BC, although the Library of Alexandria, begun in the third century BC, is the most well known ancient library in history (Battles 25-26). The goal of the library at that time was to collect all written works but to only allow certain individuals access to those works. In this aspect, the first library was more like today's museum: a place where items were kept and perhaps displayed, but rarely used, and only by a select few. These libraries were housed within religious institutions, government chambers, or in the homes of wealthy individuals. Over time, the library transformed from a place for trained specialists or society's elite to read and learn, into a place where, under the visions of individuals like Benjamin Franklin and Sir Anthony Panizzi, all people had equal rights to access and use the books in a library for enjoyment, research, and self-improvement. In America especially, the library was a place where "an artisan might become as intelligent as the sons of the gentry, limited only by his own curiosity and ambition" (Augst 7). The library thus became a symbol of freedom – specifically freedom of speech and thought – while simultaneously maintaining the atmospheres of reverence and fear instilled in the library's beginnings.

I began to wonder how others saw libraries. Of course, as a librarian, I am a fan of libraries. I believe in the ability to learn and grow intellectually through a multitude of

materials – books, audio, video, articles, research texts, and more. I believe in free access to these materials. I champion library resources among my friends and family, and borrow heavily from both the academic library in which I am employed and my local public library. In short, I love learning, and I love being a part of an institution that supports and enables the freedom to learn. There are many individuals who have championed libraries in the history of the United States: Benjamin Franklin, Andrew Carnegie, E.B. White, Ray Bradbury, and Laura Bush, to name a few. But do the views of these champions reflect the view of American society? The Pew Research Center has completed a significant amount of research on the perception of libraries in America. A 2014 report on library engagement found that “as a rule, people who have extensive economic, social, technological, and cultural resources are also more likely to use and value libraries as part of those networks” (Zickuhr, Purcell, and Rainie). Of the population surveyed, sixty-nine percent indicated that they were engaged with libraries in a high or medium capacity, and ninety percent of respondents indicated that a library closure would significantly impact their community. This study shows that the library still has a place in the modern world, which overflows with options for receiving information, from social and cultural resources. What about other cultures and societies? Do their libraries function in the same way, and do their citizens also love the library? Wouldn't their feelings about libraries pop up in the literature of other countries? And so the need to examine texts from the perspective of different genres as well as different nations was added to my list.

The library of today is very different than the library of fifty years ago, much less twenty years ago. Libraries are withdrawing massive quantities of physical texts because

they haven't been used in decades. Monies spent on physical books are now siphoned into the vaguely titled "electronic resources," which can mean anything from electronic databases to digital music to eBooks, all accessible via the Internet. Most libraries participate in at least one interlibrary loan cooperative, meaning that the library's patrons can request a book not located at their local library and receive a copy from another library within a few days. The physical library looks very different, with more space dedicated to community activities, such as programs for children, youth, and seniors, study spaces, and sitting areas for those who desire a quiet place to read, and less space to shelve books.

All this change leads me to ask: with continually advancing technology, is the library itself fundamentally changed? The Internet has certainly changed how libraries accomplish their work and increased the breadth while changing the format of materials held by a library, but in the end, is the library still the library? This is the question the field of librarianship has been grappling with for some time now. Librarians haven't come to a decisive, conclusive answer. These questions resulted in another requirement for my study: the literary texts must be from different time periods.

While the library has a physical existence in the real world, it also exists as an image or symbol in culture. The image of the library exists in many forms of art throughout history, from paintings to architecture to literature. Such representations inevitably reveal something about the world they portray. The library as an image acts as the control element in this study. This control element is the consistent image in each story, while the other elements of the story are different and may or may not affect the control element. By arranging the study in this way, the study focuses on similarities and

differences in the portrayal of the library image amongst various pieces of literature. The questions being asked in this paper are: How is the library portrayed? Does the portrayal of the library change over time? How do different genres, time periods, and contexts impact this portrayal? What does this comparison reveal about the image of the library?

In this space I will look at the symbol of the library across a select cross-section of genres, countries, and times to ask the same question: through it all, is the library still the library? By purposely choosing diverse texts, I hope this study creates a multi-layered textual analysis that overlaps at points of similarity and clearly identifies the diverging points in the depiction of the library in literature. By studying the words and patterns in Jonathan Swift's satirical essay "A full and true account of the battle fought last Friday between the ancient and the modern books in Saint James's library" (also known as "The Battle of the Books"), Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Library of Babel," and Robin Sloan's recent novel *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore*, this paper examines the uses and meaning of the recurring image of the library. The analysis shows that patterns emerge over time and although the different time periods reveal different aspects of the image of the library, the ability of the image of the library to evoke ambivalence that leads to inner or outer battles largely remains the same amongst of the literary works studied.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The images of the librarian and library have been a point of fascination for some time. Some critics of the image of the library center their arguments on or around Foucauldian theories in conjunction with library science theories and practices. For example, Radford & Radford's 2001 article argues that "fear is the fundamental organizing principle, or code, through which representation of libraries and librarians are manifest in modern popular cultural forms such as novels, movies, and television shows" (300). They continue their argument by pointing out that control and fear form a kind of reciprocal relationship, and libraries abound in control manifested in orderliness – books arranged in call number order, information in catalog records arranged according to rules, access to stacks governed by librarians. The order displayed in libraries is unmistakable, yet Radford & Radford miss several important aspects of the image of the library by focusing solely on the role of fear in these images.

Other researchers examining the image of libraries regularly cite Foucault. His theories of fear and control seem tailor-made for the naturally orderly environment of the library. Yet as many individuals have pointed out, Foucault's theories help keep the image of the library in a one-dimensional box. For example, Buschman's 2007 "Transgression or Stasis? Challenging Foucault in LIS Theory" article highlights two Foucauldian problems in library science literature: one concerns image (36), where the examination of the image of librarians is criticized as trivial and not challenging preconceived notions; the other problem has to do with unread text about libraries (37), where the texts that depict libraries are selectively chosen and discussed, leaving others to

the abyss of unread texts. Buschman is correct that the image of the librarian is oft discussed, but in a one-dimensional way that does not suggest motivation for the image or solutions to the perceived imperfect image. Buschman correctly insists that many texts containing valuable images are avoided or forgotten.

Another researcher, Kornelia Tancheva, adds depth to the theory of the image of the library in her 2005 article “Recasting the debate: the sign of the library in popular culture.” She describes stereotypical representations of the librarian as “mousy” or “Nazi-like” (530). Stereotypes of libraries typically focus on environments that could contain such a librarian, namely those of order, control and fear (531). These may be valid components of the librarian image, and Tancheva argues just that: that these representations are one-sided representations of the image of the library. As a result, she seeks to identify a holistic image in her analysis. I have chosen to use Tancheva’s theory as well as additional theories to help push back against a simple or stereotypical view in order to investigate the entire image of the library.

Tancheva immediately calls out the representations of libraries in culture as “degradingly stereotypical” or overly “positive” (530). She advocates that such stereotypes are inaccurate and one-dimensional and show a dependence on Foucault’s discourse analysis, which “theorizes the library in the Western tradition as a conservator of order and a metaphor for rationality” (531). These stereotypical elements are not the only lens through which to view libraries. Signs can and do change over time, meaning that signification becomes relative and does not remain at stasis. As Tancheva considers that libraries are *cultural signs* rather than *cultural institutions*, she examines the genre, setting, and subject of each library image (533, 542). For example, when Tancheva

considers the image of the library in the film version of *The Name of the Rose*, she foregrounds the image of the library in the story's genre of mystery fiction, its setting in the 1300s, the story's being written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Umberto Eco, and the central subject of the tension between Christian religion and humanism in the story.

Tancheva's semiotic method that focuses on the context of the image within a genre, setting, and subject matter is a practical way to examine and determine the relative significance of the image of the library in an art form. Valeria Stelmakh's 1994 article "The Image of the Library" applies the semiotic method for its ability to understand the "semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic strata of images" (9). These aspects allow for the image to become a three-dimensional representation of the library in that we can discover a range of emotions within the texts. In Stelmakh's analysis, stereotypes, reality, and idealism are each examined to determine their influence on the portrayal of libraries. These two semiotic approaches have strong applications to my paper's concentration on how the library is portrayed in literary works from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, mid-1900s, and post-Internet 2000s.

Tancheva's semiotic method supports and enhances the literary theory by Northrop Frye known as archetypal criticism, introduced by his 1951 essay "The Archetypes of Literature." Frye posits a form of criticism that combines inductive methods (structural analysis to try to see larger patterns) and deductive ones (postulating how the criticism works) to comprehend a literary work of art. Frye describes a combined approach that discovers the "social conditions and cultural demands which produced" a text (98), and also suggests a common critical meaning behind an image that is used by many artists. Frye suggests that the archetypal symbol is a problem of

structure, not origin. By this, Frye means that the concept of an archetype focuses on how the symbol is used within the text, not where the symbol came from originally. This statement is directly relevant to this study. Archetypes are simultaneously unifying and part of a total form, and can be informed by ritual, myth, and folk tale (100). Archetypal criticism invites a close analysis of an image's origins that results in a "big picture" view of the image in question, one that traces uses, innovations, and growth over time. This study seeks to discover if the structure of the library as a symbol remains the same over time when the structure of the texts in which it appears do not remain the same.

Frye also discusses the traceable rhythms and patterns of literature. He posits that "narrative and meaning thus become respectively, to borrow musical terms, the melodic and harmonic contexts of the imagery" (102). He ties rhythm and ritual together as a natural occurrence, but points out that patterns of imagery are trickier to understand and comprehend: "The myth is the central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual and archetypal narrative to the oracle. Hence the myth *is* the archetype" (103). Frye also suggests that the meaning of this archetype is greater than a symbol for an individual, but extends to "the vision of the end of social effort, the innocent world of fulfilled desires, the free human society" (108). His vision for archetypes demonstrates a universal quality to their meaning and existence.

When Frye's archetypal criticism is combined with Tancheva's and Stelmakh's semiotic methods, a fuller understanding of an image emerges. Frye's method for tracing structural patterns and origins proves useful when attempting to understand the image of the library in a variety of literary works over several centuries. Since Frye's insistence that an image is either all in the comic vision or all in the tragic vision is not always true,

Tancheva's examination of the genre, setting, and subjects of an image, as well as Stelmakh's consideration of stereotypes, reality, and idealism, can help determine where and why the image diverges from a shared meaning.

It is my hope that this paper's perhaps odd selection of works by Borges, Swift, and Sloan will show different commonalities and divergences than are typically noticed or discussed in the literature. Through the application of Frye's archetypal criticism, Stelmakh's three-pronged approach, and Tancheva's semiotic method, a multi-dimensional image of the library will be uncovered in each of the chosen texts. Images of libraries are not static, but rather display historical developments and future possibilities all at once (Buschman 39), therefore deviating from preconceived notions of what a library is, does, and represents.

## ANALYSIS OF THE THREE TEXTS

### “The Battle of the Books”

In 1704, Jonathan Swift lent his satirical pen to the ongoing argument of which was better, the Ancient or Modern writers, in his essay “The Battle of the Books.” Within the walls of Saint James’s Library, the two sides duke it out to see who will win. The satirical text itself seems to have gone through the battle, as we are told that it is missing sections that would describe the outcome. In this way, Swift slyly refuses to describe a winner, choosing to leave that decision to the reader. While the topic of the satire is intriguing, it is the setting of the story that holds the most relevance to this paper’s discussion.

This epic battle takes place in a library, specifically the royal library within St. James’s palace in London. Swift’s first mention of “library” uses the synonym “magazine,” a military term for a storeroom of gunpowder or other supplies (17). Once the “chiefest and largest” books are placed in a “quarter purposely assigned them,” they are then “called books of controversy” (17). In this sentence, Swift acknowledges several purposes of both books and libraries. To Swift, books are ammunition, perhaps to inform and shape an individual’s thoughts as well as to provide counterpoints to arguments. Libraries are warehouses that store this ammunition in an organized way in order to foster intellectual discussions about the books. At this point in history, libraries did not lend books to individuals as they do today, but housed books as a museum keeps artifacts. The books are full of ink, which forms words, powerful words that are used for violence in the battle of his satire.

Swift also uses another metaphor for libraries – that of death. He says that a “restless spirit haunts over every book” and compares libraries to the cemeteries that house the graves of books. This illustration fits well with the ensuing Battle of the Books, which fights over the ongoing relevance of Ancient and Modern works. Some books “die” over time as they are no longer relevant to the current generation of readers; some books are “resurrected” as they are rediscovered by young readers; and yet other books never die, and seemingly live on forever because of their importance in the literary and philosophical canon. However, all of these types of books coexist in the library. Placing them together, in an assigned location, ensures one of several fates: the possibility of a book being rediscovered, never dying, or dying because it becomes irrelevant due to the books surrounding it. So it is fitting that Swift chooses the library as the location for his battle of Ancient versus Modern writers.

In a way, Swift’s library is a neutral location. The physical size of the library is presumably vast, because of references to high shelves, the ability to be buried in obscure corners, and a count of fifty thousand books prepared to fight for the Moderns in the battle (20-21). Logic dictates that the collection must be large enough for the Ancient writers to match, or nearly match, the Modern writers in battle. In addition, this particular library ensures that all the books of worth have been procured and kept safely, because the king owns the library, and the king has the means and interest to purchase any and all significant works. Swift describes the battle as involving “all the books in the library” (20). Because the information contained in the books is in the library, this location provides a basic foundation for the intellectual fight that occurs.

That Swift chose the library as his setting indicates the value of the library as a place to keep and store information. There were likely very few other locations that would hold such a breadth of works in one place in the early eighteenth century, besides another royal library or a private home of a very wealthy individual. The library is also a safe place to engage in this battle because its very presence invites an argument. The protagonist says,

...I was sure they [the books] would create broils wherever they came, unless a world of care were taken; and therefore I advised that the champions of each side should be coupled together, or otherwise mixed, that, like the blending of contrary poisons, their malignity might be employed among themselves. And it seems I was neither an ill prophet nor an ill counselor; for it was nothing else but the neglect of this caution which gave occasion to the terrible fight that happened on Friday last between the Ancient and Modern Books in the King's library. (Swift 19)

Because the books were disrupted from their proper collocation that naturally encouraged the readers to engage in an intellectual battle, the books had to take on the battle themselves. This order and lack of order in the king's library incited anger, not an emotion of fear, as Foucault's theories might suggest. The library naturally encourages learning through reading, which leads to individual and group discussions on topics of interest. The act of collocating books on similar topics next to each other, no matter when they were written, invites the reader to engage in an intellectual battle of whose ideas to accept and whose to leave behind. Ultimately, written works from a variety of perspectives and time periods should be organized in a manner that does not privilege one

title over another. The variety and organization does not force the reader to believe any specific ideas, but rather keeps the choice of the reader paramount.

The battle of the books is possible because of several factors, most notably the physical size of the library allowing for the housing of a large quantity of books – numerous enough to engage in battle. As Swift explains,

Meanwhile, those books that were advocates for the Moderns, chose out one from among them to make a progress through the whole library, examine the number and strength of their party, and concert their affairs. This messenger...brought back with him a list of their forces in all, fifty thousand. (21)

The size of the library combined with the number of books allows the books to feel content and confident enough to engage in battle. It is this emotional response of contentment that is most interesting, as it seems opposite the act of war. In war, one thinks of emotions of rage, revenge, patriotism, and pride – but not of contentment, an emotion that commonly elicits images of home and familiarity. However, an important component of this emotion is the ability to gain strength from and through the very thing that makes you feel content, whether that be a home, or in this case, a library. The emotion of contentment is made possible by the interdependent relationship of the library and books. The books draw strength from being in the familiar environment of the library. Because of this nature of the library, the books within it are able to respond both contentedly (or with strength) and in anger.

It is the two emotions of contentment and anger that depict a well of feelings deep enough to respond to the fear of one type of book actually being better than another. The

introduction of fear, specifically the fear of being wrong, drives the emotions of the books to action. The reader does not see much ambivalence on the part of the books, but the buildup between books and the library is described before the choice to engage in battle occurs. This very physical and violent battle leaves such a mark on the books that even Swift's story has "battle scars" in the form of missing pages that would contain descriptions of the battle. Cunningly, Swift never reveals who won the Battle of the Books. By choosing this ending, he emphasizes the learning role of libraries and suggests that the answer might ultimately be different for each reader, rather than a proscribed one-size-fits-all answer. This subjective answer to the battle also suggests that it is also not for a single individual or institution to identify which is better, Ancient or Modern writing. In Swift's essay, the role of the library itself carries more weight than the vocabularies or philosophies contained in the books that carry out the battle. The portrayal of the library depicts a place that provides a comfortable place for strong emotions such as anger, resulting in an intellectual battle, to occur.

## “The Library of Babel”

Borges' 1962 collection of short stories entitled *Labyrinths* contains the memorable story “The Library of Babel.” Originally published in Spanish in 1941, the story looks forward to imagine what the role of the library and information will be as time progresses. This futuristic tale is told from the perspective of a librarian who has spent all his life within the confines of a never-ending Library that contains all books in every language, including many languages that have become lost or unknown. The library setting may have appealed to Borges' because he grew up reading books from his father's library, worked in a library beginning in 1938, and went on to serve as a director of the Argentinean National Library in 1955. While the genre of the story is fantastical, the setting and subject are very much based in reality.

The word choices throughout the tale jump out at the reader. The story contains a significant number of negative “never-ending” terms, such as infinite, incomprehensible, and innumerable, that describe the Library and its contents. The quantity of these terms suggests several related emotions towards the Library itself: awe, reverence, and fear. These emotions are not complete opposites, but rather related terms found on the same spectrum. The emotion of reverence involves a significant amount of respect, while fear involves a heavy dose of terror, and awe encompasses respect, wonder, and fear. This fear is shown through terms that describe the mystery and enigma of such a large, unending place. The main character frequently describes the Library as an inaccessible and impenetrable labyrinth. Castillo notes that “The cumulative effect of this series of words beginning with the prefix “in” ...is to cause the reader a slight uneasiness in the

presence of a universe so alien and so mysterious” (85). Awe emerges from descriptions of the totality and immensity of the Library itself. This completeness is a mystery, as the Library somehow contains all the books that were, are, and will be printed. In fact, the word “all” is repeated twelve times throughout the eight-page story, further emphasizing this paradox. It is out of this awe of totality that the protagonist hopes for a “book which is the formula and perfect compendium *of all the rest*” (Borges 56).

The mystery of the specific contents of the Library and its vastness produces in the main character a sense of respect and reverence for the Library. He describes the Library as only being the “work of a god” in its ability to absorb so much space within so much time (Borges 52). These conflicting yet connected emotions of awe, reverence, and fear suggest that unknown entity of the Library is both a source of frustration and hopefulness. Here the image of the library does not fit into one stereotype or accepted image, but several. The Library is simultaneously treated with the reverence of a cathedral and the intimidation experienced when confronted with all the world’s knowledge. The intimidation also plays into the images of the library as a storehouse and the library as knowledge itself. By showing related images and stereotypes into one short story, Borges shows a multi-faceted view of the image of the library.

The distinction between reverence and fear warrants its own discussion. Many of the stereotypical images of libraries involve one or a combination of these two feelings. For example, the library as cathedral implies a sense of reverence and respect that is typically reserved for a sacred or holy place. This image is typically used when the attitude towards knowledge is one of awe and curiosity. However, fear is often a significant part of the images of the library as a storehouse of knowledge. It is

intimidation and fear that can drive some libraries to collect all the world's knowledge in order to control the access to knowledge, therefore interfering with individuals' abilities to freely choose and retrieve information, or to use information against them somehow. Knowledge is power, as they say. In these images, the attitude, context, and subject are important to determining whether the images are rooted in terror or wonder.

However, to counteract the negative "never-ending" words, the tale also contains many finite terms. These words include specific numbers of shelves, books, and lines in books when describing the contents of the Library. This continual quantifying behavior of the librarian is curious because the Library has already been described as an obviously unquantifiable space, which must have been determined by numerous failed attempts to quantify the Library. The librarians seem to count to impose order on a seemingly disordered space in order to make sense of or comprehend the Library. The quantifying may have also worked to provide hope for the librarians, preventing some from giving in to despair that caused suicides, "more and more frequent with the years" among the librarians (Borges 58). The protagonist describes the librarians' actions to discover order in the Library in terms of time, totaling hundreds of years of work.

An interesting twist to Borges' story is the librarians' need for individual vindication and group justification. The theory that the Library contained all the books ever written made the librarians feel as if "the universe was justified, the universe suddenly usurped the unlimited dimensions of hope" (Borges 55). However, this euphoria quickly delved into despair when the librarians realized that it would be impossible to discover one's own vindication story within the vast Library. The librarians searched for their entire lives to find a text that would explain all other texts in

the library. Essentially, they searched to discover both their individual and collective purpose, but never found it in the form in which they expected to find it. Therefore, it makes sense that the librarians, especially the protagonist, feel as if they are simultaneously in heaven and hell. Being surrounded by books is akin to being surrounded by treasure found only in heaven, yet they cannot read the books and cannot escape the Library, and thus feel as if they are trapped in hell. The protagonist's desire for group justification stems from a desire for meaning as he writes, "for one instant, in one being, let Your enormous Library be justified" (57). He longs for the librarians' time to be worth something and the unreadable books to make some sort of sense. What the protagonist does not note is that by recording his experience in the Library, he is making sense of his own time. He demonstrates the value of the Library to himself and his life by exploring its image and its reality. By showing these sides of the library, these dichotomies of heaven versus hell, and vindication versus justification, aids the image of the library as it becomes a multi-dimensional representation. In "The Library of Babel," the image of the library moves past stereotypes and into reality.

In "The Library of Babel," readers see the full range of an internal battle brought on by the fear of living without a purpose. The library's vast size, combined with the lack of answers found within its walls, creates complicated emotions in the protagonist. He often exhibits awe at the space he is asked to guard and watch over, as evidenced by his repeated descriptions of the vast size of the library and respect for its contents. However, his emotions shift towards the end of the story, as more ambivalence and conflict is introduced through the protagonist's fellow librarians, who eventually experience fear from the power that a rumored, undiscovered text-to-explain-all-texts

holds over the group. The protagonist himself responds more in frustration than fear, wishing that his purpose and existence would be justified by the revelation of such a text. By the end of the tale, he seems resigned to the enigmatic state of the Library, ending with the belief that:

The Library is unlimited and cyclical. If an eternal traveler were to cross it in any direction, after centuries he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder (which, thus repeated, would be an order: the Order). My solitude is gladdened by this elegant hope. (Borges 58)

The circumstance of this all-encompassing library encourages an element of fear that elicits different emotional responses in different people, most notably manifested in the protagonist, who moves through internal battles of ambivalence and reflection to make a choice about the Library, its purpose, and his own purpose in the Library.

## “Mr. Penumbra’s 24-Hour Bookstore”

In his debut novel, Robin Sloan weaves a tale of books, technology and mystery. The story features a curious American bookstore clerk named Clay Jannon who uses computing technologies such as crowdsourcing and Hadoop to solve a puzzle embedded in the books kept in the bookstore in just one night. It is noteworthy that Clay uses a short time frame to discover a solution because the puzzle has taken many of the bookstore’s patrons many years, even decades, to solve. Although the story features a bookstore, patrons frequently borrow books as they would at a library. Mr. Penumbra, the bookstore’s owner, acknowledges that “This is more than a bookstore...It is also a kind of library, one of many around the world...No two are alike, but their function is the same” (Sloan 46-47). Therefore, the bookstore will be treated as a library in this paper.

Clay first visits Mr. Penumbra’s bookstore in San Francisco when he notices the “help wanted” sign in the window. He describes the bookstore as narrow and tall, “the shape and volume of a normal bookstore turned up on its side” (Sloan 7). The height of the shelves reminds Clay of a forest, while the darkness seems ominous and gloomy, suggesting that the bookstore “might just go on forever” (8). The tall ladder that Clay is required to climb as his audition for the clerk job makes Clay feel as if he is a monkey reaching for food among the trees. While Sloan describes the bookstore in friendly terms that remind the reader of natural beauty, he also acknowledges the dark side of nature by describing the forest as “not a friendly California forest, either, but an old Transylvanian forest, a forest full of wolves and witches and dagger-wielding bandits all waiting just

beyond moonlight's reach" (8). This theme continues throughout the novel, as things that seem charming suddenly seem ominous (8).

Just as the height of Mr. Penumbra's bookstore speaks of the mystery and darkness to come, it also carries significance in regards to representing knowledge. The physical structure uses the "vertical dimension to articulate a view on the construction, restructuring, or deconstruction of knowledge and language systems" (Van Acker, Uyttenhove, and Van Peteghem 532). As Clay climbs on the ladder to retrieve specific books for patrons, he is unknowingly enabling the patrons to construct and deconstruct their own knowledge. He later learns that the patrons read the texts looking for clues that enable them to solve the Founder's Puzzle, a requirement to join a secret society known as the Unbroken Spine. Once a patron solves the Founder's Puzzle, he or she is known as "unbound," a status that makes them worthy of joining the Unbroken Spine. The many shelves in Mr. Penumbra's bookstore symbolize the breaking down and then building up of each patron's knowledge towards solving the puzzle. However, the books fill the shelves of the bookstore to a point where there is no room for more books. The overflowing shelves come to symbolize the overwhelming quantity of words, pages, and books the patrons sift through on their way to gaining the knowledge to solve the puzzle.

As Clay seeks to solve the mystery of why certain patrons borrow certain books from the bookstore, he borrows an old clerk logbook and takes it to Google to be scanned. He describes the room at Google as a "field hospital," dark with harsh lights and metal equipment. The shift from the gloomy yet welcoming environment at Mr. Penumbra's bookstore to the stark emptiness of Google's book scanner room is notable. When a Google employee apologizes for Google's putting bookstores out of business,

Clay responds that “people still like the smell of old books” (Sloan 90). Here, nostalgia and memories are associated with libraries. Positive associations can be linked to nostalgia and memories, therefore transferring positive emotions to books, bookstores, and libraries. As Google’s book scanner scans the bookstore’s logbook, Clay says he feels “a pang of pity for the logbook, its secrets all plucked out in minutes by this whirlwind of light and metal” (91). The juxtaposition of old and new technology is striking. As Raj from Google explains, old knowledge is contained in old books and “accounts for most things that most people know, and have ever known” (86). Raj imagines a world in which old knowledge is available all the time, to answer each and every question. He believes the new technology will enable the old knowledge contained in old technology to become accessible and usable. To Raj, libraries are like warehouses that contain old technology – books – that can be mined for future purposes.

By scanning and text mining the old logbook from Mr. Penumbra’s bookstore, Clay is able to write a computer program that finds the clues amongst the books patrons borrow and solve the Founder’s Puzzle. He melds old knowledge and new technology to solve one of the mysteries he senses exists within the walls of the bookstore, before he even knows what the Founder’s Puzzle is. However, Clay does not realize how radical his discovery is, especially since he solved the Puzzle in one night, and it sets off a journey to New York City to save Mr. Penumbra from being fired by his boss, Corvina, the leader of the secret society Unbroken Spine.

The Unbroken Spine guards a secret library in New York City, which Clay aptly describes as more of a “Batcave” than a library (Sloan 143). This library contains heavy wood shelves, chains to tether books to tables, and colorful tomes that Mr. Penumbra

reveals to be each group member's own *codex vitae* or "book of life" (146). However, the secret library, or vault, was originally created to guard the treasure of Aldus Manutius' *codex vitae*. The entire purpose of the Unbroken Spine is to guard and decode this tome written by their founder. Where Clay found curiosities and freedom at Mr. Penumbra's bookstore in San Francisco, he finds battles of censorship and ownership in the New York library, or "Batcave." Unlike Mr. Penumbra's vertical bookstore, Corvina's secret library is just that: secret. It is built underground, away from prying eyes. This precaution is understood to be a protective move, to protect the text that the Unbroken Spine believes is its most important artifact. The precautions taken by Corvina suggest that the secret library is on the defensive, poised for war.

The physical representations of these libraries embody two distinct approaches to libraries. One seeks to keep cultural materials safe, and therefore enshrines or imprisons its materials where a select few, or no, individuals can gain access. The other approach believes that the contents of the materials are valuable to individuals' lives, and makes those materials as widely available as possible. At some point, the conflict between these two approaches comes to a head. And in this novel, Mr. Penumbra and Corvina, advocates of these two approaches, do come to their own version of a "battle of the books." The two men and their two approaches to the Unbroken Spine clash, one operating out of fear for the loss of the old, the other from a place of hope for what technology can do for the future. It is obvious that a rift had formed between them before the events of this novel take place; however, Clay's ability to correctly solve the Founder's Puzzle in a short period of time with a computer program serves as the catalyst to force both Mr. Penumbra and Corvina to face and reconcile their differences.

The physical representations of the two libraries and their respective guardians also serve as a symbolic representation of two approaches to libraries. The tall 24-hour bookstore, run by Mr. Penumbra, grows in knowledge and stretches towards the sky like a tree towards sunlight. The bookstore's members are encouraged to pursue curiosities and clues by borrowing books and searching for information. This stance is mimicked by Mr. Penumbra himself, who enthusiastically encourages the pursuit of knowledge, even when it occurs outside of the normal parameters of discovery, such as Clay's computer program that solves the Founder's Puzzle. In fact, he "looks rattled and exhilarated; actually, he looks a little crazy" after Clay's discovery (97). Mr. Penumbra responds with hope for his library, while the physical library itself encourages hope.

The dark underground library of the Unbroken Spine, guarded by Corvina, reeks of fear. He actually stations a guard at the entrance to the library at all times to ensure that only members of the Unbroken Spine enter the library. The underground location of the library implies that Corvina is hiding a secret, and is afraid of what might happen if the secret is discovered. Change scares him, as evidenced by the fact that members are only able to bring "paper, pencil, ruler, and compass" into the library (Sloan 142). And so Corvina imposes order and controls access to the treasured *codex vitae* of Aldus Manutius in an attempt to protect the tome from anyone who might bring unknown ideas or technology into the secret underground library.

*Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* is about more than just a bookstore that functions like a library; it is a conversation about new and old, about finding the purpose for each in a world that increasingly prefers the new. The novel also discusses the emotions tied to this fight: optimism and fear. Of the three texts, it is the most overt

representation of the battles caused when fear enters into an individual's beliefs and expectations to a library. Each library physically depicts opposite ends of the spectrum by its manifestation as an above- or under-ground location. The difference is also manifested in the persons of Mr. Penumbra and Corvina, two individuals who used to be friends but are now at odds with one another due to very different viewpoints on the purposes of the materials housed in libraries. The knowledge contained in Mr. Penumbra's bookstore causes him to be an optimist about its uses in a technology-driven world. Yet the knowledge contained in Corvina's library causes him to fear its release and to seek to control it. The interdependent relationship of the physical libraries to the men who run the libraries allows for dichotomous emotional reactions to the libraries in the novel. This difference in reactions to the purpose of the library demonstrates a broader portrayal of the image of the library.

## ANALYSIS OF THE IMAGE

The image of the library in these three texts is similar, yet also different. In review, the library in “The Battle of the Books” is an image of a battlefield, a place where two sides feel comfortable enough to hold a fight. The library in “The Library of Babel” shows the library as a place of stored knowledge, worthy of reverence and perhaps invoking fear along the way. The two libraries in *Mr. Penumbra’s 24-Hour Bookstore* show a dichotomy of approaches to life, one that treasures the old to the point of censorship and one that hopes that new technology can enhance and explain the old. What binds each of the texts together is the occurrence of internal or external battles caused by unmet or inaccurate expectations of the library. The following section will compare and contrast the revelations within the words of Swift, Borges, and Sloan as enlightened and informed by the theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature review section.

When considering the texts, Frye’s archetypal theory falls short because there is no common critical meaning behind the image of the library. Each of the texts examined explore different emotions; if there was a common critical meaning, the characters would react with the same one or two related emotions each time. However, Frye’s theory does have some merit in regards to the size of the library. As this paper has explored, some of the structures of the symbol of the library are similar. Size or vastness of the library is often included as an important factor. Size often allows or enables the characters’ emotional response – in Swift, the size encourages a level of contentment. In Borges, the size inspires awe. In Sloan, size implies heights of knowledge to be climbed and earned

or depths of knowledge to hide, therefore encouraging either hope or fear. Size is a conduit to give rise to an emotional response, yet the specific size is a consistent part of the structure of the image of the library.

Perhaps in this case, the size of the library becomes the myth that functions as an archetype. We know that in the real world, libraries come in many sizes, from the Little Free Libraries housed in birdhouses in individuals' yards to the enormous Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. or the British Library in London ("The History..."). Yet the myth consistent among all three texts is that libraries are large and vast. This does not reflect an archetype for the entire image of the library, just a small portion of that image. Also unaccounted for are the experiences and circumstances depicted in each tale. The circumstances of the characters also contribute to their emotional responses and reactions to libraries; these circumstances are far from identical. This uniqueness also helps the characters have unique emotional responses to very different libraries. So while an archetype is present in these three texts, it only contributes to the image of the library, it does not define that entire image. Other factors, as identified by Tancheva and Stelmakh, are present that help provide a holistic picture of library.

To uncover that holistic picture, we consider each text under Tancheva's semiotic method of examining the genre, setting, and subject matter of the image of the library. When we do this, we find many differences and similarities. I purposely chose texts that fit into three different genres: satire, fantasy, and mystery. While all three texts are works of prose fiction, the different genres exhibit different uses of each author's writing skills and imaginations to highlight different aspects of libraries.

I also purposely chose texts that had different settings: the 1700s for “The Battle of the Books,” the future for “The Library of Babel,” and present-day for *Mr. Penumbra’s 24-Hour Bookstore*. However, what is common among the texts is the presence of a library or library-like institution. The libraries look different in each setting: in Swift, the library is divided between Ancient and Modern; in Borges, it is a twisting, turning, never-ending structure symbolizing the vastness of the world; in Sloan, it is a high-as-the-treetops bookstore that contains knowledge, mystery, and hope or an underground library that hides its knowledge from the world. The overt or covert battles occurring within or to the libraries in each unique setting of the three texts are the essence of the subject matter of each text. While significantly more occurs within each of these three stories, each boils down to the fights occurring in each library. The fights themselves are unique, over: what has more meaning for society, what will provide vindication for the individual, what will stop censorship and fear. “The Battle of the Books” contains an overt battle between Ancient and Modern writings, a battle that could easily spill from the library into the larger realm of society. In “The Library of Babel,” the protagonist speaks of his own internal battle to prove that his life in the vast library is worth something, by searching for the mythical text that will reveal the languages of all the texts within the library. In *Mr. Penumbra’s 24-Hour Bookstore*, Clay and Mr. Penumbra fight censorship, fear and tradition to maintain an open-minded approach to seeking knowledge. The fights have both individual and group implications, despite the origins of the battles.

The individual analyses of the three texts show how important words and word choice are to the image of the library. These three texts include images of fighting,

reverence, and freedom. The images reveal the internal and external struggles that occur when the library in the three texts confronts the characters' deep-set beliefs and expectations. In all three texts, the image of the library provokes one or more emotions for the characters. Contentment, anger, reverence, fear, protection, and hope are all explored within the walls of a library. This is what is consistently in common: the image of the library is an image that shows, contains, and explores emotion. These emotions trigger a strong emotional reaction in the form of a fight, or battle, within each text. Sometimes these battles are internal, sometimes they are external, sometimes both. As emotions can be multi-faceted, so the image of the library takes on a multifaceted existence in these texts written by Swift, Borges, and Sloan.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *emotion* as “any strong mental or instinctive feeling, as pleasure, grief, hope, fear, etc., deriving especially from one’s circumstances, moods, or relationships with others.” It is the relationship and circumstance with the library that evokes and provokes emotion from each story’s characters. The battle in Swift’s “Battle of the Books” only occurs because the environment of the library itself elicits the emotions of contentment and anger. The relationship to the library causes emotional reactions, which then causes physical reactions. As discussed earlier, it is the orderly nature of the library that Swift highlights and points to when he says that the “the champions [books] of each side should be coupled together, or otherwise mixed, that, like the blending of contrary poisons, their malignity might be employed among themselves” (19). Continued order enables the readers to be comfortable enough to engage in an intellectual battle, while an interruption to that order causes the books themselves to react in anger.

The relationship of the protagonist to “The Library of Babel” encourages yet another emotion. Due to the vastness of this all-encompassing, never-ending library, the protagonist feels awe. He feels that the Library is the “work of a god,” inciting reverence and awe at how a space could contain so much knowledge (Borges 52). However, some of the other librarians in the story feel despair when the never-ending space of the library does not reveal the rumored text that explains all other texts in the library, or a finite, obvious purpose for their existence in the library. Yet the protagonist demonstrates hope while he simultaneously longs for a justification of purpose. This contrast among the characters shows that one multi-faceted image of the library can elicit different emotional responses in different characters, as well as cause some ambivalence or questioning that eventually leads to an internal battle within the protagonist.

Sloan’s *Mr. Penumbra’s 24-Hour Bookstore* shows the most explicit representation of emotions as a response to the circumstances of and relationship to a library, partly because the story pits two very different libraries against each other. As discussed earlier, two characters take on the persona of the library that each oversees. Mr. Penumbra runs a tall bookstore that welcomes new ideas, people, and technology to help solve an age-old mystery of the Founder’s Puzzle, which he then hopes to use in order to decode Aldus Manutius’ *codex vitae*. In contrast, Corvina guards a secret underground library that houses Manutius’ *codex vitae*. He protects this treasure by censoring the individuals that have access to the tome and relying on outdated, ineffective modes of decoding to try to unlock its secret. Corvina’s desire to protect a treasure leads him to react in fear, while Penumbra’s willingness to try new technologies brings him great hope. This story eventually becomes a fight for freedom of information: is the

information included in Manutius' *codex vitae* more or less safe by its exposure to more people? The secret society of the Unbroken Spine searched for decades to find a way to decode their founder's *codex vitae* without any leads, and that fact leads the characters in the book to react either in fear or in hope.

As this paper shows, the battles in each text are made possible by the emotional responses of the characters to the library, spurred into action by fear. Fear itself is not the image of the library in these texts, as Foucault might have said; instead, it is the element of fear that drives the characters to action. However, the characters first experience ambivalence towards libraries, followed by reflection and contemplation once their expectations are unmet or prove inaccurate, ultimately leading to them making a choice in how they regard the library. This choice might be to engage in battle, as in Swift's essay; to choose to believe in the purpose of libraries without external justification, as in Borges' short story; or to fight censorship head-on, and eventually emerge on top, as in Sloan's novel. The emotions, and especially the fear, in the library in each text encourage a choice that requires action.

So what does this image of the library mean for Tancheva's theory of the image of the library as a cultural sign, and not a cultural institution? The theory forces the individual to look beyond traditional stereotypes and Western worldviews. Although it does not prevent bias on the part of the analyst, it does encourage the analyst to look beyond his/her own biases. It is also a better-rounded theory, enabling the analyst to take a holistic approach to understanding the image of the library. However, in this instance the analysis finds many similarities, and fewer differences, than originally anticipated. This may be a natural result of the texts and not a product of this specific type of analysis,

but different analyses are necessary to determine whether the similarities hold true under different circumstances.

Stelmakh's combination of semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic ideas creates another theoretical approach to analysis. Semantically, each text reveals facts and values associated with libraries. Stelmakh explains that the revealed values are further divided into categories of "actual, preferable, and ideal" (9). Swift's essay reveals deeply set values of the library as a safe place that contains powerful words. Borges' short story shows that the library holds purpose and meaning. Sloan's novel demonstrates that hope exists in the library. Most of these revealed values are more idealistic than anything else. While the library that contains the battle of the books is safe enough for the books to begin a battle, it is not a place safe *from* battle. However, Swift seems to imply that intellectual battles can be a good thing. And while Borges' vast library contains all the texts in the world, the vindication of its purpose remains an enigma. *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* shows that hope and freedom from censorship do exist, but this fight occurred only between two libraries (one of which is actually a bookstore); the novel does not explore the countless other institutions in which this battle occurs, showing that the battle really occurs on a case-by-case basis.

Stelmakh also argues that an objective picture of the library reveals a real image. This facet of her argument enables the analyst to encompass the viewpoint of the author, and possibly society as a whole. As writers' beliefs often end up in their own writing, we can guess that the authors of these three texts are revealing their own worldview or that of their society. What the author reflects is possibly aligned with the values explored in each of the three texts. However, the author himself should not be treated as essential to

the understanding of the entire text, just as an individual reflecting his opinion in his own writing. In turn, Swift advocates for the safety of the library as place; Borges believes the library should have vast holdings; and Sloan preaches the ability to have access to and choose books for each individual. These are the images of libraries that each of the three authors attempts to achieve in their works.

Finally, Stelmakh believes that the ideas behind an image should return to influence real activity and user behavior in libraries. Each text provides a case study of this pragmatic approach: are the values and images preached in each text achieved by the end of the text? While the library in “The Battle of the Books” serves as a safe place for a battle to occur, the reader is asked to choose the final outcome for his/herself. Therefore, Swift invites the reader to become a part of the battle, to step into the safety of the library and its collocated volumes to discover on his/her own the answer to the question: which is better, Ancient or Modern writing? Or is the answer neither? So too in Borges’ “The Library of Babel,” the reader is asked to trust in the search to solve the enigma, and hope that the protagonist finds his vindication. *Mr. Penumbra’s 24-Hour Bookstore* is the only text in which the reader sees the characters achieve user behavior that mirrors the values espoused in the text. At the end of the novel, Clay reveals that he has finally uncovered the code for the Unbroken Spine’s most cherished *codex vitae*. Corvina, the leader of the pro-censorship faction of the group, attends Clay’s presentation and grudgingly accepts that he may have made a mistake in taking a pro-censorship stance. The library in this story does reveal and bring about hope and freedom.

Stelmakh’s tactics are successful in examining the underlying values and ideals in a text, adding to and enhancing the holistic aspects of Tancheva’s theory. Whereas

Tancheva asks the analyst to look at several different aspects on the surface of a text, Stelmakh asks the analyst to quickly delve beneath the text's surface to the underlying causes. Together, the two form a cause-and-effect type of theoretical analysis that continues to expand the understanding of an image in a text.

As is demonstrated throughout this analysis, the image of the library in these three texts forces conflicts of emotions from its characters by confronting the characters' expectations about libraries. Because the characters are connected to physical libraries through circumstances and relationships, they cannot help but have strong emotional reactions to how the library interacts in their own expectations for their own lives. The image of the library is one of relationships, but ultimately an image of the process dealing with internal or external emotional conflicts brought on by the introduction of fear.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has been a wonderful thought exercise for me as a librarian. I have been able to look at the library in three very different texts and see that library through the lens of another. As a librarian, I hope that others have favorable views on libraries; that they find libraries to be valuable institutions, worthy of their patronage; and that they see libraries as places that hold a breadth of knowledge that can quench any thirst for information. I was hesitant to begin this study because I was a bit afraid of what I would find. What if others didn't think that the institution of the library, where I plan to spend my entire career, was worth their time? The library is not truly a library without patrons to partake of the information and knowledge housed within its walls and computer networks. And worse yet, what if writers did not believe that the library was worth writing about? Preserving the library as an image in the literary canon validates it in a way that librarians cannot accomplish alone, by showing that the library is a valuable institution.

Despite my worries, I found many texts that I could use as fodder for this paper. I strategically selected three texts: Jonathan Swift's "The Battle of the Books," Jorge Luis Borges' "The Library of Babel," and Robin Sloan's *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore*. The purpose in choosing these three texts was to provide a cross-section of prose fiction that included different genres, subject matter, and countries of origin in hopes of uncovering any patterns, similarities, or dissimilarities in regards to the image. The image of the library was also examined for the presence of archetypes, which were found

to be present in the size of the library in each text, but not in the entire image of the library. The commonality between the images of the library in each text is the element of fear that provokes an internal or external conflict of emotions. Upon realizing that their first emotional response and expectation towards the library is unmet or inaccurate, the characters respond to this conflict with ambivalence, reflection, and ultimately a choice towards libraries as an institution. It is this process that surprised me the most in my research; I expected to find steadfast feelings towards library, and instead I found feelings that had been tested and tried. The image of the library has remained largely unchanged throughout time, geographic origin, and genre due to its ability to continually provoke internal and external conflict and resolutions in those who encounter the library.

This continuity in the expression of the image of the library in three separate texts is encouraging. It means that while the library is a place where it is safe to feel a myriad of emotions, including fear, it is also a place that can spark or fan the internal battles brought on by the provocation of emotional responses. The image of the library is hopeful, yet not naïvely so, as the image has undergone a battle and emerged victorious. It also means that the library has a long history and legacy as an institution that includes people, not books, at the center of its being. Another meaning is that the image of the library is more about the effect of the books and place on the people than merely housing books in a safe manner. This truth is reflected in the substance and three-dimensionality of the image of the library. The image of the library validates many of my own feelings about libraries, and those of the authors and the societies they represent. I, for one, am proud to be a small part of the real institution that is comprehensively represented in the image of the library in literature.

This study introduces the idea of studying the images of cultural institutions within literature. Areas for further study include applying the analysis to other cultural institutions such as museums and churches, and repeating this study among more works of fiction to determine if the results can be replicated among other portrayals of the image of the library. A large-scale analysis of texts across a similar span of time would be preferable. New methods of research in the digital humanities field that combine the power of computer programming and textual analysis would make this wide-scale project possible.

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