OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE

"T. S. Eliot's term for a pattern of objects, actions, or events, or a situation that can serve effectively to awaken in the reader an emotional response without being a direct statement of that subjective emotion. It is a means of communicating feeling. Eliot calls the *objective correlative* 'the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art' and defines it as 'a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion, such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked'…. The term was used by Washington Allston in a lecture on art as early as 1850 to describe the process by which the external world produces pleasurable emotion, but Eliot gave it new meaning and made of it a new term."

C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon
A Handbook to Literature, sixth edition (Macmillan 1992)

"I was trying to write then and I found the greatest difficulty, aside from knowing truly what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel, was to put down what really happened in action; what the actual things were which produced the emotion that you experienced...the real thing, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion."

Ernest Hemingway
Death in the Afternoon (1932) 2

EXAMPLES

The Old Man and the Sea is often compared to *Moby-Dick*. Compare Hemingway's Modernist style of understatement with the Romantic style of Herman Melville, which includes both the objective correlative and subjective expressions of feeling:

1

> Then he began to pity the great fish that he had hooked... The male fish always let the female fish feed first and the hooked fish, the female, made a wild, panic-stricken, despairing fight that soon exhausted her, and all the time the male had stayed with her, crossing the line and circling with her on the surface. He had stayed so close that the old man was afraid he would cut the line with his tail which was sharp as a scythe and almost of that size and shape. When the old man had gaffed her and clubbed her, holding the rapier bill with its sandpaper edge and clubbing her across the top of her head until her colour turned to a colour almost like the backing of mirrors, and then, with the boy's aid, hoisted her aboard, the male fish had stayed by the side of the boat. Then, while the old man was clearing the lines and preparing the harpoon, the male fish jumped high into the air beside the boat to see where the female was and then went down deep, his lavender wings, that were his pectoral fins, spread wide and all his wide lavender stripes showing. He was beautiful, the old man remembered, and he had stayed.
>
> *The Old Man and the Sea*

2

> It was a terrific, most pitiable, and maddening sight. The whale was now going head out, and sending his spout before him in a continual tormented jet; while his one poor fin beat his side in an agony of fright. Now to this hand, now to that, he yawed in his faltering flight, and still at every billow that he broke, he spasmodically sank in the sea, or sideways rolled towards the sky his one beating fin. So have I seen a bird with clipped wing, making affrighted broken circles in the air, vainly striving to escape the piratical hawks. But the bird has a voice, and with plaintive cries will make known her fear; but the fear of this vast dumb brute of the sea, was chained up and enchanted in him; he had no voice, save that choking respiration through his spiracle, and this made the sight of him unspeakably pitiable; while still, in his amazing bulk, portcullis jaw, and omnipotent tail, there was enough to appall the stoutest man who so pitied.
>
> *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 81

3

The fish died. Minimalism

4

I went to sleep, and Jim didn't call me when it was my turn. He often done that. When I waked up, just at day-break, he was setting there with his head down betwixt his knees, moaning and mourning to himself. I didn't take notice, nor let on. I knowed what it was about. He was thinking about his wife and his children, away up yonder, and he was low and homesick; because he hadn't ever been away from home before in his life; and I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so. He was often moaning and mourning that way, nights, when he judged I was asleep, and sayin, "Po' little 'Lizabeth! Po' little Johnny! it's mighty hard; I spec' I ain't ever gwyne to see you no mo', no mo'!"

He was a mighty good nigger, Jim was. But this time I somehow got to talking to him about his wife and young ones; and by-and-by he says: "What makes me feel so bad dis time, 'uz bekase I hear sumpn over yonder on de bank like a whack, er a slam, while ago, en it mine me er de time I treat my little 'Lizabeth so ornery. She warn't on'y 'bout fo' year ole, en she tuck de sk'yarlet-fever, en had a powful rough spell; but she got well, en one day she was a-stannin' aroun', en I says to her, I says:

"Shet de do'."

"She never done it; jis' stood dah, kiner smilin' up at me. It make me mad; en I says agin, mighty loud, I says:

"'Doan' you hear me?--shet de do'!"

"She jis' stood de same way, kiner smilin' up. I was a-bilin'! I says: 'I lay I *make* you mine!' En wid dat I fetch' her a slap side de head dat sont her a-sprawlin'. Den I went into de yuther room, en 'uz gone 'bout ten minutes; en when I come back, dah was dat do' stannin' open yit, en dat chile stannin' mos' right in it, a-lookin' down and mournin', en de tears runnin' down. My, but I wuz mad, I was agwyne for de chile, but jis' den--it was a do' dat open innerds—jis' den, 'long come de wind en slam it to, behine de chile, ker-*blam!*--en my lan', de chile never move'! My breff mos' hop outer me; en I feel so--so--I doan' know *how* I feel. I crope out, all a-tremblin', en crope aroun' en open de do' easy en slow, en poke my head in behine de chile, sof' en still, en all uv a sudden, I says *pow!* jis' as loud as I could yell. *She never budge!* Oh, Huck, I bust out a-cryin' en grab her up in my arms, en say, 'Oh, de po' little thing! de Lord God Almighty fogive po' ole Jim, kaze he never gwyne to fogive hisself as long's he live!' Oh, she was plumb deef and dumb, Huck, plumb deef and dumb--en I ben a-treat'n her so!"

Mark Twain
Huckleberry Finn, end Chapter 23

ARCHETYPAL ELEMENTS

In three of the passages above, feelings are generated in particular by archetypal elements: (1) the ocean, the bond between mates, the clubbing death of the female, the loyalty of the male, the leap up high to see and the dive down deep; (2) the ocean, the chase, the agony of the animal, the big whale beating its little fin in fright, choking with no voice; (4) the parent-child relationship of Jim and Huck, the generosity of Jim, Huck's dawning awareness that Jim is just as human as white folks, Jim's openhearted confession of shame, the pathos of his loneliness, the cruelty of slavery in separating families, his love of po' little 'Lizabeth, the pain he suffers for his mistreatment of her, their tears--above all, the innocent child unjustly hurt--irresistible appeals to the heart in the context of complex folk pastoralism. The vignettes between stories in Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925) illustrate the objective correlative with maximum economy. Two of the most powerful recent works illustrating the objective correlative are "Cathedral" (1981) by Raymond Carver and *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy.

Michael Hollister (2015)