The Function of Tears in U.S. Politics
Fact and Fiction

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Introducing Tears

Tears are a manifestation of human emotions and express sadness, mourning and despair, anger and rage, happiness and joy, envy and jealousy. They represent both pain and pleasure. They usually roll down people's faces spontaneously and can often hardly be controlled. They seem to suggest weakness as well as relief. However, they can also be produced deliberately and used to manipulate others, because tears are often taken to be authentic, are likely to arouse sympathy in the observer, and can motivate listeners to more easily accept and follow the tear producer's aims. In politics, in particular, shedding tears falls into the category of what Heike Paul (2021) calls "civil sentimentalism" because, like the tears in the early 19th-century sentimental novel, they may have—or be intended to have—a political effect. Moreover, crying is considered to be gendered; as the common saying goes, "boys don't cry" but girls—and women—seem to do so easily. However, as I will show, this engendering of tears is hardly ever as clear-cut and binary as it may traditionally seem. Tears that are shed in the political arena by politicians or those in the political limelight take on a number of functions that range from emotional bonding via the creation of authenticity to manipulation and more. My selection criteria for the following examples are that in the chosen instances the crying happens in public and is noticeable by everyone present and that the person who cries is an obviously public figure with a leadership position in politics. In addition, all events that I will analyze include in some way or other elements of mourning.

In the following, I will start out by briefly discussing the philosophy, literature, and language of tears. I will then first move on to an analysis of Hillary

Clinton's concession speech and her reference to her dead mother; my second example will be Barack Obama's crying after a high-school massacre mourning the many dead children, and third, and finally, a fictional politician's publicly tearing up at a funeral, namely Claire Underwood in the Netflix series *House of Cards* (2013–18), will conclude my analysis of tears in U.S. politics. I will discuss their crying in public as a political tool alongside its effects on their respective audiences. I will use some concepts taken from visual culture studies, affect theory, and Michel Foucault's theory of power to discuss what political tears and "political emotions" (Nussbaum) tell us about the relationship between gender, power, and the state to figure out the work that they do (see Ahmed 14).

The Philosophy and Literature of Tears

As Tom Lutz argues in his popular book *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears* (2001), "until recently tears have been remarkably neglected as a subject of investigation. No lamentology or lacrimology has developed, no academic fields devoted to their study, no science of tears" (18–19). Yet, while tears are academically under-researched, moments of crying are paramount in, as Lutz shows, "poetic, fictional, dramatic, and cinematic representations of the human proclivity to weep" (19). Tears can be taken as visible and tangible signs of strong feelings that can be provoked by a variety of causes. The question is how we, as listeners, on-lookers, or bystanders, read the tears that are shed, since they, at least for a moment, suspend words. Moreover, which effect do they have on us? The decoding can never be done other than from the decoders' positions and, thus, with their respective backgrounds in mind (see Hall). As Lutz concludes, "no simple translation of the language of tears is ever possible" (25). Also, tears do not mean the same things at all times. They are culturally contingent, and their effects and meanings, at least to some extent, change over time as well as across cultures.[1]

1 David A. Bell maintains, when discussing charisma as one form of emotion, that "[i]t is important to emphasize here that emotions, like everything else, have a history. They obviously have a physiological basis as well, but culture shapes the way people understand, process, and control their emotional reactions, including how they come to consider some reactions natural and legitimate and others shameful or harmful. Historians and psychologists even speak of different 'emotional regimes,' which can succeed one another in historical time" (16). Because of the emotions' history, it is important to

Moreover, the reading of tears depends very much on the understanding and perception of gender in a specific society. If sex is understood as a binary system, in the sense of Thomas Laqueur's "two-sex model" with assumed essential biological differences, then gender, as a socio-cultural construction, often, and still today, wrongfully based on the biological male-female dichotomy, depicts specific feminine and masculine qualities that are attributed to gender's sexual counterparts. In spite of a diversity of genders in the 21st century, masculinity defined as representing strength and control of emotions and femininity associated with weakness and a pronounced emotionality still often prescribe how people are expected to behave in private and in public. As a result, tears in public are usually understood as signs of weakness; therefore, men should not cry, and if they do, they are considered effeminate and weak. Do women cry as an expression of weakness and powerlessness? Tears seem to indicate a contrast to reason and rationality, a cool mind always in control. Tears reflect emotionality, spontaneity, and, seemingly, a loss of control.

There appears to be a shift from the Age of Sensibility in England, which followed and in part ran parallel to the Age of Reason and Enlightenment, where men and women seemed to be allowed to cry in public to express true virtue,[2] to a situation with clear-cut gender binaries and gender-specific imaginaries that emerged in the course of the 19th century, beginning with American sentimental fiction that addressed mostly women. This shift shows how important it is to contextualize a reading of tears, whether shed in public or depicted in literature, such as, toward the end of the century, in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) which depicts a woman with a strong imagination and her husband, a doctor, who is afraid of emotions, fancy, and anything that cannot be touched and controlled. Yet, before this shift took center stage, William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*, as early as 1789, reflected on sympathy and sentiment as even leading to incest. As Jay Fliegelman explains,

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contextualize crying in public and show that it is very different according to its cultural contexts but that it also has structural similarities.

2 See Samuel Richardson's sentimental fiction, *Pamela* (1740) and *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753–54), and, above all, Henry Mackenzie's most influential novel of sentiment *The Man of Feeling* (1771), a deliberately fragmented series of loosely connected episodes, in which the protagonist Harley demonstrates benevolence and often tearful sensibility; see also Lawrence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768) with the narrator Parson Yorick often being moved to tears.

> [d]isease, according to Dr. Benjamin Rush, was less a matter of internal malfunction than it was of external interference. Sympathy made man vulnerable not only to the misrepresentations of fraudulent beggars and petitioners playing on the automatic moral sense, but to the tyrannical "disease" of draining excitations and constant feeling and sensation. By making the heart sensitive, it had become as vulnerable as the impressionable mind to the enthrallments of the world. Like laughter or yawning, sympathy and compassion were seen as "contagious." (Fliegelman 232)

Charles Dickens frequently had his characters weep in his novels. It is only in the late 19th and 20th centuries that tears became suspicious (Paul 2021, 17).

Viewers and listeners do not only bring their own perspectives to what is regarded as a performance; they are also potentially drawn into this spectacle and may begin to share the weeper's emotions. The performative quality of publicly shedding tears can be likened to a theater performance. As Erika Fischer-Lichte claims, such a performance assumes "the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators" (164). I extend this claim of co-presence to the realm of audio-visual transmissions of such events so that viewers are co-present with the weeper but "behind the scenes" and literally in front of the screen. An analysis of what can be seen on the screen is an analysis of visual culture, which is, as W. J. T. Mitchell argues, "the visual construction of the social" (170). And yet, co-presence takes on different qualities. Tears can be—but often are not—part of a prepared script. Being moved to tears by someone else's tears establishes a close connection between "actor" and audience which comes across as an embodied act, yet removed from the immediate scene. This particular moment does create a unique and jointly experienced presence which ultimately may leave a strong impact on everyone involved.

The Language of Tears

In his analysis of tears, Tom Lutz refers to psychotherapist Jeffrey A. Kottler, who, in his book *The Language of Tears* (1996), depicts tears as a language system that can be decoded because they seem to be an outer manifestation of the emotions within a human body. As Sara Ahmed explains, "[o]nce what is inside has got out, when I have expressed my feelings in this way, then my feelings also become yours, and you may respond to them. If you sympathize, then we might have 'fellow-feeling'" (8), which establishes a temporary bond. The one

who weeps may or may not be aware of this bond or has invited it on purpose. The status of both is clearly very different, and the encoding and decoding positions may or may not overlap. The weeper creates an illusion of understanding in the recipient—intentionally or not—that may be used for political purposes. This also shows in what Sara Ahmed calls "the 'sociality' of emotion" (8), in which emotions circulate and do not reside in humans or objects but are triggered to be manifested, and then perceived and decoded to be manifested again in the recipient, and this is potentially ongoing. Ahmed calls this process "the 'inside out' model of emotions" (9). As she argues with reference to Émile Durkheim's *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1966), "emotion is not what comes from the individual body, but is what holds or binds the social body together" (9). This bonding can be instrumentalized toward political ends, as "cultural politics or world making" (Ahmed 12).

Tom Lutz, however, calls tears at best a "gestural" language (198) that is "much more open to interpretation than verbal language" (298) and often represents an emotion that, quoting Marcus, "arises from hidden and uncertain causes" (21). While this is certainly true, it seems that Lutz does not take the next step to approach tears as a culture-contingent semiotic system, a sign system that offers markers with which to decode its message—whether produced intentionally or not. Obviously, both processes of encoding and decoding, to use Stuart Hall's terminology, depend on their respective contexts, the situation of production and reproduction, and, when we refer to media, also on the technical infrastructure. The receiver will always attempt to decode the message to know what it means and, thus, a reaction is produced. We know from literary analysis and New Criticism that there can be intentional fallacy at work here. And a fallacy it may very well be, if tears are produced deliberately in order to work on the receiver. While U.S.-American writer Edgar Allan Poe called the effect his poems and short stories should have on the reader, the "single" or "preconceived effect" (446), with horror being the most frequent one to be achieved, Sara Ahmed puts this effect into the context of her own affect theory[3] and asks: "What do emotions do?" (4). In this sense, I suggest that any public weeping is a form of communication that has social and political effects which remain vague because unspoken. Seeing someone cry is, first of

3 More generally, affect, according to Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, is a "[f]eeling or emotion, and the expression of feeling or emotion in the face and body. […] the outward physical expression of inner feelings through facial expressions and gestures, and as the interpretation of our expressions and gestures by others" (431).

all, a visual image that can become "a tool for manipulation" (Mitchell 175) and is, therefore, part of "social transactions" (ibid.). However, tears are often also connected to verbal language and, thus, to cognition. Sara Ahmed sees a "relation between emotions, bodily sensation and cognition" (5). In my examples, tears are a bodily expression of an outside event internalized, turned into an emotion, and then externalized[4] and, according to Paul, activating as well as affirming but also enacting cultural scripts of grief and mourning (Paul 2021, 21). In the words of W. J. T. Mitchell, the visualization of tears is both "the social construction of vision" and "the visual construction of the social" (179), and I would add the political to the social.

Hillary Rodham Clinton's Triumph Turned Concession

In 2016, after a tiring campaign, the Democrats' candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton lost the presidential election against her Republican competitor Donald Trump in spite of receiving almost three million popular votes more than the incoming president. Many people were shocked by this unexpected outcome, and scholars, politicians, and Hillary Clinton herself began to search for reasons for this loss. In 2017, Clinton published *What Happened* in an attempt to convey where things had gone wrong. In *What Happened*, Clinton depicts her own emotional reactions, her disappointment, her frustration, her despair, her sadness, and people's tears. She quotes from letters that describe how people cried after the results had come in; how women had felt a sense of "powerlessness" (24); how women had cried and cried but then had stood up and decided to work for change: "*And eventually, eventually one of us will crash through that highest, hardest glass ceiling*" (24; italics in original). As is usual for competitors in an election, Clinton had prepared both a winner's and a concession speech although none of her followers had ever really believed that this would be necessary. Yet it was. In *What Happened*, she shares parts of the speech she would have delivered had she won, and she explains: "With help from the poet Jorie

4 Although Sara Ahmed sees a risk in talking about "emotional contagion" because it might transform "emotion into a property, as something that one has, and can then pass on" (10), tears have to be contagious in order to be used strategically and politically and attach observers to the nation. Ahmed argues that emotion is "a form of cultural politics or world making" (12). I would like to emphasize that tears as such are not an emotion but the material and bodily manifestation of emotions.

Graham, we had written a closing riff for the speech that made me tear up every time I read it. I want to share it here because, as you know, I never got a chance to deliver it that night" (382). The excerpt addresses her mother Dorothy, who had already died in November 2011, as if she were still alive and ready to receive her daughter's promises of becoming the most powerful woman in the world:

> Look at me. Listen to me. You will survive […]. And as hard as it might be to imagine, your daughter will grow up and become the President of the United States […]. America is the greatest country in the world. And from tonight, going forward together, we will make America even greater than it has ever been—for each and everyone of us. (Clinton 383)

Five years later, in 2021, Clinton teaches a MasterClass on resilience and reads this part of the speech from her book.[5] She combines her love for her mother, her ambition, and her patriotism and cannot contain her tears. Her voice breaks, and she can hardly finish the reading. She comes across as authentic, as deeply mourning her mother but also regretting missing the chance she had to become the first female president of the United States. Everyone who campaigned with her, fought with her, and hoped with her probably shed tears when watching the scene. This very personal moment is available online and turns into a strong political and community-building statement (see Anderson). To make America greater than it has ever been, puns on Trump's slogan and is not backward- but forward-looking, yet mourning the lost opportunity. It is a promise for the future because it does not try to go back to some undefined and illusive moment in the past. She evokes the ideology of American exceptionalism as the nation's founding ideology, U.S.-American democracy, which she considers in shambles at this particular moment, and her idea that the United States is simply different from all other nations. Whatever else "greater" means, this reference remains as enigmatic and fuzzy as the term "American exceptionalism" itself (see Paul 2014, 14–18).

In contrast to this emotional expression in her book (2017) and in the MasterClass (2021), in 2016, Clinton's actual concession speech as a ritualistic event needed her to be strong and resilient, to encourage her own staff, supporters,

5 MasterClass is a streaming platform, which features videos with well-known people who speak about specific topics of interest, mostly moral in nature.

and voters to continue the work they had done and not to despair.[6] Clinton's proclaimed love of America and of its people is the leitmotif in her concession. Her running mate, the senator of Virginia, Tim Kaine, speaks first, and he is full of praise for Clinton's democratic values of justice and equality for all. His emotional speech is followed by Clinton's appearance together with Bill Clinton, daughter Chelsea, and son-in-law Marc Mezvinsky. In her speech, she admits the pain but does not want young women in particular to stop aspiring to the breaking of the glass ceiling. She does not shed tears, but her audience does because they have fallen from high hopes and expectations down to a never expected loss and now fear what the future will bring to their nation. As Clinton assures them, "this is painful, and will be for a long time. […] We have seen that our nation is more deeply divided than we thought. But I still believe in America, and I always will" (8:22–8:53).

"Achieving their dreams" is another one of the central tenets of her speech and refers to the notion of the American Dream. During the long enthusiastic cheering, the camera shows individuals in the audience who are shedding tears. When Clinton finally tells her audience about her pain and that "this loss hurts, but please never stop believing that fighting for what's right is worth it" (15:10–15:18), she begins to lose some of her composure; the strain begins to show, but she does not weep. She finally addresses all women: "I know that we have still not shattered that highest and hardest glass ceiling, but some day someone will and, hopefully sooner than we might think right now" (16:35–16:42). She finally tells all the little girls that they should never forget that they are powerful and encourages them to pursue their own dreams. This is the moment when *abc News* shows girls and young women in the audience crying. They are deeply moved by Clinton's words. She ends her speech on the work that still needs to be done and says: "May God bless you, and may God bless the United States of America." One of the commentators mentions the "raw emotions" in the room while the female commentator maintains that Bill Clinton was angry and Tim Kaine near tears. Another commentator refers to Hillary Clinton's cracking voice. Although the moment of this concession speech is highly emotional, Clinton herself never loses her composure but seems to find hope in her words. Clinton's speech comes across as a pep talk for young women who, in the Clintons' walk through the crowd, become part

6 Clinton, Hillary. 2016. "Hillary Clinton's Concession Speech: Full Transcript." *The Guardian*, November 9, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/09/hillary-clinton-concession-speech-full-transcript. Accessed October 12, 2017.

of the Clintons' extended political family. The spontaneous tears of some in the audience in the room may be joined or rejected by those of the viewers behind screens. But Hillary Clinton herself does not cry and comes across as someone who knows how to lose—even if grudgingly and with some bitter feelings. Hillary Clinton is a professional politician, and what she shows on screen and live to the audience in the room is a political performance, in part scripted by her advisors, in part shaped by the expectations of the people present who need to hear from her that they will continue fighting and eventually, perhaps, break through the glass ceiling. The careful staging reveals that it is a performance, but one that is necessary (and expected) in this particular moment, a political ritual. Whether we take Clinton's words at face value depends on what we as listeners and viewers expect and want to hear. In any case, it is important that she comes across as a strong and resilient woman who knows how to gracefully lose an election.

Barack Obama's Empathy, Love, and Grief

A *BBC News* article claimed on January 11, 2017, that Barack Obama publicly cried seven times during his eight-year presidency. Some of the events were funerals, as the one of his grandmother, but the one moment that sticks out is when he cried after the Sandy Hook school massacre in 2012.[7] At the school, twenty children, aged between five and ten, and six teachers were shot dead on December 14, 2012. During his speech on the day of the shooting, Obama "engages in American civil sentimentalism as a symbolic code" (Paul 2021, 41, translation C. B.) in order to call upon the American people as an (imagined) community which jointly suffers and mourns (ibid.). He tells his audience that he does not react as a president but as a parent, evoking his own family ties. He emphasizes that America has seen such scenes too often and offers his help to the survivors, to the families of the victims, and the governor of the state of Connecticut. While speaking, he constantly wipes away tears from his eyes, first from one, then from the other, but his voice tries to remain even. He speaks staccato-like as if trying to suppress his emotions of sadness, grief, and anger

7 Obama, Barack. 2012. "President Obama Makes a Statement on the Shooting in Newtown, Connecticut." WhiteHouse.gov, December 14, 2012. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2012/12/14/president-obama-speaks-shooting-connecticut. Accessed October 28, 2022.

about the tragic deaths of so many children and adults. In his speech, he addresses all parents in America: "As a country, we have been through this too many times." And he demands that everyone "come together to prevent this regardless of the politics." He ends by asking in the words of the Scripture to "heal the broken-hearted and bind up their wounds." In this moment, Obama comes across—albeit in a "mediated authenticity" (Enli 1)—as someone who cares about people, as a family man, as a human being who is approachable and who is deeply touched by the tragedy of the shooting. Authenticity is the congruence of what human beings do and what they represent, and, more importantly, it is what those addressed see and believe the person stands for. Intentionally produced or not, his tears seek to persuade an audience with fellow-feelings to support his political program of stricter gun laws. Every time school shootings or similar massacres in other places occur, the Democrats, and Barack Obama in particular, attempt to use the momentum to enforce new regulations for gun ownership. He is careful not to deny the Second Amendment with its stipulation of the right to bear arms and to defend one's self, but he argues that there should be more severe background checks, a limitation on the ammunitions-magazines sold to one person, and more. He appeals to all Americans, regardless of their political affiliations, to work together to prevent another massacre like this from happening. Obama's appeal creates a form of an imagined community. People, inside and outside of the United States, watched his speech on TV or online, thus mediated by cameras creating various perspectives from which to view, but mostly focusing directly on Obama in a close-up. Viewers watching his tears are likely to be affected by this situation, maybe even cry with him, and become, at least for this very moment, part of the community of the American people. Yet, the NRA (National Rifle Association) has proven to be a strong lobby, and the Republicans seem to be unwilling to cooperate, not even when the lives of their own children are at stake. Those who share Obama's political views will see him as a "nurturing" (Lakoff 33) father or parent of the nation, who is honest and eager to make a difference and make America a safer place.

Having looked at both Obama and Clinton, it is striking to notice that Obama did not hide his tears on various occasions when speaking in public, while Hillary Clinton shed tears only after her loss of the election and at the imagined reading to her mother. For quite some time, Clinton did not fashion herself primarily as a family person and did not show emotions publicly. Rather, her alleged coldness and emphasis on rationality were in the foreground. For many, therefore, she came across as "too masculine."

Yet, the American presidency has been a male prerogative ever since George Washington, who, as first president, was called the father of the nation. Subsequently, "the national leader is a man with 'manly' characteristics" (272), as Karen S. Hoffman points out. Therefore, by appearing masculine, would Clinton not have been closer to the "manly" system and to fulfilling "the masculinist expectations of presidential leadership" (Vaughn/Michaelson 155)? As Justin Vaughn and Stacy Michaelson also notice, Clinton might have tried, in 2008, "to outmasculine Barack Obama" (155). Obama, however, does not come across as weak when he sheds tears: He expresses empathy and a readiness to do everything in his power to help. Women, however, as it seems, still need to avoid being nurturing in politics, while appearing masculine is not a successful strategy either. Clinton writes about women in *What Happened*: "If we're too tough, we're unlikable. If we're too soft, we're not cut out for the big leagues" (119). Her concession speech puts her into the big league; her "resilience reading" does not, and does not have to. Obama's tears make him a nurturing father; Clinton's tears turn her into a loving daughter; in politics, the absence of her tears renders her a strong leader. In all scenes, emotions are present, just not always explicitly expressed via the same pathos formulas (Warburg).

Claire Underwood's Gender Seesaw

In turning now to a fictional piece, my aim is to show how tears (and generally emotions) are used for the manipulation of citizens and how the viewers are privy to the conversations between Claire and Frank Underwood and thus understand this scheme. In the TV series *House of Cards* (2013–18), two presidents, one male, one female, run the country, and it seems that Claire Underwood, after her husband's resignation, has ultimately broken through the glass ceiling. *House of Cards* presents viewers with the absolutely brutal political life at the fictional White House, dominated by corruption, manipulation, violence, and, sometimes, even murder. Frank becomes president through violent illegal means and runs his presidency in the same way, more or less killing off all opponents. His wife Claire eventually follows him as president and can be labeled as a 'worthy' successor in all respects. The scene to be discussed in the following is part of a larger process of staging a terrorist threat, which the presidential couple promises to contain and take revenge for after the decapitation of a member of the military. In season 5, episode 1, Claire Underwood actually

sheds tears when she and her husband attend the funeral of this member Jim Miller who got killed in the ICO (Islamic Caliphate Organization) hostage crisis. In the evening, Claire regrets having cried, and the following conversation between her and her husband reveals the politics of tears: "Francis, I shouldn't have cried at the funeral." Frank's answer is: "No, it played beautifully." Claire responds: "Not for me" (season 5, episode 1).

At the military funeral, Jim Miller's wife speaks, sobs, and deeply mourns her husband, whose throat was cut by two members of the ICO when Frank refused to exchange him for an Islamist terrorist. Jim's wife cries because of her terrible loss, and while most people in the audience are affected, no one seems to cry except for Claire. She audibly cries out for a short moment and wants to conceal her wet eyes by donning dark spectacles. Frank, however, prevents her from doing so. Jim Miller's daughter blames Frank for her father's execution and says so to everyone. Frank's brief whispered conversation with her reveals that she wants him dead and Claire to be president, which is what he tells his wife in the evening. While he remains calm and keeps a poker face at the funeral, he forcefully takes the stage in the preceding scene in the House of Representatives and demands a declaration of war against terrorism and the ICO. Both scenes are the results of strategic planning because both Claire and Frank try to sow fear in people in order to then appear as successful crisis managers in whom people can trust. When Claire regrets her crying, Frank takes her outside to watch the people demonstrating in front of the White House and explains to her that they want to see the president and his wife as the "nurturing parents" a nation in crisis needs. And tears demonstrate empathy. With her tears at the funeral, Claire becomes such a nurturing mother. Claire adds the human touch to Frank's unempathic presidency. But she does not take out a handkerchief from her bag, as we would expect, but glasses. The expected gesture would have drawn people's attention to her even more, and Frank's hand on hers and the glasses can be read as a comforting gesture, which, too, literally plays into his hands. Even intradiegetically, her tears are polysemic: They surprise the mourners, establish a bond with some, but are also viewed critically by others as simply being staged. Which perception individuals have of her depends on how well they know her and on how much they are willing to accept as authentic what they see.

Next to a wife who sheds tears over a dead man, Frank comes across as masculine and strong while she seems to be weak and emotional. For Frank, this simultaneous construction of empathy and strength is the powerful and productive image of the first couple. He is the strong leader, and through his

wife, he is also associated with the more feminine and human parental side of life. Frank's response that "it played beautifully" emphasizes the performance character of the scene. For Claire, however, as she suspects, this scene weakens her chances of being perceived as strong enough for leadership. She reveals that she has her own ambitions and could be, as Elisabeth Bronfen has argued, the Lady Macbeth of the 21st century. Bronfen claims that Claire seems to be undecided as to whether she wants to be Macbeth or rather Lady Macbeth (85). Like Lady Macbeth, she supports her husband's bid for power, here: the presidency, but unlike Lady Macbeth, she, too, eventually wants the power, i.e., the highest office for herself and is ready to kill for it—and actually does so. Shedding tears relates her more closely to Lady Macbeth's final madness and troubled death than to the presidency of the United States. Yet, this combination connects to what Frank says in one of his many metalepses[8] when he visits his father's grave: "I have to do these sort [sic] of things now. Makes me seem more human, and you have to be a little human when you're the president" (season 3, episode 1). As George E. Marcus maintains and Frank's behavior confirms, "[p]olitics seems to be more and more a drama of manipulation by those capable of framing the issues to their advantage, to elicit the desired emotional response" (2). Everything Frank and Claire do is strategically performed. With Claire, however, there are frequent moments of emotional breakdowns (Gardt 189), which might render her a little too human. For Frank everything is power; even weakness as a sign of human feeling can strengthen his power since he is in control and can direct the performance. As viewers of both TV series and actual politics in the United States, we might wonder whether Claire could be Hillary Clinton's fictional counterpart who rarely breaks down emotionally, and when she does, regrets it? Is this what people see? Or is even the breakdown

8 Frank's frequent metalepses establish a close connection between him and his audience outside the fictional world and show him in control of the action since he openly discusses his strategies and crimes. As Karin Kukkonen explains, "[m]etalepsis occurs when an author enters or addresses the fictional world he or she created, and when characters [such as Frank] leave their fictional world or address their author and their readers [or viewers]" (1). Frank crosses the boundaries of the fictional world but is still confined to the frames of the TV set or the computer. While the use of metalepsis creates an intimacy between Frank and the viewer, Frank still remains in the fictional world or in a liminal space between fiction and reality. He easily navigates between these spaces and controls them powerfully. When Claire finally breaks the fourth wall, as metalepsis is also called, the audience realizes that the transfer of power has taken place.

a strategy? As Governor Conway and his wife at Miller's funeral conclude, "This morning, everything is about politics." This is pure conjecture, but the TV series was at the pulse of political developments until 2018[9] and was highly popular in terms of the cultural work it did for U.S. audiences and viewers abroad. Thus, it may not be too far-fetched to consider that viewers might draw conclusions about women in politics from having watched Claire Underwood act in *House of Cards*. After all, the impact of television series, and popular television shows in particular, on people's understanding of how the world is run, has been discussed for decades (see Hoewe/Sherrill; Phalen/Kim/Osellame).

Conclusion: "Tears! Tears! Tears!"

Tears are the manifestation of emotions turned into "the unloosen'd ocean, / of tears! tears! tears!" (216), as U.S.-American poet Walt Whitman writes in his poem "Tears."[10] Tears in politics, as we have seen, create an emotional bond between people, whether of joy or grief. It seems that emotions are at the center of U.S.-American political culture, both real and imagined, and that politics have never been an entirely rational affair. Politicians often express and also resort to emotions, and tears as their strongest manifestation, to connect to their base, their supporters, their voters. They come across as human beings when they mourn—properly measured—the loss of their mothers, fathers, and grandparents, which puts family at the center of American political culture, or reconnect to the tradition of the elegy, as in Walt Whitman's threnody "Memo-

9 Frank Underwood did not reappear in the final season because the actor Kevin Spacey had been accused of sexual assault in a number of cases and Netflix ended its contract with him. However, as of November 2024, all allegations seem to have been dropped and have not resulted in any conviction.

10 Alfred Lord Tennyson's elegy "Tears, Idle Tears" brings these emotions to a more individual level when the speaker cries out: "Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean, / Tears from the depth of some divine despair / Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes, / In looking on the happy Autumn-fields, / And thinking of the days that are no more" (132). In Tennyson, "the days that are no more" reference both the speaker's own mourning of time passed as well as of the death of a beloved person. And although he reveals these reasons for the tears, he still claims that "I know not what they mean." The origin of tears remains a mystery for him but they are the manifestations of some great emotions that are triggered when observing nature in a happy state.

ries of President Lincoln"[11] or the American Jeremiad.[12] Whitman's poetic tears connect to political culture and bridge the gap from poetry to politicians' tears, which are political because they shape how the audience perceives those who shed them. The tears oscillate between expressing weakness or power, between feminine and masculine attributes, between authenticity and strategy, and yet, they hardly ever manifest in such clear-cut binary ways. Ultimately, the three politicians, the real Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama and the fictional Claire Underwood, shed deeply political American tears because they participate in what Heike Paul calls the public display of mourning as part of American civil religion (Paul 2021, 7). In Obama's case, tears are used as a form of communication, as an impulse for social changes, and as a means of crisis management, as Heike Paul also argues (ibid. 8). In Claire's fictional case, tears may not reveal her humanity but are certainly exploited by her husband toward his own political ends. Tears, therefore, become a tool for the performance of power rather than a sign of weakness. In all my examples, tears create a powerful political community in familial terms, even if these bonds are merely imagined (ibid. 22).

The real-life politicians Clinton and Obama and the fictional Underwood have all become part of a cultural iconography; often, fact and fiction merge.[13] Looking at powerful people when they cry or are deeply moved, potentially establishes a bond between the one on stage and the one watching. It is not by chance that during Clinton's concession speech or at the fictional Jim Miller's funeral, the camera frequently shifts toward crying people in the audience in close-ups or, in the latter case, to members in the congregation, such as the governor, who looks at Claire in surprise, trying to figure out the meaning of her tears. All of these images "serve a multitude of purposes […] and mean

11 Similar poems by Whitman are "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," "O Captain! My Captain!," and "Hush'd Be the Camps To-Day."

12 The American Jeremiad is closely connected to American Puritanism and was used for lamentations about an upcoming doom. It expressed grief, sorrow, and complaint, mostly about devastating societal developments such as a bad harvest. It also became a literary device, as in Jonathan Edwards's sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741), and warns American people of what will happen unless they change their behavior.

13 Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright define visual culture as "the shared practices of a group, community, or society through which meanings are made out of the visual, aural, and textual world of representations and the ways that looking practices are engaged in symbolic and communicative activities" (3).

different things to different people" (Sturken/Cartwright 9); yet, the tears unite both sides through a set of allegedly shared values, such as, for example, empathy. But in politics, the opposite can also be true. Some reviewers on YouTube make extremely derogatory remarks about Hillary Clinton's reading at the MasterClass. All are engaged in what Stuart Hall calls the decoding process, and they do this in three ways: in a "[d]ominant-hegemonic reading"; a "[n]egotiated reading"; and an "[o]ppositional reading" (qtd. in Sturken/Cartwright 73). According to Stuart Hall, when we cry with who we see on the screen, we engage in the dominant reading; commentators and critics negotiate what they see, depending on their respective political affiliations; oppositional readings are done by those on the other side of the political spectrum. My decoding is certainly shaped by presuppositions I have about the people I view on screen. But in all cases, tears bring strong emotions onto the political stage and affect viewers' perceptions of and attitudes toward politics and politicians, who, as shown, engage in a form of sentimentalism which directly reaches out to those who listen to or view these performances.

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