Monsters and the Monstrous

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'In the Blood'

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Introduction

Cristina Santos

This themed issue on the *Monsters and the Monstrous* journal focuses on the connections between monsters, monstrosity and blood. 'In the Blood' navigates the problematics of the nature and physicality of blood itself, as a carrier of disease and contagion but also a conduit of genetic, ideological and memorial encoding.

Historically, blood has been used as the marker of purity of lineage (royal blood, blue blood) but also of 'impurity' (blood quantum, miscegenation). This blood demarcation continues into our contemporary times as evidenced most recently in the latest episodes in season 4[1] of the television series *Grimm.* Here one of the main characters is being judged by an Inquisition-like tribunal for having ignored the law of *impuro* by having married outside his Wesen (humans who also transform into monsters) specie. Humanity has long sought to quell its fears of monsters of miscegenation as contamination—but it has also used it to absorb the Other it wishes to control, to subvert, to silence. As such, it is the very result of what life becomes through, and can be configured as, monstrous, threatening, deviant, mischievous and malignant. Yet, combined with the theory of miscegenation and notion of blood quantum one notes that the 'one drop' rule still remains prevalent today as evidenced in the *(1)ne Drop* photo journal project.[2] Ultimately, these anxieties of patrimony and lineage underline the monstrosity of blood relations and the fear of non-normative bodies and behaviour—one need only view *American Horror Story*'s fourth season entitled *Freak Show* to be reminded of the perils of tainted blood and monstrous births.

One cannot deny that the vampire figure has dominated popular culture, myth and folklore as the quintessential blood sucking bogeyman. It has also long been associated with blood and blood consumption that goes beyond bodily fluids to metaphors of political corruption and humanity's own inhumanity to its fellow human beings. In addition to this rich history of vampire lore, contemporary vampire popular culture has configured vampiric blood as emblematic of sexual appetite but also with the ability to cure injuries (see *True Blood, Vampire Diaries*) and, paradoxically, to infect humans with 'disease' of vampirism (*Twilight* Saga, *The Strain*). Blood sucking and its consumption become, therefore, the mark of the 'monstrous' and the threat of being infected by one's exposure to tainted blood.

Fear of blood contagion extends also to the historical perceptions of female menstrual blood: anxieties of its powers of contamination, castration and deviance. In the western tradition popular artists such as Lani Beloso, Vanessa Tiegs and Charon Luebbers (to name only a few) have explored the abject quality of menstrual blood in their pieces--highlighting corporeality of blood and the female body while others have drawn attention to historical use of menstrual huts to isolate menstruating women from the rest of the community.[3]

The art, prose and poetry included in this issue reflect personal artistic responses to the topic of 'In the Blood' and play upon the diverse interpretations of the common point of departure. Each piece exemplifies, in its own particular way, the artist's/writer's exploration of the topic of 'blood' and its embodiment in his/her own artistic production of some of the very fears and anxieties that have plagued humanity for centuries.

Notes

[1] 'Tribunal', Grimm, dir. Peter Werner, Universal Television, GK Productions, Seas 4, ep. 10, NBC, Original air date 23 January 2015.
[2] 'About the Project,' *1nedrop.com*, Viewed on 31 January 2015, http://1nedrop.com/about/.
[3] Notable artists include, Lani Beloso's 'The Period Piece', Vanessa Tiegs' series of paintings entitled 'Menstrala' and Charon Luebbers 6' x 6'5" construction of 'Menstrual Hut.'

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'About the Project.' *1nedrop.com*, Viewed on 31 January 2015. http://1nedrop.com/about.

American Horror Story. Directed by Brad Falchuk and Ryan Murphy. Performances by Evan Peters, Jessica Lange and Sarah Paulson. 20th Century Fox Television. Season 4: *Freak Show*. Original air date 2014-2015.

'Death Do Us Part.' *Grimm.* Directed by Constantine Makris. Performances by David Giuntoli, Russell Hornsby, Bitsie Tulloch. Universal Television. GK Productions. NBC. Season 4, episode 11. Original air date 30 January 2015.

'Tribunal'. *Grimm*. Directed by Peter Wener. Performances by David Giuntoli, Russell Hornsby, Bitsie Tulloch. Universal Television. GK Productions. NBC. Season 4, episode 10. Original air date 23 January 2015.

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'To free men from the tyranny of vampires': Abraham Lincoln's Bloodiest Work

David Hoogland Noon

Abstract

In the 19th century, critics of slavery invoked blood in various ways—as metaphor, prophecy, and threat—to condemn the exploitation and violence that lay at the heart of the institution. Slavery's defenders, likewise, warned that any interference with the system would provoke a national bloodbath. Where abolitionists viewed white slaveholders as ravenous monsters, slaveholders likewise regarded insurgents like Nat Turner and John Brown as otherworldly beasts who threatened to devour whites in their own homes. Monsters were everywhere in the antebellum United States. This article considers the novel *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter* as a more recent expression of those 19th century themes. In blending slavery and vampirism—and making Lincoln responsible for the destruction of both—Seth Grahame-Smith's novel bolsters the legend of Abraham Lincoln as the Great Emancipator.

Key Words

Abraham Lincoln, vampires, slavery, blood, Civil War.

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1. Introduction

In her canonical study of literary vampires, Nina Auerbach writes that 'every age embraces the vampire it needs'—an observation that matches, at least in a loose way, the tendency for Americans to embrace in every era the *Abraham Lincoln* they need.[1] Lincoln has been, at various turns, a Christian martyr; savior of the Union; humble prairie hero; and Great Emancipator. Indeed, if any figure in American history has been blessed with eternal versatility—that is, if we ask which American counts as the most sufficiently undead—Lincoln certainly qualifies above all others. It was, then, perhaps just a matter of time before he and the vampires became more acquainted with one another. Published in 2010, Seth Grahame-Smith's *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter* is an openly ridiculous book premised on the discovery of an 'astonishing, heartbreaking, and revolutionary' chronicle of Lincoln's efforts to destroy a vast sub-nation of slave-holding vampires.[2] Discovering the 'facts' that more than 15,000 books on Lincoln had previously missed, *Vampire Hunter* discloses the contours of a vast conspiracy, a 'hidden history' of North America that explains everything from the vanished Roanoke Island settlement to the irrepressible conflict between the North and the South.[3]

Based on Lincoln's lost memoirs, *Vampire Hunter* offers the world the chance to appreciate the full measure of his contributions to human liberty. Over the course of the novel, we follow Lincoln from his childhood through (and then beyond) his assassination as he confronts a vampire menace that distresses him personally as well as politically. After a youth spent in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, he strikes out on his own and meanders through his

emerging legal and political career; falls in love with a young, beautiful woman who dies before they can marry; meets and weds Mary Todd; finds himself drawn back into the political fray by the crises of the 1850s; and leads the nation through the fiery trial of war. Along the way, he decapitates, impales, and otherwise dispatches scores of bloodthirsty undead who have assimilated themselves into the wider fabric of American life; they are cobblers, shippers, small bankers, hotel proprietors, and of course plantation masters and slave auctioneers who thrive on the labor and flesh of black captives. With great zeal and a staggering facility for violence, Lincoln eventually drives all but the most recalcitrant vampires from North America.

In this article, I will use Grahame-Smith’s novel as an opportunity to consider the suitability of vampirism as a metaphor for American slavery. After all, chattel servitude was indeed a national monster that Lincoln helped slay, and there are numerous ways that vampirism—as well as themes of blood and spectacular violence more generally—make sense as a framework for imagining slavery and the abomination of national disunion and intersectional war.

2. Blood Drawn with the Lash

The mingling of canonical literature with pulp horror represents one logical outcome of the purported disintegration of the literary canon itself, a collapse both celebrated and condemned in both academic and political discourse for quite some time. Grahame-Smith’s 2009 bestseller *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* exemplifies this hybrid genre. The mingling of serious literature and pulp horror parodies literary greatness, feasting on the durable reputation of the source texts. However, the gimmick that sustains the genre of high literary/low horror mashup often renders the original text in a different (and not necessarily nonsensical) light. Indeed, more than a few academic observers have noted that Austen’s fictionalized landscape actually makes a certain degree of sense as a zombie habitat. As one specialist in 18th century British literature explained to the *Times*, ‘The characters other than the protagonist are so often surrounded by people who aren’t fully human, like machines that keep repeating the same things over and over again . . . It’s a crowded but eerie landscape’ where shuffling ‘unmentionables’ are not at all misplaced.[4] Other sympathetic readers have noted that the tensions and threats of violence that prevailed during Austen’s lifetime—fears of French invasion, upper-class nervousness over the economically deprived and politically restless poor—were submerged but not entirely invisible in her novels. Perhaps, one scholar suggests, these conditions ‘can be better understood through the use of violent figures from contemporary movies and popular culture, which are familiar to twenty-first century readers.’[5]

In a similar way, we might think of *Vampire Hunter* as yet one more effort to evaluate Lincoln and American slavery. Indeed, one need not strain too much to understand how Abraham Lincoln’s biography—or, more broadly, the struggle over slavery in the Americas—might be rewritten as a monstrous, bloodthirsty melodrama. Indeed, that history need not be *re*written in those terms, since it was actually chronicled as a tale of national horror by many of those who lived through it. In the most dreadful fantasies harbored by pro-slavery, antebellum Southerners, for example, the Republican Party threatened the livelihoods and personal security of all Americans, and not merely those who maintained a society dependent upon chattel labor. Under the duress provoked by his election, Abraham Lincoln became for Southerners the principal agent of a sectional nightmare. They feared for the integrity of their own skins, fearfully recalling servile insurrections of years past and reciting a litany of names that included Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser or John Brown, ancestors of an even greater bloodbath to come.

Yet Lincoln was more than that. Confederates often portrayed Lincoln as a human aberration, a ferocious, even otherworldly creature who stalked liberty itself. Southern hatred of

Lincoln during the war emphasized a combination of disfiguring personal and ideological qualities that rendered him, in one memorable and apt description, a 'monster who disgraced the form of humanity.' Even voices in foreign press occasionally accepted the caricature of an inhuman Lincoln, with the London Times recommending in 1861 that he be listed 'among that catalogue of monsters' who butchered and assassinated their own kind.[6] Slaveholders who expected Lincoln to eviscerate the system that had sustained them for so many generations were, indeed, amply rewarded in their pessimism as well as in their hatred when the war, slavery, and Lincoln's own life came to brutal, intermingled ends in April 1865. By then, 'blood drawn with the lash' had been abundantly repaid in 'blood drawn by the sword,' and Lincoln himself lay dead, caked in his own gore, in a townhouse bed across the street from Ford's Theater in Washington, DC.

> The nation was awash in blood—or at least awash in bloody rhetoric—long before the first shells were lobbed at Ft. Sumter. For 19th century Americans, lurching from one slavery crisis to another since the 1820s, blood would serve alternately as both a prophecy and a threat. During the debate over Missouri's admission to the Union, for example, Georgia Senator Freeman Walker warned that denying its white citizens the right to own others would 'excite a tempest' that might well arouse the nation to civil war. Gazing into the future, he beheld father armed against the son, and the son against the father. I perceive a brother's sword crimsoned with a brother's blood. I perceive our houses wrapped in flames and our wives and infant children driven from their homes, forced to submit to the pelting of the pitiless storm.[7]

Walker's fellow Georgian Robert R. Reid concurred, warning that the fire of sectional hostility could only be quenched by 'blood—ay, and the blood of freemen' unless slavery were nationalized.[8] An element of prophecy in the Missouri debates, blood was transformed into both an open threat and an actual fact at numerous moments from the 1830s through the 1850s. In 1831, Nat Turner's uprising in Southampton, Virginia, resulted in the slaughter of nearly 60 white men, women, and children; it was followed by a frenzy of judicial and extra-judicial executions that added well over 200 enslaved people to the rebellion's death toll. Several years before leading the revolt, Turner experienced a vision in which he saw black and white spirits 'engaged in battle' as 'blood flowed in streams'; sometime later, as he worked in the fields, he found 'drops of blood on the corn as though it were dew from heaven' along with numbers and crude outlines of humans etched in blood on the leaves of trees.[9]

Two decades later, white settlers in Kansas bludgeoned and murdered one another in an effort to resolve the territory's status with respect to slavery. One proslavery newspaper in the territory urged its readers

> to repel this Northern invasion, and make Kansas a Slave State; though our rivers should be covered with the blood of their victims, and the carcasses of the Abolitionists should be so numerous in the territory as to breed disease and sickness, we will not be deterred from our purpose.[10]

Among those seeking to deter their purpose was a man named John Brown, who would organize one of the most notorious atrocities in 'Bleeding Kansas' when he and a group of anti-slavery militia hacked five pro-slavery settlers to death with broadswords in May 1856. Three years later, Brown would lead a failed raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia,

hoping to inspire a massive slave insurrection that would outdo the record in Kansas by many orders of magnitude.

For critics of slavery, the institution did not merely foster bloodshed, but it was itself a sort of gothic monster, exsanguinating its victims and devouring their flesh. Karl Marx frequently resorted to this imagery in his critique of capitalism, famously describing capital as ‘dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.’ By coercing even more hours from its workforce, capital ‘only slightly quenches the vampire thirst for the living blood of labour,’ prevailing in its hunger so long as ‘a single muscle, sinew or drop of blood’ remains available for exploitation.[11] Marx was joined by many 19th century writers who depicted capitalists as vampires, if only metaphorically.[12] Although Marx distinguished between the plight of laborers and the conditions that prevailed over the lives of slaves, he also recognized that by ‘turning of Africa into a warren for *the commercial hunting of black skins*,’ slave traders had ‘signalized the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.’[13]

Echoing Marx, abolitionists dwelled on blood, voracity, and monstrosity in their condemnations of slavery. William Lloyd Garrison warned as early as 1829 that Americans would be unwise to ‘slumber’ in the face of slavery’s threat. ’If our hearts were dead to every throb of humanity,’ be explained in a speech to the American Colonization Society,

> if it were lawful to oppress, where power is ample; still, if we had any regard for our safety and happiness, we should strive to crush the Vampire which is feeding upon our life-blood.[14]

The abolitionist martyr Elijiah Lovejoy wrote during the 1830s that slavery

> presses like a night-mare on the body politic. Or, like the vampire, it slowly and imperceptibly sucks away the life-blood of society, leaving it faint and disheartened to stagger along the road to improvement.[15]

During the early 1850s, Northern abolitionists and defenders of ‘free soil’ principles denounced the possible extension of slavery into the Mexican territories and the Northern remnants of the old Louisiana Purchase. Aiming to clarify the nature of this threat, they discerned the work of an insidious, conspiratorial ‘Slave Power’ that Frederick Douglass described as having ‘shot its leprous distilment through the life-blood of the nation.’[16] The Slave Power, Douglass and others warned, threatened to ravage the landowning aspirations of free citizens while reaching, through instruments such as Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, into the free communities of the North to steal black flesh. The abolitionist editor Elizur Wright warned that unless ‘some more effectual way’ were discovered to thwart it, the Slave Power would only move ahead, ‘enlarged’ and hungry for more. ‘Why not?’’ he asked his readers. ‘Is the monster satisfied, or has it only had that taste of blood which makes it more voracious?’[17] Wright’s fellow Bostonian Theodore Parker, in one of his many sermons decrying the Fugitive Slave Act, warned of slave-catchers and courts ‘thirsting for human blood’[18] Parker and his other radical abolitionists, echoing an earlier generation of violent prophecy, feared that

> [t]he blood of the Slave will reach Greenland's icy mountains and stain the waters at the mouth of Baffin's Bay; the Saskatchewan, its great Northern river, will drain the Slave soil into Lake Winnipeg, and the keel of Captain Kane's ship, returning from his adventurous quest in the Arctic sea, will pass through waters that are darkened by the last great crime of America![19]

For Parker—and for John Brown, whose plot Parker supported—the avenues of atonement were narrow. As Brown described it on the morning of his execution on December 2, 1859,

> the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood. I had as I now think vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed it might be done.[20]

Long before the war came, the blood-dimmed tide swelled, and monsters were afoot. But Lincoln, it seems, would have none of it.

3. Blood Drawn with the Sword

With some notably wide swings away from the existing documentary record, *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter* more or less adheres to the broad contours of Lincoln's actual life, beginning with his childhood in Kentucky and Indiana and dwelling predominantly on the young, vigorous Lincoln. The novel devotes only a few dozen hasty pages to Lincoln's presidency. The politics of emancipation—the sort of narrative that would later preoccupy Stephen Spielberg's 2012 film *Lincoln*—are of minimal interest here. Instead, Lincoln's visceral loathing for vampires and slaveholders predominates. Though he presides over the destruction of slavery on a massive scale as president, the novel emphasizes his retail efforts against it, as he dispatches his targets one by one or in small groups, a campaign that begins during his youthful days in Indiana.

Following the tradition established by many of the early Lincoln hagiographies, Lincoln's mother is erroneously portrayed as a formally-educated and highly literate woman who 'must have sensed that her son was gifted' and 'was determined to see him go on to better things' than either she or her husband could have attained.[21] Drained of life by a vampire to whom her husband owes money, Nancy Lincoln does indeed inspire her son to greater things; when Thomas Lincoln reveals to his son that vampires not only exist but were in fact responsible for his mother's premature death, young Abraham avenges himself by driving a stake into the chest of her murderer. Scribbling in his journal, the young Lincoln resolves furthermore 'to kill every vampire in America.'[22] Before long, Lincoln's pursuit of Indiana's undead wins him the attention of Henry Sturges, a vampire who—wishing merely to coexist with humans rather than to enslave them all—has committed himself to the eradication of his less tolerant brethren. 'We are vampires,' Sturges later explains, 'who believe in the rights of man' and are unwilling to see humans 'bred, raised, and corralled like cattle.'[23] The Thomas Paine of his kind, Sturges identifies and clarifies Lincoln's 'purpose,' which is simply to 'to free men from the tyranny of vampires.'[24]

Under Sturges' tutelage, the young Lincoln gradually discovers the miserable truth about American history. Vampires, he learns, arrived in the New World with the doomed Roanoke Island colony. From that moment onward, vampires remained a persistent demographic presence in the New World, as wave after wave of European migration supplied the continent with fresh streams of hungry predators. As Edgar Allan Poe—who makes several cameo appearances in the novel—describes it during one of his several encounters with Lincoln, European vampire hunters had hounded their victims relentlessly, pursuing them 'into the stinking sewers and diseased slums of Paris' and into 'the dark alleys of London,' creating conditions that drove them across the Atlantic, where they escaped persecution and took refuge from fear. In a malignant inversion of Frederick Jackson Turner's famous thesis on the political and cultural significance of the frontier, Poe explains that American vampires were drawn to the 'lawlessness' and 'vastness' of the New World. More than anything, however, they were drawn

to the American wilderness by the lure of slavery, and by the opportunity it presented to ‘feed on the intoxicating blood of man without fear of reprisal!’[25]

As with any account of Lincoln’s early life—no matter how fictional its purpose—Grahame-Smith’s faces the challenge of explaining Lincoln’s adversarial view of slavery (and in this instance, the vampires for whom slaves serve as a staple food source). The central conceit of *Vampire Hunter* simplifies the problem considerably, both by making slavery synonymous with vampirism but also by deploying vampires as the common agents in Lincoln’s lifetime of personal tragedy. Here, vampires take Lincoln’s mother; they carry off his lover Ann Rutledge; they murder his friend and accomplice Jack Armstrong; and in the midst of the Civil War, they steal the life of Lincoln’s son Willie. But aside from tormenting his family and friends, vampires also offend Lincoln’s sensitivities to human dignity and in their misdeeds help cultivate what Grahame-Smith—like so many Lincoln biographers—describe as Lincoln’s instinctive aversion to tyranny. As such, *Vampire Hunter* unreservedly endorses the legend of the Great Emancipator.

In the novel, Lincoln is passionately committed to slavery’s eradication from a young age. For example Grahame-Smith presents Lincoln’s father, Thomas, as ‘an abolitionist’ who possessed a moral interest in Indiana as a free state and therefore brought his family there from Kentucky in 1816. While Thomas might not have participated directly in the slave economy, he was most certainly not an abolitionist; though he might not have aspired to slave ownership, he also served without evident complaint in Hardin County’s slave patrol during his years in Kentucky. And though we have no evidence that Thomas Lincoln ever shared his views on slavery with his family—whatever those views happened to be—in *Vampire Hunter*, Thomas Lincoln is the man who first informs young Abraham about the dreadful secret. This knowledge serves as the foundation for Lincoln’s crusade against slaveholding vampires, but it also contributes to the alienation of father from son. As with the historical Lincoln, Grahame-Smith’s character detests his father for his cruelty and overbearing demeanor; but in the novel, he also blames the elder Lincoln for his the death of his mother, who is taken from him as payment for one of his father’s debts. Thomas Lincoln accommodates the vampires, does business with them, and suffers the loss of his wife as a result; young Abraham, refusing to submit weakly to the enemy, takes on the burden of avenging her demise.

There are numerous other moments in *Vampire Hunter* that spin off some of the (often thinly-sourced) biographical anecdotes used by historians to assess Lincoln’s relationship to American slavery. In a gruesome recreation of his 1828 flatboat journey to New Orleans, for instance, Grahame-Smith has Lincoln witness a slave auction, where he watches one buyer procure a dozen slaves ‘with seemingly no regard for their sex, or health, or skills.’ Curious, Lincoln follows the passel back to a plantation outside the city. There, concealed from view, he watches as the unfortunate victims are torn apart by ravenous white men.

> I saw the head of a boy beaten until his brains poured from a hole in his skull, and another man’s head taken entirely. I could do nothing to help them. Not when there were so many. Not without a weapon. The slave master calmly pulled the barn doors closed to stifle the noises of death, and I ran into the night, my face wet with tears. Disgusted with myself for being so helpless. Sickened by what I had seen. But more than anything—sickened by the truth taking shape in my mind.[26]

If we acknowledge that *Vampire Hunter*, for all its absurdity and conspicuous gore, nevertheless represents an expression of Lincoln memory and offers an interpretation of Lincoln’s historical significance, the slave auction (and subsequent massacre) is one of the more

important moments in this *faux* biography. Indeed, this horrifying scene marks a turning point in Lincoln's career. Up to this point, Lincoln's grudge was merely personal, his violence motivated by a need to avenge his mother. His mentor, Henry Sturges, had trained him and provided him with the names of vampires whom he might kill merely to 'provide some small measure of relief for the injustices done you' and 'to seek redress' for Nancy Lincoln's death.[27] After New Orleans, however, Lincoln wages his campaign on behalf of the nation and on behalf of slavery's victims, whose suffering is linked with his own personal trauma. In a sense, in the figure of the vampire, Lincoln's own blood—or at least that of his mother's—is mingled with the blood of the enslaved. Recognizing that '[s]o long as this country is cursed with slavery, so too will it be cursed with vampires,' Lincoln's efforts take on a renewed intensity that will endure throughout the rest of his life.[28]

Grahame-Smith's reading of Lincoln obviously depends enormously on the legend of the Great Emancipator, and it falls into a long tradition of Lincoln memory that traces his hostility to slavery back to youth and early adulthood. The New Orleans bloodbath, for example, collapses several actual events from Lincoln's life and fuses them with the posthumous memories and embellishments of his friends as well as Lincoln's own efforts to explain his views on slavery. Though he may or may not have actually visited an auction in New Orleans during either of his two visits there in 1828 or 1831, he certainly did more than a decade later during an 1841 trip to St. Louis. During that latter, somewhat more documented voyage undertaken with his friend Joshua Speed, Lincoln at one point witnessed a dozen slaves heading off to be sold. As he described it to Speed's sister Mary in a letter from September 1841, the chattel were

> strung together like so many fish upon a trot-line. In this condition they were being separated forever from the scenes of their childhood, their friends, their fathers and mothers, and brothers and sisters, and many of them, from their wives and children, and going into perpetual slavery where the lash of the master is proverbially more ruthless and unrelenting that any other where; and yet, amid all these distressing circumstances, as we would think of them, they were the most cheerful and apparently happy creatures on board . . . .[29]

As Eric Foner has argued, Lincoln's observations of the 1841 slave auction were issued in a sympathetic yet also 'oddly dispassionate' voice, and he saw the affair as an 'interesting illustration of how human beings have the capacity to remain cheerful even in the most dire circumstances.'[30] Years later, however, following the Kansas-Nebraska crisis that reanimated Lincoln's political career, Lincoln would revise his own memories of that scene, noting to his friend Speed in 1855 that the sight of that slave auction had been 'a continual torment to me' and that he had revisited that scene every time he touched the border of a slave state.[31] Indeed, numerous times over the last decade of his life, Lincoln reiterated the claim that he had 'always hated slavery, I think as much as any Abolitionist,' that it was a 'monstrous injustice,' and that 'I can not remember when I did not so think, and feel.'[32] Others in Lincoln's life contributed to this theme after his death, the most famous example being his cousin John Hanks' description of Lincoln's second visit to New Orleans in May 1831. In Herndon's notes from that 1865-66 interview, Hanks explains that

> we Saw Negroes Chained—maltreated—whipt & scourged. Lincoln Saw it—his heart bled—Said nothing much—was silent from feeling—was Sad—looked bad—felt bad—was thoughtful & abstracted—I Can say Knowingly

> that it was on this trip that he formed his opinions of Slavery; it ran its iron in him then & there[.][33]

As Herndon and Weik later elaborated in their biography, Lincoln was so revolted by the sight of ‘a vigorous and comely mulatto girl being sold’ that he ‘moved away from the scene with a deep feeling of “unconquerable hate”,’ vowing to his companions that ‘If I ever get a chance to hit that thing, [meaning slavery], I’ll hit it hard.’[34]

Historians are generally skeptical of Hanks’ recollection, particularly since Hanks did not actually accompany Lincoln to the Crescent City in 1831, and Lincoln himself never spoke a public word about slavery and his time in New Orleans. Moreover Allen Gentry, Lincoln’s traveling partner in 1828, told a virtually identical (and also posthumous) story that was passed down through Gentry’s family before eventually being published in 1963—a chain of narrative custody that raises numerous historical red flags.[35] As Phillip Shaw Paludan has noted, Lincoln’s sensitivity to Black pain and his compassion for the plight of slaves were largely posthumous constructions. During his life, he would certainly have encountered the writings of William Lloyd Garrison, which condemned slavery for its gross violations of human dignity; he would have been aware of the documents assembled by Theodore Weld and Angelina Grimké, whose 1839 collection *Slavery as it Is* graphically described plantation violence; and he would have witnessed public reaction to the revolts of Nat Turner and John Brown. At no point, however, did Lincoln express his opposition to slavery in terms that prioritized black suffering; indeed, in 1837, when he joined a fellow Illinois state representative in declaring that slavery was founded on ‘injustice and bad policy,’ his protest offered equal criticism of ‘abolition doctrines’ for tending ‘to increase than abate [slavery’s] evils.’[36] As with most Republicans, Lincoln objected to slavery primarily because it represented an affront to the principle of ‘free labor’; it denied the enslaved the dignity of earning the rewards of their own toil, and it threatened to crowd out agricultural and industrial opportunities for white laboring people in those territories to which slaveholding interests sought access.

As such, nearly all of Lincoln’s writing on slavery foregrounded the threat posed by slave interests—or what many Republicans described as the ‘Slave Power’—and elected not do dwell on the human rights and tormented existence of enslaved African Americans.[37] Though more antislavery than his father, Lincoln was neither an abolitionist nor an advocate for dramatic interventions, political or otherwise, into the existing slave society. Though wounded by the existence of slavery, he was unable to exercise his judgment against it until the exigencies of war provided him with the opportunity. Indeed, his most impassioned commentary on the John Brown raid came during his February 1860 speech at Cooper Union in New York, where he defended his fellow Republicans against the charge that Brown’s work had been inspired by Republicans. Brown, he claimed, was a deluded ‘enthusiast brood[ing] over the oppression of a people till he fancies himself commissioned by Heaven to liberate them.’[38] Though he would later be remembered as a figure of liberation and national salvation, Lincoln was repelled by Brown’s Messiah complex and distanced himself from it without equivocation and without sharing in Brown’s visceral disgust for slavery.

But the fantastic, fanatically anti-slavery Lincoln— the apocryphal, prophetic hero who recognizes his calling and vows to ‘hit [slavery] hard’ in 1831— is the only possible version of Lincoln that would work in a novel like *Vampire Hunter*, where the violence is imbued with a cleansing moral purpose. In this sense, while the novel is to some degree unimaginable outside the political and cultural conditions that enabled its production, it relies at least in part on an image of Lincoln that is rooted in some of the oldest, most admiring posthumous memories of Lincoln’s closest contemporaries and of the early biographers who apotheosized him during the half century after his assassination. Grahame-Smith, then, subscribes to a providential reading

of Lincoln that understands him as 'the greatest character since Christ,' as his secretary John Hay described him.[39] As Henry Sturges explains after the death of Ann Rutledge,

> Most men have no purpose but to exist, Abraham; to pass quietly through history as minor characters upon a stage they cannot even see. To be the playthings of tyrants. But you . . . you were born to fight tyranny. It is your purpose, Abraham. To free men from the tyranny of vampires. It has always been your purpose, since you first sprang from your mother's womb . . . .[40]

Guided by this heroic destiny, Grahame-Smith's Lincoln nevertheless goes far beyond the traditional emancipationist reading of Lincoln, which portrays Lincoln as both sympathetic to the plight of slaves but also passionately committed to upholding the law. That Lincoln earns credit for his sympathetic heart, but he does not exile himself from the liberal democratic tradition by calling for action beyond the scope of the law and advocating for slavery's prematurely violent destruction.

In *Vampire Hunter*, by comparison, Lincoln is an aggressive, secretive zealot who acts in the spirit of John Brown or Nat Turner. As a young lawyer, he divides his time between riding the Illinois circuit and dispatching vampires at night, 'ventur[ing] out with my coat and ax' in search of his targets, operating solo.[41] One of his victims, it turns out, happens as well to be a client; after unsuccessfully defending her in court in a small debt case, he returns to her house, sets her on fire, and cleaves her skull in two. Overcome with fatigue,

> I dragged her body inside, closed the door, and—after helping myself to a torn strip of her bedsheets to dress my wounds—helped myself to her bed. I do not expect I shall ever again have the opportunity of defending and murdering a client in the same day.[42]

Yet Lincoln does not operate as a solitary agent. As he pursues his bloody destiny, Lincoln also acquires a small crew of accomplices borrowed from his actual youth, including Jack Armstrong (the lead of a local gang whom Lincoln famously wrestled to a draw in 1831, a few months after arriving in New Salem) and Joshua Speed (who owned the general store where Lincoln lived and worked when he moved to Springfield in 1837).

Grahame-Smith's use of Speed in particular is interesting, because it distorts Speed's views on slavery even more so than Lincoln's and turns him into the sort of fictional ally that Speed could never have been in real life. Speed's family also hailed from Kentucky, but unlike Lincoln's father, Speed's was a slaveholder who owned a large hemp plantation outside Louisville. Although Speed—who initially shared Lincoln's affiliation with the Whig party—would prove one of Lincoln's most intimate lifelong friends, the two men would come to disagree sharply over the question of slavery. Indeed, while his brother James emancipated the slaves he inherited from his father, Joshua Speed actually owned as many as eighteen slaves by 1850. By the time Lincoln gained national prominence, Speed had long since abandoned the Whig party for the Democratic Party of Stephen Douglas, repelled by the Republican stance on popular sovereignty and slavery extension. When Speed wrote to his friend in 1855 to express his support for the Kansas-Nebraska bill, Lincoln responded with astonishment that Speed would 'see the union dissolved' rather than relinquish his right to own slaves.[43] For personal as well as political reasons, Lincoln once lamented (and slightly exaggerated), their friendship had 'died by degrees.'[44] While he ultimately affirmed and demonstrated his union loyalties during the Civil War, and though he warmly congratulated his old friend on the occasion of his election, Speed likely never cast a ballot for his friend.

Circumstances are considerably less complicated in *Vampire Hunter*, where Joshua Speed actively participates in the extermination of slaveholders and expresses sincere (and ahistorical) contrition for his family’s ties to the slave economy. As he confesses during Lincoln’s visit to Speed’s estate in Farmington, Kentucky,

> My own father dealt with the devils, I am ashamed to say . . . . They were hardly a secret among men of his stature, and a poorly kept one in out home, my older brothers having been enlisted in his efforts to win their favor.[45]

When Lincoln chides Speed for describing them as if they were ‘cattle led to slaughter,’ Speed disavows the comparison, declaring that he could not ‘take their murders lightly,’ adding that

> vampires are chief among the reasons that I never sought the warmth of my father’s esteem, or mourned his passing with more than a few tears. How could I accept it, when I have heard the screams of men and women feasted upon to line his pockets? When I have seen the faces of those demons through the spaces between the wooden planks? If I could banish it from my memory . . . if I could atone for what was done here, I would do so.[46]

Determined to atone for his father’s sins, Speed helps lure five unsuspecting vampires to his Kentucky mansion on the premise of offering them a meal consisting of ‘several Negroes.’ Waiting inside, Lincoln ambushes them, swinging his axe ‘with the whole of my strength’ and lopping their heads off with ease. ‘Only the third,’ Lincoln explains, ‘required a second effort, the blade having lodged in his face instead of his neck.’[47] When the final vampire manages to flee the scene, he and Speed pursue him on horseback, and Lincoln opens his chest with a blow from his ax. ‘As the vampire fell to his knees,’ Grahame-Smith writes,

> blood pouring from his mouth, Abe pulled up on the reins [of his horse] and dismounted. Quickly placing two hands on the handle and one foot on the vampire’s back, freed the ax, then delivered a fatal blow to the creature’s skull.[48]

Though Lincoln tries at several points in the novel to hang up his weapons and withdraw from the business of killing vampires, he always returns to the hunt, with Speed more often than not at his side. Divided politically in the historical record, Lincoln and Speed are here offered a new birth of friendship, sealed in blood.

4. Conclusion

If nations are, in Benedict Anderson’s ubiquitous phrase, ‘imagined communities,’ blood has often served as one of the principal emblems of national coherence. Whether the national bloodline flows across generations, marking out the boundaries of racial legitimacy (e.g., the purity of blood, the integrity of biological descent), or whether blood represents a sacrificial fluid, as nations open their arteries in wartime in the pursuit of eternal life, blood animates the nation as substance and symbol. In this way, the vampires in Lincoln’s midst are endowed with political meaning. By casting vampires as the architects of the slave society, the novel not only provides an almost effortless—and, as we shall see, hardly original—critique of that system, but it also quite obviously bolsters the legend of Abraham Lincoln as the Great Emancipator. To the degree that this emancipationist legend has often obscured the complexity of the historical record, however—depicting Lincoln as the lone, heroic agent of black liberation—and to the

degree that *Vampire Hunter* partakes in that legend, we see that even one of the more unusual portrayals of the literary Lincoln appreciates him in conventional, even old-fashioned, terms. Like the prairie folk hero of Carl Sandburg's multi-volume biography of Lincoln, or like the strong and dexterous shopkeeper of John Ford's film *Young Mr. Lincoln*, Grahame-Smith's Lincoln wields an axe with extraordinary skill (albeit in the service of a different craft). Yet on the question of black emancipation, he is, along with his accomplices, a zealot in fiction that he could never have been in real life. As W. Scott Poole has argued, 'America needed a vampire hunter in 1860.'[49]

Notes

[1] Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 145.
[2] Seth Grahame-Smith, *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2010), 14.
[3] Ibid., 14.
[4] Jennifer Schuessler, 'I Was a Regency Zombie,' *New York Times*, 22 February 2009, accessed 29 October 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/22/weekinreview/22schuessler.html.
[5] Chretien, Elisabeth, 'Gentility and the Canon Under Siege: *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Violence, and Contemporary Adaptations of Jane Austen' (2011), *Dissertations & Theses, Department of English, Paper 54*, accessed 29 October 2012, http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishdiss/54, 19.
[6] Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Lincoln in Text and* Context (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 199, 202.
[7] *Abridgement of the Debates of Congress from 1789 to 1856, vol. VI* (New York: D. Appleton, 1858), 400.
[8] Ibid., 401.
[9] Vincent Harding, 'Symptoms of Liberty and Blackhead Signposts: David Walker and Nat Turner,' *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, ed. Kenneth Greenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 83 [79-102].
[10] David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 250.
[11] Karl Marx, *Capital,* Vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1977), 342, 367, 416. See also Mark Neocleous, 'The Political Economy of the Dead: Marx's Vampires,' *History of Political Thought* XXIV.4 (2003): 668-684.
[12] Ken Gelder, *Reading the Vampire* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 21-22.
[13] Marx, *Capital*, 915.
[14] William Lloyd Garrison, 'Address to the Colonization Society,' accessed 14 April 2013, http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=562.
[15] Quoted in Michael Bell, *Food for the Dead: On the Trail of New England's Vampires* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), eBook.
[16] David Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univerisity Press, 1989), 40.
[17] *Five Years' Progress of the Slave Power* (Boston: Benjamin B. Mussey and Company, 1852), 80.
[18] Theodore Parker, *Additional Speeches, Addresses, and Occasional Sermons*, Vol. 1 (Boston: Rufus Leighton, Jr., 1859), 219.
[19] Ibid., 354.
[20] W. E. B. Du Bois, *John Brown* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs, 1909), 365.

[21] Seth Grahame-Smith, *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2010), 27.
[22] Ibid., 53.
[23] Ibid., 227.
[24] Ibid., 162
[25] Ibid., 203.
[26] Ibid., 114.
[27] Ibid., 92.
[28] Ibid., 114.
[29] Abraham Lincoln, ‘Letter to Mary Speed,’ 27 September 1841, in Roy Prentice Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, vol. 1* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 260.
[30] Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 12.
[31] Steven B. Smith, ed., ‘To Joshua F. Speed,’ *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 94.
[32] Abraham Lincoln, ‘Speech at Chicago, Illinois, July 10, 1858,’ in Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings, 1832*-1858 (New York: Library of America, 1989), 447 [439-458]; Lincoln, ‘Speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act at Peoria, Illinois, October 16, 1854,’ in Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings, 1832*-1858 (New York: Library of America, 1989), 315; Abraham Lincoln, ‘To Albert G. Hodges,’ Andrew Delbanco, ed., *The Portable Lincoln* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 331.
[33] Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, *Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 457.
[34] William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Abraham Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life, Vol. 1* (New York: D. Appleton, 1892), 67.
[35] Francis Marion Van Natter, *Lincoln's Boyhood: A Chronicle of His Indiana Years* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1963), 145.
[36] Phillip Shaw Paludan, ‘Lincoln and Negro Slavery: I Haven't Got Time for the Pain,’ *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 27:2 (Summer 2006), 1-23.
[37] Donald Fehrenbacher, ‘Only His Stepchildren’ (rest of citation needed)
[38] Caleb Smith, *The Oracle and the Curse: A Poetics of Justice from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 23.
[39] Herndon and Weik, *Abraham Lincoln*, 417.
[40] Grahame-Smith, *Abraham Lincoln*, 162.
[41] Ibid., 169.
[42] Ibid., 172.
[43] ‘To Joshua F. Speed,’ 93.
[44] David Herbert Donald, ‘*We Are Lincoln Men’: Abraham Lincoln and His Friends* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 53.
[45] Grahame-Smith, *Abraham Lincoln*, 180.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid., 182.
[48] Ibid., 184.
[48] W. Scott Poole, ‘Why Historians Should Be Vampire Hunters,’ *The Huffington Post*, 20 June 2012, accessed 29 October 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/w-scott-poole/abraham-lincoln-vampire-hunterb1609691.html.

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Smell of Roses and Blood: The Vampire Empire of *The Hunger Games* Trilogy

Ildikó Limpár

Abstract

In *Catching Fire*, Katniss imagines President Snow as drinking blood elegantly from a glass, and wearing his expensive suit that has a rose in its lapel. Via this association the heroine of the novel subconsciously connects the Capitol's dictatorship to the vampire image, which is a very apt one in all its implications. The article will highlight some of the vampiric aspects of how the President's image in *The Hunger Games* trilogy corresponds to his method of governing Panem's people. The most obvious link to the President's vampirism is the yearly organized Hunger Games, which epitomizes the consummation of blood. The cult of fashion, youth, and body 'perfection' in the Capitol, furthermore, links the Capitol characters to the discourse of artificiality and monstrosity, as they embody the Other for Katniss with their freakish appearance and inhuman(e) behaviour. The power to transform humans to one's own monstrous image, and very importantly, the act of manipulation by way of masking the bloody with the pleasant are also characteristics that evoke associations with the vampire lore. The article specifically surveys how Snow suggests in his appearance the bipartite structure that Panem exhibits, and how it relates to the dramatic manifestation of the Capitol's power, that is, the annual Hunger Games. Finally, analysing the relationship between Snow's consumption of blood and his bleeding mouth will establish a connection between the president's condition and the state his country is in at the outbreak of the revolution.

Key Words

Hunger Games, vampire, blood, rose, Capitol, monster, inhuman, poison, artificiality.

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'The smell of blood… it was on his breath.
What does he do? I think. *Drink it?*'[1]

Suzanne Collins's dystopian Panem is a state where visual culture shapes people's mentality, independently of the fact whether they live in the Capitol or in one of the districts. Communication through visual images is a natural consequence of President Snow's media-oriented governing—so much so that even Katniss Everdeen, who comes from the poorest district of all, is extremely aware of the importance of symbols that she becomes associated with. Katniss's stylist Cinna, the Capitol, as well as District 13, deliberately and alternately employ various images to communicate crystal clear messages to the masses of screen watching audience. Due to Katniss's ability to understand the full weight of these symbols, her first person singular narration results in a text that does not demand much effort from the readers

when it comes to interpreting the novel's symbols. As a consequence, the images that she *subconsciously* associates with various phenomena and characters are more intriguing to examine. Many of these important metaphors have been successfully collected and analysed in Jill Olthouse's essay, 'I Will Be Your Mockingjay: The Power and Paradox of Metaphor in the Hunger Games Trilogy.'[2] There is one prominent image, nevertheless, that has not received much emphasis so far—that of the vampire empire, embodied by President Snow, the head of the state, who smells of blood and roses. While the word vampire does not appear in the *Hunger Games* trilogy, Katniss makes clear that she sees Snow as the blood sucking monster that lives on the oppressed and manipulated people's blood. While this association may appear at first glimpse as a simple and straightforward reference to the act of consuming blood, various other aspects of the Capitol, which Snow embodies, supports the image of the vampire. The president's dual attributes—blood and roses—signal the complexity of the vampire metaphor, and also resonates to the essential component of the political system: the construct of the Hunger Games.

The concept of the vampire, as Bruce McClelland demonstrates in his *Slayers and Their Vampires: A Cultural History of Killing the Dead* (2006) is far from being unified except from its connection to the vampire's mirror character, the slayer, and the motif of blood sucking. In his exploration on the development of the vampire myth, Matthew Kratter states that vampires of traditional culture 'inspire fear, horror, revulsion, as well as fascination and even reverence.'[3] Based on Montague Summer's research, Kratter points out that early examples of the vampire in folklore and mythology connect 'physical deformity and moral montrosity.'[4] While during the course of history the belief in the existence of actual vampires has gone, the vampire has remained a powerful symbol of evil. '[A]ny secularization of Satan that has occurred over the last hundred years has been accompanied by an extraordinary revitalization of the vampire myth,'[5] resulting at one point in the birth of Rice's vampires, who are, as Leonard Wolf notes, a 'race of brilliant and beautiful—always beautiful—killers.'[6] In Katniss's imagination, his oppressor, President Snow combines all these characteristics. He is brilliant and murderous; the heroine's gaze, however, transforms his beauty into physical deformity. Snow is also associated with other traditional vampiric characteristics, such as the ability to manipulate people's mind, as well as exhibiting wealth and an aspiration for longevity.

Although not linking the concept of the vampire directly to the images Katniss relates to Snow's character, Mark Thomas finds the vampire image perfectly suitable to describe how Panem operates:

> Capitol's monopoly enlivens Marx's observation that "Çapital is dead labour which, like a vampire, only becomes alive by sucking out living labour, and the more it sucks, the more it is lively".'[7]

However, not only may we connect the Capitol's practice of economic exploitation to vampirism, thus seeing the Capitol as the blood sucking monster that enjoys all the products that are provided by hard work in the districts; in fact, the Capitol does feed on blood literally: it needs to consume its annual portion of bloodshed in the Hunger Games in order to function properly—that is, according to the needs of the governing head. The Capitol's residents appear to be the privileged layer of the society, enjoying luxury that is unbelievable to the various districts; their fashion-obsessed existence, nevertheless, results in a political blindness that prevents people from becoming conscious, politically thinking individuals. The surface freedom, as well as the decadence and the self-centeredness that belong to the Capitol is the result of a very conscious political oppressing strategy.[8] Fitting the social norms is such a complex and energy consuming activity that it keeps the citizens completely occupied and

trains them to follow norms unconditionally. This process turn these people into 'unthinkingly obedient to the rules of their society.'[9] As a consequence, Capitol residents are just as much oppressed as district people—only the methods of subduing them vary. While in the districts it is brutal force and the constant struggle to survive that keep the people in political inactivity, it is distraction that functions similarly in the Capitol:

> The citizens' natural desire for originality and self-expression is channelled into 'safe' outlets that draw attention away from the harsh realities of the injustices that make their lives possible.[10]

Political repression, the basic means to have control over the population in a dictatorial system,[11] is omnipresent in Panem.

The different tools to maintain political repression in the various parts of Panem is signalled in the very title of Collins's trilogy, and it is re-echoed in President Snow's special attributes: blood and roses. The term Hunger Games, as Dereck Coatney observes, points out the inalienable features of the country that has been torn into two parts. Hunger is a term matching the basic experience of those living and suffering in the districts, driven by instincts, as a consequence; whereas games applies to the life of the privileged few in the Capitol, where no worries about the basic needs of life exist.[12] In the Capitol, life is a series of entertainment programs, including the televised annual Hunger Games, which the districts see as a cruel championship of survival, a commercialized version of what is going on outside the Capitol in their everyday life. This duality is reflected in Snow's appearance, and it is its underlying implications that really disturb Katniss.

The mixture of the perfumed rose scent and the smell of blood that fill the air around Snow is not only suggestive of the country's bipartite structure, but evokes a more complex imagery—that of the blood sucking monster who may conceal its beastly nature to manipulate its victims and coerce them into co-operation. As the smell of blood appears to directly come from the president's mouth, Katniss imagines the man 'sipping [the blood] from a teacup. Dipping a cookie into the stuff and pulling it out dripping red.'[13] This version of the blood drinking man evokes elegance and aristocracy—adherent characteristics of the image that make it so suitable to associate vampirism with the ruling classes.

The wealth and style that Snow's character displays are manifest in his association with roses on many levels. The president wears his ever-present rose in his lapel, which suggests that he is in suit—the classic man's wear for elegant appearance, as opposed to the colourful and eclectic clothing that has come in fashion in the Capitol. Via Snow's 'costume,' age and stubbornness, that is, a strong resistance are communicated. Snow is the one who successfully transforms his prey, but hardly shows signs of transformation. Due to the developed medical and beauty technology in the Capitol, Snow's character reflects an image of a man who appears capable of fighting time. His lips 'are overly full, the skin stretched too tight,'[14] notes Katniss, hinting at the usual practice of applying beauty treatments and plastic surgery in the Capitol to maintain the residents' appearance of being young, healthy, and attractive in their attempt at an eternal existence in beauty and perfection.

Snow's old-fashioned gesture of sending roses as gifts also contribute to the construction of the vampire image. This practice of his reinforces the dichotomy of the vampire in his roles of the seducer/manipulator and the oppressor/aggressor, since what appears as a thoughtful and kind gesture actually indicates threat to the one who receives the flowers as gifts. When Katniss returns to her house after the bombing of District 12, she immediately understands what the innocently looking rose carefully placed in her room signifies.

> Positioned on my dresser, that white-as-snow rose is a personal message to me. It speaks of unfinished business. It whispers, *I can find you. I can reach you. Perhaps I am watching you now.*[15]

The rose is white as snow—and by now even the very expression evokes associations with the vampire, thanks to Neil Gaiman's famous rewrite of the Snow White story in his 'Snow, Glass, Apples.' I doubt if this was a literary allusion by Collins, but the paleness and coldness evoked by Snow's name obviously results from the careful design of the characters' names, which Katheryn Wright explores in details.[16] Snow's name creates a perfect contrast with Katniss's name: the latter includes connotations of vegetation, food, that is, life, whereas snow has the implications of cold, winter, and death itself. He is the Reaper himself—the character that is responsible for the yearly reaping. It is the Reaper who sends 'Snow's second delivery,'[17] as Katniss calls the mass of pink and red roses that are thrown to highlight the place of destruction after bombing District 13. The 'gift' threatens the unity that Katniss and Peeta had, reminding the girl of the roses of similar colours, which decorated the set for the couple's post-victory interview.

Beside combining elegant style and threat, the rose is connected to one of the main themes of the trilogy: that of camouflage. Hiding the real nature of the monster, the rose in a lapel suggests a gentleman. But the rose does not merely function as a visual distraction. Snow smells of blood, which reveals too much of his bloody history: he gained and maintained power by poisoning his rivals and enemies. To ensure his image of being clean of these deaths, he himself drank of the poisoned cups, too, which caused inner bleeding in his mouth despite always taking an antidote. He needs the rose in order to suppress the smell of crimes: 'he wears the roses that reek of perfume. They say it's to cover the scent of blood from the mouth sores that will never heal.'[18]

The rose is to cover and uncover the crime—just as it literally happens when Snow throws roses onto the land that he bombed and just as he employs words to distort reality. Roses make the place of destruction even more highlighted, as the beauty of nature contrasts death and annihilation. In a similar manner, the terminology of the dictatorship also serve this duality, as Olthouse explores when she discusses how the words *reaping* and *tribute* aid in constructing a world of oppression. While reaping suggests a feast for the workers, in the Capitol's usage it makes 'the murder of innocent young people seem as natural and necessary as a fall harvest.'[19] In effect, this usage masks and falsifies reality, but by doing so, it also emphasizes the difference between the original meaning and the intention in the Capitol's use of words. One may observe how power plays with the meaning of a word in the Capitol's application of the term *tribute*. Historically, tribute is the payment of the weaker state to the more powerful neighbour, and thus even the original meaning is paradoxical. The tribute was considered to be as 'sign of respect and a contribution to the well-being of the state;' however, the tribute paying states 'may very well considered it as a weapon to ensure that they would forever be under the rule of Rome.'[20] Thus while the official explication of the usage of the word emphasizes respect, the word's connotation suggests an eternal bond of servitude.

The rose does not only mask dictatorship—it also serves to hide the inhumanity of the president, thus linking Snow's character to the theme of artificiality. While the rose should be the ultimate image of the natural, it transforms into an object of genetic engineering. Katniss observes the unnatural scent of the rose upon her first personal encounter with the head of the state: 'There's a rose in President Snow's lapel, which at least suggests a source of the flower perfume, but it must be genetically enhanced, because no real rose reeks like that.'[21] The president embodies the ruling power, and this power is as unnatural as the vampire—no wonder that the primary associations that Katniss has of the Capitol people centre around the image of

the freak, the image of the unnatural and inhumane. The vampire is the manifestation of the 'invading Other'[22] in the vampire literature, and this is not different in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, either. Snow's inhumane way of thinking makes him a monster indeed; moreover, he is a monster that creates similar monsters—an act that also speaks of vampirism.

The freak show that Katniss must face in the Capitol needs further observation to see how the novels explore the theme of distorted humanity. By thinking of the Capitol people as freaks, Katniss's attitude to the Capitol people becomes no different from that of her own makeup team to her. 'Do they really have no idea how freakish they look to the rest of us?,'[23] Katniss ponders, echoing Flavius' exclamation that compares the girl to an *almost* human being.[24] People brought up in the Capitol represent the Other to the district residents, and the otherness primarily comes from these people's departure from their natural humanity.

The Capitol exhibits a hyperbolic equivalent of the Land of Opportunities—or rather, Extremities. While the original freak show displayed people born with the strangest distortions, the monsters of the Capitol are artificially shaped creatures. The freedom to modify the body to the extremes—of which Katniss gives a brief list in *Catching Fire*[25]—leads, actually, to renouncing freedom, as Brian McDonald makes the point when he claims that for Katniss's preparation team 'as for the Capitol as a whole, being a "real human being" lies precisely in freedom from the constraints of identity.'[26] This deconstruction of identity is what connects the Capitol to modern and postmodern art,[27] which, as Rieff argues, inverts the process that should be art, and instead of confirming 'the power of re-creation,' enjoys the 'perversities of deconstruction, pleasured in the pain of suffering and death.'[28] In this aesthetic principle inherently lies the concept of the annual bloody Hunger Games. The artificial deconstruction of one's body results in the artificial deconstruction of one's humanity. Human-like characters lacking their humanities, thirsting for blood: this is what Katniss sees in the Capitol residents during the preparation time for her first Hunger Games.

One's humanity that would manifest itself in instinctive acts and emotions is replaced by empty gestures and mannerism outside the districts. The Capitol etiquette insists on 'civilized' behaviour, such as good table manners and avoiding bad language; but this etiquette, seen from Katniss's perspective is barbarian exactly because it is utterly selfish, egotistic and lacks any form of empathy with the rest of humanity. For instance, the Capitol table manners propagate the use of liquids that would make a person throw up so that he may keep on consuming, which is especially controversial when the majority of the country starves on a daily basis. Capitol etiquette, furthermore, is not only oblivious of the human suffering that is omnipresent in the districts, but organizes, promotes, and greatly enjoys the yearly death games. Civilized behaviour thus means a norm of conduct devoid of human feelings and empathy and becomes attached to the notion of the artificial as opposed to the 'natural' condition of mankind.

This inhuman(e) demeanour is the result of incessant conditioning. President Snow is made to be seen as a powerful stage director who is responsible for much of the show that occupies both the Capitol residents and those who live in the districts. In fact, Collins presents him as the responsible authority for maintaining the power structure, which includes the creation and maintenance of the Capitol's monstrosity. Whoever is directly bit by the blood thirsty community of the Capitol hugely transforms. Those who are slayed in the Hunger Games or outside it as a consequence of a victor's arena activities pay with their lives for this bite. Those who survive the arena and need all sorts of escaping strategies to cope with their everyday reality suffer emotional death. Finally, those who become monsterized due to the vampiric state's tightening grab pay by giving up their humanity. To this latter category belong those who are brought up and thus conditioned in the Capitol, as well as those who adapt to the system either willingly, as the residents of the career districts do, or as a result of coercion manifest in the experience gained in the arena.

One of the metamorphoses evoking the vampire image is visible in Enobaria's changed appearance. As she is from District 2, she grows up in a constant preparation for taking part in the Games; she does not fight against her inner beast in the arena as many of the tributes do, but turns inhumanly brutal in a hand-to-hand combat, killing 'one tribute by ripping open her throat with her teeth.'[29] In memory of her victory that this monstrous kill brought to her, she assumes a vampiric set of teeth, in which each tooth 'ends in a sharp point like a fang and is inlaid with gold.'[30] She becomes a product of the Capitol, assimilating to its people, living as a real celebrity with countless fans. But these admirers are, in reality, victims of the system, just as Enobaria is. The Capitol's method of spreading and keeping information as it pleases by controlling all forms of media does not allow its citizens the opportunity to grow into moral individuals. This society is not immoral, though; instead, its members function amorally: they display an inability to differentiate between good and evil, and to make valid moral judgment. The immoral versus amoral issue is a debated one concerning the vampire: while in the old vampire myths these undead are usually considered soulless—and thus evil—demons, and therefore, are directly linked to the hellish sphere, their physical need to feed on blood makes us consider their blood sucking activity as a necessity and not as crime, which works against our understanding of these creatures as immoral, devilish beings.

The Capitol's manipulating power together with the brutal force that it employs to prevent the 'prey' from performing real resistance appears in Katniss's nightmare featuring a cannibalistic Snow. In the same nightmare Katniss sees how Darius is turned into an Avox, that is, how his tongue is dissected. Then she finds herself at a party, clearly a Capitol event, where everyone conceals their identity by wearing masks. Metaphorically speaking, hiding behind a mask is an act that may be connected to the vampire whose inner monstrosity is hard to spot, as he appears in a human form.

> [T]he most dangerous form that evil takes is the visibly human, since when it is ambulatory and mimetic of the individual, it is difficult to distinguish the evil being from a fellow member of the community.[31]

At the party, Katniss appears to see Finnick—only to find out that this is only a mask, under which she sees Snow, whose 'puffy lips are dripping in bloody saliva.'[32] The order of appearance of the various images establishes a weird connection, and as a result, Snow transforms into a tongue consuming monster. In addition, this nightmare foreshadows the announcement of truth concerning Snow's coming and staying in power.

When Finnick discloses Snow's secret about poisoning his enemies, we receive explication concerning the smell of blood emanating from his mouth. His sin turns against himself and what sin he commits also affects him. The sores in his mouth do not stop bleeding, therefore blood is indeed the sign of Snow's bloody, monstrous nature. It is a kind of self-inflicted punishment, the crime turning against the perpetrator and making Snow identified as the source of the evil deeds. The poison that he used on others to kill them affects Snow as well and makes him bleed from the inside. The more crimes he commits, the more he hurts himself too. The nightmare Snow is someone who bleeds because of cutting out Darius's tongue, thus the crime shows an immediate effect. However, bleeding does not only mark Snow as the villain; it also indicates that crime may not have the sole function of torturing or eliminating others. Crime will not be left without reprisal; what is more, revenge comes from within the very crime committed.

What does this self-inflicted vengeance mean in a larger context? Based on the synechochical relationship between Snow and the Capitol, we may conclude that the president's condition is suggestive of the condition that the vampire empire has. His bleeding mouth, the

organ that used to consume and suck the blood of others—even if only metaphorically—is also the organ where the sore may not heal. The method of oppression will be turned against the oppressor, Panem as a whole, thus the revolution that we see in *Mockingjay* is inherent in the bleeding image of the president. He used poison, which poisoned his own body, and thus the body of the state has become affected, too. His most poisonous—that is, most blood shedding—method, the annual Hunger Games, together with the incessant surveillance, actually produces the means to destroy the Capitol: Katniss—the girl who, as Collins puts it, 'should never have existed.'[33]

The connection between blood and poison fits in the vampiric framework, although I doubt this is part of a conscious design, as it appears that the poison-venom analogy is rather the result of the snake metaphor, regularly applied to Snow. Nevertheless, the poison is clearly linked to the theme of artificiality that has been examined above as the inhuman feature of the vampire. As such, the Hunger Games is the dramatized and televised version of how the Capitol operates, that is, how it kills off the members of the districts that feed it with their blood, the tape that shows Haymitch's victory is of special importance. The arena is always the design of the Capitol, an artificially built environment where even nature is manipulated—just as human nature has been transformed in the capitol, resulting in mutt-like creatures. The arena's specialty in the second Quarter Quell is the poisonous environment, thus making visible the real 'nature' of the oppressor. And twenty-four years later, a handful of poisonous berries are able to generate the reprisal…

The vampiric aspects of Snow's image in *The Hunger Games* trilogy correspond to the president's method of governing Panem's people. His smell of blood reveals his bloody dictatorship that demands the consummation of blood, which the annual Hunger Games epitomizes. The cult of fashion, youth, and body 'perfection' in the Capitol links Snow and the Capitol characters to the discourse of artificiality and monstrosity, as they embody the Other for Katniss with their freakish appearance and inhuman(e) behaviour. Furthermore, Snow's power to transform humans to his own monstrous image, and very importantly, the act of manipulation, one significant motif of which is masking the bloody with the pleasant, also support the construction of Panem's president as a vampire in the reader's imagination. All of these aspects of Snow's character are indicated in Katniss's first personal encounter with the dictator, where the most important impression he gives comes via the smell—the smell of blood and roses.

Notes

[1] Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire* (N.Y.: Scholastic Press, 2009), 30.
[2] Jill Olthouse, 'I Will Be Your Mockingjay: The Power and Paradox of Metaphor in *The Hunger Games* Trilogy,' *The Hunger Games and Philosophy: A Critique of Pure Treason*, eds. George A. Dunn and Nicolas Michaud (N.J.: Wiley, 2012), 41-54.
[3] Matthew Kratter, 'Twilight of the Vampires: History and the Myth of the Undead,' *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 5 (Spring 1998): 32.
[4] Ibid., 33.
[5] Ibid., 35.
[6] Ibid., 41.
[7] Mark Thomas, 'Survivor on Steroids. Law, ~~Law~~ and Power in *The Hunger Games*,' Griffith Law Review 22.2 (2013): 377.

[8] Christina Van Dyke, 'Discipline and the Docile Body: Regulating Hungers in the Capitol.' in *The Hunger Games and Philosophy: A Critique of Pure Treason*, eds. George A. Dunn and Nicolas Michaud (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2012): 251.
[9] Ibid., 255.
[10] Ibid., 255.
[11] Ronald Wintrobe, 'The Tinpot and the Totalitarian: An Economic Theory of Dictatorship,' *The American Political Science Review* 84.3 (Sept. 1990): 851.
[12] Dereck Coatney, 'Why Does Katniss Fail at Everything She Fakes? Being versus Seeming to Be in *The Hunger Games* Trilogy,' *The Hunger Games and Philosophy: A Critique of Pure Treason,* eds. George A. Dunn and Nicolas Michaud (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2012), 184.
[13] Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire*, 30.
[14] Ibid., 19.
[15] Suzanne Collins, *Mockingjay* (N.Y.: Scholastic Press, 2010), 15.
[16] Katheryn Wright, 'Revolutionary Art in the Age of Reality TV,' *Of Bread, Blood and* The Hunger Games*: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins Trilogy* (Critical Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy; 35.), eds. Mary F. Pharr and Leisa A. Clark. McFarland, E-book. Kindle edition.
[17] Suzanne Collins, *Mockingjay*, 161.
[18] Ibid., 172.
[19] Jill Olthouse, 'I Will Be Your Mockingjay,'45.
[20] Ibid., 45.
[21] Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire*, 20-21.
[22] Matthew Kratter, 'Twilight of the Vampires,' 37.
[23] Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire*, 49.
[24] Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (N.Y.: Scholastic Press, 2008), 62.
[25] Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire*, 49.
[26] Brian McDonald, 'The Final Word on Entertainment': Mimetic and Monstrous Art in the *Hunger Games*,' *The Hunger Games and Philosophy: A Critique of Pure Treason*, eds. George A. Dunn and Nicolas Michaud (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2012), 17.
[27] Ibid., 14.
[28] Ibid., 15.
[29] Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire*, 224.
[30] Ibid., 224.
[31] McClelland, Bruce. *Slayers and Their Vampires: A Cultural History of Killing the Dead.* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 2.
[32] Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire*, 221.
[33] Rick Margolis, 'The Last Battle: With 'Mockingjay' on its way, Suzanne Collins weighs in on Katniss and the Capitol.'(Interview with Susan Collins.) *School Library Journal*. August 1, 2010. Viewed on 25 November 2014,
http://www.slj.com/2010/08/authors-illustrators/the-last-battle-with-mockingjay-on-its-way-suzanne-collins-weighs-in-on-katniss-and-the-capitol/#.

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Flesh and Blood: Reading Monstrosity and Desire in the *Twilight* Saga and *The Vampire Diaries*

María Mariño Faza

Abstract

The vampire has always been constructed as a threatening other and associated with violence and deviant behaviours, but the emergence of the supernatural romance in the late twentieth century has led to the transformation of these creatures into romantic heroes. The *Twilight Saga* and *The Vampire Diaries* not only reflect the degree of success that this type of narrative has had worldwide, but they also help analyse how ideology is articulated through the discourse of monstrosity and desire in our contemporary society. Blood is read as the epitome of the vampires' otherness and used to portray the dichotomy between good and evil, reinforcing particular behaviours and attitudes, while censuring others. Both narratives link the vampire's lust for blood in terms of current anxieties regarding violence and discuss on the breaking of boundaries between what is understood as human and monstrous, challenging these established categories. However, vampires have also been linked to themes of desire and sexuality and blood is once again used to portray that otherness and negotiate established assumptions, while also helping to draw the boundaries between the normal and the deviant and promoting a discourse of containment.

Key Words

Gothic, supernatural romance, young adult fiction, monster, *Twilight*, *The Vampire Diaries*, vampire, blood, desire, sexuality.

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Vampires, as many other types of Gothic monsters, have always reflected the different anxieties present in each period. In fact, they have become 'one of the key means in Western culture whereby unconscious desires and fears are symbolised'[1] but, as Nina Auerbach[2] (1995) explains, every generation has a way of understanding vampires and appropriating them. It is precisely their changeable nature that allows us to better understand the time they inhabit. More than ever before, our vampires, our monsters, 'serve as a discourse and as representation of the change itself'[3] that is taking place in our twenty-first century Western world. In the same way as Dracula reflected late Victorian England anxieties regarding transformation and modernisation, contemporary vampires also reflect the society in which they have been created. Nowadays, vampires do not stand for the old folklore traditions that appeared in narratives such as Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and many other stories circulated in the nineteenth century. They have evolved and must be inscribed within popular culture, which now plays an important cultural, economic and also ideological role. As Stacey Abbott demonstrates, the vampire 'is shaped both by the challenging world into which it emerges as well as by the medium through

which it is represented'[4] and, therefore, the influence of the television and the cinema in our contemporary Western society should not be overlooked.

This is particularly important in the case of one of the most influential vampire narratives of the twenty-first century, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Saga. Since the first novel appeared in 2005, this series has enjoyed unprecedented success and when Summit Entertainment adapted the first book into a motion picture in 2008, the so-called '*Twilight* phenomenon', went viral, grossing millions of dollars in revenues. Despite the criticism raised by many of its detractors who complain about the ideological and religious implications of Meyer's narrative, the success and appeal of the saga is undeniable and has contributed to a change in the perception of vampires, who have now adapted to the new century. As a consequence of the huge popularity of this type of young adult fiction, the creation of similar products has been promoted in an attempt to capitalize on the *Twilight* success. This is the case of *The Vampire Diaries*, which premiered in September 2009, only a year after the first of Meyer's film adaptations appeared on screen. Based on L. J. Smith's series of novels written in the 1990s, Kevin Williamson and Julie Plec developed this television show for the American television channel CW with tremendous success. Both narratives, which are inscribed in the supernatural romance genre, discuss similar issues and are a perfect example to analyse how monstrosity and desire are articulated. By analysing how blood, sexuality and restraint are portrayed in both texts, I will try to explain not only how 'vampires blend into the changing cultures they inhabit'[5] but also how they create particular ideological constructions that are offered to their audience as something natural 'rather than part of a system of belief that a culture produces in order to function in a particular way.'[6]

Since the second half of the twentieth century, there has been a shift in many vampire narratives that has transformed how the story is told. By changing the perspective from the human victims –as seen in *Dracula*, where we hear the story from the different letters and documents the characters exchange—to the vampire's own narrative voice—as in the case of Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*—, a new perception of these supernatural creatures has appeared and they are now regarded as sympathetic characters, as 'a sex object and romantic hero'.[7] This transformation has been read in two different ways. Some critics link it to 'notions of rebellious outsiderdom'[8] and understand these 'morally ambiguous, sympathetic vampires […] as a source of empathy and identification'[9] but others understand this change as a sign of the vampire's domestication and the need to sanitize them so that they can become 'a plausible hero.'[10] In this new type of narrative, which includes the supernatural romance, 'the relationship between the vampire and its human "victim" is pivotal'[11] as it will be seen in the two narratives studied. They will exemplify the change 'from being creatures ruled solely by instinct and blood-lust, to complex beings with an inner life'[12] that are no longer isolated but try to mainstream, highlighting the shift that vampires have undergone since the earliest narratives in the late nineteenth century to their first introduction to the cinema and later to the television when they became part of the popular culture and appropriated by the entertainment industry.

Traditionally, the vampire's nature was linked to animals. They were regarded as predators who hunted down their human prey and, therefore, those narratives epitomized the dichotomy of good versus evil and helped establish the boundaries between humanity and monstrosity. One of the most commonly accepted traits of the vampire lore is their need for blood and it is precisely this thirst that links them to danger and violence, turning them into monsters. This articulation of the moral debate on virtue versus wickedness has been repeated in the vampire narratives since the nineteenth century. However, it is in the mid-twentieth century when the opposition between human and monster has been replaced and the traditional division of good human and bad vampire has been renegotiated. Now, 'the traditionally "othered" vampire, is no longer entirely monstrous […] he is in fact a most desirable romantic

hero.'[13] This is the case of Anne Rice's first novel *Interview with the Vampire*, where we meet the vampire Louis whose refusal to drink human blood 'marks him as suffering and as deserving of our sympathy'[14] and, on the other side, we are presented with Lestat, a blood-thirsty and cruel vampire who becomes the villain in the story. The same dual depiction of vampires, stressing the traditional dichotomy of good versus evil, appears in the *Twilight* Saga and *The Vampire Diaries*, with Edward Cullen and Stefan Salvatore as the stereotypical repentant heroes in a quest for redemption.

However, despite this apparent domestication and their transformation into heroic figures, there is still an element of danger inherent to every vampire that intrinsically links them to their monstrous nature, and that is their need for blood. It is precisely here where these narratives present the taboos, where it becomes clear that they can never be completely dissociated from 'the *Other*, danger, desire, predatory instincts, and an obscure side of the human psyche.'[15] The role of the vampire, as that of other monsters, is to 'construct the politics of the "normal".'[16] Therefore, their portrayal in these narratives, this dichotomy between virtuous and evil vampires, is constructed in ideological terms 'pointing to these lines that must not be crossed.'[17] Blood here becomes a discourse of containment, of censuring particular attitudes. In their drinking of blood, vampires are transgressing certain limits so they must be portrayed as monsters. As Damon Salvatore explains 'we're predators, not puppies,'[18] positioning himself in the traditional depiction of vampires as the dangerous other and humans as the victims. However, in supernatural romance not all vampires behave similarly; there are some who choose not to drink human blood and it is in this inner fight against their animal desires that they are articulated as sympathetic creatures, opening a debate on traditional categories and the relevance of these dichotomies in our contemporary society.

Blood becomes a discourse that negotiates established assumptions but also helps to draw boundaries. Although it has the power to transform humans into vampires, it is read differently in each narrative. In *Twilight*, the link between sexuality, blood and death is made clear by presenting their drinking from humans in terms of poison. Blood is equated with venom and associated to an extremely painful experience, whether it is because the human has been attacked by a vampire or because they are being transformed. This link makes it clear that the narrative is trying to present those attitudes as unnatural, as something negative. It articulates the discourse around this idea of not trespassing borders and promotes restraint from those behaviours that are here clearly censured to its audience. In the saga, the Cullens' otherness is doubled since they are not only different because they are vampires but, in their own world, they are a minority because they do not feed on humans. But this double outsiderdom is read as something positive. As Susannah Clements explains, one of the most important choices the Cullens have to make is whether they want to feed on humans, whether they choose to be killers or not. As Edward explains to Bella: 'we call ourselves vegetarians, our little inside joke.'[19] But it is their personal choice and, as the audience soon learns, it is a difficult promise to keep since their desire for human blood is very powerful. In fact, we are constantly reminded of Edward's almost uncontrollable need when he is with Bella, an urge that, as in many other similar narratives, is presented as an addiction. He feels 'guilt and torment'[20] because of his monstrous desire for Bella's blood and is constantly fighting it because he loves her and does not wish to harm her in any way. The narrative's emphasis on Edward's strong will and his decision not to give in to his basic instincts as well as his repentance from his past sins makes him 'a suitable romantic partner,'[21] the perfect hero for the story. Edward's sacrifice and choice of lifestyle is rewarded with love and allows him 'to participate in more human activities like family and human bonding'[22] whereas those who decide to continue feeding on humans, such as Victoria and James, are punished. Although this ending is representative of the genre in which the novel and the films are inscribed, the

ideological implications should not be overlooked since it promotes particular values on its audience and modulates a particular perception of reality: Edward's following the established rules and mainstreaming is rewarded and these accepted behaviours are reinforced by stressing that in their breaking of the rules, other vampires are defeated and eventually die because of their sins.

In *The Vampire Diaries* a similar depiction is presented and the element of danger in the vampires' nature is emphasised. The potential menace of the vampire's thirst for blood is clearly stated in the first episode of the series when we witness how two humans are violently and even playfully killed by a vampire, whom we will soon learn is Damon, one of the Salvatore brothers. But restraint is once again highlighted in this television series, as it is in the *Twilight* films, and becomes central in characters such as Stefan who chooses to drink only animal blood. As he explains to Elena, he is different from other vampires: 'I don't drink human blood. That's not how I choose to survive, but Damon does.'[23] The narrative focuses on his love for Elena and his need to be good for her. However, as in the case of Edward, Stefan's need for human blood is regarded as an addiction. Whenever he succumbs to temptation he becomes a monster, a ruthless killer known as 'the Ripper.' This duality, typical of the Gothic fiction, is present when Elena first sees him feed on human blood—'you were like this other person'[24]—and is repeated in all the different seasons, highlighting Stefan's struggle, but also echoing similar supernatural romance fictions where the vampire is portrayed as 'a lonely figure striving endlessly for redemption by actively do good in the world.'[25] In this sense, Stefan's quest requires of many sacrifices. He must struggle between his instincts and his love for Elena but he also needs to redeem himself by trying to actively help others and compensate for all the death and pain he caused in the past. *The Vampire Diaries* discusses, then, the question of restraint in a similar fashion as *Twilight* does, particularly in the character of Stefan but also in his brother Damon, who soon after he arrives at Mystic Falls and meets Elena is willing to change for her, to stop killing and blend in with the community, becoming—as his brother—a romantic hero himself. Once again, 'control of addictive traits,'[26] of the drinking of blood, is vital for vampires who want to mainstream and become less monstrous and this restraint is rewarded with love, with happy endings.

It is also important to point out that, unlike *Twilight*, *The Vampire Diaries* does not link the drinking of human blood with wickedness. It is not regarded as something intrinsically negative and, in fact, the television series provides a different option apart from drinking from humans or animals—using packed blood. In this sense, it turns vampirism into something similar to an illness. Drinking that blood offers life support without the risks of biting a human and losing control. In *Twilight*, vampires always kill when they feed but this is not the case for *The Vampire Diaries*. Therefore, it is not drinking blood that is censured, but the act of killing humans and the violence that is part of that feeding. The monstrous aspect of vampirism is reflected in their attack on humans but, as *The Vampire Diaries* proves, it is not only vampires who become monsters but also humans. The shedding of blood is not only on behalf of the vampires but also the humans arriving at or living in Mystic Falls. In season five we learn how Damon was subjected to torture for years by some human doctors. These attitudes reflect how boundaries in contemporary narratives are not so clear. As Sue Chaplin suggests, there is a tension 'between what counts as human and what counts as monstrous, inhuman or subhuman; the dividing line between humanity and its monstrous "other" is rarely secure'[27] and now humans can appear as more monstrous than vampires themselves. As Mary Bridgeman suggests, this type of description manifests 'an anxiety about the propensity towards violence in an increasingly complex world of untenable yet indestructible categories of difference.'[28]

However, one of the characteristics of this television series is associating blood not only with death but also life. Whereas *Twilight* only regarded blood as a poisonous substance, *The*

Vampire Diaries stresses its almost mythical status as provider of life. In the same sense, Renfield stated that 'the blood is the life'[29] in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the healing properties of blood in the television series are clear from the very beginning, thus, blurring the boundaries not only between life and death but also between what it is to be human and vampire. This particular characteristic of the blood raises once again the question of what it is to be a monster. In a community where humans can act as violently as vampires, blood is not always linked to something negative but can act as a powerful tool to restore order and fight evil. Vampires are, therefore, not only death bringers but also the heroes who can fight injustice and heal those who have been unjustly harmed.

As it has been explained, blood is used in both narratives to articulate the discourse of the monstrous, but it can also be read in terms of desire and sexuality since the act of biting a human is 'a fundamentally intimate one, and it involves a certain kind of penetration.'[30] Vampires have always represented what is forbidden but, at the same time, desired. They mark the boundaries between the acceptable and the deviant, they are constructed as a discourse, 'continually linked to forbidden practices, in order to normalize and to enforce'[31] particular attitudes and behaviours. The two narratives explore the drinking of blood and its link to sexuality from the perspective of young adult fiction. Therefore, they will have a paramount importance in the way teenagers perceive this issue and contribute to the shaping of ideologies, promoting particular views that are obviously charged ideologically.

The drinking of blood has always epitomized sexuality and the limits that must not be surpassed. These erotic connotations have been clear since Bram Stoker's *Dracula* when the female vampires that the Count has in his castle approach Jonathan Harker and we are told how he longs for them to bite his neck:

> I could feel the soft, shivering touch of the lips on the supersensitive skin of my throat, and the hard dents of two sharp teeth, just touching and pausing there. I closed my eyes in languorous ecstasy and waited –waited with beating heart.[32]

But how is this sensuality associated with the vampire depicted more than a century after the publication of this novel? In *Dracula,* vampires are punished. They are the villains of the story and they must be killed before order can be restored. Lucy, for example, epitomizes that uncontrolled lust and thirst for blood that dangerous female sexuality, so she must be killed. But it must be remembered that the supernatural romance has turned the vampire into the hero of the story. It has domesticated the monster and, in fact, 'with the beautifying, humanizing, and secularizing of the vampire has come a change in its cultural status'[33] and now the vampire 'has transcended its fearsome traits to become a loving husband, father, and contributing community member.'[34]

In Meyer's narrative, the treatment of sensuality and blood is directly linked and carries negative connotations. Both elements are placed at the same level; they are understood as forbidden pleasures, as a kind of sin. In fact, the first books remind us of the 'old-fashioned romance with lots of talk and little touch.'[35] However, this does not mean that Meyer's novels were placed out of their own time. Differences from narratives in previous centuries can be perceived, particularly in the fact that Bella, as other heroines in this type of young adult fiction, accepts her own sexuality. As Gaïane Hanser explains, there are many examples in the last years where this change can be perceived. Although Buffy in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or Sookie in *True Blood* were virgins at the beginning of the series, they 'gradually embrace their sexual drives.'[36] The same happens with Bella in the first novel/ film, who acknowledges that it makes her feel powerful to be desired and does not deny her sexual impulses. She offers

Edward her blood, asking him repeatedly to bite her and transform her into a vampire. He not only refuses to drink Bella's blood, but also to have sexual intercourse with her. Surprisingly, in this narrative, it is the man who chooses chastity and refuses to drink her blood, something he perceives as an extremely intimate and dangerous situation. Edward's refusal is linked to his refusal to act as a monster driven by his vampire instincts and emphasises the value of restraint in the narrative, reinforcing his status as the hero of the story. Only after Bella marries him does Edward comply with her request and sexual intercourse and the drinking of blood become part of their lives as vampires. Some scholars have argued that, in doing so, Edward 'subverts typical power dynamics'[37] but the double meaning of this attitude cannot be overlooked since it can also be read as 'a masculine attempt to control a woman's sexuality.'[38]

Whereas *Twilight* promotes abstinence before marriage and offers its audience a message of the value of 'love, commitment, and restraint,'[39] *The Vampire Diaries*, where the Mormon religious ideas are not present, follows the trend of other contemporary teen television series where sexual relations appear as an integral part in the characters' lives. Although here-it is also linked to the drinking of blood which is presented with sexual connotations. However, like other similar narratives, the vampire's attractiveness and their biting of humans 'gives shape to deep-seated anxieties and tabooed desires,'[40] with the 'penetrating teeth set in the softness of the mouth, the vampire mouth problematizes any easy distinctions between the masculine and the feminine.'[41] However, in the case of *Twilight* and *The Vampire Diaries*, this problematic representation is avoided by presenting only heterosexual relationships, something that does not happen in other contemporary narratives such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *True Blood* where homosexual relations are also portrayed. Traditional heterosexual relations are the norm and, in fact, *The Vampire Diaries* avoids any controversy by presenting the drinking of blood as a sensuous activity only when done on the opposite sex. Also, the sharing of blood between vampires that appears in the television series is charged with erotic connotations but is always presented between a man and a woman. When Elena is transformed into a vampire and cannot drink animal blood like some other characters do, Damon offers her his own blood.

> *Damon*: You're a new vampire, Elena. You need warm blood from the vein. Maybe this will do the trick. Or not, but just don't tell Stefan.
> *Elena*: Why not?
> *Damon*: Because blood sharing is kind of personal.
> *Elena*: What do you mean it's personal?
> *Damon*: Just drink.[42]

The scene continues with Elena drinking Damon's blood while he caresses her hair and both embrace enjoying, what is presented as, an intimate shared pleasure. Vampirism is, therefore, clearly linked to 'a heightened sexuality'[43] but it is always presented within the limits of this type of teen-oriented narrative and in clear opposition to other television series, such as *True Blood*, where sex and vampirism are more openly portrayed and promiscuity and sexual desire are clearly linked to vampires. The discourse of desire and blood is now openly presented in television and the cinema taking the vampire to the twenty-first century when sexuality is openly discussed as part of teenagers' everyday life. However, it should not be forgotten that this discourse of desire is only acceptable in terms of heterosexual relations and neither *The Vampire Diaries* nor *Twilight* offer alternative models of relations only those inscribed in the tradition of heterosexual romantic love.

As it has been explained, blood has always been a crucial element in the depiction of vampires since it has been used to articulate different discourses in different periods. In the twenty-first century, the emergence of the supernatural romance, aimed at a young adult

audience, has presented the vampire in terms of the hero of the story. But, despite this recent domestication, it still remains a monstrous figure and potentially deadly. Vampires' need for blood stresses our fears about violent and monstrous behaviours present in our contemporary society and reflect the anxieties provoked by the breaking of traditional structures that are no longer valid in this new century and the blurring of categories such as good and evil, human and monster. Vampires and their thirst continue to have a symbolic status as representatives of tabooed desires and censured behaviours as both the *Twilight Saga* and *The Vampire Diaries* prove. But it must not be forgotten that both narratives also contribute to containing alternative discourses and promoting particular ideological views. Stephenie Meyer's books cannot be distanced from her Mormon beliefs and *The Vampire Diaries* is clearly a product marketed after the *Twilight* success in 2008 and controlled by the American television network CW, whose main interest is profitability and, therefore, tries to avoid any controversy. However, vampires' potential for subversion, their liminality, always asks us 'to revaluate our cultural assumptions'[44] and leave open the debate on monstrosity and desire, on new interpretations and constructions of reality.

Notes

[1] Sue Chaplin, *Gothic Literature: Texts, Contexts, Connections* (London: York Press, 2011), 22.
[2] Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).
[3] Marina Levina and Diem-Tui T. Bui, *Monster Culture in the 21st Century: A Reader* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 2.
[4] Stacey Abbot, *Celluloid Vampires: Life after Death in the Modern World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 10-11.
[5] Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, 6.
[6] Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 21-22.
[7] Susannah Clements, *The Vampire Defanged. How the Embodiment of Evil Became a Romantic Hero* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 2.
[8] Milly Williamson, *The Lure of the Vampire: Gender, Fiction and Fandom from Bram Stoker to Buffy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 31.
[9] Ibid., 29.
[10] Clements, *The Vampire Defanged*, 149.
[11] Williamson, *The Lure of the Vampire*, 35.
[12] Emma Somogyi and Mark David Ryan, 'Mainstream Monsters,' in *The Twilight Saga: Exploring the Global Phenomenon*, ed. Claudia Bucciferro (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2014), 202.
[13] Mary Bridgeman, 'Forged in Love and Death: Problematic Subjects in *The Vampire Diaries*,' *The Journal of Popular Culture* 46, No. 1 (2013): 14.
[14] Williamson, *The Lure of the Vampire*, 42.
[15] Claudia Bucciferro, 'Mythic Themes, Archetypes, and Metaphors: The Foundations of *Twilight*'s Cross-Cultural Appeal,' in *The Twilight Saga: Exploring the Global Phenomenon*, ed. Claudia Bucciferro (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2014), 20.
[16] David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 263.
[17] Ibid.
[18] *The Vampire Diaries*, 'Break on Through,' dir. Lance Anderson, writ. Rebecca Sonnenshine, Outerbanks Entertainment, Airdate March 22, 2012, Season 3. Episode 17,
[19] Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2005), 188.

[20] Clements, *The Vampire Defanged*, 109.
[21] Ibid., 143.
[22] Ibid., 109.
[23] *The Vampire Diaries*, 'Lost Girls,' dir. Marcos Siega, writ. Kevin Williamson and Julie Plec, Outerbanks Entertainment, Airdate October 15, 2009, Season 1, Episode 6.
[24] *The Vampire Diaries.* 'Let the Right One In,' dir. Dennis Smith, writ. Brian Young (story), Season 1. Episode 17.
[25] Clements, *The Vampire Defanged*, 143.
[26] Somogyi and Ryan, 'Mainstream Monsters,' 208.
[27] Chaplin, *Gothic Literature*, 27.
[28] Bridgeman, 'Forged in Love and Death,' 17.
[29] Bram Stoker, *Bram Stoker Dracula. A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. by N. Auerbach et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 130.
[30] Clements, *The Vampire Defanged*, 6.
[31] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses),' in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. by J. J. Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 16.
[32] Stoker, *Bram Stoker Dracula*, 42.
[33] Somogyi and Ryan, 'Mainstream Monsters,' 209.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Bucciferro, 'Mythic Themes, Archetypes, and Metaphors,' 18.
[36] Gaïane Hanser, 'Isabella Swan: A Twenty-First-Century Victorian Heroine?' in *The Twilight Saga. Exploring the Global Phenomenon*, ed. C. Bucciferro (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2014), 132.
[37] Bucciferro, 'Mythic Themes, Archetypes, and Metaphors,' 18.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., 22.
[40] Somogyi and Ryan, 'Mainstream Monsters,' 203.
[41] Ibid., 270.
[42] *The Vampire Diaries*, 'Memorial,' dir. Rob Hardy, writ. Jose Molina and Julie Plec, Outerbanks Entertainment, Airdate October 18, 2012, Season 4, Episode 2.
[43] Somogyi and Ryan, 'Mainstream Monsters,' 207.
[44] Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses),' 20.

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Image 1: Thicker than Water. © 2014. Image courtesy of Spade

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'I Want Blood!' Vampirism in 20th-Century Russian Urban Childlore

Yelena Novitskaya

Abstract

The genre of oral scary stories or *strashilki* is one of the most popular of the contemporary Russian children's subculture. Rooted both in traditional folklore and children's mythic thinking, these are tales about encounters with supernatural forces, objects, and things that usually end in the victim's death. This article focuses on one particular category of *strashilki*'s evil agents, namely vampires. The vampire of Russian children's scary stories possesses many of the attributes of the 'general vampire' although the word itself did not appear in oral childlore until after the arrival of cable television channels and video salons in the late 1980s. It is a killer that often finds a not-so-trivial way to feed on its victim(s) to provide its own nourishment; instead of mere blood-sucking it would use a system of tubes, a piano whose keys are constructed of tiny needles and other procedures devised by a child's mind. It may adopt various forms and often is a shapeshifter. A supernatural, nocturnal creature, it often dwells in the material world. Special attention is paid to stories about cookies/meat pies prepared of people and tales about ominous stains. The latter occurrences have a pronounced liminal character and possess attributes similar to the properties of blood, a substance which can travel between various realms. Both groups of *strashilki* are regarded here as vampiric stories as their malevolent protagonists employ known folk vampiric qualities. Several scary stories appearing on these pages are translated from Russian by the author of the article.

Key Words

Vampires, blood, scary stories, children's folklore, childlore, Russia, red, *strashilki*.

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1. Introduction

As is known from some primary sources, Russian youngsters have been telling scary stories since the 19th century. There are memoirs from the mid-1800s in which authors remember getting together in some quiet nook to terrify each other with wild tales about demons, ghosts, and vourdalaks (vurdalaks). About the same time, enthusiasts started collecting and studying children's oral narratives.[1]

The foundations for scholarly studies focused on children's oral prose were set in the USSR in 1920s when the term 'children's folklore' was introduced. Childlore was regarded in its relation to the general way of life, rather than a genre or subculture as such. The political and social situation of the 1930s did not encourage further research. Folklorists resumed their studies only with the beginning of Khrushchev's *thaw*, in the mid-1950s. After years of cautious work, Soviet researchers first introduced childlore as a genre at an All-Union research conference in 1970. They revealed types of children's oral narratives long known in the West, such as ruthless rhymes, scary stories, black humour, etc. Scary stories, or *strashilki* (term by

M. Osorina) have been in the focus of scholarly attention since then; it has become the most studied genre of the contemporary children’s subculture.[2] The vast body of oral tales collected by folklorists in 1970s-1990s throughout the country allowed researchers to reveal structural similarities and plot–character–motif stereotypes. On the whole, patterns distinguished in this type of childlore make it a specific oral epic tradition.[3]

It was established that *strashilki* were genetically linked to fairy tales and *bylichkas*:[4] their social role was seen in evoking the experience of fear which, in the circumstances known to be safe, incited a specific kind of pleasure and lead to emotional catharsis. Thus, *strashilki*, paradoxically, perform a therapeutic function: by telling these tales and listening to them children experience fear and learn to master it.[5]

At the most recent stage in the studies of *strashilki* they are regarded as children’s mythology, an integral system reflecting some common patterns of formation of children’s perception. The sources of this phenomenon are found in the mythical thinking of preschool and early elementary school children. Behind the simple gear of child mythology there are psychological constants, emotional experiences and images rooted in the collective unconscious. This mythology actualizes ancient archetypes in the preservation of which children’s folklore is instrumental. Being saturated with relics of archaic rituals and mythical conceptions lore becomes a means of cognition and appropriating culture.[6]

For this article, tales from two compendiums were analysed: 140 scary stories collected by S. Loiter (LC) published in *Russkii shkolnyi folklor*[7] and 287 texts from the web site *Detskie strashilki* (‘Children’s Scary Stories’).[8] This assortment contains *strashilki* from the folklore collection of the State University of Nizhni Novgorod and stories uploaded by users (UNN). All the quotations from scholarly texts originally written in Russian as well as scary tales presented in Section 3 were translated by the author of this article.

2. The Genre of Strashilki

The main feature of *strashilki*, which are tales with similar plot collisions and outcome, is the fact that the mysterious and unexplainable events that take place in them are the result of the activities of supernatural forces, objects, and things. These supernatural forces are not just evil-doing; they are fatal in most cases. Children’s inquisitiveness deals here with the mystery of death. According to V.N. Toporov childhood is ‘a zone of increased and exposed danger,’ ‘a zone which is under the death’s unsleeping attention, when every hazard is a threat against life, irrevocable possibility of death’.[9] The irreversibility of death makes *strashilki* not just scary stories but rather tales about death which often comes as a punishment for disobedience or for breaking a taboo or prohibition.[10]

Researchers distinguish between two types of *strashilki* according to their evil protagonists. The biggest group features ordinary inanimate objects from the material world: gloves, curtains, shoes, ribbons, dolls, cookies, etc. They move, talk, strangle, and suck blood. This behaviour is based on the mythical consciousness of children. The ability to naïvely personify non-living creatures which is, according to E.M. Meletinsky, intrinsic to the primeval and characteristic of children’s thinking is responsible for the fact that objects and things from everyday life in these stories cease being themselves and acquire symbolism.[11] This ability along with the child’s ever-ready recreative imagination which assigns to objects emotional meaning not matching their real qualities accounts for the genesis of *strashilkis’* demonic figures.[12]

The second group includes stories descending from traditional folklore genres. Malevolent agents here are the witch, the cadaver, the vampire, the sorcerer, etc. They act and reason differently from their namesakes of ‘adult’ tales, but archetypal motifs found their way into *strashilki*. By assimilating the motifs and characters of the adult superstitious tales and by

personifying occurrences, objects and things of the world around them, children created their own 'late demonological tradition' as defined by S. Neklyudov, which reflected the complex of their ideas about fear, death, and fatal hazard.[13]

There is no universally accepted classification of *strashilki*. They have been organized by the main malefactor: a mystic agent, an object-killer, an object representing a dead person, a harmful locus, an anthropomorphic evildoer, a malevolent family member; by the similar plot development: a hand appeared and strangled someone, a red stain came back, 'don't buy black gloves', 'girl, girl, approach the piano', green eyes, red curtains, etc. There have been attempts to create a detailed typology of the scary childlore, which identifies 'classical' *strashilki*, children's *bylichki*, 'innovative' *strashilki* descending from literary or cinematic pretexts, etc. A need to build a strong taxonomy is accounted for by the heterogeneity of the genre which easily draws on rural *bylichki*, urban legends, horror movies and junk food news.[14] For the purposes of this article we will simply sort the texts according to the way their victims are destroyed.

The biggest group from UNN (118 items) features death from unidentified reasons (e.g. 'the boy died', 'everyone died') or from random causes ('the boy died of fear', 'mother stamped him to death with her hoofs', etc.). A similar category from LC comprises 37 items. In the second biggest group (UNN-57; LC-37) victims are strangled. Such popularity of strangulation deserves a separate study since this is not the way people are usually killed in traditional Russian fairy and folk tales; *Baba Yaga* and other villain figures usually consume their victims, cooked or uncooked. This study, however, is beyond the limits of the present project. Straightforward vampirism, i.e. sucking or drinking the victim's blood is depicted in 32 and 19 stories respectively. In this article we will attempt to show that at least two other types of children's scary stories belong in this category, namely the stories about ominous stains and cookies/meat pies.

3. Analysis and Illustrations

Definitions of vampirism vary, but one common trait is that 'vampires are killers who physically or psychically drain the life from human victims'.[15] Traditionally, it is done by blood-sucking or blood-drinking. The meaning of blood as the seat of life and the source of the power of the soul[16] or a soul substance[17] is manifest here. While featuring classic vampiric attributes, blood-consuming villains of Russian childlore have never born their generic name until later. The word *vampir* (vampire) did not really circulate among elementary school children; the Russian vampires *oupir* and *vourdalak*/*vurdalak* (e.g. Oupir in the Afanasiev's compendium of Russian tales and Aleksey Konstantinovich Tolstoy's *La Famille du Vourdalak*) never left the realm of written fiction until the late 1980s – early 1990s. The experience of this article's author who belongs to the *strashilki*-telling and *strashilki*-ingesting generation corroborates here with researchers' findings.

Strashilki reached their popularity peak in the 1970s-1980s when they were told at night in the pitch-black darkness of a pioneer camp dorm. Later, in the 1990s, the genre nearly went into oblivion, especially with the demise of pioneer camps and the arrival of video salons and cable channels, which introduced people to the unknown before thrillers and horror films swarming with the undead, zombies, and vampires. It is then that the word *vampir* started to appear in *strashilki* (3 instances in LC).With the development of the Internet in the 21st century this category of childlore got a new impetus and a new existence.[18]

Similarly, blood-sucking and blood drawing in *strashilki* is not necessarily done by the plain vanilla neck biting. Malevolent agents use knives and forks, tubes, beating up and hanging upside down, etc. Sometimes blood consuming is only implied or, as illustrated in the following tale, happens post factum. Note the appearance of militia men in this and many other *strashilki*.

In the minds of Soviet children they still are mighty and valorous heroes who come to rescue when summoned.

Red Piano

A girl got a red piano; people in the piano store said that one single old woman would be able to fix it and gave her address. The girl started practicing and after some time felt that her fingertips hurt. They told her that she had simply chafed her fingers. Soon the girl began to wither away, she grew thinner, and her cheeks lost their blush. A month later the piano broke. They called the old woman. She arrived and said:

‘I will fix it but you are not to look, don’t come into the room or I won’t be able to do my work.’

They obeyed.

After some time the old woman left.

The girl started playing again, but she was getting thinner and thinner. Soon she was not able to walk. A month later the piano broke. The old woman came one more time. She told the parents not to watch her. But they could not bear it and peeped into the room. They saw that the old woman opened the piano and took out a jar full of blood. She started drinking greedily.

They called militia men, and the old woman got arrested. They began examining the piano and saw that its keys were made of tiny needles. The girl was playing and the needles pricked her fingers. The blood ran into the jar drop by drop, and the old woman came in to drink it.[19]

The old woman in this story is acting in perfect accordance with Andrew Swensen’s definition of a vampire as ‘a demonic being which feeds on human life and destroys that life in securing its own existence.’[20] While the piano-practicing girl grows weaker a jar of her blood keeps an old woman active for at least a month.

> The traditional image of blood-sucking [or blood-drinking in this case. – YN] acts as a metaphor for tapping into human essence; the vampiric drawing of this essence produces sustenance and, generally, diabolic revelry for the vampire and results in the loss of some or, more frequently, all of the victim’s life energy.[21]

In his ‘Vampirism in Gogol’s Short Fiction’, Swensen notes that the vampire being a corporeal but supernatural entity nonetheless dwells in the so called objective reality. Characteristically,

> the vampire psychologically manipulates, enchants, hypnotizes, and seduces its victims and generally overcomes them by enticement rather than by the use of brute force, and this facet of the vampiric relationship augments the aura of sexuality and primal desire.[22]

This principle is unintentionally travestied in the naïve account of *strashilki*. Young narrators hardly had any idea about psychological manipulations but what else could compel the victims to abide by the blood drinkers' life-threatening demands? The girl in the previous story gets back to playing the piano after it is 'fixed' despite becoming sick while the daughter from the following tale continues obliging the skeleton until almost dead. (Why does a piano perform such an ominous part in *strashilki*? Is this because Soviet children hated their private music classes which were considered almost an obligatory addition to the universal school education?)

Black Piano

Once there was a family: the mother, the father and the daughter. The girl wanted to learn to play the piano and they agreed to buy it for her. They also had an old grandmother who told them to on no account buy a black piano. The mother and the father went to the store, but there were only black pianos there and they bought a black one.

Next day when everyone went to work, the girl decided to practice. No sooner had she pressed a key that a skeleton got out of the piano and demanded a jar of blood from her. The girl gave him her blood; the skeleton drank it up and went back inside the piano. This was going on for 3 days. On the fourth day the girl became sick. Doctors could not help her because every day when everyone went to work, the skeleton came out the piano and drank the girl's blood.

Then the grandmother suggested breaking the piano. The father took an axe and started chopping and destroyed the skeleton along with the piano. Then the girl immediately got well.[23]

Earthly characters of *strashilki* would comply with commands from murderous curtains and blood-thirsty black tulips but for some unknown reason would ignore warnings about an imminent danger. There are four versions of the 'Coffin on wheels' story in UNN; LC contains two. In all of them a girl pays no attention to the menace and is killed (most often, strangled). The gruesome finale of the tale below is unprecedented.

Coffin on Wheels

One girl started cleaning up her apartment. Radio goes:
'Girl, girl, a coffin on wheels is looking for your city.'

The girl does not hide out. Radio goes again:
'Girl, girl, a coffin on wheels is looking for your building.'

The girl does not hide out. Radio goes:
'Girl, girl, a coffin on wheels is looking for your apartment.'

The girl does not hide out. Radio goes again:
'Girl, girl, a coffin on wheels is behind you.'

> The girl did not hide out, and the coffin beat her and hung her from the ceiling and put a bowl under her for her blood to run into it.[24]

The vampire of Russian folklore finds its way into *strashilki* even if their narrators are not aware of this fact. It may assume all sorts of shapes, and we believe that the various blood drinking curtains, gloves, shawls, flowers, etc. are shapeshifters. Occasionally there would be explicit transformations: a girl found a black wallet, at home she sat down to examine it, suddenly a terrible voice sounded and a witch came out of the wallet.[25] Or the father gave the mother three black tulips for her birthday, at night the parents disappeared while the tulips grew bigger, long black arms stretched out of the lamp to seize the daughter but a militia man chopped them away and blood flew out of black tulips; it was a sorceress and tulips were her heart.[26] At other times a nonanthropomorphic figure takes the place of a blood-sucking object: the mother asked her daughter to buy her a coat of any color except red, there were only red coats in the store, the girl bought the red one and dyed it, the mother put it on and never could take it off, she could only take it off when the coat drank all her blood.[27] There is a similar tale about blood-drinking shoes.[28] In the following story footwear consumes blood and is indestructible with common weapons as vampires are.

White Slippers

> A family got a new apartment. When they moved in, they saw a pair of white slippers by the entrance. They did not remove them. At night the father woke up and heard some noise; he thought it was just his imagination and did not get up from the bed. When everyone woke up in the morning, they found that he was nowhere to be seen and that there was a red stain on the bed sheets.
>
> Next night the same thing happened to the mother, then to the daughter and to the son. A unit of 20 militia men came in and put a jar with 1 liter of blood on the bed and covered it with a blanket. At night there were some banging sounds, and then a slipper crawled onto bed and started drinking blood. One militia man shot it, and it burst into small pieces. These pieces flew out of the window and went towards the graveyard.
>
> Militia men ran out of the building and followed the pieces. They reached an old well. They looked into it and there were bones, skeletons and upon them a trunk with blood. The second slipper was sitting on the trunk and militia men could not hit it no matter how they tried. They were unable to destroy it.[29]

The shapeshifter from the next story hypnotizes a victim with her eyes. This ability is a common attribute of the vampire. ‘The eyes also symbolize the fantastic and dark powers of the night as they represent implacable portals to the dark nether realms’.[30]

Black Roses-2

> One girl’s mother died. When she was dying she asked the girl to never buy black roses. Once the girl went for a walk and met an old woman who was selling black roses. The girl felt a desire to buy these roses and she bought them. At night, when the girl went to sleep, the black roses suddenly started to open and little black old women began to get out of them. They grew bigger

and bigger and finally joined together into one huge old woman. She thrust herself at the girl:

'I want blood!'

The girl got scared and cried. The old woman vanished. On the next morning the girl goes to see her grandmother. The road runs through the graveyard. The girl walks and sees the grave of the old woman who sold black roses. The girl wants to run away but cannot. The eyes on the old woman's portrait draw her in. The girl steps further towards the grave and falls under the ground. There she sees a dark hallway and three doors. She enters the first door; young girls sit there and cry.

'Why are you crying, young girls?'

'How can we not cry if they are going to undress us now?

The girl enters another door; undressed girls sit there and cry.

'And you, why are you crying?'

'How can we not cry if they are going to suck blood from us now?'

The girl enters the third door and sees that the old woman drinks blood from young girls. The girl ran so fast that the old woman could not catch her. She got out of the grave, shook off the dirt – and there is her mother standing there and smiling.[31]

Vampiric folk motifs found in *strashilki* include the eating of corpses (see 'Oupir' in Afanasiev's compendium of Russian tales[32]): an old woman catches a taxi and asks to take her to a graveyard; the driver waits for her to take her back, she returns covered with blood. 'Why are you all covered in blood, were you eating corpses?' 'Ye-e-e-es!'[33]

In stories about mincing people for meat pies or adding blood and sometimes brains or flesh to prepare red cookies (13 in UNN and 6 in LC) this motif may be aggravated by the repercussions of court trials and vague rumors about serial killers, but the vampiric aspect is more or less explicit in them.

Red Cookies

A girl loved red cookies. Her mother baked these cookies. The daughter said: 'Mom, I love red cookies.' And the girl followed her mother. When the mother bought regular cookies, she went to the graveyard and drank blood from a grave. Then she comes home and says: 'Here are the cookies you wanted!' 'No! I didn't want those! And you are a bloodsucker!!!'[34]

Another story which may be in part inspired by criminal reports employs a known vampiric attribute, the urge to propagate. Bandits lured a girl into a cellar of her own building, hit her on the head and took her to their hiding place. They killed her, tore off her skin, cut her

in pieces and poured her blood into glass jars. Then they caught other children and made them drink this blood.[35]

Still another variation of the blood-and-flesh-devouring motif is presented in the two stories about men feeding on their family. Curiously, in both cases the arrangements they use to attain their goal includes a staircase. In an old building lived a girl and her family, there also was an old woman in the neighbourhood. The girl noticed that the old woman always jumped over 3 steps when using the staircase in the old building and asked her about the reason. The old woman told her to come to the stairs at midnight. In the meantime the girl’s mother and sister disappeared. She saw that everything was ablaze under the stairs at night, looked closer and saw that a man all covered with blood was tearing off her sister’s skin and eating her flesh. Her mother’s skin hung on the wall. The man turned out to be the girl’s father[36] who sat under the stairs and used tubes to drink blood from everyone; when people became too weak to escape he dragged them in and ate their flesh.[37] Or: there lived a family and they had an old man who would say that a person who stepped on the 11th step would die. The family did not know that this old man was a sorcerer. The son of the family came back from the army and found no one at home. He immediately understood that they had stepped on the 11th step and decided to do the same. He was lucky and he just fell down between the knives [which were apparently mounted there]. There were human bodies and bottles of blood underneath. He got out and came back with militia men. They jumped down and found the old man who was sitting there and eating meat from the bodies. They started to shoot, and even when their bullets hit him they did no harm to him. Eventually, a militia man saw a black spot on the old man’s forehead and when he hit it the old man blew up.[38]

Slavic vampires often could be deceased people who in their lifetime had been sorcerers[39], so the remark about the old man from the second story being a sorcerer is still another indication of the ties *strashilki* have with folklore.

The universal vampiric invincibility to regular bullets has left its trace in *strashilki*, but the naïve narrative gives it a peculiar twist. The old man from the previous story had a weak spot on his body and only by hitting this spot they were able to kill him. In another story a vulnerable spot which helps to destroy vampires is almost literally the Achilles’ heel. A woman in black and three men in white would come out through a picture on the wall of a birthing centre to steal babies. Police were watching because babies had disappeared from this place before. They followed and saw a horrible room stained with blood with bins packed with little legs, arms, and heads; one bin was filled with blood. Police opened fire. They hit the villains, but their bullets did no harm to them. Suddenly the woman tripped and her shoe fell off her foot. Police saw that there was a little baby tooth in her heel. A sniper shot and hit this tooth. The woman and the three men dropped down dead. When they brought them to the police station, it turned out that they were robots, apparently aliens.[40]

The outcome of the following story is disarmingly unsophisticated. A girl begged her mother to buy her a red rose, and the mother agreed. They brought it home and put it on the piano. At night the girl did not go to sleep and remained in the room admiring the rose. Suddenly, it began to grow, and grew very big, and a red man came out of it. He started walking down the corridor and, after a long trip, disappeared behind a door. In the morning the girl told her parents about it. The mother went and brought militia men with her. They hid away and began watching the rose. It grew huge once again, and the red man came out of it. Militia men started firing at him, but all was in vain. He kept walking and eventually entered that room. Militia men followed and saw that he was bathing in a pool filled with blood. And then he came out of it and died.[41]

The group of stories about ominous stains (usually red, sometimes black or otherwise coloured) stands apart from other vampiric *strashilki*, but we will attempt to show that they pertain to the category. This formula occurs 7 times in UNN and 6 times in LC.

When discussing one of the most popular formulas of the childlore researchers speculate about the sacral function of the stain in traditional culture. For example, ethnographic materials related to the construction of a Slavic dwelling introduced by A.K. Baiburin suggest a conclusion that the stain plays the role of a medium between the cosmos of the home and the chaos of the external world. The stain marks the wall which appears pervious to the supernatural force. This stain is a clear and distinct sign of disaster.[42]

Another valuable observation comes from a person who shares his own experience with telling *strashilki* and listening to them at the web site of the University of Nizhni Novgorod. One of the most vividly remembered motifs for him is the motif of the underground which was not an ordinary grave or a crypt but rather a supernatural space. The stain fraught with death which could emerge on any wall at any time before an unsuspecting person was for him the scariest protagonist of *strashilki*, and it clearly connected in his mind to this underground motif.[43]

The liminal function of the stain is emphasized by its color, most frequently red, sometimes black; other hues occur rarely. Black is traditionally associated with impure forces, night, death. The archetypal power of red demands a particular attention, as it 'often represents a threshold between extreme emotions or between different realms.'[44] Discussing the psychological implications of red in Carl Jung's conceptual system, Cynthia Anne Hale remarks that any colour can be simultaneously perceived as a physical and emotional experience. With its implications of 'a ritual symbol that connects the living to the dead,', a 'threshold between reality and fantasy or between sleeping and dreaming,' red may be an element of connection between the unconscious realm and the world of matter.[45]

Red Stain

A family got a new apartment. There was a red stain on the wall; they did not have time to paint it. In the morning the girl sees that her mother is dead and the stain has become much brighter.

At night the girl woke up because she felt very scared. Suddenly she saw an arm reaching to her from the stain. The girl was so frightened that she died.

Then militia men came and found nothing. One militia man shot the stain and it disappeared. And then he came home and saw a red stain on the wall above his bed. At night he felt that someone wanted to strangle him. He started shooting.

His neighbours came running and saw that the militia man was lying there strangled and the stain was not there anymore.[46]

Black Stain

A man came to an unfamiliar town and wanted to settle in a hotel. They offered him a hotel on the outskirts of the town where no one wanted to live. The hotel keeper gave him a room right under the attic.

> At night the man saw a black stain on the ceiling. It began to grow. The man turned on the light. The stain disappeared. But when he turned off the light, the stain came back. The man decided to sleep with the light on.
>
> In the morning the hotel keeper kept turning away from the man and squinted. The man brought in a stone and put it under the bed. At night the stain was back. He tried to turn on the light, but the lamp was not working. Then he threw the stone at the stain. There was a cry, and the stain disappeared. In the morning the man saw that the hotel keeper’s arm is bandaged. The man told him about the stain, and the hotel keeper frowned.
>
> That night the man came back very late hoping that there would be no stain. But the stain began to grow and fill the room. The man threw a knife at it. There was a cry, the stain turned red, and blood ran down the walls. The man hurried to the attic and found the hotel keeper with the knife in his heart.[47]

Not only is the stain in these and in similar stories a marker of the threshold and a shapeshifter: the arms reaching out from a stain belong to a woman who kills people; when trying to rub away a stain a girl cripples her mother; a stain turns into a door which leads into a room full of murderous bandits; a stain on the wall is a mother’s gateway to the room crowded with demons where she eats corpses (*Baba Yaga* comes to mind, but consuming cadavers is rather the predilection of a Slavic vampire). Its attributes suggest the properties of a substance whose propensity is ‘to travel within, between, and beyond’ various domains and whose material qualities ‘are only one plausible starting-point for understanding its symbolic salience’,[48] namely blood.

Being able to secure life, blood can also be ‘a source of danger through its lack of boundaries’.[49] Leonid Lipavskii impressively describes this unique combination of material properties in his ‘*Issledovanie Uzhasa*’ (‘Study of Horror’).

> Curiously, some people are still scared by the view of blood, they start feeling lightheaded. But, one would think, what is there to be afraid of? Here it oozes from the cut, this red liquid containing life; it flows freely and languidly and creeps out in a freeform, ever-widening stain. Although, I suppose there is something revolting in it. It is all too effortlessly that it leaves its habitat and becomes independent, a tepid puddle, whether living or non-living it is unknown. To an onlooker this seems so against the nature that they weaken, the world becomes grey blur in their eyes, a giddy dimness. (…) Slowly leaving its captivity, blood begins its primal, impersonal life that is alienated from us.[50]

The ominous stain whose association with blood is implicit in its character and whose ability to become bigger or brighter when it kills someone, falls under Jan Perkowski’s definition of the ‘general vampire’ as ‘a being which derives sustenance from a victim, who is weakened by the experience’.[51] It may be a shapeshifter and usually emerges at night or the major events related to it occur before sunrise; this also marks the stain as a vampiric figure.

Thus, the vampiric personage is one of the most popular agents of harm in the Russian childlore; there are 45 such stories in UNN and 38 in LC, cookies/meat pies and ominous stain tales included. The vampire of *strashilki* is a killer that finds a particular way to feed on its victim(s) to provide its own nourishment, sometimes using naïvely complicated procedures

devised by a child's mind instead of mere blood-sucking. Being genetically connected to Slavic folklore it may adopt various guises and often is a shapeshifter. It is basically a nocturnal creature. It has the ability to enchant its prey with its eyes and tends to propagate. It is a supernatural entity but often dwells in the material world. It can appear at any moment anywhere.

Beware, a coffin on wheels is in your city.

Notes

[1] Sofia Loiter, 'Detskie strashnye istorii,' *Russkiĭ shkol'nyĭ fol'klor: ot vyzyvaniĭ' Pikovoĭ damy do semeĭnykh rasskazov*, ed. A. F. Belousov (Moskva: Nauchno-izdatel′skiĭ t͡sentr 'Ladomir', 1998), 56.

[2] A. F. Belousov et al., 'Detskiĭ fol'klor: Itogi i perspektivy izucheniya,' *Ruthenia*, Viewed on 5 February 2015, http://www.ruthenia.ru/folklore/luriem10.pdf.

[3] Loiter, 'Detskie strashnye istorii,' 58-59.

[4] One of the three main types of Russian legend, the other two being the bylina and the skazka. Bylichki deal with the supernatural world and with beings that come from the land of the dead, the underworld. When pagan beliefs were at their strongest in ancient Russia, the common peasants half-believed the bylichki. These legends are generally short and told in the first person, being related from father to son and thence passed down through the generations. Mike Dixon-Kennedy, 'Bylichka,' *Encyclopedia of Russian & Slavic Myth and Legend* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1998), 48.

[5] Loiter, 'Detskie strashnye istorii,' 56-57; Belousov, 'Detskiĭ fol'klor,' 232-33.

[6] Maina Cherednikova, 'Sovremennaya russkaya detskaya mifologiya v kontekste faktov traditsionnoĭ kul'tury i detskoĭ psikhologii' (synopsis of diss., Institute of Russian Literature (the Pushkin House), Russian Academy of Sciences, 1996), 4, Viewed on 5 February 2015, http://cheloveknauka.com/v/59248/a?#?page=1.

[7] Loiter, 'Detskie strashnye istorii,' 56-134.

[8] 'Pionerskie strashilki', last modified November 16, 2014, Viewed on 5 February 2015, http://scarykids.ru/?dir=/pioneer.

[9] V. N. Toporov, *Mif. Ritual. Simvol. Obraz: Issledovaniya v oblasti mifopoeticheskogo* (Moskva: Progress, 1995); quoted in Loiter, 'Detskie strashnye istorii,' 59.

[10] Loiter, 'Detskie strashnye istorii,' 59-60.

[11] E. M. Meletinsky, *Poetika mifa* (Moskva: Glavnaya Redaktciya Vostochnoĭ Literatury, 1976) quoted in Loiter, 'Detskie strashnye istorii,' 60.

[12] Loiter, 'Detskie strashnye istorii,' 60.

[13] Ibid., 63-65.

[14] Belousov, 'Detskiĭ fol'klor,' 233.

[15] Andrew Swensen, 'Vampirism in Gogol's Short Fiction,' *The Slavic and East European Journal* 37 (1993): 492, Viewed on November 19, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/308458.

[16] Kocku von Stuckrad, 'Blood,' *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*, ed. Christoph Auffarth, Jutta Bernard and Hubert Mohr (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006). Gale (AAT 1882006), 187-190.

[17] Jean-Paul Roux, 'Blood,' in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 986.

[18] G. V. Marfin, 'Sovremennoye bytovanie 'pionerskikh' strashilok,' *Afanasievsky sbornik: Materialy i issledovaniya. Vypusk 9* (Voronezh: Nauchnaya Kniga, 2010), 115-116, Viewed on 5 February 2015, http://folk.phil.vsu.ru/publ/sborniki/afanasiev_sb9.pdf.

[19] ‘Pionerskie strashilki.’
[20] Swensen, ‘Vampirism in Gogol’s Short Fiction,’ 492.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Swensen, ‘Vampirism in Gogol’s Short Fiction,’ 493.
[23] ‘Pionerskie strashilki.’
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Loiter, ‘Detskie strashnye istorii,’ 56-134.
[28] Ibid.
[29] ‘Pionerskie strashilki.’
[30] Swensen, ‘Vampirism in Gogol’s Short Fiction,’ 493, 504.
[31] ‘Pionerskie strashilki.’
[32] Aleksandr Nikolaevitch Afanasiev and Vladimir Iakovlevitch Propp, *Narodnye russkie skazki A. N. Afanas’eva* (Moskva: Goslitizdat), 1957.
[33] Loiter, ‘Detskie strashnye istorii,’ 56-134.
[34] Ibid.
[35] ‘Pionerskie strashilki.’
[36] One cannot help noticing that parents and, sometimes, grandparents are the malevolent agents in *strashilki* only too often. But speculations on this topic are clearly beyond the limits of this article.
[37] ‘Pionerskie strashilki.’
[38] Ibid.
[39] Swensen, ‘Vampirism in Gogol’s Short Fiction,’ 493.
[40] ‘Pionerskie strashilki.’
[41] ‘Pionerskie strashilki.’
[42] Maina Cherednikova, ‘Sovremennaya russkaya detskaya mifologiya, 13.
[43] ‘Strashilki,’ in *Folklore Archive of the University of Nizhnii Novgorod*, col. 63, unit 20, № 84, Viewed on 5 February 2015, http://www.unn.ru/folklore/sstrash.htm.
[44] Cynthia Anne Hale, ‘What About Being Red? Encounters with the Color of Jung’s Red Book,’ *Psychological Perspectives* 53 (2010): 482, doi: 10.1080/00332925.2010.524113.
[45] Ibid., 482-484.
[46] Loiter, ‘Detskie strashnye istorii,’ 56-134.
[47] ‘Pionerskie strashilki.’
[48] Janet Carsten, ‘Introduction: Blood Will Out,’ *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (2013): S2, S6.
[49] Ibid., S5.
[50] Leonid Lipavskii, *Issledovanie uzhasa* (Moskva: Ad Marginem, 2005), 24.
[51] Jan Perkowski, *The Darkling: A Treatise on Slavic Vampirism* (Columbus: Slavica, 1989); quoted in Swensen, ‘Vampirism in Gogol’s Short Fiction,’ 507.

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Monstrous Blood Relations: The Seriousness of *Slapstick*'s Twins

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Abstract

This article *focuses* on the sibling relationship between the 'monstrous' twins in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slapstick, or Lonesome no More!* Examining the embodied relationship that defines the blood relation between the twins, the article argues that the siblings resemble conjoined twins and thus challenge the autonomy of the body. By doing so, they subvert the Western conventional notions of bodily individuality and sovereignty. The argument draws upon the work of Margrit Shildrick on monstrosity and congenital twins to give a different reading of the novel. The argument begins by a definition of 'slapstick' to show that the term is far from trivial and directly related to the body's physical limitations. This is used as a gateway to a discussion of the nature of blood relations in the novel. Corporeality is central to this argument; the siblings' connection is a flesh, body, mind bond that cannot be replaced. Moreover, it is this particular bond that threatens their existence. Vonnegut is anticipatory in his creation of characters that put their heads together to generate genius thoughts. This draws attention to the inextricable connection between the senses and the physical body. Recent studies have shown that craniopagus twins share the sensory field of the brain. It is not simply that their heads are fused together, but their brains are too. For Vonnegut, the body is always central to the characters' interaction with each other and the world. When the twins' 'lonesome no more' plan is implemented to create artificial extended families across America, there is something significant missing. What is missing is the bodily connection. Blood relation is not simply the addition of a middle name or sharing a last name. *Slapstick* foregrounds a monstrous relationship between the twins' bodies to show that there is a significant difference between a 'relative' and a 'blood relative,' and that difference lies in that very visceral and monstrous nature of blood and the body.

Key Words

Monsters and monstrosity, blood relations, embodiment, congenital twins, Kurt Vonnegut, *Slapstick*.

*****

Have we then learnt at last how to untie
The bond of birth, umbilical long cord,
So that we live quite connected by the blood we share?
What monstrous kind of sword
Can sever veins and still we do not die?[1]

Published in 1976, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slapstick, or Lonesome No More!* was generally perceived as a disappointment, particularly when compared to his earlier novel, *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969). Vonnegut himself described the upsetting reactions to his book:

> *Slapstick* may be a very bad book. I am perfectly willing to believe that. Everybody else writes lousy books, so why shouldn't I? What was unusual about the reviews was that they wanted people to admit now that I had never been any good. The reviewer for the *Sunday Times* actually asked critics who had praised me in the past to now admit in public how wrong they'd been.[2]

Despite Vonnegut's remarks and negative reviews, many critics have acknowledged the significance of the novel, particularly in its presentation of the ideas of individuality, community and family. Todd F. Davis argues that it is Vonnegut's popularity that led critics to disapprove of aspects of his work that were previously considered admirable.[3] To exemplify this, Davis refers to Vonnegut's use of three different points of view which was a technique not criticised in his previous work *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) but was now 'regarded at best as distracting and at worst uncontrolled.'[4] Vonnegut describes *Slapstick* as 'the closest [he] will ever come to writing an autobiography.'[5] The novel is inspired by Vonnegut's own close relationship with his sister, Alice. One of Vonnegut's last memories of his sister is when she refers to her terminal illness and the imminent separation from her sons due to death as slapstick.[6] Blood relations and relationships in general are central to *Slapstick,* as the entire novel depicts the desperation for a life that is 'lonesome no more.'

Set in an apocalyptic future, the novel focuses on Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain who narrates his life story. Wilbur is one hundred years old and the last president of the United States. Wilbur and his twin sister Eliza are born deformed, with six fingers on each hand, six toes on each foot, and four nipples. As they become older, they turn into 'full-grown giants.'[7] Their parents, disturbed by their monstrous children, isolate them in a mansion and visit them once a year. Wilbur and Eliza connect to each other through an incestuous relationship and an intellectual bond that makes them genius, yet, this genius is only possible when they are in close physical proximity, with their heads together. They become 'the gentlest geniuses the world has ever known.'[8] However, this genius also becomes disturbing to those around them, and they want them divided. Wilbur and Eliza are forced to separate from each other and the distance is traumatic. The events take place with the backdrop of a deteriorating America. In 'So Smart it's Scary: Genius as Monstrous in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slapstick*,' Joel Harrison makes a significant argument that the twins' intellect, a monstrous product of incest, is what is feared the most and not the monstrous appearance of the last President of the United States, Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain.[9] The incestuous relationship between the twins has been thoroughly examined, so has the seriousness of Vonnegut's slapstick. However, the purpose of this article is to draw a connection between Wilbur and Eliza and Margrit Shildrick's conceptualization of congenital twins in order to show that there is more to the physical component of Wilbur and Eliza's relationship than incest. Drawing upon Shildrick's work, this article will argue that Wilbur and Eliza have an embodied relationship that mirrors congenital twins and that this inextricable corporeal connection challenges any attempt to separate their identities. This is also a connection that differs significantly from their plan to create 'artificial families,' because unlike Wilbur and Eliza, there is no actual 'blood relation' in these constructed relationships.

2. Slapstick

As a departure point for this analysis, it is important to define the term 'slapstick' in this particular context. This definition will be used to justify the need to focus on the corporeality of the main characters' bodies. According to Alan Dale,

> the term is now often used by itself as a pejorative, meaning 'merely' low physical comedy, but in part because popular comedy and literary comedy are thought of as belonging to distinct audiences, separate occasions.[10]

Moreover Dale argues that what is disturbing about slapstick is that many of the gags 'play on our fears of physical and social maladjustment.'[11] He uses an analysis of a section of William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) to show that slapstick shouldn't be perceived as trivial. Dale argues that while Faulkner 'doesn't stage a slapstick episode; he describes slapstick as an elemental aspect of existence.'[12] Dale suggests that when Faulkner describes the obstacles to man's mobility such as 'the natural laws like gravity and ice'[13] or 'the very refuse of his [man's] own eating left upon floor or pavement,'[14] Faulkner gives a far more profound meaning to the otherwise seemingly trivial banana peel moment. Faulkner shows that 'slapstick is a fundamental, universal, and eternal response to the fact that life is physical.'[15] It is this definition and understanding of 'slapstick' that is essential to an analysis of Vonnegut's novel. While Vonnegut does create slapstick scenes, when analysed in-depth it becomes evident that there is a urgency to his slapstick that is equal to Faulkner's description. The novel does not undermine the seriousness of slapstick; instead, it shows that embodiment is central to interacting in the world. Moreover, the twins' relationship is based on this corporeal coexistence, one that surpasses any other relationship in the novel.

Vonnegut explains his choice of title: 'I have called it "Slapstick" because it is grotesque, situational poetry—like the slapstick film comedies, especially those of Laurel and Hardy, of long ago.'[16] By invoking his own sister's last word, Vonnegut intensifies the significance of the novel's title; thus, there is an inherent doubling in the title itself; it belongs to Vonnegut, the author, but is also spoken by Alice, the sister. This is a connection that is mirrored in the relationship between Wilbur and Eliza, who have a unified, genius voice when their heads are placed together. While Vonnegut's statement certainly shows an affinity with the light-hearted, the reference to the 'grotesque' connotes the repulsive and the ugly just as much as it implies the comic. It is important to see the seriousness of Vonnegut's slapstick. The slapstick in the novel stems mainly from the twins' plan to 'cultivate idiocy.'[17] Wilbur explains their strategy to keep the servants and their parents from knowing the truth: 'We refused to speak coherently in public. "Buh," and, "Duh," we said. We drooled and rolled our eyes. We farted and laughed. We ate library paste.'[18] At the heart of his slapstick is a kind of suffering, two children labelled as monsters that have to somehow satisfy those around them by acting monstrous. They fear that any evidence of humanity in them may lead to their destruction. When the twins exaggerate their monstrosity, they present themselves as both physically and mentally debilitated. Vonnegut's slapstick echoes Freud's conceptualization of comic tropes; Freud argues these tropes focus on 'degrading the dignity of individuals by directing attention to the frailties which they share with all humanity, but in particular the dependence of their mental functions on bodily needs.'[19] These bodily needs are central to *Slapstick*. As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that the twins are just as dependent on each other physically as they are intellectually, an idea that highlights the importance of the word 'blood' in blood relations. Their monstrous relationship foregrounds a connection that is not limited to having the same last name or common ancestry. It is a particular connection that is entrenched in their flesh and bones.

3. Shildrick and *Slapstick*

When the novel is read closely, we find that it presents a telling portrayal of the monstrosity of blood relations. Shildrick's definition of monstrosity is the most fitting to this context; Shildrick defines monstrous bodies generally as those 'that in their gross failure to approximate to corporeal norms are radically excluded.'[20] She explains, however, that the monstrous is not a category that is simply based on the strangeness of that excluded being; the monstrous is the result of 'the relationship between self and other.'[21] Shildrick justifies her refusal to categorize the monstrous as simply the 'other' by stating that 'it is not that some bodies are reducible to the same while others figure as the absolute other, but rather that all resist full or final expression.'[22] And it is precisely this issue that makes Wilbur and Eliza's bodies disturbing to their parents; it is not because they are simply different from them, but because they are also a reminder that they are the same.

To examine this complex relationship between the parents and the twins, it is useful to refer to examples that foreground the problematic definition of their blood relation. Wilbur explains that he 'cannot fault them [the parents] for being shattered by having given birth to monsters.'[23] The mother questions her ability to love the children when she asks, 'How can I love Count Dracula and his blushing bride?'[24] Their father doesn't embrace his children's uniqueness either and instead refurbishes an inherited mansion and exiles his children. Disconnected from the outside world by two chain fences covered with barbed wire, the children are certainly treated as a risk to 'humans'. However, more importantly, it seems that what the parents find to be a real risk is the possibility of a blood relation with their children. Their advisor tells them that they 'were no more true relatives of theirs (…) than baby crocodiles.'[25] From the very beginning of the novel, there is an emphasis on blood relations; through the interaction between Eliza, Wilbur and their parents, it becomes apparent that genealogy is only problematic when the twins' monstrosity challenges the definition of a 'normal' family. This issue is evident in Wilbur's own confusion regarding his and Eliza's identity. While the twins carry the family name 'Swain' and Wilbur refers to Professor Elihu Roosevelt Swain, who previously owned the mansion, as 'the most intelligent of all [their] known ancestors,'[26] Wilbur doesn't always seem so sure of this connection to his family. He goes as far as saying that he understands his parents' predicament as 'it was natural as breathing to all human beings, and to all warm-blooded creatures, for that matter, to wish quick deaths for monsters.'[27] What is particularly striking about this statement is that Wilbur refers to his parents as being of a different blood category from his. This of course is ironic since he and Eliza are their children. However, this becomes even more problematic to the twins when they consider their connection to their parents' hometown 'Turtle bay.' At one point when they are older and Wilbur tells Eliza that their mom returned to Turtle Bay, Eliza asks him, 'Did it ever occur to you, dear Brother, that dear Father was not our Father at all?'[28] When Wilbur asks for an explanation she replies, 'Perhaps Mother stole from the bed and out of the house on a moonlit night […] and mated with a giant see turtle in Turtle Bay.'[29] Eliza raises a point that often overshadows the text; the twins are treated as though they are the product of something that is both human and non-human, a definition that of course solidifies their category as monsters. The origin of the monster has been debated since ancient times; generally, however, the 'human' monster is often defined as a hybrid being, the offspring of the human and the non-human. Donna Haraway argues that 'monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations.'[30] This is precisely the problem in the novel, coming to terms with a body that is not unified and blood relations that do not seem to make sense when a mother and father seem 'normal' and a son and daughter are 'freakish'.

Slapstick provides a thought-provoking take on why a monstrous body is seen as a challenge to the genealogy of human blood relations. Shildrick analyses the case of the

nineteenth-century Siamese twins, Chang and Eng, and gives a telling analysis of their identity. Given the risks of separation surgery, the twins were attached till their deaths; however, they did have independent legal identities. Shildrick argues that Western discourse defines autonomy in a very strict sense as a clear, identifiable separation between two entities. As Shildrick states,

> it is the privileging of singularity and autonomy so evident in Western discourse and the value accorded bodily self-determination which combine to erase any consideration that there might be other ways of being, or that a different morphology might ground other relational economies.[31]

And it is this challenge to autonomy that is manifested in the twins' monstrous connection to each other. From the very beginning, sharing as opposed to individuality is the norm for the twins. They share their mother's womb, they share the mansion, and they even share their minds. This involvement becomes a threat to those around them, mainly because it epitomizes the blood relation between them. They are so conspicuously related, and it is disturbing for their parents to believe that they too are related to them on an embodied level. It is a different 'relational economy' that is difficult to comprehend, much less embrace.

Their parents are witnesses to the twin's unconventional bodily movements that often mirror each other. These identical movements in themselves subvert the notion of individuality. The movements also reflect a strong relationship between the twins that is portrayed in slapstick mode but draws attention to their monstrous bodies:

> As always, we pretended to become overexcited. We jumped up and down. We were so big by then the floor began to go up and down like a trampoline. But we suddenly stopped, as always, to have been rendered catatonic by more happiness than was good for us. That was always the end of the show. After that, we were led away.[32]

This example is particularly telling because it draws attention to the twins' roles as performers in the novel. The 'show' that Wilbur refers to takes place in front of their parents on one of their yearly visits. The exaggerated motions, particularly given the twins' gigantic bodies, are both disturbing and comical. However, in both cases, the absurdity accentuates the grotesqueness of their bodies and their actions. Moreover, it is a kind of confirmation of their blood relation. They are two separate bodies, but their bodies are not sovereign. This resonates with Shildrick's argument that the connection between conjoined twins is not simply one of the 'self', but an actual phenomenological relationship of being that is rooted in the corporeal body and its senses.[33] Their subjectivity and embodiment depend on each other; they must perform together and their bodies must be in-sync, albeit in a monstrous harmony, because their existence depends on it. A separation of their bodies is a threat to their very being.

Not only do Wilbur and Eliza often mimic each other's movements, but they also put their heads together in a way that mirrors the image of congenital twins. They do this because they are especially 'brilliant' when they put their heads together. When the twins overhear their mother saying that she would 'give anything for the faintest sign of intelligence, the merest flicker of humanness in the eyes of either twin,'[34] they decide that it is time to stop pretending to be stupid in order to give their mother the comfort she needs. They write a letter and place it in her room; the letter says, 'Dear Mater and Pater: We can never be pretty but we can be as smart or as dumb as the world really wants us to be.'[35] Although they expect that this would bring some solace to their parents, Wilbur explains that this is how he and Eliza 'destroy[ed] their Paradise- [their] nation of two.'[36] Indeed, that is exactly what happens to the twins,

particularly when they begin to show that, not only are they intelligent, but that their intelligence is based on an embodied connection between them. When they meet their nurse for the first time after they write this letter, they show her the strength of their relationship for the first time:

> Eliza and I leaned our heads together, put them in actual contact, just above our ears. The single genius we composed thereby then spoke to Oveta in Eliza's voice, which was as lovely as a viola.[37]

The image of the twins putting their heads together is very similar to that of craniopagus twins, a rare phenomenon where twins have two individual bodies but are attached at the skull. To a great extent, Vonnegut's depiction of the twins was anticipatory. It is similar to recent findings that show that craniopagus twins share sensory stimulus through their fused brain. A recent Vancouver Sun article on two conjoined twins gives a description of them that is very similar to Wilbur and Eliza in *Slapstick:* 'They are conjoined not just by flesh and bone. Their brains are "zippered" together by a neural bridge between the thalami, the sensory processing hubs of their brains.'[38] This is exactly what Wilbur and Eliza have, a connection that is bodily and thus is also sensory. And though it may seem farcical in the context of the novel, two giants putting their heads together to think in unison, it is actually an illuminating insight on the body. Just as slapstick seems to be nothing more than an absurd gag but is actually rooted in the very nature of our physical being, Wilbur and Eliza's seemingly comical attachment is entrenched in the physicality of their existence.

When their parents find out about their supposed intelligence, they insist on having the twins sit through various tests. When forcibly separated while taking these tests, the twins refer to themselves as Betty and Bobby Brown, two insignificant individuals. They ask their parents to give them a chance to take the tests again, this time together. They then answer all the questions correctly, however,

> in the innocent process of checking and rechecking [their] answers, wound up under the table- with our legs wrapped around each others' necks in scissor grips, and snorting and snuffling into each others' crotches. When we regained our chairs, Dr. Cordelia Swain Cordiner had fainted, and our parents were gone.[39]

While the actions of the twins are shocking mainly because of their nature, they also exemplify that which is disturbing about the identity of conjoined twins. There is certainly an incestuous dimension to this relationship, one that breaks social taboos. The proximity of their bodies in this particular context is objectionable on its own. However, there is another physical boundary that the twins break; beyond the aspect of incest, their bodies are a reminder of the subversive connection of congenital twins. Throughout the tests, the twins show that their bodies' attachment to each other is essential to their ability to perform properly. Conjoined twins are problematic because their existence implies that one being can be comprised of more than one body.[40] Thus, their embodiment is subversive because it represents 'a monstrous insult to the norms of human corporeality, another mode of being that defies the binary of sameness and difference into which medical intervention is designed to recuperate them.'[41] This shows how 'the ideal of the autonomous subject is contested by the twins' concurrent and co-operative intentionality.'[42] Similar to congenital twins, in *Slapstick* the twins' embodied relationship eradicates the boundary between one body and the other.

It is a challenge that is so intense that it brings about a spontaneous outburst from their mother. When Dr. Cordiner laughs at the idea that the twins may commit suicide if separated, the mother snaps:

> Mother did not say anything at first. But she had clearly become subhuman in the finest sense. She was a coiled female panther, suddenly waiting to tear the throats our of any number of childrearing experts- in defense of her young. It was the one and only time that she would ever be irrationally committed to being the mother of Eliza and me. Eliza and I sensed this sudden jungle alliance telepathically, I think.[43]

It is especially striking that in this single occurrence when the mother becomes committed to them, she is described as sub-human; it is the first time that the blood relation between the three of them becomes more than just a superficial connection. This is the type of bond that Vonnegut makes superior to any simple last-name based relation. The conjoined twin image is also important when the aspect of separation is considered. In *One of Us: Conjoined Twins and the Future of Normal,* Alice Dreger shows that so-called normalization surgeries have significant adverse effects on those who are considered abnormal and challenges that very term. One such type of surgery, separation surgeries for congenital twins can lead to traumatic effects on the patients, including sensory impairment and bodily scars that leads Dreger to questioning whether congenital twins should be separated in the first place. [44] In *Slapstick*, it is clear that the separation of Wilbur and Eliza takes a serious toll especially on Elisa. When Wilbur visits her years after the separation, Eliza resents him for the separation. Wilbur is far more successful. Unlike Eliza who is sent to a mental institution, because she fails to show communication skills equal to those of Wilbur on her own, Wilbur is sent to school and graduates from Harvard. Eliza tells Wilbur, 'You were always the brainy one. I was just some kind of tumor that had to be removed from your side.'[45] Eliza's words seem to confirm Dreger's idea that we cannot really conclude that separation for the sake of normalization is always for the benefit of all those involved. This is an idea that is also referred to in Shildrick's work. And although Wilbur is far more successful, he is still haunted by the relationship he had with Eliza.

One of the most significant actions in the novel is when Wilbur, having based his winning campaign on the slogan 'lonesome no more,' creates artificial families. This is a plan that he and Eliza had thought of together. Their inextricable connection, despite its perceived monstrosity, makes them feel fortunate. They want everyone to feel that they have someone, that they are not alone. It reflects recent studies on conjoined twins that show that 'just as we might pity conjoined twins their lack of independence and privacy, so they might pity the unconjoined's lack of the kind of companionship that they enjoy all the time.'[46] The plan is based on giving everyone a connection to a family. Every citizen is given a new middle name and those who share this middle name become part of an extended family:

> 'Why,' I said, 'you say to that beggar, 'What's your middle name'' And he will say 'Oyster-19' or 'Chickadee-1' or 'Hollyhock-13' you say to him: *Buster - I happen to be a Uranium-3. You have one hundred and ninety thousand cousins and ten thousand brothers and sisters. You're not exactly alone in this world. I have relatives of my own to look after*.[47]

This idea is based on the desire to create artificial family links between random people so that no one is left alone:

> An ideal extended family,' Eliza and I had written so long ago, 'should give proportional representation to all sorts of Americans, according to their numbers. The creation of ten thousand such families, say, would provide America with ten thousand parliaments, so to speak, which would discuss sincerely and expertly what only a few hypocrites now discuss with passion, which is the welfare of all mankind.'[48]

The goal is to recreate the connection between Wilbur and Eliza, so that there is always someone that knows they are related to someone else. While the thought itself is based on a basic human need, it spirals out of control and leads to a divided America. Various groups, linked by their artificial familial relations to one another, begin to fight and each other. It is a plan that inadvertently leads to violence, the very opposite of what it was meant to accomplish.

While there are many arguments that can be made for why the country collapses, one that still needs to be highlighted is that Wilbur and Eliza misconstrued the definition of relatives. By embodying the morphology of conjoined twins, they had a connection that was very different from the one they created. They overlooked the role of the body in a manner that echoes Shildrick's argument that the connection between congenital twins is misunderstood as being simply a superficial one of the body that does not affect identity:

> But such an account misses not only the complexity of perception as it is mediated by the skin, but the psychic investments of body image and the phenomenological sense of being-in-the-world, in which corporeal extension is indivisible from subjecthood and identity.[49]

The twins' plan does not work mainly because an artificial family cannot replicate the bond of a blood relation. Moreover, a blood relation in the context of *Slapstick* is not simply based on a name. It is one that is rooted in the body and its perceptual experiences. As previous examples show, the twins are connected perceptually, a connection that foregrounds the material body. It also highlights the idea that the body is central to any relationship between humans:

> Human experience is incarnated. I receive the surrounding world through my eyes, my ears, my hands. The structure of my perceptual organs shapes that which I apprehend. Relations with others are based upon our mutuality of gaze and touch, our speech, our resonances of feeling and perspective. From the visceral of craving to the loftiest of artistic achievements, the body plays its formative role.[50]

While Vonnegut does not create a typical image of congenital twins, where the two are actually connected to each other at birth, the twins in the novel choose to recreate this bond. It gives them an intellectual relationship that is secured in the body. Once this sense of security is jeopardized, it is not merely that their bodies are no longer attached, it is that their identity is no longer the same. Vonnegut's work makes us question, not only the unjustifiable separation of the siblings in the novel, but also any attempt to transform relationships in general in order to make them fit an 'ordinary' or 'normal' category. The problem is not the seeming monstrosity of these relations, but the insistence on redefining them, thereby destroying their essence.

Notes

[1] Elizabeth Jennings, 'Family Affairs,' *Elizabeth Jennings: The Collected Poems*, ed. Emma Mason (Manchester: Arcane Press, 2012), 88.
[2] Kurt Vonnegut in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. William Rodney Allen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 184.
[3] Todd F. Davis, *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade: or, How Postmodern Harlequin Preached a New Kind of Humanism*, SUNY Series in Postmodern Culture (New York: SUNY Press, 2012), 92.
[4] Davis, *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade*, 92.
[5] Kurt Vonnegut, *Slapstick, or Lonesome no More!* (London: Vintage [1976] 1991) 1.
[6] Vonnegut, *Slapstick*, 8.
[7] Ibid., 43.
[8] Ibid., 51.
[9] Joel Harrison, 'So Smart It's Scary: Genius as Monstrous in Kurt Vonnegut's Slapstick' (Paper presented at the 6th Global Conference on Monsters: Myths of Enduring Evil, Oxford University, 24 September 2008).
[10] Alan S. Dale, *Comedy is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) 1.
[11] Dale, *Comedy is a Man in Trouble,* 11.
[12] Ibid., 10.
[13] William Faulkner, *Light in August: The Corrected Text* (New York: Modern Library [1932] 2002) 69.
[14] Ibid., 69.
[15] Dale, *Comedy is a Man in Trouble*, 1.
[16] Vonnegut, *Slapstick,* 1.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., 45.
[19] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (Worcestershire: England, Read Books ltd. [1905] 1990), 260.
[20] Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: Sage, 2002) 2.
[21] Ibid., 1.
[22] Ibid., 2.
[23] Vonnegut, *Slapstick*, 93.
[24] Ibid., 48.
[25] Ibid., 20.
[26] Ibid., 25.
[27] Ibid., 53.
[28] Ibid., 85.
[29] Ibid., 85.
[30] Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 180.
[31] Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 50.
[32] Vonnegut, *Slapstick*, 103.
[33] Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 50.
[34] Vonnegut, *Slapstick*, 75.
[35] Ibid., 75.
[36] Ibid., 77.

[37] Ibid., 78.
[38] Denise Ryan, 'Through her Sister's Eyes,' Vancouver Sun, January 2, 2014, viewed November 5, 2014, http://www.vancouversun.com/health/Through+sister+eyes+Conjoined+twins+Tatiana+Krista+were+extraordinary+from+beginning/7449226/story.html.
[39] Vonnegut, *Slapstick,* 115.
[40] Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 53.
[41] Ibid., 53.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Vonnegut, *Slapstick*, 110.
[44] Alice Domurat Dreger, *Conjoined Twins and the Future of Normal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 70.
[45] Vonnegut, *Slapstick*, 137.
[46] David Benatar, ed., 'Introduction,' *Cutting to the Core: Exploring the Ethics of Contested Surgeries* (Maryland, Rowman and Little Field, 2006), 8.
[47] Vonnegut, *Slapstick*, 187.
[48] Ibid., 110.
[49] Margrit Shildrick, 'You Are There Like My Skin: Reconfiguring Relational Economies in *Thinking through The Skin*, ed. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (London: Routledge, 2001), 164.
[50] Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1990), 1.

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Image 2: Stone Love. © 2015. Image courtesy of Spade

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Visualising the Menstrous: Infectious Blood in Contemporary Art

Ruth Green-Cole

Abstract

Patriarchy in affect subjugates the blood of women by controlling the way it is visualised and thematised as waste, dirty and abject. The work of Julia Kristeva and her seminal account of abjection, as well as Barbara Creed's descriptions of the monstrous-feminine, particularly the 'menstrual monster' provides a productive lens through which to understand and contextualise contemporary works of art. These theorists explain how controlling, elite and dominating systems of decorum and aesthetics can be countered by re-evaluating the abject, transgressive and marginalised which are instead valorised in contemporary art. Artworks by Francis Bacon and Hermann Nitsch are discussed in regards to 'masculine blood' to explain how menstrual blood is read differently and following which I examine instances of demonised blood in contemporary art and popular culture to show how *othered* blood is understood as dangerous. The discrimination and consideration of 'homosexual' blood as dangerous has infiltrated society implicitly and methodically as traditional images of spilling masculine blood has been associated with transcendence and heroism. Similarly, the terms monstrous and *menstrous* are synonymous, a conflation of two words that simultaneously implies that when a woman is menstruating or is *menstrous* she is like a monster in a crazed state of irrationality. The term also reinforces the relationship between fear and blood. The lesbian vampire as an example of the 'monstrous-feminine' is constructed upon a curious array of menstrual connotations. The image of a woman with blood at her lips parallels menstrual blood seeping from the labia, in the same way, as the portrayal of the vagina dentata is a mouth-like vagina with teeth. The major intentions of this article is to illustrate some of the ways in which art can transvalue menstruation, thereby disturbing or affecting gender essentialism and create new and meaningful narratives within visual culture.

Key Words

Abject, HIV, homosexuality, *l'informe,* lesbian, menstrual blood, menstruation, menstrous, monstrous-feminine, vampire.

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1. Introduction

Blood is a kind of gold within a system of exchanges in value. In a society that had considerable epidemics, famines and wars death is forthcoming, and blood constitutes one of the most vital principals able to defeat the fear of death through the idea of transmission. To have certain blood, or to be of the same blood, and to be prepared to risk one's blood all signify the continuation of a bloodline, a fundamental value in society. Blood's significance is due to its value and representation as a form of currency and owes this high value to its inherent fluidity. The formlessness of blood makes it 'easily spilled, subject to drying up [and] too readily mixed and capable of being quickly corrupted.'[1] The conquering of blood is an act of power where the shedding of blood becomes a symbolic exchange within a hierarchy where various kinds of

blood denote different currency. This value system belongs in what Foucault explains as, a 'society of blood' where 'power spoke through blood'.[2]

To cite a well-known example, Francisco Goya's *The Third of May 1808* painted in 1814 commemorates the power of blood, discussed by many scholars as, a ground-breaking war scene. *The Third of May 1808* is revolutionary not only in terms of its content but by its painterly approach and composition. Tension exists because the central protagonist held at gunpoint, arms outstretched with his right hand clearly bearing the signs of the stigmata. Goya's only reference to salvation and God's blessing. *The Third of May 1808* is a dramatic and emotionally charged portrayal of brutality, enhanced by a coagulating pool of blood beneath the slain. The history painting is compelling. The semiotic of blood evokes a narrative of violence, heroism and humanity and show how the dominant social system elevates male blood through honouring the blood of (male) heroes. Similarly, Francis Bacon's carcass paintings draw stimulus from World War 1. He saw the human psyche as animalistic, subject to base urges of violence, lust and fear. This approach was also a large consideration in the performance work of Viennese Actionist Hermann Nitsch and his infamous *Orgies, Mysteries, Theatre* (1960-2014) included the blood and viscera of slaughtered animals in ritualised acts incorporating the human body, as discussed shortly.

Depictions of masculine blood in art demonstrate the fundamental values that are central to patriarchal society and which exclude any other kinds of blood, namely, menstrual blood. Patriarchy in affect subjugates the blood of women, controlling its visualisation and thematisation as waste, dirty, abject (when it should be upheld as life-giving). Menstrual blood principally consists of blood, mucous membrane (endometrium or uterus lining), vaginal discharge, and vaginal cells making it different from venous blood. Menstruation is linked to pro-creation is a natural part of the reproductive cycle. Instead, patriarchy sees menstruation as separate from reproduction, preferring to view menstrual blood is unspeakable waste, which explains traditional societies frowning upon intercourse during menstruation, when in some cases, menstruation does not inhibit arousal. What is pertinent here is menstruation is a natural cycle that connects to women's fertility but it is generally not seen as so, instead regarding as waste. In comparison, male blood is considered meaningful and worthy of spillage, venerated for its power leading to death.

Consumed with blood's power and upon seeing the residual blood on a sidewalk after a violent struggle, Bacon painted *Blood on the Floor* (1986) and *Blood on the Pavement* (c1988). These two paintings show a preoccupation and memorialisation of blood because of violence, suffering and fatality. Bacon became attracted to the visceral and vivid qualities of blood and raw meat. The artist asserted, '[i]f you see somebody lying on the pavement in the sunlight, with blood streaming from him, that is in itself—he colour of the blood against the pavement--very invigorating...exhilarating.'[3] This fascination with blood and flesh, typified by works such as *Painting* (1946) and *Figure with Meat* (1954) shows a connection between human and animal as comprised of raw flesh, blood and bones.

Early documentation of Nitsch's *aktions* (actions) parallel Bacon's painting *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* (1962) insofar as the carcass has been slung up, mirroring a crucifix. A typical *aktion* lasts around several hours beginning with a cacophony of music and sound, following Nitsch delivering orders for the theatre to begin. Assistants bring out a slaughtered beast; limbs splayed open as if it were on an upside down cross. The animal eviscerated, has its entrails and blood poured over a nude man or woman, the participants suspended upside down in a pseudo crucifixion.[4] Such sadomasochistic rituals occurred because of Nitsch belief that humankind has an innate aggressive instinct, and he believes the media controls or represses this aggression. Nitsch initiated these ritualised acts to allow participants to release suppressed energy thereby becoming a purifying and redemptive act through suffering and humiliation.

> A profound sense of repulsion pervades everywhere and at first charges the spectator negatively, but at the same time it acts subtly within the spectacle: the instincts are appeased, they sublimate themselves, they are dulled.[5]

Orgies, Mysteries, Theatre essentially became a form of art therapy inspired by Anton Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty', which goes back to the roots of Greek theatre, as well as the writings of Freud and Wilhelm Reich.[6] Nevertheless, intentions to challenge normative behaviour, (through the body coming into to contact with abject and leaky animal fluid, and ritualised acts) are thwarted somewhat due to Bacon and Nitsch's symbol of the crucifix associating blood with transcendent values.

2. Menstrous Monsters in Film and Photography

The theory of abjection, accompanied by the concept of *l'informe* (the formless), had been percolating within literary criticism and art history for many years until the early 1990s where they met at an intersection, a social and cultural instant where abjection came into its own. Even though the concepts had developed since Bataille demarcated them in the late thirties, it was after Kristeva's re-articulation of abjection that the concepts re-energised and caught the attention of many social and cultural theorists, psychologists, philosophers, art critics, and artists.[7] Engaging with the work of Jacques Lacan, Kristeva begins with the fundamental difference between the subject and the object. The subject is everything that individuals believe themselves to be in a corporeal or psychological sense. In common contexts, there is a transparent explanation between this understanding of self, and everything else in the world, which can be designated as 'others' or 'objects.' Kristeva states, '[t]he abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I.'[8] The horror of abjection has two archetypes, the excremental, and the menstrual:

> Excrement and its equivalent (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, the society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalisation, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference.[9]

Abject contamination is *l'informe*, a formlessness that is irrational, seeping into space that is reserved for order, in the same way the heterotopia of menstruating women represents a spatial incursion, a territory that ruptures into the mainstream. Foucault's account of 'heterotopia' places menstruation into a kind of neutral liminal space, a transitory space that women inhabit through cyclic reproductive states of being. Foucault, posits that

> there is a certain form of heterotopia that I would call crisis heterotopias, i.e., there are privileged or scared or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis; adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.[10]

Living in a state of crisis implies that women's bodies are out of control and incapable of containment. The fluidic and leaky body is therefore a monstrous and dangerous body a horror that should remain unseen.

Understood primarily as 'abominations,' the abject is associated with 'sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest.'[11] Aristotle began by saying a woman is 'literally a monster: a failed and botched male who is only born female due to an excess of moisture and of coldness during the process of conception.'[12] Supplemented by definitions of a 'monstrous-feminine', as constructed in visual culture, Creed established that the depiction of woman-as-monster is an overexposed personification in cinematic culture largely framed by psychoanalytical discourse.

The theorem of the monstrous-feminine reflects the notion that women 'lack' the 'one true organ' thus visualising women as sexually castrated.[13] Creed summarises the concept of the monstrous-feminine, 'as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallocentric ideology, is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration.'[14] Freud wrote is his paper *Fetishism* that, 'Probably no male human being is spared the fright of castration at the sight of the female genital.'[15] Freud is referring to the male fear or 'phantasy'[16] that women are castrated, which is emphasised by the mere absence or lack of their external genitalia and thus simultaneously implies women's genitalia, are also castrating organs. Irigaray on the other hand, describes the 'fright' as merely 'the horror of nothing to see'.[17] This trope is a narrative of monstrous *difference* conjuring castration anxiety in the male spectator.

The terms monstrous and *menstrous* are synonymous, a conflation of two words that simultaneously implies that when a woman is menstruating or is *menstrous* she is like a monster in a crazed state of irrationality. The term also reinforces the relationship between fear and blood. Therefore, visual depictions of menstrual blood are completely taboo. The 1976 film *Carrie* illuminates a commonly held trope about women's fear during their own discovery of menarche, typically in the bathroom. The film is misleading in its representation that masturbation causes menstruation and further sediments this by portraying Carrie's punishment for masochism.[18] The screen production industry has become a vehicle that provokes and 'educates' society about what is abject, and unclean.

> When Carrie first bleeds, she is in the shower, pleasurably massaging and stroking her own body. [...] Soft focus, slow motion and dreamy music create a mood of gentle romanticism. [...] The romantic mood is suddenly broken as Carrie looks down in horror as menstrual blood spills forth and runs freely down her legs. In panic, she runs screaming from the shower. The response of her class is swift and brutal. The girls bombard her with tampons and sanitary napkins as she cowers like a defenseless, terrified child before the savage onslaught.[19]

The savage onslaught refers to Carrie's classmates as they yell; 'Plug it up!' while flinging her with tampons as she cowers on the gym locker floor. This scene in *Carrie* is homage to Alfred Hitchcock's shower scene in his epic film of 1960 *Psycho,* in which blood mixes away with water. Diluting the blood, seen as unclean liquid with one understood as pure. This scene educates women to expect or relate their own experience of menarche as a tormenting whilst they watch women perpetrate the shaming and punishment of another.

Carrie transforms into a 'witch' after the arrival of menarche thereby linking menstruation with witchcraft. The main character becoming a 'menstrual monster'[20] invokes a link between menstrual blood and supernatural abilities when Carrie develops extrasensory powers at the onset of menarche.[21] Witches invoke the fear of death, invariably contributing to trope of menstruation as 'the curse'. Mrs White (Carrie's mother) finds out about Carrie's onset of menarche and strangely is abjected by her own daughter. She terrifies Carrie with the words

'God punished Eve', principally with the 'Curse of Blood', subsequently with the curse of 'Childbearing' and finally with the 'Curse of Murder'. This scene recounts Eve's original sin and symbolises the way menstrual blood signifies demonised blood.

Creed's analysis of the symbolic function of the menstrual blood in *Carrie* is significant as she identifies the copious amounts of blood (menstrual blood, pigs blood, post-partum blood, the blood of sin and the blood of death) portrayed in this movie is to construct the central characters, Carrie and Regan, as figures of abjection.[22] In the prom scene, a large bucket of pig's blood is spilled upon the prom couple, from overhead. The crowd laughs in revulsion. Carrie standing on the prom stage, dripping head to toe in symbolic menstrual blood, furiously unleashes her telekinetic powers upon the entire school, inflicting death upon the students. The menstrual blood from the first scene is interconnected to sinister and supernatural, paranormal powers traditionally associated with the image of women as witches.[23] Ritual becomes a means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude it. *Carrie* is fictitious, however, viewers may form, whether conscious or unconscious, opinions based on what has been presented.

This is also apparent in television commercials where sanitary demonstrations use a blue fluid to illustrate absorbency. If advertisers were to use red liquid, it might invoke the viewer and potential purchaser of abjection and disgust. Red fluid is too close to the real thing, which society is frantically trying to avoid, too dispel the fantasy that the women's body does not leak. The semiotic of using blue liquid to represent menstrual blood might be implicitly linked to the notion of pure blood or 'blue blood' members of society. More likely, other representations rather than blood that are associated with blue liquid, pure clean water, laundry products and cleaning products, however this reinforced the images that menstrual blood is impure and profane. Ultimately, visual media is a powerful tool for conveying meaning whether fact or fiction.

The female vampire as a portrayal of the monstrous-feminine builds upon an interesting array of menstrual connotations. The character of the female as succulent gained her notoriety through vampire horror films of the 1970s. Since this time, she has been associated explicitly with sex, violence and death. Andrew Tudor suggests there could be a connection between the increased visibility of the female vampire and women's liberation movement of the 1970s.[24] This may have contributed to society's fears of a more aggressive female sexuality and notions of the menstrual monster.[25] The female vampire as subject opens up a number of personas to study, women as lesbian vampire, women as victim, women as creature, gender and metamorphosis, abjection and the maternal. The lesbian vampire is significant for a number of reasons. She signifies sexual deviance, invokes the threat of castration, causes a women's blood to flow, and crosses gender boundaries by becoming-masculine.[26]

The female vampire is particularly ominous and especially abject as she threatens to seduce the 'daughters of patriarchy away from their proper gender roles.'[27] Homosexuality incites anarchy within the symbolic order as Creed states, '[l]esbian vampirism, however is doubly abject because woman, already more abject than man, releases the blood of another woman.'[28] In this reconfiguration of the vampire horror scene, abjection is inescapable. Driven by a lust for blood, the female vampire will cause women's blood to flow, thus, transforming them into animalistic undead creatures of the night (if she chooses not kill them first). Vampires also transgress the boundary between human and animal; dead and undead which make them abject. Vampires are animalistic because of the explicit bloodlust and the fact that they have fangs. The notion of vampiric transformation symbolically relates to menstruation, in two ways. The first is the act of releasing blood through the neck, as a parallel signifier for the neck of the uterus. Secondly, the releasing of menstrual blood represents the transformation from girlhood

to womanhood. In regards to female vampires, the transformation becomes monstrous, from innocent virgin to bloodsucking sexual deviant.

The image of a woman with blood at her lips parallels menstrual blood seeping from the labia, in the same way as image of the 'vagina dentata' pictures a mouth-like vagina with teeth. For example, cover of Creed's book depicts a woman's vertical mouth, lips open and exposing her white teeth. If drinking blood is abject, consequently, drinking menstrual blood must be doubly abject. Feminist Germaine Greer famously said, 'If you think you're emancipated, you might consider the idea of tasting your menstrual blood - if it makes you sick, you've got a long way to go baby.'[29] Artist Ingrid Berthon-Moine accepted Greer's challenge; her photographic work *Red Is The Colour* (2009) is a series of twelve passport style portraits of women who wear their menstrual blood as lipstick. Her work investigates sexual representation and the human body as a site for questioning and dissolving cultural and social preconceived notions about menstrual blood. Wearing menstrual blood as lipstick inadvertently leads to a small taste, but Berthon-Moine is the exception as getting over what society deems as abject is a difficult task, especially when affective reactions of loathing or panic to viscera are so ingrained.

It is not so much of a stretch to consider that perhaps there are many layers to this notion that the mouth can represent the vagina. After all, both the mouth and vagina have lips that lead to an internal cavity. When gazing upon a menstruating woman in Dogon culture '[e]mphasis was put on her mouth; by extension it represented her bleeding vagina, as indeed did all the openings of her body.'[30] Judy Grahn discusses that the painted red mouth as signifier for vulva was a way for tribal women to inform others that she was menstruating.[31] Blood signals suggest the notion of the *menstrous* women need to be distinguished as other. In another direction, these blood signals in turn gave women a way to invoke the creative and dangerous power she held during her menstruation. As colouring the mouth red to look like it was bleeding, released tribal women from the more inhumane menstrual seclusion rites. Over time, the interpretation of red lips has blurred from signifying menstruation, to inferring sexual availability. Berthon-Moine is interested in revealing this forgotten history as each of the twelve portraits in *Red is the Colour* are named after a shade of over the counter red lipstick, to denote the link between menstrual blood and cosmetics.[32] As Grahn asserts, menstrual blood was essentially the 'first' cosmetic or human paint to become a signifier.

3. Infectious Blood and Performance

Instances of 'infectious' blood in contemporary performance art show how othered blood converts to dangerous blood and therefore vilifies individuals. The discrimination and consideration of 'homosexual blood' as different and dangerous has infiltrated society implicitly and methodically as traditional images of spilling masculine blood has been associated with transcendence and heroism, as previously mentioned. In an aim to subvert traditional masculine and religious iconography, Athey's 'extreme performance art', incorporates carnivalesque bodies and sadomasochistic practices in a mandate to confront distinct notions about the male (heterosexual) body. Athey uses blood as a primary medium to explore themes such as, traumatic experience, desire and sexual orientation.

As with Athey, Italian performance artist Franko B has also been primarily concerned with bloodletting and acts of self-harm. His work is autobiographical and addresses issues of abandonment and institutionalisation related to maternal authority, religious iconography and medical practice. The process of Franko B's performative works is different to Athey's as he trained in fine arts. Franko B maintains,

> In a way my body is the canvas for me to make beautiful icons, and blood is just like a drip of paint [...] the body is the canvas and the blood and

> everything else that is projected onto the canvas, that is the language that is paint.[33]

Franko B's work extends beyond the performance as he objectifies his leaking body. Both Athey's and Franko B's work often provoke inter-repulsive sensations by spectators who find their work difficult to fathom. The difficulty lies in the tension between pain and pleasure and is often about the viewer's sense of bodily boundaries.

The fear associated with Athey's work is often to do with fear for the artist or the audience's safety. Confronted with the spectacle of blood, can trigger panic or at least alarm and in some cases hemophobia. [34] This alarm may be the result of empathy or repulsion, but this general anxiety over blood holds ignorance about contagion. This alarm may be the result of empathy or repulsion, but this general anxiety over blood ends up heightened in some from ignorance about contagion. This anxiety is a deep-seated irrationality; blown out of epic portion by sensationalist news media adopting terms such as 'the gay plague' or 'diseased blood' and 'infected blood'.

Athey's performance *Four Scenes from a Harsh Life* (1994) is the title of the second part of his *Martyrs and Saints* trilogy performed in Minneapolis. The performance opened with 'The Holy Woman' a sexually ambivalent characterisation of St. Sebastian pierced by arrows and anointed with oil. In a later scene, 'Working Class Hell', Athey dressed in a working man's outfit, wearing surgical gloves proceeds to make African scarification patterns with a scalpel into the back of fellow performer Darryl Carlton, also known as, 'Divinity Fudge'. Athey then blotted the wounds with white paper towels and another performer, also wearing surgical gloves, proceeded to hang them on a clothesline hooked up to a pulley system. This act within the scene referred to a 'human printing press' with a clothesline, pegged with bloodied paper towels, hoisted over the audience.[35] In a later scene, Athey creates a crown of thorns by inserting large needles into his forehead leaving blood to drip down his face.

Controversy ignited by an erroneous article, written by Mary Abbe, a journalist who did not attend the performance. She spread rumours that the audience received exposure to, and contact with, HIV positive blood. Indeed, Athey has lived with HIV for the last 20 years but Carlton has not. The article publically brandished Athey as transgressing moral boundaries, arguing that 'public funds [were] spent on transmitting HIV'. Athey has never applied for a public fund and yet vilified for receiving US$150.00 under the assumption that he was unsafe in his performance practices.[36] Many spectators feel challenged by Athey's performance because they force the viewer into assessing their own bodily fragility and question sexual and gender norms. The knowledge that Athey is HIV positive has spawned a hatred of 'homosexual blood', which has been categorised in similar ways to menstrual blood, contaminated and dirty.

In the early 1980s, HIV cases where appearing intermittently in the United States. At the time, these cases were associated with Kaposi's sarcoma, and were not long after considered as cases of 'gay plague' by ignorant, assuming medical professionals and media. The New York Times printed the opinion of,

> Dr. Curran [who] said there was no apparent danger to nonhomosexuals from contagion. 'The best evidence against contagion,' he reported, 'is that no cases have been reported to date outside the homosexual community or in women.'[37]

This highlights not only a strong blood taboo in terms of 'contamination' and 'infection' but also a cultural backlash, against queer artists. The reaction to Athey's performance exemplifies a societal paranoia towards homosexuals, associating unfounded criticisms regarding hygiene,

pollution, immorality and the endemic/pandemic creation of the idea of 'gay blood' or gay disease, when the virus itself cannot determine its victims, let alone by their sexuality.

Despite criticism by extremists, Christian authorities and conservative political representatives, Athey's investigation of the taboos surrounding blood, pain, and the docile body is not an isolated or unusual spectacle. *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* belongs to the lineage of ritual bloodletting performances introduced by Chris Burden and Pane two decades earlier. Burden's *Trans-fixed* (April 23, 1974) is perhaps one of the most cited examples of early 'extreme performance art', where he lay face up on top of a Volkswagen Beetle and had nails hammered into his outstretched palms so that he was crucified on the car bonnet.

At one level, a 'queer radical' interpretation is determined to be accurate; it is of course public knowledge and Athey is open about his HIV positive status; however, there is a more complex and multilayered context in which to read his work. An insightful text by Fintan Walsh provided a 'menstrual' perspective. There is, as he suggests, a significant amount 'of puncturing the HIV positive gay male body'[38] in performance art, but as there is a blurring between pleasure and pain, there is another blurring of masculinity and femininity that offers a 'number of provocative means of resisting traditional representations of masculinity.'[39] In interviews, performances and writings, Athey discusses how destructive childhood experiences are the source of inspiration for his work, due to growing up within a female collective and a zealous church-going community. Athey's Pentecostal upbringing, training as a Pentecostal minister, and fifteen years of drug addiction, performed via self-mutilation practices, are meant to re-signify wounds caused by others.

Walsh continues, 'Athey's work pertains to feminine identifications that connect his maternal abuse with his sexual identity and the performance or trauma in the "present".'[40] Walsh discusses this when he notes that Athey only cuts his own flesh after he has summoned some 'damaging matriarch from his past through fetishistic drag performance.'[41] Some traditional scholars have considered drag as a misogynistic practice. Peggy Phelen declares,

> Gay male cross-dressers resist the body of a woman even while they make its constructedness visible. This is in part why the misogyny which underlies gay male cross-dressing is so painful to women.[42]

Nevertheless, his early recollections of women's blood underscore his bloodletting practice. Athey recalled travelling to see a religious woman who seems to have, 'not bled' on either of the two visits that he made as a child. His frustration after realising that she was a 'fraud' was to take his sister to the back garden, slice off her fingertips, after which he did his own, to show her [his sister] how insignificant the wounds were and to make her stop crying.[43]

These early memories of female blood seem to be influential on the development of Athey's bloodletting practices. Athey recalls the encounter with his sister more fondly than the incident with the holy woman, perhaps by his ability to see his sister's blood, albeit by coercion.

> This introductory correlation between woman and blood, culturally in dissociable from menstrual blood, is a reoccurring motif throughout Athey's work, and it refuses to allow female subjectivity to escape from the derisory notions of abjection. Using self-harm, Athey exploits this association in order to incriminate his female minders.[44]

The infamous HIV towels, symbolic of menstrual blood, displayed strung up on a clothesline as if they were menstrual rags hanging out to dry. It is possible to think about how this work contains within it fear of or antipathy towards menstruation but such imagery re-appropriated in

the context of gay blood and HIV as something akin to 'outing'. It is also interesting how this art appropriates the tradition of 'the bloodline' to create a positive message about an alternative bloodline which is not heroic but ambiguous.

4. Conclusion

This article has analysed a number of powerful tropes that are associated with menstruation. It considered specifically how contemporary art challenges preconceived views of menstruation, through an examination of the semiotics of menstrual blood. Many menstrual works are meant to shock, in true avant-garde fashion, but not needlessly or nihilistically. They are important interrogations of aesthetic authority and decorum, challenging ignorant and popular beliefs about art's functions, as much as they create visibility and space within art and the public domain for contested values associated with blood. It is also worth stating that there should be no single or correct way to determine what menstruation, menstrual blood and taboo mean. This is because it is important that artists be allowed to critique and expose how patriarchal structures can make people feel powerless and humiliated. In diverse and individual ways, the artists I have discussed in this article share this mutual aim. Artists such as Athey are content to use their practice to question how homosexual individuals and their blood is othered and dangerous blood associated with immorality and infection. This prodigious remains unquestioned and unchallenged if confined to the margins on the non-visible. Some artists go further such as Berthon-Moine and celebrate menstruation in their art as a way to transform stigma and shame into transgressive and creative acts that challenges society's assumptions about the origins and dominant attitudes towards menstrual blood. However, it is important that whatever approach one decides, such a discursivity be aired in public, make visible and is divested of any historical or habitual residues of shame or deference to patriarchal models of decorum and hierarchical power.

Notes

[1] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley (Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin Books, 2008), 147.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Matthew Gale, et al., *Francis Bacon* (London: Tate, 2008), 234.
[4]The flesh/meat trope is one frequently associated with abjection. Carolee Scheemann's *Meat Joy* (1964) art performance also features meat, flesh, blood and naked human bodies.
[5] Lea Vergine, *Body Art and Performance: The Body as Language*, (Milano: Skira, 2000), 176.
[6] Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' is a surrealist form of theatre discussed in his book *The Theatre and its Double*, originally published in 1938. See translated version by Mary C. Richard, (Grove Press, 1994).
[7] Jack Ben Levi, et al., *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art: Selections from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum* (New York, The Museum, 1993), 7.
[8] Julia Kristeva. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Colombia University Press, 1982), 1.
[9] Ibid., 71.
[10] The term heterotopia was first used by Foucault is the preface for *The Order of Things* (1966), a few months after, he employed the word again in a radio broadcast of two lectures called *France Culture.* In 1967, he completed a text called *Of Other Spaces*, which transcribed this radio lecture, afterwards adding more principles to describe and define heterotopia. Michel Foucault. 'Of Other Spaces,' In *Other Spaces! The Affair of the Heterotopia: Die Affäre Der*

Heterotopie, ed. Bernd Knaller-Vlay and Roland Ritter (Graz, Austria: Haus der Architektur 1998), 28.
[11] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 9.
[12] Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity* (New York: Routledge 1998), 49.
[13] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 23.
[14] Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine,* 2.
[15] Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism', trans., James Strachey, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud.* Vol. XXI (London: Hogarth, 1927), 154.
[16] Phantasy is a term used in psychoanalysis to determine between fantasy, which refers to fairytale fantasy, and phantasy, which refers to sexual phantasy.
[17] Irigaray, 26.
[18] Aviva Briefel, 'Monster Pains, Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film', *Film Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (Spring 2005), 22.
[19] Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 79.
[20] Ibid., 77.
[21] I attribute this line of flight to Creed.
[22] Regan by association.
[23] In the 14th century the Catholic Church deemed witchcraft as heresy and the services, witches performed were seen as crimes and most often than not these 'crimes' were associated with practices of midwifery.
[24] Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 59.
[25] Ibid., 77.
[26] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans., Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 293.
[27] Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 61.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Germaine Greer, 'The Wicked Womb,' in *The Female Eunuch* (Paladin: London, 1971), 51.
[30] Judy Grahn, *Blood, Bread, and Roses! How Menstruation Created the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 74.
[31] Ibid., 76.
[32] Ingrid Berthon-Moine, 'Red Is the Colour (2009),' *Women's Studies* 40, no. 2 (2011): 247. There are twelve portraits to represent twelve months of the year.
[33] Fintan Walsh, *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 130.
[34] Hemophobia is the extreme and irrational fear of blood, which is similar to Menophobia and related to trypanophobia (fear of blood injection injury) and traumatophobia (fear of injury).
[35] Marcus Wessendorf, 'Bodies in Pain: Towards a Masochistic Perception of Performance-The Work of Ron Athey and Bob Flanagan.' University Website. *The University of Hawaii*. Accessed January 17, 2014. http://www2.hawaii.edu/~wessendo/Bodies.htm.
[36] Athey received the funds indirectly through sponsorship by the Walker Art Centre, who in turn received $150.00 from the National Endowment for the Arts towards supporting performance art. Subsequently the House of Representatives cut the endowment budget by 2% the following year, because of the public outcry of public money going towards 'spreading HIV'. William Grimes, 'For Endowment, One Performer Means Trouble,' *The New York Times*, July 7, 1994, sec. Arts, viewed on 5 February 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/1994/07/07/arts/for-endowment-one-performer-means-trouble.html.

[37] Lawrence K. Altman, 'Rape Cancer seen in Homosexuals.' *The New York Times*, July 3, 1981, sec. U.S. Viewed on 5 February 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/1981/07/03/us/rare-cancer-seen-in-41-homosexuals.html.
[38] Walsh, *Male Trouble*, 111.
[39] Mary Richards, 'Ron Athey, A.I.D.S and the Politics of Pain,' *Brunel University* 3, no. 2 (2003). Viewed on 18 January 2014. http://people.brunel.ac.uk/bst/vol0302/index.html.
[40] Walsh, *Male Trouble*, 112.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid., 114.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.

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Short Stories and Poetry

Saturn Devouring His Son

A. Marie Carter

It's been fifteen years, two months, and a handful of days since you were born. It's been seventeen years since I last got on a plane.

In all that time I've rarely let you out of my sight, despite the assurances of your father, and your doctors, that you would survive without me for a few weeks. When it finally came to it, I boarded the plane tentatively, cautiously placing one foot over the threshold, as if testing the temperature of a bath full of water. The irritation of the travellers queuing at my rear eventually compelled me forward but I was unable to shake the feeling that I was abandoning you somehow. I even considered turning around and pushing through the crowd to get back to you at the gate, where, with your father's help, you had waved me goodbye.

I used to travel all the time when I was younger. In my early twenties I had done the obligatory backpack through South-East Asia, and the requisite road-trip across America. I had worked for six months in London and been drunk for two months in Scotland. By twenty-seven I had suffered trekkers knee while climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, narrowly escaped being eaten by a bear in the Rockies, been stoned for two weeks straight in Amsterdam, and squatted with five crazy Mexicans in an abandoned ball bearing factory in Madrid.

When I think about it now I have to admit that even back then I had secretly looked forward to one day sharing those stories with a child – with my child – with you. But back then you were only the glimmer of an idea; a shifting, shapeless entity tugging at some maternal urge within me that I tried to dismiss. I envisioned that I would forever remain the intrepid traveller, independent and unhindered by offspring. Like so many girls my age I frequently extolled the catch-cry 'I never want to have children', while furtively wondering how true that sentiment was, and how long I could ignore my biological clock. Despite my cavalier façade, you were always there, like a smoky apparition, twisting and curling in my periphery, and you knew better than I did how inevitable you were. I realise now that I bought that silver sari in India not just so I could wear it, but because I hoped one day to pass it on to you, along with the stories. I have told you some of them, and I think you like my stories, but you never say.

It's hard for me to know what you like, though I know you love foxes. I know this because of how you cuddle your fox toys, and the way you clap when you see them on TV. Our house is riddled with fox ornaments. I never intended to become one of those people whose kitchen is full of pig knick-knacks, or duck themed teapots, but somehow it happened. So, my trip had been for both of us, to the tundra, where my small tour group was assured that the chances of seeing an arctic fox were pretty good.

If it hadn't been for the blood on her snout she would have been impossible to pinpoint in the snow, her thick white fur blending seamlessly with the surroundings. She was carrying something small, and equally as white, in her mouth and she trotted a few metres with it, before depositing it down in the snow. The guide took out her binoculars and inspected the kill. She inhaled quickly, a noise that would have been a gasp had she not been trying to keep the group at ease and, taking it as a signal, we all took out our binoculars too.

'What's she got?' whispered one woman.

'I'm afraid she has a cub,' replied the guide.

There was silence for a moment, as everyone's much anticipated, awe-inspiring brush with nature turned sour.

'What? Not one of her own?' hissed the same woman.

'It's hard to say, but quite possibly. Arctic foxes don't tend to run in packs like red foxes do. In red fox packs it's not entirely uncommon for a vixen to kill another's young if food is scarce, but arctic foxes aren't known to do that. All I can say is that the cub must have been very sick, a runt, for the mother to do this.'

'Is she going to eat it?' I asked, horrified.

'Perhaps, but we'll drive on a little further now, to where another vixen hunts.'

'Is the poor thing even dead yet?'

'Unfortunately, there's nothing we can do. We can't interfere, and we must let nature take its course.'

I looked through my binoculars at the creature again. I had travelled over 17,000 kilometres to see her and it had taken four planes, three stopovers, two buses, one four-wheel drive, and seventeen years.

We tiptoed back to our jeep and drove on in silence. We saw no other foxes that day.

On the last evening of my holiday I wandered about in the cold, looking for gifts for you and your father. I stopped into every souvenir shop I could find, thinking that the next one might offer me some new trinket to purchase that the twenty other shops before it had somehow neglected to stock.

That night, as I lay in my hotel bed, I thought about when you were born. I had known immediately, even before the doctors told me, that something was wrong. I suppose it's inherent in the nature of every kind of mother, to know when their offspring is not quite right. Except in our human world we put them in humidicribs, attached to feeding tubes and heart monitors and heartache, doing everything we can to keep them alive.

For an instant I imagined a world where doctors let mothers act like they do in the wild. I remembered a painting I saw once in Madrid, of *Saturn Devouring His Son*, a gaping-mouthed spectre clutching a bloodied headless corpse. I imagined hospitals full of mothers consuming their not-quite-right babies, blood trickling from their mouths as they rid themselves of nine months worth of hard labour that had only bore rotten fruit.

I'm shocked to even think it, but I know it's okay because no one knows. I would never let anyone know how that one time, just that one time, I thought about what it might have been like if you hadn't survived.

In my suitcase I have dozens of gifts packed for you. Among them I have an expensive necklace inlaid with volcanic gemstones, a pretty fleece jumper, a deck of cards with an illustration of a different Nordic god on each suit, a book of glossy pictures that do much more justice to the scenery than my fuzzy photographs ever could, and a soft, plush, hand-stitched, snow-white arctic fox.

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Bad Blood

Tess Williams

Sprawling over five city blocks, its furnace reaches up through the smoggy sky like a necrotic phallus. St Benedict's Medical Centre looms over nearby apartment buildings. In the late evening, windows show weak light but poor maintenance bruises the inside corridors of the building with puddles of purple from blown bulbs. Noise drifts out of open doors: the clanking of trolleys with club wheels, the endless nasal litany of intercoms, conversations rolled into a homogenous buzz. And always, outside, the needy bleat of sirens and the regular complaints of car horns.

A portico flanked by Doric columns distinguishes the original building from less imaginative red brick oblongs that spawn from the older structure like fungal buds. The public entrances are bright, if not friendly, but around the shadowed corners a concrete capillary system of paths and alleys service areas littered with garbage. Sooty windows sulk beneath street level, covering furtive activity that processed the unseemly stuff of the hospital like an architectural bowel.

In the basement there is the incinerator. Strange shaped packages and black plastic bins often go into the fire together with more mundane bundles of papers and plastics. The furnace room belongs to Frankie and The Mexican. Next to the incinerator room is the morgue where Vinnie and One-Armed Al work nightshift, and Joe and Two-armed Al work day shift. They aren't the only people there, but they are the ones who take charge of the trolleys that everyone else avoids. They also deliver the strange bins and odd packages to Frankie and The Mexican.

Between the furnace room and the morgue, a maze of pipes and machinery run like a grumbling gut through the hospital, warming the cafeteria on the bottom floor that provides food for staff and regular patients with special vouchers. The stench of disinfectant layered on urine provides a subtle appetite suppressant that even the garlic cannot overcome. Counters hold parades of limp salads presided over by Lila, a large, eternally optimistic woman whose face shines with the greasy residue of endless years bending over chip cookers. When she isn't cooking, she shifts jellies to the lower shelf - child height. As the cafeteria does not serve many children, it is an instinctive move rather than a calculated one. She doesn't like waste and she has no educated prejudice against sugar.

In one corner of the cafeteria Henry and Joyce sit at a laminex table with empty coffee cups in front of them. Joyce discretely uses her thumb to wipe clotted lipstick off the rim of her cup, while Henry plays with a spoon, tapping it on his saucer in a restless rhythm. Apart from dressings on his blotched hands and neck, there seemed to be nothing interesting about either of them, nothing to distinguish them in the shapeless mass of humanity moving compulsively in and out of the hospital like a contaminated tide. They are, however, in love.

Under his open jacket, Henry wears hospital greens. Joyce's coat is done up to the neck, and falls buttoned to her thin calves in almost the same brown as her worn court shoes. She grooms her hair with her fingers in a way that suggested colour and shine rather than coarse grey strands, and Henry coughs, raising his bandaged hand to politely hide the rattle of sputum. A packet of cigarettes lies between them covered in large font health warnings and Joyce reaches across the table to still the hand clicking the spoon.

Henry pulls away from her as she feels the odd stickiness of his skin. Under the urine, disinfectant and garlic, she thinks there is a slightly sweet odour coming from him. The scent reminds her of almonds, home made marzipan and childhood. She smiles at the memory but

then peers at his pale skin, blooming with small purple circles. She suppresses a frown, trying not to appear concerned because he hates that. Five years ago was the last time she had asked him how he was and he had told her. Dying, he'd said, as he wept onto the breast of the same coat she wore today. Three months left.

That bad news was recalled and dismissed in an eyelid flicker. Henry had a way of picking up, of defying the odds. Of contradicting medicine. Here he is in his work greens and it appears doctors don't know everything. Rather than follow that thought, she turns her attention to her own arm, pulling up her coat sleeve and picking at the swabs and tape wound tightly around her lumpy forearm. Henry plays with the pack and removes two cigarettes. He waves them in front of her as if they are chocolates and she can't help but smile again, showing neat ex-cheerleader teeth. Or perhaps a very convincing set of dentures. She takes one of the cigarettes and twirls it elegantly in her fingers. Her other hand idly clicks the lighter without producing flame, as if she is flirting with the tobacco.

Henry suggests they go outside.

At first Joyce is reluctant. To go outside is to take the first step toward separation. Henry to Helen, his wife of thirty three years, their dog Mitzi, and a sideboard full of photos of children and young people in college graduation gowns. Joyce to a bedsit, bare of human company with a heater that never works. Of course, she prefers to stay with him. He's warmed her from the inside out for ten years now. She reaches across and pats his exposed wrist where the bone stands out like a tumour. It is a mistake of timing as it prompts him to stand and wind his scarf around his damaged neck. As he steps over to her chair to help her to her feet, it is plain to see that they are both thin with suffering.

They leave their cups on the table. Henry moves slowly, protectively holding Joyce's elbow. As they pass the counter, Lila calls out.

'Hey, Henry! Joyce! Jellies half price now.'

'Thanks Lila,' says Henry, 'Just came by to collect my lady.'

The big woman nods to them - many vouchers have passed between them. 'You still seein' that doctor on floor nine, Henry?'

Henry makes as if to spit, 'Haven't seen him in two years!'

'An' you Joyce? You good?'

'Nothin' changes, Lila. Three times a week. It's relentless.'

As the couple leave, Lila bustles up to the tables. She loads her tray with their used china and takes an empty jelly cup from in front of an old man. Her voice recedes as they move out into the corridors. 'Here, give me that Norman. You want more? You had your dinner, friend. You need to go home!'

As the old man rises, she says, 'Sad about them two. Real sad.' The old man picks his nose and doesn't answer because he doesn't follow much of what Lila says, and now he is thinking about his bus. As he leaves, the cafeteria returns to its quiet shadows, and Lila goes to the till and counts out money.

* * *

Outside is bleak. The sun has set an hour ago and the sky over the city is cold silver. Bitter gusts of wind lifted tug at Joyce's coat flaps and Henry's scarf as they walk down the street, their feet dragging through drifts of rubbish.

'Should be a law,' Joyce observes bitterly, looking at the paper scraps.

'There's too damn many of them already! You got a hat?' asks Henry.

Joyce reaches into her bag and draws out a pink beret. She pulls it on. They stop and face each other. Henry takes care of the finer details, tenderly tucking in her ears and her hair,

making the beret sit a little higher on her forehead. At the end of the block an alleyway insinuated itself possessively around the old hospital building. Together they cross it onto a brighter lit path.

'I can't cope with much daylight anymore.' Henry touches his mottled face with a mottled hand.

Joyce, who had taken charge of the cigarettes, expertly lights them both at once. She passes him one. As she drags deeply on hers, she speaks from the side of her mouth like a gangster's moll, 'Just as well I got the evening run, then.'

They walk again for a while. Then Joyce speaks again, 'Henry, hospitals are there to help.'

Henry gives a bark of laughter, 'Joyce,' he says with a particular softness in his voice, 'Joyce, people like us … well, everyone knows the poor die younger than the rich.'

'It don't have to be that way,' she says fiercely as they head into a wind that seems to be maliciously slapping their legs with litter.

The sidewalk under their feet is cracked and uneven as if something huge moves restlessly under the ground, trying to lift the city up, to throw it off. Joyce imagines great breaths huffing through the sewer gratings and she shudders. Dawdling, they reach the corner where they usually part. Joyce steps under an awning and lights two more cigarettes. They can barely see the reddened tips of dull fire moving in the shadow. There is a catch in her voice when she speaks.

'Will we be all right, Henry?'

Henry is silent, but his hand finds hers and squeezes it. Again, she felt the dampness through her gloves. Is it blood leaking out of those plum coloured lesions? She asks again, but more uncertainly, 'We'll be all right, won't we?'

She feels his shrug rather than sees it, 'What can I say? We fight, but half the time I don't know what I'm fighting.' For a moment they hold each other in the dark, the tobacco smoked curls around their shadow forms, making them romantic, needy, normal. Somehow younger again. Finally Joyce breaks away and mutters in annoyance, 'Where's justice!'

Henry's teeth clamp shut, she can sense the frustration he holds in. How is he supposed to look after her when it is becoming impossible to look after himself? 'How about I see you home tonight?'

'What about Helen?' She can't help sounding caustic, and as she says it she attempts to take back the worst of the bitterness and slips her arm through his, looking up at him with eyes like shattered slate.

He sees past the hardness to the coquettish beret and the constant sadness of the taped arm. He thinks of her battling the machine so often as it takes her blood and she snatches it back. Her fight is constant, an invisible maw that swallows her and spits her back a little worse for wear every time. 'It's not as if she doesn't know,' he says ever so gently. As they walk, holding on to one another, the world becomes still and hushed. Moonlight silvers snow under bone-bare branches. Music drifts from somewhere and cars hush disapprovingly through tyres slide over slush. At the next intersection two young women lean in a doorways and three young men laugh and push each other around on the pavement. Their flirtation feels edged with danger, the skins of the young lovers are as impenetrable as shadow and their bright teeth shine wet and white under the neon. They ignore Henry and Joyce, remnants from somewhere else, detritus on another path.

'When do you go back?' Henry asks.

'Usual. Monday.' She knows he means the hospital where she spends so many evenings hooked up to the machine.

At the subway they make their way down the steps, past the tiled 'no spitting' signs covered in tiny wads of chewed paper. On the platform, an old man talks loudly about being saved right here and now by the living body of Jesus. The living blood of the Lord. Light shines from his rheumy eyes as he stares enraptured by invisible redemption. Joyce thinks about the detergent qualities of divine blood, but says nothing. The train pulls in and the doors open. Joyce and Henry wait as the people get out, then they enter and sit together.

In the light carriage, Joyce is pale, almost grey, but Henry's skin becomes obscene. It suppurates and peels around the plum-coloured blotches, but the rest is rough and broken too. Joyce stares at her lap remembering words she read somewhere in her youth, from a mostly forgotten literature course. Skin like an old, peeled wall.

'I don't think I can come with you anymore, Joyce.'

In the dilapidated carriage, with the graffiti on the glass and the floors, and the torn seats, her heart cracks in two and it hurts more than she could have ever imagined. Her breath is frozen in her chest. Ten years, and every week he's been there for her. His is the first face she always sees when she drifts up out of an anaesthetic. A painkiller that can't be bottled. When she's on, he'll turn up unexpectedly with small things that give her pleasure: a packet of jellies, a malicious magazine about the rich and beautiful, a flower from the hospital garden. She's always thought because of her enslavement to the machine, she would be the first one not to be there. There was that bad news from Henry's specialist many years ago, and she had braced herself then but nothing happened. He'd won somehow. She doesn't think she can bear it.

'What will I do?'

Henry sighs. 'Maybe find someone else.'

'Oh, you can be so foolish!' she says crossly. Then she sees a smile that is barely there and she knows he has pulled her back from self-pity again.

The train stops and they get out. The station is empty and dank, smelling of cats and garbage. Out on the street rain sets in, not heavy but like icey darts. Two blocks later they reach the door of the apartment building where Joyce lives. Henry's hands rest on her shoulders as they stand on the doorstep. They try hard for closeness, pressing briefly together then almost spring apart. Henry does have to think about Helen now.

'Maybe … when I've had a weekend to rest. I just feel so … consumed.'

Joyce pats him like a baby, 'You go. I have to go in … the blasted heater, you know. Call ….'

For a second, there is a spark, 'I should come and do it for you! I said I'd look at it.'

She pushes him away, 'Not tonight ... I've got the knack anyhow. You get to bed!'

Their parting was not so much awkward as speedy. The rain was needling them nearly as much as Henry's dilapidation, the tears locked in Joyce's slate grey eyes. They part with mumbles.

'Joyce, I *will* be there Monday.'

'Only if you're well….'

'I'll see you …'

'Go! This rain is heavy …'

Then the night pushes them apart like a jealous child. From the shelter of the doorway, Joyce watches him walk away and says to herself across the blinding sadness that he will be there next week. He always is, he's just tired. In her apartment, where there is no blasted heater to be turned on any more, she makes herself an instant coffee. She puts on her thick flannel pyjamas and her coat, clutching two hot water bottles to stop the shivering as she sits under the blankets inside a thin circle of reading light. A novel lies open on her lap while tears of anger finally run down her face. It is unbearable!

Henry's apartment is warmer than the street but Helen is already asleep in her own room and Mitzi shows no interest in him. When he turns out the light, the photographs of the children in their graduation gowns disappear while the memory of Joyce's face remains.

He makes it to the hospital on Monday. And on Wednesday, and on Friday. In fact, Henry manages to meet Joyce on all her shifts for five more weeks, but then the day comes when he can't get out of bed. Helen looks at the stained towels she has placed on her sheets to protect them. Wordlessly she brings him glasses of water, and he asks her to turn the lights off. She pulls the phone cord out of the wall and cooks, making a lot of noise in the kitchen. For another thirteen days she changes the towels, places the photos of the children near him and keeps the dog away from him. Finally, she plugs the phone back in. She takes Henry's address book from his coat pocket and calls.

'Joyce?'

Silence. Then, 'Helen?'

'It won't be long. You should know.'

Silence again. 'Do you think I could see him?'

'No,' Helen answers rather quickly but firmly. 'No. I don't think that's a good idea.' The children have called from out of state and no one is coming, but she adds, 'It's really a family time.'

Joyce hears the click of the receiver in her ear like a gunshot. She sits in the freezing bedsit and feels a tide of pain and fury rolling through her body. Her grey eyes cry and cry but the hardness does not leave them. She is a woman with no photographs and no dog. She hates Helen less than Helen hates her, but she is not going to leave the world with her anger and hurt unrelieved, so she stays up for the whole night and plans how the end will be.

In the morning she phones the hospital and tells them she won't be in for a while, an old family friend has rung from out of town and she is going to visit. The staff who work on the ward know her well and say this is a bit sudden. They wonder if she wants them to contact the local hospital in her friend's town and send information? No, she'll do that when she gets there, thanks all the same. Joyce is not the kind of woman you can insist with. Things are fine, she says, she's already checked. The nurses are very busy and say goodbye to her in that impersonal way she had come to recognise as their version of human warmth. She is their job, so of course they are concerned, but there is also that difficulty with her health insurance. Well, a paying patient can take her place now. She makes three more unrelated phone calls, then she takes herself off to bed to wait.

* * *

All in all, it takes just over two weeks, which quite surprises Joyce. She thought it would be much quicker, but she's not eating or moving much. Day by day the old tiredness creeps up on her, and her muscles begin to ache if she lifts anything heavier than the kettle for her hot water bottles. She spent a lot of time sleeping and shivers uncontrollably in the cold. Her blood is thick with waste, sluggish. She doesn't know why it doesn't warm her. When she finds her breath coming very short and she is only able to stay alert for an hour or two at a time, she prepares herself. It's going to be hard work.

Snow has built into little piles against the buildings and around the trees, so the cold might keep her awake and focused, but she wants to be warm enough to make it to St Benedict's. To do this, she takes out her fur-lined boots and put them on over thick socks. She puts on three jumpers and heavy trousers over her thermals. Over everything else she pulls on her big brown coat. Lord, her arms ache. Checking herself in the mirror, she winds a muffler

around her neck and pulls on the pink beret and matching gloves. As she pulls the door closed on the apartment, everything is left neat and cold. Very cold.

The walk from the subway to the hospital is the hardest part. She is so tired and the snow falls hard, stinging her face, while gusts of wind push her back. Finally she arrives at the central building; however, before she reaches the brightly lit entrance, she turns into the alleyway that leads towards the back of the hospital. Stumbling on icy blisters of broken asphalt, Joyce moves deeper and deeper into the darkness.

She reaches a corner and hesitates just for a second. Then she continues around the back of the darkened building, moving into an area so black it is a void, a place where her breath freezes into ice particles as it leaves her mouth and for a moment her eyes cannot decide up, down, in or out. The uneven pounding of her heart shakes her whole body as she seeks handholds in the glassy blackened bricks of the wall and she begins to taste fear like dirt in her mouth. She grits her teeth and speaks into the darkness, 'Where are you, damn you! Where are you?'

The only answer is the pungent smell of garbage from the bags she trips over. As she gets to her feet she realises she's lost her purse. It doesn't matter. She just keeps moving, holding onto the frames of the underground windows. She slips and falls a second time, pulling herself up on bars that begin at ground level and reach far above her head. Near her she hears scuttling and squeaking, and senses the body heat of animals. She wipes her face with her glove and realises she is sweating and the moisture is freezing on her forehead.

Cursing the small heels of her boots, she keeps her balance by gripping on to the shadow part of the hospital. Slowly she picks her way through the dark. Once again she stumbles over something that seems too solid, something with rags wound around it; she expects a groan but there is no sound. Every now and then she calls out and her voice echoes eerily over the throbbing from the hospital basement.

'Do you remember Henry? I want to speak with you!'

The alley becomes darker and deeper. Joyce curses out of her fear, 'Damn you! Come out where I can see you!' Then she rages, 'You took Henry! Come and account for yourself!' Finally she slips again and finds herself lying on crackling plastic bags of waste. She is overwhelmed by the putrescence and when she tries to stand her hand slides through something wet.

It is all too much, and she begins to sob.

That is when the whispering comes.

Out of the darkness, it insinuates itself into her misery. A sound that is barely anything. Like rats feet on straw it runs up her backbone and makes the hair on her scalp prickle. Joyce peers about her, there is nothing to see but shadow layered upon shadow. The building towers above her but she can't see where it stops and the sooty black sky begins. If she turns around she can just see a lighter grey smudge of the end of the alley, and she realises she has come a long way. She holds her breath, wiping the snot from her nose across a filthy pink glove, and fights the fear.

'I want … to meet you,' she says. Her voice quivers, breaks.

The whisper comes again, seductive and yet harsher than any sound she's ever heard. She can't locate it. 'Are you ill? Let me help you.'

'Like … like you helped Henry?'

A pause is followed by another gust of fetid air. She retches. She's eaten nothing for the last few days and she is so, so tired. Wiping the strands of mucus away from her chin she holds her hand up to defend herself. Something bitterly cold brushes across the tips of her fingers.

'Do you want to stand?'

Joyce rises shakily to her feet, her hand clutched by a dark, cold entity. She tries to withdraw it, but the grip is firm. The dreadful hoarseness came again, seeming polite and slightly apologetic. 'I don't recall the names of all those who find their way here.'

Joyce's eyes, growing accustomed to the gloom, begin to perceive a form. Human shaped and human sized, if a little on the small side, it holds an aura of unbelievable age. The hair is long and white, possibly framing a ruined face, but there is not enough light to see details. There is also a coat, and through the gloom Joyce sees crusted black stains covering it. She stammers when she speaks, in her weakened condition her heart bangs on her ribs relentlessly. An end is inevitable, terror has to be controlled.

'You ... you …feed on the weak….'

The grip on her hand becomes painful, the voice is cold and soft as a snow drift and crackles like windscreen ice in morning sun. It is mesmerising. 'Feed is a harsh word, my dear. There is only pain because separateness hurts. Sometimes it's best to let go. It's best to join, to just remember you are part of something much larger.'

Joyce glances at the sheer hospital wall beside them and the creature makes a sound of contempt, 'Oh, that is not large. That is just dust covering dust. My gift is making something that big become small, and making someone as tiny as you part of an immensity.'

The words make no sense to Joyce as she tries to withdraw from the terrifying visage and dark, clotted clothing. This is a nightmare that makes the difficult comforts of the hospital - just a few bricks away – dissolve into shadow. Joyce thinks of the constant needles, the endless hours waiting, the nausea and tiredness, the constant vivisection of hope that is part of medicine. Now she really understands some of what Henry had come here for. This is an underbelly of nurture, an assuaging of helplessness. In the darkness she can feel a radiant desire for communion beyond prescriptions, x-rays and scalpels.

She tries to express what can't really be said, 'You do the work they can't.' She nods towards the wall, her voice trembling like the rest of her body, 'The work they won't do.'

The creature moves closer and strokes her arms. It is a sickening intimacy. She feels her eyelids flutter in awful anticipation as its breath, rancid with the putrescence of composted earth, fills her mouth.

'Did Henry leave … suddenly?'

She shakes her head, helpless in the monster's grip.

The broken voice crackles like crunching ice. It made her jaw ache. Her head spins with the stench and she vaguely sees it open its mouth, exposing proud yellow incisors. In the blackness behind them, there seem to be words of invitation. Or are they just thoughts? 'Only cowards go slowly. Let's make this quick. No pain, no regrets. Be part of my best work.'

Joyce goes limp in the icy fingers that are doing a better job of holding her up than her own spine.

* * *

They can't find anyone else to do the identification, so they called in Lila. She sees a lot of old people through the canteen. Often chats with them, knows their doctors and illnesses. With one-armed Al she walks the short distance through the basement corridors behind a bored police officer.

'So, another one in the alley? Ain't that about four or five from back there in a while?'

'It's the weather! Old people, homeless people. They got nowhere to go!' One-armed Al's voice is so deep and strong it seems to make up for his lost limb. He sounds big and complete.

'Don't I know it!' sighs Lila. 'See them all the time, spinnin' out their coffees to stay somewhere warm.'

The morgue is bitterly, bone biting cold. The receiving area has a viewing screen, a window that allows the body to be completely displayed. The policeman leans on the wall. One-armed Al stands with Lila right up against the glass. Together they stared at the covered trolley. Vinnie stands impassively on the other side of the body. With a sense of theatre he waits until everyone is still then he reaches out and pulls the sheet back. Lila looks at the corpse. She sees an ancient face, a ruined face of deep runnels through flesh webbed with cracks. She's surprised – she's been around but she doesn't think she's ever seen anyone that old who was living. As she stares she noticed the fissures around the mouth and wattled neck are darker than the area around the eyes, which is much finer and whiter than the rest of the face. Against the translucent eyelids and the white brows, the strange stain around the chin seems sinister.

'Nope. That's no one I ever seen before, Al. Seems dirty, somehow too.' She's a little offended, 'Don't you clean folks up before you show 'em?'

One-armed Al is apologetic, 'Well we did the clean up as best we could for you to look. Frankie reckons it was an old wino. Look like metho ate right through the gut an' that's vomited blood all down it. Lot of blood.' One-armed Al shakes his head as he continues to gaze at the still form on the trolley, 'Funny thing about it. Was wearin' an old lab coat. You know, like a doctor.'

Lila sniffs, 'Probably one that got thrown out. They do that to keep warm sometimes. Go through the stuff in the bins.' She pats one-armed Al on the shoulder of his whole arm, 'Well, I got meatballs to fry. Can't stand round all day. Sorry I can't do nothin' for you.'

Lila leaves with the bored police officer, and one-armed Al goes through another door into the main area of the morgue. Vinnie has shifted the trolley towards the rows of steel drawers embedded in the old wall.

One-armed Al's voice rumbles through the silence. 'No good putting that one back, I reckon. No one'll pick it up, Vinnie. No one'lldo a burial. Put it with the lost ones.'

One-armed Al sighs loudly. A job like this can have heavy responsibilities. 'Reckon we'll do the paper work tonight and send it upstairs. They'll probably send it straight back to Frankie and The Mexican, eh? Then we better clean up poor old Henry up for his missus. Funeral parlour taking him tomorrow.' One-armed Al walks to the cabinets and pulls a drawer open.

* * *

Joyce moans and rolls away, suddenly aware of light.

'My God!'

Something falls on the floor, a sound that goes through Joyce's head like a cleaver. 'My God!' again. It's a man's voice and he sounds very frightened. Joyce might have to help, find out what is wrong with him. She heaves herself up into a sitting position, despite the headache and there's the young man. He has acne and his hair is caught in a green cap. She grabs her head with her hands and peers around.

She's in an emergency cubicle at St Benedicts, she knows them well enough to recognise them. But why? It seems unnaturally quiet and that young nurse with acne can't seem to stop staring at her. Really staring. His name-tag says Angus. Outside the door, she picks up the brighter lights and the bustle she is used to in Emergency. Figures start to become clearer. Nurses in green and white, an orderly in grey. Doctors in white coats over colourful clothes, and the noises around her resolve into people crying and swearing. Lying on a bed across the

corridor is a boy in a tracksuit retching painfully into a basin. Joyce can't see much but she can see a scorpion tattooed on the boy's bare ankle.

She turns to the nurse, his face is still ashen. Suddenly she feels strange, as if she doesn't belong here, as if her body is not real. And her speech feels odd, wrong somehow. Angus doesn't make a sound, but sweat has broken out on his forehead. He stretches out a shaking hand towards her. It holds a piece of paper.

It is a form with resuscitation notes and underneath it a Dr Reynolds has recorded her time of death.

Joyce looks at the paper closely, then glances up at the clock. Apparently she died an hour ago. Angus gingerly puts the sheet on the table next to her and stutters, 'I'm sorry. You were a renal patient. Here. Right? It was kidney failure. In the alley. Don't know what … You had no dialysis for two weeks. I'm sorry. Your blood … your blood was … your blood was bad …and you died…. Right? It's here.' He nervously reaches out to tap the paper.

What's going on? Why is he apologising? Is he asking her about this or telling her? Joyce needs to get out of there. She swings her legs over the side of the bed and pushes herself off to stand. Her voice comes out in a snarl that neither of them expects.

'My things?'

Angus points to a cardboard box on one of the benches and flees. He's going to get someone else and she thinks maybe there's just a few minutes before he's done babbling, been believed and someone else heads back to check on her.

She locks the door behind him and quickly slips into her clothes. Even her purse is in the box, looking the worse for wear. The pink gloves she throws in the bin. They are filthy. The smell of them is strange and unpleasant. Dressed, she moves out into the corridor and then takes a white coat hanging on the back of a chair. With it over her street clothes she briskly walks past the main reception area. She's seen enough doctors going off shift to know what they look like. And she has to move swiftly because it wouldn't do any good to have Angus pursuing her with believers before she's figured out what's happened.

On the train flashes of her last trip to the hospital come to her. As if she is watching herself, images like static photographs appear in her mind. Lost in the alley and very tired. Oh, so devastatingly, desperately, endlessly tired! And cold! Yet also burning with anger and a delicious despair. She is alone in the carriage wondering about the new sensations in her body as the cabin light shimmers. Her eyes feel as if something dark has just passed in front of them, but the shadow doesn't move away, it somehow folds into her flesh, which no longer aches but seems somehow renewed. She puzzles over the strange layers of her body. The sense of it being new, but also of it being ancient. Her flesh feels tight and neat but she can almost smell a sweet, wet blackness within her veins. Oblivious to the whistling rackety noises of the train, she feeds upon the deep tunnel cocooning her. Speeding through the endless subterranean burrows that the train follows, she is nourished by the newness that comes with fresh green shoots and comforted by geological crumblings through aeons and space. The very earth holds and warms her – and she can't remember when she was last warm.

The train stops at her station. Joyce's slate eyes register the name. The doors close but she remains in her seat. She thinks of the little cold apartment, her struggles with kettles, broken heaters, blankets and the uncomfortable, interminable sleeping in coats. But that's not why she stays in her seat. As the train rocks her softly and insistently she hears what she has to do. She's finally realised on this journey through the deep and comforting tunnels that she had something to do. She'd thought it was all about Henry, but it was about so much more.

People need her. Those who spend too much time looking in all the wrong places to stop the pain, need her help. All those frightened folk that pray uselessly to the towers of the hospital, putting off their inevitable reunion with the loving darkness it stands upon, need to be

shown the joy of surrender. As she carefully unfolds the white coat, she smiles. The blood beats through her like a muddy river teeming with unimaginable histories and vitalities and she smiles. A yellow, proud toothed, carnivorous smile.

Tess Williams is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at The University of Western Australia. She is a writer of speculative fiction with two published novels, *Map of Power* (1996) and *Sea as Mirror* (2001). She also co-edited the benchmark feminist science fiction collection, *Women of Other Worlds* (2000). Both novels and the collection were shortlisted for major awards, including the Australian Aurealis Award and the American James Tiptree Jr Award, and the collection *Women of Other Worlds* won the Australian William Atheling Jr. Award for contributions to SF. Over the last decade she spent time finishing a PhD on evolution, ecofeminism and feminist science theory and graduated with Distinction. While working on the thesis, and continuing to study and write, she has lived with the numerous complications of dialysis and renal transplantation. This experience forms part of the inspiration for this story.

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Nightmares

Eileen M. James

for Waverly and Olivia

Listen, dear hearts:
children disappear sometimes, slip out of their parents' grip.
Down wells or away with strangers.
Trolls wait on enchanted stumps for little ones to play
out of the sight of love-struck grownups bound in devotion.
The clouds in the sky can turn soft familiar shapes
into cold wicked figures.
The apologetic mother wonders if her doting hands weren't quick enough.

And now, inhale this bedtime tale of mother-love:
ghosts only exist in my dreams. See, my eyes could not focus wide awake
on quick breaths and dead memories that sway through these windy curtains.
The moon is always just a few hours away. I worry about the locks on doors.

My children, I will cloak you under my bosom. You see:
witches crunch tiny femurs between awesome teeth.
The wolves *will* find you. Don't be fooled by the house of gingerbread
piped with sweet white icing.
Woodland greens seem so unsuspecting.

Eileen M. James teaches composition, English literature, and poetry at several colleges in Rhode Island. Her work has been included in a variety of publications, such as *Innisfree*, *The Creative Woman*, *RIBOT*, *Syncopated City*, *Contraposition*, *Rag Shock*, and *No Exit*. As a former secondary English instructor and special educator, she has worked with high school students to produce quality literary magazines, to participate in community poetry readings, and to create an online literary journal. With an interest in pedagogy for secondary and postsecondary learners, Eileen has presented various conference topics, which include engaging adult learners, effective methods for peer review of writing in the college classroom, differentiating instruction for remedial college writers, and successful approaches to multicultural issues in educational settings. Eileen received an MFA in poetry from Brown University and is currently a PhD candidate in Writing & Rhetoric at the University of Rhode Island.

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Below a Bridge the River Watches

Mario Tofano

> *No attribute of substance can be truly conceived from which it would follow that substance can be divided.*[1]

'Today, November 15th, a Friday, an overcast day in Los Angeles, approximately 10:45 am. The States have been awake for roughly four and a quarter hours, much has happened and there is much to be done. On this day, at this time, a merry band of hacktivists momentarily stalled all .gov pages by generating a novel listing of code at random, a CalTech particle physics lab sighed as their accelerating collider nearly reproduced desirable results, frog town croaked and ribbitted with morning orgasms, 3 dozen meteorites rained detritus over Atwater village, a lightning strike was reported near Griffith park, a murder took place maybe two, a lie was broadcast on local news concerning the disappearance of weapons from an army base in Kandahar as was a failed nuclear missile test in N.K., and finally, the moon occulted the sun in full eclipse enticing many a spectator to seek enchantment in the nothing new. But then, a minute later, as the sun re-emerged having survived its momentary alienation, there appeared a novel attribute, appendage, a most unusual feature: a blemish or perhaps a blister. Above the L.A. river, near the old red trolley park, an amorphous absence floats 6 or so feet in the air, as if the texture of our world has been severed and a gossamer of void spread as salve over the wound. Today, history was interrupted. Before me floats anacoluthon, gone is tomorrow when today is suspended.

Patrick Canario emailed those words to our editor, his last report as a journalist, his last report as an anything, before walking to the stout cement bridge over the river and swan diving off onto the cement beach below. That was two weeks ago. I knew Patrick. We crossed paths as freelance writers around the Southland for many years and recently found employment at the same online newspaper, whatever that means. He was never my favourite colleague: pompous,

pedantic, prone to dramatic gesture. But he did good work. He possessed the respectable ethic to write both what he saw and what he felt. And for that he was trustworthy.

Patrick hadn't been working the morning of the eclipse but was fishing for carp at the river when it occurred. Often overlooked as a fishing destination, the mighty Los Angeles River, ankle deep and wide as a ruler for much of its visible length, does in fact open up wide enough in spots for cat tails, cranes, and schools of flush water carp. Patrick taught me that much at an office holiday party once. Middle age made us elder statesman in an office filled with freshly graduated diapers and so we shot the breeze with each other if we had to shoot it with anyone.

In the past two weeks the police have utilized the fortuitous opportunity afforded by Patrick's timely demise to seal off the area surrounding the amorphous void described in his final dispatch. Only badges and hazmat suits were allowed to cross the yellow ribbon area doubly condemned as crime scene and quarantine site.

However, photographs surfaced of the site. Captured by drones flown by private citizens and momentary barrier breaches by kids wielding cell phones, pictures documenting a monolithic chasm of sorts flooded the internet and piqued the curiosity and fear of locals. Increasing anxiety due to the police presence and secrecy transformed into unrest as greater numbers of residents turned up at the ravine off Glendale Avenue demanding to see what was being hidden from the public eye. I was sent there by my editor to meet with a friend of hers, a legal advisor with the Department of Public Health. He was a man beloved by all for his discretion but my editor sensed that whatever he saw by the river had neutralized this trait, she sensed he was becoming unglued. With Patrick gone, I became the natural first choice to handle sensitive information. In many ways Patrick would have been ill equipped to handle this had the tables been turned. Despite his pretentions, he couldn't sit on a story as he always aspired to be the eyes and ears for the masses—and I've never been much for fishing.

I introduced myself. His handshake was damp and he appeared preoccupied, like he was consumed by thought but trying to present composure in the company of a stranger. Had I met him under less peculiar circumstances I would assume he had taken a dose of LSD.

'What can you tell me?' I asked.

'It's marvellous. And utterly horrifying.' He answered.

'Let's start with what *it* is.'

His eyes focused as if suddenly punched by sobriety.

'Well, nothing.' He said 'It appears to be nothing. As in not a thing for which a noun exists to characterize it with any efficacy. Smudge, stain, shadow, blur, space, I couldn't say. You must see it yourself.'

'I'd love to. Can you facilitate that for me? Or is there word on when the river will be opened back to the public?' I asked.

'Just walk down there. Once you get down to the river, no one will harass you. Once you get to the river everything is different. City officials, scientists, police officers, they're all down there just revelling in it, reflecting on it, thoroughly disturbed I imagine. The secret is that there has been no official statement, no reports given, because no one knows what to report. Nobody has come to terms with what it is, what's happening down there, if anything actually is. You're a reporter, go and report.' He said.

'Listen, I appreciate you taking the time to speak with me but to be honest, I'm having trouble understanding what you're describing. Something is happening right down this cement gorge. You know what it is and frankly you aren't being forthcoming.' I pressed.

'Sure something is happening. I suppose I can be sure of that much because when you look at it, you can feel it in your blood, coursing your veins. Goosebumps appear as if your

pores and hair follicles received word from your blood to stand on high alert for a confrontation with the sublime, that paradoxical trepidation of desire and aversion, of awe.' He returned.

I stopped him again and asked him to clarify these digressions into the metaphysical. I did not understand his tone to be coloured by the pop spirituality trending in Hollywood. His voice was searching for answers that were not yet apparent, his message was grave. He seemed agitated by the descending mood of our meeting and I suspected the conversation was near done. In jest, I asked him if God had finally made an appearance.

'If that's the case, it shouldn't be too hard to convince the people to wait patiently for a while longer. It's worked fine up until now.' I said.

He nearly smiled and looked directly at me for the first time, sincerity in his gaze.

'No, not God. We are very well accustomed to the idea of God. We have represented that idea for long enough to come to terms with it, the divine or what not. We know how to relate to that idea, the second coming, the rapture. Yes, we have grown comfortable with the notion of divine agency, divine order. No, this isn't God,' he continued 'this is the opposite, this is unprecedented, this is uncertainty.'

The counsellor gave me a stern nod that was as reassuring as it was cautionary. We shook hands. This time my paw was damp and my gaze preoccupied. He left. I assume. And I stood for several minutes mustering the courage to take his advice and heed his warning. I wondered briefly if this story was worth the trouble. If the lawyer was telling the truth than this unnameable substance could prove quite dangerous to confront. My mind leapt casually through various disaster scenarios: radiation, infectious epidemic, a seismic shimmy that sinks California into the Pacific. Then I thought about my job, the story, a manufactured debt to Patrick, a Pulitzer. And then my mind fell quiet. I lit a cigarette and stood at a junction, a liminal silence of indefinite length, between decisions, from which the next step taken would define the present and the to-come.

Before I knew it I was halfway down the ridge and over my shoulder a young police officer demanded I return to the free speech zone with his canon drawn. Something inside me (for my thought had ceased) wagered that the officer would not pull the trigger given the backlash law enforcement was receiving nationally for loose canons. I kept my head down as I continued to run to the river but instead of shots fired I heard the echoing chants of the multitude pushing their way through the blockade and joining me in a mad dash toward the concealed. Having reached the bottom I lifted my head and met the gaze of a swan who quickly dismissed me and turned its beak aloft. That's when I saw it.'

That's when you saw what Mr. Grant? Is that when you saw Ana?

'No. Don't do that. We always do that. Anthropomorphize. What I saw has no name. Don't flatter yourself with cute shorthand that reminds you of a former girlfriend in order to reduce what this is to the manageable proportions of a tropical storm.'

I was simply referring to the moniker your former colleague provided in his report: anacoluthon. The name Ana has become quite popular among the folks camping by the river. There are others too: metakosmia, pivot, aporia, interregnum, the non sequitur, trickster, and apnea, which I rather like. Some call it the end. Others the beginning.

'Enough with the names Doc, or I'm finished talking for the day. Names belong to the known.'

Than help me understand what you saw Mr. Grant. We can call it the space if you prefer.

'Space is too inadequate, this hovering absence is darker than space, quieter. That sounds absurd perhaps as neither emptiness contains a medium for vibration to travel and yet unlike space the deep vacancy carries no motion within it at all. Featureless, odourless, tasteless too I imagine. And yet it moves or fluctuates or breathes, to speak metaphorically, crudely at any rate. Incommensurable are its attributes, from one angle appearing endlessly narrow and deep

while from the opposite side appearing shallow and flat. Paradox is its countenance, which captures all scrutiny, absorbs penetration, and casts every studying gaze back onto itself with the distorting acuity of a prism. What I heard was an inscrutable interlocutor, I felt a silent interrogator, I saw the impossible smile of the uncanny.'

And that's when you decided to…

'Jump. Yeah Doc, that was about the time I was moved to follow Patrick's lead and jump from the bridge.'

So you felt compelled by this spectre to jump?

'Compelled? Like, under its spell? Why, have you found something? You ran tests haven't you, how did the results look?'

Actually Mr. Grant we have been running tests for weeks on hundreds exposed to the spectre. Besides elevated cortisol levels consistent with anxiety we have found no physiological abnormalities in any of the subjects tested, yourself included. Your response to this unusual phenomenon was not unique. There has been a dramatic increase in suicide attempts over the past month. In fact, Ana has engendered profound effects in this city since its emergence. Many thousands have abandoned their jobs to sit idly by the river while many more thousands have raised camps that build and trade among one another as neoteric confederations. Widespread accounts of a feeling of general validation have been reported and several religious cults have sprung up. One cult, I've heard, sits beneath the void and stares up into its depths until twilight meditating. Another cult fasts during the afternoon and come nightfall they dance and sing in festival, cooking whatever they have gathered from the river for the day. Foraging has become quite easy down there these days. Mosquitofish and tilapia have been swimming upstream, birds, coyotes, bobcats, waterfowl, even the notorious Griffith Park mountain lion 'P-22' spends most days on the banks staring into the nothing. Commerce in much of central Los Angeles is suffering. So much so in fact that the Mayor called on Governor Brown to appoint an emergency council charged with formulating a series of contingencies if this phenomena continues to effect economic stability in the city. Pundits have called for containment, which as we both know was attempted and unsuccessfully so. Others have suggested elimination but I'm uncertain what they envision eliminating. The river? The people? Ana? A featureless spectre haunting us? If you ask me, most frightening of all is the idea that something new and unpredicted is forging an unforeseeable future. These are disquieting times Mr. Grant that much is certain.

* * *

Peter Grant hobbled out of a physical therapy clinic on crutches a month after sustaining multiple fractures to his legs during an unsuccessful suicide attempt. The hibernal sunset burned with orange and purple over Santa Monica. Grant stopped to rest a moment and admired the coordination of a street performer spinning plates balanced on each finger and his nose. A sudden gust of wind blew the performer off balance—some time the plates must fall.

Mario Tofano reads cultural theory at Claremont Graduate University. He imagines the indeterminacy of the monstrous event as an accelerant for radical politics. He has walked the banks of the L.A. River but has yet to catch a fish.

Bloodlines

Peter Arnds

‘Remove everything sharp and explosive,’ repeated the Major, ‘and please, do break it to him gently.’

It was 110 Fahrenheit in the shade, but there was no shade to speak of on this barren stretch of land around them. He was cleaning through his stuff when Captain Wilson approached him from behind, gently tapping him on the shoulder. He had not heard him enter, so he twitched slightly under the sudden touch, but caught himself immediately. Wilson looked at him for a while, steadied his gaze upon his friend’s deep black eyes.

‘Lewis,’ he said. ‘I gotta talk to you.’

The man was as white as a sheet. Something wasn’t right, Lewis thought. So he sat down and so did Wilson, who now stared at the sandy ground in front of him.

‘I don’t know how to tell you this, but something terrible happened.’

Lewis did not say a word. His gaze, which had rested heavily on Wilson, stiffened. A distant ache suddenly made itself felt in his heart. The last time he remembered this sensation of slight, but persistent, pain in his chest had been out there on the desert, during an operation he knew they couldn’t handle. He felt sweat pearls trickling down his spine.

‘I am so sorry, Lewis. But – ‘

‘But what?’

Wilson tried to put his arm round his friend’s shoulder but Lewis withdrew instantly into himself, searching for a centre he could not find. He felt it slipping away from him like a stone falling into a bottomless well without water so that it can never be heard hitting the ground. He stood up, his legs trembling slightly, and walked over to the entrance of the tent. Opening the flap he looked outside at the scorched treeless landscape. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky. It was quiet, for a change, and America, his wife and children, were all far away.

‘What happened?’

They were both silent for what seemed like an eternity.

Then, from somewhere in the distance, Lewis’ voice was heard again.

‘Tell me,’ he said. ‘For God’s sake, just tell me.’

I met Lewis and his wife Sarah a few months later. Sitting several rows behind them I was watching them as they were watching the dog expert put a hand on the bible. He was a colleague from the Department of Biology.

‘It’s a type of dog,’ he said, ‘that used to accompany Roman legions across the Alps. It was their duty to watch the camp and the domestic animals. One of these camps then became known as Rottweil, a city in South West Germany, and named after the red roof tiles of the villas the Romans built there. Much later, in the eighteenth century, these dogs were then used by butchers to herd cattle to the market and carry the sacks of money back home once all the cattle were sold. In the nineteenth century these animals were used by the police.’

Lewis stiffened when the accused was called upon. The lawyer was staring at a document and did not look up at her. There was little movement among the jury and complete silence in the courtroom.

‘May I ask you where you were at the time of the accident?’

She cleared her throat:

‘In Germany. My mother was ill. I had to go over there and help her.’

‘How long were you in Germany for?’

'Two months.'

'What about your dogs? Could you not have put them in a shelter while you were gone?'

'I can't afford the shelter.'

'But who was feeding them in your absence?'

She was silent.

'Well?'

'Nobody. They hunt.'

The lawyer looked up now and turned to the audience.

'What exactly do you mean by that?'

'They hunt wild turkeys and rabbits. They do that a lot, even when I am here.'

The frozen faces of the jury.

When I was called upon, the prosecuting attorney walked over to the judge and picked up another document. He looked at it briefly then asked me if the translation was mine.

'Yes.'

'In your translation of the bloodline of the three dogs you state that previous animals from the same bloodline had already been immune to the sound of gunshot. Can you confirm that?'

'Yes.'

'Could it be stated that based on the bloodline you have translated from German these dogs have been bred over generations in such a way that they became increasingly less fearful of gunshots?'

I hesitated.

'Take your time.'

'Yes. I think one could say that. That was the impression I received from the original document.'

'Just an impression?'

'It's in the language. The word *schussunempfindlich* turns up with increasing consistency from generation to generation. It means 'insensitive to gunshot.''

'Your translation further seems to indicate that the dogs of this bloodline have been bred to display aggressive behaviour toward strangers, most likely for the purpose of protecting the property of their owner. Would you confirm that?'

'Yes.'

'Do you think it is possible to say that in the end these dogs have been bred over generations to the point of attacking everyone who looks like a stranger to them?'

I hesitated.

'Could you elaborate on stranger, your Honour?'

Now it was the attorney who seemed to hesitate. He looked nervously around the room, his eyes resting heavily on Lewis and his wife who were holding hands.

'Some dogs,' he continued. 'Some dogs in this country have been known to attack people of varying ethnicities because they were conditioned … , I mean, they have been trained to do so. I hate to say it, but there are people in this country who train certain kinds of dogs, dogs that are genetically predisposed to an aggressiveness that overrides their fear even of gunshots. They train them in such a way that they display aggressive behaviour toward anyone who looks very different from their owners.'

'You mean dogs in other words that are being taught a kind of canine racism?'

He nodded.

I could not confirm the attorney's suspicion that the dogs in question had been from a bloodline of dogs that were trained to be racist, so he soon gave up on pursuing this discussion any further, obviously relieved that he could drop such an embarrassing topic.

Finally, he called upon the bus driver to report what she had seen. She moved very slowly across the room. It took her a few minutes to sit down in the witness chair and put her hand on the bible.

'When I pulled up with the school bus I saw the bigger of the two boys throw a rock at the dogs. But he missed him. They started running, the bigger one always staying behind the younger one. When they reached the tree the older boy was helping his brother up the tree, but it was at that moment the dogs started running. I was too far away to do anything, but I kept blowing the horn. Hella, I kept leanin' into it and blew the hell out of it. But it didn't do no good.'

'Did you not have a fire arm on you?'

'I didn't, your Honor. Not every school bus driver is armed. Believe me, if I woulda had a gun on me I sure woulda used it. And I wouldna have aimed at empty air. I woulda shot them damn dogs right on the spot. I don't know about insensitive to gun shot. If you ask me, ultimately every critter is sensitive if you just blow a hole in their hide.'

One could have heard a pin drop in the courtroom.

Jesse and Sarah sat there completely rigid, petrified.

Jesse was ten, Owen six. They were on their way home waiting for the school bus when it happened. Neither of them had noticed the three dogs. Suddenly they were there, only about 50 yards away from the kids, drooling out of their muzzles, deep growls vibrating inside their black and brown throats. Their heads lowered. Jesse could clearly see the frisson of their powerful shoulder muscles. He picked up a rock and threw it with all his strength at one of the animals but missed. 'Run,' he whispered, 'run,' but his brother just stood there and stared, paralyzed. Could not take his eyes off the dogs. Jesse stepped in front of Owen, pushing him back slowly in the direction of the cottonwood tree. Just a few more steps and they would reach it. A few more steps, Jesse thought, climb up the trunk and cling to one of the lower branches. Even if they were to jump up, the dogs would not be able to get to their legs, for the boys had a lot of practice climbing trees. Had they not for years been climbing all the trees of their parents' yard? All the way up to giddying heights, and had not Dad always warned them not climb up so far? But again and again they would practice getting up the slippery trunks and into the higher reaches of the maze of branches and twigs as fast as they could. It'd be a piece of cake, Jesse saw this right away, the young cottonwood had an ideal set of branches, perfectly grown for climbing, the bottom one about as high as Jesse's head, from there it'd be easy to get further up quickly. They had reached the tree and Jesse lifted Owen up so that he could clasp both arms around the trunk. 'Pull yourself up, c'mon,' he said. Owen did as he was told.

At that moment the dogs started running.

It took them only a few seconds to reach the tree. Little Owen had already put one leg over the bottom branch. It pressed itself into his knee bend, scratching him a bit, but he knew from experience that his skin had not chafed. He was able to pull himself up, to keep climbing further up, out of reach of the fangs and into safety.

At that moment the first dog sprang at Jesse.

Jesse embraced the trunk of the tree with both his arms, but the Rottweiler bit deep into his leg and started tearing at him, shaking his strong head and pulling him away from the cottonwood. He caught a glimpse of the school bus. Heard its persistent honk. But all three dogs were upon him now. They sank their teeth into his arms, legs, and other parts of his body. He tried to protect himself by curling up into a foetal position, folding his hands round the back of his neck. Then he hid his entire head between his own arms and pressed his face into the grassy patch by the tree. He saw a thin line of blood trickle past his elbow as the honking of the school bus continued. Until it stopped.

Tell me, Lewis had said. For God's sake just tell me.

Wilson did not know the details but he knew which words to choose, the words one soldier would say to another in a situation like this.

'Lewis,' he had said. 'I don't really know what happened, but man, Jesse is a hero. He's a goddamn hero. Don't you see that? He gave his own life for that of his brother. Lewis, you should be proud of your son.'

The trial lasted one week. The dog owner did not show any remorse toward Jesse's parents. So the judge saw no reason to sentence her to less than 14 years in prison.

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Notes

[1] Benedictus De Spinoza, 'Concerning God,' *The Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1982), 38.

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Book Reviews

Empire V

Victor Pelevin
Moscow: EKSMO, M, 2006
334 pages

> Give me at least one reason why people are better than vampire bats… It [the bat] even causes no serious harm… To release a little bit of red liquid from veins is considered to be beneficial from a medical viewpoint. For instance, there was a case when a vampire bat saved a Catholic monk who was dying of fever. But … there was no case when a Catholic monk saved a dying bat…[1]

Continue reading and you will find out that many human ideas of vampires are false– bats are not those wicked monsters depicted in novels and movies. Humans are murderous, while vampires do not kill anyone – they do not even suck blood, as everybody thinks; the mere word 'blood' is considered to be vulgar, a taboo, in the refined circle of those who do, in fact, reign in the world, and in their discourse, vampires would prefer to apply euphemisms. They use humans for their purposes, true, but do it humanely, guided by high ethical principles.

This is just a piece of the jigsaw puzzle which is gradually assembled in the reader's mind while reading Victor Pelevin's *Empire V*. The author gives us a perfect, if frightening, explanation of our world, the world where vampires rule, mainly due to their ability to 'read' other people by tasting their blood. Biting others inconspicuously, including fellow vampires, is a special skill that gives one power, and accumulation of this power is the basis for the Fifth Empire (Empire V), the humane epoch of vampire order, imperial vampirism embedded in the wordplay in the book title. Another allusion which reveals vampires' relation to power is that according to an old tradition, after becoming a vampire one changes one's name to be called after a deity of an ancient civilization, like Enlil, Ishtar or Jehovah – and this symbolizes his or her conversion into the highest link of the food chain on earth.

Tasting blood leads to learning the whole mental sphere of the interlocutor: thoughts, background, current situation, relation to state politics, even size of clothes, everything. A specimen of blood can be passed to other vampires in a test-tube as one's comprehensive personal file, or just as a projection of someone's past experience. Sampling it will immerse the taster into a virtual world resembling motion pictures where not only visuals and sounds, but also tastes and odours make sense. This vampiric degustation is equivalent to inserting a USB flash drive into a computer in order to download and then read information about its master. For those who possess this ability, blood becomes a perfect carrier of information.

> A vampire is recommended to pretend to be going to tell something quietly to his victim. He has to be cautious: people around should not think that he is about to spit into the victim's ear, that he is whispering obscenities, smelling someone's perfume etc. – as many protectors of social morality, as many interpretations are possible.[2]

To be able to read in a language, one should know the code, the system of conventions that makes this transmission of information possible. Sure, in reality a blood test may tell a lot about the person, starting with the genetic profile, ending with the current situation: contagion, fever, or diet. But even the most sophisticated analysis will not betray the person's thoughts. In the book, this metaphor helps to tie together notions of power, information and biology. But what helps to decode blood here? A feature that actually makes one a vampire is an organism called 'tongue', or the vampire's second brain, which can be viewed either as a parasite or a symbiont, living in a human and being able to migrate into another body. That so to say, the semantic potential of blood not only makes it an efficient communication tool, when 'tongues' recognize and interact with each other, but also gives one power over the other. This power is information, knowing one's thoughts, knowing one's sins, and its acquisition through tasting bodily tissue helps to construct a bridge between the real world and that of signs.

Satirical, plain, exciting, boring, mystical, transparent – these are just some of the epithets to be found in comments by the global reading community regarding Pelevin's prose, and *Empire V* in particular. Some call it pulp fiction, others trace its roots in Castaneda's writing. Some draw parallels between the book and the phenomena of modern mass civilization, such as advertising, whereas others argue that to fully understand Pelevin one must be familiar with more esoteric literary artefacts related to ancient mythology and novels by Tolstoy and Bulgakov.

As it seems, every review has a grain of truth revealing one aspect of this versatile prose, a virtual fusion of the mystical and the mundane, the sacred and the commonsensical, which makes you begin to question your own explanation of the world order.

Without going deep into the book's philosophical jungle, which is better left for individual exploration, no matter what kind of weapon one chooses in this quest – quotes from classical literature or fast-food chain slogans – reading it brings not only aesthetical pleasure, both to sophisticated gourmets of postmodernist literature and novices in the world of contemporary fiction. It also offers more outrageous discoveries concerning the nature of this world and its possible interpretation by someone who is not quite like others, with his penchant for vampires and werewolves. The fast-moving plot brings the most sceptical disbeliever of anti-vampiric readership to a mind-blowing denouement, but leaves enough food for thought even after the last page is turned.

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Flame-Touched Inheritance

Agnes Gaura
Budapest: Delta Vision, 2014
408 pages

Vampires have always been powerful and ambiguous creatures, the much loved and hated rock stars of the literary scene. After the success of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga and numerous copies, publishers (and some readers) have grown quite wary of the topic, a good number of literary magazines even warn writers against sending submissions featuring vampires and/or werewolves. And yet vampires are still around, indestructibly strong as ever. They are present not only in popular culture but also in the academic world; for example, the British Library is hosting an exhibition about Gothic Literature and they chose the figure of vampire to be their poster figure. This proves that although the topic of bloodsucking demons might seem to have been exhausted, there are still secrets and angles to be explored and that they have a place in scholarly discussions not just in teenage dreams.

Agnes Gaura, a contemporary Hungarian writer entered the literary scene with her series featuring Borbála Borbíró, a young vampirologist. The series is remarkable for several reasons; for instance, because it treats the subject matter in a well thought-out style which is both entertaining and educative. Furthermore, the setting is not the fog-ridden Albion or one of the cosmopolitan US cities but the near neighbour of Dracula's homeland, Hungary. Although the topics and the problems encountered are universal there are many small instances which give a delightful *couleur locale* to the story. For example, the boss of the protagonist is a *taltos* which is the Hungarian equivalent of the shaman. They can take animal shapes, usually that of a powerful animal like a bull or a horse and they can also conjure storms. The antagonist in the third part of the series is a *ludverc*, a malevolent shape shifting spirit.

One of the noteworthy features of the story world is that vampires have not only come out to the public but they have been deeply integrated into the political structure. It is a way of controlling the violent haunting needs of the vampires (citizens need to give a certain amount of blood as a form of tax) but this way their valuable knowledge and experience can also be used for the benefit of the country. In one of her articles on the Aranymosás website, Agnes Gaura says that she wanted to use this setup as a reflection/variation on the usual image of the vampire as a political metaphor in which they usually represent exploitation or an aristocracy which feeds on the people. In her version the vampires are a useful and integral part of society although they are not devoid of problems.

While many contemporary vampire novels focus on the difficulties of human/vampire (love) relationships and the difficulties which might arise from the difference between mortal and immortal, this series lays emphasis on the question of immortality and its price. What happens to the soul of vampires? Are they superhuman or simply inhuman? These are some of the questions Gaura seeks to answer. She introduces the figure of the 'vampire muse' a very powerful vampire who is able to bestow astonishing creative powers on the people who they bite. The effects of the bite will depend on the kind of person they bite; for example, Nofertiti's bite inspired a religious reform, Ligeia inspired Poe with his dark and powerful stories. More interesting, however, is the effect of the bite on vampires, as these living dead regain some of their humanity, some of their soul. Interesting and important questions are examined here which rise above the usual scope of vampire novels.

The female protagonist, Borbála Borbíró (Bori), is an ex-Humanities student who, seeing that she cannot earn a living with her Egyptology degree, changed to the study of vampires. In Bori the reader can see the continuation of the adventurer scholar archetype (eg. Indiana Jones,

Robert Langdon) with some extra spice added with the doing away of the usual gender stereotypes—that is, replacing the middle-aged man with a resourceful young woman (similar to Laura Croft of the *Tomb Raider* series). We can also see the traces of a sociological phenomenon in her figure, such as the fact that many students who studied for a degree in the humanities need to find a job in a different line of work because there are very few opportunities to work in their own field. Under the fantastic façade of the story there are numerous realistic details which make the story tangible and more life-like. The tragicomedy of Hungarian everyday life brings the story closer to heart of the readers.

The fourth volume of the series, *Flame-Touched Inheritance,* was published in 2014 and follows Bori in her quest to find her grandmother's mysterious inheritance. The quest leads her to trace one of the most successful vampire muses—Nofertiti. Knowledge doesn't come cheap though, Bori and Attila, her *taltos* boss, have to literally descend to the depth of Hell to emerge with the heritage. The specialty of the Borbála Borbíró books is that they provide us with high-quality *edutainment*, the books merge exciting adventures, witty conversations and a host of interesting information about various topics. In this last volume; for instance, we get a vivid and colourful description of the Egyptian underworld and the journey of the soul. The reader can learn something new with every chapter s/he reads, let it be mythology, Hungarian history or literature. Last but not least, the plot is well-structured and full of surprises even if you can figure out some of the twists before the end, there will be always something which comes unexpected even to the most attentive of readers.

The books were published in a good quality paperback edition with stunning cover pictures which a help the readers to immerse themselves into the magical world of the stories.

Fanni Sütő studied English language and literature at the Eotvos Lorand University, Budapest and is now doing her second Master's Degree in Children's Literature at the University of Roehampton, London. Her creative work has been published in Hungary, Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom.

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[1] Victor Pelevin, *Empire V* (Moscow: EKSMO, 2006).
[2] Ibid.

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Film Reviews

The Babadook

Dir. Jennifer Kent
Causeway Films and Smoking Gun Productions, 2014
Film 93 minutes

Australian horror film *The Babadook* (2014), written and directed by Jennifer Kent, situates horror and monstrosity firmly within the family unit by bringing maternal ambivalence to life in the form of a storybook monster. The film centres on the relationship between mother Amelia (Essie Davis) and her young son Samuel (Noah Wiseman), which was literally born of tragedy: Samuel's father was violently killed in a horrific car accident as he drove Amelia to hospital on the night Samuel was born. Amelia has never psychologically recovered from this trauma, nor from the sense that she was robbed of her lover and best friend by a difficult child who she can't seem to love. The film begins as the seventh anniversary of the terrible birthday approaches. Samuel is a fragile, pale and highly sensitive boy with serious emotional issues, and Amelia, who surrendered her career as a writer for a menial job as a carer for people with dementia, is painfully lonely and drowning in sorrow. She is unable to connect with those around her, and she is variously pitied and reviled by colleagues, social workers, doctors and family members alike.

The impact of Samuel's behavioural disturbances on Amelia is exacerbated by his intense need to be physically close to her: in an early scene, Amelia stares gauntly down the barrel of the camera, deprived of rest and comfort as her sleeping son grinds his teeth and twitches next to her, and initially we're asked to share in her resentment. Monster-obsessed Samuel's fierce boasts that 'I'll kill the monster when it comes - I'll smash its head in' – in conjunction with his arsenal of homemade weapons, which he insists on sneaking to school – demonstrates a propensity towards violence. This characterization initially frames him as a marked, demonic child, something that is alluded to in a quiet, grim dinner table scene that visually recalls the troubled mother-son relationship of *The Sixth Sense* (Shyamalan, 1999).

However, as Samuel's favourite DVD, a magician's tutorial, states, 'life is not always as it seems – it can be a wondrous thing, but it can also be very treacherous', and the film quickly becomes an exploration of the intersection of serious emotional trauma and maternal ambivalence. This treachery comes in the form of a disturbing, red-bound picture book, whose cloaked antagonist, Mister Babadook, draws in equal parts from the surreal, expressionist aesthetics of Edward Gorey and *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (Wiene, 1921). Despite the protestations of her son, who understands the implications of the book's threat that 'you can't get rid of the Babadook', Amelia discounts the macabre story. However, each attempt to get rid of the offending item, and to deny the existence of the monster, only goads it further into life.

The Babadook isn't a whodunit, nor is its storybook monster a figure that only makes itself known in the film's final moments. Rather, after a series of increasingly uncanny encounters with the creature and its ghastly manifestations. The film's turning point is the moment that Amelia finally lets her guard down and lets the Babadook in: she is overwhelmed by all of the bitterness, sadness and hostility that she has been suppressing, and this possession grants her violent, near-supernatural powers. What makes this intrusion more horrific is the knowledge that this threat has never been external. Throughout the film Amelia insists on

keeping her basement locked, and it is in this subterranean id-space that she hides the mementoes of her happy relationship with her dead husband, both compartmentalising her grief and refusing Samuel a relationship with his father's memory. Later, this space becomes the dark locus of her resentment and horror, as it is here that she is asked by the Babadook to fully embrace her rage by sacrificing Samuel. Samuel must both protect himself from the malicious creature and attempt to save his monstrous mother from herself. His outright acknowledgement that Amelia doesn't love him, coupled with his fevered insistence that his own unrelenting love can save them both, forms the film's tragic heart.

In a recent interview with *The Guardian*, writer-director Jennifer Kent suggests that, with the exception of the psychological thriller *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Ramsay 2011), there are few examples of narratives about a mother's deeply conflicted attitude towards her child, and that her film confronts one of society's last taboos.[1] However, this does not acknowledge the fact that the overriding hallmark of horror films about motherhood in the 21st century is an interrogation of maternal ambivalence, coupled with the suggestion that while mothers might be able to save their children from danger, they are the ones who are most likely to put them in harm's way in the first place.

While this is an area of fascination that is present throughout the genre, especially within horror films about families and family homes, it is best evidenced in a cluster of recent horror films that deal explicitly with single mothers who are unable to adequately care for their children, be it out of selfishness or ignorance, or because of their inability to cope with the overwhelming pressures of solo motherhood. Consider the following representative sample: in American J-horror remake *The Ring* (Verbinski, 2002), journalist Rachel's (Naomi Watts) single-minded ambitiousness leads to her neglecting her young son, which results in him watching a video tape that is haunted by a wrathful spirit of a girl who was mistreated by her own parents. In *Triangle* (Smith, 2009), Jess (Melissa George) is locked in a Sisyphean cycle of torment and atonement as she tries to account for her abusive behaviour towards her autistic son. The malevolent spirit of *The Conjuring* (Wan 2013) is the ghost of a woman who sacrificed her newborn child to the Devil, and who now possesses mothers in an attempt to make them kill their own children. Even when the mother gives her all, it is not good enough: in *Grace* (Solet 2009), heavily pregnant Madeleine (Jordan Ladd) struggles after a car accident kills both her husband and her unborn child. Madeline insists, against medical advice, on carrying the pregnancy to term, and its monstrous, cannibalistic needs soon outstrip Madeleine's ability to provide.

In each of these films, as in *The Babadook*, it is the woman's inability to mother in an 'appropriate' way (whatever that might mean), and the implied trauma of the fragmentation of the allegedly stable nuclear family, that leads to the woman placing the child in exactly the danger that she must then attempt to save them from. This dark thematic strain both attacks and reinforces the toxic ubiquity of the twin notions of 'essential' and 'ideal' motherhood - notions that suggest that motherhood is the pinnacle of a woman's experience, that mothering should be something a woman wants to do and should naturally succeed at doing, and that mothering must be done in socially, culturally, and ideologically complicit ways. When considered as a group, these films suggest is that this maternal ambivalence is something that can perhaps be contained, but never eliminated, such that it is motherhood *itself* that is made monstrous and that unlocks an animal monstrosity within women. In each, mother is both victim and villain, but never innocent.

Certainly, *The Babadook* is an intelligent and beautifully crafted film; it is wholly aware of the aesthetics and narrative tropes of its generic pedigree, the performances by Davis and Wiseman are quite extraordinary, and the film's relationships are nuanced and compelling. The production design, too, contributes beautifully to the profound sense of dread: Amelia's whole

world is devoid of warmth, and the film's dour colour palette of blues, greys, creams and whites imbues the film with a sense of sorrow and emptiness, which is exacerbated by the film's spare sound design. As the Babadook's influence becomes more obviously expressed, the tired, overgrown and gloomy villa in which Amelia and Samuel live becomes a cavernous and frightening prison, all deep shadows and hard angles. Amelia - hollow-eyed, wearing an old fashioned white nightdress, her blonde hair pulled back in a dishevelled bun - takes on the role of harried, haunted Gothic heroine.

However, *The Babadook*'s interrogation of maternal ambivalence contains an enormous blind spot. There is a streak of conservatism at its heart that frames the transgressive mother as both hysteric and witch, and the film continues a narrative cycle of mother-blaming that has been in place since the psychoanalytically-informed archetypal 'bad' or 'monstrous' mother of the maternal melodrama. By the film's end, the monster has not been defeated but it has, perhaps, been tamed - although whether the Babadook is really held captive or is instead being fed and actively cultivated by Amelia is a matter of interpretation. What *The Babadook* succeeds in doing, rather, is adding to a subset of horror films that suggest that the most dangerous thing to a child is his mother, and that hinge on the idea that this monstrous maternal threat is something that won't abate and cannot be escaped.

Notes

[1] Paul MacInnes, 'The Babadook: "I Wanted to Talk about the Need to Face Darkness in Ourselves",' *The Guardian*, 18 October 2014, Viewed on 19 November 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/oct/18/the-babadook-jennifer-kent.

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The Strain

Dir. Peter Weller, Guillermo del Toro, et. al.
Produced by Carlton Cuse, Mirada Production Co.
Television series, season 1 (2014)

The Strain is a new television series adapted from a trilogy authored by Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan. Whereas many other vampire television series are towering romances which focus on libidinous and sexually attractive vampires, such as *The Originals*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *Moonlight* and others, *The Strain* stands in firm opposition to this trend. *The Strain* explores vampirism were it to take the form of a deadly pathogenic disease. In this case, its result is much more similar to zombie fiction like *The Walking Dead*.

By deciding to portray vampires as non-sexual beings who transmit the virus of vampirism through a decidedly disturbing tongue-like muscle, *The Strain* brings something unique to television. It produces a vampire who is decidedly unattractive, and repulses us with its grotesquerie. Throughout this initial season of *The Strain*, we will see the infection through the eyes of a CDC team sent to combat it. Lead by Dr. Ephraim Goodweather, the CDC team will ultimately serve as the resistance. This version of vampirism starts with a single carrier who spreads the infection to a few, who then spread it farther. All are under the control of the initial carrier. In this case the carrier is named the Master.

It is the twisting, paranoid, and dangerous story which enhances the idea of unattractive vampires. No one would fight sexy vampires. However, with these gruesome grotesqueries, who do not even possess sex organs, there is no compunction to let them live. The deglamorizing of the blood sucking monster provides greater poignancy when family members of the resistance inevitably and tragically become infected. It is through the combination of dark story, ugly monsters, and wonderful production values that *The Strain* provides one of the finest series of television. *The Strain* stands out as a truly original take on vampires.

Guillermo del Toro initially conceived *The Strain* (2014) as a television series. At the time, the notion of non-attractive vampires was less than inspiring to the Development Executives he pitched it to. However, there has been a complete change of heart, as monster stories have experienced resurgence on television.

The Strain was a successful trilogy of books co-written by del Toro and Chuck Hogan (2009, 2010, 2011) which inspired Carleton Cuse (of television series *Lost* [2004 – 2010]) and *Bates Motel* [2013-] fame) to take a stab at finally bringing the story to small screen. This idea was most fruitful, and as can be evidenced by the first season in 2014, a very satisfying show has been created. Economical in its structure, with shades of the television series *The Walking Dead* (Scott Gimple, 2010 -) and other pathogen related horror tropes, *The Strain* is a triumph of contagion terror, due to its grim straightforward storytelling manner. As with any CDC level viral crisis, the 'Canary Team' – the initial medical examiners – must detect and unravel the mystery of how this strain of vampirism came to New York City. In its presentation of the team's work, *The Strain* excels at demonstrating procedural medical investigation, for the first few episodes before chaos inevitably breaks loose.

The story, like all great monster stories, starts simply and unravels into a complicated and intricate conspiracy. A plane flown by the carrier Regis Air lands at Kennedy Airport. There are but four survivors and everyone else is found to be dead. As the head of the New York Center for Disease Control (CDC) 'Canary Team', Dr. Ephraim Goodweather (Corey Stoll) is tasked with performing an inquest on the dead and injured passengers of the flight.

After performing an initial discovery and recovery of items and victims, the investigation unravels with furious speed. Over Dr. Goodweather's protestations, the survivors are all allowed to go home, and a mysterious casket vanishes without a trace. Within the praxis of the casket disappearing, the survivors leaving, and the dead rising an unsettling new reality comes to life. There is an undead contagion set to infect all of New York City, and very soon the rest of the continental United States.

As the crisis of the mass vampire infection reveals itself fully in the first season of *The Strain,* the plague slowly and inevitably increases and becomes far more difficult to combat. This is the essence of contagion terror. As we see with many fine zombie series and movies, once the disease has spread it's almost impossible to stop it. One could safely contend the entire arc of the first season is Dr. Goodweather learning there are some forms of pathogen beyond his control, and the terribly unattractive strain of vampire – in series referred to as *strigoi* – proves incredibly formidable.

Besides using the Polish *strigoi* as the term for these vampires, the other fascinating feature is their communal grotesqueries. These are not the sexy vampires one has become accustomed to in film and television. Rather, these are pallid, white bodies. Instead of fangs, this enormous proboscis like tentacle releases from the vampire's mouth and latches onto the victim's body. There are numerous moments where this horrifying and deeply violating form of blood sucking is used to great effect. As in del Toro's other works, the vampire strain ravages the body and refashions it into a decayed mockery of the beautiful person it once was. The *strigoi* are shown actively losing their body hair, including the often gorgeous hairdos they wore while they were alive. The proboscis, however, is not the exclusive manner of spreading the infection. If one were to come into contact with vampire blood, or the worms that parasitically exist in these vampires, a person would be turned. We watch this several times, most poignantly when Ephraim's ex-wife Kelly (Natalie Brown) turns after a vampire worm bores into her eye socket.

Further, the vampire's body becomes efficient and streamlined in its grotesqueness. As we witness with one of the four initial victims, Gabriel Bolivar (Jack Kesy), the vampire has no purpose for reproductive organs. It simply reproduces by spreading the vampirism. Therefore human genitals serve no good purposes. As the transformation metastasizes through Bolivar, we witness in a scene shot through with dread, his rejection of three very supple and nubile groupies. He finds he cannot become erect. As he rushes to the bathroom, because he feels a great weight in his bowels, he discovers his testicles and penis no longer are of use, as they fall off his body and into the toilet bowl. As he flushes his former sex organs down the drain, we sense whatever vestiges of humanity have left Gabriel Bolivar--he is now a vampire, complete with a vampires' very smooth and efficient cloaca; a hole through which waste matter passes.

The heroes of this first series are both complicated in their frailties and inventiveness. Besides Dr. Goodweather, who watches his crusade to inform the public fail, there are several other persons who fight to stop it. His canary team Dr. Nora Martinez (Mia Maestro) and Jim Kent (Sean Astin), the city exterminator Vasily Fet (Kevin Durand), a pawn broker --with a long history involving the *strigoi*-- Professor Abraham Setrakian (David Bradley), Dutch (Ruta Gedmintas) - a hacker who initially enables one of the season's antagonists Eldritch Palmer (Jonathan Hyde) to sabotage the Internet, and Zack (Ben Hyland), Dr. Goodweather's young son. Each has a personal conflict involving the vampires. The poignancy of the encounters grows as the season inexorably rushes to its end. A bond is suggested to be latent between Zach and Dr. Martinez, as they both lose their mothers (Zack's mother is also Dr. Goodweather's wife) to this strain of vampirism; it is further complicated by their current status as lovers.

We watch in evocative flash backs all the dealings and mishaps wrought upon Professor Setrakian, as he first carves the casket for the chief monster, The Master. Setrakian first

encounters the Master and his eventual emissary Eichorst in Auschwitz during World War II, one of the most notorious concentration camps of the war. At the time, Setrakian is solely focused on survival. He's a trained journeyman carpenter. If a Nazi Commandant demands a casket, who is Setrakian to refuse? Once it becomes clear the casket is designated for the terrifying monstrosity who is visiting the concentration camp barracks, and feeding off of Jewish inmates, Setrakian realizes he must do something about it.

However, as an inmate at Auschwitz, there is little Setrakian can do save witness the barbarism. Once he completes his studies at university, he resolves to end the *strigoi*, and becomes a vampire hunter chasing The Master and Eichorst all over Europe. It is later in 1967, in Croatia, that Setrakian falls into a trap, which causes him to lose his beloved wife Miriam (Adina Venson) to the *strigoi*. As we witness his complete heart break and struggle with compassion, Setrakian must slay his now vampire wife. Yet he cannot abandon her totally, he cuts out and retains her heart for the rest of his life preserved in a jar. Thus informing the justification to hunt and eliminate the *strigoi* since they threaten and feast off your loved ones.

The acting in this series is top notch. The production values are fantastic. The cinematography is purely cinematic. Also, the lighting is really superb. Many of the scenes of this show must by virtue of the subject matter, take place in dark spaces and at night. However, we see every horrifying and gruesome detail clearly despite the apparent absence of light. The costume department outdoes themselves, particularly in the flashbacks to Central and Eastern Europe. The music for this series is discordant and tense. It evokes the anxiety at the thought you could be a vampire's feast.

There are some moments in the series where some people will feel it has had a bounty of stupid decisions. Such as the episode wherein Zack is sent by the elderly Mrs. Martinez to fetch a pack of cigarettes. You wonder how this child will survive on the streets of a city now rampant with looters and monsters. Personally, I found while the series reveled in a sense of schlock, it was a superb extrapolation of what would happen were a city like New York were to be attacked by such a contagion.

This series, like the books which precede it, is focused on telling a superb and suspenseful horror variation on the 'Man vs. Nature' trope. While the humans can certainly combat The Master and his hive of strigoi, no normative human means of destruction will work on The Master. Both Setrakian and Goodweather have a Captain Ahab-esque moment, where upon attempting to dispatch that monster and end the scourge, they are either incapable of completing the action, or their methods prove ineffective.

What I found most compelling in this scenario, was how effectively Eldritch Palmer could aid and enable The Master and Thomas Eichorst through his seemingly unlimited resources. Were such creatures to invade our shores they would be unstoppable if a potent member of the 1% chose to aid them. It's chilling as it is likely accurate.

The Strain has been approved for a second season. This is a very good thing, as the show offers us an opportunity to remember an age old secret: vile monsters can be beautiful, this does not mean they will always prove to be beautiful by our definition. A viral parasitic strain of pestilence which creates a hive of bipedal nocturnal killers.

This decision to deglamorize the vampires featured in this series is a cutting rebuttal to the current slate of vampires on film and television. Shows such as *Being Human* (Toby Whithouse, 2008 -), *the Originals* (Julie Plec, 2013 -), *Moonlight* (Ron Koslow and Trevor Munson, 2007 – 2008), *the Vampire Diaries* (Kevin Williamson and Julie Plec, 2009 -), and the *Twilight* saga – *Twilight* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2008), *New Moon* (Chris Weitz, 2009), *Eclipse* (David Slade, 2010), and *Breaking Dawn* parts 1 & 2 (Bill Condon, 2011 and 2012) among a great many other titles, all seek to romanticize the vampire. While initially the monster in folklore was considered a plague, in the current age, vampires are sexually desirable

protagonists. They save the human man or woman they wish to romance. The sub-industry of vampire romance is a serious and mainstreamed fetish. To imagine a monster as a glamorous, sexy creature who wishes to be monogamous with the spectator is a huge and magnetic draw.

Then comes *The Strain*, which wishes to reassert the primal horror which used to exist in people's hearts when they imagined the vampire, who wishes only to suck your blood. In rejecting the zeitgeist of sexy, glamourized vampires, *The Strain* creates a revolutionary act—since the rejection of the need for pretty desirable vampires can be seen as a contrarian act. In committing this grave and distinctly alternate version of vampires, which recalls the ancient horror associated with the creature, Carlton Cuse and, by extension, del Toro and Hogan have wrought a compelling master work of modern terror.

By rejecting the archetype of the beautiful, sexy blood eater, and replacing it with their decidedly unsexy vamps, Cuse and company have made some of the most compelling television I have seen this year. By imbuing the vampire with its sense of dread and gruesomeness, they have revitalized the old fables. If that's not a beautiful act of defiance worthy of your viewership, I don't know what is.

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