Monster (n): Defining Monstrosity

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Humanity has a long history of defining itself through what it is not. The impulse to define “me” or “us” against an “other” has been discussed by writers and thinkers as diverse as Aristotle, Plato, Jacques Lacan, Frantz Fanon, Julia Kristeva, Stephen King, and Octavia Butler, among others. Moreover, the impulse seems to predate the human tradition of writing our thoughts down for posterity. Some of the best-preserved evidence we have from the Paleolithic Era, for example, is cave art that frequently depicts hybrid and humanoid figures, like the famous “Sorcerer” of the cave of Les Trois Freres, France, suggesting that interest in the distinction between human and non-human is as old as humanity itself.

And one need only look at national bestseller lists, movie schedules, or news outlets to recognize both the power and the appeal of “monsters,” real as well as imagined, within contemporary discourses on everything from entertainment and advertising to science and politics. Taken together these observations speak to humans’ seemingly inherent need to categorize the world around us in a manner that makes sense of similarity and difference alike. “We” are an “us” (similar) because we are not “them” (different); “they” are “others” (different) because they are not “us” (similar). The question then becomes, when do we privilege the similar over the different and vice versa? Pushing this logic further still, who is the “we” who gets to decide what these boundaries of normality or sameness are? What are the larger implications of identifying an individual or group of beings as different first and foremost? How many boundaries must be crossed before being “different” or “other” becomes synonymous with being “frightening,” “bad,” or “monstrous”?

These are but a few of the complex questions our seminar grappled with throughout our semester together. Using the lens of a specific
monster, the reanimated corpse, we explored the extent to which “monster” is an adaptable, multifunctional concept. Who or what we fear might change, but how and why we project our fears outwards—the way we create our monsters—has remained remarkably similar throughout human history, for better or for worse. Individuals or species deemed genetic anomalies or developmentally disadvantaged were labeled monsters until relatively recently, for instance. While we have moved away from this particular pejorative identification, we still tend to associate “monsters” with abnormal or inhuman creatures, including those that belong to our own species. Alongside the biological connotations of the term, the concept of the monster has strong ties to theological, moral, and technological quandaries as well. In short, whenever we encounter an individual, a thing, or an action we cannot understand rationally or emotionally, a monster offers or, in some instances, threatens to rear its head. Hence a vampire can personify our attempts to make sense of variety of phenomena, from rabies, the plague, and HIV/AIDS, to sexuality/sexual desire, immigration, and abusive relationships. It should not be especially surprising, therefore, that no matter how many monsters are explained away or exposed as fraud, there is always another waiting in the wings to move center stage, reveling in its ambivalent position as the embodiment of human fears and desires simultaneously.

The essays in Monster (n.): Defining Monstrosity reflect their authors’ interest in the ways in which the rhetoric of monstrosity continues to evolve to express anxieties about a wide range of topics, including the limitations of humor specifically and entertainment more generally, the potential disadvantages of becoming over-reliant on technology or scientific advancements such as cloning, the relationships between women and the men—living as well as dead—in their lives, the influence of social and generational expectations on the mental and emotional health of individuals and communities alike, and the popular appeal of self-proclaimed monsters. The texts analyzed cover a variety of mediums and genres. Here you can read about the monsters of young adult fiction, short stories, novels, anime, graphic novels, movies, music, horror, southern gothic, comedy, dystopian and crime fiction, and popular culture. Here you can find a bevy of insight into how our culture has recreated monsters to indicate our own aspirations and fears. Here, perhaps most importantly, you can learn more about what it means to be human, because understanding our monsters ultimately helps us understand ourselves. Warning: the
act of being human is messy and frequently unsettling, but boy can you learn a lot about it if you are willing to confront those monsters we construct intentionally as well as unintentionally. So go ahead, turn the page if you dare, and be prepared to be blown away by the bravery, integrity, and intelligence of the analyses contained herein.

Dr. Leah Haught
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Music
Kanye West: Hell of a Life
By Randy Anderson

“I understand that you don’t like me but I need you to understand that I don’t care.”

–Kanye West

Kanye West is arguably one of the most polarizing pop culture figures of the last ten years. Even those who are not familiar with his body of work will almost certainly have opinions about Kanye West based solely on his public persona, much of which trends toward the negative. However, when his public actions between the years of 2007 and 2010 are examined alongside his works that were current within that time frame, paying special attention to the changes in performativity and lyrical content during that period, a new picture begins to form that may work to shed light on the words and actions of the enigmatic star. During those three years, Kanye made choices that altered the way he lived and the way he was perceived from then on. Each of those choices Kanye made lead him to shed a bit more of his humanity, beginning with his 2008 album 808’s and Heartbreak and continuing till we arrive at track six of his fourth studio album, My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy, entitled “Monster.” When the events of Kanye’s life between 2007 and 2010 are viewed through the lens of monstrosity, what emerges is a narrative of a man grappling with the loss of his own humanity, who is dealing with grief, loss, anger, and success, all at levels he was unprepared for, while completely alone, pushing him to declare himself monstrous.

A declaration of monstrosity as part of the image of a rapper is not wholly unique or exclusive to Kanye West. The image that the word “monster” produces in the imagination of rap fans is that of a creature that is larger than life, cannot be killed or even stopped, and can destroy everything in its path. With that imagery it is easy to understand why the term “monster” exists as a persona that Kanye
would adopt at this point in his career, when he is seemingly unstoppable. However, when examining the events that led him to assertion of the monstrous, there is perhaps a more psychological meaning than simply being boisterous.

In 1923, German psychologist-philosopher Sigmund Freud published a provocative theory termed The Ego and the Id, suggesting a theory of human psychology that altered the way Western culture perceives human identity. According to his theory, the ego is the part of our minds that “prevents us from acting on our basic urges (created by the id), but also works to achieve a balance with our moral and idealistic standards (created by the superego)” (Cherry). Another way of looking at it is that the ego is simply the self as differentiated with another self or the world.

Freud theorized that the ego balanced an id and a superego, equally important parts of the human psyche. Every person possesses an id, the innate self out of which springs the wants and urges that we have from childhood. The superego, in turn, is the portion of the self that engages social norms, accepts rules and expectations adopted from our families or social and cultural environments. It is the responsibility of the ego to control these differentiating forces. While we have dark twisted fantasies in the id, social norms regulated by the superego declare these unacceptable, so we regulate these two forces through the ego.

In Kanye West’s *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* the theory of The Ego and the Id becomes very evident. The album is wildly creative with manic and unpredictable beats, with astounding celebrity cameos like Elton John and Chris Rock who are featured together with rap phenoms like Jay-Z, Lil Kid Cudi, RZA, and Nicki Minaj, all of whom could be considered monsters of their craft. The album was received by fans and critics alike as West’s sincerest artistic endeavor to date (Beaumont). It is the tension between West’s own ego, superego, and id that creates the driving force behind the album’s celebrated brilliance, but it is that tension that created the monster in the first place.

Kanye West’s reputation is not that of a person who is graced with self-regulation: he is quickly incensed when he does not get what he desires, and upset when he feels restricted by social and cultural norms. For example, many still remember when Kanye went off-script and told a TV audience that “George Bush doesn’t care about black people” during a benefit for Hurricane Katrina in 2005, or his
rant against Taylor Swift at the MTV Music Video Awards in 2009. These incidents speak of a man who has allowed his id almost complete control, giving into his wants and desires and has done away with social norms and exchanged them for his own.

By his own actions, Kanye has become as much a pariah as he has a cultural icon. For each person who applauded his denouncement of George Bush, there was a right-wing pundit ready to declare him the worst person who ever lived. For each fan who agreed with Kanye’s interruption of Taylor Swift, there was someone calling for his head for embarrassing America’s sweetheart on TV. Even President Barack Obama weighed in on the controversy, calling Kanye West a “jackass.” With such a divided existence in the public eye, Kanye’s superego took a hard blow and thus he retreated further into the embrace of the id. This moment of choice is encapsulated by Jeffry Cohen when he wrote, “the monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling and a place. The monster…incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy, giving them life and uncanny independence” (4). Kanye would reach his proverbial crossroad in 2007, where a string of personal tragedies would push Kanye into a final and full acceptance of the id, and in so, give birth to a monster. This transformation was documented in *808’s and Heartbreak* and *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* as he became a creature that fed on the fear and anxiety of Kanye West, and lived only for his own desires and fantasies, and its name would be Yeezy.

Neither Kanye’s 2010 declaration of “I’m a motherfucking monster,” from the track “Monster,” nor the creation of Yeezy as a way to insulate himself from any further pain stem solely from a few hurtful words or a particularly bad day (10). It is the culmination of the most tragic events in Kanye’s life up until this point that spur his transformation. To best understand what led to Kanye embracing the monstrous, it is imperative to go back to the year of 2007 before the release of *808’s and Heartbreak*, before he became a media pariah and foil to Taylor Swift, to the first of two events that would alter the course of Kanye’s life forever.

On November 9, 2007, Kanye West’s mother, Donda West, was released from a hospital after a five-and-a-half-hour surgery for a tummy tuck and breast reduction. An overweight woman close to sixty, Donda struggled to find a doctor willing to clear her medically for the operation, but she persisted until finding a doctor who agreed
to perform the procedure. It would be hard to find fault in Donda wanting to look her best; after all she had just left her position as chairwoman of the English Department at Chicago State to devote herself to managing her son’s career full time, as well as his West Brand LLC and the Kanye West Foundation. Donda had raised Kanye as a single mother both in Atlanta and in Chicago, and was a constant encouragement in the early days of Kanye’s career. Kanye took Donda to award shows and events all around the world, walking her down the red carpets, showing her off to photographers, and singing her praises to the press. She was his foundation, and he was appreciative, making sure she had everything she could ever want, even cosmetic surgeries. On the evening of November 10, 2007, Donda was found unresponsive on the floor of a family member’s home. She was rushed to the hospital where she was pronounced dead. Donda West had suffered a heart attack, the result of a coronary artery disease that should have been detected during routine pre-surgery tests (Beaumont).

Suffering the loss of his mother, Kanye threw himself into his work to find solace. He would disappear for long periods of time, working to perfect every aspect of his upcoming Glow In The Dark world tour. His way of dealing with the death of his mother would in turn cause the disintegration of his only other close female relationship in his life, his fiancée Alexis Phifer. Despite reports that Kanye and Alexis were to marry in April of 2008 to honor the wishes of Donda West that they wed, Alexis was photographed in New York City without her engagement ring. Rumors sprang up that Kanye’s stringent rehearsals for his upcoming tour had strained their relationship to the breaking point, but whatever the reason it was evident that the relationship had ended. Kanye was alone, and he was in freefall (Beaumont).

In an interview with the New York Times, Kanye West said, “creative output, you know, is just pain. I’m going to be cliché for a minute and say that great art comes from pain,” and great pain was indeed what he was feeling and more than ever Kanye needed to create (Caramanica). This burst of creative energy was fueled by the tragedy his life had become; Kanye retreated to Avex Studios on the island of Honolulu. There he worked to create something therapeutic, which would speak to the loneliness he felt in his life. Upon completion, he called it 808’s and Heartbreak.

808’s and Heartbreak was unlike anything Kanye had previously created. Deriving its name from the TR-808 drum machine that was used to create the beats for the album, the album ranged from the
ethereal and haunting to the tribal and frenzied. Combined with the emotion that powered his need to create this album, Kanye gave his audience a tangible sound for his metamorphosis. Though Kanye’s music had always been somewhat biographical, it was this album in which he opened himself up like never before. Due to this unprecedented vulnerability, this becomes the place to best begin to apply the lens of monstrosity to Kanye, and uncover the narrative hidden beneath the already exposed tracks of the album.

If the song “Monster” from *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* is to be viewed as the end of his journey to becoming a fully-fledged monster, then *808’s and Heartbreak* documents the loss of Kanye’s humanity and the beginning of his transformation. Opening with the song “Say You Will,” it acts as a prologue to the album, bringing the listener up to speed with where Kanye finds himself. The song deals primarily with the loss of someone who fails to stay even though they promised to, alluding to his engagement with Alexis Phifer. The most interesting thing about the track however, is not the lyrics but the music itself. A reedy Pong electro beat pulsates in the background of the song, keeping its pace at a steady 43 beats per-minute. As Kanye finishes singing, the music continues for nearly three more minutes unimpeded. The slow but steady Pong becomes the prevalent noise, its slow rhythm like that of a human heart, a heart that is beating far too slow. Suddenly the beat stops, and in its place a sound like a supernatural choir, building to a crescendo. 30 seconds later, the beat returns at a methodical 43 beats per-minute. If the song is bringing the listener up to present on Kanye’s life, then the beat can be interpreted as the heartbeat of his mother, beating slowly and carefully, trying to recover from the trauma of the heart attack Donda West suffered as she lay dying on a bedroom floor. As the beat leaves the song, so does Donda, replaced by a heavenly choir. When the beat returns, it belongs now to the heart of Kanye West, beating slowly and carefully, trying to recover from the trauma it just endured.

The next track, “Welcome to Heartbreak,” opens the album proper, and the curtain is pulled back on Kanye as he exists in that moment, and he is not well. The lyrics “my head keeps spinning / Can’t stop having these visions” make up the chorus to the song, reflecting the mental turmoil that Kanye finds himself in (6–7). The song deals with the sudden meaninglessness of the fame and wealth Kanye finds himself with compared to the love and the family he lost. Kanye finds himself withdrawing away from situations involving those things he
has lost. Later in the song he sings about attending his god-sister’s wedding but that he “had to leave ‘fore they even cut the cake” because the event reminded him too much of what he feared he would never have again (33).

Most noticeable about this album is the use of Auto-Tune to mask Kanye’s voice. In fact, with the exception of this single track, Kanye’s real voice is never heard a single time on the entire album. Perhaps it is because in his grief over the death of his mother, and his feeling of responsibility for her death, Kanye has come to hate himself so much that even the sound of his own voice is disgusting to him. If the end result is becoming a monster, then it stands to reason that Kanye would seek to change himself completely to shed his humanity and become something other than himself, something other than human, and what is more human to ones-self than the sound of their own voice. Kanye will continue to disguise his voice until such a time in which he ceases to identify as Kanye West.

One of the more notable tracks from a narrative standpoint is the song “Amazing.” This is because it is both the first time Kanye refers to himself as a “monster” as well as the first time his audience is introduced to an actual monster. In his anguish, Kanye sings: “I’m a monster / I’m a killer / I know I’m wrong / I’m a problem / That’ll never / Ever be solved / And no matter what / You’ll never take that from me” (12-19). Before Kanye has any concept of the monsters that exist in this narrative, he can only assume that he is one, and, given Kanye’s need to be the best, it is safe to assume he believes himself to be the worst monster imaginable. His sins are beyond forgiveness, and there is nothing he or anyone can do to save him. At this point in the album, Kanye is at his darkest point, his lyrics are dark and foreboding with little hope for his future. It is here that 808’s and Heartbreak introduces its first guest rapper, Young Jeezy, who slides into the last verse with a bravado that flies in opposition to Kanye’s lament. Young Jeezy, whose rap style conflicts with the slow singing of Kanye, says: I’m amazing / Yeah I’m all that…Victorious / Yeah we warriors / We make history / Strive for victory…Look at what he been through / He deserve an applause” (36-37, 40-43, 57-58). From a literal standpoint, the addition of Young Jeezy on this track is important for a few reasons. Unlike Kanye’s previous albums, there are very few guest artists featured on the album. This lends to the spartan and very personal feel of the album as Kanye explores his feelings of loss and depression. On previous albums
Kanye would give up-and-coming rappers guest spots on his albums to showcase their talents, but for *808’s and Heartbreak*, Kanye stuck almost exclusively to rappers with an established pedigree similar to his own. This created boundaries on the album that only allowed for inward exploration, with guest rappers adding to or highlighting Kanye’s experience, versus stealing focus from Kanye’s lament. Jeezy’s verse is important in that it creates a tonal shift by using a flow (meaning the rhythms and rhymes of a hip-hop song’s lyrics and how they interact) that is very similar to the flow that Kanye would have used in his earlier albums, creating a dissonance in the song between new and old Kanye. From a narrative standpoint, Young Jeezy represents an alternative that Kanye did not know he had. Yeezy’s verse embraces Kanye’s fame and desires shedding away everything that is not about the pursuit of more, leaving behind ideas of love and of family, to shed that last part of humanity that he is clinging to that is ultimately holding him back. Young Jeezy is Kanye’s first glimpse of a true monster, and Kanye is intrigued.

Following the unexpected bravado of “Amazing,” *808’s and Heartbreak* returns to the melancholy with both “Love Lockdown” and “Streetlights.” Each of these tracks are largely introspective, exploring his feelings towards his former lover as well as his mother. Kanye uses his lyrics to express confusion and regret on what has gone wrong in his life, and feels he has become a victim to his own emotion, causing him to keep his ability to love on “lockdown,” whereas on “Streetlights” Kanye likens the passing streetlights from the window of his cab to that of moments of love and affections flitting passed him.

As both of these tracks are preceded by Kanye’s encounter with Young Jeezy in “Amazing,” Kanye is weighing the worth of his humanity and if it is worth these feelings he has experienced, being overtaken and controlled by his own emotions. Knowing that Young Jeezy has suffered, yet is still in complete control of himself causes confusion and doubt in Kanye as to whether remaining human is worth seemingly never feeling in control again.

As part of the narrative of monstrosity, no song on *808’s and Heartbreak* is as important as the tenth track on the album, “See You In My Nightmares.” It is through this track that Kanye seeks out another established monster in order to have himself transformed into something other than human. To help him during this transformation, Kanye seeks out Lil Wayne who guest stars on the track. It
is a fitting choice as Lil Wayne began his rap career at the age of 15, reaching large-scale success as part of rap group Hot Boys before releasing critically panned solo albums. It wasn’t until Lil Wayne reinvented himself and returned as a strictly solo act, notably referring to himself as “Weezy” that he reached levels of success that he had dreamed of. As the song progresses so does Kanye’s transformation. The song opens with Kanye repeating “I’m cold” over and over (1-3). This coldness that overtakes Kanye is his own symbolic death. To become something other than human, Kanye must let go of his life. From here, each of Kanye’s verses represent the before and after of his transformation. In his first verse Kanye sings:

I got my life and its my only one / I got the night, I’m running from the sun / So goodnight, I made it out the door / After tonight, there will be no return / After tonight, I’m taking off on the road…Tell everyone that you know / That I don’t love you no more / And that’s one thing that you know. (13-22)

Kanye is using this first verse to inform anyone left who would care that he has made his decision. All the feelings of being alone and having nothing have brought Kanye to this point in his life where all he feels he is in control of is his own heartbeat that is keeping him alive. He believes that giving in now to monstrosity is the difference between surviving and living. Kanye has arrived at the crossroad that Cohen wrote about. He will die and be reborn a monster.

If the first verse of “See You in my Nightmare” is indicative of a transformation, then the second verse is the transformation completed. Each choice made by Kanye on 808’s and Heartbreak has led to this moment, from his presumed monstrosity to being reborn as a literal monster. Separated by a short chorus, this reborn Kanye tears out of the gate at the beginning of the second verse, aggressively rapping:

Okay I’m back up on my grind / You do you and I’m just gon’ do mine / You do you, cause I’m just gon’ be fine / Okay I got you out my mind / The night is young, the drinks is cold / The stars is out, I’m ready to go / You always thought I was always wrong / Well know you know. (23-30)

With this verse, Kanye’s tone and cadence have changed entirely. He charges forward, assertively declaring, “I’m back,” and that for
the first time on the album he is “gon’ be fine” (25). Kanye’s verse also sounds noticeably reminiscent of the verse Young Jeezy had in “Amazing,” as Kanye is no longer focused on the introspective or metaphysical, but instead he raps about more tangible pleasures he now looks forwards to like heading out at night and having drinks.

The key to Kanye’s newfound swagger is found in the lyrics “Okay I got you out my mind” (16). The true death that created this monster is the death of both the superego and ego respectively. With these dead, Kanye is free to do what he has been unable to do which is to not care anymore. He no longer feels the burdensome weight of the death of his mother or the loss of his fiancée encumbering him. In fact, with the death of the superego and ego, this new monster is composed entirely of the id, caring only about his own wants and desires and acting on them without thought to consequence. This monster would no longer be contained, and its name was Yeezy.

There is a final notable track on 808’s and Heartbreak entitled “Pinocchio Story.” A live track recorded at a show in Singapore, it is unlike any other track on the album. On it Kanye freestyles over the screams of his fans, pouring his heart out, unscripted and raw. There is something of a dissonance to the track, as the lyrics read like the last diary entry of Kanye West before he gives himself over to Yeezy. It is a lamentation of a dream deferred, as Kanye sings about the hell he finds himself trapped in mentally, how there is nothing left he can buy, nowhere he can escape to that can stop the pain. Regardless, he returns to the chorus each time he raps, “I just wanna be a real boy,” wishing to return to a normal life, a life that has long since escaped him (29). The Auto-Tune is gone from this track, replaced instead by Kanye’s own voice through an ethereal and dreamlike echo. As the vocals ebb and flow and fade away, so do the last vestiges of Kanye’s humanity. Yeezy is all that remains.

Where Kanye might have been described as “brash” or “bold,” Yeezy is abrasive and offensive, and in the space of time between 808’s and Heartbreak and My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy, he made his presence inescapable. These are the years of his infamous social media rants, his lashing out at critics and the paparazzi. None were spared his wrath when Yeezy felt overlooked or unattended to, which was especially apparent in his aforementioned intrusion into Taylor Swift’s award acceptance speech in 2009. Even the staunchest defenders of his had trouble reconciling his actions to the public. The monster Yeezy needed a place to find its purpose and experience the
growing pains associated with his new existence. With that in mind, he returned once again to the studio to discover what it meant to be a monster.

The 2010 album, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* was as far a departure from *808’s and Heartbreak* as possibly imaginable. Gone were the reedy, hollow and tribal beats of the Roland TR-808 drum machine, and in their place layered and complex hip-hop beats created a collage of sound, representative of the tone of the album. Instead of bringing in guest artists that would juxtapose the melancholic mood of his previous album, Kanye brought in rappers who would mirror his new intensity and fierceness. The combination of these elements coupled with the perfectionist lyrics of Kanye West created an album that is hedonistic in its grandeur. The perfect environment for someone or something like Yeezy to spread their wings and explore their new space.

The first track of the album, titled “Dark Fantasy,” opens with Nicki Minaj reciting a contorted version of the Roald Dahl poem *Cinderella*:

> You might think you’ve peeped the scene / You haven’t / The real one is far to mean / The watered down, the one you know / Was made up centuries ago / They made it sound all wack and corny / Yes its awful blasted boring / Twisted fiction, sick addiction / Well gather round children / Zip it, listen. (1-8)

In an affected English accent, Minaj lays out the central purpose of *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. Introducing the album like a tale from a storybook, she essentially informs the listener that everything they think they have known up until this point has been wrong. The literal meaning here is that Kanye has come to expose the modern rap game as something silly and tedious. Kanye will deliver the listener from this and give them rap in its most unadulterated and terrifying form. When the same verse is analyzed through the lens of monstrosity, the meaning does not change all that much. The concept of rap music is replaced with the idea of monstrosity, implying that the popular concept of a monster is diluted and hackneyed, having existed for too long without change. As a monster, Yeezy represents a return to form, the type of monster that has been kept hidden away because it is too menacing. The verse ends with a stern warning to those who have overlooked him for too long, to shut-up, and to pay attention to what happens next.
The song “Dark Fantasy” reads like Yeezy cutting lose from everything that was holding Kanye back and embracing a whole new lifestyle. It is an ode to sex, drugs, and material excess, all things that a creature composed of id would desire. As Yeezy begins, one of the most notable departures from 808’s and Heartbreak is the distinct lack of Auto-Tune on this and all the tracks on My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy. Unlike Kanye, Yeezy has no desire to hide himself or change anything about how he is presented. Yeezy demands to be heard. Yeezy raps about Lamborghini Murcielagos and Diablos as well as clothes from fashion designer Phoebe Philo. There is mention of consumption of alcohol and pills, as well as copious amounts of sex. Yeezy is living the life that Kanye had been unable to. The song is also the first time Yeezy is mentioned by name when he raps “DJs need to listen to the models / You ain’t got no fuckin’ Yeezy in your Serato? (You ain’t got no Yeezy, nigga?)” (32-34). Yeezy introduces himself as someone that models are demanding. Yeezy sees himself as something that is inseparable to the kind of partying lifestyle implied in that verse. Not only does he partake in a lifestyle of intemperance, but he stands as a symbol conveying that attitude to others as well.

The song “Power” sees Yeezy begin to realize what the capabilities of a monster truly are. The lyrics are introspective, seemingly a trip through Yeezy’s psyche, which is schizophrenic and fragmented. Even damaged however, Yeezy’s id blazes through in the opening lines declaring: “I’m living in that 21st Century, doing something mean to it / Do it better than anybody you ever seen do it / Screams from the haters, got a nice ring to it / I guess every superhero need his theme music” (1-4). Yeezy declares himself a product of the 21st century. He is a sign of the times and a pivotal figure at that. Unfazed by his critics and detractors, their words are like music to him, and not just any music but his own theme music, as Yezy declares himself a superhero. Yeezy even likens himself to Malcom X, using a quote from a police officer who said of Malcom X, “no one man should have that much power.” Yeezy attributes this to himself in the chorus with “no one man should have all that power” (5, Manning 263).

Yeezy would have everyone believe that he is so powerful he cannot be bothered, rapping: “the clock ticking I just count the hours” inferring that he now only concerns himself with the largest parts of life, leaving the menial details behind (6). However later in the song he attacks the cast of Saturday Night Live for making jokes about him. He also refers to himself as “the abomination of Obama’s nation,”
pointing to the president’s comments about him after his interaction with Taylor Swift (48). His anger flips inward and outward throughout the song, but at the end he reminds everyone listening that “at the end of the day, god damn I’m killing this shit /...I got the power to make your life so exciting” (50/57). Yeezy realizes that his true power is his influence; that no matter what he does people listen to him. They pay attention to him and that power can be leveraged to take Yeezy to greater heights than he had ever imagined. With the concept that his newfound monstrous power can be leveraged for control and influence, Yeezy sets off to make a bid to be head-monster-in-charge, and in the track “All of the Lights,” he introduces himself to the world as someone to be seen. The hook of the song is especially revealing as a choir of voices sing:

   Cop lights, flash lights, spot lights / Strobe lights, street lights / (All of the lights, all of the lights) / Fast life, drug life / Thug life, rock life / Every night (all of the lights) / Turn up the lights in here, baby / Extra bright, I want y’all to see this / Turn up the lights in here, baby / You know what I need, want you to see everything / Want you to see all of the lights. (24-34)

Yeezy wants to be seen by all facets of society, good and bad. He not only craves the attention, but he demands it, and refuses to hide any part of himself away from the world. It is not just attention he wants though, it is power and acceptance over and from others. This is readily apparent when examining the choir of voices in the song. It is made up of a layered effort of some of the biggest names in music. From Rihanna and Drake, to Elton John and John Legend, there are fourteen musical superstars whose voices have been melded together to be lifted up in a demand that Yeezy be given the proper attention and respect. The aesthetic choice is fitting, because they all, as monsters of entertainment, are the monsters that Yeezy would place himself above. By having them sing for him, Yeezy ascends to a level fitting of leadership. However, if there is a position of leadership to be held it must be assumed that position is currently held, if not jealously guarded by another.

To arrive at the sixth track of My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy is to finally arrive at “Monster,” and the declaration that Kanye/Yeezy is a motherfuckin’ monster (10). It is in this particular song where the
literal and the narrative of Kanye West’s monster comes the closest to intersecting. Both Kanye’s path as a hip-hop artist and his transformation into the monster Yeezy both have the same goal, which is to be the best of their kind. The “why” of the declaration is clearer now, as it is in response to the question of just who does Yeezy think he is? The song itself speaks to a system of hierarchy within this caste of monsters, as it features five vocalists on the track. Of those five, Yeezy, Jay-Z, and Nicki Minaj are representative of this generational structure. Jay-Z finds himself on top, holding the leadership position that Yeezy would claim for himself. Yeezy holds the spot of the would-be usurper to Jay-Z’s throne, declaring himself more fit to lead a new school of monsters than Jay-Z. Minaj represents a new generation who would follow Yeezy, but she also is representative of a future threat, the same kind Yeezy poses to Jay-Z.

“Monster” begins with an intro from Justin Vernon of Bon Iver asking the ultimate question that Kanye struggled with all throughout 808’s and Heartbreak, namely, “are you willing to sacrifice your life” (4)? While it may seem a question that is too little too late for Kanye, it is in fact a question posed to Yeezy. With his newfound freedom in monstrosity, does he realize the burden of leadership? For as Jay-Z will tell him, heavy is the head that wears the crown. Undeterred, Yeezy launches into his verse, answering the challenge of who he is with “Gossip, gossip, nigga just stop it / Everybody know I’m a motherfucking monster” (9-10). Yeezy finds it disingenuous that Jay-Z would pretend to not know who he is. He knows his reputation now precedes him wherever he goes. There is no longer need for rumor and conjecture because Yeezy has arrived and everyone can see for themselves the monster that he is. Yeezy continues to use his verse to make clear where he views himself in the hierarchy, going on to say:

The best living or dead hands down, huh / Less talk, more head right now, huh / And my eyes more red than the devil is / And I’m about to take it to another level, bitch / No matter who you go and get / Ain’t nobody cold as this / Do the rap and the track, triple double no assists / And my only focus is staying on some bogus shit. (17-24)

Where most would describe themselves as the best alive, Yeezy has broadened that distinction to include everyone to ever come before him, making it clear that no one comes close to his level. Even in
his allusions to the devil, Yeezy must come across as somehow more distinct, to include demonic red eyes that would signify a monstrous power. Yeezy has come to change the way business is being done, to raise the bar and show there will be no one who is worthy to stand in his way because no one is as dangerous as he. Yeezy asserts that he has come this far on his own and has done so by casting aside pleasures that would be only a distraction. Things like love, friends, and family. 

Jay-Z stands in direct opposition to Yeezy in the narrative. Jay-Z represents the old guard, the generation that ushered Hip-Hop into mainstream popular culture. If Yeezy’s monstrosity could be characterized as a vampire, Jay-Z would be Dracula. He says as much in his opening lines, introducing himself with no humility:

Sasquatch, Godzilla, King Kong, Loch Ness / Goblin, ghoul, a zombie with no conscience / Question: What do these things all have in common? / Everybody knows I’m a motherfucking monster. (55-58)

Jay-Z does not see himself as part of a hierarchy; he seems himself as part of a pantheon. Each monster he names is iconic, a creature whose status has withstood the test of time, but one must note that his “question” does not ask how he relates to these monsters, but rather, what they have in common regarding himself. Jay-Z puts himself at the top of his who-is-who of monsters, the best of the best. It is a place he fought hard to get to and is unwilling to relinquish his spot. He warns that “None of you niggas have seen the carnage that I’ve seen / I still hear fiends scream in my dreams… I smell a massacre / Seems to be the only way to back you bastards up” to let Yeezy be dethroned; he has gone as far as to kill to keep his rule and would not hesitate to do so again (61-62/73-74).

The final verse of the song belongs to Nicki Minaj, who is unique to the track in many ways. She is by far the youngest rapper on the track, which allows her the role of representing the newest generation of hip-hop artists/monsters. Being young means she has grown up under the influence of both Jay-Z and Kanye/Yeezy, lending to some loyalty to both parties. Ultimately that allegiance would fall under Yeezy as he symbolizes change in the established order. This is doubly good for Minaj as sole female on the track and the only female to rap a fully developed verse. Like monstrosity, the world of hip-hop can be extremely misogynistic with women not often given
the leading role. Yeezy would see Minaj for what she is capable of, rather than limit her by her sex.

Minaj’s verse is somewhat reminiscent of Kanye’s verse on “See You in my Nightmares” in that it captures the newness of monstrosity. Minaj is certainly not at the level of Jay-Z, nor has she started to reach her stride and realize her true potential as a monster like Yeezy has. Everything she is experiences is new and exciting, though she is not completely sure of what it all means yet, so she seems to be trying everything on for size when she raps:

OK, first things first I’ll eat your brains / Then I’m a start rocking gold teeth and fangs / Cause that’s what a motherfucking monster do / Hair dresser from Milan that’s the monster ‘do / Monster Giuseppe heel, that’s the monster shoe / Young Money is the roster and a monster crew. (87-92)

Everything she comes into contact with and every one of her own actions is potentially monstrous. Minaj blends different monster-like qualities such as flesh eating and fangs in an effort to find her place, and picks these particular qualities simply because it is expected from monsters. To accentuate her monstrous infancy, her voice fluctuates wildly, from sweet and innocent to guttural and screaming in such rapid succession that the listener may never know which voice truly belongs to her, but she is determined to show Yeezy that he should allow her to stand with him, delivering one of the most aggressive and impressive verses on the entire album. She ends her verse ensuring Yeezy that there is no one else who can top her, saying “Besides ‘Ye, they can’t stand besides me,” but also reminding him in a final scream that “Aaaah, I’m a motherfucking monster” (108/113). Again the listener is reminded of the hierarchy at play in the song. Minaj has decided to back Yeezy in his coup attempt, thinking him the better leader for a new generation of monsters. She is younger, hungry, and extremely talented, and while she supports Yeezy now, one day she could just as easily decide to come for his spot, because, as she says, “that’s what a motherfucking monster do” (89).

My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy continues for another seven tracks, and so does the narrative. In fact, the narrative could be followed further by applying the lens of monstrosity to the follow up album Watch the Throne, to find the conflict between Yeezy and Jay-Z reach its climax and conclusion, and on to Cruel Summer to
see how Yeezy adapts to his new position of power. “Monster,” however, is where the transformation of Kanye West into a fully-fledged and realized monster, ends. In losing everything he held dear, a man sacrifices himself to escape the pain, trading his humanity in order to find solace in something other than what he had always known. The abandonment of the superego to the whims of the id allow for an unbridled life, one that exists beyond the acceptable boundaries of social norms. Kanye continues to live at and beyond those boundaries, pushing them further whenever he can, indifferent to the comfort of detractors, and in that space, he creates a place where monsters can thrive.

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“You’re Still Good to Me, if You’re a Bad Kid, Baby”
By Paisley S. Burklow

“In a crisis, in this crisis, don’t remain calm…get agitated and add to the chaos.”

*Organizations are obstacles to organizing ourselves.*
—The Invisible Committee

Stefani Germanatto, better known by her stage name as Lady Gaga, is nationally famous for her outrageous fashion, gender bending performances and politically charged pop songs. She is a strong advocate for marginalized members of society including the LGBT community, differently abled persons, sexually abused individuals and anyone who has ever felt out of place in the world. Her lyrics, performances, fashion and social media posts, especially during the *Born This Way* era, all work together in an effort to support Gaga’s reclamation of the term “monster”.

Certain lifestyles and biological make-ups have, for centuries, been deemed horrific by close minded members of society. Bigotry and prejudices are not new evils in this world. Stephen Asma argues that, “[r]eligious ideologies often dehumanize those who do not fit inside the sanctuary of orthodox” (Asma 249). Lady Gaga takes on the role of Mother Monster, and creates within her art a safe haven for her fans, better known as “Little Monsters”. Her albums are not the only works of art Gaga created for the security of little monsters. She considers her tours, or balls, to be a place where little monsters can come and celebrate being who they want to be without worrying about judgers and scorners. Mother Monster uses social media platforms to communicate with her fans and lift them up with words and pictures. She has tattooed herself in honor of Little Monsters. This act of permanent mark on her body adheres to a new generational idea in which tattoos are no longer a pejorative mark within society,
but rather signs of individuality and artful expression. Everything she puts on her body, whether it is a permanent tattoo or one of the many distinct and temporary wigs that she wears daily, is a sign to Little Monsters that they are not alone in this inconsistent world. Gaga is not afraid to get a little ugly if it means making a point. She does not always wear the most flattering fashion statements because she is not always trying to be pretty. She does not always wear the latest fashion trend because she is not always trying to be the most fashionable. With that being said, her fashion is not for the faint of heart. She mixes glamour and grunge and celebrates sexuality with her body, as she is often wearing minimal clothing. She attempts to make a statement with her fashion or physical appearance and her music. For Gaga, it is all about being meticulous and clear for her audience, Little Monsters and judges alike.

My argument states that Gaga has reclaimed the term “monster” and continues to uphold the notion of beautiful monster. With that being said, I will adhere to this idea myself. Within the confinements of this paper, the word “monster” is being used to reference the ones whom Gaga intends to rejuvenate and advance. “Monster” is a positive term in this essay. The term “judger”, along with other obviously pejorative terms, will be used in reference to the actual villains in society who intend to place marginalized members of society into rigid, narrow minded categories. Monstrosity is all about perspective and Gaga treats the meaning as if it is in flux. Gaga’s action through her different modes of art create a mood of change in America meant to upgrade the Little Monster community (and the rest of the world for that matter) into a new era of acceptance and positivity. She intends to slay the intolerant mindset and rid of the world of its many dogmas by means of her colorful art.

To understand the impact which Gaga has already made in the world, one must first understand who is affected by these dogmas. Anyone can be affected by the opinions and judgments of others, therefore her message can be useful for any human, making her activism extremely universal and needed. In order to also understand the significance of Lady Gaga’s role in the Little Monster community, it is vital to first understand that many different groups of people all over the world are marginalized and considered horrific by others, who think, act, dress, worship and live differently than they do. There are certain groups within society that tend to be marginalized more than others, but no single person is immune to judgment. Gaga’s message
and reclamation is intended for anyone willing to listen and agree. She is heavily influenced and inspired by specific communities, but this is not to say that her lyrics and posts cannot reach anyone who listens and watches.

The way a person is physically born, the person someone chooses to love or marry, the way someone chooses to dress or fix their hair and the overall daily life of unique individuals are often demonized by intolerant people and groups who fear the gates of difference. But, if these differences do no harm to others, why are they ostracized? When a person of a certain belief is not fully understood by another person who has different beliefs, anxieties develop between the two parties and the outcome is often hate and judgment. When cultures refuse to understand and accept other cultures, hate and judgment breed in enormous amounts and cause social injustices that are difficult to bear. Lady Gaga challenges fans and listeners to understand the misunderstood through her lyrics and provides artful explanations of marginalized people and their way of life. By reclaiming the term “monster” and demonstrating her own life style of harmless rebellion, Lady Gaga attempts to break down all of the barriers that centuries of different societies have set in place. Her message of acceptance and empowerment for Little Monsters is more powerful than the iTunes top one hundred list. The tone in her music and celebratory way of life is a living example of rejuvenation for the alienated. Marginalization ultimately threatens identity. Each individual person possesses a right to their own identity from birth. Lady Gaga recognizes this idea and celebrates the monsters and “bad kids” in society. Evidence of monster reclamation is apparent in every song, video, outfit and wig that Lady Gaga shares with the world. Songs, such as “Bad Kids”, videos like “Born This Way”, outfits such as the infamous meat dress, and the different multicolored and weirdly shaped wigs solidify her pure devotion and celebration of differences between all humans.

While Gaga’s first and second studio albums explore themes of monsters and monster metaphors, it is primarily important to take a closer look at Lady Gaga’s third studio album, Born This Way, in
which Gaga actually places herself and her fans within the role of beautiful monster. The title of this album creates a strong tagline for Little Monsters to live by. Being born and created are sacred situations, and Gaga keeps them sacred by alluding that there is beauty and acceptance in the way each person is created. The title, “Born This Way”, reveals that Gaga takes a biological stance concerning the debate of whether gay people are born gay or become gay later in life. Contrary to the first idea (being born gay) is the idea that someone who is gay could have experienced circumstances causing them to become gay. Because of the title of this Lady Gaga album, being gay is a right rather than a problem. Claiming that someone is born gay removes them from the category of being a victim of circumstance or linking their sexuality to a negative situation. In addition, this claim is not limited to the LGBT community. The song continues and acknowledges other social disquiet such as racial issues, disabilities, and social class. Half way through the song the tone switches from a pop rock dance hit to a spoken word verse as Gaga speaks in a very clear almost robotic tone when she chants, “don’t be a drag, just be a queen/ whether you’re broke or evergreen/ you’re black, white, beige, chola decent, you’re Lebanese, you’re orient/ whether life’s disabilities/ left you outcast, bullied, or teased/ rejoice and love yourself today/ ‘cause baby, you were born this way” (Gaga, 2011). Anyone who has ever acknowledged a characteristic of his or her self that is not considered the “norm” can appreciate the idea that we are all born in the exact fashion that we were meant for this world. Ultimately, this stance takes imperfections and makes them beautiful, which is a bold stance to take considering the strict importance contemporary society places upon perfection and beauty.

*Born This Way* features rocky, punkish, pop sounds mixed with images of body modifications. This shows how seriously Gaga revels in difference and individuality. The front album cover art is electrifying and motivating. This album cover features a very black and white close up shot of Lady Gaga’s face, swirling white, blonde hair, her wide open mouth that is showing teeth and either singing or screaming with bright red lips. The back of the album is the same image, only a zoomed out version of the front cover shot, revealing the rest of Gaga’s body which is designed to look like a motor cycle, creating a hybrid figure of human and machine. Motorcycles and leather jackets are often associated with a hard core, degenerate life style. The correlation between degenerate culture, motorcycles and leather

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jackets could be considered a stereotype, and this is exactly where Gaga begins her reclamation. Gaga seizes the opportunity within a stereotype like this to reclaim the pejorative, degenerate implication. She channels a super star mentality with her motorcycle body and bold, open mouth, expressing strength and noise as well as providing a voice for the often voiceless members of society. Another celebratory metaphor set in motion by the motorcycle hybrid image is the symbolism of celebration for those individuals who are differently abled and have medical body modifications. Any differently abled person, who possessed synthetic parts or additions to his or her body, is essentially part human and part machine. Gaga is reveling in their strength and uniqueness of being part human and part machine. The album cover is only the tip of the iceberg, which prepares us for middle fingers to the sky, punk pop celebration album.

For more proof of empowerment, one could look directly to the lyrics of the song “Born This Way”. The song begins, “Just put your paws up, ‘cause you were born this way, baby” (Gaga, 2011). The “paws” Gaga references are all the hands of Little Monsters. She often yells, “put your paws up” during performances, raising her arm to make a claw figure with her fingers and often shows her teeth, snarls her lips, expressing a shabby persona that is loved by many Little Monsters. This galvanizing statement is meant to rally her fans and raise their arms in agreeance that they are proud of their differences. The song continues, “[m]y momma told me when I was young, we are all born superstars” (Gaga, 2011). These lyrics create a mother figure who is giving loving, warm advice to her child. The role of “mother” is important to Gaga and she uses the power of a maternal figure to ease the troubled hearts and minds of those who find comfort in her music while simultaneously dancing and rocking out in
the manner of celebration. Gaga could be considered a “cool mom”. The song pops and punches through more upbeat, uplifting lyrics, and then comes the iconic line, “I’m beautiful in my way, ‘cause God makes no mistakes, I’m on the right track baby, I was born this way” (Gaga, 2011). According to her lyrics, she is claiming to believe in a higher power who created and loves everyone, turning certain sects of Christianity and other religions on its head by using their all-perfect and all-knowing powers in favor of marginalized individuals, rather than the ultimate judger who rejects people of different ideologies. This is only one example of the many different groups and religions who marginalize or reject individuals who are not their prescribed “normal”. Gaga herself identifies as having been raised Catholic. But, while Gaga is acknowledging and giving credit to her higher power, she is also loving others and setting the new standard for humanity to “stop throwing stones at your sisters and your brothers” (Gaga, “Come to Mama”, 2016). This lyric comes from a song on her most recent studio album, released October 2016, which is proof that she is still continuing her ongoing installment of acceptance within humanity. Her themes of love and acceptance in a world full of hate and rejection seem permanent thus far in her career, although she seems to always find new, exciting ways to reach her audience.

When humans are abused mentally and physically, they react. When people are demeaned and mistreated, they fight back. When Little Monsters are judged, they wear their leather jackets and blow cigarette smoke in your face. That could be seen as their way of fighting back. Lady Gaga’s abnormally artistic style might seem raw for some (and we will get to the meat dress, so pun intended), but if she is being peaceful and bringing people together through fashion and music rather than violence, the harm in her message is hard to find at that point. Stephen Asma in his text *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* argues that, “desperate environments create desperate measures. Thug life looks monstrous by the standards of polite society, but it was hatched and nursed in a world where it has distinct advantages” (Asma 247). While Gaga is not endorsing being problematic within society, she is also not lying down and rolling over for the institutions, which create problems where there could be peace. Jack Halberstam, a celebrated transgender academic says, “Welcome to the gagapocalypse! As the environmental crisis turns from bad to worse, as wars break out like wildfire across the globe… and as the social rituals that formerly held communities together lose
their meaning, it is time to go gaga. In a crisis, do not remain calm, do not look for the nearest exit, do not stick your head in the sand; do agitate, do make things worse, do run screaming through the street, and do refuse to return to business as usual. Business as usual is what created this mess in the first place” (Halberstam 132). Halberstam touches on the fact that marginalized people should not be passive in the midst of mistreatment and turmoil. Gaga’s song “Bad Kids” is another manifestation of this call to fight back. In looking closely at some lyrics from her song “Bad Kids” she touches on the fact that each generation is effected, either positively or negatively by the generation before them, their environments and their media. If Gaga can be the Mother Monster who urges her Little Monsters to fight back and stand his or her ground in opposition to unfair judgment and marginalization, one kid who has never had that kind of support can be affected in a positive way. Also, if she can inject media into the world that lifts up the “bad kids” rather than breaking their spirits, this world could be a better place.

Gaga attempts to create positive atmospheres with her music for individuals who are too often cast out. The most artfully, rebellious lyrics within the Born This Way album can be found in the song “Bad Kids”. Why should bad kids have an anthem if they are bad? This question can be answered by first understanding what Gaga means when she uses the term “bad kids.” Gaga begins the song by not singing, but yelling, over quick, strong, electric guitar chords, “We don’t care what people say, we know the truth / Enough is enough of this horse shi t/ I am not a freak / I was born with my free gun / Don’t tell me I’m less than my freedom” (Gaga, 2011). This opening statement acts as catharsis for the singer and for those who are singing, or screaming along. She expresses resistance to the word “freak” and fuels Little Monsters with lyrical ammunition against any judgers. The chorus rejoices, “Don’t be insecure if your heart is pure / You’re still good to me if you’re a bad kid, baby” (Gaga, 2011). This song includes many different forms of neglect for the audi-
en. Lady Gaga is well known for advocating the LGBT community and differently abled community, but she also understands that there are more hidden victims of circumstance such as people who experience bad home lives. As the lyrics continue, she expresses that, “My parents tried until they got divorced ‘cause I ruined their lives / I’m a bad kid and I will survive” (Gaga, 2011). A child whose parents are divorced might feel secluded from the world because of bullying or mental abuse from his or her parents and peers. Lady Gaga’s message is powerful because she extensively includes all forms of insecurity whether it is mental, physical, social, or domestic. No insecurity is too small for Gaga to address. The universality of her message could be the item that holds the Little Monster community together so tightly. Not only does this song express an understanding and provide a place of comfort for those who have been called or considered “bad kids,” it is also a rally for those who have been targeted for not being perfect, and in contemporary society, perfection is a tough and ongoing struggle for many. She shouts another solution for staying strong and not allowing the judgers to take Little Monster’s pride when she says, “Pump your fist if you would rather mess up than put up with this” (Gaga, 2011). The energy of the sounds and solidity in the lyrics provide a safe haven for anyone who has ever felt marginalized.

**Born This Way** not only encapsulates gender issues, domestic problems, or physical problems, it also addresses the ongoing issues of xenophobia. Now more than ever, our country, along with the rest of the world, needs a light shed on the fact that the world is one planet, not a bunch of different countries and sections. She sings in her song titled “Sheibe” that “I don’t speak German, but I can if you like” (Gaga, 2011). She then proceeds to sing catchy German lyrics along with a dance club beat. She admits in the lyrics that she is not fluent in the language, but she attempts to include a sense of national love for the world and shows active experimentation with

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other languages and cultures. She does the same in the song called “Americano” where she sings certain words and phrases in Spanish. Gaga’s music is her original claim to fame, but her fashion statements are second to none. On the opposite spectrum, some highly dislike her style or use her for the punch line of their celebrity jokes. She has often been featured on shows such as *What Not To Wear*, but her fashion statements are not meant to be taken lightly or labeled as “pretty” or “flattering.” One of the most iconic fashion statements Gaga ever made was her appearance at the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards when she wore the infamous meat dress. Many people misinterpreted this fashion statement as an act against animal rights but the metaphor Gaga intended had zero to do with animals and PETA. She explains during her interview with Ellen DeGeneres on her talk show that, “the meat dress was tied to her protest against the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy and was a statement against the governmental restrictions placed on the rights of gay soldiers” (Mapes 1). Gaga continues her explanation and says, “It’s certainly no disrespect to anyone that’s vegan or vegetarian. As you know, I’m the most judgment-free human being on the Earth. It has many interpretations, but for me this evening it’s [saying], ‘If we don’t stand up for what we believe in, if we don’t fight for our rights, pretty soon we’re going to have as many rights as the meat on our bones’ “ (Mapes 1). She also wore a meat bikini on the cover of *Vogue*, the meat being another metaphor this time around. That is, she covered her flesh with other flesh in order to reclaim the idea that people can be seen as pieces of meat. By sexualizing her politics, she harnessed the power of her own body and sexuality, possibly inspiring others to be comfortable with their physicality and their fashion, which is essentially what you use to cover your body. Gaga’s fashion is committed to reclamation to the point that she goes as far as modifying her body with prosthetic implants in order to look different. Not only does Gaga display notions of hybridity in her
art, but she wears this idea around on her body. She reorganizes the human idea of what is valid. She attempts to include all types of people within the category of acceptable human. Monsters are beautiful within the philosophy of Lady Gaga. Her face and shoulder body modifications were a part of her everyday attire during the *Born This Way* era. She wore them to interviews and in most photo shoots. These physical appearance statements are declarations that hybridity of all forms are acceptable. She literally wears her fabulous monster fashion on her bare skin. During the *Born This Way* Era Lady Gaga wore many body modifications and implanted notions in her photos and music videos of character half human, half something else (machine, mermaid, alien, etc.) By doing so, Gaga captures the two ideas that monsters “dwell at the gates of difference” and “monsters are harbingers of category crisis” (Cohen 1). As mentioned earlier, she appears half woman half motorcycle on her album cover. She also displays costumes and characters in her music video “You and I” that appear to be half human, half machine. In the very first scene of the video she is walking down a rural gravel road in Nebraska wearing a sleek, black pants suit, platform stilettos. The close up of her face in this scene reveals that she has metal and wires attached to her chin and a type of bionic arm. She is also seen in the “You and I” music video as a mermaid trapped in a tub, a half human half fish entity. A major portion of the video takes place in a laboratory where she is, part of the time if not trapped in the tub or glowing tube of heads, on an examination table and strapped to different surfaces while being experimented on by a mad scientist type character. All of the forms she takes in this video are traditionally grotesque in some way or another. Whether she is a person with feathers coming out of her neck, or a floating head in a test tube, all are images of interesting, different figures that are being stifled from being their true selves. Gaga artfully comments in this video on the smothering nature of people trying to control innate characteristic of others in order to keep their norm on a comfortable level. This forced comfortability from one party only makes the other party uncomfortable, creating an evil and vicious cycle of unhappi-
ness in the world. In this music video, she is calling for monsters to continue be monsters, and for judgers to stop judging.

Another character Gaga takes on in the “You and I” video is Joe Calderone, her male alter ego. Gaga, as Joe, bends gender and sexually advances her own female self in the video by grabbing her thigh in quite a risqué manner. A popular opinion during this era was disgust for her gendering bending roles and experiences, but Lady Gaga performed these kinds of acts anyway because the message she was attempting to get across is more important than submitting to judgment of others. She bends gender showing the malleable nature of sexuality rather than frigid one-sidedness. Gaga dressed as man and grabbing her own female thigh is also a metaphor for self-love, which is a very important step in being happy within your own mind and heart. Relentless individuality and self-love are tools Mother Monster equips Little Monsters with in this scary world.

Gaga’s art is often loud and boisterous which is one reason why she is famous and listened to, but the element of connection she has with her fans specifically, can be heavily attributed to the fact that she became famous at the same time social media was also exploding in our world. Advancement in technology allows fans to be even more connected with their favorite artists than ever before. Lady Gaga is a prime example of a social media super giant. With over sixty three million followers on twitter she is one of the most followed people in the world. But it is also important to note that Lady Gaga follows copious amounts of fans herself. It is common for famous individuals to follow few people on their social media accounts, but in return have an enormous amount of followers. Lady Gaga is different. She is connected with her fans, tweets them back, comments and likes their photos. She posts stories to snap chat that are from her perspective with messages for her fans to see throughout the day, creating a “girl next door” vibe while also spreading international love and peace. Her connectivity with her fans creates a large, but also tight-knit community of Little Monsters and attempts to repair the holes that things such as cyber bullying have punctured in our culture.
Now, consider the following scenes in regards to what Lady Gaga strives to be for her Little Monsters, and for this hurting world:

Outside, a grey abandoned New York street corner clouded with sooty air and mucky black tops multiple sirens sound in the distance and a dog barking down the street. The faint noise of chain link fence bangs open and closed and then a yellow taxiBlur by and standing across the street is a figure, effortlessly posed with one ankle crossing the other, shoulder leaning up against one of the many brick walls surrounding the area. She’s smoking a cigarette, laughing with two men, all of them dressed in different arrays of worn out leather jackets and denim accessories. She kicks the curb with one of her spiked, leather, gravity, and platform boots. Her legs covered in ripped black fishnet. The back of her leather jacket is studded to spell the words, “Born This Way” with the painted outline of a purple unicorn in mid gallop. One might think this description of Gaga is forgetting to describe her pants, but it has not, because she is not wearing any. She bears thin ripped tights and a tiny, leather, studded panty that matches the skinny bra she wears under the oversized jacket. They finish their cigarettes as the laughter continues and they step inside a door that is labeled, “BACKSTAGE: AUTHORIZED PERSONEL ONLY.”

Inside, she now sits at a glowing vanity, surrounded by hands that are primping, pulling and plucking. She wipes her face with a white cloth, smearing her thick, black eyeliner. She begins to cry, looking to the mirror at her hair dressers reflection and says, “I just don’t want my fans to ever feel…,” she stops talking and puts her head in her hands. She continues again, “I just sometimes feel like a loser still, you know? I know it’s crazy cause it’s like were at the garden,” she continues through soft sobs and more tears, “but sometimes I still feel like a fucking loser kid in high school” Her face is sad, eyes
are closed and she says softly to her friend, “I’m sorry” in a thin, exasperated voice. She wipes away the rest of her black tears with a white cloth and says, “I just wanna be a queen for them you know? And sometimes I don’t feel like one” She grasps the cloth in between her two hands and folds them as if in prayer. Her eyes stay closed, and a peace comes over her face as she sits silently and prays for Little Monsters (HBO special Lady Gaga Presents: The Monster Ball Tour at Madison Square Garden).

*Born This Way* will continue to be an anthem album of Little Monsters, although Gaga has not stopped there. Since *BTW*, she has released two other studio albums, *ARTPOP* (2013) and *Joanne* (2016). *ARTPOP* contains themes that extend the celebratory tone of *BTW* while remaining politically active and expressive. Her most recent album, *Joanne*, contains familial and historical elements that are close to the artist’s heart along with traditional Gaga-ish pop songs that convey the similar message of love and acceptance. Gaga still truly identifies and is steadfast in her role as Mother Monster. Her song “Come to Mama” on the latest album is Gaga’s way of wrapping her arms around her Little Monsters and comforting them in a time of extreme social and political turmoil. The chorus passionately sings:

Come to Mama,
Tell me who hurt ya.
There’s gonna be no future, if we don’t figure this out!
Oh, come tomorrow….
Who are you gonna follow?
...
So why do we gotta
Fight over ideas?
We’re talkin’ the same old shit after all of these years!
So why do we gotta
Tell each other how to live?
The only prisons that exist
Are ones we put each other in.
Gaga’s sounds and style might slightly alter with each new album she produces, but one consistent factor in her art is her dedication to Little Monsters and a better world. She continues to grow as an artist and activist and reaches the hearts and minds of all Little Monsters, young and old, black and white, male and female…you and me. I predict and expect that only more awareness and activism will be brought to the social table by Mother Monster in these politically troubling times. If anyone tries to mess with her Little Monsters, she has loads of lyric and love bullets hiding up her sleeve, ready to aim and fire at anyone who threatens their peace and humanity in this prescriptive world. Some people would argue we are digressing during current times, falling back to an older America with elder, antiquated and patriarchal ideals. But as long as figures such as Lady Gaga are in the media, I am confident certain aspects of our new America are untouchable. In the words of Mamma Monster herself, “Paws up forever, baby.”

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There’s a Monster in My Pocket: The Allure and Fear of Categorizing Others as “Monsters”

By William Brown

“I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel”
—Creature in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein

_Pokémon: The First Movie: Mewtwo Strikes Back_ portrays themes of Monsterology both through its literal monsters as well as its human characters. Throughout _Mewtwo Strikes Back_ the viewer sees monsters and humans deny categorization, the boundary between monster and human get blurred, and the ability for villains, regardless of species, to disguise their appearance to exploit unknowing victims. The denial of categorization, whether a conscious decision or innate characteristic, when a particular person or group desires to understand a person/creature creates a tension in which one is fascinated by the potential of said person/creature, but also fearful of its capability. The blurring of these boundaries not only serves as means to create “monsters” by allowing beings to infiltrate “good” society, it can also provide a positive outcome in which two societies mutually learn about, and thus understand, the other better, thereby respecting differences and preventing conflict.

Although this paper focuses on one Pokémon movie and not the franchise as a whole, it is still important to understand how Pokémon’s use of monstrosity works on a consumerist level. Jason Bainbridge argues that what is described as “monstrous” is often simply “otherness,” and it is that sense of difference that can create the initial attraction/repulsion feeling when dealing with others (Bainbridge 400). “Pokémon” is actually an abbreviation of its initial Japanese title “Pocket Monsters,” and the franchise stems from creator Satoshi Tajiri’s affinity for collecting insects. The premise of Pokémon is to capture different Pokémon and store their data inside an encyclope-
dia called the Pokédex. Pokémon creates a single large culture of Pokémon fans in which many subcultures can coexist. Through the larger context, subcultures are able to explore forms of “otherness” within different subcultures, which prompts attempts to categorize and understand each other, thus turning boundaries of separation into bridges of respect for coexisting, but potentially conflicting, ideas. These subcultures also allow Pokémon as a franchise to constantly produce new monsters that coincide with current fears and anxieties due to a system that Tim Jordan defines as “hyperdifferentiating capitalism” in his essay “The pleasures and pains of Pikachu.” Similarly, Tesar and Koro-Ljungberg argue that “strangers, Gods, and monsters are all names for” otherness, and that children’s experiences with them are necessary so that they can develop skills that allow them to not only differentiate between groups but also be interested in exploring different groups (Tesar, Koro-Ljungberg 696). The creation of new Pokémon retains the overarching allure of capturing and understanding magical creatures as one’s friends while constantly appropriating itself to speak toward current fears and issues. Therefore, not only is Pokémon creating new creatures to be categorized and understood, the company is creating more subcultures that can also then be explored and understood in greater detail.

In his Seven Theses, Cohen writes that monsters function because of their “refusal to participate in the classificatory ‘order of things,’” thus denying categorization (Cohen 6). Inherent in the definition of categorization is the ability to understand, or classify, a particular subject, which becomes a crux in some of the roles within the film. In Mewtwo Strikes Back, scientists are attempting to clone a Pokémon called Mew. While most Pokémon have a specific type to which they belong such as fire, water, and electric, Mew has the unique ability of not belonging to a specific type, which allows Mew to learn every ability. This denial of type is Mew’s denial of categorization, and it creates an allure for scientists to study. However, because Mew is a very rare Pokémon, scientists are unable to locate an actual specimen to study. Instead, they must try and create a clone using Mew’s DNA. The scientists’ cloning of Mew not only serves to understand Mew and how its genetic code functions, it also implies a demand to place Mew within a category, because the more one learns of a specific person or thing, the more that person has the ability to classify it based on its strengths, weaknesses, and resistances. As one further studies a particular subject, though, more information arises that could
potentially be frightening, as is the case when the scientists succeed in cloning Mew.  

*Mewtwo Strikes Back* begins with a narrator claiming that both humans and Pokémon constantly search for the meaning of life, and while he describes this, the viewer can also hear a voice that he/she learns to be Mewtwo’s asking both “Who” and “Where am I?” The movie then cuts to a lab in which the viewers see Mewtwo in his case while a group of scientists are talking. Therefore, the movie creates a distinction in which the humans, at least this particular group, are searching for their answer via science and genetic experimentation with Pokémon. By breaking down the Pokémon genetic code and examining what makes them different to humans, the scientists can also learn what distinguishes themselves as human. However, their experiment does not create a clear line that bifurcates the realm of human and Pokémon, partially because they have not created Pokémon; they have created a clone. Not only that, this clone becomes monstrous partially because it disrupts “natural organic procedures” in that it does not naturally decompose and be consumed, a process which Lestel discusses with Frankenstein’s creature. The monstrosity derives not only from its blurred boundary and lack of category, but the way in which that denial of categorization disrupts natural processes due to the scientists’ breaking the biological cycle by inserting energy into something unnatural. Therefore, rather than Mewtwo allowing the scientists to fully understand themselves, Mewtwo blurs the line between Pokémon and human even further by becoming an anthropomorphic creature in regards to both appearance and mental capabilities.

Mewtwo seeming to have a human consciousness stuck within a Pokémon body disturbs the viewer by relating him/her to an animal. In his theory text *On Humour*, Simon Critchley explains this effect by stating, “When the animal becomes human…we laugh out loud[, b]ut when the human becomes animal, the effect is disgusting” (Critchley 33). Critchley argues that jokes in which animals behave like humans are deemed funny because they are absurd, while jokes about humans behaving as animals are disturbing because they remind the human of his/her id—that humans have primal desires as well. When Meowth, a Pokémon that has taught himself to speak, talks to humans, it gets shaken off and seen as cute and absurd. But when Mewtwo, a being that seems stuck between humans and animals, speaks, the viewer finds less humor because it pairs humans directly with Mewtwo, his
monstrosity, and his deconstruction of biological processes. This fear shares similarities with those in which people are afraid of artificial intelligence, because it prompts one to ask if man will one day manage to create a super-race or superior, artificially intelligent robots that will be able to take over the earth and eliminate humans due to their not needing people to survive.

The initial lab scene opens with Dr. Fuji, a scientist interested in cloning, and his team congratulating each other on their achievement, and the viewer can hear one say, “Call Giovanni,” the leader of Team Rocket that funded the experiments. Before the scientists can celebrate too long though, Mewtwo, who had been resting in the fetal position with wires connected to him similar both in appearance and function to an umbilical cord, (Figure 1) breaks out of his cloning chamber and begins to destroy the lab. The image of Mewtwo resting in the chamber shows how Mewtwo represents the birth of a new subspecies of cloned Pokémon. Specifically, Dr. Fuji says that Mewtwo is “greater than Mew, improved by human ingenuity,” which begins to form the hierarchy in which humans are superior to Pokémon and the creatures are subservient tools. Furthermore, it ties in to the idea that humans constantly alter animals phenotypically in order to make them more preferable in both industrial and domestic environments (Kleisner and Stella). However, Dr. Fuji is not simply interested in cloning Pokémon, rather he wants to use this technology to clone his deceased daughter. Therefore, Dr. Fuji is actually testing his hypotheses of cloning on his universe’s conception of animals before subjecting the same treatments to his daughter’s DNA.

The obfuscation of his end-goal allows Dr. Fuji to manipulate his team of scientists to assist him in gathering data in a controversial field. Also, the dialogue about calling Giovanni is important, as Giovanni leads Team Rocket—an illegal corporation later that focuses on steal-
ing Pokémon—which causes the viewer to discover that even the initial moment of happiness and celebration subverts itself by revealing that not only were the experiments were funded by a criminal, the experiments were also being used for the personal gains of Dr. Fuji. Two individuals are manipulating others for individual gain—Giovanni wanting a super race of Pokémon and Dr. Fuji wanting to bring back his daughter. This manipulation shows how technology, when placed in the wrong hands or pushed by a negative force, can be unethical and problematic even when one could argue that the technology could enhance everyone’s overall life, such as nuclear fission being used for warfare as well as energy. At the same time, the idea of testing scientific theories on animals creates a sense of hierarchy to which the viewer can relate. However, the film later challenges the standard hierarchical system through Mewtwo breaching both the physical and mental boundaries between humans and Pokémon.

Mewtwo challenges the established hierarchy both through its visual and mental/intellectual functions. Typically all Pokémon of the same species look identical, regardless of gender or age, but Mewtwo looks much different than the original Mew. Mewtwo is tall, has a form that slightly resembles a human, and sharp lines characterize his defining features. In contrast, Mew is small, has smooth edges, and is always seen carelessly floating through the air or being playful. In fact, Mew resembles a fetus more appropriately, which forms a rift between the natural origin of a species and the laboratory-created origin. These physical differences automatically sparks dissonance between the two, as it seems Mewtwo is a failed clone in that it does not visually match. Similar to Frankenstein’s monster, Mewtwo is close enough that one can see the relation, but the more aggressive nature allows the viewer to automatically place Mewtwo in a category of “other,” because it seems to exist in a realm between Pokémon and humans. Mewtwo serves as a visual, anthropomorphic bridge with which the reader sees the differences between human and Pokémon. However, unlike Frankenstein’s monster, Mewtwo’s brain seems to evolve along with his physical form, allowing him to not only use telekinesis but also telepathy in order to communicate with humans via their own language. In this way, Mewtwo becomes what Lestel defines as a “meta-monster,” which is a monster that “searches for human status outside the realm of [its] own species (Lestel 260). Therefore, rather than creating a clone, it seems as though Dr. Fuji has found a way to manipulate the genetic code in such a way to speed
up evolution to create a being that the world is not yet ready for, as he cannot appropriately fit within the Pokémon category. Using his telepathy, Mewtwo realizes that the scientists no longer want him and are afraid of him, which leads to his blowing up the lab.

Mewtwo’s interspecific communication between humans and Pokémon becomes another way in which he breaks boundaries. All Pokémon can understand human language, but not all humans can understand the Pokémon’s. Most Pokémon can only say their own name, and although other Pokémon are able to understand what each other says, many humans cannot. Mewtwo’s understanding of both humans and Pokémon and his ability to communicate with both becomes one of his dominant sources of power as it helps him exist outside the realm of simply being a Pokémon clone. Mewtwo has a deep, male voice while Mew has a quiet, high-pitched voice, which the movie uses as an objective correlative to portray both Mewtwo’s power and his more aggressive nature. Therefore, not only does Mewtwo’s physical form make him difficult to categorize, his ability to exist on the same metaphysical plane as humans and converse openly with them also sets him apart. Other Pokémon have psychic abilities utilizing telekinesis, but only Mewtwo can also use his psychic powers to communicate via telepathy—an ability that seems to place him in a higher rank than other Pokémon as it allows him to exit the realm of Pokémon and enter the same metaphysical plane as humans, thus making him a threat to both sides.

After being abandoned by the scientists, Mewtwo encounters Giovanni who wants to use Mewtwo’s power on behalf of Team Rocket. Although all humans have Pokémon and many assist with chores, Team Rocket is the only group that actually enslaves the Pokémon against their will. All other Pokémon serve as happy companions to their trainers. Part of Team Rocket’s method is that the members, particularly Jessie, James and Meowth, dress up in disguises in order to get closer to the movie’s protagonists, Ash, Misty and Brock. Meowth also has the unique ability to speak English, and is the only Pokémon other than Mewtwo with this ability. However, Meowth had to learn through training; it is not an innate ability such as Mewtwo’s. While Mewtwo can further use this ability to control humans and have them speak for him, Meowth has to use disguises to hide the fact that he is human and because of that fails to deconstruct the boundary in the same anthropomorphic way that Mewtwo does. In contrast, a Pokémon named Ditto does exist that has the opposite
ability as Meowth—it can shape shift into other forms as it pleases, but it cannot speak. Mewtwo is the only Pokémon capable of doing both, although the physical is only to an extent.

Team Rocket utilizes their ability to “pass” and deceive the protagonists in attempts to steal their Pokémon without much physical conflict because they lack proficiency in battle, but it also ties into the denial of categorization. Team Rocket is feared because they are so elusive and difficult to find despite their being a large organization, not because the physical prowess of each member. They are capable of role-switching very quickly in order to adapt to their surrounding and exploit it for their thievery. Their sense of monstrosity does not derive from physical prowess as it often does in tales involving creatures, rather it encompasses their motives and means by which they are able to perpetrate society. Rather than sneaking at night and stealing Pokémon, they utilize costumes such as nurses in order to coerce people into giving them Pokémon under reasonable circumstances while having a getaway plan. Therefore, the ability to alter one’s appearances and infiltrate another society does not have to stem from a being that can already be labeled as monster due to its physical appearance, rather the ability itself becomes monstrous when used corruptly.

Giovanni, who hides his identity as the leader of Team Rocket by being the leader of a Pokémon gym, deceives Mewtwo by saying that he can help Mewtwo learn to consciously use his powers while he ultimately tries to control Mewtwo with a metallic suit. Mewtwo catches on to this deception, though, and ultimately leaves Giovanni, thus isolating himself again. Whereas Mew’s denial of categorization adds alluring mystery, Mewtwo’s creation leads to his being refused categorization and being ostracized. He is not completely Pokémon, nor is he completely human; he belongs to a group that only includes himself. Mewtwo longs to belong to a group, though, which leads to his stealing of Dr. Fuji’s technology to create his own species. In order to get specimens, he devises a plan to lure trainers to his island where he can capture and clone their Pokémon. Because Mewtwo occupies a space between human and Pokémon, he cannot pass effectively in either community. Mewtwo uses his psychic powers to control both a human and a Pokémon that he can control and communicate through, which not only becomes his method of deception, but also a display of power as he decides to control a Pokémon nurse—an integral part of society which many trainers rely on—and Dragonite—the most powerful, non-legendary Pokémon in existence. He uses these two
to deliver his invitation for the strongest trainers to challenge him on his island he names New Island.

New Island’s name shows how Mewtwo believes that he and his creations on that island will become the new superior race. He challenges only the strongest trainers to come to his island, and then creates a storm the characters say is out of a prophecy to ensure that only the most capable trainers and Pokémon can reach him. Rather than starting from the bottom and working his way up to the top, this shows how Mewtwo decides to challenge the current hierarchy by starting at the top. If he can defeat the top tier trainers and their Pokémon he can solidify himself as the new leader and “master of both humans and Pokémon alike” (31:32). Not only that, he also wants the trainer’s Pokémon so that he knows his clones come from strong Pokémon. Therefore, his process becomes similar to genetic cross-breeding in that he chooses only select members to breed in order to ensure that his yield is resilient and strong, while also ethnocentric because he believes that there cannot be any other race superior to his own. Rather than live in harmony, he wants to strengthen the system of hierarchy while maintaining a position at its top.

After Mewtwo lures the trainers to his island, the issue of appropriating science for one’s controversial/unethical reward arises again as Mewtwo manipulates the cloning process. Rather than using it to unlock genetic secrets and understand himself more, he attempts to remove his creations’ mental restraints that hold back their power in an attempt to create a super-species of Pokémon. Because he is a hyper-evolved organism, he needs to create a word that is able to sustain him, which he attempts to create by himself. However, the desire to be accepted remains, as he reveals that he decided to begin his clones with the same three Pokémon that trainers choose from when they begin their journey. Therefore, despite wanting to create his own race, he still shows a desire to connect and belong to the pre-existing world. However, humans abusing him have suppressed these feelings. This continued abuse by multiple humans leads him to believe that all humans are bad and want to enslave Pokémon, thus creating a hatred for humans. This shows Mewtwo’s hatred was not an innate characteristic and he was not born a monster such as Dr. Fuji believed. Instead, Mewtwo became a monster because of his treatment, and his desire to make a new species of Pokémon exists more so that the Pokémon will be too strong to be controlled and thus enslaved by humans. Therefore, even after he has been mistreated, he
still seeks a purpose that he believes to be good, he simply goes about fulfilling his desires with controversial methods. Mewtwo’s belief that he serves a greater purpose shows that monsters are not sadistic or evil, rather that they have ideas that differ from the accepted norms while still stemming from similar desires to improve one’s own society. Despite Mewtwo’s existence as the technical minority in terms of numbers, he sees himself as a member of the eventual “correct” race, which leads him to wanting to create that race.

When Mewtwo creates his own species of Pokémon, they are also visually different than the originals, although the changes are not as drastic. The primary difference is that most of Mewtwo’s clones all have striations and markings on their bodies that resemble scars (Figure 2), which plays into the idea of creatures frequently being categorized as monsters strictly based on their appearance. Not only are horror-genre “monsters” often physically different, people being physically different often leads to a person/group being ostracized and labeled as monster, despite simply being different. This ranges from certain animals being avoided for being ugly to the extent of the Hamitic myth being used to justify racism. In fact, in their article “Monsters we met, monsters we made,” Kleisner and Stella argue that most forms of monstrosity stem from human creation, whether it be physically via phenotypic modifications or simply through metaphysical, ideological constructions. (Kleisner and Stella). Cultures form unique zeitgeists regarding what is perceived as beautiful/preferred, so when something falls outside of the current zeitgeist, the otherness is unappreciated and often ridiculed. Therefore the creation of a “monster” takes place on both sides—the people who label a person/group as other, and the person/group that reacts whether in acceptance or rejection of that title.

A similar form of ridicule leads Mewtwo to rejecting both humans and Pokémon, because he cannot fit fully in either category. Because of this, Mewtwo actually removes the mental constrictions of his
clones so that they feel no hesitation in remorse during their battle and do not struggle with the same internal conflict that Mewtwo does. Mewtwo’s internal struggle and his attempt to block the same struggle from his clones’ minds shows that his feeling of ostracism stems from both his ability to perceive differences and his inability to ignore/accept them. That being said, Mewtwo also begins to participate in the same thing that he claims he hates—the enslavement of Pokémon. Rather than create his own race and live peacefully with them, he further isolates himself by using them as tools to eliminate the preexisting communities despite the enslavement of Pokémon being the initial issue that drove him to hating humans. Therefore, no matter how hard Mewtwo tries to reject the current methods and see his existence as something greater, the movie forces him to realize that he is the same as everyone else.

Despite the differences being clear at the beginning of the battle, the clones and Pokémon become indistinguishable as the battle progresses (Figure 3). This transformation makes the viewer anxious as he/she no longer knows which Pokémon are “good” and “bad.” *Pokemon: The First Movie* does this to show that appearance does not actually matter. The movie creates a system throughout the first half in which the viewer believes he/she can discern between good and evil visually in order to then remove the visual cues and show how appearance-based judgment serves as a fabricated belief system. While the Pokémon fight, the song in the background repeats, “Brother, my brother, tell me what are we fighting for” (55:47), a question that circulates within the Pokémon’s minds. As the battle wears on, the clones and originals are shown to be equals and begin to share a mutual desire to stop fighting—an idea the viewer receives by Team Rocket’s Meowth translating his conversation with the cloned Meowth which refuses to fight him. The mutual decision to stop fighting each other furthers the notion that physical appearance alone does not lock one group out from another,
rather that learned behavior does. Instead of continuing to fight, each pairing of Pokémon and clone begins to collapse onto one another in exhaustion—a physical representation of their realization that the differences between the two of them are not actually important. However, this realization takes longer to occur with Mewtwo.

The battle between Mew and Mewtwo ends with Ash running between both of their attacks, which serves as the actual collision of the three main groups in the movie—humans, Pokémon, and clones. At this point, Pikachu, the first Pokémon Ash received that typically stands on his shoulder, runs over and tries desperately to revive him. Pikachu tries to revive Ash by shocking him—an homage to Frankenstein giving his monster life via electrical galvanism—while all the humans, Pokémon, and clones watch and begin to cry. Everyone crying shows how the different groups were able to come to a common ground when someone who wanted to be an ally to each group was inflicted harm. Therefore, the boundaries between them begin to deconstruct in their grief. At first Mewtwo cannot understand why the Pokémon were so upset, but Mew explains to him that it derives from Ash’s desire to truly be friends with all Pokémon, not exploit them as the creators of Mewtwo did. This makes Mewtwo have an epiphany and say, “I see now that the circumstances of one’s birth are irrelevant. It is what you do with the gift of life that determines who you are” (105:00). This ties back into the argument of groups making others out to be monstrous based on cultural differences. Because Mewtwo was so caught up with his own creation that set him apart biologically, he was unable to see that there were ideological idiosyncrasies amongst humans, some of which he agreed with. Mewtwo decides to call off the battle and do no further harm to the humans or their Pokémon.

Despite calling off the battle, Mewtwo still does not think that the humans should coexist with the clones because the fear of humans abusing that technology again is too high. Mewtwo destroys the laboratory equipment and secludes himself with his clones far away from humans, another homage to Frankenstein, to ensure that the data and evidence of cloning are lost. In this way, the film’s “monster” becomes its hero, as it makes a self-sacrifice for the greater good, which connects to the idea of monsters being both alluring and repulsing. If Mewtwo did not have any evidence of having redeemable qualities, he would have been unbelievable. His ability to feel empathy/sympathy also made his terror more real to the viewer. Therefore, although the
movie denies the viewer the “happy” ending with everyone coexisting, it does end in a self-sacrifice stemming from ideological growth and Mewtwo is finally allowed to have a group rather than be further ostracized. Mewtwo realizes that he, Pokémon, and humans can never be entirely the same and completely fall into neat categories, but that they are not entirely different, either. He also respects that he and his clones were not properly designed to fit with the others strictly based from a biological standpoint, so rather than risk potential competition between species, Mewtwo decides that it would be best to live independently from one another so as not to spark later conflict.

Monstrosity stems from a person’s or creature’s ability to infiltrate a separate society from their own and spark confusion. Mewtwo feeds on this as he can partially fit within two categories—humans or Pokémon—but does not fully fit within either. Therefore, any interaction with either group serves as an act of infiltration. Both Pokémon and humans fear his destructive power as well as his mental prowess, because it ties in to Foucault’s argument that in order for a monster to exist, it must be “not only a violation of the laws of society but also a violation of the laws of nature. Its very existence is a breach of the law at both levels” (Foucault 34). Whether the monster is a person that switches forms to infiltrate such as a werewolf, Jekyll/Hyde, or Team Rocket, or the fear has its own body with which it moves around such as Frankenstein’s creature, Godzilla, and Mewtwo, the “monster” at its simplest form is an “othered,” person, idea, or belief than the person it frightens. Therefore, rather than boundaries being formed to keep monsters out, the construction of boundaries leads to the creation of monsters by disallowing groups to interact fully with each other.

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“Come See What’s Underneath”:
Monstrous Interiority in *The Babadook*

By Kaleigh Ingram

“My mother always told me
No monster lived beneath my bed,
But she had failed to warn me
It laid on top of it instead.”

—Erin Hanson

One would expect to find grotesque monsters lurking in the darkness of a low-lit horror film, but by using the aesthetics of horror alongside a nontraditional plot structure allows a director to use stereotypical styles but repurpose their meanings. Due to the ability and freedom allowed by visual representations, film provides an outlet for monstrosity in ways which written literature may be unable to achieve. *The Babadook* (2014), directed by Jennifer Kent is categorized under the genre horror due to Kent’s use of signature horror characteristics including her use of lighting and sound, but fundamentally Kent uses the aspects to signal a larger social commentary. *The Babadook* chronicles a series of isolated days between a widow, Amelia, and her sex-year-old child Sam during which they encounter a monster that ultimately reveals the monstrosity in her. They find a children’s book in their home explicitly detailing a shadowed monster plaguing
a mother as she terrorizes her child. *The Babadook* uses a conflated literal and figurative monster, the duality of the monster shown with stylized aesthetics to reveal the monstrosity surrounding unaddressed grief. It is through this unaddressed grief that the audience sees Amelia’s trauma and how losing not only her husband but also her identity as a woman is enhanced by the associations of motherhood.

The film immediately orients the viewers into a state of overwhelming blue-gray tint; an aesthetic Kent maintains throughout the film, only contrasting it with the Babadook’s red in order to provide visual duality paired with the narrative’s dual nature. Whereas a hyper-saturated tint focusing on warm colors, reminiscent of sunshine, would frame the film for the viewer as an uplifting emotional landscape; the blue-gray hue positions the audience to view the characters in a dulled emotional state, forewarning the negativity to come in *The Babadook*. Amelia and Sam’s interior home, decorated exclusively with the already familiar blues and grays, also serves to visually display Amelia’s muted emotional state. The only non-muted colors in the film are red and black, always solely in relation to the Babadook itself. Both black and red are associated with the physical Babadook creature. The Babadook appears as an opaque black which creates a distinct contrast in comparison to the multiple scenes of gray. Red, also associated with the monster, occurs initially on the cover of the children’s book “Mister Babadook” and then again within the book to depict blood. Breaking the established norm of the color scheme to display the Babadook signals to the audience that the Babadook itself is a fracture from the normalcy of muted emotions for Amelia, and is instead characterized by powerful emotions and actions. Bright red blood contrasting the dulled colors visually signifies the narrative concept that blood or powerful emotion will breach Amelia’s depression-like state. The audience, led by the events displayed in “Mister Babadook” and the visual aesthetics, is led to believe that the red represents the literal spilling of blood, whereas the actual events of the film show Amelia ultimately saved by powerful emotion towards her own blood, her son.

Kent uses character placement alongside the other aesthetics to show Amelia’s desired separation from Sam. Amelia longs for a separation from her son, shown by her physical presence near him. When they sleep in the same bed Amelia places herself on the edge of the bed farthest from Sam. In order to create distance in the bed between them she must physically remove his body from touching hers. In
one scene Sam discovers his mother fully dressed in the bathtub and she asks him to join her, also fully clothed. The medium shot Kent chooses shows both Amelia and her child in the same scene with space between them, visually representing the emotional distance between them. The scene also brings up associations with motherhood. It is not uncommon for mothers to spend bath time with their young children to create quality time and building trust. Kent destabilizes the initial connotation to remind the viewer how far removed Sam and his mother are from a functional relationship. Sam whispers, “I don’t want you to go away” representing both his fear of her possible suicide and his fear of her personality change (Kent). He recognizes a change in her and expresses his fear in this venerable and tense scene. Amelia and Sam do not use genuinely affectionate touch until the end of the film when Amelia has determined she will defeat the Baba-dook. She desires a separation between herself and her son because she has lost her own sense of self in the process of motherhood. The only scene where Amelia enjoys leisure time separate from her home and child occurs after leaving work under the guise of a sick child but instead of getting Sam, Amelia goes to the mall for ice cream. The film purposefully uses Amelia’s stillness in contrast to the other people in the mall’s time-lapse movement to show time passing. Once Amelia returns to her car she witnesses another couple kissing and observes them extendedly, longing for adult intimacy. The interruption to her staring follows the woman in the kissing couple seeing Amelia watching them. It isolates Amelia because the eye contact from the woman in couple reminds Amelia she is not part of that moment. She is immediately forced back into her own reality where she checks her phone to find multiple missed notifications regarding her son. This starkly contrasts the leisure of the afternoon. This moment of Amelia’s personal life is the only time in the film where she enjoys an uninterrupted activity for herself is vital because she is required to take time she does not have away from responsibilities to order to achieve this limited “free” time. It shows her inability to have a personal life of her own because of her single parent status created added responsibilities to her child.
Sam’s behavior maintains a point of conflict in the film initially developing his behavior as the source of Amelia’s exhaustion. One of the films first few scenes illustrates a few of Sam’s bad behaviors, some of which are violent in nature. Amelia removes Sam from school due to the result of his behavior. After expressing judgment for Amelia’s parenting the administration suggested a monitor for Sam signaling him as differently abled than the other children, Amelia’s response removed her child from school. His behavior initially looks as though it may be the reasoning for her issues she is blamed for his behavior creating “mother-blame” as Blum describes in their article “Mother-Blame in the Prozac Nation.” Blame placed on Amelia by the authority figures present, the administration functions as Blum details, “The mother valor/mother-blame binary serves, in modern Western cultures, to hold mothers responsible for child outcomes and thus for the health of families, future citizens, and the nation” (Blum 202). Continuing with, “Such good mothers with ostensibly selfless devotion, are policed and police themselves through the fear of mother blame, being judged inadequate, unnatural, or selfish” Blum describes Amelia’s own parenting anxiety as a reaction to the authority figure’s judgment (Blum 202). Ultimately, it is Amelia’s unhealthy emotional state impacting and creating her monstrous child but the blame placed onto her only escalates her issue. Representative of society, authority figures such as the police, doctor, and school officials all view Amelia’s child as a reflection of her abilities as a mother but refuse to offer solutions functionally worsening her emotional well-being.

Her unintended single mother status caused by the sudden loss of her husband during a car wreck on the way to give birth forces Amelia into multiple roles during the moment of Sam’s birth. She becomes both a widow and a single mother at the same moment. The audience only witnesses the days leading up to Sam’s seventh birthday and therefore the seventh anniversary of her husband’s death but in that time it becomes noticeable that her parenting style holds similarities to attachment parenting. When examining Sam’s inability to sleep alone without nightmares, his need for her constant attention, and her hesitance to allow him socializing without her present, one sees her parenting style as ineffective and potentially toxic but it is her own loss of self that causes her insecure connection with her child. With his consistent need for her attention the audience sees her only in relation to him. Amelia, when not with Sam, works her nursing home job to support them. She exhibits increased irritation at her job,
seen when she sarcastically calls out bingo numbers. Considering her previous preferred job as a children’s book writer is far from her current profession her irritation seems justified. After her husband, whose profession was also in the arts, passes away, the viewer is left to presume Amelia needed the stability of her nursing home job in order to monetarily support Sam. Therefore, after her husband’s death Amelia is forced to cope with widowhood and motherhood providing no space for her version of herself as these labels describe a type of femininity placed on to her. These sacrifices made for Sam without the anticipated help from her partner has led Amelia to losing the core self she possessed prior to Sam. Paired with the already strenuous pressures of motherhood Amelia is unable to cope with the trauma of losing her spouse or the effort of rediscovering herself outside of motherhood. Amelia attempts to reclaim her femininity and rediscover sexuality through masturbation but Sam interrupts her by walking in after fear of a monster. Writer Kaplan claims her desire to repossess this part of herself while still as a mother is a conflict many women face, “even when they are in heterosexual marriages, women have difficulties linking these three aspects of their lives” (409). Considering Amelia remains single her attempts to maintain a sexual identity while combining her work and parental identity are only made more challenging. Sam’s interruption during her self-pleasure is indicative of their larger relationship in which he takes precedence over Amelia’s needs, desires, and identity.

Amelia attempts to place Sam first but this model of parenting becomes unsustainable due to Amelia’s unaddressed trauma. Amelia’s trauma regarding the loss of her husband in a car crash on the way to give birth to their child is revealed in the first scene, set up as a flash-back. Her thoughts on the trauma are interrupted by her child screaming, “Mommy” immediately and visually followed by her enacting a stereotypical mother role and checking for monsters under his bed. Sam whines that he has “had the dream again” allowing the viewer to understand this interruption is not the first time, but rather a routine for Amelia and Sam. The aesthetics and quick camera cuts as well as movement only heighten the perceived repetition. Multiple scenes further display her lack of time to herself due to her child’s actions. For example, within the first three minutes of the film the camera focuses on Sam in bed with Amelia with hands clinching around her neck until she untangles his limbs from her and moves the furthest away from him as possible while still in the same bed. Amelia physically removes
his body from her own. A similar type of action occurs in a later scene but this time she forcefully pushes him away yelling, “don’t do that!” (Kent). She must put a physical and emotional space separate from him while being unable to achieve it. Kent demonstrates this with her character placement. Researchers in a 2003 study examined the various facets of relationships between mothers and their children who live in poverty. These researchers Diener, Neivar, and Write discovered a connection between increased depression in mothers with less secure attachments with their children. They state, “given that maternal depression is linked to less-sensitive maternal behavior, one would expect maternal depression to be associated with higher rates of insecure attachment. In fact, there appears to be fairly reliable association between depression and insecure attachment when attachment is assessed after 15 months” (156). In addition to the other scenes mentioned, Kent uses a meal scene to fully develop the concept of space. Meals, typically a time for familial representation and affection, are shown negatively in The Babadook. Amelia and Sam eat on opposite ends away from each other, not unlike bedroom scene between the two. In places where viewers expect to find happy conversations between mother and son the viewer is met with an amplified silence. The inability to sustain such a parenting style combined with other factors causes Amelia’s breakdown. Cinematically, Amelia’s inability to sleep is shown by her exaggerated dark circles, disheveled appearance, and her constant desire for more sleep which is only exuberated when Sam is pulled out of school due to his “significant behavior problems” (Kent). Amelia begins sleeping even less and showing more overt symptoms of depression; including a constant desire to sleep and an inability to get out of bed causing her to miss responsibilities like her job and basic housework.

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These issues are only symptoms of the real problem, her inability to process the trauma of her husband’s death. Due to the immediate birth of her son she was thrust into both widowhood and motherhood at the same time. The unanticipated sacrifices, which accompanied her sudden single motherhood, further her separation from herself as her own sense of self is replaced by motherhood. She is required to abandon her creative career as a children’s writer to acquire a more steady day job of retirement home worker presumably for monetary and time reasons. Her removal from her self in order to replace her view of herself with motherhood amplifies these issues. She cannot reach the idealized mother figure due to her position as a single parent, viewed as non-normative by society. The non-normativity stems from the trauma of losing her husband resulting in a loss of the position of wife as well. She cannot become the ideal mother due to her inner thoughts regarding her husband’s death and child’s birth. At the lowest point of her breakdown she screams to Sam, “Don’t you know how many times I wished it was you, not him, that died” and continues with, “sometimes I just want to smash your head against a brick wall until your fucking brains pop out!” (Kent). Her inner thoughts triggered by the loss of her husband and her worsening mental state envisions violence against her own child. Yet Sam sees a different option. He replies, “You’re not my mother” expressing he differentiates between his mother and her mental illness (Kent). This scene although dark, establishes hope for both Sam and his mother. If he considers a difference between the monster in his mother and his true mother that means that fighting the monster returns his mother.

The literal monster begins to appear after Amelia begins her breakdown paralleling her existence with the monster’s. She morphs into a monstrous mother after her mental health declines so fully that she can no longer function as a mother or herself. The audience must recognize Amelia’s forced parenting style due to her husband’s death resembles certain aspects of attachment parenting only escalating her issues. She gave up her preferred job to obtain a steady job but even so still occupies the lower class. Her previous job holds significance when considering “Mister Babadook” is a children’s book. Although it is left for interpretation how the book arrived in their home the parallel between her and the monster is not lost on the audience. Her niece’s birthday party presents the reminder of her class status when the mothers of a traditional, heterosexual, nuclear family purposefully call attention to Amelia’s lack of a husband and
how single motherhood places her below their societally legitimized pairings. The idea of multiple kinds of motherhood is not foreign to film as Lynda Bundtzen discusses in her article “Monstrous Mothers: Medusa, Grendel, and Now Alien”. Amelia eventually becomes the monstrous mother but scenes leading up to her internalizing the Babadook point to her inadequacy as a mother. The concepts of multiple motherhoods, with clear distinction as to which kinds are correct for mothers to enact reinforce the structure. Although motherhood can take many forms only the societally accepted motherhood is idealized. Other types of motherhood, like Amelia who sacrifices often but still struggles with her mental illness are rejected. Bundtzen explores this concept using Alien where she claims, “The major confrontation of the film, in fact, will not be impotent male marines vs. alien Big Mama, but between Ripley, a woman who practices the maternal as compassionate care vs. a biological-maternal principle of monstrous proportions, embodied in the alien other” (14). While in The Babadook there is no alien to juxtapose Amelia with, she struggles with the imposed requirements of motherhood. As single working mother Amelia is subject to criticism throughout the entire film for her inability to reach the ideal motherhood. Therefore, when placed in conflict between herself and the ideal mother partnered with her other circumstances produces an alternate, monstrous, Amelia who succumbs to the Babadook and attempts to murder her own child.

To begin with the viewer only sees Amelia and her son a few weeks before his seventh birthday but at this point in their life Amelia has limited contact with others, which progresses to a full isolation for herself and her child. She has regular contact with her sister but when Sam’s behavior becomes challenging it creates a rift between the two causing a loss in their contact. Amelia shows no interest in dating even when a coworker expresses romantic interest. Her self-isolation only worsens throughout the film. She first isolates her child from school then herself from work. These two choices create a space where only her and her child are present for extended periods of time; there is no break for her to live her own life. This quickly becomes toxic due to her unaddressed mental health issues but it also points to something more sinister. Only after Amelia’s sleep deprivation and severe isolation that she sees the Babadook but it is much earlier that Sam knows about the monster. The viewer is set up to believe Sam imagines a monster but soon realizes that he sees his mother for who she is, including the monster that her unaddressed grief causes. The
children’s book “Mister Babadook” provides a voice to the monster as it claims, “the more you deny the stronger I get” and also “you can’t get rid of the Babadook” (Kent). The monster is evocative of mental illness as the more Amelia ignores her symptoms and struggles the worse they become. It also reminds viewers that grief and mental health cannot be cured and instead, only managed. The children’s book leads the viewer to believe in both literal and figurative monster. The more Amelia ignores her troubling symptoms the stronger and more violent they get. As she ignores her own breakdown to focus on her child and the more she isolates from the few people she contacts the more violent toward her child she becomes.

Amelia’s identity as mother and her mental health both relate to preexisting gender stereotypes surrounding parenthood and mental illness. As seen with the doctor she takes her child to, mental health professionals do not legitimize women’s mental health, as they are not considered serious, as though women may be lying about their symptoms. Amelia would no longer be diagnosed with post partum depression years after birth but an important distinction for women, and specifically mothers, emotional wellbeing within the medical system can be gained from examining post-partum depression and how it is dealt with by mental health professionals. Victoria Hendrick discusses the dangers associated with an undiagnosed post-partum depression stated as, “The mother’s suffering, coupled with the burden that her depression places on the family and the potential detrimental impact on the relationship between mother and child and the child’s cognitive and social development call for prompt and effective methods of screening for postnatal depression” (1003). Considering Sam’s birth is paired with the trauma of the car crash leading to the loss of her husband it is not unlikely that her depression symptoms began after Sam’s birth. It is shown that a negative impact was made on her relationship with her child and social development is hindered considering his behavioral issues. He is unable to relate to other children as seen when he discusses death with the child in the grocery store and when he pushes Clare’s child out of the tree house. Hendrick furthers with a study showing 86% of participants experiencing depressive symptoms and only 29% ending with a diagnosis regardless of the already established importance. The doctor in The Babadook reinforces these claims because although she attempts to seek out help for herself and her child the doctor only recommends he see a therapist. Releasing an overwhelmed mother who exclaims
that she cannot cope with a child who is in equally negative emotional health situation displays how little regard medical professions take women’s concerns regarding emotional health. This scene also reinforces the idealized motherhood, which the doctor feels Amelia should innately know and adhere to.

Although no spoken dialogue in the film directly states Amelia has a mental illness the aesthetics paired with the character positioning creates a strong connection between symptoms of depression and Amelia’s actions. Initially, Sam attempts to bridge the emotionally distant gap between himself and his mother with physical affection. Amelia rejects his attempts solidifying the tension between the two. Amelia begins having issues sleeping. During scenes displaying Amelia asleep the audience hears insects warbling and sees a time lapse representing time passing during her un-restful sleep, lasting the entire night. She begins to sleep later into the morning attending work late and then skipping it all together in order to continue sleeping. As her emotional state worsens her other responsibilities such as dishes and housekeeping begin to fall to the wayside similar to her job. These symptoms, easily dismissed when considered individually, lead to her first breakdown directed toward her son showing the full extent of her emotional state. After her son reminds her of her neglect to feed him she naps crossly, “why do you keep talk-talk-talking” and then yells, “if you’re so hungry why don’t you eat shit” (Kent). Unable to continue functioning under the combined stress of her issues she falls victim to a spiraling mental health. Amelia attempts prior to this scene to obtain medical help for her child she only addresses a symptom of their issue and begins her child on sleeping medication. The doctor’s reaction during the encounter is representative of the medical community’s response to mental health in women and children. The doctor admits Sam is suffering from anxiety but refuses to offer guidance or solution beyond a recommendation for a therapist. The doctor acknowledges a problem with Sam yet with Amelia, who states, “I’m really not coping” indicating her own stress. Instead of support Amelia is met with judgment as the doctor compares her to other mothers claiming, “most mothers aren’t too keen on them unless it’s really bad” (Kent). His response of judgment stemming from comparison against other mothers reinforces the concept that mothers should not struggle.

Kent ensures the audience is aware of Amelia’s struggle despite the societal attempts to ignore it. The visual ways in which the audi-
ence notices her refusal to address her husband’s death surround her nearly underground basement, which remains locked, representing the repressed and unaddressed memories. She keeps all of his items in the basement in boxes and the door remains locked with a key, off limits to both her son and herself. When she realizes Sam has been sneaking into the basement and rummaging in her late husband’s items she is uncontrollably angry. Sam yells, “he was my father” (Kent) leaving the audience to interpret Sam’s grief and Amelia’s anger. Understanding the ability Sam has to cope with his father’s death sheds light on Amelia’s coping skills as well. Amelia’s inability to confront the trauma of losing her husband affects her own psyche but also the emotional state of her son who is forced to pretend his father didn’t exist. Her desire for Sam to imagine his father didn’t exist is shown by her response in the grocery store when Sam mentions his father’s death. She is embarrassed at his discussing the topic with other people and yanks his arm away from the individuals. It is furthered by her refusal to allow Sam to celebrate his birthday on the day he was born due to the trauma she experienced on that day. Her request that he avoid speaking about his father’s death to strangers as it makes them uncomfortable, ignoring his need to process the information and potential grief leading to monstrous results.

The basement becomes a place where Amelia and Sam must both address the Babadook and her grief. Amelia’s defeat of the Babadook only arrives when she is forced to spend time in the basement by Sam’s design. He ties her in the basement so she can neither leave the space nor hurt him any more. He reminds her and seemingly himself with, “We said we’d protect each other” after she frightens him and causes him to back away from her. His reminder serves to exhibit his bravery and call for hers as well. He states, “I know you don’t love me. The Babadook won’t let you” (Kent). The basement is the only place this confession could occur. She is surrounded by what created her monstrous self and the Babadook, her refusal to grief her deceased husband. Therefore, he forces her to recognize her grief instead of repress it. Clearly a painful place for Amelia, she writhes and shakes on the ground both screaming and crying while her eyes appear completely black. The monster is its strongest when surrounded by what allowed it to occur. He tells her she must “get it out” this only serves to anger her and the Babadook more. She begins strangling him and intends to kill him but it is his expression of love as he gently strokes her face as she strangles him that releases her
from the Babadook’s hold and expels it from her body. This is both a literal and figurative action. She literally vomits a black mass but also this moment is where she determines to defeat her own monster.

The duality of the monster is one of the characteristics the Babadook possesses that sets it, the monster, apart from other typically studied monsters. It is also necessary to consider when examining the Babadook the perceived gender of the monster. It is mostly cloaked in the few scenes the audience is able to see it but it still looks distinctly masculine; whereas Amelia is feminine. The Babadook wears the clothing of her deceased husband, representing her anxieties surrounding coping with her husband’s death. When examining the gender of the physical monster present the meaning of the Babadook itself becomes debatable. If one were to claim the Babadook were simply a foil of Amelia and her “monstrous” side the masculinity of the monster does not line up with her view of herself. Therefore, while the Babadook may represent a part of her it is more complex than that. Amelia’s defeat of the Babadook results in a contained monster not an eliminated one, staying true to the children’s book line “you can’t get rid of the Babadook”. The end of the film shows a happier Amelia and Sam collecting worms and preparing for his birthday party. The birthday party would be a triggering event for Amelia as she intends to host it on the day of his birthday. Therefore, she must feed the Babadook literally and figuratively. She and Sam collect worms for her to provide for the monster but she must also address her grief surrounding the day, she alone ventures into the basement asking Sam to wait outside until she comes for him. Her fear becomes evident as the creature screams from the darkness and she steps back but ultimately she remains to give a space to the monster. Her acknowledgement of the necessity of a time where Sam cannot interrupt her is developed in this scene as she reminds him to wait for her to come to him. She also feeds the Babadook in the basement where she previously found herself unable to unlock the door due to the grief. Amelia discovers if she takes time to feed her own monster she can manage it, meaning as long as she addresses the grief properly her grief does not need to be monstrous.

Amelia’s capacity for change from the monster to conqueror of the monster, and also herself contributes to the complexity of the duel nature that is the text. A monster text as multifaceted as this is vital to the study of monster based literature. Typically the monster and the person who defeats the monster are separate entities; yet, here they
are one in the same. Amelia will never hold the power to eliminate the monster completely only subdue it, similar to grief. Her husband’s death and her resulting depression will continue to threaten her but they cannot destroy her if they are addressed properly. Therefore, not only is Amelia fighting a monster she is also required to come to terms with the monster within her own self. The Babadook is a physical manifestation of her unaddressed grief, but she is warped by her grief so in order to defeat the monster she must first reconcile the loss of her husband, her depression symptoms, and her abusive tendencies toward her child, and ultimately her most monstrous self.

Works Cited


*The Babadook*. Directed by Jennifer Kent, performances by Essie Davis and Noah Wiseman. Entertainment One, 2014
That’s Not Funny
By Morgan Luellen

“Dark Comedy is very difficult. You have to bring the audience in and push them away at the same time.”
—Pierce Brosnan

The term “monstrous” typically has negative connotations; however, the term is incapable of being narrowed to solely one true meaning due to its ability to be identified in different ways. An individual may label something misunderstood to them as “monstrous” while another person may label an individual “monstrous” because of that specific person’s rude attitude. According to the broad use of the term “monstrous,” humans and monsters are incapable of being on the same spectrum; however, in the film The Nutty Professor, the relationships between Professor Klump, stand-up comedian Reggie Warrington, and Klump’s horrific alter ego Buddy Love suggest that humans have the ability to be monstrous. Monstrosity is typically the label or acknowledgment of a species or thing that has been placed in a category of “otherness” due to it being misunderstood to humans and social normality. However, in the Nutty Professor, Mr. Klump’s relationship with Reggie and Buddy illustrates the idea that humans are capable of being labeled monsters as well. Therefore, everything is capable of being monstrous depending on the individual performing the labeling whether it is perceived by humans or those
who are seen as different and categorized as “other.” Moreover, due to the term’s unique ability to evolve and have a spectrum of different perceptions, the term suggest that it has the possibility of being utilized in negative and positive ways.

Comedy is utilized by adolescents and adults all over the whole world as its purpose is to provoke laughter while providing an outlet from reality for individuals. Comedians are very effective as they have the ability to induce laughter amongst enormous audiences, which are illustrated in the film The Nutty Professor. In “Parallels Between Improv Comedy and Therapy” Barb Chandler states, “Humor also can be used effectively in therapy, as it can help clients have an “Aha” moment as their perspective on a situation shifts” (Chandler 43). Moreover, comedians are respected very much due to their power of helping individuals escape from actuality. Although comedy genres such as stand-up, dark and parodic are monstrous in different ways, comedy have the ability to be perceived as therapeutic as many people attend comedy shows or watch funny movies to help them feel better about a bad day or a sad circumstance. Therefore, comedians are viewed as powerful due to their talents as they provide a place for their audiences that takes them away from their unfortunate realities. Also, many comedians illustrate to their audiences the idea that humans are very relatable and face many of the same struggles allowing their audiences to feel more comfortable with their particular situations as another individual in the audience is possibly encountering the same struggles. This method that comedians utilize helps viewers and listeners feel as though they are not abandoned or facing several hardships alone in this world. Comedy, then, provokes audiences and viewers to feel accepted as well as understood in such a huge world of so many different people.

Comedy was introduced in the origin of Greece where the Greek god of Dionysus would sing hilariously loud choruses amongst one another during the feast. In “Old Comedy,” Britannica Encyclopedia defines comedy as “plays are characterized by an exuberant and high-spirited satire of public persons and affairs. Composed of song, dance, personal invective, and buffoonery” (23). This comedy became known to historian theaters as Old Comedy in which they utilized fantasy, satire, and parody throughout loosely connected scenes to provoke laughter. Shortly after Old Comedy declined, Aristocrats brought about New Comedy. Old and New Comedy during fourth century B.C. perceived comedy to be festive and a celebration. There-
fore, today, the evolution of comedy is viewed as a celebration and now healing as it is therapeutic in many ways.

Barb Chandler states, “But humor needs to be used cautiously as therapeutic issues are serious and cannot be taken lightly” (Chandler 43). Although comedy has proved itself to be very beneficial and medicating, today specific comedies challenge this perception as sometimes comedy has the ability to be very hurtful toward several individuals throughout the audience. In “The Giant & The Child: ‘Cruel’ Humor in American Culture,” J. Boskin states, “The complexities by which humor responds to swift and unsettling changes that have characterized American society throughout its history” (143). As Boskin suggests comedy has changed in unsettling ways provoking the act to become very complex as it is able to be hurtful suggesting that America is evolving in some of the same ways as comedy. Many comedians speak on issues that other individuals are frightened to speak about making the experience scary and confrontational. Most comedians stem their jokes from real life situations provoking comedy to be a form of reality. For example, many people are scared to speak on Donald Trump’s win; however, a comedian brings these hidden conversations to light, which has the possibility of making this occurrence hurtful depending on a person’s position toward that specific topic of conversation making comedy very complex. Specific comedies that are intended or capable of making a person feel humiliated are stand-up comedy, dark comedy, and parodic comedy. These particular comedies perform the complete opposite of Old and New Comedy as they practice in degrading individuals and groups provoking one’s self-esteem or confidence to decline as they are shamefully ridiculed in public in front of a crowd of people. Unfortunately, this definitely does not sound like a celebration. These acts illustrate the newfound relationships between humor and reality today. Today, many people avoid humor as it is a reflection of reality. The boundary between humor and reality has become blurred due to comedians utilizing reality to form humor. While many may suggest that these comedians are simply doing their jobs, these specific comedians illustrate monstrous acts as they purposely tease specific individuals and groups throughout their performances to induce laughter. Although monstrosity is incapable of having one true meaning, these three genres of comedy demonstrate monstrous acts due to their negative impacts on an individual or group. Moreover, the film, *The Nutty Professor* directed by Tom Shadyac suggests that stand-
up, parodic, and dark comedies are monstrous due to their abilities to “other” and divide individuals by ridiculing a specific person or racial group publicly for entertainment.

Many comedians have different motives for their performances. Although very talented individuals, select comedians choose to use their talents to hurt people, while some choose to earn a dollar, and others to genuinely make people laugh. In “The Limitations of the Profit Motive,” Kenneth Arrow states, “In a profit economy, every economic activity is dependent on the profit motive, whether or not that activity is beneficial or harmful to society” (Arrows, 23). Kenneth suggests that any events or acts that are capable of earning money have the ability to be viewed as an economic activity. Today, comedy has made an enormous amount of money. Therefore, many comedians have become more focused on making a profit rather than being concerned about how they are making their audiences feel. Comedy is an economic activity as it has the ability to be acknowledged as a business placing itself in the profit economy. Comedy then has a profit motive. Many comedians such as Reggie Warrington in The Nutty Professor and celebrity comedians like Kevin Hart produce a comedy for a profit. Therefore, once the economic activity, comedy, is then dependent on the profit motive, money, they become careless on “whether or not that activity is beneficial or harmless to the society” (Arrows, 23). Reggie Warrington is a comedian that chooses to produce harmful comedy to make a profit. He illustrates himself as careless to whether or not he helps or hurts people. When being interrupted by an individual in his audience Reggie cuts his fan off and states, “This my show” (46:17). He demonstrates selfishness as he is earless to what his audience member has to say and compliment about his show. Time is money and Reggie wants and needs all of his time to perform to earn his total profit. Therefore, he illustrates his monstrous character as he shuts down a fan in the audience who was only complimenting him. Reggie leaves this viewer feeling humiliated by interrupting his compliment during the show. Warrington illustrates his care for whether his business, comedy, is beneficial or
harmful to their society as he performs stand-up, dark, and parodic comedies that all have the ability to be labeled monstrous due to its ability to provoke people to feel isolated, othered and humiliated.

Stand-up comedy is monstrous as the comedian stands up directly in the front of his audience while selecting certain individuals to ridicule to induce laughter. Many stand-up comedians intentionally find an individual who is categorized as “other” depending on their personal imperfections that force them to be viewed as different. According to the film, Professor Klump’s imperfection is his weight. Due to his environment, Mr. Klump feels uncomfortable in his own skin because his society has “othered” him because he is different in size. Comedian Reggie Warrington decides to use Klump’s weight to provoke laughter amongst his audience. In *The Nutty Professor*, in conversation with comedian Reggie Warrington, Buddy Love states, “The way you take a person’s personal defect and flip it around and make me people laugh, that’s some funny stuff” (45:54). This quote illustrates a tactic or strategy that many stand-up comedians are now utilizing despite it being harsh. Historical stand-up comedy is more pleasant and less hurtful. In “Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation,” Lawrence Mintz states, “Stand-up comedy is arguably the oldest, most universal, basic, and deeply significant form of humorous expression (excluding perhaps truly spontaneous, informal social joking and teasing)” (Mintz, 71). Although stand-up is an admirable expressional comedy, it is evident that comedians in stand-up have developed apart from its historical foundation as Reggie utilizes individuals in his audience to harass for laughter by bringing focus to an individual’s difference or possible insecurity. Comedians discover these insecurities through society’s standards of what is exceptional and unexceptional. In Professor Klump’s community, being overweight is considered unexceptional as it is frowned upon. For example, the protagonist, Mr. Klump, is considered obese. During his time at the stand-up show, Reggie Warrington selects him as a target and makes fun of his weight in negative ways as he states, “You don’t drink Slim-Fast, you must drink “Slim-Slow” (28:15). Moreover, this quote being mentioned by a comedian illustrates the validity of the argument while noting that comedians have different motives such as intentionally hurting someone to provoke laughter.

During an earlier era, comedians utilized the relative strategy throughout their performances. The relative strategy is simply when the comedian speaks on encounters and occurrences that the major-
ity of the audience have the possibility to relate to with one another. For example, in *The Nutty Professor*, during the beginning of his stand-up show, comedian Reggie Warrington states, “Women be shopping; women be shopping! You can’t stop a woman from shopping” (26:41). Reggie Warrington illustrates how effective this strategy is as he warms up his audience while inducing them to laugh through shared experiences. This particular stand-up strategy is capable of being truly beneficial as he utilizes his talents to bring the audience together as one community. However, instead of performing this harmless specific strategy throughout his show, he uses it more as an introduction to his harmful show by initially making people feel welcomed before the show has its major turnaround that leaves his guest feeling self-conscious and depressed. Therefore, by initially and successfully utilizing relative comedy in the beginning of his show, he is suggesting that there are other ways of producing comedy without it being in a hurtful manner. Due to Reggie choosing the strategy that involves ridiculing others rather than relative comedy, viewers acknowledge that he is hurting his audience purposely making him monstrous.

First and foremost, in stand-up comedy, a comedian’s position plays an important role within his talent as humor is a form of power. Due to their front and center-staged position, they are viewed as dominant or the leader of the whole room. Secondly, during most stand-up acts, there is normally a spotlight located directly on the humorist typically following him throughout the show giving him a sense of power. Due to his placement, he is feeling in charge of his audience and all of the focus is directly on him. Therefore, when he selects his target, everyone in the room is quiet and listening to the jokes he projects on this specific person making this experience very despairing and difficult for the victim as the focus immediately transitions to the individual being teased. This leads to laughter as the audience sees and makes the connection of the jokes to the victim. This experience has left an individual feeling isolated and alone in a room full of people. This comedy is monstrous as the comedian has “othered” the victim making him feel divided from the entire audience. Furthermore, the power of humor illustrates that it is capable of controlling one’s emotions and mind.

Many comedians are aware in how they hurt the individuals in their audiences; therefore, they justify their monstrous actions by simply ridiculing themselves. Although a comedian is capable of helping a
victim of the audience feel better by placing themselves on the same spectrum as the victim, many comedians have different motives that fail to qualify for flattery such as Reggie Warrington. He ridicules himself to allow himself to feel more comfortable with his wrong doings, rather than caring about those who have paid to come see his performance. We then examine the behaviors of comedy through the comedian as Reggie’s goal is to be ‘liked’ by his audience. In the article, “Just Joking Around” scholar Cecily Cooper examines comedy in a positive and negative form, Cooper states, “It is true that requests do not always follow ingratiatory acts, since some people may ingratiate to simply influence others regarding their personal attributes—that is, to be liked” (Cooper, 765). We then focus on the behaviors of comedy through the comedian. Reggie’s motives are very careless to his audience as he is shameless in how he has made victims in his audience feel. Although Reggie prefers to perform monstrous acts through his humor, Cooper highlights how humor has the ability to be effective and positive to these victims or targets within four categories: favor doing, opinion conformity, other enhancement, and self-presentation.

Favor doing is performed when a comedian’s main purpose is to be “helpful and considerate” (Cooper 765). Many comedians illustrate favor doing when they are utilizing their talents to encourage certain behaviors to benefit themselves. For an example, Professor Klump was ridiculed about his weight during Reggie Warrington’s stand-up show. Reggie’s jokes had the potential to motivate Klump to lose weight and challenge him to improve his health. However, during the favor doing process, although Reggie Warrington has the potential to help various people, many comedians potentially hurt their targets rather than help as Cooper states, “Favor doing may also engender feelings of obligation in the target” (765). These individuals being targeted are typically forced to unmask themselves in front of a group of individuals as they are confronted by their own insecurities that then forces them to feel constrained until these issues that are within themselves are resolved. Moreover, although Reggie had the potential to be helpful, his motives were unfortunately different for his audience as he asks the audience before he torments Professor Klump, “Should I get on him? Should Reggie lay it on him” (28:20). At this moment in the film, before emotionally abusing Professor Klump, comedian Reggie Warrington questions the audience before continuing his horrifying jokes. With the audience screaming for
more torture, Reggie decides to ridicule Mr. Klump for the rest of the night. Instead of potentially motivating Klump, he chooses to tease him in favor of his audience, which suggests that his purpose is more so to be liked rather than help his victim. Many comedians utilize their talents to change the status quo while others could care less and leave the status quo the same. Reggie is a prime example of a comedian who had the ability to change the status quo of comedians ridiculing specific individuals who fail society’s expected standards to gain approval from their audiences, but his actions illustrate that he prefers to keep it the same for the sake of his own selfish glory which is monstrous due to his lack of sympathy for his guests and his choice of taunting an individual provoking the victim to feel alienated or othered in front of a numerous amount of people.

Opinion conformity occurs when the target agrees with the comedian and his expressed position. In The Nutty Professor, before dedicating the whole show to Mr. Klump, Reggie Warrington initially makes fun of Mr. Klump’s weight in a light manner. However, when Mr. Klump firstly agrees with the jokes performed on himself as he states, “You got me, that’s a good one” (25:15), Reggie Warrington is displeased and chooses to encourage the audience to allow him to ridicule Mr. Klump for the remainder of the night. The purpose of opinion conformity is to allow the target to form a healthy relationship with the target as Cooper states, “Opinion conformity includes agreeing with the expressed position of the target or somehow articulating the target’s position as correct” (765). Cooper suggests that comedians may provoke healthy benefits for their targets while inducing laughter by simply allowing their targets or audience to have a voice throughout the performance. As their target expresses their opinion towards a specific topic, a satisfying outcome is produced as the comedian agrees with his or her audience or target. However, Reggie feels different to this position. He believes that his job is to simply make people laugh throughout his audience instead of forming a relationship with his target. Due to the increasingly amount of odds placed on a relationship being formed throughout a comedy show, it is obvious that Reggie prefers to remain conventional rather than encourage new healthy behaviors between comedians and their targets that could be advantageous in several ways. A true comedian does not have to ridicule an individual to be genuinely funny due to the fact that anyone has the ability to state an unsatisfying joke toward someone and make them laugh; however, during the current
era, jokes became harsher while a comedian’s career became easier and increasingly disturbing.

Cooper introduces readers to the concept of other enhancements. Other enhancement is defined as “the communication of enhancing statements to the target through flattery, praise, and the like” (765). Therefore, a comedy show has the ability to be enhanced constructively by the comedian stating or expressing themselves with a more sweetened tone. Although the majority of comedians have the ability to practice or encourage other enhancement, many of other comedians such as Reggie Warrington believes that it is far less important on if his target perceives the joke brutally or carelessly. During his comedy show after continuously teasing Mr. Klump, Reggie then decides to taunt Mr. Klump more harshly by also ridiculing his date, Ms. Purty. Reggie states, “I don’t know who’s sucking whose titties ova here” (28:39). In this particular scene, Reggie is suggesting that Mr. Klump’s chest is bigger than his own female date, which is not socially normal according to conventional standards. Reggie illustrates that he is committed to harsh stand-up comedy tactics as he not only makes fun of Mr. Klump but also his date. The film suggests that Reggie is careless to the other enhancement strategy suggested by Cooper as he chooses to be monstrous by using an ill toned voice and stating more insulting comments than flattering such as in the quote mentioned above.

Finally, Cooper identifies self-presentation as a strategy a comedian should utilize to influence his or her targets through verbal statements to allow the audience to feel welcomed and secure by demonstrating respectable characteristics throughout their performance as she states, “self-presentation is verbal statements intended to explicitly persuade the target of the ingratiator’s positive qualities or characteristics” (765). Reggie suggests that the self-presentation category is hopeless as he continues to degrade his audience rather than making them feel comfortable throughout his show. Reggie demonstrates the opposite of Cooper’s strategy to induce positive laughter by humiliating different individuals in his audience. Mr. Warrington ridicules at least five different people before dominating Mr. Klump. Due to his ability to jump through the audience and specifically tease various people, he provokes his guests to feel uncomfortable rather than out of harm’s way. Although many people are laughing throughout his performance, many of them are also scared and unsure about if Reggie will taunt them as well. Therefore, his self-presentation is monstrous
as his own crowd feels frightened to be in this particular atmosphere due to his horrid actions and his diminishing rude self-presentation. Moreover, instead of using his power of humor to change the status quo by transforming stand-up comedy into a positive welcoming environment and therapeutic event, Reggie becomes a product of his environment by allowing outside forces and standard conventions to provoke him to use his comedic powers to maintain the status quo of what stand-up comedy has become. Reggie’s actions and choices produces an excruciating and self-conscious environment that illustrates monstrosity as an individual who has the ability to change harsh stereotypical aspects and traditional conventions such as making fun of someone to induce laughter chooses to hurt and embarrass an individual to the point where he or she may feel like they are naked in a room full of clothed people. These actions are unjust and very hurtful. Although Cooper suggests and illustrates through four different categories on how comedy has the power to be therapeutic and healthy for an individual, Reggie illustrates how comedy has the ability to be perceived as monstrous due to its ability to harm an individual by decreasing one’s confidence by humiliating them in front of a large audience who laughs at them in a torturing way leaving the target to feel victimized and tortured.

Although stand-up comedy is capable of being truly offensive due to its negative ways to humiliate people, dark-comedy is as hurtful as stand-up comedy as many actors and comedians utilize traumatizing situations to encourage laughter. Many will declare that dark comedy is potentially a therapeutic process as it can possibly remove the seriousness from such a horrific or devastating event. However, dark comedy is monstrous due to its abilities to aggravate and torture one’s grieving emotions and find humor in such a traumatic moment that should be taken more seriously. In dark comedy, traumatizing events such as funerals and deaths are perceived as comical. Actors and comedians illustrate monstrous behaviors as they mock heartfelt events that have possibly taken a toll on an individual. Therefore, rather than being sympathetic and comforting, comedians choose to be cold-hearted closing an ear to hear or removing a shoulder to cry on by making fun of a serious matter. Many of them find several odd moments in such occasions and desire to advance in their talent by insulting those attending the event and the deceased. In The Nutty Professor, Professor Klump has a dream that he will become obese and die due to his overweight. During this dream, he kills the whole
city as well as his crush, Ms. Purty. Dark comedy is illustrated in this scene when Professor Klump awakes from this dream and realizes that his dream is a possible reality. When Mr. Klump realizes he passed out continuously stuffing his face with an enormous jar of M & M’s while eating a gallon of vanilla ice cream, Buddy Love appears on the television and states, “Hey chunky draws! You gone always be fat and die fat! Nobody wants you” (31:10). Comedian Buddy Love illustrates dark comedy as he ridicules Mr. Klump’s horrifying, yet true dilemma by laughing and shouting while making these statements. Although Mr. Klump is still alive, his dream of death is a vision of his possible reality. Therefore, dark comedy is present as Buddy Love makes fun of Klump during such a serious occasion as at this point in the film Mr. Klump realizes that he could be dead due to his unhealthy eating habits. During this scene, viewers feel sympathetic for Mr. Klump as watchers learn that death could be in Klump’s near future. Instead of being a merciless comedian, dark comedy utilizes such frightening and alarming dark moments such as this dream to provoke people to laugh while the target is left feeling alienated and othered due to everyone in the audience laughing and pointing all of their fingers at him in a time where he should be being comforted and motivated more than anything. There is a possibility that many people will pick up these characteristics and make fun of those in need of assistance or comfort causing people to divide themselves amongst one another. Due to Buddy Love’s monstrous acts, Klump is left feeling tortured and alone. He believes that due to his overweight circumstances that have been poked at throughout the film, nobody will ever love or want him. Today, love is very important in the world due to several changes throughout the human race that have forced everyone to promote love rather than hate. An enormous amount of civilians in the United States learned that if everyone loves everyone, this will eliminate the possibilities of anyone feeling as though they fail to belong or they are unwanted because they are different. This film illustrates comedy’s monstrous ability to divide individuals while demonstrating Klump’s hurtful emotions of feeling disconnected as he wakes up in tears flipping through channels that only advertise about “becoming fit or getting in shape”. Comedian Buddy Love illustrates monstrosity as he chooses to maintain existing conditions in comedy rather than utilizing his talents to provide a new outlet by making comedy more positive and helpful for people such as Klump who are viewed as different because of their weight. Mr.
Love’s humor has the possibility of being powerful as he could have been a source of motivation for Professor Klump to change his own particular existing circumstances for the best in terms of becoming a heathier individual rather than for the worst in terms of provoking Klump to endure seclusion.

Parodic comedy is monstrous as it forces a divide within groups and much more. Dark and stand-up comedies are displeasing as they target specific individuals and tragic events in front of a mass audience; however, parodic comedy is equally insulting as it teases and tortures several culture groupings provoking different races to laugh at one another leading into a larger divide amongst groups who should advance together rather than be against each other. Parodic comedy is the act of imitating well-known stereotypical conventions for purposes of ridicule or satire. Many comedians practice parodic comedy throughout films and shows. A select few would argue that parodic comedies are not monstrous and highly important as it is a voice for several racial groupings and many more reviewers who choose to hold their opinions as they are unwelcoming. However, parodic comedy intentionally has a purpose to ridicule and poke fun at anything of the comedian’s likings. In *The Nutty Professor*, comedian Reggie Warrington illustrates parodic comedy as he teases several races throughout his performance. Initially, Reggie starts with a black woman who is seated directly in front of him as he states, “She’s un-be-weavable! Looks like a head full of curly fries” (26:30). In this particular scene, Reggie initiates his parodic comedy by ridiculing a black woman wearing weave. Many women of the African-American community wear weaves very often due to the stereotypical hair types that are socially acceptable as Ruffin states, “Historically, straight hair and curly/wavy hair has been seen as more socially acceptable because of the European standard of beauty” (Ruffin 23). Studies show that “African-Americans spend over seven billion dollars on weaves and wigs” (Sibeko 45). Therefore, although it was impossible for Reggie to actually imitate this woman by wearing a wig, he brings attention to her hair, which highlights this specific stereotypical practice and also brings attention to the other black women in the club who are wearing weaves. This act is monstrous as Reggie provokes many black women in this club to feel wrong or self-conscious about their choice to follow or be a part of what is known as “social normality.” However, Reggie follows these social standards by humiliating any black woman in the audience wearing weaves leading them to feel
odd and abandoned for simply being who they are and doing what they choose to do whether or not if it is socially acceptable. This then places these women in their own grouping dividing them from other races and cultures that are viewed as socially fit.

Reggie continues his show utilizing parodic comedy as he ridicules a white man in the audience. Warrington states, “Hey, look at this white dude right here” (27:10). At this specific moment, Reggie immediately brings the focus to a white man in the audience. He illustrates parodic comedy by changing his voice to which he believes is a ‘white man’s voice” and asks, “What is a weave is exactly” (27:13). After trying to imitate this man’s voice, many viewers acknowledge the intentional ridicule in parodic comedy. Next, Reggie suggests that because this man is a white man, he has zero knowledge of weaves. These incredibly antagonizing and racist remarks illustrate the monstrosity in parodic comedy. This performance demonstrates how parodic comedy has the ability to divide racial groupings within this one scene. After teasing this man, Reggie has now targeted several other white men in this audience causing a separation between white men and other racial groups in the audience. Reggie’s actions are ill and prohibit diversity. Because humor is capable of being a form of power, Reggie Warrington has the ability to use his comedic talents and bring these racial groups together in positive ways. Many of these races have the ability to learn and advance through one another while encouraging divergence and differentness; however, Reggie chooses to antagonize being different while carelessly leaving his audience to feel alienated altogether.

Comedy is a very complex act as it has the ability to be perceived in different ways that make us all different from one another. Many believe that comedy is therapeutic while others believe that it is also monstrous. Comedians are those who induce laughter in the audience. Some such as Reggie target their audiences. Although his jokes provide an outlet for some of the audience members, he forces other members of the audience to confront the reality they needed to escape from. Comedy, then, illustrates the term “monstrous” complexities as it is capable of being perceived as both positive and negative depending on the person labeling. For example, these comedians provoke their audiences to laugh through specific comedy genres such as stand-up, dark, and parodic comedy which all are capable of being antagonizing comedies as illustrated throughout The Nutty Professor. However, the audience has the ability to be perceived as

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monstrous for encouraging such harmful acts by laughing. In “Truly Funny: Humor, Irony, and Satire as Moral Criticism” E.M. Daldez states, “There is the more recent debate about humor and morality, about whether jokes themselves may be regarded as immoral or about whether it can in circumstances be wrong to laugh” (Daldez, 2). Jokes have become so harsh that it has raised discussion over what considers a joke to be morally satisfying and unsatisfying. In other words, comedians need a filter as some of their jokes are untasteful and better off unsaid. Many may believe that the audience is equally immoral as the comedian for participating by laughing at such acts that are hurtful towards another person while others may disagree. Therefore, what is considered immoral or moral in comedy depends on the individual doing the perceiving such as the term “monstrous”. Comedy illustrates the term “monstrous” idiosyncratic nature by illustrating its countless ways to be comprehended, while also becoming a reflection of its own society. In “Origin of Comedy” Alfred Bates states, “Though its development was mainly due to the political and social conditions of Athens, it finally held up the mirror to all that was characteristic of Athenian life” (Bates 26). Due to comedy highlighting realistic events and circumstances that individuals choose to keep silent about provokes comedy to be a mirror of reality. An individual’s own perception on life due to his or her own personal experiences and encounters in life is the significance to why terms such as “monstrous” and acts such as comedy are very complex due to their ability to evolve and provoke a spectrum of different meanings.

Works Cited


Literature
The Danger of the Zombie in Carrie Ryan’s *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* Trilogy through Gendered Groups and Social Performance

By Courtney Arndt

“We make our monsters, then fear them for what they show us about ourselves.”

–Mike Carey, *The Unwritten, Volume 1: Tommy Taylor & Bogus Identity*

With shows like the *iZombie* and *Walking Dead*, zombies have become a source of entertainment; however, while it is easy to assume that our consumption of this monster is mindless, their presence reminds everyone of the anxiety concerning death and the act of living. Although their visual representation offers an abundance of material to study, it is how they are represented in books that truly offer the most dynamic interpretation of their function not only in their world but ours as well. In Carrie Ryan’s *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* trilogy, survivors are given the chance to reconstitute their social worlds due to the apocalypse; however, their construction of masculine and feminine roles through gendered groups in the community during the aftermath raises questions about traditional beliefs and social performance. By looking at the zombies within the texts, we see how they function as divider between the gender binaries and how the represented community mirrored through them reifies a social expectation of how it and every individual should perform according to the new world.

In *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*, the zombie plays a number of roles—not only acting as the monster but also the mirror in which the town is revealed. In the midst of a post-apocalyptic world, we are introduced to the main protagonist, Mary, and the isolated com-
munity. Through Mary, we become acquainted with the monster that plagues the borders of her town, the Unconsecrated and how they begin to define our expectations of the town. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggests in “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” the monster serves a double purpose: “one that describes how the monster came to be and another, its testimony, detailing the cultural use that the monster serves” (13). Following this line of thinking, it is important to look at the Unconsecrated as a social narrative for the community and how it begins to question the construction of the gender binary. Despite the obvious focus on Mary and her struggle to remain connected to the only other surviving member of her family and those that she loves, it is the community that she lives in that truly represents our understanding of the “monster” within the text. “As walking corpses the returners force the living to confront their own mortality and frailty; in disability parlance, they remind the living of their temporary able-bodiedness” (Smith 30). Through the “monster,” the community is forced to not only acknowledge the deconstruction of their society but also the beliefs and values surrounding that society—ideas about gender, life and death are called into and the validity of social structure becomes unstable. It is in this questioning that we see the community reinforcing traditional values in order to reestablish familiar social structures to promote survival and a semblance of hope.

With a belief in the gender binary and how it should be exacted, the community becomes divided through groups: the Sisterhood, a female orientated power, and the Guardians as the male counterpart with the Recruiters acting as a deceptive balance between the two in the last two novels. As we learn more about the Sisterhood, we begin to realize exactly how they assume their stance within the community, which focuses on their control of power through feminine stereotypes about performance and knowledge. As Ken Corbett states in “Gender Now,” “Gender is bodied and constituted via fantasy… and practice. Gender is that which is replicated through normative regulation” (839). Although Corbett goes on to explain that gender is beginning to be defined differently with each generation, his explanation of how gender is established coincides with how the Sisterhood asserts their authority. By enforcing ideals of gender, the female group not only emphasizes the solidification of the gender binary but the expectation of gender through normative performance within a community. We see this expectation immediately when we are introduced to a widow and the choice she faces. When the woman who has become infected
from the Unconsecrated requests the chance to join her husband in the forest, who has turned into one of the zombies, it is the Sisterhood that ultimately permits her the reunion. Although it could be argued that the scene does not represent the feminine association with performance, it is vital to look at what the Sisterhood believes they have power over. When describing the female group, Mary mentions “that the Sisterhood has always protected the people of the village” and that they preside over actions concerning the development of the community, especially marriage (Ryan 31). Females are often associated with life and its continuation, and it is in this aspect that we see the Sisterhood using the association to develop power over who lives and stays within the community. The Sisterhood, in the case of the widow, allows her to join her husband through her pleas “to fulfill her marriage vows to the man she has chosen and loved”; however, it is not through mercy that they allow her the choice but, ultimately, her function within society and their assumed power over marriage and survival (9). The widow has become a liability to the community, and in order to execute such a threat, the Sisterhood allows her to join the monsters in the woods.

Though there is the assumption that the Sisterhood only acts according to the best interest of everyone when looking at the impending risk of the Unconsecrated, their complete adaption of the feminine role regarding life becomes problematic when they begin deciding who is dangerous and cannot be useful to their survival. When Mary’s brother ultimately disowns her, she has only one option—to join the Sisterhood and help the development of the community through her service. Completely against conforming to their ideals, Mary immediately shows defiance to the leader of the Sisterhood, Sister Tabitha. The elderly woman meets this defiance with a drastic answer; leading Mary to a secluded area, she offers her two choices: she can either join the Sisterhood willingly or be casted out into the Unconsecrated to be infected. The arrival of the monster reaching through the barrier of the town legitimizes Sister Tabitha’s threat. In this instance, the Sisterhood comes to represent a perverted holder of life and chooses to execute their power in the most extreme fashion.

Interestingly enough, the Sisterhood not only reveals a parallel narrative to the monster through the binary of life and dead but what constitutes monstrous qualities that supposedly only the Unconsecrated have: “There is always a choice, Mary. It is what makes us human, what separates us from [the Unconsecrated]” (Ryan 34). By
taking away the choices from Mary, the Sisterhood is enacting their power over life while enforcing the understanding that “the only true thing that separates the living from the Unconsecrated is choice, free will” (9). If Mary or anyone else within the community can never achieve choice or free will, there is nothing separating them from the monster and, instead, exemplifies the thin line between the Sisterhood and the monstrous qualities they abhor.

Another way we see the Sisterhood enacting a narrative with the Unconsecrated is through their involvement with the monster. As Mary is introduced to the Breakers—a variation of the Unconsecrated instilled with speed and extreme violence because of isolation from the monstrous group—we learn that the Sisterhood had a hand in creating one of the Breakers by keeping an infected girl within the town to study. While initially we can categorize the Sisterhood as bordering monstrous through their solidification of the gender binary and how they perform within the community according to this binary, it is their direct association with the creation of the “monster” that allows the reader to question who should truly be classified as the monstrosity. As we learn more about the Sisterhood’s involvement with the creation of the Breaker, it immediately becomes apparent that the female group carries out their studies in secret—downplaying the presence of the Breaker despite their knowledge of what this Unconsecrated can do in order to keep the village calm. With this association between the Breaker and the removal of choice, the Sisterhood enforces their power through the feminine narrative. As mentioned before, their unwillingness to relinquish any form of control takes away the freedom of choice forcing both the group and the citizens into the same category of the Unconsecrated—limited by the boundaries placed by someone else.

As the Sisterhood continues to limit the village through secrecy and power imbalances, they continue to solidify the understanding of the gender binary through the monster by incorporating their power and communal assumption over the mother-child relationship. At one point in the novel, Sister Tabitha, an elder of the Sisterhood tells Mary, “Our ancestors knew that in order to survive we had to preserve. They knew to keep strong bloodlines. That creating each new generation was the most important task beyond keeping the village safe and fed” (113). Sister Tabitha establishes not only the Sisterhood’s power through seemingly passed-down wisdom but the feminine contributions of the group to ensure survival as well. While it can be argued
that the survival of the village does depend on conception and does not reveal monstrosity, it is important to look at how the Sisterhood deals with its concern maintaining a so called normative relationship between mother and child to guarantee that the village will succeed. Although there is varying levels to how this relationship becomes perverted through the Sisterhood, one of the most interesting is how the female group turns its own relationship with the village into “the monstrous offspring and the perverted maternity” (Almond 220). In “Monstrous Infants and Vampiric Mothers in Bram Stoker’s Dracula,” Barbara Almond states [A] more ominous form of maternal vampirism is forcing “food” into the child—food in the form of ideas, behaviors, allegiances and beliefs, particularly beliefs about the nature of human relationships—to a degree that may totally co-opt autonomy, defeat creative effort, and lead to a paranoid view of the world. (227)

By looking at the Sisterhood as a monstrous mother, we begin to see how their views regarding performance begin to shape how the village responds to not only their roles within the community but how they react to the Unconsecrated as well.

While the Sisterhood exerts a perverted maternity over the village, it is through Mary that we begin to see the extent in which the beliefs of the female group have changed her. After reluctantly accepting her role within the community and partaking in a marriage ceremony, Mary still contemplates a different future for herself; however, her thoughts are quickly interrupted with Sister Tabitha’s words of advice: “You are a bound woman, Mary. And you have a duty to your husband, to God and this village… Your mother found that out the hard way and you would think you would have learned your lesson from her” (Ryan 116). It is in this moment that we see the Sisterhood enact “a level of emotional abuse” to make sure Mary’s “most basic needs and sense of reality [are] disregarded” (Almond 227-228). With an emphasis on the connection between the survival of the village and her cooperation in performing her “duty,” the Sisterhood effectively place boundaries on not only Mary’s agency but also how she will view any acts that do not focus on her role as destructive. Along with deconstructing her beliefs about life beyond the village and Unconsecrated, the Sisterhood uses emotional abuse to firmly imbed their
own values. Although Mary’s mother makes a brief appearance at the beginning of the novel, she remains a source of guilt and confusion for the protagonist and, eventually, becomes a weakness that the Sisterhood continually exploits in order to reaffirm the female group as the sole maternity figure and power. By “[referring] to such behaviors as [monstrous] rather than faulty or unempathic parenting” we are able to see how the need of the Sisterhood transgresses beyond the need to survive but the “need to… survive through the child” in order to apply a continued authority (Almond 228). For the Sisterhood, Mary does not only represent the opportunity to continue the human race but the chance to further their beliefs and ideals of the Unconsecrated and the world. In deconstructing Mary’s idea of what her role should be, the Sisterhood ensures that Mary cannot think of herself without the implications of marriage and motherhood, and how each decision she makes will impact the survival of everyone she knows. It is through this conditioning that Mary begins to lose any sense of identity beyond the one the Sisterhood allows.

To further delve into how the Sisterhood uses their power to destroy the individual narrative for a communal one, it is important to look at the group’s monstrous maternity and the adaption of a strict gender binary. Throughout *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*, Mary tries to establish an identity beyond the normal ideal of wife and mother; nevertheless, the Sisterhood uses their authority to bring the protagonist back into the community with the Unconsecrated as their weapon. Normally “the indeterminacy of the zombie’s gender is reflected in the use of the “it” when characters refer to them [leaving] the zombie to be represented as neither gendered or human,” however, while the Sisterhood does use non-gendered pronouns such as “they” and “them” when referring to the Unconsecrated, they do not directly distinguish between the Unconsecrated and the living in regards to their performance in nature (Murray 5). By permitting this line to be blurred, the female group reveals the emphasis of community: even monsters have purposes that they perform and to transgress this duty leads to becoming worse than them. With this conviction, the Sisterhood continually tries to rewrite Mary’s desire to function outside the societal space, which stresses that any individualism is perverted and corrupt.

Despite her aspiration to perform separately from the community as an active female, Mary reveals how the Sisterhood envelops the ideal of a performing female without inclinations of sexuality and
internal masculinity. In Kinitra Brooks’ “The Importance of Neglected Intersections: Race and Gender in Contemporary Zombie Texts and Theories,” she argues that often the female characters in a zombie apocalypse are depicted as “not wholly feminine … in fact, quite boyish in both construction and name” (464). While Mary does not fall under the category of masculine with her name, her tendency to wander beyond the social boundaries reveals a partiality of encompassing both gender qualities that defies the Sisterhood’s expectation of feminine duty. Mary challenges the Sisterhood’s model of femininity through her attraction to Travis, a fellow villager who is unavailable through his betrothal pledge to another: “Associations between… sexual aggression and male adolescence” (Keane 21) are often made to the point that there is a supposed understanding that “men are entitled to act on their sexual passions” (Henderson 130). Therefore when Mary expresses desire in a context that rebels against the community’s ideal of marriage for duty, she is labeled as a transgressor. We see this directly when Sister Tabitha confronts Mary about her emotions and tries to reify the construction of gender and duty through the Sisterhood and community: “You lust after Travis. You place your own desires before those of your friend, before those of your community… Do you not understand that life in this village is not about love but about commitment?” (Ryan 68). After this confrontation, Mary tries to dismiss her feelings for the young man and adapt to the social expectation of her gender role, but continues to feel conflicted about her identity.

When Mary finally flees the village and the Sisterhood after a breech in the fence, it appears that the young woman is free to reconcile her masculine and feminine traits while dispelling the ideology of the community; however, it quickly becomes apparent that Mary cannot dismiss the internalized beliefs of the Sisterhood. While the female group exemplifies the monstrous mother trope through their firm command of authority through the generalization of the female role, it is through Mary that we see the extent in which their idea of reproduction and maternity has become depraved. Much like Simone de Beauvoir’s argument against “the gendered preconception that maternity is enough in all cases to crown a woman’s life,” Mary tries to redefine her role as woman within the post-apocalyptic world as neither a wife or mother but when confronted with an Unconsecrated child, she reverts back to the ideals of the Sisterhood (Murray 14). Looking at the child, Mary states that she “should feel compassion…
some sort of dormant maternal instinct” and begins to go through the motions of trying to comfort the child (Ryan 195). Although it can be argued that Mary feels compassion as one would feel towards another human being, the imparting message of the Sisterhood strictly relates that children are the only means for survival. While Mary does view the Unconsecrated child with a sense of sadness, her observance reveals the degree in which she believes that survival equates to children: “This child could be my brother’s. It could be my mother’s. It could Travis’s and mine” (Ryan 194). In this admission, Mary discloses the people closest to her and herself indicating the legacy she would want to continue—much like the Sisterhood and their authority when pairing couples to together to ensure continuation of tradition.

After managing to escape the forest, Mary makes it to the coast where she encounters a man checking on the bodies that wash ashore to see if they are Unconsecrated or human. In joining the man in his task, it becomes clear that the Sisterhood’s hold did not extend beyond the forest: the Unconsecrated are known as Mudo and the physical boundaries are not seemingly present compared to constant reminder of the village. With this concise ending of a new beginning for Mary, it would seem that the protagonist has the chance to reassert her belief system. Yet in *The Dead Tossed Waves*, the daughter of Mary illustrate that teachings of the Sisterhood are still with her: “I cringe as she uses the word Unconsecrated, a throwback to her old life and the way she was raised. Her refusal to call them Mudo like everyone else is just another reminder of how different she is” (Ryan, *The Dead Tossed Waves* 35). Although Mary succeeds in escaping the physical surrounding of the gendered groups of her village, not only does it manifest in the thinking of her child and herself but in the very way she becomes segregated from her current community as well. While the Sisterhood continually promoted the survival of the community as a whole, they relied on the mirrored separation of the Unconsecrated and human to further categorize gender to ensure absolute authority. In committing this act, the Sisterhood thrived on separation not only from the Unconsecrated but, also, from the entirety of the world. With Mary acting as an unwitting representation of the Sisterhood, it becomes evident that their reconstruction of the gender binary and social performance will be continued and even developed by other groups and individuals.

We begin to see the influences of the Sisterhood in Mary’s daughter, Gabry, she is when confronted with the community and the social
performance of survival. After a brief tryst with friends beyond the boundaries of the city, an Infection occurs that forces Gabry to return to her home and pretend she did not partake in the event: “Shaking and afraid, I wrap my arms around my chest and stand with the people of Vista” (Ryan 40). It is in this moment that we see Gabry conforming to the community and believing in the solidarity of standing together versus standing alone—a direct value of the Sisterhood that abhorred splitting the community in favor of an individual. This sentiment is also echoed through Mary when she bluntly asks her daughter if she was involved in the event: “I need to know if you were out there with them. I need to know what to say if the Council asks me” (Ryan 36). Though this scene implies a semblance of parental concern, Mary directly involves the community when trying to learn the truth about her daughter and Gabry complies with this influence by reaffirming herself as “too afraid…to cross the Barrier”; thus, someone who could never assert her own identity without the boundaries of society and the presence of zombies (36). Following the influence of the Sisterhood and how it manifests in not only Mary but her daughter as well, we can see how the survival of traditions really relies on the continuation through generations. As mentioned before, Corbett relates that gender depends on normative regulation and, if we are to believe that gender can be defined through practice then it must also be true that gender roles can be defined through the same practices. By performing gender in not only the community but also how it will function in the future, the Sisterhood guarantees their thoughts and opinions will still have validation in the social structure.

Continuing with the impact of the Sisterhood, it is also vital to look at the male counterpart, the Guardians and their connection to the male-dominated Recruiters. In The Forest of Hands and Teeth, the male group plays a less significant role in the development of the social structure beyond their perceived gender roles; however, by comparing the Sisterhood to a monstrous mother, we can also portray the Guardians as an absent father-figure. Through this absence, the Sisterhood is allowed a greater authority and the depiction of femininity and masculinity become distorted. In Mary Williamson’s “The Importance of Fathers in Relation to their Daughters’ Psychosexual Development,” she argues that fathers are seen as a “second object… someone who will hold the [child] in mind and be there to turn to when the relationship with the mother is difficult” (208). By being an absent father figure, the Guardians force the villagers to rely
on the Sisterhood despite the toxic connection between the two and, effectively, allow the village to see masculinity as being uninvolved towards femininity except when dealing with matters that directly deal with traits and performance of male persuasion. The first instance in which we see the Guardians conforming to their performance within the community is through their implied sexuality through the Unconsecrated: “As a metaphor for perpetual male adolescence… the consumptions of flesh stands in for models of agency promoted by discourses of patriarchal masculinity” (Keane 19). Much like the Sisterhood when they assert authority over the village through the appearance of being uniquely tied to life through their gender, the Guardians stress their authority over matters that deal directly with perceived consumption. When Mary’s mother becomes overwhelmed by the Infection, “the Guardian quickly grabs the end of the rope tied to [her] mother…heaves against [a system of pulleys], the other end of the rope dragging [her] to the edge of the pen” (Ryan, The Forest of Hands and Teeth 16). It is in this moment, we can see that the mother’s link to the Unconsecrated allows the Guardians to exert an authority that normally would be placed with the Sisterhood: In viewing the Unconsecrated and consumption as a variation for the masculine narrative, the Guardians solidify their stance within in the community through their gender performance.

Persisting with the masculine narrative through consumption and gender role, Mary and several others learn after a breach in the fences surrounding the village that the Guardians prepared for such an incident by preparing food and weapons along varying escape paths. With the “manifestations of… infections in the form flesh and blood consumption” and an emphasis on the potential of exposing narratives through gender constructs, the Guardians and the Unconsecrated begin to reflect one another. In other words, by viewing the “monster” as a link to the Guardians, we are able to not only see how consumption ties human and non human in a masculine narrative but also defines gender roles in the community (Keane 15). As Mary and the others struggle down the paths, the indirect guidance of the Guardians through gathered materials reveals varying aspects of the masculine narrative. In one instance, the very act of providing the supplies for the escape routes has a tendency to be viewed as a masculine contribution. In the face of a threat, it is supposedly a man’s function within society to provide a solution that guarantees survival. This heteronormative belief is further expressed when a
male counterpart in Mary’s group states, “It wasn’t unforeseen that this could happen. That we would be forced from the village. The Guardians prepared for such an event” (Ryan 150). Contradicting the general idea that the Sisterhood controlled every aspect of the village, the Guardians stake claim on extending survival through a masculine view and standpoint: food for energy and weapons for defense. Stripped of the supposed comforts of the maternal nature, Mary and her friends have to rely on the male approach of ensuring the community through their survival.

While the Guardians do not seem to play a substantial role in solidifying gender binaries according to social structures, they do open the reader to critically think about the patriarchal influence of the Recruiters in The Dead-Tossed Waves and The Dark and Hollow Places—especially through their constant presence even when dealing with feminine gender roles. Although it is never implied that women cannot join the militia-orientated group, the reader never sees a woman partaking in group-related activities unless it involves a confrontation or punishment. When Gabry returns from her brief encounter beyond the boundaries, she learns that the Recruiters have captured the other people who joined her: “The others. They will be sent to the Recruiters to serve for two years, though they will not be allowed to claim the honors that come from service. They will not be granted citizenship… Not after their service, and not ever” (Ryan, The Dead Tossed Waves 43). Among the people captured is her friend, Cira and while her presence within the group dispels the notion that the Recruiters are solitarily masculine, it is her very lack of agency and mobility within the group that not only speaks of disregard for the individual in any community but absolute assimilation of forced community as well.

Regarding the Recruiters and their stance against the “monster,” their forced narrative of power and community echoes that of the Sisterhood; however, while the female group relied on the association between female and life, the Recruiters rely on aggression as an aspect of their masculine authority. When revealing the punishment for Gabry’s friend, a man connected to the Recruiters states, “You must understand that our lives are not about the individual. Our rules exist for the collective. They are about survival and safety… And you must know that we, as your leaders, do not take our duties lightly” (Ryan 42). By implying the Recruiters do not take their responsibilities lightly while enforcing a severe punishment, there is the unmis-
takably awareness that the male group will do what it has to in order for the collective of the town—even disregarding the individual through violence. Although it could be argued that the presence of Elias, a Recruiter more focused on the survival of Gabry, negates the absolute authority of the male group and its inclination toward violence, the mentality of the collective quickly appears when presented with the Mudo: “It is the only way to survive! I had to find a way to keep all of you safe and this was it! ... The Recruiters can do that” (Ryan, *The Dark and Hollow Places* 157-159). Through instilling the mindset that the Recruiters can guarantee survival through communal power, the individual reverts back to believing in the presence of the community when faced with the dangers of the Mudo and stress the importance of the group’s narrative to others.

In *The Dark and Hollow Places*, the narrative of assertive and violent masculinity through the Recruiters continues when the group believes the community has been compromised. After killing one of the Recruiters to ensure the safety of Annah, a young woman consistently threatened with the presence of the male group, Catcher is given a choice of giving up one of the women under his protection to pacify the men and the injustice they feel has been committed. Instead of choosing a male to establish punishment, the Recruiters specifically demands for one of the women and site it as upholding the rules: “You have no idea how much it takes to keep order? It takes rules, and to have meaningful rules, you have to have consequences for breaking them” (Ryan 312). In asserting that it must be a woman that nullifies the killing, the Recruiters are not only pushing the narrative of masculinity over femininity but also ensuring that their violent narrative becomes the only one that matters. Like the Sisterhood, who used their ties to feminine associations to exact authority, the Recruiters use the male binary and its connotation to stabilize their command while limiting the female narrative.

Despite the opportunity to reconstitute their social worlds in the aftermath of a zombie apocalypse, the gendered groups assume power through the solidification of the gender binaries and the social expectation of how gender should be performed through the fear and the anxiety of their “monster.” With the Guardians and the Recruiters, their consumption of the male narrative leads to associations of violence and assertion in the disguise of promoting the community against a threat. While the Sisterhood established their control through the association of femininity to life, the presence of the Unconse-
crated helped to ensure that their separation of male and female was seen as an act of the community—a way to designate duties to every individual without giving them an identity beyond the village. Although all of the groups faced a common “monster,” their response to fix traditional gender roles in order to set familiar social structure leads to a greater monstrosity than the one they face. By forcing a community that relies on solely their performance as either male or female, the individual cannot implement a task that does require the involvement of the collective and, essentially, erases any chance at obtaining a self-identity. Without allowing the expression of self, the community is left with very little and faces the threat of becoming like the zombies, and if we are the monsters then everything we feared enhances in us.

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The War on Young Adult Literature: Monsters Fighting Censorship
By Erin J. Fugagli

“I wanted to tell a story about characters at that crucial life stage just between adolescence and adulthood, where your choices determine the kind of person you’re going to be rather than reflecting who you already are.”
—Cassandra Clare

Censorship, especially that of books, is a practice which has increased in frequency in the twentieth century, and it persists at high levels today. Historically, censorship targets marginalized groups, such as women or minorities, in an attempt to exercise control by limiting knowledge. Today, literature created for young adults has become one of the most censored genres in existence. Over half of the books listed by the American Library Association as banned or challenged are those written for young adults or children. Considering that literary critics estimate that young adult literature has only existed since the nineteen nineties, the number of censored young adult-aimed books overcoming that of adult books is somewhat extravagant.

Perhaps in response to massive amounts of censorship, young adult literature maintains a proclivity towards monster texts. These monsters within the literature not only often stand to represent taboo issues, but also to act as the minority groups, the inclusion and young adult discussion of whom might cause them to be censored. However, authoritarian parents often have a problem with the ideas that these monsters may represent (diversity in sexuality, race, class, etc.) being shared and discussed with their adolescent children, hence the reason why these are some of the most aggressively banned books. This is perhaps the reason why monsters are such a popular device in young adult literature; they can be used to disguise these themes in a way that is didactic for young adults, but easily dismissed as “not real”
by censoring parents. With some of the most popular young adult texts being *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, *Vampire Diaries*, and my chosen text, *The Mortal Instruments: City of Bones*, it is clear that there is no shortage of monsters in adolescent literature, and that there is no shortage of readers gravitating towards this subgenre. *City of Bones* contains such a variety of monsters (shadowhunters, werewolves, vampires, seelies, warlocks, etc.), that it can act as a representation of the many functions of monstrosity in young adult literature, as well as why young adult-aimed authors use it, and why young adult readers gravitate toward it so frequently. By hiding multifaceted and usually embargoed “adult themes” such as diversity behind the mask of literal monstrosity, Cassandra Clare’s *Mortal Instruments: City of Bones* sidesteps censorship in order to allow this monstrosity to fulfill the important function of acting as a tool which guides young adult readers through adolescence as they encounter and respond to the real life “monstrosity” of diversity in situations that may be outside of their realm of familiarity.

If monstrosity in general is a literary and cultural manifestation of the other and how it can inspire fear and is excluded, then using literal monsters as characters in young adult literature with which readers are to align themselves essentially paints young adult readers as an othered group. This alignment within the literary genre gives young adults the opportunity to not only understand, but also become that which is often considered culturally “monstrous.” Since adolescents often feel out of place and unaccepted as they develop a sense of self anyway, they can easily sympathize with monsters who are not accepted in the literature, and therefore gain a deeper understanding of the feeling of being truly othered by society. By taking away their voices through censorship of the only literary genre that is truly theirs, these adults further other adolescents. When adolescents feel marginalized by adults, they can more easily sympathize with those who are excluded by society for other reasons such as race or sexuality. Because the resurgence of young adult literature acts as an outlet for this, adolescents today are offered reading material that they not only enjoy and can find themselves in, but which also creates an atmosphere of acceptance, creating a generation of people more accustomed to conversing about difficult/taboo topics, and more willing to accept differences in others. By reading young adult fiction to become literal monsters themselves, they are happy to ignore or reject society’s figurative ideas of monstrosity, for accepting it as monstrous
would be self-proclaiming monstrosity. Cassandra Clare’s *The Mortal Instruments: City of Bones* is a prime example of this, as it includes not only a traditional out of place adolescent main character, but also a myriad of monsters, all of which the main character accepts as equal, regardless of adult societal pressures telling her not to.

Young adult literature is a relatively new phenomenon; literary critics estimate that it has only existed en masse for under thirty years. The term “young adult” itself did not even exist until the nineteen sixties when it was coined by the Adult Library Services Association. There was then an explosion in the eighties of young adult followings of adult books suitable for teenage readership, such as *Lord of the Flies* or *Catcher in the Rye*. True young adult books, though, were rare, often contributed to the small size of the teen generation in the eighties. In the late nineties and early two thousands, however, an explosion of young adult literature took place, often attributed to the success of the *Harry Potter* novels, quickly followed by more supernatural tales (Strickland). The emergence of young adult sections in bookstores and libraries is an occurrence that mostly took place in the last ten years; a 2012 survey of public libraries shows that one-third of U.S. libraries have librarians dedicated specifically to young adult literature, a profession unheard of as recently as 2000 (Young Adult Library Services Association).

Although there are many canonical adult texts that are suitable for young adult readers, many of which become students’ first exposure to literature, until now there has never been a significant genre of texts that treats young adults as intelligent people worthy of their own literature. Marc Aronson describes what previously passed for young adult literature in his book, *Exploring the Myths: The Truth about Teenagers and Reading*: “These older books were not written ‘for’ teenagers. Their authors did not pay any attention to the constraints of language, understanding, or treatment that some think a younger readership imposes” (22). Therefore, it is safe to say that true young adult literature, rather than just books that young adults happen to pick up, does fulfill these expectations; it is literature that is written on a psychological level that is appropriate for adolescents, that includes characters they care about who are their age, with issues that are relevant to them. Aronson also states that “these are books that challenge, engage, provoke, tease, disturb, beguile, entice, seduce. They inspire readers but do not provide handy resolution,” indicating that he finds as much value in young adult texts as an adult literary critic.
would find in canonical texts (119). These books are important, they are relevant, and they attribute a certain specific intelligence to young adult readers that allows them to both understand more and feel more understood; in other words, they can fully engage and converse with the literature. However, since writing this way is a relatively new practice, it is evident that generations born prior to the nineties did not have this understanding or representation in literature. A lack of inclusion in literature indicates a lack of inclusion in society, effectively creating an entire group of marginalized people who have no voices. Continuing to censor these voices when they finally speak out is continuing to actively marginalize young adults, creating a generation of people able and willing to accept and understand other marginalized groups, refusing to bend to the expectations of society just as they refuse to bend to the banning of their books.

In her “Young Adult Literature and Censorship: A Content Analysis of Seventy-Eight Young Adult Books,” Nancy Horton states that “The members of society who are most influenced by censorship are the young adults. The quality of their education depends partly on their academic exposure to materials in the school library” (3). This indicates that young adults rely partly on literature in order to assess and learn about the world, and they rely on their libraries both public, and in school, to supply this information. They require the literature in order to become educated adults, and censoring their literature is telling them what they are allowed to know as they progress into adulthood. It is important, therefore, to discuss the reasons as to why adults censor the literature available to their children. Although obvious issues like violence, language, sex, etc. are frequently the reasons why young adult literature is banned, Carolyn Sigler found that “censorship, particularly when it comes to children, is not about their moral development; it is about the fear of losing control over them. Authoritarian parents are more often outraged by books that portray young people defying their parents’ values than by the language the book contains” (234). Parents are afraid that their children will abandon the values that have been taught to them in pursuit of activities and beliefs that their parents would not normally condone. In doing this, they are indicating that children do not have the presence of mind to decide which elements of their literature to follow, and which elements they disagree with. In short, they are infantilizing their children, hiding opportunities for knowledge out of fear that young adults will pursue them. They are
failing to see that young adults should not be treated as children, but as people who are defining their entrance into adulthood, and who have every right to explore their options in doing so. Unless and until authoritarian adults return this sense of agency to teenagers, young adults will remain a marginalized group who is struggling to make their voice heard in the literary world.

Aronson, a college educated Ph.D. holding professor is unfortunately in the minority of high level educators who think that young adult literature is a genre worth consideration and criticism. Its lack of validation on a collegiate level is not only unfounded, but also contributes to the attitude of censorship of the genre; it has not been approved by the scholars, and therefore will not be approved by the school board. Because of this push for canon-only curriculums, many young adults become discouraged from reading stories that are irrelevant to them, causing high school teachers now to push teaching young adult texts, a process made difficult by censorship. This inclusion in the literary world is clearly very important to young adults, as literature in the young adult sect has become a high-profit genre with avid followers. If literature is a culmination and/or result of society, then a group must be included in the literature in order to be a valid participant in society. Previous generations, including the parents of current young adults, were left without much literature that contained any sympathy or understanding of their lives. Aronson discusses how before the nineties, the genre was essentially a collection of adult books suitable for young adults, but not actually written with them in mind. Now, however, adolescents have access to this literature which validates their issues, gives them a voice, and often acts as a guide for them. Authors such as Cassandra Clare, J. K. Rowling, and John Green are idols for many young adults, and their books offer solace in a world where their voices are often trivialized or ignored. Because of the trust placed in these authors and their works, young adults are willing to listen to the possibility that they are allowed to form their own opinions, and more importantly, that their opinions matter. These books let young adults know that they do not have to fall in to traditional values that they may not agree with, and that a generational disconnect from their parents is okay and can even be natural. They teach and allow adolescents that it is okay to move across cultural boundaries, or even to tear them down. Although these texts often have to hide their teachings behind subtext and monstrosity, they still are able to reach young adults on a didactic
level and give them options and agency in their lives, making young adult literature a very powerful genre.

In these monster texts, which are so present in the young adult genre, the main character is often a “regular kid” who by chance (or recently discovered birthright, in the case of City of Bones), encounters a monster, and then has to figure out the secret world in which these monsters live. By using this trope, authors can mimic the inevitable teenage discovery of the world outside of their own household that often happens when they go to high school or college or move out of their parents’ home. This allows the adolescent reader to use the text as a mirror reflecting their own coming of age, and also as a guide for how they should respond to the experience. Many young adult texts are criticized for having characters with little substance. However, this is an often-misunderstood paradigm of young adult literature. The characters are often empty or reflective enough that a young adult reader can project themselves onto the main character; it is not a book telling them what to do or how they should live their lives, it is a novel that they live through themselves as they read, allowing them to experience possible outcomes of their behaviors. It differs from probable past didactic experiences in that by being relatable, it gives the adolescent reader a voice with which to iterate opinions alongside the main character, rather than having an adult figure dictate how they should behave. In fact, many young adult texts, especially those concerning the supernatural, remove parental influence entirely, whether through absentee parents or orphaning the main character, “for this allows him [or her] both to search for his [or her] heritage and also removes any parental obstacles to his [or her] adventure” (Barton, 30). In other words, parental units are removed and the young adult character gains an unadulterated voice of their own. Therefore, if monsters in these texts represent diversity, then the texts themselves are guides, leading young adults through a possible response sequence in the face of diversity.

In City of Bones, Clary meets several of the monster types included in the overall narrative setting, and is told how her “kind,” the supposedly elite Nephilim, or shadowhunters, are supposed to respond to these monsters’ diversity according to societal expectations, which is usually to keep them at a distance and always expect the worst from them, and is sometimes to kill the monster. Some of the monsters in the text very clearly represent real marginalized groups, such as werewolves as a representation of people of color, while some of the
monsters are explicitly stated as minority groups, such as Magnus the gay Asian warlock, and show these groups contrasting with the Nephilim, the obviously privileged group within the text. Clary’s father, the most prominent evil villain in the book, maintains a traditionalist, exclusionary, and frequently violent approach against these “monsters,” and pressures Clary to feel and act the same (Clare). However, because Clary is young and has not yet formed her concrete ideas of how diversity should be handled, she is not forced by conditioning to follow the ideals laid out for her by her parent, and is free to create her own beliefs and accept the monsters regardless of their differences. She acts as a mirror and a representation, therefore, of her young adult readers in that she knows that the cultural boundaries of diversity exist, and she knows that she is expected not to cross them, but she sees them only as abstract lines, rather than concrete walls, and can therefore cross them without issue. If young adults project themselves onto Clary as a character, then they are given a voice to disagree with their parents just as Clary does, and experience what could happen as a result, which in Clary’s case is that she meets a diverse group of friends and learns about many other cultures.

Young adults as readers, while usually still developing a sense of self and lacking a concrete definition of purpose, are very malleable compared to adult readers. They have heard the ideas imparted onto them by adults and society, but these ideas can be more easily retaught, reimagined, or changed than they can in most adult readers. These young adults are aware of societal expectations and the teachings of their parents, but they have not yet exited this malleable, transitional thinking and entered the process of concretely and permanently defining their own views. Therefore, good young adult literature has to contain characters to whom these easily influenced readers can relate, who explore issues that these readers find important. Taking into account the youth and malleability of the readers, these texts also have the opportunity to teach young adults about topics and themes that they have not yet encountered, or which adults or society may consider them too young to handle (death, sex, violence, sexuality, diversity, evil, etc.). This puts authors of young adult literature in a position of power in that they often are deciding how their readers will first encounter these themes, and then laying the foundation for their readers’ reactions and thoughts on these ideas.
Throughout *City of Bones*, Clary has to struggle with many “monsters” in the novel, including monstrosity as a representation of race, cultural boundaries, homosexuality, interracial coupling, and religious beliefs. In his “Monster Culture (Seven Theses), Jeffrey Cohen states that “the monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself” (12). In other words, crossing a cultural boundary is either something discouraged by the presence of “monsters” or by the threat of becoming the monster that society fears. In the case of young adult literature, though, readers often already feel that they are on the outside of societal acceptance. Their voices are silenced, they are expected to follow dictated rules and procedures of society including those that involve exiling other “monsters” as they are perceived by adults. In short, young adults are a marginalized class. They are a cultural group on their own, and this marginalization allows them to visit and understand other marginalized groups without the fear of this monstrosity. If you are already the monster that society fears, then what do you have to lose by ignoring social boundaries? In *City of Bones*, Cassandra Clare uses the figurative teenage monster as a liaison with literal monsters to encourage the crossing of cultural boundaries, or rather, the dismantling of them.

In his introduction to his *Ashgate Encyclopedia of Literary and Cinematic Monsters*, Jeffrey Weinstock discusses the need of adults to understand monsters, saying, “Monsters are in short inevitably the most interesting—and, one should add, threatening—of “people” because they are ontological puzzles that demand solutions” (1). In young adult novels, however, the need for understanding in adolescents is minimal. Because they have no conditioned concrete fear of monsters as they represent diversity, they do not need to understand them, and they often do not even realize that there is anything to understand. In addition, because young adults often feel misunderstood and robbed of a voice in a censoring and controlling world, they can empathize with the monsters, for they feel monstrous and excluded themselves; they do not need to find understanding, because the understanding is already there. Clary for example, witnesses Simon, her best friend of ten years, turning into a vampire. When she discovers his new state of being, she is only concerned with finding out about Simon as a person (is he good or evil, has he maintained
his old self), rather than understanding him as a monster. When she finds that he is good, she accepts his monstrous exterior with no further need for explanation. This happens frequently in young adult literature: in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight*, Bella is very upset to find that her friend is a werewolf because she believes that he is killing hikers in the woods. When she finds that he is not, she is fine with his monstrous condition. In *Harry Potter*, the main characters do not care that Professor Lupin is a werewolf, because they know he is a good person, regardless of parents’ will to remove him as a teacher. This recurring factor suggests that the determination for acceptance for young adult characters is good over evil, rather than outward appearance or one’s habit of turning into a wolf sometimes.

This moral judgment of teenage characters also speaks to the importance of monstrosity in young adult texts; monsters must be present because there has to be some glaringly obvious difference between the main character and the other, and the teenager must see past that difference, especially if the other is characterized by goodness. Because of this difference, a strong message is sent: if Clary, Bella, and Harry can all get past their loved ones being literal monsters based on their goodness, then why can society not get past differences in race, religion, and sexual or gender orientation, as long as the other is good? Although good versus evil is a somewhat youthful judgment devoid of much grey area, it still seems a better determining factor for acceptance than skin color or religion, or any of the other cultural boundaries which adults often try to enforce onto their children. It paints the characters in these young adult novels as more enlightened than real life adults, and allows readers to question boundaries and step towards this enlightenment as well. While Weinstock is right in that monsters demand solutions in many literary and literal situations, young adult literature is different in that the implied reader, a teenager, does not feel that prescribed need to understand the monster, but can merely accept it as equal unless and until its actions suggest malignancy. This type of understanding allows the adolescent reader to carry this judgment process beyond the pages of the novel and ask why their parents have this need to isolate, control, and understand real life marginalized groups, including themselves, while also giving them the opportunity to rebel against this kind of thinking.

Another commonality in these young adult novels in the inclusion of a character who is good, and who is close to the main char-
acter, but who has been coached by the hegemony to be prejudicial towards others. This character acts as a foil to the main character, as a contrast to show that there are those young adults who are devoid of most prejudice (such as Clary), and there are those who have been coached by their elders and their society to believe that these prejudices are natural order. In *City of Bones*, this character is Jace. He is very close to Clary throughout the novel and the rest of the series, and he serves as an indicator of the cultural boundaries expected by society. Whenever Clary meets a new class of people (vampires, werewolves, etc.), Jace tells her not only what they are, but also the stereotypes associated with them. A similar phenomenon exists in *Harry Potter*, where Ron, who has grown up in a wizarding household, exposed to wizards’ stereotypes, teaches Harry and Hermione about how the wizarding world views certain subjugated groups such as giants or trolls. Because these prejudicial characters are on the “good side,” young adult readers can see that racism or prejudice is not always only for those who are considered bad people or those who are old, but that it is something that begins to foster in the innocence of youth, and can exist in those who are “good,” but ignorant. Because Jace is young and has never been exposed to any of these other classes of downworlders on a personal level due to segregation, he simply believes the stereotypes imparted unto him by his elders. When Clary meets Jace and they begin dealing with the downworlders in order to defeat her father, he begins to realize that the stereotypes are wrong, and that downworlders and humans can be good people worthy of acceptance and agency. These characters, who are all still in the youthful stage of malleability, show young adult readers that even if they have been taught to observe these cultural boundaries, they are still worth exploring on their own to see if they are justified or correct. They show young adults that they have the opportunity to develop their own opinions based on experience. They also show readers that the adults in their life who may believe in similar stereotypes are not necessarily bad people, but that they have just been taught poorly. These characters are an important trope because they show the readers their own ability to change. Just like Jace and Ron learned and saw through experience that they were wrong, and then began to develop their own opinions, readers also have the agency to decide to dismantle the cultural boundaries constructed of learned stereotypes by experiencing life and letting education change their minds.
In response the banning of his book, *Looking for Alaska* for its inclusion of an awkward oral sex scene, John Green states that teenagers are critically engaged and thoughtful readers. They do not read *Looking for Alaska* and think ‘I should go have some aggressively unerotic oral sex,’ and they also don’t read *The Outsiders* and think ‘I should go join a gang.’ …But even beyond that, I don’t think books, even bad books, corrupt us. Instead, I believe books challenge and interrogate. They give us windows into the lives of others and they give us mirrors so that we can better see ourselves.

From the mouth of an author who writes about young adults for young adults in a way which is known for its honesty, it is apparent that he is not trying to change the minds of young adult readers. He is not trying to make them rebel against their parents’ morals. He is trying to teach them about the world that they live in, and about themselves as they act in this world. *Harry Potter* is not trying to teach witchcraft to teenagers, *Twilight* is not trying to encourage teenage marriage to a vampire, and *City of Bones* is not trying to influence young adults to leave their homes and slay demons. On her reasons for writing *City of Bones*, Clare states that “I wanted to tell a story about characters at that crucial life stage just between adolescence and adulthood, where your choices determine the kind of person you’re going to be rather than reflecting who you already are” (Springen). She wrote Clary as a representative of young adults, and she recognizes the importance of this position. She realizes that the content of young adult literature can shape young adults into the people they will be as adults, not by encouraging them to defy their parents, but by showing them that, just as Clary disagrees with her father and chooses not to follow his ideas, that young adults can respectfully disagree with their parents and decide their own paths to morality. The books exist to converse with the young adult reader. They do not try to preach to young adults, but instead place young adults on equal footing with the characters and the issues, and give them the opportunity to discuss their beliefs in a way that adults in their life may not encourage or accept.

Young adults, as stated, often feel outside of cultural boundaries of acceptability. By that definition, they feel like monsters. Young adult literature, even when it has to use literal monsters to get around the censors, seeks to show young adults that they have a place in the
literature, and that that place is not one of monstrosity. It seeks to show them the ways in which society labels peoples and groups as monsters and takes away their agency. With censorship so heavy in the world of young adult literature, teenagers can easily relate to this feeling of having no voice. It is not only that the voices of young adult characters in literature are minimized by censorship. It is also the fact that banning young adult books without taking into account the intelligence of adolescents and giving them agency to choose their own reading material, young adults are infantilized by censors. They are told that they have no right to choose, no right to the knowledge that they may wish for, just as marginalized groups in society are told that they are not entitled to equality.

In his response to book banning, John Green goes on to say that “if you have a worldview that can be undone by a novel, then the problem is not with the novel.” In fighting against or ignoring censorship by reading banned books, teenagers are able to see this. They can question why these adults are so afraid to have their worldviews questioned, and they can begin to question them. Young adults should be allowed to rebel against their parents’ morals. They should be allowed to disagree with the ideas that adults are imparting unto them. It is not the young adult literature that is causing them to disrespect their parents, it is censorship. If teenagers are not allowed a voice in society’s conversations because they are pushed out of the boundaries alongside the monsters, then their choices are to yell back at society or to reject it entirely. Parents may view this as disrespect, but if adults ban their literature and thereby take away their respectful discourse, then rebellion is their only option. The better course of action instead of censorship would be an open forum of respectful discussion. Censorship should not be the answer to rebellion.

Teenagers are often labeled as monsters by society. They are not adults, they are not children, they do not fit in to the cultural boundaries of society. They are cultural monsters, and they therefore understand cultural monsters. Adults, however, exhibit Weinstock’s belief that monsters are “ontological puzzles.” They do not understand these teenage monsters, and they try to silence and control them rather than give them a space in society. Therefore, society has a group of people (adults) who are closed off and frightened of crossing cultural boundaries and facing the monsters on the other side, and another group (teenagers) who are stuck outside of the boundaries with the rest of society’s monsters. They are learning to respect these “monsters,”
and they are learning to accept them. In a young adult society, much in thanks to young adult literature, there is potential to have a world without concrete boundaries. There is potential to have disagreements, rather than disrespect. There is potential to have open discourse and conversation, rather than just shutting down or oppressing the weaker side of the discussion. By creating such a large amount of monster texts, young adult authors are beating the oppression of censors, and simultaneously allowing teenagers to discover what it is like to be censored and marginalized. They are reclaiming the word “monster” in a literal sense to show teenagers that the figurative monstrosity assigned unto them by society is irrelevant. In young adult literature, different does not always mean wrong. Monsters are not always evil. The genre is creating a world in which young adults can grow up to be different. In young adult texts, everyone can be a monster, and when everyone is a monster, cultural boundaries fall and monsters cease to exist.

Works Cited


Strong Bones: Taking Back Her Narrative in Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones*

Leah Mirabella

“Our heartache poured into one another like water from cup to cup. Each time I told my story, I lost a bit, the smallest drop of pain.”

—Susie Salmon, *The Lovely Bones*

Our culture’s obsession with serial killers perpetuates violence into a popular genre full of mutilated victims serving as plot devices in a cat-and-mouse chase between catchy-nicknamed serial killers and overzealous detectives. On the surface, Alice Sebold’s novel *The Lovely Bones* could fall into that genre; the novel features a serial killer who brutally rapes and murders Susie Salmon—a 14-year-old girl living two doors down from him. His name is Mr. Harvey, and he fits the infamous serial killer trope. He lives alone, and he never had any children. In one of her first descriptions of him Susie says, “We had read about men like him in health class. Men who never married, ate frozen meals every night and were so afraid of rejection that they didn’t even own pets” (Sebold 11). His idiosyncratic lifestyle features handcrafting miniature houses and setting alarms that remind him to shut the blinds at the same time every night. Mr. Harvey even designs an elaborate murder plot disguised as making a clubhouse for the neighborhood kids to enjoy. He hollows out the cold ground of a dead cornfield and lines it with shelves full of knick-knacks and snacks; Susie just happens to be the first one to try it out with him—signaling multiple red flags to condition readers who have encountered his type of monster before in film, novels, crime shows, and late night TV newsmagazines. However, *The Lovely Bones* is not simply a crime thriller about your average serial killer. When describing the novel Cassuto says, “[Sebold] borrows the character of the serial killer from
the crime genre and transplants him into a fantastic tale told from beyond the grave by his final victim” (267). Sebold rejects the typical structure of crime fiction, and she carefully weaves Mr. Harvey into Susie’s powerful narrative. Women and children tend to make up majority of the victims of infamous serial killers, but they rarely get a voice to tell their story. Instead of a silent, ignored victim and an iconized, glorified killer, Sebold gives the girl a medium to work through the trauma. Through the structure of Susie’s posthumous narration, *The Lovely Bones* works towards empowering victims of violence in a society not only hardened to the tragedy of serial rape and murder, but also entertained by such horrors by humanizing herself as a victim and forcing readers to see the monstrosity of her killer. Instead of the strengthening the murderer’s role in the story by obsessing over his motivations like the typical crime genre, Susie’s narrative focuses on her own growth and emphasizes learning how to live in a tragic world *despite* the monsters that inhabit it.

Sometimes the scariest monsters are the ones who don’t look like monsters at all—the monsters who live two doors down, who shop at the same mall as you, and who seem practically human. These monsters threaten our peace of mind—the rapists, the pedophiles, the serial killers, and the ones who encompass all three horrors. Not only have these criminals become a part of society’s consciousness, but also they have wormed their way into society’s fascinations. Stephen Asma points out that “serial killers have probably always existed, and maybe they’ve always been fascinating and entertaining to those of us at a safe distance, but it seems fair to acknowledge a new grand-scale media celebration of such killers” (195). Hank Wagner pinpoints the most culturally prominent beginning of this captivation with the success of Alfred Hitchcock’s movie *Psycho* (1960), claiming that the “image of a sexual deviant who could only express his frustrations through violent acts became part of the cultural zeitgeist,” which ultimately “inspir[ed] myriad works of nonfiction, novels, short stories, comic books, [and] films” (474). Since then, serial killers have been driving the plot lines of countless detective shows like *Criminal Minds* and starring in films dedicated to making sense of their psychological deviances like *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). While this combination horror and crime genre full of suspense, thrill, psychoanalysis, backstory, and justice seeking seems fairly new against the backdrop of history, Wagner argues that serial killers may have even “inspired the fantastic legends of the werewolf or vampire” (475).
He also points out that this recent surge of fascination may be that serial killers are “only finally being appreciated for who they truly are: damaged human beings who find release by killing and mutilating other human beings” (Wagner 475). But what happens when you take away the “safe distance” that Asma mentioned? Through Susie’s first-person narrative, *The Lovely Bones* forces the reader to be up-close and personal to horrific reality of being the victim of a serial killer—twisting the norm and questioning society’s fascination and obsession with these monsters.

What deems serial killers as monstrous is not only that they are relentless killers, but also that no matter how many studies are done or cases are solved their motivations are incomprehensible. According to Leonard Cassuto, “The simplest way to make sense of serial killers is to describe them as monsters” (244). He then goes on to classify them by their “shape-shifting” ability to “fit in everywhere,” their extreme isolation, their antisocial tendencies, and their contempt towards community (Cassuto 244). These damaged” human beings are still human, yet their actions put them in the same category as age-old monsters communities have warned of for centuries. While most people could say with confidence that they have never encountered a werewolf or vampire, they would be reluctant to claim that they have never seen a serial killer—they could cross paths with one everyday and never know it. These criminal monsters not only rob society of their peace of mind, but they ultimately rob their victims of their power through emotional, mental, sexual, and physical violence. Sebold’s alternative methodology of focusing on Susie’s story instead of merely Mr. Harvey’s combats the systematic power that serial killers typically hold within the crime genre and enables the victim despite her traumatic death.

Susie’s narration from beyond the grave marks one of the most resounding and unique aspects of the novel. This structure serves as a crucial element to give back power to Susie even after her Mr. Harvey takes her physical life on earth. Sebold establishes this unconventional dynamic from the first line of the book: “My name was Salmon, like the fish; first name Susie” (5). The past tense “was” immediately contradicts the logical process of Susie’s narration, and she directly follows it with, “I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973” (5). This book begins in the same place as other works of crime fiction—with a murder, but this time the victim is not lying motionless on the ground in a pool of blood. Alice Ben-
nett highlights by stating, “In this rewriting of a murder mystery, the murder victim is the one who gets to arrange the telling of the story’s events to ensure that the murderer is not the creative force shaping the plot’s dynamic” (104). Sebold parallels Susie’s unconventional posthumous storytelling with naming her Salmon. Like the fish who swims upstream, Susie swims against the current of silencing death in order to reach peace in her heaven. She makes her own path and encourages readers to follow along—with her as their guide. Susie takes claim to her story; instead of saying that a man murdered her, she uses the passive voice and a possessive pronoun saying, “My murderer was a man from our neighborhood” (Sebold 6). This structurally removes Mr. Harvey from the action and empowers Susie’s posthumous voice through possession. Susie’s narrative “challenges a dead silence at the very center of the murder mystery and provides a means for the corpse to speak back, rather than just reducing [herself] to a plot device” (Bennett 105). Far from simply existing as a plot device, Susie comes alive through her vivid narrative, and she refuses to let this story focus on anything but her own journey.

Susie’s first-person, stream-of-conscious account of her rape and murder within the introductory pages of the novel not only forces the readers to witness the horror of Mr. Harvey’s acts, but also see Susie as real person instead of merely a victim of a serial killer. Sharon Stockton explains this as a way to “juxtapose the enforced corporal and mental suffering of the rape victim with a narrative space of fantasy magic realism, and surrealism” (195). Vignettes of Susie’s life surface throughout her recollection of murder; after Mr. Harvey calls her by name, Susie digresses about the “embarrassing anecdotes” her father shared with strangers “as loving testimonials to his children” such as the story of Susie being jealous of her new baby sister Lindsey and trying to “pee on top of Lindsey in her carrier” (Sebold 7). She refuses to relay the details of her death without juxtaposing them with details of her life. When she climbs into the underground clubhouse that Mr. Harvey built she says, “This is neato,” and she immediately compares herself to her little brother “on [their] day trip to the Museum of Natural History in New York, where he’d fallen in love with the huge skeletons on display” (Sebold 9). When Susie “[lies] down on the ground, in the ground, with [Mr. Harvey] on top of [her] panting and sweating,” Susie thinks of how her “mother would be checking the dial of the clock on her [new] oven” (Sebold 12). Sebold sprinkles contrasting tidbits of comfort from Susie’s life.
throughout the sickening scene; these little references to her family begin to humanize her to the reader despite Mr. Harvey’s dehumanizing acts of rape and murder. Susie refuses to let go of the life Mr. Harvey attempts to rip away from her. She describes the rape by saying, “I felt the corners of my body were turning in on themselves and out, like in cat’s cradle, which I played with Lindsey just to make her happy” (Sebold 14). Even at the most devastating moments of the scene, Susie contrasts extreme distress with heartening ties to her family. Because the description is in the past tense, these digressions do not simply act form of disassociating escapism from the violence, but instead they serve to anchor her control over the retelling of the events. Mr. Harvey’s actions are “motivated by his own psychological damage and fear, not by a compelling and clever murder plot, and the story of detection and discovery doesn’t drive the reading experience”—Susie does (Bennett 104). Despite the disturbing nature of Mr. Harvey’s actions, Susie refuses to let her last scene on earth be the last chapter of her life. In fact, this is literally the first chapter of her book, and these vignettes introduce her family members that the rest of the novel revolves around. Even though he thought he silenced her by ball[ing] up the hat [her] mother had made [her], smashing it into my mouth,” Susie speaks out in her death. Susie’s story starts where Mr. Harvey thought he ended it (Sebold 13). This dynamic continues throughout the novel as Susie watches over her family from heaven. While the plot does still include Mr. Harvey, Susie determines his role in her narrative.

Just like her first chapter, the rest of her narrative is filled with a seamless mix between stories of her past life, vivid descriptions of her current heaven, and omniscient observations of those remaining on earth. Susie is both a narrator and character in her story, which makes the point of view both first and third person omniscient. She has in-depth insights to the thoughts, memories, and motivations of her family, friends, and even her killer. Instead of receiving Mr. Harvey’s backstory scribbled out on criminal profiler’s dry erase board like the typical crime show, Susie inserts tidbits of his past in the midst of her narrative. In her heaven, she has the power to look into his mind and “see all the way back to Mr. Harvey in his mother’s arms” (Sebold 97). In a few short flashbacks Susie tells readers of Mr. Harvey’s parents’ constant quarrelling, his mother teaching him to steal, and his father eventually abandoning his mother. While these scenes serve to slightly satisfy crime fiction’s standard psychoanaly-
sis, explanation, and insight into the murderer’s motivations, Susie’s inclusion of his thoughts after her murder complicate any sympathies the reader may begin to feel for Mr. Harvey. After her ascension to the “in-between,” Susie relays the following:

[Mr. Harvey] felt a calm flood him. He kept the lights out in the bathroom and felt the warm water wash me away and he felt thoughts of me then. My muffled scream in his ear. My delicious death moan. The glorious white flesh that had never seen the sun, like an infant’s, and then split, so perfectly, with the blade of his knife. He shivered under the heat, a prickling pleasure creating goose bumps up and down his arms and legs. (Sebold 50)

This description of Mr. Harvey’s thoughts and feelings after killing Susie is disturbing in general, but the fact that she narrates them adds an entirely new level of discomfort. In one flashback to Mr. Harvey’s childhood, Susie says that he “had a moment of clarity about how life should be lived: not as a child or as a woman. They were the worst two things to be” (Sebold 190). He concludes this after observing violence towards his own mother; while he sits in the truck with her, she narrowly escapes getting raped by running over a man. Instead of rejecting the systematic cruelty towards women witnessed in that moment, he eventually engages in it. In order to have a different effect on reader, Susie’s first-person description of Mr. Harvey’s emotions combats our hardened, indifferent response to woman/child victimhood in the crime genre; she forces us to hear her voice amidst the violence. The usage of the possessive “my,” the infantile description of her skin, and the phallic, penetrative, splitting of Mr. Harvey’s knife forces the reader to look at this as more than a mere description of a crime scene; she gives an intensely intimate insight into the unnerving reality of both the rape and murder. Instead of blatantly accepting victimhood, Susie’s voice combats the victimization of women and children by forcing the reader to look uncomfortably through her killer’s eyes. Susie makes the violence disturbingly personal—not entertaining, not fascinating, and not easily glossed over. As an alternative to glorifying Mr. Harvey’s actions and dissolving Susie into a long list of victims like most serial killer fiction, Sebold forces readers to acknowledge the significant humanity of Susie and the sickening monstrosity of Mr. Harvey.
Sebold further humanizes Susie by crafting Susie’s narrative as a coming-of-age story. Brian Norman argues that Susie “decides she is in neither a crime drama nor a protest novel, but rather a teenage coming-of-age novel” (144). Entire sections of this novel make the reader forget that Susie died. From her recollections of middle-school crush Ray Singh, to her anecdotal inclusion of memories from her childhood, Susie’s narrative often reads like a typical young adult novel concerned with growing up and fitting in. However, Mr. Harvey’s violence ultimately jars her bildungsroman. Looking down upon earth, Susie claims, “I desired to know what I had not known on Earth. I wanted to be allowed to grow up”; Susie’s murderer barred her from coming of age and from “know[ing] the secrets” of life “from beginning to end” (Sebold 19). This adds to the severity of Susie’s murder and the importance of her posthumous narrative. At only 14, Susie had her entire life spanning before her. Not only did Mr. Harvey end her life, but he did so before she really had a chance to live it out. Sebold combats Mr. Harvey’s violence by allowing Susie a “step-by-step vicarious emergence into womanhood” through close observation of her sister Lindsey (Norman 146). In the same way that Lindsey enters Susie’s closet to borrow her deceased sister’s dress, Susie enters into Lindsey’s conscious to borrow her living sister’s “growing up” experiences. When Susie witnesses Lindsey’s first kiss with Samuel, Susie describes, “It was glorious… I was almost alive again” (Sebold 71). She also contrast their loss of virginity by saying, “At fourteen, my sister sailed away from me to a place I’d never been… In the walls of my sex there was horror and blood, in the walls of hers there were windows” (Sebold 125). Susie devoted much of the second half of the novel to Lindsey growing up and finding comfort and peace in her relationship with Samuel. They graduate from college together, and the novel concludes with an anecdote of Susie checking in on her sister from heaven. Susie even lives on through Lindsey naming her and Samuel’s daughter Abigail Suzanne. Despite Mr. Harvey’s attempt to prevent Susie from growing up, Susie’s vicarious growth through her sister serves as an empowering device for experiencing the life he stole from her.

While part of Susie’s coming-of-age occurs vicariously through Lindsey, Susie also defies the limits of death through her relationship with Ruth Connors. An accidental touch of the hand in Susie’s flight to the “in-between” connects the two girls. Throughout the narrative Susie watches over Ruth, and Ruth not only begins to see parts
of Susie’s murder unfold, but she also gains insight to the violence against other women whose spirits have left the physical world. This relationship climaxes to “the moment [Susie] fell to earth,” and into Ruth’s body (Sebold 299). While she gained awareness of herself in Ruth’s skin, she “lost” the thought of “Mr. Harvey sailing away unwatched, unloved, unbidden” (Sebold 300). Instead of using her limited time on earth to avenge her death and convict Mr. Harvey, she chooses to spend her time intimately with Ray. Previously, she “had only been hurt by hands past all tenderness” (Sebold 304), so she “[took] this time to fall in love instead—in love with the sort of helplessness [she] had not felt in death” (Sebold 309). The consensual and compassionate sexual encounter with Ray provides Susie with the denouement to her bildungsroman. For Susie, “leaving Earth again was easier than coming back had been” because her swap with Ruth finally allowed her to obtain what she desired most despite her death (Sebold 311). Susie’s posthumous relationship with Ruth provides the means for Susie to discover sex on her own terms, which Mr. Harvey initially ripped away from her. These girls work together to empower each other against violence towards women.

Not only does Ruth serve as a medium for Susie to “come-of-age,” but she also becomes a messenger for other victims. Because of their connection, Susie says:

Ruth would get an image and it would burn into her memory… a fall down the stairs, a scream, a shove, the tightening hands around a neck—and at other times... an entire scenario spun out in her head in just the amount of time that it took the girl or woman to die. (Sebold 251)

After receiving these visions in her journal to “try to place the pieces back together, to set them firm, to make the murdered girls live again” (Sebold 313). Only she sees them on almost every street corner and on every bench throughout New York City, pointing out society’s tendency to overlook the grim realities right before their eyes. Just as Susie tells her own narrative, Ruth takes on the responsibility of telling the narrative of those women silenced by murder. Not only is Susie getting a chance to tell her own story, but also through Ruth and Susie’s connection other women’s voices can be heard despite their attacker’s attempts to silence them. Sarah Whitley argues, “Ruth’s willingness to bear the burden of rage and retribution fulfills
the reader’s desire for justice” (359). More so, it also reiterates the importance of telling the story of the victim’s life and not simply the story of the violence that ended it. Susie and Ruth both work towards telling a different story than the norm—one where women have power over their own narratives.

Sebold also uses dramatic irony to enhance Susie’s control over the narrative. From the first few pages the readers know who killed Susie—she tells us. Unlike a diary, her first-person point-of-view acts more as a memoir addressed to an audience. She chooses to share insights with readers that her family on earth will never know. This metafictional dramatic irony creates suspense—but not in the same way a typical “who-done-it” crime thriller hints towards the capture of the suspect. Sebold’s suspense is disturbing and frustrating because it is laced with a very real grief of a family who has lost a daughter to violence. Mr. Harvey sketches and crafts elaborate dollhouses with picture perfect trimmings and ideals of family, but his house building directly opposes the figurative home destruction he causes to his victims’ families. Cassuto claims that Susie’s “dual focus on the murderer and the family he maims” designates Mr. Harvey and other serial killers alike as “anti-family [men]” who are “purely anti-sympathy, anti-domesticity, [and] anti-sentimentality” (267). Constant thoughts of Mr. Harvey do not occupy Susie’s time in heaven. Instead, he surfaces in the narrative when the thoughts or actions of her friends and family lead her there. While Susie concerns herself with both their grief and growth, her father and sister feel compelled to seek justice for Susie’s death. Sebold uses her direct connection to the readers to address the trauma of violence caused by serial killers like Mr. Harvey, while also relaying the importance of working towards overcoming the trauma in the search for peace.

The mirroring of Mr. Harvey’s house to the Salmon’s home furthers the characterization of him as “anti-family” man. Because of the 1970’s suburban setting, the houses in Susie’s neighborhood match each other in architecture, but they contain opposing inhabitants. When Lindsey breaks into Mr. Harvey’s house in search of answers for her sister’s death, she “couldn’t stop the memories slamming into her” as the same exact green flagstones from the Salmon’s house lined the hallway of Mr. Harvey’s. Visions of her “crawling after [Susie] when she was a baby” and Susie’s “toddler body running delightfully away from her” filled both her imagination and Susie’s in heaven (Sebold 179). Mr. Harvey’s sterile, cold, and empty house becomes
a relentless rush of memories for Susie to witness through Lindsey’s recollection. From Susie “sliding down the banister and asking for [Lindsey] to join,” to “sisters dressed identically in velvet or plaid or Easter yellows” posing and “smiling hard as [their] mother tried to focus her camera,” Lindsey’s journey into Susie’s killer’s house reveals a stark contrast to the Salmon’s lives to Mr. Harvey’s (179-180). Sebold exaggerates this even further by placing both Susie and Mr. Harvey in identical places within the architecture of the two houses: “[Lindsey] went into what had been [Susie’s] bedroom in [their] house, and she found [Susie’s] killer’s” (182). While every room of the Salmon house is filled with memories and life, Susie’s room is a “no man’s land” in the middle of their house (Sebold 44). Opposite of that, Mr. Harvey’s house is practically vacant, but his bedroom is the “least barren room” (Sebold 138). Sebold uses this mirroring to emphasize the trauma inflicted upon the Salmons by Mr. Harvey; the room where he thrives in his house is the same room laid barren in the Salmons. Making the devastating effects of Mr. Harvey’s murder impossible to ignore, Sebold highlights the severity and seriousness of loss for families. Just as victims should not be reduced to plot devices, neither should the stories of grieving families seeking justice for their loved ones.

As the denotation of “serial killer” implies, the void in the Salmon family is not the only void left behind by Mr. Harvey—his violent urges also rip away other victims from the world by. Because Susie has access to Mr. Harvey’s mind, she “knew the names” even though “some he had forgotten” (Sebold 129). To him they were like possessions; he kept tokens from each one, and “he would count them like beads on a rosary” (Sebold 129). To Susie they were voices desperate to be heard. Susie connects with these victims as she watches Lindsey in Mr. Harvey’s house. Susie says, “The architecture of my murderer’s life, the bodies of the girls he left behind, began to reveal itself to me know” (Sebold 181). Her omniscience in death unveils the names, locations, murder times, and ages of the other victims of Mr. Harvey’s. Instead of a killing pattern and typical victim “type” like most fictional serial killers feature, Mr. Harvey’s list features a variety of women ranging from six-year-old Ledia Johnson to 49-year-old Sophie Cichetti. This wide range reflects the harsh reality of victimhood instead of simply categorizing them to fit into a generalized mold. Susie gives small insights into their stories, allowing them to have a voice within her own narrative. Susie even interacts with the
victims in her heaven; Susie states, “Our heartache poured into one another like water from cup to cup. Each time I told my story, I lost a bit, the smallest drop of pain” (Sebold 186). Susie becomes a “representative voice of victims of femicide” through the community with each other (Pederson 6). Mr. Harvey’s secrets no longer hold power because of Susie’s persistence to shed light on the victims darkened by his violence.

Throughout *The Lovely Bones*, Susie’s narrative voice takes back the part of the power taken from her. While Susie cannot undo the trauma inflicted on herself, her family, and her friends by Mr. Harvey, she can teach us “much about the value—indeed the necessity—of facing… the evils that make us fearful” (Pillsbury 358). Susie’s empowerment comes from growing up in her own way and not only voicing her own story, but also the story of previously silenced victims just like herself. These notions of justice for Susie are “utterly unlike crime novels or true crime books where the solution of factual puzzles [or] punishment of the guilty” provide conclusion and satisfaction for the readers (Pillsbury 359). Revealing her growth after death, Susie notably points out towards the close of her narrative:

> These were the lovely bones that had grown around my absence: the connections – sometimes tenuous, sometimes made at great cost, but often magnificent – that happened after I was gone. And I began to see things in a way that let me hold the world without me in it. (Sebold 320)

Here Susie removes the focus entirely from Mr. Harvey and chooses to see the strong “bones” or connections grown in her family and herself after her death. The “lovely bones” of the title are not the physical bones of her body destroyed by Mr. Harvey, but instead they are the ties that she gains with her family, friends, and fellow victims in their death. Susie’s narrative does not entirely remove the trauma of rape and murder from her life—she is still dead; however it provides a source of empowerment to herself from beyond the grave and for other victims like herself. Despite the reality of Susie’s death, Sebold “create[s] a unique form of literary survivorship for the heroine” (Whitley 355). Through this, Susie contests victimhood of typical crime fiction by “set[ting] up a series of connections between the living and the dead, and between other dead victims of violence, which foregrounds an alternative response; one that does not involve
crime and solution, or murder and mystery” (Bennett 105). Sebold opens a dialogue for victims of trauma to share their side of the story instead of coldly disappearing into the file cabinets of fictional detective offices, which ultimately stresses the importance of considering the consequences of society’s seemly harmless fascination with serial killers and crime fiction. As Whitley points out, “Should we continue to deny the materiality and impact of sexism and gendered violence…we will make…monsters of ourselves” (352). We must make every effort to see the humanity of the victim, and we must acknowledge the monstrosity of supporting violence against women as a form of entertainment and intrigue. Sebold promotes an alternative to crime fiction obsessed with serial killers by concentrating on the extremely vulnerable and powerfully beautiful voice of victims systematically silenced by violence.

Works Cited


“The past is never dead”: Enduring Monstrosity in “A Rose for Emily”

By Abbie Smith

“With nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will.”

—William Faulkner

In his 1930 southern gothic tale “A Rose for Emily,” William Faulkner uses a repulsive, disintegrating corpse to instigate immediate disgust in his reader. Faulkner furthers this repugnance when he reveals that the titular Miss Emily Grierson slept beside this rotting corpse for many years. The town of Jefferson, Mississippi collectively narrates “A Rose for Emily,” and Faulkner uses both this mob-mentality point of view and the story’s physical corpse to suggest that while Miss Emily’s actions were indeed monstrous, the town’s perpetuation of a sexist and prejudiced tradition turns Emily herself into a corpse left rotted and abandoned by society before she ever kills Homer Barron. However, in her problematic version of rebellion, Emily perverts the southern town’s marriage plot by living in her bridal room with her rotting, monogamous lover. In “A Rose for Emily,” Faulkner creates a monster that he defines by its suppression of others, which manifests in the story as misogynist, prejudiced actions towards multiple characters. Despite the initial disgust Faulkner creates with the corpse and Miss Emily’s actions, this group-narrated story proves the idea that “we create our monsters, even as they create us” as it depicts Miss Emily’s descent into her own monstrosity (Stommel 341). However, by the end of the short story, Emily Grierson recognizes the monstrosity she inherited and begins to again reject Jefferson’s influence on her life. Through Jefferson’s oppressive treatment of Miss Emily, Faulkner indicates that this southern town embodies the true monstrosity in “A Rose for Emily” and, therefore, that the town’s tradition of trapping people
into a locked, gendered social sphere leads only to destruction and the cyclical creation of future monsters.

William Faulkner famously wrote, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*, 73). Faulkner’s words resonate specifically in the southern United States—a cultural space where what’s dead doesn’t stay that way, with major impacts on the region’s present and future” (Anderson 8). Southern Gothic literature like “A Rose for Emily” mirrors its setting’s “undead” but often silenced history by using reanimated or rotting bodies that “act as vessels through which the violence of history is materialized” (Charléty 119). The grotesque elements of the Southern Gothic genre approach fear in “a more visceral or carnal way” than the traditional Gothic genre through its sparse use of ghosts and apparitions and its altered focus on the more literal “undead” bodies, including not only vampires and zombies but also “corpses unburied, decayed . . . yet still filled with . . . a kind of life” (Anderson 1). Often, these corpses serve to embody fears about race and gender common during the antebellum and Civil War era South. Faulkner situates the town of Jefferson, which obsesses over its southern institutions and gendered spheres, alongside the South’s prejudiced tradition and in a place of narrative control over Emily’s life in order to reveal the historically common suppression of females in southern culture. In this way, the bodies in the Southern Gothic—and “A Rose for Emily specifically—become “a repository for domestic anxieties . . . to collect additional anxieties about gender, history, and nationalism” (Taylor 90). The Southern Gothic genre “challenge[s] stock representations of the south by grounding the fictional discourse in prosaic, crude reality,” disrupting the picturesque ideals held about southern culture both during Emily’s time and the present (Charléty 113). In “A Rose for Emily,” Faulkner specifically critiques the continued sexist tradition in southern culture through his use of the “undead”—the corpse of Homer Barron and the lifeless, suppressed existence of Emily Grierson.

The town of Jefferson’s narration of “A Rose for Emily” embodies the community’s influence over Emily Grierson’s life. They, as a whole, hold power over how they tell her story, in what order they tell it, and what parts, specifically, they even tell at all. The narrator—a single representation of Jefferson as a whole—uses the pronouns “us” and “we” 42 times in a place of narration, as the town implicates itself in the events it narrates. However, the individual narrator slips into the use of “they” at times “to hide his and his neighbors’ collusion
in the killing of Homer Barron” (Dilworth 251). This contradiction in narration shows itself as the town discovers Homer’s body. The narrator says that “they waited until Miss Emily was decently in the ground before they opened it” but that “for a long while we just stood there,” looking at Homer’s corpse (Faulkner 5, emphasis added). This contradicting self-identification suggests that the town and the individual narrator attempt to hide their complicity in Miss Emily’s crimes. For the active part of the narration, when the townspeople break down the door, the narrator separates itself from the others in the town. However, when the townspeople simply view the product of Miss Emily’s monstrous actions, the narrator slips back into its group mentality and rejoins the town in their collective gaze into Miss Emily’s life and actions. By switching its presence in the events in Miss Emily’s life, the narrator unconsciously proves the town’s complicity in Miss Emily’s activities and suggests that the town, despite its narrative control over Emily’s story, attempts to push off the control it holds over Miss Emily’s actions. Throughout the story, the town proves, despite its attempts to mislead the audience, its own role in forcing Emily into an altered mental space that prompts her own shocking crimes.

Furthermore, the narrative voice of Jefferson, through its failure to give Emily any narrative voice or agency, shows that Emily acts as a depository for the town’s fears of female power, and, therefore, the town forces its own monstrous traditions onto Emily herself. Laura Mulvey, a feminist film critic, claims that, in a text, a woman “stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other” or embodies a person by which a “man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (58). Mulvey’s claim suggests that women such as Emily exist in stories controlled by a male-centered authority and hold no real narrative voice in their tales in order to reveal the power of a patriarchal society’s control over women. Similarly, Terry Heller applies this concept directly to Faulkner’s story by saying that the reader never sees Emily “thinking and must infer her motives from a small group of external actions” (316). Jefferson tells Emily’s life story through the events that it believes lead to her murder of Homer Barron, and it attempts to portray those events in a way that excludes the town from blame although it often fails in this endeavor. The narrator never offers any explanations that Miss Emily may have
given for her actions nor overtly acknowledges its own complicity in the events that they reveal. In doing so, the town removes Emily’s voice from her story in order to keep her from gaining the ability to, in Mulvey’s words, “make meaning.” This elimination imposes on Emily the legacy of the town’s own monstrous actions in an attempt to displace its own blame in Homer Barron’s death and Emily’s actions.

Faulkner situates “A Rose for Emily” in a post-Civil War southern community that, following its failed attempt to keep slavery alive, forces women like Emily Grierson into a fixed domestic social role by changing their town’s and their own personal histories. The non-chronological “A Rose for Emily” begins at Miss Emily’s funeral, and the narrator describes the deceased Emily as “a fallen monument,” reminiscent of the fallen southern institutions that the town also mourns (Faulkner 1). At the funeral, the former Confederate soldiers go on to alter Emily’s own past by “talking of Miss Emily . . . believing that they had danced with her and courted her perhaps, confusing time with its mathematical progression” (Faulkner 5). The men of Jefferson, Mississippi use their place of power in the town to change the actual history of Emily’s life—one of seclusion and repression—into one that better fits the current narrative they wish to project to the world. Miss Emily, like the other fallen monuments of the southern past, evolves into an idealized memory. Just like the veterans idealize the Civil War era while wearing their “brushed Confederate uniforms,” they also romanticize Miss Emily’s past instead of acknowledging not only Mr. Grierson’s ability to keep all them from Miss Emily even if they wanted to court her, but also the reality of the judgment and criticism they placed on Emily later in life (Faulkner 5). These men, like the narrator of the story, tell a version of history that they believe rids them of any responsibility for the negative events that happened in the past. These veterans, despite knowing that they never dated or even had a friendship with Miss Emily, tell a history that excludes them from any blame that results from both the town’s pressing of Miss Emily further into her home and their judgment of her relationship with Homer Barron—a marriage-centered judgment that leads to her attempts at marriage and later Homer’s death. Similarly, the narrator, while revealing the tale of Miss Emily’s life, chooses to suggest that the blame of Miss Emily’s actions lie with her, not with the town itself, despite often unconsciously implicating itself in her actions. By changing their version of history, both these aging Confederate veterans and the narrator attempt to turn Miss Emily’s life into one that leaves them innocent.
Instead, this altered yet implicating version of events points the blame for Miss Emily’s actions towards the town of Jefferson and suggests that they and their attempts at distancing themselves from Miss Emily after her death remain the monster in the story.

Before revealing Miss Emily’s crimes in “A Rose for Emily,” the narrator unconsciously incriminates itself in Miss Emily’s actions through its non-linear, second hand depiction of Emily’s life. Like the Confederate men, the narrator chooses to relate Miss Emily’s story in a misleading, non-chronological way. The story begins at Miss Emily’s funeral then immediately moves back in time to the days following Homer Barron’s death. This false order confuses the reader and, by relating information before the reader understands the events’ significance, the narrator distracts the reader from realizing the town’s culpability in Miss Emily’s actions. In addition, the town’s language adds to their attempts to distance themselves from blame. After Miss Emily buys arsenic at the drugstore, the town automatically assumes that “she will kill herself” (Faulkner 4). In the following line, they say that before she bought the arsenic, they claimed, “She will marry him,” speaking of Homer Barron, her lover (Faulkner 4). The narrator unconsciously pairs these two grammatically identical phrases to reveal the link between Miss Emily following the southern town’s marriage plot and her inevitable death. In her original affair with Homer Barron, “Emily briefly rebel[s] against Southern values,” but, “by ending her affair with him, at least as far as the townspeople [are] concerned, she conform[s] again to those values” (Dilworth 251). The town repeatedly misinterprets Miss Emily’s actions. They assume she will follow exactly the traditional female role in their society. However, instead of falling into their trap and either marrying the socially unacceptable man or committing suicide because her lover disappears, Emily perverts their marriage tradition by killing Homer Barron and keeping him in her rose-colored bridal bedroom. Her perversion of the marriage role both allows Emily to conform to the town’s values while also exposing the deadly problems in Jefferson’s outdated traditions.

Emily takes her town’s traditional opinions of marriage and gender relations and flips them. Emily first goes against her town’s views of whom she should date by riding around in public with Homer Barron, a northerner and “day laborer” (Faulkner 3). Despite the town’s belief that Homer was not good enough for the long-standing Grierson family’s heir and their assumption that Emily and Homer had a sexual
relationship, Emily still “carried her head high enough—even when [the town] believed she was fallen” (Faulkner 3). The town, with its intrusive and judgmental gaze, believes that Emily’s relationship with an undesirable man, one that opposes the tradition of the exclusive southern town, is inappropriate, and they assume that she has turned into a “fallen woman.” However, even when Emily eventually does attempt to move her relationship with Homer into a more socially accepted position, his claim that “he [is] not a marrying man” forces her to take extreme measures in attempt to fit her society’s standards (Faulkner 4). So, in order to conform to her town’s strict rules for women—rules which, as evidenced by the townspeople’s whispering about Homer and Emily’s relationship, determine the social standing of females in their society—Emily mimics the narrator’s pairing of marriage and death in her attempts to keep Homer Barron in the same trapped gender role she experiences. She kills Homer in order to follow through with her town’s expectations without having to convince Homer himself to play his own role in the town’s prejudiced tradition. Emily grows up surrounded by her town’s expectations of her to marry and, in doing so, conform to their standards of femininity. However, when she fails to keep Homer in her life as either her lover or her husband, Emily distorts her town’s expectations of marriage and allows their monstrous tradition of forcing women into a rigid gender and social role to spur on her own monstrous actions of killing Homer Barron.

Just as the narrative voice of “A Rose for Emily” emphasizes the monstrosity of Jefferson, Emily Grierson’s interactions and relationships with specific members of the town also enforce the argument that the town’s influences on Emily embody the true monstrosity in the story. Emily grows up with only her father, and his success in keeping his daughter from proper socialization assists the rest of Jefferson in trapping Emily in a domestic sphere that, like her ancient antebellum home, begins crumbling to the ground despite numerous attempts to keep the town’s sexist traditions alive. From a young age, Emily’s father keeps her from interacting with males, and the town-wide narrator explicitly remembers “all the young men her father had driven away” (Faulkner 3). Emily’s father, a fellow product of Jefferson’s social spheres, traps Emily in her home, a physical representation of the female role. The town describes a scene of Mr. Grierson chasing away Emily’s potential suitors, saying, “Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the
foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung door” (Faulkner 2). Emily’s father steps in front of her, keeping her framed inside the home that would later begin to crumble around her, and he keeps her from not only experiencing a life that might bring her out of his domestic trap but also, ironically, from the men that could continue his tradition of keeping women inside the domestic sphere. Mr. Grierson’s focus on keeping his daughter under his power alone leaves her unable to properly function when he dies. Emily at first refuses to acknowledge the death. She eventually does allow her father’s body to be taken away, but her denial of her father’s death shows her deepening reliance on the male dominated society around her (Faulkner 3).

So, Emily finds Homer Barron to fill the male void in her life. Their relationship initially rebels against their society’s standards, but Emily eventually needs to re-conform to her previous role in order to appease the town, who “force[s] the Baptist minister . . . to call on her” and then later his wife “[writes] to Miss Emily’s relations in Alabama,” who they believe will bring Emily back to the town’s values (Faulkner 4). However, Emily’s father’s insistence that she rely solely on him forces Emily into her choice to kill Homer in order to fully rejoin her society. When Miss Emily’s relations leave her home, Emily, who had prepared for what the town assumed was her wedding, admits Homer into her house for the last time. Emily’s relatives’ arrival reinforces the town’s values about marriage and gender relations. However, Emily, who knows Homer will not marry her in the way the town intends, sees no other way to mollify the town outside of killing Homer Barron. Miss Emily’s father kept Emily perpetually trapped in their home—a symbol of the female domestic sphere—and, in doing so, she cannot live outside her society’s standards and eventually reverts back to their expectations, albeit in an altered form.

However, Emily also replaces her father’s role in her home in a similar way to how she perpetuates the town’s monstrosity. The narrator says that, after Mr. Grierson’s death, the townspeople knew that, without her father alive, “she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will” (Faulkner 3). The town knows that despite all that her father had “robbed” from her life—proper naturalization, love, and companionship—Emily would still, eventually, “cling” to her father’s traditions and expectations. The narrator refers solely to Emily’s father, but, since the town too perpetuates sexist traditions and expectations, the narrator’s words can apply to the town as a whole.
as well. Later in the story, when the young leaders of Jefferson come to collect Emily’s taxes, the reader sees Emily “framed in a doorway, dominating the room as her father’s portrait dominated before she entered” (Heller 307). Emily replaces her father as the dominating force in her home. Because of the way her father and the rest of the town treats her, Emily becomes dependent on their approval, and, therefore, she holds onto their actions and goes on to continue them. She experiences their monstrosity and then perpetuates it when she cannot escape the town’s hold on her life and psyche. Mr. Grierson’s death and Emily’s initial denial and then replacement of his role in their home suggests that Emily will eventually go on to perpetuate the town of Jefferson’s own monstrosity and proves that the cycle of monstrosity often reappears in those it oppresses.

After Mr. Grierson’s death, Colonel Sartoris, the former Confederate soldier and later mayor of Jefferson, treats Emily Grierson as a child who cannot fend for herself by paying her taxes. This infantilization of Emily by the mayor of Jefferson leads to her further dependence on the traditional gendered ways of southern society. When the new generation of Jefferson leaders come into power, they ask Miss Emily to pay her taxes, but she refuses, further suggesting that Emily relies on the traditional way that Jefferson treats women, a reliance that began with her father and continues due to Sartoris’ infantilization of Emily. When the new leaders visit Miss Emily in an attempt to convince her to pay her taxes, they hear her hidden gold pocket watch, symbolizing the invisible, but still present, passing of time despite their desire to bring Miss Emily into modern society by paying her taxes and putting street numbers on her home (Faulkner 1). Miss Emily’s clash with this new generation of Jefferson leaders emphasizes the continued growth of her reliance on the traditions of her town. Emily’s father and Colonel Sartoris treat Emily as a child who needs to be both protected and sheltered inside her societal role. However, instead of simply keeping her locked in a gendered, Mr. Grierson and Colonel Sartoris use their misogynist monstrosity to turn Emily into a monster herself. As time passes—symbolized by Miss Emily’s own pocket watch—Jefferson’s sexist tradition continues in its younger generation of leaders and it ingrains itself into even the people it suppresses.

Chronologically after Homer Barron’s unknown death but, in the order given by the narrator, after the young leaders come to persuade Emily to pay taxes, the townspeople notice a stench coming from the Grierson home. At first, the gossipping ladies of Jefferson blame it on

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Miss Emily’s only servant, an African American named Tobe, saying, “‘Just as if a man—any man—could keep a kitchen properly’” (Faulkner 2). Here, the women place both gendered and racial lines around Tobe, similarly to the way they treat Emily. The “any man” part of their statement suggests that not only could Tobe, a black man, not keep a kitchen clean, but neither could any white man since the kitchen remains a female space. When the townspeople approach Judge Stevens about the smell, Stevens says, “‘Dammit sir’ . . . ‘will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?’” (Faulkner 2). The judge goes on to say that the smell must be “just a snake or a rat that nigger of hers killed in the yard,” so four men “crossed Miss Emily’s lawn and slunk about the house like burglars . . . and sprinkled lime” (Faulkner 2). Unbeknownst to the men, Emily notices their actions and “a window that had been dark was lighted and Miss Emily sat in it . . . her upright torso motionless as that of an idol” (Faulkner 2). Judge Stevens, along with the rest of the town, has placed Emily in a locked position for so long that they continue to use her femininity as a way to distance themselves from her actions. Judge Stevens had to know that such a strong odor could not have come from a small snake or rat. Dilworth claims that, because the townspeople would have smelled the decomposition only weeks after Homer’s disappearance and Miss Emily’s purchase of arsenic (although this is hidden from the reader due to the scene’s early occurrence in the story), the town “suspected there was a corpse in the house and reasoned by process of elimination that it was not in the cellar . . . and not on the first floor” (259). The narrator’s claim later in the story that the townspeople knew that “no one had seen” the inside of her upstairs bedroom door “for forty years” “implies an opinion formed long before Emily’s death” (Faulkner 5, Dilworth 259). Since many of the townspeople sent their children to the first floor of Emily’s home to take chinapainting lessons and others had seen her cellar, they knew that there was no body in those areas. Their lime-sprinkling suggests that the men believed that some type of corpse was buried on her property, but later investigation, in the many years following, led the people to believe that the secret hid not in the ground but inside Miss Emily’s upstairs bedroom. The men even “[sniff] along the base of the brickwork and at the cellar openings,” searching for proof of the town’s collective crime (Faulkner 2). The town and narrator’s “refusal to acknowledge this suspicion or certainty symbolically aligns the narrator with Emily, who had refused to acknowledge the death of her...
father and . . . her lover,” connecting the town’s monstrosity with the monstrosity of Emily’s actions. The town recognizes its own crimes in the silenced actions of Emily Grierson.

Furthermore, Emily’s realization that the town somehow knows about the corpse on her property through her observation of the men spreading the lime suggests that, as she sits in her crumbling trap of a home with Homer rotting nearby, she knows what the town’s actions have done to her. She sees them spreading the lime, attempting to hide both her and their own crimes, and she sits as if an “idol,” observing how deadly and disturbing the southern town’s gender specific marriage tradition really is. At this time, Emily alone knows that the smell comes from inside the home that her father had trapped her in, specifically from the bridal room she so carefully prepared for her lover. Her final acceptance of the town’s authority in her life results in Emily’s perversion of the town’s marriage expectations. However, even her acceptance of the inevitability of the town’s authority keeps her outside of society. Their forcing her into their expectations turns her into a monster who traps Homer into a perverse interpretation of his own social role as husband. However, the town narrator, in its shocking reveal of Homer’s body, “distracts readers from accumulated evidence of the town’s prior knowledge of the killing” (Dilworth 252). Again, the jumbled narration style causes the reader to not immediately recognize the town’s role in Emily’s actions, but Emily, in her time spent observing the town enclosed in her home, fully recognizes the town’s monstrosity. Emily’s actions not only perverse the “marriage” she creates for herself, but they also finally place Emily in a place of control over Homer, a man who also previously rejected social norms. The town shames her for living outside their societal norms by dating a foreign, dangerous-seeming man. But, when he refuses to join her in traditional marriage, Emily’s decision to force Homer into her expected role in society initially casts her further as an outcast and turns her into the town’s monster. However, upon analysis of the town’s true role in the story, Emily’s final grasp at control shows her knowledge of and continued rebellion against the town’s monstrous behaviors.

Beyond simply keeping Emily in a fixed, gendered social role, the town of Jefferson’s narrative voice continuously focuses on the “undead” in the story—both the literal dead Homer Barron and the metaphorically dead Emily Grierson. The “undead” in “A Rose for Emily” imply the merging of the town with the very alive horrors of the past with the present.

“The past is never dead”
that the corpse represents. Julia Kristeva describes the symbolic corpse—the representation of what she calls the abject—as “a border that has encroached upon everything” (3). The abject, represented by the corpse, threatens one’s feelings of mortality and one’s feelings of power; seeing the abject corpse embodies “the contamination of life by death” (Kristeva 149). The town breaks down the door of Miss Emily’s bedroom and finds the woman’s long lost lover decaying in their shared bed, igniting the desire of the town to disclose the morbid details of Emily Grierson’s life that lead to her sleeping with a corpse. The town “[leans] forward” towards Homer Barron’s skeleton in order to find evidence of Miss Emily’s sins, acknowledging both their repulsion and attraction to the symbolic, abject corpse (Faulkner 5). In doing so, the town steps over the physical barrier—like Kristeva’s border—that separates them from the monstrosity of their own creation held in Miss Emily’s home. The town and its narrator cross the border between human and monster and recognize its embodiment of the rotting corpse within. When they find Homer Barron’s corpse, the town realizes that “they hold within them the ultimate other that is the corpse” and they choose to justify their monstrous actions through their telling of Emily Grierson’s life (Charléty 116).

The narrator also continuously describes Emily with corpse-like language, reducing her even further from a woman in society to a corpse, which it uses to remove itself from any responsibility for Homer Barron’s death. The narrator continuously depicts Emily though her body, observing its changes throughout the years, as Emily goes from looking very thin to later morbidly obese. The language the narrator uses to describe her, however, suggests that the town and its treatment of Emily turn her into a living corpse before she fully turned Homer Barron into a dead corpse. The town describes Emily when she refuses to pay her taxes by saying that “her skeleton was small and spare . . . . She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water” (Faulkner 1). Without context, it would seem as if the narrator described a drowned corpse instead of a living woman. Here the narrator again falls onto Kristeva’s border. Their narration of Emily’s story suggests the town’s interest, but its distancing of itself from Emily through the corpse-like language shows the town’s fear and repulsion towards its and Emily’s shared crime. The town, through its distancing narration, reflects Kristeva’s argument that the abject or corpse is “what [one] permanently thrust[s] aside in order to live” (3). The town thrusts Miss Emily and her life away, leaving
her delegated to the place of an outcast who does not totally conform to their society’s standards. Later in the story, the narrator describes Emily at a younger age, when she bought the arsenic, and says that she had “cold, haughty black eyes in a face the flesh of which was strained across the temples and about the eye sockets,” turning a living woman into language of lifeless flesh and bone (Faulkner 3). The narrator likens Emily to Homer’s corpse, relating Emily to Homer and therefore suggesting that with Emily the town also recognizes its complicity in Homer’s death. The town identifies with the monstrosity they see both in Emily and in Homer’s corpse. They see both the dead and living consequences of their perpetuation of a sexist tradition.

By describing Emily with this corpse-like language and, therefore, connecting both the town itself and Emily with the abject corpse, the town-wide narrator of “A Rose for Emily” shows its ultimate role as the monster in the story while also proving Emily’s recognition of the town’s monstrosity. The town suppresses Emily into the embodiment of a living corpse, further trapping her in a fixed role and, therefore, reducing her status to that of a literal corpse—arguably, in the town’s eyes, a role even lower than that of a single woman. In his study of “A Rose for Emily,” Terry Heller asks the question: “If [Emily] makes Homer into a corpse, who makes her into one?” (317). The story suggests that it is the town itself that turns Emily into a symbolic corpse through its language and treatment of her, making the town’s crime the instigator of Emily’s own crime. Nevertheless, Emily, through her continued seclusion and observation of the town, still recognizes the town’s monstrosity and their treatment of her as an abject corpse trapped in a traditional female role. With this recognition comes an empowerment of sorts when Emily, at some point between her murder of Homer Barron and her own death, locks her bridal bedroom and leaves Homer’s body to continue rotting on its own. Emily, despite her categorization as a symbolic corpse in the story, removes herself from association with the physical corpse, showing her recognition, like the town, of her own monstrosity reflected in Homer’s abject corpse. However, Emily, unlike the rest of the town, removes herself from the symbol of her monstrosity instead of perpetuating that same monstrosity in another victim.

The narrator of “A Rose for Emily” describes Homer Barron’s dead body as having “apparently once lain in the attitude of an embrace, but now the long sleep that outlasts love . . . had cuckolded him” (Faulkner 5). At the end of “A Rose for Emily,” the reader discov-
ers that Emily had shut up the upstairs room where Homer Barron rested and she died instead “in one of the downstairs rooms . . . her gray head propped on a pillow yellow and moldy with age and lack of sunlight” (Faulkner 5). Finally, at the end of her life and after she kills a man to achieve the expectations of her society, Emily realizes that she needs to totally reject her town’s marriage expectations. She does not find fulfillment in being a “bride,” so she shuts up her rose colored bedroom and leaves Homer Barron’s corpse and her wedding presents trapped in the bridal suite. She no longer lies in an embrace with the body of Homer Barron or the traditions he symbolizes.

Emily Grierson ultimately realizes the monstrosity present in her town’s outdated, sexist traditions. However, this realization comes too late, and the town narrator relates Emily’s life story—taking away her voice and agency even in the telling of it—in a mix-mashed way to cover up its role in Emily’s actions. This town, in its monstrous trapping of Emily into an unmovable social role containing the expectation to marry and live under the scrutiny of the town’s rules, turns Emily Grierson into a monster that continues on her forbearers’ monstrous actions. But she, challenging those like her father, subverts the town’s gothic traditions in her own troubled exertion of power in the murder of Homer Barron. In this way, Emily Grierson’s story underscores how the horrors that result from a society perpetuating a cyclical, outdated, prejudiced tradition remain, as Faulkner says, “never dead.”

Works Cited


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Quit Clowning Around: An Analysis of The Killer Clown Phenomenon

By Taylor Smith

“Clowns are vicious—they’re all nefarious grins—and if you hung out with a bunch of clowns in a bar, pretty soon it would turn into a horror movie. Nefarious means evil. It’s nothing to do with Rastas.”

—Jeni Fagan

Recent reports of clown sightings have caused mass panic in communities across the United States. Such fears can easily be attributed to society’s negative associations with clowns brought about by factors such as coulrophobia—fear of clowns—and representations of clowns in horror such as Stephen King’s *It*. The killer clown phenomenon has become more prevalent in recent years with Heath Ledger’s portrayal of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. Pennywise and the Joker represent perverted forms of the clown which terrorize instead of entertain, creating what has become known as the killer clown phenomenon which suggests clowns are not to be trusted but instead figures to be feared.

Clown culture has origins in medieval Europe where carnivals were loud social gatherings for people to go and forget about their daily troubles. Bakhtin argues that “the carnival culture had extremely significant meaning during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance” (Amnon 599). The clown was an actor who had one goal—to create laughter among the audience through comedic acts almost bordering on the absurd. They became “a mainstay of both circus and carnival in various cultures” (Swan 312). Gladys Swan argues that the clown’s role in the carnival is to transform the world around them into an artistic and chaotic rendering so that the audience can forget their mundane lives through laughter. Lucile Hoerr Charles notes that “all actors perform a similar function; the clown’s function is different
because he so fully retains his own personality at the same time that he acts out the outrageous, neglected, tabooed, proscribed element” (33). Interestingly enough, clowning has manifested itself as a form of entertainment in various cultures such as the Hopi and Pueblo tribes. On this, Irving Johnson notes “clowning antics by members of sacred clown societies is common during many ritual events among other Native Americans...of the southwestern United States” (154). Thai theatre also has a form of theatrical performance using clowns dubbed nang talung in which “the clown [is] symbolically powerful by virtue of his ability to bridge these spaces and celebrate its interstitial position which would otherwise remained as structural oppositions in nang talung culture” (Johnson 159). The clown characters are based off historical figures whose descendants are sometimes present among the crowds. The prevalence of clowning in a variety of cultures gives the art form an international universality. In many of these cultures, clowns perform the function of entertainer and storyteller, making them a trusted source of entertainment for their audiences. The killer clown phenomenon takes advantage of this universal trust and perverts the icon of Western theatre into a figure of horror and distrust.

The killer clown has cropped up in many places, creating a familiarity akin to the original art form. Sufferers of coulrophobia—fear of clowns—state that “the combination of freakish makeup, strange clothes, large hands and feet and weird voices...strikes paralyzing terror” are what strike them the most at the sight of clowns (Hunter 66). The killer clown operates in a mode referred to as horror comedy, an inversion of both genres, which attempts to promote laughter in a context of fear and anxiety. According to Carroll, “Moreover, given the strong analogy between the clown-figure of incongruity humor and the monster figure of horror, it should come as no shock that the clown can be and has been used as a serviceable monster in horror fictions” (Carroll 155-6). Carroll argues that through incongruity theory, which stipulates that we are often terrified by things which defy normalcy or categorization, the clown is often monsterized as a serial killer because of his make-up and past as a beloved entertainer. Perhaps the most well-known representation of the killer clown is Pennywise of Stephen King’s It. While the monster is a shapeshifter with the ability to transform into one’s darkest fears, Pennywise the Clown is the primary form, which the titular monster takes to lure and feed on his young victims. In the opening of the novel, young George Denborough meets Pennywise after dropping his paper boat into the
storm drain and describes him as having “funny tufts of red hair on either side of his bald head” with “a big clown-smile painted over his mouth” (King 15). He offers George a balloon, which he uses to lure him into the storm drain and sever his arm, making him his first victim. Pennywise preys on George’s familiarity with clowns and uses his generic blend of various clown make-up to lure other victims. He uses his make-up throughout the novel to disguise himself as a universal entertainer as he stalks his prey. While Pennywise takes his recognizable form through his supernatural powers, Heath Ledger’s portrayal of the Joker in *The Dark Knight* belongs to a human being with an inhuman personality. In the opening of Christopher Nolan’s film, the Joker robs a bank owned by the mafia, during which he and his fellow robbers don clown masks. They speculate how the Joker got his name by stating that “I hear because he wears make-up to scare people—war paint” (*The Dark Knight*). Referencing his make-up as war-paint indicates the Joker’s status among his colleagues and criminal circles as an agent against the establishment. The Joker menacingly taunts a banker lying on the floor bleeding to death and takes his generic clown mask off to reveal a face painted white with red lipstick and frizzled green hair. His make-up acts as a blend of famous performers in that “his appearance—chalky white complexion, bizarre green hair, and seemingly permanent grin—were inspired by Conrad Veldt’s performance…” (Goodwin 388). His first appearance is described as an albino figure with green hair and a permanent grin, which is how he has been portrayed in every showdown he’s had with Batman since the 1960s. Not only does his make-up create a sense of othering, but his psychological state remains his primary way of defying categorization. His scars indicate his tormented mental state, yet his confusing and conflicting explanations as to how he got them have sparked debates as to his motivations. In an interview, Heath Ledger indicated that his character was a schizophrenic clown, yet this is complicated by the Joker’s “well-executed crime sprees in which he has demonstrated a remarkable attention to detail” (Goodwin 389). While schizophrenics are characterized by their inability to function and form coherent thoughts, the Joker plans his crimes in a serious, detailed manner. His mannerisms also create another problematic diagnosis of psychosis, as he licks his lips throughout the film. According to Goodwin, “Langley likens Ledger’s flicking his tongue and licking of his lips to tardive dyskinesia…associated with long-term use of antipsychotic medication” (390). Whether or
not Heath Ledger meant to lick his lips to cause discomfort to the audience, his behavior in *The Dark Knight* also complicates his mental condition. He may not have schizophrenia, but he does have some mental condition, which may be linked to his behavior whether it be antipsychotic medication or his current mental state altogether. The Joker’s complicated mental state and defiance of a psychological diagnosis further complicates his categorization in society. While the clown’s makeup usually represents an exaggerated parody of Western beauty, the Joker has cast away this notion of parody in favor of trivializing his own mental disfigurement while Pennywise simply uses it as a disguise to cover the real monster he is. The use of makeup as a means of expressing their purposes for disrupting the natural order validates their transgressions against society.

As an art form, clowning works to dissolve tension not create it. Because clowning works to disrupt the organization of the natural world in favor of comedy, the killer clown works to disable the established order in extreme and often monstrous ways. The killer clown often uses this inability of categorization to their advantage, which is one of the primary markers of a monster and therefore creates tension. The clown is expected to create humor “with emphasis upon regression to childish pleasures” (Charles 26). Pennywise takes this regression of childish pleasure and turns it upside down, challenging the social order via his extreme and murderous nature. During the summer of 1958, the Losers club—which consists of local kids Beverly Marsh, Bill Denborough, Stan Uris, Michael Hanlon, Eddie Kaspbrak, and Richie Tozier—begin to notice that Pennywise began popping up in Derry right around the same time the murders started. They soon realize that he is the entity killing children as Richie Tozier exclaims “‘It’s a monster. . .Some kind of monster. Some kind of monster right here in Derry. And it’s killing kids” (King 409). While Pennywise has shown many monstrous characteristics such as killing young George Denborough and committing other murders around town, he has not been called what he truly is until Richie declares it. Sarah Martin Alegre notes that “in *It* children understand the monsters that threaten them because of their familiarity with the monsters of their private fears, which they must eventually forgo and forget as adults” (110). While Pennywise uses the familiarity of the clown to blend in as a popular entertainment icon, he also takes the form of other fears such as the adults in their lives. Only after declaring his monstrous status do they realize Pen-
nywise for what he truly is—a being which defies the social order and creates terror. This identification of his true self allows them to observe how Pennywise acts in a monstrous mode. The killer clown’s monstrosity comes from their ability to create a sense of alienation between themselves and society. Perhaps the most striking part of the Joker’s monstrous nature is his ability to separate himself from other criminals. During a meeting with some of Gotham’s highest crime lords, the Joker appears to offer his own insights, much to the chagrin of some of the gang leaders: “I know why you have your group therapy sessions in broad daylight. I know why you’re afraid to go out at night. The Batman. He’s shown Gotham your true colors. Dent, he’s just the beginning.” *(The Dark Knight).* The Joker’s insane proposal sounds impossible yet remains the only option for the criminals continued existence. They are tied up in a bind and have had to move their money overseas in order to keep the authorities from confiscating it. This narrow option forces them to accept him as the ringleader of the remaining gangs in Gotham. The killer clown creates tension and alienation to advance in society.

Recently, the tension brought about by the killer clown phenomenon in the media can be attributed to our devaluation of them in our culture. Fredrico Fillini argues that the rise of the killer clown has been brought about by “the disappearance of the [original] clown to the sense of absurdity and disorder which pervades modern life” (Fried 214). The killer clown acts as a self-entertaining serial killer, and the form absurdity, which they come to represent stems from the lack of morals in our society. Pennywise acts as a representation of this moral absurdity as he constantly transforms into various forms of terror. His actions have blurred the lines between jokes and actual atrocities much like human serial killers who Zelda Knight argues “have lost the boundaries between fantasy and reality, between assertiveness and aggression, between savagery and civilization, and have disconnected from humanity…” (21-2). Pennywise and the Joker are monsters in that they have abdicated their humanity and severed ties with morality. Ledger’s performance as the Joker places him in a category of extreme terrorism and anarchy and an embodiment of the fears and anxieties which Americans have in the advent of global terrorism. Stephen T. Asma defines a monster as “human beings who have, by their own horrific actions, abdicated their humanity” (8). The lack of reason or apparent motives for his crimes are the primary cause of his absurd nature, as Bruce Wayne’s butler, Alfred, notes that
“some men aren’t looking for anything logical…some men want to watch the world burn” (The Dark Knight). Denying any reason for his crimes, he sets himself apart from the other criminals by committing acts without having a clear reason. His statement to the banker at the opening that “whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stranger” defines this differentiation between himself and the norm (The Dark Knight). The Joker also uses puns to define his form of monstrosity, such as during his confrontation with the gang leaders of Gotham, one of the leaders places a bounty on his head. In response, he opens his jacket to reveal a suicide bomb, saying “Let’s not blow this out of proportion.” (The Dark Knight). His statement is both a pun and a warning, as he literally has the power to blow himself up and kill everyone exists in his own category in that he denies fulfilling the role of the typical clown or villain, but as a new generation of evil. He acts as a self-entertaining serial killer who, according to Knight, views “the idea of pleasure in the process of inflicting harm is an essential component of evil or evil people” (Knight 25). The Joker and Pennywise combine both the characteristics of the classic clown with the senseless violence which society has become both anxious about and entertained by.

In most cultures, the monster’s origins remain unclear and non-linear. Whereas the clown has earthly roots in medieval European theatre, killer clowns such as Pennywise have different roots. After Adrian Mellon’s death at the hands of Pennywise and a few homophobic bullies at a town carnival, Don Hagarty states that the town is “a lot like a dead strumpet with maggots squirming out of her cooze” (King 33). His description is accurate in that the town has disintegrated and decayed because of Pennywise’s presence, which has influenced the homophobia among the townsfolk. Mike Hanlon’s father, Will, confesses his opinion and thoughts on why bad things frequently happen in Derry, stating that “It’s because of that soil. It seems that bad things, hurtful things, do right well in the soil of this town. I’ve thought so again and again over the years. I don’t know why it should be…but it is” (King 537). Trying to discuss the creature’s origins, the Losers research a method known as the smoke hole in which they have a vision of the monster coming to prehistoric Derry. They realize that regardless of how the monster traveled to earth, it “had come from a place much farther away than another star or another galaxy. . .” (King 913). This claim seems to later be supported when Beverly visits her childhood home and encounters
Pennywise, who shapeshifts into a rotting version of her deceased father. Upon escaping this grotesque representation of her abusive father, Pennywise laughs and states “I am the last of a dying race... The only survivor of a dying planet. I have come to rob all the women...rape all the men...and learn to do the Peppermint Twist!” (King 690). What makes Pennywise monstrous in this aspect stems from the idea of his alien status—that he borders on the familiar and the different, as Cohen notes “the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond...”(7). Questionable origins such as these are similar to those of the Joker’s scars. Ledger gives many reasons as to why he has these scars through various stories. As soon as the Joker grabs the gangster who ordered his death, he begins to explain how he got his scars, explaining that his father, in a fit of drunken rage, cornered his mother with a kitchen knife: “He takes the knife to her, laughing while he does it. He turns to me and asks ‘Why so serious?’ Sticks the blade in my mouth. ‘Let’s put a smile on that face!’”(The Dark Knight). Such abuse would warrant much of the Joker’s erratic behavior, yet the story is complicated later when he crashes a fundraiser for Harvey Dent, cornering Batman’s love interest Rachel Dawes and gives her a different story about his scars:

I had a wife, beautiful like you...who gambles and gets in deep with the sharks. One day they carve her face. We have no money for surgeries. I just want her to smile again. I just want her to know that I don’t care about the scars. So I stick a razor in my mouth... And you know what? She can’t stand the sight of me! She leaves me, and now I see the funny side: Now I’m always smiling. (The Dark Knight)

While both stories are different, they share the presence of a razor blade or other sharp object as the primary cause of his disfigurement. This is significantly different from the story we’re given before in that instead of an external-or from someone else-cause for the injury, as he professes that he inflicted the scars himself. Regardless of whether or not these scars are self-inflicted, Cynthia Barounis notes that they “appear to serve throughout the film as an outward manifestation of his inner perversity and his fundamental lack of humanity” (312). This feature adds to the Joker’s monstrosity and his representation of the killer clown phenomenon. Their denial of their actual existence adds to their oblique reasons for existing in modern society.
The killer clown usually operates in a carnival-like atmosphere. Throughout King’s novel, Derry is referred to as a carnival a few times. King describes Derry Elementary School as “the typical confused educational carnival, a circus with so many rings that Pennywise himself might have gone unnoticed” (King 995-6). Derry Elementary is where most of the Losers (except Mike) attend school. Referring to it as a circus, King notes the uncontrollable chaos and uncertainty, which occurs at here, allowing Henry Bowers and his cronies to have a tyrannical reign over the students because of a lack of responsibility among the adults and other authority figures throughout the town. Such chaos exists because “like Bakhtin’s carnival, [it] is ‘not a spectacle seen by people; they live in it, and everyone participates because this very idea embraces all people” (Halnon 40). Such mass ignorance, which allows the adult populace to accept things as they are perhaps, remains one of Pennywise’s biggest strength. It allows him to torment and murder the children in Derry without interference. This power allows him to control Beverly Marsh’s father, allowing him to confront her one day when she returns from playing with her male companions in the Barrens. After beating her mercilessly, he attempts to rape her and she escapes with him in pursuit. She rushes through town, her father obviously chasing her. No one seems to stop him or intervene, including two men who watch apathetically: “Two men lounged in the loading doorway of the Kirshner Packing Works, munching thick sandwiches, open dinner buckets near at hand. ‘You in a woeful place, girl,’ one of them said mildly. ‘Looks like you goin’ in the woodshed with your pa.’ The other laughed” (King 1101-2). Possessing her father, Pennywise uses this pursuit as a means of entertaining the townsfolk rather than allowing them to feel concern. She escapes, narrowly losing her father by hiding in the Barrens. The ability for Pennywise to cause the people of Derry to ignore such events until it is too late adds to his monstrosity, as Will Hanlon suggests that people in Derry “have a way of looking the other way” (King 546). His power over the town allows him to operate in a circus-like atmosphere, turning townsfolk into bystanders who are incapable of interacting or intervening with the situation and ultimately turning Derry into a nightmarish circus. Much like Pennywise, the Joker operates in his own theatrical space; because he represents a perverted form of the integral centerpiece of the circus, he decides to create chaos in order to create his own performing space. Such chaos comes from his form of entertainment, or his
criminal behavior, as he attempts to perform aggressive, or “aggro” theatre. Aggro theater is primarily confrontational, as James Penner suggests “Ideally, aggro performance produces a moral catharsis in the spectator, who is converted to the cause” (77). Since it is not passive as spectators expect, this form of guerilla theatre uses shock tactics similar to those used in the Carnival of the Grotesque. Batman dislikes this form of entertainment as he interrogates the killer clown stalking Gotham. After his arrest and detainment at Gotham City Police headquarters, Batman proceeds to torture him, slamming him across the room and demanding answers. The Joker only laughs and croons at him, mocking his inability to get the answers he desperately seeks. According to J.M. Tyree, “the suggestion that the Joker wants to impress Batman, that he is a little in love with him . . . is as compelling an explanation as any” (32). His statement implies that not only is he a foil to Batman but he also seeks a relationship with him on a subconscious level. This obviously repulses Batman, as he slams and beats him. In terms of creating his own grotesque carnival, the Joker does this in an attempt to turn Batman into a helpless spectator like the rest of Gotham, which he refuses to become. Pennywise and the Joker’s use of spectatorship allows them to carve out their performance spaces from normal settings.

The killer clown often plays tricks that are self-entertaining and sadistic in nature. According to Tony Magistrale, Stephen King’s stories draw readers in because of “his awareness of the pervasive-ness of evil” (190). Since he exists to entertain for the purposes of sewing discord and chaos as part of a feeding cycle, Pennywise plays tricks on the Losers club. Such tricks include causing a cacophony of voices from different victims he has taken and causing bubble of blood to burst in the drain in Beverly’s bathroom: “There was blood on the mirror, running in long drips. There were spots of blood on the light over the sink […] There was blood…everywhere…and her father didn’t see it”(King 476). Pennywise’s mind tricks continue into their adulthood when the Losers return to Derry to confront him once more. Ben Hanscom falls victim to one of these personal, one-on-one visitations from his childhood monster which only he can see: “He looked up and saw Pennywise the Clown standing at the top of the left hand staircase, looking down at him…There were empty sockets where his eyes should have been. He held a bunch of balloons in one hand and a book in the other” (King 655). Since no one except the Losers and his other victims can see him, Pennywise takes advantage
of this and uses it to terrorize his former conquerors, even using this to communicate with the mentally unstable Henry Bowers, causing him to hear voices from the moon, which tell him to “hunt up Belch and Victor and be at the corner of Kansas Street and Costello Avenue around noon. The voice told him he would know what to do then” which is right around the same time in which Beverly’s father is chasing his daughter down, and speaks to Belch and Victor ordering them to “Kill her” (King 1106). The manipulation through mind tricks is not an uncommon factor in the killer clown phenomenon as the Joker constantly creates moral quandaries designed to harm law-abiding citizens. During his interrogation with Batman, he informs him that Rachel Dawes and Harvey Dent are each strapped to explosives set to go off. Vilja Johnson states that he does this because “in the moral chaos of Gotham City, the Joker attempts to dismantle and destroy societal codes” (958). The Joker preys on Batman’s human limitations, knowing he can only save one of them. This is one of the many jokes he plays on the city of Gotham as he tries to tear apart the established order in an anarchistic fashion, blurring the line between clown and monster. The Joker’s tricks force people to partake in scenarios, which test their morality and force them to choose between life and death. Similarly, Pennywise’s tricks on Derry’s children have no effect on the adults, as they are so accustomed to it that they barely recognize right from wrong. The killer clown’s ability to manipulate reality and turn it into a sick personal joke creates moral dilemmas for those who fall victim to them. These jokes serve as evidence for the pervasiveness of evil, which the clowns fill their performing spaces with through their psychotic pranks.

A significant mark of the monster is its ability to return in slightly different variations. According to Jerome Cohen, “the monster itself turns immaterial and vanishes, to reappear someplace else” (4). The creature stalking Derry in the form of Pennywise the Clown reappears multiple times throughout its history, as Mike Hanlon’s research confirms. He describes how It has manifested itself in a form of mass blindness to social injustices such as Beverly Marsh’s father attempt at raping her. He interviews Egbert Thoroughgood, an elderly resident of Derry who describes how Claude Heroux killed several people in the Silver Dollar in September 1905. He describes how he “remember[s] thinkin that there must be a county fair up Bangor way... There was a...comical sort of fella [. . .] Seen him a few now’n thens since… Figure maybe he had such a good time that night. . .that he decided...
to stick around” (King 1079-80). In another interview, Mr. Keene describes the shooting incited by the Bradley gang as well as spotting Pennywise participating in the malicious act:

I glanced around just once and saw him upstreet beyond them Swedes under the Bijou’s marquee...He was dressed in a pair of farmer’s biballs and a cotton shirt underneath. But his face was covered with that white greasepaint they use, and he had a big red clown smile painted on. Also had these tufts of fake hair, you know. Orange. Sorta comical. (King 787)

The matching descriptions confirm Pennywise’s immortality; spread decades apart, his presence in the town confirms he is not a typical circus performer but rather a perverted form of the integral entertainer. Johnson’s observations on clowning in Thai theatre suggests that the clown’s ability to connect audiences with their ancestral heritage makes them a celebrated figure in their community, as they are “symbolically powerful by virtue of (their) ability to bridge these spaces and celebrate its interstitial position which would otherwise remained as structural oppositions in nang talung culture” (Johnson 159). Much like the clowns of nang talung theatre, Pennywise represents this timeless immortality by showing up frequently throughout the centuries in Derry, Maine. Throughout the novel, Pennywise moves around in what would be normally static space of history, yet because he is not a static figure, his powers allow him to manipulate time and space to connect this fact to his audience—in this case the Losers club—to explain his omnipresence and intimidate them into backing down on the idea of stopping him. Pennywise’s ability to move across time and space furthers his status as the monster that haunts Derry. Many critics argue that Batman must exist in order for the Joker to exist as he states “What would I do without you?” (The Dark Knight). His statement implies that not only is he a foil to Batman but he is also a representation of evil in the world, which many scholars debate cannot exist without the presence of good or another opposing force to resist it. The Joker even mentions at one point “I think we’re destined to do this forever;” laughing as he says it (The Dark Knight). Batman refuses to accept this, despite how the Joker will always be there to cause chaos and terror in Gotham and that Batman must learn to expect villains such as him to disrupt the natural order and terrorize the citizens of Gotham. Pennywise and
the Joker’s implied immortality suggests that their primary reasons for existing is to cause chaos and discord.

The killer clown often has—or rather recruits—a henchman. Usually this partner comes from the populace witnessing the atrocities which they commit. This comes from the theatrical practice of audience participation, which Penner states “affirm[s] anarchist principles in the sense that the audience was assuming a position of authority and self-autonomy within the performance space” (88). When the Joker and Pennywise invite Dent and Bowers into their respective performance spaces, the two are no longer spectators but instead performers of chaos. Their henchman’s deadly flaw comes from their own motives, which the clown takes advantage of and uses to manipulate them. Pennywise recruits many people throughout Derry’s history such as Claude Heroux and Al Marsh to carry out his deeds, yet only one of his associates—Henry Bowers—nearly rivals his benchmark of evil. Henry is already on the verge of insanity when Pennywise chooses him to kill off the members of the Losers Club. According to Knight, “[serial killer’s] play as children can be described as aggressive and many come from dysfunctional families where there is neglect and abuse or are controlling and authoritative during the formative years...” (Knight 1191). His father’s lack of proper parenting, combined with his alcoholism and constant racist indoctrination, creates a psyche fit for a serial killer, which Henry eventually becomes as he slays his father, believing that once he kills him and all the others “the voices—those inside and the one which spoke to him from the moon—[will] leave him alone” (King 1148). Pennywise eventually re-recruits Henry when he reawakens in 1985, speaking to him again from the moon as he lies in bed at Juniper Hill Asylum, taking the form of his deceased friend Victor: “I can take care of them if they only half-believe...but you’re alive, Henry. You can get them no matter if they belief, half-believe, or don’t believe at all. You can get them one by one or all at once. You can pay em back” (King 747). Bowers accepts the challenge and escapes Juniper Hill with the help of Pennywise, becoming his henchman once more as he travels to Derry to eliminate the now grown-up Losers. The Joker recruits his own henchman from those he knows are vulnerable and on the border between sanity and insanity; after surviving the explosion, Harvey Dent is horribly disfigured with half his face burned off. Dressed as a nurse, the Joker visits Dent in the hospital to inform him he has been wronged by those he trusts.
He explains, “You were a schemer. You had plans, look where that got you” and to “introduce a little anarchy. Upset the established order. And everything becomes chaos. I’m an agent of chaos. Oh, and you know the thing about chaos? It’s fear” (*The Dark Knight*). Originally, the clown was simply a figure who upset the establishment via harmless jokes and laughs. The Joker, however, gives a perverted twist to this aspect when he gives his speech to Harvey Dent explaining his role as an agent of chaos. This is further proof of the killer clown as an actor against the establishment. According to Johnson, “the Joker…hopes to tear down the presumed morality of the city, allowing people to free themselves from all structure, from all morality” (958). By handing Dent the quarter to give him a fair chance of life or death, the Joker officially converts him into one of the new agents of chaos, turning Dent into Two-Face and creating a legacy of his monstrosity. According to Penner, this invitation to the performance arena “symbolize[s] the negation of hierarchical relationships and the abolishment of centralized forms of authority within the performance space and within society” (88). When the Joker and Pennywise invite Dent and Bowers into their respective performance spaces, the two are no longer spectators but instead performers of chaos. They perform dangerous acts on the community much like their recruiters. By inviting these vulnerable spectators into the performance area, the killer clown strengthens their own efforts to create more chaos.

Reports of clown sightings in America and Europe have only added to the stigma of clowns as figures to be feared. Narratives such as Stephen King’s *It* and Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* have increased these fears, distancing the public from these entertainers-turned-killers. These anxieties stem from the viral fears spread by these and other fictional and nonfictional narratives of clowns stalking and attacking people in public. The Joker and Pennywise serve as embodiments of our culture’s restrictive fears in a way in which people still find difficult to comprehend. Their monstrosity lies in their refusal to be categorized by society. Their polarizing nature makes it difficult for society to approach or fight them, forcing us to create vigilantes such as Batman and unlikely heroes such as the Losers to fight them off. Only by breaking the spell of nervous spectatorship and participating in this theatrical performance for control of social order can society truly understand and banish these monsters.


Knight, Zelda G. “Some Thoughts on the Psychological Roots of the Behavior of Serial Killers as Narcissicts: An Object Relations...
Cyborgs and Consumerist Monstrosity in M.T. Anderson’s *Feed*

By Marla Williams

“If, as Freud suggested, technology is our prosthetic attempt to become God, will we inadvertently become a monster God?”

—Stephen T. Asma

M.T. Anderson’s young adult novel *Feed* illustrates a dystopian America in which a technological device implanted into human brains allows corporations to control consumer impulses through a constant projection of advertisements and currently trending merchandise. The feed exists as a brain enhancement typically grafted to the organ at birth and allows continuous access to the internet, television shows, advertisements, and m-chats (a telepathic way to communicate with others who also have the feed). The feed tracks each person’s browsing and shopping history, which allows corporations to create consumer profiles for every person with the feed and further targets them based on their personal interests. The perpetual flow of information into their brains ultimately dehumanizes the people within Anderson’s novel as they lose the ability to think for themselves. While several people within this society view the feed as an enhancement to their lives, the limited brain activity of the cyborgs in combination with the corporation’s ability to manipulate that lack of autonomy represents consumerist monstrosity as it brings about mindless consumption and reinforces the class constructs that already exist. Written in Titus’s perspective, *Feed* illustrates his relationship with Violet as she strives to reveal the frightening vulnerability of surrendering the mind and relying too much on technology.

As liminal beings defy categorization, they are often seen as problematic creatures that pose dangers to the spaces in which they live. Jeffery Cohen defines monsters as liminal beings that “are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts
to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (6). Originally, these liminal beings consisted of zombies, centaurs, and gorgons, but technological and scientific advances now prompt new liminal beings in the forms of cyborgs and posthumans. Stephen T. Asma explains how these advances allow a further hazing of the distinction between people and creatures: “We now live in an unprecedented technological era that allows us to engineer many more boundary crossings than we ever imagined… The human body has become more plastic and open to manipulation than ever before” (269). Although Anderson never directly references his characters as cyborgs, the characters call each other “unit” or “unette” depending on their gender. According to Clare Bradford, this classification “signals how individuals are envisaged by FeedTech Corp: as revenue-generating components in a global economy” (130). Those in the novel who have the feed categorize as cyborgs due to the feed’s enhancement of their abilities. Titus, the narrator of the novel, believes the feed exists solely as an enhancement primarily because he cannot imagine life without the feed. He claims that “one of the great things about the feed [is] that you can be supersmart without ever working. Everyone is supersmart now” (Anderson 47). As the implantation allows everyone with the feed easy access to limitless information, the people within this society fail to retain information, and they rely on the feed. Considering most with the feed receive it before much brain development, the invasion of the feed becomes problematic as it essentially replaces the brain as a functioning organ.

However, the feed originally existed as a removable and much less invasive machine, which suggests its gradual control over society and warns against the potential dangers of technological reliance. For example, Violet’s father, a professor striving to preserve the “dead languages,” chooses to not have the feed implantation partially because he cannot afford it but largely because he opposes it morally. Instead, he occasionally uses one of the oldest feed models: “His back honestly had a big hunch, which was from a really, really early feeds scanner, from back when they wore them in a big backpack on their back, with special glasses that had foldout screens on either side of your eyes” (Anderson 135). Violet’s father’s ability to easily remove his feed whenever he desires allows him more control over the feed’s intrusion. Although the novel does not illustrate the transition between the backpack and brain chip models, the society gradually
became more dependent on this technology, which leads to the feed’s permeant implantation. Considering contemporary crossings, Lucile Desblache further analyzes the cyborg as a liminal being and its refusal of categorization as ‘Our cyborgean ‘convergence culture’ entwines virtual and real… It renders humans… increasingly dependent on technologies and fuels our consumption traditions” (247). While the concept of the feed seems impossibly futuristic, smartphone separation anxiety represents a real fear especially amongst young adults. Richard Emanuel dissects nomophobia, an abbreviation of no mobile phone phobia, and its effects on young adult lives. Based on a survey he conducted in the southeastern United States, one out of every five students rated themselves “totally dependent” on their smartphones (Emanuel 9). Furthermore, Emanuel claims that “the truth about smartphone addiction is that people are not addicted to their smartphone, they are addicted to the information, entertainment, and personal connections it delivers” (2). While smartphones currently exists outside the body, the devices act as an appendage that causes anxiety upon separation, which suggests the potential transition towards an implant similar to the feed. According to his research, people seem to be “‘attached’ to their smartphone—checking it an average of 70 times per day… The phone has become an extension of our self” (Emanuel 7). Much like the earliest form of the feed, smartphones currently exist as a removeable device. However, as people grow increasingly dependent on the technology, they approach the risk of self-alienation.

Although Titus views the feed as an enhancement, his problematic dependence on the feed hinders his ability to actively interact with others. Despite their constant connection to others through m-chats and the overwhelming amount of media coverage spilling into their brains, the feed renders those within this society exceedingly lonely, and this loneliness triggers their consumerist impulses. Bradford analyzes that “the dystopian setting of Feed is a state of emptiness where the young are offered consumerism as a substitute for participation in citizenship” (129). This concept surfaces at the beginning of the novel when Titus’s group of friends arrive on the moon for spring vacation. Titus “was trying to talk to Link” but fails as the feed’s activity overwhelms his brain with “banners that looked goldy and sparkling” (Anderson 8). Titus’s use of the verb talk rather than chat signals his attempt to verbally communicate rather than send m-chats through the feed; however, the feed prevents him from doing so as it projects more advertisements than he can filter. In this moment, the
feed reveals itself as more of a hindrance than an enhancement as it consistently disrupts Titus’s thoughts. Asma comments on the possibility of technology causing self-alienation as people lose the ability to control the technology and increasingly depend on it: “if the tools become constraints rather than emancipators, then we may be in for unprecedented forms of alienation. Technology may alienate us from ourselves, dehumanizing us and turning us into self-made monsters of a new sort altogether” (Asma 263). The feed progressively alienates the cyborgs as it strips away their ability to think independently and physically participate with the world around them.

Moreover, the cyborgs’ excessive dependence on the feed yields a traumatic experience when a system hacker, the Coalition of Pity, temporarily disables all feeds within a certain distance and leaves the cyborgs with a rare, unbearable silence. The hacker manages to deactivate the feeds, and when the police arrive, they “shut off” the cyborgs and their bodies fall to the ground (Anderson 40). Their bodies’ inability to function without the feed verifies not only their mental dependence on the feed but also their physical reliance on the feed as an organ. Despite his friends surrounding him in the hospital, Titus admits that “[he] missed the feed” (Anderson 47). The feed alienates Titus and his friends as they cannot physically interact with one another due to their dependence on the feed to communicate. Also, this event further proves the cyborgs’ need for consumption as the disablement of their feeds takes away their ability to view and purchase commodities while rendering them essentially lifeless. Titus wakes up in the hospital and instantly tries to connect to the feed but finds himself with “no credit… disconnected from the feednet… [and] starting to get scared” (Anderson 43-44). His emptiness results from his inability to interact the only way he knows how—through consuming advertisements and products. The doctors and technicians eventually fix the feed, and Titus compares the device’s activation to the vitality of water: “We were all starting to feel good… the feed was pouring in on us now, all of it, all of the feednet… It came down on us like water… like frickin’ spring rains… We were dancing in it like rain, and we couldn’t stop laughing” (Anderson 70-71). Even though their literal brains remain functional the entire time, the feed’s reconnection immediately makes the group more lively and signifies the dehumanization of their reliance.

As those with the feed depend more on the device while also losing agency over their own thoughts, they fall into the trap of
consumerism set up by the corporations controlling the feed. Using the society’s vernacular, Titus illustrates the way the feed originally targeted consumers: “It was all da da da, this big educational thing, da da da, your child will have the advantage, encyclopedias at their fingertips, closer than their fingertips” (Anderson 47). Initially parents had their children undergo the feed implantation to ensure their child’s advantage over others and, therefore, their further socioeconomic progression. However, the feed quickly transforms from an educational enhancement into the main source of entertainment; Titus continues, “now, it’s not so much about the educational stuff but more regarding the fact that everything that goes on, goes on on the feed” (Anderson 48). They receive the news, watch television, and constantly view advertisements through the feed. Even though the feed often overwhelms and muddles the characters’ thoughts, Titus still claims that “the braggest thing about the feed, the thing that made it really big, is that it knows everything you want and hope for, sometimes before you even know what those things are” (Anderson 48). As the feed continuously fills minds with personalized advertisements, their entire lives revolve around consumption and competing with those around them. The novel represents consumerist monstrosity as those with the feed evolve into zombielike creatures due to their mindless consumption of merchandise. Concerning this zombielike consumption, Asma claims that “An environment lacking in basic needs (employment, food, shelter, etc.) can produce a dehumanized populace, but an environment with too much wealth and prosperity can also dehumanize” (241). Their inability to reason and the highly suggestive advertisements trap them in a vicious cycle of consumption and cause the cyborgs in *Feed* to turn into zombielike creatures.

Although the feed invasion begins at birth for most people, not everyone chooses this path due to its expense or their opposition to the device. Those who live without the feed or receive the feed later in life, allowing their brain more time to develop, obtain the ability to think for themselves more so than the others. For example, Violet gets the feed implanted at age seven whereas Titus receives the feed at birth. As Violet’s brain was more developed at the time of installation, this allows Violet more agency over her thought process than Titus. She both recognizes and resists the consumerist monstrosity entrapping this society, but Titus fails to challenge the feed’s manipulation. During Titus’s moon visit, he meets Violet, a girl who immediately appears different from the other teenagers due to her “dress
of gray wool” that “wasn’t plastic” (Anderson 17). Although Violet may appear “normal” to the reader, her clothes signal her difference to the others as they typically wear shiny, plastic clothing promoted and sold through the feed. Titus confesses that “[they] were all just kind of staring at her like she was an alien. She smiled. [They] just kept staring at her” (Anderson 23). Violet’s difference results from her ability to make her own choices and not instinctively submit to the feed’s advertisements. In this same chapter, two of the other girls in Titus’s friend group to the bathroom “because hairstyles had changed,” and they could not resist immediately conforming to the new trend (Anderson 20). However, even after Titus notes her strange appearance, Violet’s difference attracts Titus. He confesses, “I thought she was the most amazing person I had ever seen in my life, even if she was weird as shit” (Anderson 24). Here, Titus represents the human impulse of “the simultaneous lure and repulsion of the abnormal or extraordinary being” as Violet embodies a philosophy completely Other to him—nonconformity (Asma 6). While Violet’s appearance expresses her difference from the others, it also hints at her rare ability to exercise her agency and resist submission even at the risk of further alienation.

Titus’s repulsion and attraction to Violet derives from her autonomy that enables her to practice resistance. Expounding upon the cyborgs’ inability to deviate from the trends and behaviors advertised by the feed, Lisa Kerr explains that the “feed literally invades the human body… [and] rather than enhancing personality, the feed demolishes free thinking, turning individuals into rampant consumers and trend-crazed drones for whom the idea of autonomy is virtually nonexistent” (28). While the others with the feed immediately submit to its advertisements, Violet’s late implantation enables her to resist. As Titus compares himself to Violet, her difference brings about his self-consciousness of his lack of autonomy. Shortly after meeting Violet, Titus continues talking with his friends and realizes how ridiculous they sound: “suddenly I realized that we didn’t really sound too smart. If someone overheard us, like that girl [Violet], they might think we’re dumb” (Anderson 20). Titus first expresses concern about his intelligence after meeting Violet, and this anxiety builds throughout his relationship with her. Later on in this same section, Titus continues, “I could completely feel Violet watching us. She was listening. I didn’t want to have her judging us, and thinking we were too boring or stupid or something” (Anderson 56). Before they even
speak to each other, Violet’s presence prompts Titus’s self-awareness as he begins to question his and Violet’s differences.

Even as Titus recognizes their differences, he fails to realize the reasoning behind that difference—the time at which they relinquished control over their minds to the corporations. Titus receives the feed at birth, and his brain never develops as the device “disables [the cyborgs] both intellectually and physically” (Kerr 29). The feed continuously pours information into his brain, and never allows the organ to work on its own: “Intellectually, [those who received the implant at birth] are void of independent thought… Titus and his friends do not question the dangers of this type of technology” (Kerr 29). As the feed strips the cyborgs’ ability to think independently, the feed promotes their blind passivity of the device’s control. Aside from obtaining the feed after some brain development, Violet also homeschooled herself and reads avidly while the corporations further dehumanize the population by controlling their public education. Titus illustrates the power shift from local governments to global corporations: “Now that School™ is run by the corporations, it’s pretty brag, because it teaches us how the world can be used, like mainly how to use our feeds… now we do stuff in classes about how to work technology and how to find bargains and what’s the best way to get a job and how to decorate our bedroom” (Anderson 109-110). Titus even admits to his illiteracy as the feed presents information audibly and he “kind of protested [reading] in School™” (Anderson 65). Therefore, Violet’s reading habits appear quite abnormal to him and his other friends. Titus questions it: “She was always reading things about how everything was dying and there was less air and everything was getting toxic… She said that it made her frightened to read all this kind of thing… So one time I said to her that she should stop… [and] she was like, But I want to know what’s going on” (Anderson 111). Unlike Titus, Violet understands the power of education and strives to keep herself informed about how the corporations unfortunately control their society. Even though they often view the other as strange and share many differences, Titus and Violet attempt to understand the other’s perspective.

As Violet’s free thinking makes Titus question his own autonomy, she gradually brings him into consciousness of the monstrosity consuming him and the others within this society, but Titus initially refuses to accept the feed’s ability to manipulate for so many years. Because Violet remembers life without the feed, she recognizes
the feed’s ability to mold the society into mindless consumers. She explains this process to Titus: “‘Everything we do gets thrown into a big calculation… They want to know what you want… They’re also wanting to make you want things… it’s all streamlining our personalities so we’re easier to sell to’” (Anderson 97). While the feed’s cataloging attempts to make the consumption more personal, Baudrillard discredits this philosophy and argues that “[w]e can imagine… each individual feels unique while resembling everyone else: all we need is a schema of collective and mythological projection—a model… advertising has changed from a commercial practice to a theory of the praxis of consumption” (Baudrillard 11-12). Rather than individualizing people, the corporations objectify those with the feed by creating consumer profiles and promoting blind consumption while obtaining even more profit. Titus expresses his lack of concern and replies, “‘Yeah. Okay. That’s the feed. So what?’” (Anderson 97). In response, Violet enlightens Titus about her plan to subvert the system so that the feed can no longer target her: “‘What I’m doing… is trying to create a customer profile that’s so screwed no one can market to it. I’m not going to let them catalog me. I’m going to become invisible… [I’m] Complicating. Resisting’” (Anderson 98). Recognizing this injustice, Violet attempts to overthrow the feed and resist its objectification. In this subversion, Violet reflects Asma’s prediction of “The current advances in robotics [leading to…] a time when a race of artificial slaves will rise up and overthrow their human masters… [revealing that] the fear we have that something we control will twist around and start to control us” (Asma 257). Originally, people chose to receive the feed, but over time it developed into a necessity as their society marginalizes those without it. Eventually the feed begins to control the cyborgs rather than the people controlling the mechanism. After they go on the fake shopping spree, asking about objects they did not buy, Violet asks Titus what he thinks about resisting. At this point in the novel, Titus makes a joke about resisting and refuses to think about the terrifying power of the feed.

Moreover, Titus often struggles to consider another point of view as his dependence on the feed greatly limits his perspective. Violet expresses her frustration at the corporations for manipulating people but also towards the society for blindly following the feed: “‘No one with feeds thinks about it… When you have the feed all your life, you’re brought up to not think about things… It’s something that makes me angry, what people don’t know about these days. Because
of the feed, we’re raising a nation of idiots. Ignorant, self-centered idiots” (Anderson 113). As Violet tries to help the group of friends, but especially Titus, recognize the monstrosity consuming them, it proves increasingly difficult for her as they refuse to believe the possibility of the feed’s oppression. The cyborgs within Anderson’s novel transform into “media zombies” due to their increasingly submissive attitude towards the feed’s advertisements. If the feed advertises it, the cyborgs immediately purchase it regardless of their familiarity with or desire for the product. Mika Pantzar defines the media zombie as “a dystopia of a human being chained to an entertainment machine… [as a] computer society offer[s] unprecedented opportunities for the passive reception of stimuli” (13). The feed’s dehumanization allows the corporations to further manipulate their control over the cyborgs as their projection of advertisements continuously influence their impulsive consumption.

As the characters evolve into these media zombies, their consumption increases, and the corporations abuse this by camouflaging their industry’s toxicity through the commodification of it. The earth’s contamination produces small lesions on everyone’s bodies, and the United States president addresses the problem by falsely claiming that the American industry did not cause the sores. Initially everyone attempts to cover the open cuts, but the feed popularizes them by showing celebrities modeling their own lesions. This extreme scarring that occurs towards the end of the novel demonstrates the damaging extent of the corporation’s control as they manage to commercialize the previously shameful, oozing wounds that make the skin transparent. Quendy, one Titus’s friends, arrives at a party embracing her lesions so that others “could see all the red fibers through the splits in the skin… like muscles and tendons and ligaments and stuff” (Anderson 198-199). The corporation’s ability to camouflage this epidemic further proves the cyborgs’ submissiveness as they not only accept the lesions but also purchase fake lesions similar to temporary tattoos. They still fail to question the feed and corporations even though the repercussions of their extensive consumption causes their skin to rot. Recognizing the feed’s increasing power, Violet strives warn the others of its danger, but everyone dismisses her and mocks her “abnormality.” Titus recalls Violet’s distress: “[She] was screaming, ‘Look at us! You don’t have the feed! You are feed! You’re feed! You’re being eaten! You’re raised for food! Look at what you’ve made yourselves!’ She pointed at Quendy, and went, ‘She’s a monster! A
monster! Covered with cuts! She’s a creature!” (Anderson 202). Violet equates Quendy to the commodity as the device removes their autonomy and objectifies those who do not resist the feed. While Violet accuses Quendy of morphing herself into the monster, those who receive the feed at birth prove to have little room for objection to the technology.

Furthermore, as his own socioeconomic status and the feed’s regulation place limitations on his perspective, Titus primarily views the feed as a device promoting progression. His privilege causes his failure to realize these dependencies on technology lead to a marginalization of the less powerful. As “Titus’s generation is not built to question the feed,” his inability to oppose the device derives from his reliance on the feed as “one more functioning organ, an integral part of [the] body system” (Kerr 29). Due to these limitations placed on his, and many other lives, Titus remains unaware that only seventy-three percent of the population actually have feeds until Violet brings it to his attention. Shocked, Titus asks, “There’s that many who don’t? […] What do you mean?” (Anderson 112). Violet explains that even she received the feed much later in life than most others, because “[they] didn’t have enough money. When [she] was little. And [her] dad and mom didn’t want [her] to have one” (Anderson 112-113). Titus further proves his ignorance when asking why Violet’s father did not come to the moon even after their hospitalization due to the Coalition of Pity hacking their feeds. Again, Violet explains, “Do you know how much it costs to fly someone to the moon? […] He wanted to come, but it would have been, like, a month of his salary. He saved up for a year to send me” (Anderson 103). Violet eventually received the feed, but “the problem is, if you get the feed after you’re fully formed, it doesn’t fit as snugly… It’s more susceptible to malfunction… It can break down more easily” (Anderson 170). While Titus passively believes the feed benefits everyone, Violet testifies against this as her lower socioeconomic status prevents her from obtaining the newest, most reliable feed.

Although Violet’s late implantation allows her more autonomy, her nonconformist behavior poses a major threat to the corporations, and her feed begins to malfunction as they attempt to cast her out of their society. The malfunctioning begins shortly after she invites Titus to resist with her, which suggests the feed’s attempt to stop her from warning the other cyborgs against the dangers of the feed. She explains that her feed “is really malfunctioning,” and as it “is tied
in to everything… Sometimes feed errors are fatal”” (Anderson 169). Violet’s feed eventually begins deteriorating which means her brain also starts to wither. Even though her brain development surpasses most others, the feed’s deterioration threatens her life because it controls so much of her body’s function. Confirming their attempt to reject Violet, the corporation she contacts refuses to repair her feed due to her previous resistance: “Unfortunately, FeedTech and other investors reviewed your purchasing history, and we don’t feel that you would be a reliable investment at this time… I’m afraid you’ll just have to work with your feed the way it is” (Anderson 247). Their equating Violet to an investment confirms the objectification of the cyborgs, and the feed’s control over them permits the corporations to dispose of the cyborgs whenever they attempt rebellion. Violet continues her fight against the feed’s control, but she confesses, “‘They’re really close to winning. I’m trying to resist, but they’re really close to winning’” (Anderson 262). Violet slowly loses control over her limbs, and the feed deletes her memories from her life before the feed. Violet ultimately fails at resisting the feed, because the device gradually wins control over her mind and body. At this point, her body begins to convulse, and Titus recalls that “she had broken somehow… she was shaking, and her eyes were all white and rolling around, she couldn’t talk anymore” (Anderson 202). The feed successfully ends Violet’s revolt against the feed and renders her braindead while her traumatizing downfall triggers the beginning of Titus’s resistance.

As Violet lies in a comalike state, unable to think at all, Titus essentially assumes the role of her feed as she relies on him to relay information about current events and even herself. Because Violet anticipates her eventual defeat, she sends Titus a recording of all her memories: “I’m going to tell you everything. Some day, I might want you to tell it back to me” (Anderson 253). However, Titus never agrees to this transaction. Despite his familiarity with the feed’s typical overabundance of advertisements, Violet’s messages overwhelm Titus to the point that he “didn’t open them… had a headache… [and] deleted everything she had sent” (Anderson 253-254). Violet’s asking Titus to exist as her feed elicits his comprehension of the feed’s authority as he now, involuntarily, must provide the only information she receives; Violet fully relies on him in the same way he depends on the feed. Titus holds the power to limit and censor the information he gives, and that control frightens him. As Violet lies in bed looking “real, real pale,” Titus shifts from a “media zombie” into
mortality as he recognizes the feed’s ability to manipulate the cyborgs through the suppression of their minds (Anderson 286). Thomas J. Morrissey argues that “Violet’s slow decline as her feed fails offers Titus a chance to show his humanity and maybe even vow to avenge her or to at least give a meaning to her death” (196). Throughout the novel, Titus rejects Violet’s persistent cautions against the feed, but, in the final chapters, Titus signals his step towards humanity as he promises to attempt resisting the feed. Even though Violet cannot mentally acknowledge his proclamation, Titus assures her of his final understanding and acceptance of her warnings.

In the final chapter of the novel, Titus’s and Violet’s roles reverse as Titus now informs Violet while she lies passively in her hospital bed. The inversion of their roles initiates when Titus calls Violet a zombie (Anderson 269). Originally, Titus personified the mindless zombie submitting to the feed’s power, but the feed now controls Violet’s body and renders her a zombie as she cannot control her mind or limbs. Titus enters Violet’s room and notices her lying there, “an empty shell,” like countless other cyborgs (Anderson 235). Despite his previous apathy towards the corporation’s increasing control, he decides to “tell [Violet] the news… some things [she] likes. The strange facts…” [He tells] her that the Global Alliance had issued more warnings about the possibility of war… that there had been rioting malls all over America (Anderson 296). This moment proves significant for Titus’s autonomy as he manages to break through the feed’s limitations on his perspective. As Violet lifelessly lies there, Titus “could see [his] face, crying, in her blank eye” (Anderson 298). His crying “for the first time in his life,” further “[signifies his] move toward humanity” (Kerr 31). Titus receives Violet’s humanity as his recognition of the feed’s supremacy allows his resistance of it.

Anderson’s *Feed* exemplifies how technological dependency allows the oppression of minds, produces self-alienation, further marginalizes the poor, and encourages compulsive consumerism. While the initial enhancements spawned by technological innovations seem to initiate progression, the eventual dependencies on technology strip people of their agency and often cause these dependencies to go unvoiced. Furthermore, Pantzar asks not how lives change with the new advancements in technology but, rather, how “we change with new technology” and its intrusion. While relying on technology appears monstrous in many ways, the perception of this monster as uncontrollable ultimately drives the fear. Recognizing a monstrosity,
as Titus eventually does, will not dissolve the monster altogether, but it initiates one’s ability to successfully approach their monstrosity rather than continuously suppressing it.

Works Cited


Contributors

Randy Anderson is just a city boy, born and raised in south Detroit. He took the midnight train going anywhere. He now lives in Fayetteville with his wife, two sons, three dogs, two cats, two horses, one donkey, and the inability to tell his wife no, apparently. He hopes one day to option his English Degree into a powerful, high paying job. He is still unsure of what a preposition is.

Courtney Nicole Arndt is student of the English program at the University of West Georgia. Completely new to the idea of monsters having a role in society that defines humanity, she spent a great deal of her final semester reading about zombies and vampires. With two great cats and a Siberian husky, she plans on continuing her studies while spending more time with them and, hopefully, read more about monsters.

William Brown is a senior at The University of West Georgia and has worked as an editor for the college’s literary journal, Eclectic, for two years. After he finishes his undergraduate degree, William hopes to receive his MFA and PhD in order to become a professor of English and Creative Writing.

Paisley S. Burklow is a scholar, deep digger, aspiring writer, confirmed reader, planter, dog lover and cat lover (yes, one can be both). She delights in degenerate America, as it is often the subject of her writing. She has a keen liking for deteriorating buildings.

Erin Fugagli From McDonough, Georgia. English Major/Marketing minor. Passionate about studies in young adult literature. Goals are to graduate, move to Seattle, and drink lots of coffee, hopefully while working as a content writer for a large company (goals are subject to change without warning).

Kaleigh Ingram is a Gender & Sexuality Studies minor who typically enjoys focusing their literary studies and research around those topics. They love all things spooky and where most might have a
never-ending list of To Be Read, they have an ever-growing To Be Watched list of horror films. Additionally, they love curling up on the couch with their cat to crochet and sip on tea.

**Morgan Luellen** Well, hello! My name is Morgan Luellen. Movies are a thrill with animation being my favorite. *The Nutty Professor* was my very first VHS. I have been cooking since I was six years old and I desire to be a chef in the near future. A bible verse that I live by states, “In ALL things, you yourself must be an example of good behavior.”

**Leah Mirabella** is perusing a Bachelor of Arts in English with a concentration in secondary education. After college she plans on teaching middle school or running away to Italy to teach English—she can’t decide. She’s happiest when she’s rummaging through antique stores, drinking coffee with way too much creamer, or eating her weight in spaghetti alla carbonara.

**Abbie Smith** grew up an avid reader and has continued to pursue her love of studying literature and writing throughout college. She hopes to obtain a Masters of Arts in English and later teach high school English after graduating in the spring of 2017. A few of Abbie’s favorite things are Christmas songs, matching pajama sets, Target popcorn, and quality stationary supplies.

**Taylor Smith** a native of Griffin, Taylor moved to Carrollton in 2013 to embark on what has turned out to be an exciting journey. Since he was young, he’s always enjoyed writing, and his years at the University of West Georgia have helped him sharpen and refine his craft. Since arriving on campus, Taylor has self-published his first novel and hopes to one day become a successful author and teach at the college-level.

**Marla Williams** wants, after graduation, to teach high school English, preferably American Literature. She also aspires to teach English to English Language Learners. Marla enjoys wearing pink elephant pajamas, repetitively reading *The House on Mango Street*, and singing Christmas carols.