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## Articulate Vol. XXVIII

Maggie Malin  
*Denison University*

Olivia Bernard  
*Denison University*

Ian Bradshaw  
*Denison University*

Eliana Lazarro  
*Denison University*

Cassidy Crane  
*Denison University*

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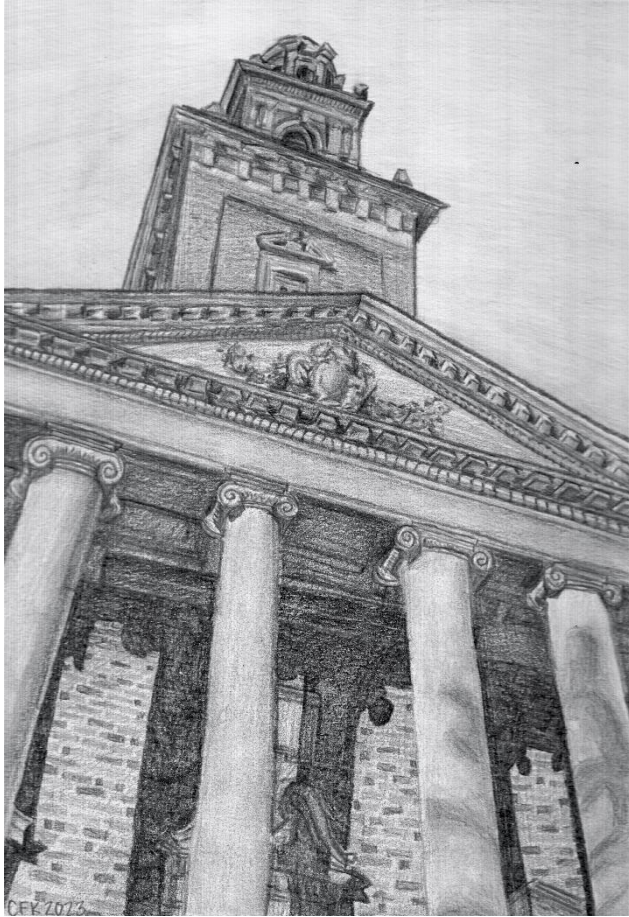
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# Articulāte

2023



**A Journal of Literary and Cultural Criticism**



# Articulāte

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## Call for Papers:

Articulāte is a student-authored and student-edited journal sponsored by the English Department. The editors of Articulāte are looking for submissions that demonstrate original thinking and strong scholarly research in their analysis of literary and/or cultural texts. Essays should not exceed fifteen typed, double-spaced pages. However, longer essays of exceptional quality may still be considered. Please use MLA citations.

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\*Winner of the 2022-2023 Robert T. Wilson Award for Scholarly Writing.

# The Ties That Bind: Female Friendship and Sexuality in the African American Women's Novel

Maggie Malin

...

Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been one of the most popular assigned novels across a scope of high school and college classes for the last forty years. It lays the foundation in many ways for the African American women's novel in its direct discussions of independence and self-discovery as well as sex and love as it follows protagonist Janie Crawford (who takes on three other surnames over the course of the book from a series of husbands of varying quality) on her search for a love that will fulfill her. Nearly forty years later, contemporary novelist Toni Morrison released *Sula*, an intergenerational story of Black womanhood and a more implicit quest of self-understanding through relationships with others. Both books are notable for their bold depictions of female sexual autonomy and emphasis on the self-defining importance of the pursuit of sexual fulfillment. Both authors also give their protagonists a friend—Pheoby to Janie and Nel to Sula—who is equally integral to each woman's development into and understanding of herself.

In ways big and small, *Sula* is Morrison's side of a conversation with Hurston across a thirty-six-year gap. As early as the opening paragraph, she makes reference to a grove of "pear trees" as a tribute to the femininely flowery and erotically charged pear tree metaphor in the opening act of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Morrison 3). In many ways, the novels are similar, as they each follow a young woman growing up and searching for love and purpose in a world stacked against them. Tonally, though, the books differ. Whereas Hurston is something of a romantic idealist, full of hope that her Black female protagonist's quest for understanding and peace may be reflected in reality, Morrison responds to her ideas of companionship and sexual

autonomy with a more cynical lens befitting of the intersectional struggles of Black womanhood. In *Sula*, Morrison's more cynical stance on Hurston's lovingly hopeful ideas of sex, friendship, and self-discovery work not to diminish them but rather to empower them further amidst conflict.

Both books follow their protagonists from adolescence into adulthood, and the main threads of each journey arise from the women's sexual awakenings, both represented by a metaphor of nature. The more serene of the two, Hurston's protagonist Janie first experiences orgasm in a flowery passage about the pollination of the blooms of a pear tree (Hurston 11). The moment is full of language like "sanctum," "creaming," "frothing with delight," and "marriage"—language that evokes softness, care, joy, and love. Janie comes to understand sexual fulfillment as just that—fulfillment, or a manifestation of an intentional delight. The fulfillment comes from herself and empowers her to seek out a love that will fulfill her in the same way. Black feminist poet Audre Lorde writes that "[o]nce we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavors bring us closest to that fullness" (Lorde 54–55). Janie's sexual awakening instigates her quest for a love that can live up to her standards of pleasure, which varies in its success.

Meanwhile, Morrison takes a starker stance on girls' sexual coming-of-age. Protagonist Sula and best friend Nel wrap their minds around sex for the first time while digging in the "bare" dirt with "undressed" twigs. The girls plunge their sticks "rhythmically and intensely into the earth" with impatience and little regard for the implications of their actions (Morrison 58). They then fill the hole with debris and bury it as a "grave" without saying a word to each other (59). There is a driven solemnity to their process, which is notably penetrative—the girls take on the phallic perspective. They dig with an almost angry purpose that they can't identify but that they have an unspoken intent of. They open a hole and then immediately defile and



bury it. The action is all too representative of the male perception of women as vessels of their pleasure and bearers of their pain. The fact that this perspective is Sula and Nel's first encounter with intercourse is an establishment by Morrison of the dark truth of sexual autonomy. Morrison argues that even young women, who arguably deserve a peaceful solo pear-tree awakening, live in a world where sex is understood through the male perspective, a self-centered viewpoint rooted in personal gain. The nature metaphor she chooses to use acknowledges Hurston's representation of sex as something natural and earthly, but functions more as a preemptive cautionary tale than a celebration.

As established, *Their Eyes* puts forth a more hopeful and uplifting view of the female world than *Sula*, though this difference flips in regards to the protagonists' matriarchs' perspectives on sex, and how those ideas are received by their daughters. Sula's mother Hannah is a "daylight lover," borrowing men for her pleasure regardless of their marital status, emerging from her dalliances "looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier," and teaching "Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable" (Morrison 44). In the world of *Their Eyes*, though, when Janie's grandmother and guardian Nanny finds out that Janie has gotten her "womanhood on [her]," her only instruction regarding her granddaughter's changing body and mind is that she "wants to see [her] married right away" (Hurston 12). The only way she knows for Janie to be safe in her adult womanhood is for her to "marry off decent like" (13). Both Nanny, a formerly enslaved woman, and her daughter, Janie's estranged mother, faced sexual exploitation and abuse; that pain is Nanny's only context for sex. Even knowing this family history, Nanny's stern fear of unweddedness does not reconcile with Janie's believed equation of sex, marriage, and love.

So Janie is taught that sex is to be feared and Sula is taught that it is an everyday part of life, and in this one aspect it is Hurston rather than Morrison who writes the more cynical viewpoint. However, both

protagonists proceed to pursue their own sexual freedoms, and it is in the reactions of the world around each woman that Hurston's hopefulness and Morrison's hesitance prevail again. In *Their Eyes*, after Janie's second and most directly oppressive husband Jody dies, Janie punctuates her grieving process by "let[ting] down her plentiful hair" and going about her life with it "in one thick braid swinging well below her waist" (Hurston 87, 89). Janie's hair is established as a symbol of her sexual appeal and thus her sexual autonomy; Jody insists that she tie it up and hide it while she works in his store, and chronologically later the people of Eatonville criticize Janie for letting her hair swing "down her back lak some young gal [sic]" despite being forty years old (55, 2). When Jody dies, Janie is free to make her own choices about her appearance, granting herself her first bodily autonomy since her orgasm under the pear tree. With her hair down carefreely, Janie is able to redefine her life as an individual, and then fall in love on her own terms. This course of action is a prime example of the romantic and hopeful tone that Hurston promotes—something fresh and empowering for stories about Black women, after generations of slave narratives and oppressive seduction novels. Hurston writes of sexual autonomy as Black female freedom, untethered to whiteness or maleness and celebrated thusly.

Sula's sexual autonomy is more explicit than Janie's, which Morrison uses to explore the unpleasant reality of the demonization of female sexuality. When Sula returns to the Bottom as an adult, she chooses to fulfill her sexual appetite not unlike her mother did, going "to bed with men as frequently as she c[an]" (Morrison 122). She takes sex as her best opportunity to "find what she [is] looking for: misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow," and the town construes her as a "pariah" for her tendency to "[try other women's husbands] out and [discard] them" (122, 115). In this narrative, sexual freedom is destructive, both to Sula herself and to the people around her. There is no reward for her autonomy, and in fact her neighborhood of the Bottom becomes a more adverse place as the people of the town begin

to define their own morality in opposition to her promiscuity (115). Morrison's distrust of our societal structure to see sexual freedom, especially of women, as anything other than sinful emerges for a moment to the forefront of the narrative. But Morrison wants to be clear that there is strength in Sula's actions, and does so through Sula's emotional intentionality.

Unlike Janie, a lifelong romantic, Sula isn't looking for emotional connection to accompany her sexual pursuits—instead she revels in the grief of her lack of it, and lives for the “utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender, feeling her own strength and limitless power” (123). Audre Lorde would argue that even this deep connection to “the solitude [Sula finds] in that desperate terrain” which “had never admitted the possibility of other people” grants Sula a strength that she can use to her advantage (Morrison 123). Lorde advocates for women to connect with their own eroticism, a self-fulfilling passion which she claims originates with sexual pleasure but can and should extend to all aspects of a woman's life. “[A]s we begin to recognize our deepest feelings,” Lorde argues in a 1984 essay on the subject, “we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society” (Lorde 58). In her emotional revelations about sex, Sula walks a fine line between this empowering application of fulfillment and the pornographic opposite, which Lorde describes as “sensation without feeling” (54). Sula chooses men indiscriminately and uses their sex to intentionally stimulate emptiness, which certainly seems like sensation without the affirmative kind of emotional feeling we might now associate with a healthy sex life. Her exploration of her autonomy would align with Lorde's derogatory and unfulfilling definition of pornography if she were not so attached to the solo power she gleans from her pursuits. It is this acquaintance with herself, with what she wants to feel and how she knows she can reliably feel it, that allows her “to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within [herself]” (Lorde

58). Morrison takes a darker twist on Hurston's quest for erotic fulfillment, but she still puts her leading woman in the cockpit with a strong knowledge of what she's after and how she can go about getting it. Sula's newfound responsibility to and for herself, as somber as it might be, opens her up to the sexual experience that brings her to her first and only male love, as far as the narrative is concerned.

At some point in each protagonist's journey, she takes a lover who comes close to fulfilling her desires—though both authors recognize that men are not the peak of female fulfillment. In *Their Eyes*, Janie meets her beloved Tea Cake after two unhappy marriages in which she is forced into the role of a domestic doormat, and in the most recent of which her sexual passion was quelled to the point where “[s]he wasn't petal-open anymore” (Hurston 71). Tea Cake is something new—he combs Janie's hair, teaches her how to play checkers, and encourages her to speak her mind. He is attracted to her regardless of her relative seniority. His tender and amiable courtship paints him as “a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring,” thus reawakening Janie to her sexual potential (106). Hurston writes him as a near-perfect lover—as close to a success in Janie's quest as she has experienced so far. No man is perfect; Tea Cake disappears for a short time and squanders Janie's emergency funds on a party a few towns over, and his plan to win it back relies on gambling (122–25). While by today's standards this sounds irresponsible at best and financially abusive at worst, Tea Cake and Janie's care and trust run so deeply both ways that the emotional strain is resolved. Tea Cake leaves, but he comes back; he takes Janie's money, but he delivers on his promise to win it back, taking Janie along for the adventure. There is a hopeful romance to their conflict resolution that Hurston perpetuates throughout their relationship.

Sula finds a good lover too—the man she knows as Ajax, who catcalls her and Nel as young teenagers, being “the first sexual excitement she'd known,” and who returns to her life “bearing gifts” during her sexual tour of the Bottom after her affair with Nel's husband

(Morrison 50, 130, 125). As he courts her and she regularly enjoys sex with him, Sula begins “to discover what possession [is]” (131). She expresses her newly-developed domestic feelings for Ajax with a clean house and a nice dinner, and in this homely display of affection she scares him off and he leaves her the next day (134). Morrison asks Hurston to consider what she might think of as a more realistic stance on men—specifically Black men of the early twentieth century, who continued to grapple with what personal freedom looked like in a post-Reconstruction era America. Ajax enjoys wooing Sula, but he fears any implication that he may lose some kind of freedom by committing himself to her. This insecurity is only implied; Morrison writes from Sula’s perspective to emphasize the resulting empty pain that Ajax leaves in his wake. Unlike Tea Cake, Ajax never returns; though he was good at it, his courtship was for his own pleasure alone, with no regard for how he might truly affect Sula. Where Hurston expresses a belief in a healthy, lasting, and sexually fulfilling relationship, Morrison paints a realistic (if cynical) picture of the rise and fall of hope that accompanies infatuation, and how the decline of that romantic hope may be exacerbated by different perceptions of commitment and possession.

While sex and courtship play a prominent part in each protagonist’s life, the emotional core of each narrative is rooted in female friendship. Morrison and Hurston agree on the erotic—that is to say, unrestrainedly passionate—power of these friendships. Each woman is defined by her friendship with another woman that explicitly fulfills her in a way that no male connection has. As her tone tends to be, Hurston’s perspective on her leading friendship—that between Janie and townsperson Pheoby Watson—is less printed with tragedy and more imbued with an empowering sense of romance. Interdisciplinary feminist writer Carla Kaplan contends that Pheoby fulfills Janie’s quest for erotic connection simply by being a good listener to the story of her life. To an extent, Janie struggles with freedom of speech with each of the men in her life, but “Pheoby’s hungry listening” actively “help[s] Janie to tell her story,” to define herself on her own terms, uninterrupted

(Hurston 10). The act of listening itself is innocuous, but it aligns with Lorde's proposed function of "form[ing] a bridge" that results from the inherently erotic act of "sharing...joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual" (Lorde 56). Pheoby is there to receive Janie exactly as Janie presents herself, without bending to any roles or expectations, which is a first for Janie. "Only in telling her story to Pheoby," emphasizes Kaplan, "does [Janie] fulfill her quest for the satisfaction she beheld under the pear tree" (Kaplan 138). Morrison extrapolates from this friendship for Sula and Nel, but even her cynical lens results in a similar powerful catharsis.

Morrison acknowledges, as Hurston does, that women bring a certain vitality into other women's lives that is not matched by men. When Sula arrives back to the Bottom after years of school and travel, Nel bubbles with affection for the way Sula radiates life and definition and girlish humor. With her childhood best friend back in town, Nel is able to rekindle "a bright and easy affection" with her husband Jude—a previously lost "playfulness" attributed to Sula's reemergence in Nel's life that is "reflected in [Nel and Jude's] lovemaking," underscoring the erotic nature of Nel and Sula's bond (Morrison 95). After Sula's affair with Jude, Nel enters a deep grief for the loss of her husband that she cannot seem to reach the climax of. It is only after Sula's death, twenty-five years later, that Nel realizes it was the loss of her pure friendship with Sula she was grieving for, and she is finally able to release her mourning cry (Morrison 174). The language Morrison employs during Nel's cathartic revelation—"Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things"—mirrors the exact language used at the beginning of Nel's grief cycle when she cannot reach emotional release—"The mud shifted, the leaves stirred, the smell of green things enveloped her" (174, 108). The earthly imagery also calls back to Nel and Sula's joint sexual revelation in the dirt beneath the trees, once again establishing the women's bond as erotic. Morrison looks at the erotic nature of female friendship as one that allows for a richer, more fulfilling experience of the world. Nel's epiphany of her love for Sula,

“[w]hen released from its intense and constrained pellet,...flows through and colors [her] life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens...[her] experience,” as Lorde’s personal experience with the erotic does (Lorde 57). With Sula being the kernel of Nel’s grief instead of Jude, Morrison emphasizes the inextricable impact of the women’s friendship.

It is notable that the thing that remains fulfilling, the thing that empowers the characters at the start of the book and at the end, is not the men or the sex or even the understanding of oneself, but instead the friendship between two women. In all of Morrison’s overall distrust of circumstance and other people and systemic disadvantage, she responds to Hurston’s picture of strength and self-definition through friendship with a fulfilling and defining friendship of her own. Though fraught with conflict in adulthood, Sula and Nel provide the same function for each other that Pheoby does for Janie. Not only do they define themselves through each other in a more circumstantially equal way than they can with their male lovers, but they grow from each other as well, because of their shared experiences as women aging side by side. Morrison agrees with Hurston about many of her points regarding the power of sexuality, the significance of autonomy, and the erotically fulfilling impact of friendship. She writes from a different time—a post-civil rights movement America that calls for a diligence for the details of oneself and a distrust of the way life is set up to exploit those details—whereas Hurston wrote during the Harlem Renaissance, a time of Black hope and liberation expressed through art. As the world evolves, Black women’s roles in it fight to evolve too; through it all their one guarantee has been each other.

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# The Splitting of the Self: Catherine's Crisis of Identity in *Wuthering Heights*

Olivia Bernard

...

The relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is one of the most striking in Victorian literature. The sheer unbridled passion that the two have for each other goes beyond any kind of romantic lust, or indeed, beyond any kind of separation of the soul to begin with. Catherine's famous declaration that "I am Heathcliff" (Brontë 64) is not metaphorical. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest in their essay "Looking Oppositely: Emile Brontë's Bible of Hell," he is the embodiment of her masculinity. And so, because Victorian patriarchy attempts to strip control from women by both removing their access to masculine power and teaching the women themselves to internally spurn and disregard that power as a means of maintaining control, Catherine's losing Heathcliff is a physical and social rending alike. She loses with him an important piece of herself, her ability to interact with the world, and her ability to seek control, both over herself and her surroundings. Emily Brontë uses the conflict between patriarchal norms and Catherine's true, undivided self to make the mental fragmentation of Victorian women literal. By placing Catherine's masculine half into Heathcliff, and then removing him from her as she's pushed into the role of a proper lady, Brontë catalogues the inevitable destructive descent as her identities—first as an unorthodox but complete person and later as the split, "proper" woman she's forced to become—collide and ensnare her physically and mentally. As she throws herself against the bars of this cage and gradually deteriorates, Brontë presents a potent warning about the violent damage oppressive structures do to those they trap.

Growing up, Catherine is anything but proper. She is belligerent towards the restrictive expectation that little girls be sweet, tame, and obedient. She seeks ways to both rebel against this notion and access a

masculine form of control that will grant her a way out of its norms. But because *Wuthering Heights* physically splits Catherine's masculinity and femininity in the forms of herself and Heathcliff, she has only her feminine self and no masculine half: an incomplete identity. Her goal of control is constantly out of reach—not that it stops her from trying. In a telling example, when her father asks her what she'd like as a gift from his travels, Catherine requests a whip. (By contrast, her brother Hindley makes the much tamer request of a fiddle.) In their essay, Gilbert and Gubar note the symbolic significance of Catherine's unorthodox answer (362). Nelly, Catherine's lifelong maid and the narrator, attempts to lampshade the abnormality of Catherine's wish by insisting it's simply for horseback riding, but the connotations that whips carry point to something deeper. Whips are associated with dominance, whether physical or sexual or social. It is always the master—a typically masculine person—who wields the whip as a means of control over others, fitting with Catherine's greater desire to take command of her own life. Gilbert and Gubar thus agree that “symbolically, the small Catherine's longing for a whip seems like a powerless younger daughter's yearning for power” (362). While Catherine is gifted no physical whip from her father, they point out that she receives one nonetheless: Heathcliff (362).

Heathcliff arrives ragged, sullen, and nameless, with an unknown origin and plucked straight off the streets. At first, the characters refer to him as “it”—so othered that he is, at this point, ungendered. But Catherine recognizes that this new, male presence could be exactly what she's looking for. In “The Double Vision of *Wuthering Heights*: A Clarifying View of Female Development,” Helene Moglen notes that “It is Catherine who gives him his identity and he—named for her dead brother—becomes an extension of her” (394). Moglen understates the fact that this extension is not just an expansion: Catherine and Heathcliff completely merge their identities. More specifically, Catherine subsumes Heathcliff's identity into hers because he really has no identity before he comes to the Heights, and, by doing so, she absorbs the power of his maleness. He “functions just as she must unconsciously have hoped [the whip] would, smashing her rival-brother's fiddle and making a desirable third among the children

in the family so as to insulate her from the pressure of her brother's domination" (Gilbert and Gubar 362). Now, commanding both the masculine and the feminine, Catherine becomes a usurper backed by Heathcliff, shifting the power dynamics in the family. Hindley, the archetypal male heir, loses influence over his father when Mr. Earnshaw makes Heathcliff his favorite child—and, through Heathcliff, indirectly grants Catherine that privilege as well (even if he criticizes her wayward behavior).

With Catherine's newfound masculine power embodied by the favored son, she has an unprecedented amount of possession over "the kingdom of Wuthering Heights, which under her

rule threatens to become... a queendom" (Gilbert and Gubar 362). Nelly notes that "In play, [Catherine] liked, exceedingly, to act the little mistress; using her hands freely, and commanding her companions," and later adds that Heathcliff "would do *her* bidding in anything, and his only when it suited his own inclination" (Brontë 34). To Catherine, in her new kingdom, it's clear that this "play" is, in fact, very real. She rules the house, and although her dominance remains unspoken and inexplicit, she makes no secret of it. She takes the blame for Heathcliff's behavior, seeing as "she got chided more than any of us on his account" (Brontë 34), because his actions are hers, with him at her command.

Not only do Catherine and Heathcliff upset these family dynamics, but also the two escape them by leaving the domestic space altogether. In this way, "The childhood which Catherine and Heathcliff create for themselves belongs, in some sense, to the moors" (Moglen 394). The land beyond Wuthering Heights is as wild and untamed a space as the children themselves, and it is a place to which Catherine can now escape using the masculine freedom of Heathcliff. They share a pure, elemental passion outside of society (either Wuthering Heights or Thrushcross Grange) that surpasses social understandings of identity all together. They are a fusion, neither normative nor non-normative because they are outside anything that would label them as either. Catherine is anything but a proper Victorian girl, and Heathcliff is similarly abnormal; as Steven Vine notes in "The Wuthering of the Other in Wuthering Heights," "Cathy and Heathcliff identify with each other

in their mutual otherness” (345), and they both embrace it in full. It is during this time, between the queendom of the household and the genderless freedom of the moors, that we see Catherine’s true self: high-spirited, insolent, lively, with “her tongue always going—singing, laughing”; she is a “wild, wick slip” while still being caring and empathetic, doting on her ailing father in the same breath that she teases him (Brontë 33-34). Catherine balances her masculinity and femininity, and, by doing so, is both in power and enabled to express her full personality.

But Catherine’s free, wild girlhood is abruptly ended with an disastrous twist of fate. Her father dies, the now-vengeful Hindley repossesses the house, and, in an unfortunate turn, Catherine and Heathcliff’s antics lead them to the normatively proper, genteel Lintons at Thrushcross Grange. When they gaze through a window from the outside position of their “otherness” to the inner normativity of the family’s parlor, the Lintons take notice and chase the children out. In her frenzy to escape, Catherine is seized by a male bulldog and subsequently by the Grange itself (Gilbert and Gubar 364). Heathcliff, meanwhile, is banished for being too strange, too grubby, too uncivilized, and too *masculine* to be caught with Catherine, which he accurately identifies when he reflects that “she was a young lady and they made a distinction between her treatment and mine” (Brontë 41). The Lintons are shocked by the “absolute heathenism” of Catherine’s childhood spent “scouring the country with a gipsy” (Brontë 40), and they agree to take her in for the next five weeks as the dog’s bite heals. Thus, Catherine’s identity is fractured, separated from her human whip and other half.

At the Grange, which serves as a symbol of socialization in the story, Catherine experiences unprecedented rewards for her actions and an appeal to her vanity. These create a new system of incentive to replace that of punishment (and never praise) at the Heights. With Catherine enticed by the opulence of the Grange and lulled by the stroking of her newfound ego, the Lintons pet, groom, and “reform” her with “fine clothes and flattery” (Brontë 41). They repress her desire for a masculine half and stifle her autonomy, excessively feminizing her.

She loses the elemental bond between herself and Heathcliff, and her access to the society-less space of the moors. Though Catherine might think that, by becoming ladylike, she is gaining influence in genteel society, she has unknowingly cut off her only connection to masculine power and real control in her male-dominated world. What she has added in shallow respectability, she has lost in true agency, because what it means to be a “respectable” woman is to be powerless.

Catherine returns to the Heights “a very dignified person” instead of “a wild, hatless little savage jumping into the house, and rushing to squeeze us all breathless” (Brontë 41). This appearance is so unlike her, so removed from the true, wild self of her girlhood, that Hindley even remarks, “I should scarcely have known you—you look like a lady now” (Brontë 42). She is now trapped within a normative cage that socialization has taught her not to fight and not to sully in any way, whether with physical affection—she refuses to hug Nelly for fear of getting flour on her dress, because “it would not have done” (Brontë 42)—or in the passion she previously exhibited, rendering her a bland and curtailed version of her former self. Her time with the Lintons has not just splintered her identity but neutered and cauterized it as well.

In fact, she has been so changed by her “insertion into a socially-sanctioned femininity” (Vine 346) that she can barely relate to Heathcliff anymore, and Heathcliff himself is distraught at “beholding such a bright, graceful damsel enter the house, instead of a rough-headed counterpart to himself” (Brontë 42). Her “otherness,” instead of separating her from the normative household and aligning her with him, now rends the balance of masculine and feminine that the two of them once forged. She looks at him with a pitying scrutiny that comes from the same place that everyone else regards him: worried that his dirtiness will sully her, laughing at his gloom, and ultimately driving him out (however accidentally). As Vine puts it, “her loss of Heathcliff figures her violent separation from her earlier, rebellious self” (346). She can no longer create space for herself: by rejecting the masculine part of her

identity that allows for self-definition in a repressive society, she has unknowingly set herself on the path to crisis.

Now locked in by the gilt bars of polite society, social obligations, and propriety of the gentry, Catherine has no choice but to marry Edgar Linton. As Gilbert and Gubar recognize, “she cannot do otherwise than as she does, must marry Edgar because there is no one else for her to marry and a lady must marry” (365). Yet Catherine finds she cannot justify why she’s yielding to its expectations. In an anxious conversation with Nelly, she attempts to rationalize the engagement, saying, ““he will be rich, and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighbourhood, and I shall be proud of having such a husband”” (Brontë 61). None of these reasons involve Edgar himself; they are all about what social and material benefits Catherine will gain. When Nelly presses, Catherine again grasps at straws, adding, ““I love the ground under his feet, and the air over his head, and everything he touches, and every word he says—I love all his looks, and all his actions, and him entirely, and altogether”” (Brontë 61). Her words are despairing and evasive; she avoids mentioning Edgar himself as anything but an afterthought and instead focuses on the objects around him as though desperate to look anywhere but at him. Her assertions of love are false and forced, “a bitter parody of a genteel romantic declaration which shows how effective her education has been in indoctrinating her with the literary romanticism deemed suitable for young ladies” (Gilbert and Gubar 365). It’s clear that Catherine does not really want to marry Edgar. But, since she sees this marriage as her only choice (though really it is only an illusion of choice), she tries to talk herself into it. Ironically, her act of self-naming with the famous line, “*I am Heathcliff*” (Brontë 64), happens in the same conversation wherein she forces herself permanently towards Edgar and away from Heathcliff and drives Heathcliff from the Heights in the process. She knows that her identity has been rent, but socialization has taught her to keep herself caged, and she sees union with Heathcliff as something that would

“degrade” her when, in fact, such a thing would make her whole, were it not for the persecution that would follow.

With her marriage to Edgar, however, Catherine becomes disillusioned and overcome with resentment towards her husband. At first, on the outside, “she accepts the level of existence which the Grange represents—Christian morality, adult sexuality, maternal duty, aristocratic culture,” while, on the inside, “her soul cries out for the existence of the moors” (Moglen 396). These cries don’t remain silent for long. The backlash of splitting her identity gradually hits, bringing with it the realization that her identification with the values of Thrushcross Grange are superficial (Moglen 395) and that her constructed identity as Edgar’s wife is similarly false. Her life at the Grange is shallow and dishonest to herself—at her core, she’s still a social outcast; she’s only been pretending to be a proper Victorian wife and woman. By putting on the ladylike façade that led her to this marriage, she’s also invalidated and spurned her identity as it’s connected to Heathcliff. But it’s been so long since her childhood, and she has spent so long acting the part of Victorian lady, that Catherine has lost the sense of the boisterous and unapologetic identity that she proudly bore as a girl. Who is she now? Catherine can’t answer. When Heathcliff’s absence sends her into a delirious fever, this loss of identity is strikingly revealed as Catherine fails to recognize her own face in a mirror. “Don’t you see the face?” she asks Nelly desperately (Brontë 96), gazing at herself. Her identity “has been so radically divided that it has been destroyed” (Moglen 397). She “othered” herself from Heathcliff when she married Edgar, but now she is “othered” from Edgar, as well—and, crucially, from the person she once was.

Her destruction doesn’t result just in madness. It first becomes a desperate viciousness, rejecting all the normativity that she’s trapped in and trying to create masculine freedom for herself—but she can’t, because in her society, you must be a man to have that, and she’s lost the person that “makes” her one. She returns from her illness an angry, manipulative woman. With her former identity now in tatters, she pulls

together the threads of her anger to reconstruct a shaky, unstable personality for herself by it. She turns from aloof to antagonistic and abusive towards Edgar, making him the subject of her violent outbursts and faulting him for her premeditated illnesses. Her viciousness repels him; “it was nothing less than murder, in her eyes, for any one to presume to stand up and contradict her” (Brontë 70). She carefully cultivates the effects of her dangerous rages on those around her, observing that “[Edgar] has been discreet in dreading to provoke me,” and she attempts to make Nelly her co-conspirator in maintaining this stranglehold on her husband by telling her to “represent the peril of quitting that policy, and remind him of my passionate temper, verging, when kindled, on frenzy” (Brontë 91). Her wild aggression leaves the gentle Edgar, who’s supposedly the head of the family and thereby expected to be in control of his wife, unsure of how to deal with Catherine except by walking on eggshells around her—just as she desires. If she can’t have freedom, she’ll make sure no-one else can.

Despite this one-woman crusade against all who surround her, revenge is incapable of satiating Catherine, and she only turns more volatile. Since her abuse of others has failed to placate her, she turns it maliciously inward instead. At this point, she’s got power only over herself, and she can harm the male characters by harming herself. Edgar and Heathcliff above all others must share in the misery she creates for herself, being so deeply linked to her. She decides that “if I cannot keep Heathcliff for my friend, if Edgar will be mean and jealous, I’ll try to break their hearts by breaking my own” (Brontë 91). She even goes so far as to consider retribution by way of suicide: “If I were only sure it would kill [Edgar], ... I’d kill myself directly” (Brontë 94). Her frenzied attempts at self-punishment distance her further and further from those around her until she is beyond saving.

Catherine’s manipulateness and seeming lack of morality during this stage of her life strike most modern readers as shocking, senseless, and reprehensible. Around the time *Wuthering Heights* was written, however, proto-feminist writers had identified the patterns in



society that led women like her into this crazed cycle of destruction, and their perspective makes Catherine's actions more understandable. Mary Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication on the Rights of Woman* (originally published in 1792), lays a harsh critique on the socialization of girls to suppress their rationality and instead put up a false exterior to please others, leading to an inclination for deceptiveness and trickery. "From the tyranny of man," Wollstonecraft writes, "I firmly believe, the greater number of female follies proceed; and the cunning, which I allow makes at present a part of their character, I likewise have repeatedly endeavored to prove, is produced by oppression" (280). In other words, because women are groomed to play up thingstought to be pleasing to get what they want, they become adapted to fraudulence—which of course they use to subvert the authority oppressing them. The tension between these states of mind is evident in how Catherine oscillates between two forms of manipulation. At times she presents a pleasing, ladylike, false exterior to charm others into tending to her; at others, she throws violent tantrums and threatens self-harm. The latter takes advantage of the expectation that women are physically and emotionally weak: in women, physical violence is seen as harmless, and emotional outbursts as inevitable. This means that others around her—including those whom she abuses—are inclined to excuse or discount her outright cruelty more readily and thereby further enable it.

Her erratic behavior, to Wollstonecraft, is entirely expected. "To laugh at [women] then," she says, "or to satirise the follies of a being who is never to be allowed to act freely from the light of her own reason, is as absurd as cruel; for, that they who are taught blindly to obey authority, will endeavor cunningly to elude it, is most natural and certain" (272). This is exemplified in Catherine using what limited tools are at her command—cutting words, crazed tantrums, her own body—to try to regain any amount of control over and freedom within her circumstances. What's more, trapped women lash out to grasp at any modicum of that freedom, which might be read as overly extreme and

irrational. But Wollstonecraft explains that this reaction is only natural, likening it to how “The bent bow recoils with violence, when the hand is suddenly relaxed that forcibly held it” (111). So, while Catherine might not be likeable, she is understandable. The causes of her actions are far from arbitrary, and her aggression ultimately comes from a place of repression, not intrinsic cruelty. Catherine is what happens when a woman is caged within a social structure that orders her subservience and mandates her powerlessness.

Catherine’s vicious self-abuse results in a rapid descent into delirium. She has no identity anymore: she’s now defined herself only by her relationships to those she can harm—and no longer by anything to do with her as a person. Her connection to Heathcliff has been so split that it’s been destroyed; even his return can’t save her. She dies senseless and unconscious, as insensible to her mourners as she is to herself.

Emily Brontë’s depiction of Catherine shows how easily a sexist, restrictive society like that of the Victorian era can lead women trapped within it to desperation and abuse. Catherine was not born a half-mad abuser. Her toxicity is simply “the natural consequence of [her] education and station in society,” as Wollstonecraft explains. “Let woman share the rights,” she adds, “and she will emulate the virtues of man” (281). Because Heathcliff represents Catherine’s connection to masculinity and thereby “the virtues of man,” Brontë suggests that to be truly virtuous, women should hold tight to their masculinity and use it to assert themselves morally and socially. It could grant them freedom they desperately need in Victorian patriarchy. In a utopia where women were vindicated and free to begin with, they would become virtuous without masculinity, because subjugation due to their femininity is what drives them to folly and vice. In other words, Catherine’s spiral was never inevitable—and without oppressive Victorian society, she never would have lost the buoyant spirit of self she had in her youth. Catherine is horrible, but it is society that shaped and exacerbated her

worst impulses. And to build a better society, one that won't drive its members to violence, readers should learn from her example.

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# Into the Woods: Masculinity, Humanness, and Primitivism in Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*

Ian Bradshaw

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Richard Marsh's 1897 horror novel, *The Beetle*, features Sydney Atherton, a careful restrained, but effectively mad scientist, whose jealousy compels him to invent a weapon of mass destruction (Marsh 102). He is a curious character who blurs the lines between nobleness and savagery and reveals the nexuses between imperialism, orientalism, masculinity, and Victorian constructions of "humanness." For all his dignified airs, Atherton's violent and sexual impulses control him, and his inventions propagate imperial violence.

In this essay, I argue that Sydney Atherton's chauvinist, imperialist designs, sexual insecurities, and proximity to the racialized Other identify him as a primitive, despite his "civilized," Western ideals. Throughout the paper, I employ two definitions of primitivism: a standard definition that refers to devolved, debased, or not-fully-human people, and an imperialist definition that refers to nonindustrial, non-Western, "uncivilized" people. These definitions overlap considerably, and I use them interchangeably, because we cannot ignore how imperial, Western thought cast non-Westerners as less than human. My paper combines New Historical and psychoanalytical approaches to literature to determine how the novel responds to a collective psychological experience within a specific historical moment. More specifically, I focus on Victorian anxieties about human devolution. Drawing on W. C. Harris and Dawn Vernooy, I examine Atherton's aggression. However, Harris and Vernooy never explicitly identify Atherton as a primitive or explain how he manifests Victorian anxieties about human devolution. Thus, I remedy a significant oversight in the scholarship by making this claim. I also reference Thomas M. Stuart's commentary on evolutionary competition, and I synthesize Victoria

Margree's study of Britishness and masculinity with my own thoughts about primitive sexuality in ostensibly "civilized" society (Stuart 223; Margree 69).

Atherton's deep, sexualized hatred of Paul Lessingham speaks to Victorian anxieties about human devolution and emasculation, which dominate Marsh's novel. When the scientist discovers that Lessingham intends to marry his childhood friend and life-long love, Marjorie, he teases and scolds her, then gracefully excuses himself (Marsh 92-96). However, the scientist immediately fantasizes about violent revenge (Marsh 97-98). He passes Lessingham's house, and he curses him, his supporters, and his career, before confronting the Robert Holt and retiring to his private laboratory. Holt's interaction with Atherton, according to Holt, is especially curious. Marsh introduces Atherton before Atherton introduces himself, and the version of Atherton that we see is incomplete, inchoate, and possibly inhuman. Holt describes Atherton as "gentle" and "handsome," yet the scientist enthusiastically recommends murder (Marsh 82-83). This conversation reveals the tension between Atherton's "civilized" self-presentation and primitive reality. The scientist does not reveal his identity or name, so he implicitly dehumanizes himself. Immediately, he ceases to be a whole person; he is a mysterious, violent stranger who wants his rival dead.

Marsh does not offer a mere male rivalry based on sexualized hatred; he stages a conflict between sexes that reveals how sexual hierarchies and constructions of "civilization" are inextricably linked. As Atherton retreats from the party, he offers some angry complaints, which reveal how he views his friend, their relationship, and romantic relationships in general. His vision of romance is paradoxically artificial and deeply primitive. He declares, "if everyone has his own, she [Marjorie] is mine, and, in that sense, she will always be mine" (Marsh 97). He imagines marriage as an artificial, social relationship, but recommends a "natural," primitivist gender hierarchy by asserting his "right" to Marjorie's affection. Thus, he ironically embraces primitive

impulses by appealing to conventional, “civilized” British gender divisions and hierarchies.

Margree reminds us that the Victorian construct of “the ‘angel of the house’ organized masculinity and femininity around a division between public and private that relegated women to the domestic space” (72). The metrosexual, dandyish Atherton responds to the “New Woman,” whom Marjorie Lindon typifies, with conservative hyper-masculinity (Harris and Vernooy 345). However, the masculinity that Atherton performs, while conventionally “British,” completely debases him. His desires to re-relegate the woman to the domestic sphere, erase female sexuality, and reclaim the virile masculinity that New Women ostensibly usurp go together with his sexualized hatred for Lessingham. His desires for sexual control reveal primitive impulses. Not only does female sexual emancipation threaten to destabilize gender hierarchies, but it also threatens to destabilize civilization itself. In this way, Atherton effectively surrenders his humanity to protect a construction of it.

Humanity and masculinity occupy similar spaces in *The Beetle*, and injury to one usually means injury to the other. Constructs of humanity and masculinity hinge on experiences of Britishness. As Margree argues, Marsh advances a specific construction of British normativity, which “demands the preservation of the integrity of a British identity envisaged as virile and masculine, and this requires the repudiation of anything that would threaten this – racial otherness, femininity. . .” (Margree 79). We cannot separate sexual and social instability because they create crises of identity as is evident in this novel. Most men in Marsh’s novel lose their humanity and masculinity to the supernatural Other, yet the Beetle never successfully “unmans” or dehumanizes Atherton in a real, physical way. Instead, Lessingham and Marjorie reveal Atherton’s sexual insecurities.

While Atherton and Lessingham’s contest for Marjorie is inherently debasing and “primitive,” we can read their relationship in other ways that support my thesis. Atherton admires Lessingham, and

his strange admiration identifies Atherton as a primitive in several important, indirect ways. Harris and Vernooy observe that, “While Atherton is not physically overpowered by the Beetle as Holt is, Atherton finds himself intellectually obedient to Lessingham’s verbal arguments, to the power of his words, his mesmerizing charisma” (359). These references to Lessingham’s hypnotic power are significant, especially since Atherton resists the Beetle’s mesmerism. Curiously, Atherton compares Lessingham’s style of rhetoric to witchcraft (Margree 71). He suggests that there is something unnatural—or too natural—and primitive about it. In this way, Marsh conflates foreign and domestic threats to Victorian constructions of civilization, and he casts the steadfast representatives of British civilization as decidedly anti-British. As a hypnotic, Radical upstart, Lessingham’s politics fail to be functionally British, and we can read Atherton’s attraction to his rhetoric as a form of anti-British, anti-civilization, “primitivist” dissent. However, they are still sexual competitors, and their contest for Marjorie directs the narrative. Thus, we can read the planned murder of Lessingham as, paradoxically, anti-primitive violence against him that translates to real, imperial violence. Just as Atherton resorts to “base” hypermasculinity to combat the New Woman, he resorts to imperial violence to protect or promote Britishness that Lessingham and Marjorie seem to undermine. Ironically, imperial violence also reveals nonnormative, degenerate, and primitive impulses, as I explain later.

Atherton’s proximity to the Beetle identifies him as a primitive. Marsh cleverly doubles them, and both characters demonstrate similar sexualized hatreds: “The Oriental and Atherton are doubles in their reanimation after nearly dying, their status as outsiders to the political process, their hypnotic ability, their sexual designs on Marjorie, and their simultaneous hatred of Lessingham” (Vuohelainen 300n2). By doubling the characters, Marsh implicitly others and primitivizes Atherton. He conflates the Beetle’s “oriental magic” with Atherton’s Western science because he refers to his invention as “magic” (Marsh 145). In his analysis of *Dracula* and *The Beetle*, Thomas Stuart insists

that, “They are not monsters of degeneracy but rather of stopped time, their existence emphasizing humanity’s failure to progress in evolutionary competition” (223). We can apply the same reading to Atherton. He undergoes total social and sexual stagnation, rather than atavistic reversion. His sexual frustrations and insecurities motivate him.

When the Beetle confronts Atherton, he escapes its hypnosis, declaring, “I’m a trifle better at the game than you are. Especially as you have ventured into my stronghold, which contains magic enough to make a show of a hundred thousand such as you’ ” (Marsh 145). Here, Atherton clearly, implicitly racializes the Beetle. The inventor’s casual violence, misanthropy, and racism are curious, and his threat against the Beetle reflects the anti-imperial undercurrents in Marsh’s novel. His inventions represent gestures towards violent, “Western” masculinity and constructions of humanity that magnify their fragility. It is important to note the symbolic implications of Atherton’s decision to murder Lessingham’s cat, because it is feminized, racialized, orientalist symbol. Thus, we see “an act that reads as a coldly objective experiment, a literalizing of violence against the Other” (Harris and Vernooy 363). Victorian anxieties about human devolution hinge on xenophobic anxieties. Britons’ interactions with a nameless, foreign Other at home and abroad apparently threaten their identity and biology, and their imperial projects represent a kind of self-endangerment. In this case, Marsh conflates identity and biology, and normative “Britishness” typifies superior, masculine, evolved humanity.

Atherton argues that good, civilized government depends on superior scientific knowledge: “ ‘You’re adding to your stock of information every second, and, in these days, when a member of parliament is supposed to know all about everything, information’s the one thing wanted’ ” (Marsh 137). However, his quest for information depends on extraordinary violence and thus ceases to be authentically human. Percy Woodville’s severe anxiety surrounding Atherton’s inventions separates the inventor from “civilized” society, in this case



embodied by Percy, who is cruel and unsympathetic, and he manipulates his friend. Atherton's treatment of Percy is curious, and their interactions have obvious homoerotic connotations, which we cannot dismiss. Of course, Percy's intense dislike for cats could be an invitation for a queer reading (Marsh 135). The context seems to recommend it. Atherton gets Percy drunk, "takes him home where he forces more liquor on him, and proceeds to demonstrate. . . his own deep-seated homosocial desire/hatred for Paul" (Harris and Vernooy 363). In this way, Atherton's laboratory is a sexual laboratory where degradation is possible, and the proximity between imperial and nonnormative sexual violence conflates them. Harris and Vernooy acknowledge a "link between imperialism's discursive (and so often material) circumscription of women and male homoeroticism" (342). Here, we can see that link in practice; his attempts to destroy Lessingham and undermine Marjorie's "masculinity" by proving his own make different kinds of sexual "abnormalities" possible. Thus, Atherton becomes an agent of devolution and degradation, as well as a microcosm for the insidious, degrading power of imperialism. Even if this connection does not identify Atherton as a primitive, it proves that he encourages devolution and primitivism.

Finally, how should we read Atherton and Grayling's relationship, and why does Marsh include it in his novel? Grayling's affection for Atherton's is curious. She is incredibly supportive and enthusiastic, and she offers to finance his projects (Marsh 118-119). Atherton evades her advances, but eventually marries her (Marsh 321). Like Marjorie, Grayling tries to demonstrate "masculine" female power, and her partnership with Atherton undermines his chauvinistic, imperial gesture; it "functions as a bid to forward her own romantic victory rather than to promulgate a national project for military dominance" (Harris and Vernooy 347). In this way, she simultaneously empowers and emasculates him. Like Atherton, Grayling uses imperial violence to assert her "masculinity"; however, she uses it to undermine Britishness, rather than promote it, because she wants to upend normative gender

hierarchies. Ultimately, Grayling fails as a New Woman. According to Harris and Vernooy, “Her daring. . . is cut short by her conscientious stance on pussy-protection in Atherton’s lab: her unwillingness to participate in (feline) slaughter” (348). This symbolic analysis suggests that Grayling cannot realize sexual emancipation because she does not completely commit to “masculine” violence; she will not kill the cat.

Now that we understand Atherton and Grayling’s relationship, we can determine how it identifies him as a primitive. How can their relationship be primitive if it depends on normative Western gender hierarchies? The novel ends with an epilogue: “She [Grayling] began, the story goes, by loving him immensely; I can answer for the fact that he has ended by loving her as much” (Marsh 321). Atherton did not love Grayling when she wanted masculine authority, and he could not love her until she fell into a feminine gender role. Margree concludes, “Neither the masculinised woman nor the emasculated man will survive. . . . In the case of Marjorie, it is because by the end of the novel she has been returned to a position of normative femininity” (78). In the case of Grayling, this is also true. While they have a normative relationship, the masculinity that Atherton performs completely debases him. His desires to relegate Grayling to the domestic sphere and reclaim the virile masculinity that she tries to usurp identifies him as a primitive. Sexual insecurities thus dominate his relationships and stabilize his identity as a primitive.

Readers might struggle to identify a main character in Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* that best serves the author’s purposes, but I would argue that he gives the most rich and radical social commentary to Sydney Atherton. My readings of Atherton, his identity, and his relationships prove that he interacts with devolution anxieties in meaningful ways, and the novel seems to revolve around his problems. His chauvinist, imperialist designs and his relationship with the Other identify him as a primitive, and he clearly manifests the hypocrisy and violence of “civilized” Western society. I believe that Marsh uses him to interrogate this hypocrisy; however, he still resorts to traditional

categories of normalcy and abnormalcy. Regardless, we can use his novel to gauge late-Victorian gender, racial, and social anxieties.

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# Peering Behind the Veil: Death and Enlightenment in the *Aethiopica*

Eliana Lazarro

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*What happens to us after we die?* It is a question shrouded in uncertainty, but the Ancient Greeks believed they had an answer: after a proper burial, the souls of the dead would descend to the underworld to face their final judgement. The ferryman Charon would row them across the river Styx, separating them from the world of the living. However, this was not an enduring boundary, and under some circumstances, the spirits of the dead were able to return. A *nekyia* is a magical rite by which ghosts were called up and summoned, often to be questioned about the future.<sup>1</sup> This mystical process is repeatedly visible in Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*. Over the course of the novel, its central characters repeatedly receive messages from the dead, who provide them with prophecies and advice. Through Charikela, Kalasiris, and Theagenes's interactions with these spirits, Heliodorus depicts the dead as enlightened beings, who are released from the bounds of the mortal world and see the truths behind the proverbial veil.

Before examining the prophetic dead of the *Aethiopica*, we need to understand the Homeric blueprint for these scenes. As R. W. Garson says, "Heliodorus' indebtedness to Homer is conspicuous at many points,"<sup>2</sup> and his references to necromancy draw straight from Homer's *Odyssey*. Book XI of the *Odyssey* is the *nekyia*: Odysseus's summoning of the dead. At Circe's advice, he goes to the boundary of the underworld in order to seek directions home to Ithaka. To call upon the spirits, Odysseus "poured libations for all the dead: first honey-mix,

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<sup>1</sup> *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (1940), s.v. "νεκυία."

<sup>2</sup> Garson, R. W. "Notes on Some Homeric Echoes in Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*." *Acta Classica* 18 (1975): 137.

sweet wine, and lastly, water,” and sprinkled barley on top (*Odyssey* 11.25–27). Finally, he adds the “black blood” of several sheep (*Odyssey* 11.36). Through these ritual actions, Odysseus enables the prophet Tiresias to speak of the trials which lay ahead. Odysseus’s purpose in performing these rituals is to revitalize the spirits, so that they may have “any meaningful interaction with the

living.”<sup>3</sup> These ghosts are part of a different world; only after drinking blood, a symbol of the life they have departed, are they able to interact with the living Odysseus. However, once they are enabled to speak, the spirits provide Odysseus with wisdom beyond human means. This scene is the blueprint for the appearances of the dead in the *Aethiopica*. In both texts, the restless dead can be summoned to offer knowledge, though their answers may always be straightforward.

In the *Aethiopica*, the most Homeric example comes in Book VI, when Charikleia and Kalasiris watch a woman reanimate the corpse of her son. The woman pours libations of milk, honey, and wine into a pit and creates an effigy from wheat flour. Finally, “she picked up a sword and... drew the blade across her arm” (Heliodorus 6.14). The ingredients offered by this woman—honey, wine, grains, and blood—directly reference the mixture Odysseus provides for the dead. Not only are their procedures similar, but so are their motives: the old woman also seeks supernatural knowledge. She wishes to know whether her other son will perish in battle, but this information is beyond her grasp as a mortal. When her son is reanimated, he chastises her: “These are forbidden mysteries, cloaked in secrecy and darkness, but you have had the audacity to perform them... and you even parade the secrets of the dead before witnesses such as these” (Heliodorus 6.15). The protest of the dead man reveals one key truth—the practice of necromancy can reveal “the secrets of the dead.” The dead man has been imbued with greater knowledge than when he was alive through his disassociation with the mortal world.

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<sup>3</sup> Johnston, S.I., *Restless Dead: Encounters Between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley, 1999), 8.

Though her son is distressed at his reanimation, he does provide the knowledge his mother seeks, though not the outcome she wished for. Not only will her son die in battle, but the woman “shall not escape death by the sword” (Heliodorus 6.15). Almost immediately after, the woman impales herself on a spear stuck in the ground and dies (Heliodorus 6.15). Incidentally, the doom-filled words of this spirit are likely a reference to another tale of necromancy: the summoning of Darius’s spirit in Aeschylus’s *Persians*. In the wake of a devastating naval defeat, Darius informs his people that “They have not plumbed the depths of their disasters—more troubles will keep flowing yet... the corpses heaped in piles, will still be there when three generations have come and gone” (Aeschylus 815–820). Here, Darius speaks of the future fate of his son Xerxes’s armies—though his people sought reassurance, Darius has seen the darkness which lies in the future, and thus has none to give. For Aeschylus’s audience, the Persian loss would have been a notable historical event, lending credence to Darius’s words. Here, he acts as “the raised dead, prophetic and quasi-divine, but not a true god.”<sup>4</sup> Just as the dead man, Darius speaks words of doom upon his summoning, casting a shadow over those who raised him from the grave. Both of these characters demonstrate the dangers of communing with the dead: the truths they have to share may not be the ones we wish to hear.

In addition, the prophecy of the necromancer’s son comes to pass with a remarkable swiftness. This serves a key purpose: it instantly proves to the reader that the words spoken by the dead man are true. This revelation features prominently in our minds, as the corpse had not only spoken of his mother’s fate, but of Kalasiris and Charikleia’s as well. According to the dead man, Kalasiris’s sons are on the verge of battle, but “his arrival will stay their hands,” and Charikleia “will pass her life at [her loved one’s] side in glorious and royal estate” (Heliodorus 6.15). Because we have just witnessed one of the corpse’s

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<sup>4</sup> Kennedy, Rebecca Futo. “A Tale of Two Kings: Competing Aspects of Power in Aeschylus’ *Persians*.” *Ramus* 42, no. 1-2 (2013): 75.

predictions play out, we are incentivized to take these prophecies seriously and to keep them in mind as we continue reading. Through these prophecies delivered by a corpse, Heliodorus emphasizes the knowledge the dead gain beyond the grave. Additionally, these messages are explicitly delivered by a dead man—literally a body puppeteered by necromancy. The clarity of this scene primes the reader’s mind to keep an eye out for the messages of the dead in future books. We have learned that the dead speak the truth; now, we can use that knowledge to make predictions about the story ahead.

Kalasisir, a witness to this act of necromancy, also had a prior experience with the power of the dead. In Book V, Kalasisir tells the story of how he, Charikleia, and Theagenes made their journey from Greece to Egypt. During this tale, he mentions that after sailing from Greece, he had a dream in which an old man in a cloak and helmet appeared. The man was withered with age, “and his expression was one of cunning and many wiles; he was lame in one leg, as if from a wound of some kind” (Heliodorus 5.22). A wily man in a helmet with one injured leg: this is Odysseus, here to scold Kalasisir for neglecting to pay him tribute when he passed Ithaca. The fact that Odysseus is elderly in Kalasisir’s vision is relevant. This is not the young, strong Odysseus of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but an Odysseus far from his prime, soon approaching death. As punishment for Kalasisir’s disrespect, Odysseus predicts that Kalasisir will suffer as he did: ““Ordeals like mine shall you undergo; land and sea you shall find united in enmity against you”” (Heliodorus 5.22). Similarly to the old woman necromancer of Book VI, here we see the displeased spirit of a dead man delivering a vengeful prophecy to the person who has wronged them. Additionally, just as the dead son’s judgment did not only extend to his mother, so too do Odysseus’s statements apply to others outside Kalasisir. Unlike Kalasisir, Charikela has something in her favor: Penelope has taken a liking to her. Because of this, Odysseus says that ““her story has a happy ending”” (Heliodorus 5.22). Although Odysseus had spoken forebodingly to Kalasisir, this part of his message brings good news.

Through this, we see that the enlightened knowledge of the dead does not only bring negative consequences in the *Aethiopica*, but also positive ones: the dead can also bring forward messages of care and affection, which will positively impact our protagonists.

Another key example comes through the dreams Charikleia and Theagenes discuss during their time in prison under Arsake's wishes. At the peak of their suffering, they each receive a dream of Kalasiris, who has since died of natural causes. Charikleia says that Kalasiris told her: "If you wear pantarbe fear-all, fear not the power of flame"(Heliodorus 8.11). Charikleia had carried a pantarbe stone with her when Arsake sent her to the pyre, and she was spared from the heat of the flames. Through this, we see Kalasiris's prophecy was carried out, though Charikleia was not purposely attempting to follow it. Theagenes has also received a message—Kalasiris told him that "Ethiopia's land with a maiden thou shalt see: Tomorrow from Arsake's bonds shalt thou be free" (Heliodorus 8.11). Theagenes initially takes this as a prediction of his demise, with "Ethiopia's land" representing the underworld, and his freedom from bondage resulting from his death. However, this prophecy comes true in a different way, as Theagenes and Charikleia are rescued from prison and taken to *Aethiopia*. In this way, both predictions delivered by Kalasiris are shown to be accurate. Though Kalasiris claimed the powers of magic in his lifetime, we know that this was not always true; to Charikles, Theagenes, and Charikleia, he often claimed to have performed spells and enchantments which did not exist. Additionally, although he interpreted dreams during life, these were omens supplied by other powers. Therefore, the knowledge he presents results from his residence in the underworld, not from any power he possessed in life.

Kalasiris's case differs from those we have seen so far: unlike Odysseus and the necromancer's son, Kalasiris is not a vengeful soul. He returns from the underworld for purely positive reasons, wishing to assure his foster-children of their fate and guide them to safety. His motives are comparable to Penelope's in Book V—each of them feels



an attachment for a living person and delivers a beneficial prophecy as a result of this care. In fact, the Greek literary tradition includes many examples of spirits using their powers to help the ones they loved. As stated by Sarah Iles Johnston, “the dead might be frightening and vengeful, but they were also expected to provide help to the living who treated them well, or to those with whom they had a link based on affection.”<sup>5</sup> This obligation was especially compelling in the cases of family members. Though Theagenes and Charikleia do not fit the traditional definition of blood relations, they had a close bond with Kalasiris, and each mourned him as a father. This degree of care and regard enables Kalasiris to return to them after his death, providing his children the advice and hope they need to carry on. None of this would be possible without the wisdom he achieved in the underworld—his death forced him to leave his children behind, but allowed him to help them in a unique way.

Through the otherworldly messages of three different spirits, Heliodorus depicts the enlightenment of the dead in the *Aethiopica*. Though these people have departed the world of the living, they now possess the power to affect it in a way they never could before death. With the obstructions of the material world removed, the dead are able to step outside their bounds as mortals and view the twists and turns of fate itself. However, their messages are ultimately for the living. Surrounding Theagenes and Charikleia, these phantoms contribute to their journey and to the happy ending which was written out for them by the gods.

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<sup>5</sup> Johnston, S.I., *Restless Dead: Encounters Between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley, 1999), 28.

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## *Midsommar* (2019): Is ‘Good for Her’ the New Final Girl?

Cassidy Crane

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*Midsommar* (2019) is part folk-horror, part high school comedy, part breakup film, part slasher, and part feminist movie. Director Ari Aster gives the viewer two stories: the unhealthy relationship between main characters Dani and Christian, and the Swedish cult Hårga that slowly but surely encroaches on their lives. By the end of the film, Dani is the last foreigner standing, with the men who wronged either her or the cult dead in a ritual sacrifice. Across the film, we watch Dani go through the death of her family, be mistreated by her boyfriend, and be brushed off by his friends. The final shot of the film shows Dani smiling, crowned May Queen, watching Christian burn to death. After the release of *Midsommar*, this final image of Dani became an online meme, accompanied by an image from the show *Arrested Development* of the character Lucille saying, “Good for her.” Dani is like a Final Girl, but she is coded differently.

I argue that Dani represents a new type of Final Girl, which I call the Good for Her Girl (written as GFH Girl from now on). The GFH girl honors the Final Girl and slasher film conventions while departing from them. The GFH Girl differs from the Final Girl in that she has experienced continuous trauma throughout her life and seeks revenge against men at the end of the film, yet still the audience reacts sympathetically to her.

### **Part I: *Midsommar* as Slasher**

Though *Midsommar* is regarded - rightfully so – as a horror film, director Ari Aster ultimately saw its genre as twofold. In an interview with David Sims for *The Atlantic*, Aster explained,

I would say this was, for me, a way of making a breakup movie and having fun with clichés and tropes that are inherent to two different genres, doing

something that's simultaneously absurdist and nakedly vulnerable. It's folk horror, but being given to you with the trajectory of a high-school comedy. It's about a girl who everyone knows is with the wrong guy, and the right guy is under her nose.

This combination of genres is reminiscent of the slasher film, where often high school or high school-aged teens are put into a horrific situation. The victims are normal people with normal problems, but they go through an abnormal experience at the hands of a killer that may or may not have a motive. This comparison especially rings true for the monster of a Slasher film being compared to that of *Midsommar*: the threat is often human as opposed to supernatural.

Ari Aster calls upon many tropes of the slasher films in *Midsommar*. Of the slasher films cited by Carol Clover, the inventor of the term "Final Girl, *Midsommar* compares closely to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). Clover describes the elements of the slasher as such:

the killer is the psychotic product of a sick family, but still recognizably human; the victim is a beautiful, sexually active woman; the location is not-home, at a Terrible Place; the weapon is something other than a gun; the attack is registered from the victim's point of view and comes with shocking suddenness (96).

Slasher films heavily rely on these elements in which to put cliché young characters into. We can see these elements present in *both Texas Chain Saw* and *Midsommar*, even if *Midsommar* was not necessarily marketed as a slasher.

To start with the elements that are less important to this paper but important to the slasher film, the location of "not-home" is clear in both films. In both *Texas Chain Saw* and *Midsommar*, our group of future victims go to the home base of the families that will kill them. In *Texas Chain Saw*, the couple Kirk and Pam stumble into the Family's home, ensuring their deaths. In *Midsommar*, the Americans are brought to Sweden by a fellow graduate student, Pelle. Here, Pelle lures them to his cult family under false pretenses. In this scenario, the characters of

*Texas Chain Saw* seem more foolish, but neither group is able to escape due to the isolated location. In both films, the monstrous groups use different methods of murder than a gun, with the *Texas Chain Saw* using mostly a chainsaw as well as a hammer as murder weapons. The cult in *Midsommar* uses different rituals, though most are off-screen. Sims notes this, saying “You’ve [speaking to Aster] also kind of made a slasher movie with no kills. You don’t really see the murders, but they’re all getting picked off, one by one. They just walk off into the woods.” The culminating scene is a large fire killing Christian and burning the corpses of the other foreigners, as well as willing participants. Unlike *Texas Chain Saw*, *Midsommar* is much more subtle. The audience knows what is happening, but the horror is in the tense feeling as opposed to the abject violence and gore (for the most part).

Gendered killing plays out differently in *Midsommar* than in the slasher film. Clover argues that in a slasher “death of a male is always swift, even if the victim grasps what is happening to him, he has no time to react or register terror. [...] The murders of women, on the other hand, are filmed at closer range, in more graphic detail, and at greater length” (105). This matches up with *Texas Chain Saw*, especially comparing Pam’s murder to Kirk’s or Jerry’s. Pam is sexualized through her death, even hung on a hook, comparing her to a piece of meat. In *Midsommar*, there are nine deaths: five foreigners and four natives; 2 women and 7 men. We only see the death of one of the women – she is one of two that commits ritual suicide by jumping onto rocks. Her death certainly has extreme graphic detail, but no more than the man that jumps after her. We watch both of their skulls smash onto the rocks until they are almost no longer recognizable. When the man survives his jump, one of the cult members delivers a killing blow to his head with a hammer. This is reminiscent of Leatherface smashing Kirk’s head with a hammer in *Texas Chain Saw*, but in *Midsommar* we stay in this moment longer.

To return to Pam’s death, there is similarity in how Pam is hung up on a meat hook and how Simon – one half of the British couple, and

the first foreigner to disappear – is strung from the barn ceiling, naked, and covered with flowers. Mara Bachman observes in a Screen Rant article that Simon has undergone a Norse method of torture called blood eagle, and that “Perhaps the most disturbing part of Simon's death is the fact that he is actually alive when Christian finds him. It's very subtle, but his chest can be seen rising and falling with each painful breath he takes, serving to paint a much more complete picture of the cruelty of *Midsommar's* Hårga cult.” Though we do not witness the entirety of his torture, like Pam, Simon is similarly tortured in a way that can be interpreted sexually. The way they are both displayed and forced to live through their torture – Pam watching Kirk die, Simon being stripped naked and having his sight removed – while being presented both violently and provocatively is jarring.

These two scenes serve as two sides of the same coin – *Midsommar* is not a film that is overtly sexual about women (while *Texas Chain Saw* is), but it does contain sexual content in relation to violence. This is especially important in looking at how the victim of *Midsommar* is not this “beautiful, sexually active woman” (Clover 96). Despite this, the general structure of the slasher is still there, with only a few differences.

### **Dani as Final Girl**

*Midsommar* is a film that is predictable, as most slashers are. Aster notes this in his interview with Sims, saying,

I'm not here to subvert the [horror] genre, but at the same time, we all know what's going to happen. So it's not that interesting. If anything, I respect you as a viewer—you know they're all going to be killed—so that's not where the surprises are going to be, and that's not where the joy is going to be.

There is a familiarity in the Slasher genre: we know that everyone is going to die. What makes it exciting is how. If *Midsommar* follows the guidelines set forth, we know that Dani will live and be our Final Girl.

She does live, but Clover's explanation of what a Final Girl is does not only require her to avoid death.

Clover requires a Final Girl to be not just a girl. She defines the Final Girl as boyish, in a word. [...] she is not fully feminine – not in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends. Her smartness, gravity, and competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance sets her apart from the other girls and ally her, ironically, with the boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself. Lest we miss the point, it is spelled out in her name: Stevie, Martie, Terri, Laurie, Stretch, Will (Clover 109).

Dani. It is a masculine name, after all. But this alone does not make her our Final Girl. In appearance, Dani does not wear makeup and wears simple clothing. This certainly sets her apart from the women in the cult. We might juxtapose her against Connie, the only other non-cult woman, though Connie dies very quickly. Though they are both taken aback by the ritual, Connie and her fiancé Simon yell about it, which gets them killed. Dani stays alive by fading into the background, which is ironically very feminine.

Dani does not ally with the majority of the men, but she does find a confidant in Pelle. We watch the men talk badly about her, mostly regarding her relationship with Christian and her emotionality. Her lack of sexuality is perceived as a flaw by Mark, who takes the cliché of the sex-obsessed friend of Christian. He tells Christian to break up with Dani before they go to Sweden so that he can find a milkmaid to have sex with instead. Pelle, who is the one who lured everyone to Sweden, tells Dani that she deserves better than Christian. They share a kiss after Dani is crowned May Queen. Dani finds friendship more with the women of Hårga, who give her clothing to match them and let her in on their customs. When Dani discovers Christian having sex with another girl, a group of women cry with her. The men were instead encouraging Christian to cheat on Dani.

Dani lacks the specific masculine intelligence that Clover claims keeps the Final Girl alive. Instead, she avoids the wrath of the cult by

minding her own business, and finally by being crowned May Queen. May Queen is arguably the most feminine role of the film, though it does perhaps require a physical prowess to be the last woman standing. Dani is adorned with flowers and a crown and is later placed into a dress-like blanket of flowers. This role as the top female of Hårga is what affords her the ability to choose between Christian and a cult member to be sacrificed.

Ultimately, Dani has some masculine traits, but these traits are not what keep her alive. It is her actions more than her traits that keep her alive. In addition to who the Final Girl is, Clover does outline what the Final Girl *does*, saying,

She is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again. She is abject terror personified. [...] She alone looks death in the face, but she alone also funds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A) or to kill him herself (ending B). She is inevitably female (106).

Sally in *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is used as Clover's example of the epitome of a Final Girl, mostly for all of her screaming and being chased through the woods. Dani, however, is never chased, cornered, or wounded. She does not scream because of the cult. She hardly screams at all. But when she does scream, it is because of her boyfriend, Christian

Dani is primarily positioned as a character in relation to Christian throughout the film, much as Christian is positioned in reference to her. They are *the* couple. Returning to Ari Aster's assertion of *Midsommar* as a breakup movie, Dani very much lives in this genre. Dani's priorities throughout the film remain with her relationship until the very end. We do not see her engaging in these "Final Girl activities" because she does not know that she is living within a horror film. Instead, she maneuvers as she would within a breakup film. It is hard to



characterize her actions as “Final Girl” or not “Final Girl” because the characters outside of the cult do not know what they have wandered into. Dani cannot run from a monster if she is never chased.

Dani is also shielded from the horror because she is different from the other characters. In *Texas Chain Saw*, the Family goes after the group of teens that trespass on their land and cannibalize them. There is a reason for the violence, even on the surface, and it is because of the transgressions of the teens. Similarly, the cult has a reason for each of the killings of the foreigners. The British couple, Connie and Simon, are killed for their disrespect at the ritual suicide and for trying to leave. Mark is killed for peeing on the ancestor tree. Josh is killed for taking a picture of the cult’s holy book. Christian, however, is killed because Dani makes that choice. She makes that choice because she perceives Christian as having cheated on her. Every death has a reason.

Dani is not abject terror personified. She is heartbreak personified. Dani has to suffer the murder-suicide of her sister and her parents while being in a relationship with a man who does not care for her. At the end, she does look death in the face, but it is not her killer. It is her victim, burning alive, in the carcass of a bear. Dani cannot be the Final Girl. I argue she is something similar, something more.

### **Dani as Good for Her Girl**

From the film’s beginning, the audience’s sympathies lie with Dani. We watch as her family dies when Dani can do nothing to stop it. We watch as her boyfriend badmouths her with his friends. We watch as her boyfriend treats her badly at a party and ends up getting her to apologize for it. We watch as her boyfriend forgets her birthday. Later, we watch Dani watch her boyfriend have sex with someone else. This woman has been through so much, and so much of it has been out of her control. Mark decided to pee on the ancestor tree, so he was killed. Josh decided to take pictures of the sacred book after explicitly being told not to, so he was killed. But Dani? Dani did everything right. It is not

her fault that bad things happened to her. When the festival reaches its end, and Dani finally fights back against the man who has hurt her the entire duration of the film, there is a simple audience reaction. Good for her.

Aster's portrayal of Dani and Christian is night and day. Dani is the doting girlfriend who just needs someone to pay attention to her needs, while Christian is the selfish boyfriend who forgets how long they have been together. They were on the cusp of a breakup when Dani's family was killed and Christian only stayed with her because of that.

One way that *Texas Chain Saw* and *Midsommar* are similar is the audience perception of the victims. Though we are scared of the killer, the victims deserved it in a way. Pam and Kirk decided to walk right into the Family's house, what did they expect was going to happen? We can apply this logic to Christian. Christian treated Dani poorly without even a moment of redemption. The two things he did to be kind to her (not breaking up with her and inviting her to Sweden) were only because he felt bad for her, not because he had any real love for her. When he is a bad boyfriend, what does he think is going to happen?

With Dani creating "ending C" and joining the killers, we get to watch the ultimate death. The cult kills over pettier things, where anyone who mildly steps out of line is the next to be sacrificed. With the genre split between the folk-horror and breakup/high-school comedy, the cult is the folk-horror monster. But Christian is the villain of our breakup movie. While high-school comedies might end with the girlfriend publicly dumping her horrible boyfriend, *Midsommar* ends with her sacrificing him.

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<sup>1</sup> As a sidenote, the sex that Christian has with the other woman is not necessarily consensual. There are other papers and articles about the faults of that scene and how it can be seen as problematic, but that is beyond the scope of my paper. Though I believe that scene is an example of Christian being a victim of the cult, he still is a bad boyfriend to Dani up to that moment. It takes Dani seeing Christian in that position for her to finally understand that, and she does not have the full context of that scene that we do as the audience.

In this way, the feeling of “good for her” transcends genre. We might have a similar reaction to the high-school comedy that we do to *Midsommar*. But the violence scratches a certain itch in the viewer that is more satisfying than simply telling off a mean bully might fulfill. In her article “Do you Want to Watch?” Jody Keisner explores this relationship between a viewer of a slasher film and the victims within the slasher. She says,

Not only does the horror movie monster serve as a model of deterrence in the fictional reality created, but the movies themselves serve as models of deterrence for the mostly teenage audience, illustrating what behaviors equal death. The movie audience is allowed to watch and “enjoy” (“enjoy” is used lightly here since so many viewers report increased anxiety and levels of fear) without the same “punishment” as the movie’s victims (Keisner 419).

Keisner is not comfortable with the slasher providing murder as a “punishment” for premarital sex, but that theme is not present in this movie. Dani survives to punish Christian, and because his transgressions are worse than premarital sex, there is more satisfaction in watching it happen.

I would also argue that the audience satisfaction does not only rely on Christian’s death but also on Dani’s happiness. It is not just about hating Christian, it is about liking Dani and wanting what is best for her. Keisner disagrees with the notion that a female viewer might relate to a Final Girl (412-413), but could she relate to a GFH Girl? We root for both, but perhaps the type of satisfaction we get is different.

The Final Girl might act as a stand-in for feminism, but Keisner argues that she only imitates it. When watching a film filled with the fear and murder of women, sparing one does not make up for everything else. Keiser asserts,

This interpretation of the Final Girl as an expression of female empowerment, or an “I” for the audience to identify with, becomes problematic when comparing gender discrepancies in horror movie portrayals and audience reactions. Furthermore, male viewers report that they enjoy

slasher films significantly more than female viewers, and that enjoyment is heightened when in the company of a distressed woman (422).

How does this change with a GFH girl? Even if she is masculinized, does it balance out with the death of a man?

I characterize the GFH Girl as a woman who has undergone trauma throughout her life – in particular, by men – and is able to enact revenge by the end of the film. In Shuntaya’s article on the genre, she gives examples (some of which she empathizes with more than others) such as Amy from *Gone Girl*, the titular character of *Carrie*, Cee of *The Invisible Man*, and Jen of *Revenge*. While the Final Girl is a characteristic of the slasher, the GFH Girl exists in both horror and thriller.

Watching a “bad guy” kill people might give some satisfaction in an audience, but the justice we see served by a GFH Girl is much different. Audiences enjoy having the “good guy” win, but better yet, they like seeing punishment upon the “bad guy.” With *Midsommar*, we might have expected one of the endings that Clover proposed (106), with an ending A having Dani escape or an ending B of Dani burning down the cult herself. With the combinations of genres, Dani kills the “bad guy” we might not expect her to, but the bad guy that is worse to her.

Dani is never treated badly by the cult, only the other foreigners are. As Dani never steps out of line, she is accepted and even crowned as May Queen. The only man that is sympathetic to her is Pelle, the man that might be right for her over her own boyfriend (Aster qtd in Sims). So in this sense, we sympathize with the cult because we sympathize with Dani. Aster even sees this movie as having a happy ending, saying,

Hopefully, the details [of the cult] are rich, and there’s a logic behind everything the villagers are doing, and they’re not just lawless pagans. At the same time, they’re also adhering to laws that are very particular to this film, and they exist solely to satisfy Dani’s particular needs. They are perfect for

Dani right now. It's a wish-fulfillment film in a way—she loses a family and gains one (qtd in Sims).

We return to the high-school comedy, where the protagonist dumps her boyfriend, but this time she gets with another guy that people misunderstand. But she understands him, and so we say, “Good for her. Good for them.” Perhaps this is how Aster wanted us to feel about the cult – that they might not be for us, but they are for Dani, and so we like them.

Despite the name of the GFH Girl containing the word “good,” this doesn't mean that everything in it is truly good. Kaiya Shuyata's article is very critical of these films, focusing specifically on *Midsommar* and how we as an audience should not have this reaction. She says,

Dani has clearly been broken down by a white-supremacist cult throughout the course of the film; they've groomed her with praise, given her a false sense of family, and ultimately forced her to join their cult by murdering all her friends. This is not a powerful moment of feminist fury: it's a heart-wrenching example of how cults prey on the fragile and weak. Using the “good for her” meme in this context, thus branding *Midsommar* as a feminist tale, is quite frankly false advertising (Shutaya).

Shutaya argues that while the audience may see the ending of *Midsommar* as Dani taking control of her life, instead this is just another sad moment after all the sad moments that came before it. Shutaya also cites *Gone Girl* as a poor example of using “good for her,” as we should not celebrate Amy's actions of manipulating her cheating husband and framing him for murder. Shutaya ultimately sees movies such as *The Invisible Man*, which ends with a woman killing her abuser, as an example that is worthy of “good for her.” Though I agree with Shutaya's point to an extent, horror is often about indulging messed-up desires, and the GFH girl is an outlet for violent revenge. To watch Amy frame her husband for murder or Dani make the choice that forces Christian to burn to death excruciatingly may not be an equivalent

punishment for the crime. But it isn't about being fair. It's about the satisfaction that comes along with it.

*Midsommar* borrows from the slasher genre, but with the wit of a high-school comedy, we watch the good girl burn her boyfriend to death inside of a bear. The GFH Girl replaces a Final Girl, where instead of getting pleasure from her fear, we are satisfied by her revenge. Dani's fate is unknown after the credits roll, and we do not know if she will have a happy life with the cult. At least, for the moment, we can watch her smile at the flames.

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From the editorial board of *Articulāte*,  
congratulations to all the writers whose work  
was chosen for the Spring 2023 issue!



