The Horror of Disabilities: Rereading Disability Narratives to Infer Horror's Progressive Functions

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The horror genre, which seeks to shock and horrify its audience, is uniquely suited to dealing with subversive and controversial topics. By embracing the abject, this genre is able to explore ideas outside of society's established roles and standardized ideals. However, Lennard Davis accuses the horror genre of monsterizing the marginalized disability community. He views most disabled characters' narratives in horror as negative representations of disability that further stigmatizing views regarding disability. I contend his claim through a two-part approach: first, by using Julia Kristeva's study of the abjection to uncover the horror genre's subversive functions that allow it to become a tool of progression; second, by applying this view to reread a few apparently harmful disability narratives that in fact challenge the 'good versus bad' dichotomy and invite a change in perception regarding disability.

Horror as a Subversive Tool of Progression

Horror is by nature a subversive genre which enables it to explore topics outside accepted norms and thereby challenge established ideas. According to Julia Kristeva, the horror genre is wrapped in a state of abjection and deals with subjects that disturb and are rejected by society. These abject elements are concerned with taboo subjects and exist in a disoriented or ambiguous state (Childers 308). Abjection evokes a "violent, dark revolt" (Kristeva 1) caused by "what disturbs identity, system, order[,] [w]hat does not respect borders, positions, rules[,] [t]he in-between, the ambiguous, [and] the composite" (4). This subversion of accepted norms and perceptions allows horror

narratives to tackle themes that are considered repulsive and improper. By transgressing the rigid roles and perceptions created by society, these narratives can envision the possibilities that lie outside the standards set by such roles and demonstrate the dangers of the popular, yet problematic, ideals. The subversive functions undertaken by horror narratives enable it to become a tool of progression, illuminating the horrors and errors of established ideas.

Carmilla by Sheridan Le Fanu and "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman are two horror stories that present subversive characters and offer progressive interpretations of rigid roles and perceptions. In the 19th century, a woman's role was to be the "Angel in the House," a phrase adopted from a popular poem at the time by Coventry Patmore. He presented his wife, who was submissive, devoted, gentle, and pure (Patmore 75), as the standard for all women. In *Carmilla*, the titular character subverts this role by being a solitary woman, with no empathy or subservience to the men she encounters, while being openly sexual with her female companions. "[E]xpress[ing] a hysterical fear of sexually and domestically powerful women" (Killeen qtd. in Garancher 12), *Carmilla* presents an alternate lifestyle for women that was a shocking notion at the time, introducing diversity into an inflexible role. "The Yellow Wallpaper" illustrates the dangers of wrong perceptions by demonstrating an uncompromising account of the full effects of the rest cure for mental illnesses. Following the story's publishing, Gilman claimed that the horrible fate of the protagonist so terrified a certain woman's family that they "let her out into normal activity and she recovered" (CrashCourse 00.11.29-00.11.40). The dangers of the attitudes at the time towards mental illnesses highlighted by the story eventually influenced Gilman's doctor to alter his treatments (CrashCourse 00.11.46-00.11.52). This shift in mentality signifies the power of the horror genre to challenge existing structures and push society towards

more progressive attitudes. The presentation of monstrosity and shocking events can evoke strong reactions and push for progressive, albeit uncomfortable, readings. Both these stories evoke horror by creating protagonists that subvert expectations, enabling diversity and change to seep into rigid and stereotypical roles and perceptions.

Rereading Disability Narratives

By considering the horror genre as a tool for progression, the disability representations in horror can be reread to uncover the narrative's intentions to challenge the 'good versus bad' dichotomy and inspire change. *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* by Victor Hugo both introduce hybridity into identity by featuring disabled characters who possess 'good' characteristics but are judged to be 'bad' monsters. By presenting 'monstrous' disabled characters who possess qualities of goodness and by juxtaposing them with abled characters who are cruel and apathetic, horror narratives can frustrate the clear dichotomy of good versus bad. The abjection in horror "remind[s] us that boundaries we use for identity, … are permeable and constructed rather than impermeable and permanent" (Hall). Like Carmilla who dismantled the established chaste and pure identity forced on women, horror fiction can challenge the monster labels thrust on people with disabilities by permeating boundaries to expose the monstrosity in abled people and the humaneness embedded in people with disabilities. This hybridity of characteristics illustrated through abjection can be achieved through a monster that challenges categorical thinking (Hall). By acting subversively to their labels, such 'monsters' can induce a reconfiguration of identities and induce a more holistic interpretation of disabled identities.

In *Frankenstein*, the 'good versus bad' dichotomy is challenged through the behaviours of the creature and Dr. Frankenstein. Although the creature is not often

considered as being disabled, Davis points out that the creature's difference in appearance is a disruption in the visual field similar to any other physical disability (2187). However, this is the extent to which I agree with Davis's argument on the matter of *Frankenstein*, since Davis considers the monstrous theme in the novel as a negative representation of disability. He points out how the creature remains nameless, adopts the name of his creator, and is referred to as "the monster" (2187). I argue that referring to the creature as "Frankenstein's monster" allows Dr. Frankenstein and the creature to act as mirror characters, illuminating the humanity in the 'monster' (i.e., the disabled character) and the monstrosity in the 'human' (i.e., the abled character) to the reader. This linguistic choice in naming highlights the abject in the novel, making apparent the permeation of boundaries. For example, during the first conversation between the creature and Dr. Frankenstein, the creature "implores [Frankenstein's] goodness and compassion" (Shelley 87), while Frankenstein curses the day the creature was created (88). The creature repeatedly expresses his need to connect with others, claiming that his "soul glowed with love and humanity" (87) despite being abandoned by his creator and other humans. During this interaction, the creature explains how he was not evil by nature or because of his disability but was driven to violence through painful experiences. The juxtaposition of the calmness of the creature with the enraged Frankenstein serves to outline how both 'good' and 'bad' coexist in both characters regardless of their disabled/abled nature. Moreover, the creature has greater understanding and respect towards the value of life than Frankenstein. The creature comprehends the responsibilities associated with creating life and recognizes its loyalty to Frankenstein as his "natural lord and king" (87). However, Frankenstein, even when confronted with the miserable existence to which he condemned his creature, refuses to be empathic or understanding, considering instead the creature's existence as a

wretched catastrophe (49). These interactions illustrate the hybridity in these characters' identities, demonstrating instances of humanity expressed by the 'monstrous' creature and apathy expressed by the 'human. Through these characters' subversions of their labelled roles, the narrative is able to emphasize the flaws of a dichotomous 'good versus bad' identity creation.

A similar frustration of the 'good versus bad' dichotomy through mirror characters is seen in the Gothic horror novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The novel juxtaposes Quasimodo, a physically disabled character who is caring and heroic, with the abled yet corrupt archdeacon of the Notre Dame Cathedral, Claude Frollo. Similar to the creature in *Frankenstein*, the 'monster' label is thrust on Quasimodo due to his physical appearance. From infancy, Quasimodo is referred to as a "real monster of abomination" (Hugo 147) and he is regarded as "a savage because he was ugly" (158). On the other hand, his abled adoptive guardian Frollo was considered "a pious, docile, [and] learned" (165) man. However, their appearances are contrasted with their morals in their treatment of Esmerelda. While Quasimodo risks his life to protect and care for Esmerelda, Frollo's actions lead to her execution. Risking public humiliation and even persecution, Quasimodo rescues Esmerelda and expresses his pure and compassionate love towards her. Contrary to this, the revered Frollo treats Esmerelda like an object of desire and possession, forcing her to love him or die by hanging (502). The mirroring of Quasimodo and Frollo highlights the errors of placing the monster label on a character who is caring and empathic simply on account of their physical disability, while a seemingly good character allows their selfish desires to lead to the death of an innocent person. This disturbance of established identities and frustration of dichotomies invites readers to challenge the boundaries set by the 'monster' labels. As such, in both *Frankenstein* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the apparent negative representation of

disability in fact serves to challenge the 'good versus bad' dichotomy by presenting behaviours that emphasize the hybridity in identity.

In addition to that, the creature's acceptance by the blind De Lacey, and his family's shock and rejection of the creature, notes how the monster label is a matter of perception that needs altering. Davis, contrastingly, contends that De Lacey, who did not realize that the creature was disabled, and being the only person to treat the creature with respect, furthers the idea of the disabled body being "a zone for repulsion" (2187). However, I do not agree that the kindness the creature receives from De Lacey is a reiteration of the body being a site for horror. On the contrary, this compassion performs a call-to-action function similar to that in "The Yellow Wallpaper." While "The Yellow Wallpaper" inspires change by demonstrating the negative effects of the beliefs surrounding mental illness, *Frankenstein* inspires a change in perception by considering the positive impact of such change. Representations of disability in horror can "challenge what we mean when we refer to the human" (Hall) and "confront the able-bodied persons with the limits of life" (Kristeva qtd. in Hall), and by removing the creature's monster label while encountering the blind man, the narrative illustrates how this limitation is a matter of perception. When freed from the prejudices surrounding disability, De Lacey is able to appreciate the creature's personality and values and have a meaningful conversation. This is an invitation to the readers to envision settings where disabled characters are not immediately met with horror and rejection but welcomed with the same civility as given to an abled person. In contrast to the calmness with which De Lacey receives the creature, the rest of the family is horrified to see the creature in their home (Shelley 117-19). Based on the creature's appearance alone, the family deems the creature to be a monster and immediately resorts to violently rejecting the creature from their society. Additionally, driven by unwarranted fears and anxieties

towards the creature, the family flees their home. I suggest that this reaction is not meant to reinforce the idea of the repulsiveness of the disabled body, but to emphasize the errors of the superficial judgments made based on a difference in appearance. Through the scenes with De Lacey, the narrative illustrates the peaceful, and perhaps enjoyable, interactions that can be achieved when disabled persons are not labelled based on prejudicial labels. The chaos that follows the family's reactions demonstrates the negative repercussions of the monster label to not only the creature but to the family as well. Hence, the shock and repulsion created in this scene serve not to vilify the disabled body, but to evoke strong reactions in order to inspire a change in perception.

The subversions in horror narratives that challenge systems and blur boundaries allow it to function as a tool of progression. Stories such as *Carmilla* and "The Yellow Wallpaper" demonstrate how these subversions can introduce diversity and evoke positive change through horror and shock. In this light, the disability narratives in *Frankenstein* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* can be reread to uncover their progressive functions by challenging the 'good versus bad' dichotomy through the hybridity in identity, and by evoking the need for a change in perception. Acknowledging the role of horror as a tool for progression widens the stage available for disability narratives to challenge established stigmatized ideals and brings the horrors experienced by marginalized communities to the forefront.

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