

Spring 5-11-2012

Matriarchal Monsters: Literary Villians Through the Lens of Gender

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The University of Southern Mississippi

MATRIARCHAL MONSTERS:
LITERARY VILLAINS THROUGH THE LENS OF GENDER

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Honors College
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of English

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Table of Contents

I. Introduction	1-4
II. Chapter One	5-18
III. Chapter Two	19-30
IV. Chapter Three	31-42
V. Conclusion	42-44
VI. Works Cited	45-46

Introduction

The exposure of American readers to the literary monster culminates at an incredibly young and impressionable age. The genre of children's literature seems to rely heavily on the impact of the presence of villainous monster characters. From the "boogey man" to "Cruella de Vil" to "The Grinch," children are presented at a very young age with the character of evil. As a result of our early experience with villains, we as readers accept the "bad guy" created in a novel to be classified under the category of "monster." However, most readers have never even pondered or questioned the label of the "monster." Through my studies, I have found the concept of the monster to be one of the most complicated character types there is. In my exploration of the literary monster, I have uncovered a community of monsters whose analysis I believe is imperative to understanding the role of the monster in the novel. Although studies of the female monster in literature are abundant, ranging from mythological Greek characters such as Medusa to the supernatural Gothic females in the works of Charlotte Brontë and Mary Shelley, considerable research on a more specific group, the matriarchal monster, has yet to be conducted. The matriarchal monster is unique among all literary monsters both in her gender and in the accepted identity she is supposed to fulfill. As a woman and caretaker, the mother is meant to be a balance between gentle and strong. Because the matriarchal monster disturbs this balance by committing an act that is evil, I believe she is attributed even more evil qualities than a male monster who may commit the same monstrous act. In opposition to this double standard, I will argue that the matriarchal monster tends to be less evil than the typical literary monster, and that her actions tend to become almost heroic. Further, I will argue that the "monstrous" actions of the

matriarchal monster result from a struggle for power within her societal structure, rather than from a desire to be evil or cause harm.

Studies of female monsters in literature are abundant. Characters ranging from mythological Greek monsters, such as Medusa, to Gothic monsters,

In order to explicate the challenges of the term “matriarchal monsters,” three specific examples of women who have been placed into this category will be analyzed. I have chosen three women who come from distinctly different periods of time. Additionally, these women originate from two distinct nations. I have chosen to study characters from such a broad span of time so as to make my findings potentially universal to all literature, from one of the first epic poems of all time to a very modern work of fiction. Through my analysis of a well-rounded group of literary characters, I hope to prove one thing in common between the three of them: what is the core of their motivation to commit a monstrous act.

The first matriarchal monster was created by the *Beowulf* poet between the 8th and 11th centuries. She is referred to as Grendel’s mother. Grendel’s mother is widely accepted by literary scholars to be a monster whose monstrosities are unjustifiable. However, claims have been made that note otherwise. I will present the controversy that surrounds her identity and propose that she, in various situations, is very similar to the hero of the story, Beowulf.

The second female monster that I will introduce is Mina Harker of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, which was first published in 1897. Mina is arguably one of the most widely known female vampires in literature, as *Dracula* is often accepted as the masterpiece of vampire literature. She demonstrates both a wholly human character and a character whose body is eventually being infused with the poisonous blood of a vampire. Mina is representative of a hybrid Victorian woman whose vampirism leads to the demise of the novel's ultimate villain, Dracula.

The final female monster that I will analyze was created by Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved*, published in 1987. Sethe is an escaped slave living in Ohio with her teenage daughter, Denver. She is the mother to three other children who have left her home on 124 Bluestone Road. Her oldest, two boys, have run away in hopes of escaping the horrors that their life in 124 has forced them to experience. This horror is a result of Sethe murdering her daughter, who is only identified as the "crawling already baby," in hopes of saving her from the impending danger of the white men coming to take Sethe and her family back into a life of slavery. I argue that Sethe is not an evil monster but, instead, a mother whose decision to kill her baby stems from a loving desire to protect her children from the terrorizing life of a slave. Sethe commits a monstrous act as a way to be more powerful than the institution that devastated her own life, slavery.

In my analysis of the literary monster, I will use the Oxford English Dictionary to define "monster" first as, "Originally: a mythical creature which is part animal and part human, or combines elements of two or more animal forms, and is frequently of great size and ferocious appearance. Later, more generally: any imaginary creature that is

large, ugly, and frightening.” The second definition I will use is, “A person of repulsively unnatural character, or exhibiting such extreme cruelty or wickedness as to appear inhuman; a monstrous example *of* evil, a vice, etc” (“Monster”). Therefore, the term “monster” is not limited to an inhuman being but is always categorized as having some sort of definitive evil factor. Each of these three monsters possesses both characteristics that adhere to these definitions and ones that challenge them. In order to explore each of these monsters, I will utilize the origin of the word which describes them, monster. The term monster is derived from the French word “monstrer,” which means “to demonstrate.” I will use this etymology to suggest that monsters demonstrate or show us something about ourselves that we would rather not see, but that is important to see.

The overall argument I will make is not to say that these women are not monsters in some way. Instead, I will argue that these characters demonstrate the fact that a monster does not have to be purely evil, and that the monster character often commits her monstrous act as a means to gain or regain power. Monster classification is not as simple as the concept of good versus bad. Instead, these definitions suggest that a literary monster is not a member of a homogenous group of evil beings, but in fact are a group of hybrid, powerful characters. Through this approach, I hope to discover what is at the core of the female matriarchal monster, and what underlying commonality firmly connects Grendel’s mother, Mina Harker and Sethe.

Chapter 1

Grendel's mother is one of the most unfairly typified villains in all of literature. Traditional scholarship on the topic of Grendel and his mother commonly assumes their monstrosity. I will take a different approach and question what I find to be a shallow judgment of Grendel's mother. Rather than attempting to justify her actions, although I will argue that they are not purely evil, I will instead demonstrate the importance of her monstrosity as a foundation for power within the creation of a community. I will shed light on the potential arguments against her monstrosity but, more importantly, I will examine what the *Beowulf* poet hoped "to show" or "to warn" through Grendel's mother. The monstrous act for which she is persecuted is the murder of Esher, the man who killed her son, Grendel. However, the cultural context of the poem forces the viewing of this action from a different perspective. I will argue that Grendel's mother, rather than being a cold-blooded killer, was instead participating in a blood feud, a common practice of the time. As evidence that Grendel's mother's actions cannot be seen as wholly negative and vicious, I will present her narrative description within the poem, her lineage, and her maternal instinct. I will argue that Grendel's mother's monstrosity results from three problems: a disregard for her creation of a community much like that of the Danes, biased translations referencing her character and strength, and, finally, translations based on gender prejudice. Further, I will suggest that Grendel's mother is subtly portrayed as heroically as the poem's protagonist, Beowulf. Finally, I demonstrate the purpose of Grendel's mother as a mode to obtain power amidst the problems previously noted.

The first problem I will address is that scholars may have overlooked an important societal structure within the poem. According to the definition of the literary

monster and the conventions of the term, it is common for any monster, male or female, to be portrayed in isolation from civilized society. This is the first aspect of the monster definition that she defies. This claim of separation from the definition is not as clear-cut as it initially sounds, however. To some degree, Grendel's mother is indeed a member of a society separate from the Danes. For example, the two do not mingle or trade. They exist in resistance to the other. The "society" that she creates consists of her small family unit which is cognizant of two specific traditions of the Danes, thus illustrating a connection between the two communities. Grendel's mother's interaction with the Danes creates a larger community comprised of both societies in interaction, even if that interaction is marked by violence and warfare.

The first Danish tradition that both the Danes and Grendel's mother share is the importance placed on heritage and ancestry. The editor of my particular edition, Burton Raffel, emphasized the importance of lineage in the inclusion of a chart of Danish genealogy following the poem. This genealogy illustrates the passing down of kingly power. The genealogy provided at the conclusion shows the royal name being passed down from Shild to Beo to Healfdane and, finally, to the current king, Hrothgar (Raffel 139). The relationship between father and son was crucial to the maintenance of the Danish family, specifically those families with royal heritage. In his article entitled, "Blood and Deeds: The Inheritance Systems in 'Beowulf,'" Michael D.C. Drout presents the morphing tradition of Danish lineage from inheritance by blood to inheritance by deeds as presented in Beowulf. The morphing tradition of inheritance is exemplified in Hrothgar's decision to "adopt" Beowulf as his own son and ordain him as king, despite the fact that he already had two sons, Hrethric and Hrothmund. Drout argues,

Inheritance by blood is a familiar idea; under this system, power and identity passes along the line of genetic descent, from father to son. Inheritance by deeds is a more nebulous concept but is epitomized by Hrothgar's attempt to nominate Beowulf as successor: the hero's deeds, rather than his lineage, allow him to be identified as a potential heir. (Drout 202)

For the purpose of my argument, the most significant piece of this excerpt is the evidence that it provides that affirms the Danes' tradition of power in heritage. Although the transition that it suggests is important to the poem, it is more important here to note that the transition was one not taken lightly. The tradition of family was longstanding and the interference that Beowulf posed rudely interrupted the custom. The society of Grendel and his mother, although much less exposed, carries the same value of familial heritage. If Grendel's mother is to be seen as a matriarch of a community much smaller than that of the Danes, a group consisting of just her and her son, then it is fair to assume that she would fear a breakdown within her family heritage, just as a king of the Danes might. The murder of her son threatened further existence of the very community she led.

The second Danish tradition which was arguably also a tradition of Grendel's mother's society is their reaction to a specific breakdown of family: death. The Danish society has two definite ways in which a family copes with the death of a member. The first is the collection of "weregild" (Raffel). A weregild represents a quantitative value of the dead person's life. This resolution is the most civil and humane of the two. The second was a blood feud, which coincides with an "eye for an eye" mentality. Murder is punishable by death and vengeance is an acceptable way to cope with the murder or manslaughter of a family member. According to "Anglo-Saxon Law" by Frederick Pollock, "A man's kindred are his avengers; and, as it is their right to honor and avenge him, so it is their duty to make amends for his misdeeds, or else maintain his cause in

fight” (Pollock 244). The battle between Grendel and the Danes, and also the Geats once Beowulf enters the story, is a blood-feud. Night after night, Grendel viciously murders the Danes in Herot, the mead hall. Beowulf, a Geat, hears of the monster attacking the mead hall and decides to use his might and bravery to serve as a mercenary for the Danes. Because Grendel does not offer a weregild for the lives he has taken, both Beowulf and the Danish society see their only option as development of the blood feud. Beowulf sustains the traditional custom and thus kills Grendel.

Following the murder of her only son, Grendel’s mother seeks vengeance against the Danes and murders Esher, a Danish nobleman who is also one of King Hrothgar’s closest friends. Naturally, the blood feud continues and she is eventually killed by Beowulf just as her son was. Thus, Beowulf and Grendel’s mother commit virtually the same crime, except Grendel’s mother commits hers on behalf of her son rather than on behalf of a fellow comrade. Through her participation in the back-and-forth actions and reactions between the two feuding parties, Grendel’s mother becomes an active member in Germanic society. Therefore, she holds just as much of a role in society as Beowulf does. When Grendel’s mother’s actions are justified in the way I have just portrayed, she can be seen in a very different light. Instead of a monstrous character who represents the “other” in the poem, Grendel’s mother becomes the matriarch of a conflicting society to the Danes.

The second problem I will confront stems from a factor completely out of the control of both Grendel’s mother and her creator. The bulk of assumptions about her character rely on the supposed word choice of the *Beowulf*-poet. However, in reality, the word choice of the poem actually depends on the decisions of those who have translated

it. Much of the literature written on the epic poem questions the intended meaning of the *Beowulf* poet that has, over time, been lost in translation. These misconceptions of Old English terminology can be found in the case of both Grendel and his mother. Signe M. Carlson suggests that there are various adaptations of the poem because some translators choose to “footnote” words as meaning one thing while others decide they meant something very different (357, 358). This inconsistency in translation leads to variations in identifying Grendel’s mother’s character.

Carlson gives a variety of examples to prove that things may not always be as they appear when it comes to monsters in literature. Although some apply strictly to Grendel, they further solidify my argument that translations of the poem are based on the translators own opinions. For example, the word *feond* to describe Grendel is translated by some to mean “devil,” “Satan” or other demonic connotations. On the other hand, many translators simply decided it meant “enemy.” These connotations directly alter the portrayal of Grendel as being an actual monster. Carlson states,

The fact that “fiend” is a modern derivative of *feond* does little to recommend it as an accurate meaning of the Old English word and its association with the Satan or Devil of the Christian faith makes it unacceptable in reference to a pre-Christian figure. Therefore, it seems that the interpretation of *feond* as ‘fiend’ must be replaced by the translation ‘enemy’ (‘foe,’ ‘adversary’), if we are to trace the origin and true nature of the folktale Grendel. (359)

Carlson also notes that translations exist in which Grendel is described using the word “monster” when it seems that actually they should use words such as “titan” or “troll,” thus exuding a very different persona (359). Carlson is the first of several skeptics of the mother-as-monster argument which I will introduce. As a community of scholars, they

seem to hold a common fear: that Grendel's mother was not actually intended to be interpreted as a monster, but simply an opposing force to the almighty Beowulf.

John D. Niles asserts his concerns with *Beowulf* translations in his article, "Rewriting *Beowulf*: The Task of Translation." He affirms the previously stated concern of bias and the idea of translation as a matter of opinion rather than concrete evidence (Niles 859). He does not view the problem with translation as completely negative, though. Instead he sees Old English translations as "healthy controversies" to continue (Niles 859). Niles proposes that "readers of any translation are advised to take it as an imaginative reconstruction" (Niles 859). Although this statement seems to discredit much of the translation that has been conducted, I do not believe that to be its purpose. I argue that Niles is begging the reader of *Beowulf* to recognize that an Old English story has the potential to be, in a sense, rewritten so as to entertain. Thus, because it would be much more entertaining to view Grendel's mother as a villain whose evil could not withstand the goodness of Beowulf, it seems in the best interest of a translator to portray her as such.

The most commonly referenced point of support for those who agree that Grendel's mother is not actually a monster is the term used by the *Beowulf* poet, *ides aglacwif*. In his article entitled, "*Beowulf* 1259a: The Inherent Nobility of Grendel's Mother," Keith P. Taylor illustrates that, "by referring to Grendel's mother as *ides aglacwif*, the *Beowulf*-poet emphasizes not the physical monstrosity, but the inherent nobility of Grendel's mother" (14). This terminology must be broken down into three terms: *ides*, *aglaeca* and *wif*. The term *ides* translates to "lady" (Taylor 15). According to Taylor, the combination of *aclaeca* and *wif* translates to warrior-woman (15). The

distinction between female and woman suggests that not only is Grendel's mother a female, but she is also a human woman. Although translators have transformed this phrase to mean "evil fiend woman" and other such interpretations, the truth is in the etymology. Taylor emphasizes one other description that helps us as readers to fully characterize this "warrior-woman":

Before she is called *ides aglaecwif* in verse 1259a of *Beowulf*, Grendel's mother is mentioned only twice by the *Beowulf*-poet, once at verse 1256b of the text, in which she is called *wrecend*, "avenger," and again at verse 1258b of the poem, where she is named as *Grendles modor*. Certainly, at the moment that Grendel's mother is called *ides aglaecwif* by the *Beowulf*-poet, there is no information available to the audience of *Beowulf* to indicate that Grendel's mother is an inherently evil creature; on the contrary, other than the fact that she is to be an "avenger," the only information recoverable to the audience of concerning Grendel's mother is that she is in fact Grendel's mother and as such must be both a woman and an *aglaeca*. (20)

The term "avenger" that Taylor translates directly correlates to the blood feuds mentioned previously. If avenging another's death was accepted, then Grendel's mother cannot be accused of murder. From these studies of Old English vocabulary, I assert that the only viable terms that the *Beowulf* poet may have actually used to describe Grendel's mother are "avenger," "noble," "female," "warrior" and "woman." These adjectives do follow one of the definitions of "monster" in that they describe a creature that is made up of many pieces and parts. However, in this situation, Grendel's mother challenges the definition that suggests that the combination of parts that make up such a character must indeed be evil. Instead, the sum of all the parts, rather than being horrific, could just be foreign to the society judging it, as in Grendel's mother's case. She challenges the mother figure that *Beowulf*'s society accepted as normal. To this society, her masculine qualities were seen as flaws, rather than as the strengths that made her powerful.

In order to provide evidence for the varying, biased terminology I have mentioned, I will use examples from four *Beowulf* translations, following the guidance of Christine Alfano in “The Issue of Feminine Monstrosity: A Reevaluation of Grendel’s Mother.” I will use the Old English version of *Beowulf* provided by Georgetown University to compare translations of lines 1258-1259. In Old English, the lines read, “Grendles modor,/ ides, aglæcwif, yrmþe gemunde” (Georgetown University). The version that I have used in my research thus far, that of Burton Raffel, translates these lines as “She’d brooded on her loss, misery had brewed/ In her heart, that female horror, Grendel’s/ Mother” (Raffel 1258-1260). A second version as presented by Alfano is translated by Michael Alexander in *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*. It reads “Grendel’s mother herself, a monstrous ogress,/ was ailing for her loss” (Alexander 1258-1259). A final example of several proposed by Alfano is translated by Marijane Osborn. It reads, “The demon’s mother, a witch of the sea,/ resenting her sorrow” (Osborn 1258-1259). This collection of translations demonstrates accurately the inconsistent nature of *Beowulf* translation. It proves that varying versions are indeed the result of personal preference, rather than concrete etymology.

Alfano delves deeper into Grendel’s mother’s misinterpretations and confronts her physical description as well. In yet another direct comparison with *Beowulf*, Grendel’s mother is analyzed by many scholars within the scene of *Beowulf*’s arrival to Grendel’s mother’s home. The Burton Raffel version states, “She welcomed him in her claws,/ Clutched at him savagely but could not harm him,/ Tried to work her fingers through the tight/ Ring-woven mail on his breast” (1501-1504). My initial problem with this translation is that at one point in the excerpt, Raffel refers to Grendel’s mother’s

hands as “claws,” and then suddenly calls them “fingers.” In so doing, Raffel creates a mysterious physical identity for Grendel’s mother. Alfano notes the double-standard in Grendel’s mother’s grip being of “claws” just because it is strong, while Beowulf’s strength is never dehumanized (Alfano 3). This observation hints at a gender double-standard that will be demonstrated later. However, for the purpose of my argument against poor translation, it is important to note Alfano’s assertion that a proper translation from the original *atolan clommum* would be “terrible grip or grasp, rather than “claws” found in Raffel’s version (Alfano 3).

Now that I have addressed the blood feud and several questionable translations, I would like to quash one of the age-old reasons that Grendel’s mother is labeled as a monster. The *Beowulf*-poet traces Grendel’s lineage back to Cain, the son of Adam and Eve and murderer of his brother, Abel. In Burton Raffel’s translation of the poem, Grendel is referred to as a member of “a race of fiends accursed like their father” (Raffel 1266). The poet is deliberate in his or her connection between Cain and Grendel. This could be because Cain was and still is considered an evil human. Defending Grendel’s actions falls outside the scope of this project; therefore, my defense will consistently be for Grendel’s mother. The only connection between Cain and Grendel’s mother that the poet draws is that she is “living in the murky cold lake assigned her since Cain had killed his only Brother” (Raffel 1260-1262). Thus, it is clear that Grendel’s family has been forced to reside in the lake since Cain’s monstrous act. The poet does not say, though, that Grendel’s mother is a blood relation to Cain. Although her son may have descended from him, since children descend from two parts, there is no textual proof that she did as well. In her essay, “We’ve Created a Monster: The Strange Case of Grendel’s Mother,”

M. Wendy Hennequin asserts further that it is never explicitly stated that Grendel's mother originates from the genealogy of Cain (514-5). Therefore, any blood relation to Cain is impossible to prove. It is important to note also that the connection that is illustrated in Grendel's relation to Cain roots Grendel's mother in a very human situation, a family unit. Although her genealogy may not link her to Cain, her son's roots connect her to a larger community of humans. Further, her interactions through blood feuds with the Danes, who are all human, firmly connect her with human deeds.

The third and final problem that I will confront is the gender prejudice that Grendel's mother faces. In her essay, "Beyond Abjection: The Problem with Grendel's Mother Again," Renee R. Trilling poses the challenge that Grendel's mother presents to the monster definition in saying, "As a monster in the heroic order, and as a female in a masculine world, she confounds simple definitions and crosses the boundaries that define the limits of agency" (Trilling 1). Trilling remarks on the complexity of Grendel's mother's character within the context of a world of competing femininity and masculinity. As asserted previously, the community of the Danes was directed and maintained by men. Simply by being a female matriarch of her own community, Grendel's mother challenges preconceived notions of femininity, thus wrongfully casting her as a being not fit for society.

Much of Grendel's mother's masculinity is rooted in the scene of the poem when she raids Herot:

So she reached Herot/
Where the Danes slept as though already dead;/
Her visit ended their good fortune, reversed/
The bright vane of their luck./
No female, no matter/
How fierce, could have come with a man's strength,/
Fought with the power and courage men fight with,/
Smashing their shining swords, their bloody,/

Hammer-forged blades onto boar-headed helmets,/ Slashing and stabbing with the sharpest of points. (Raffel 1279-1287)

In describing the horrific attack, the poet immediately confronts Grendel's mother's gender as the most horrifying factor, rather than the attack itself. Even before describing the violence that ensued, the poet emphasized the fact that Grendel's mother's might was equivalent to that of a man, which must have frightened the Danes. In her article, "The Social Centrality of Women in Beowulf: A New Context," Dorothy Carr Porter addresses the apparent attention that the poet paid to Grendel's mother's gender. She points to this scene and suggests that Grendel's mother's monstrous reputation may be derived from the fact that she seems to be a "hardier" opponent than her son was (Porter 4). Yet again, Grendel's mother is being compared to a male character in an attempt to define her. As a result of her unconventional strength and power, I argue that any alienation that exists between her community and that of the Danes is deeply rooted in her rejection of the accepted norms of women at the time.

I have suggested previously that Grendel's mother should possibly be regarded as a hero of the poem. My logic is based on a comparison to the poem's widely accepted hero, Beowulf. They are both incredibly strong and powerful characters fighting for the preservation of their respective communities. Carolyn Anderson proposes that the men of Beowulf never face consequences for the murders they commit in the way that Grendel's mother does (Anderson 2). She utilizes gender as the root of this double-standard in saying, "For example, Beowulf avenges Esher's death, and the deaths of all those who have died at the hands of Grendel, and this is the mark of a hero" (3). Grendel's mother participates in the blood feud just as Beowulf does and, in a way, in a

more justifiable manner as Grendel is her son and her only known descendent. Thus it seems that Grendel's mother's very motherhood blankets the potential for universal heroic consideration.

Stemming from her femininity is Grendel's mother's maternity. In explaining why exactly the maternal aspect of Grendel's mother is important, I will outline a character analysis which my evidence has produced. Grendel's mother is a noble woman. She possesses great strength—strength associated with masculinity—but does not necessarily descend from any evil being. She lives within the confines of a society that accepts revenge as a form of closure upon the loss of life, yet finds herself as the matriarch of a community all her own. The major role that she plays within the poem is that she kills Esher in reaction to him murdering her son. The poet says that, following the death of Grendel, “a monster still lived, and meant revenge. She'd brooded on her loss, misery had brewed in her heart, that female horror” (Raffel 1257-1260). If the term “monster” were removed from these lines and replaced with, say, “mother,” these lines would do no more than describe the emotion that any mother must feel after the loss of a child. Furthermore, this translation is thought-provoking in its inclusion of the last three words, “that female horror.” The object that this phrase modifies is unclear. It is possible that the translator wishes it refer to the “monster.” However, it is also possible that it refers to her “heart,” thus suggesting that the maternal heart may be horrific in that a mother will go to great lengths for her offspring. The possibilities demonstrated within this analysis contrast those that see Grendel's mother as a heartless monster.

In keeping with the importance of Grendel's mother's maternity, I find it incredibly significant that the poet does not assign this character a name. Her own

identity as an individual is overlooked by the importance of identifying her as someone's mother. Although this may seem insignificant to some readers, it is undeniable that naming and lack of naming are direct and deliberate in literature. Her lack of a name must be taken into account when analyzing what the *Beowulf* poet wanted his or her reader to gather from her character.

Through my presentation of three overarching problems I see in the reputation given to Grendel's mother, her creation of a society very much connected to the Danes, mistranslations in the text, and gender prejudice, I have shown a different side of this character. The evidence I have provided has at the very least shed light on holes within some of the "strongest" arguments for Grendel's mother's monstrosity: the murder of Esher, her supposed physical description, and her lineage from Cain. I have demystified her and portrayed her as who she really is: a woman mourning the loss of her son who, rather than excluding herself from the society surrounding her, participates actively by continuing a blood feud. Furthermore, I have acknowledged her femininity and motherhood as contributing factors in her centuries-long reputation as a monster. I have attempted to come to her defense, possibly too late, but nevertheless with sturdy evidence that cannot be ignored. In regard to the translations, rather than disproving other possible translations which would be unfair, I have simply shown the gaping holes in the longstanding accepted word usage. If I have not disproved Grendel's mother's prior misconceptions outright, I argue that I have at the very least shown their logical flaws. Most important, I have explored what I believe the *Beowulf* poet was attempting to demonstrate through Grendel's mother's character: that a female mother who possessed masculine qualities was deemed evil solely based on her gender. The power that she

possessed challenged the power that a woman was supposed to possess and, thus, she became something that the Danes could not identify, a monster.

Chapter Two

Centuries after the literary debut of Grendel's mother, Bram Stoker introduced a new breed of matriarchal monster, the vampire. *Dracula*, initially published in 1897, has been dubbed by many literary critics to be the original horror classic. It is a reasonable assumption that those same critics would agree that the vampire creature would indeed be classified as a "monster," by the definition I have introduced. In this chapter, I will discuss the prominent female character of *Dracula*, Mina Murray. At the onset of the story, she is the fiancée of Jonathan Harker. Through her relationship with Jonathan, Mina is dragged into a supernatural whirlwind of murderous and evil events brought on by a vampire named Count Dracula. She is the only woman among five men who, following the death of Mina's dear friend Lucy, devote their time to bringing Dracula to his demise. I will argue that Stoker obscures the line between good and evil to question the authenticity of a villain's monstrosity through Mina's character in order to achieve three objectives. First, he uses Mina as a symbol of infusing the monstrous into a woman as a means of granting her power that she would not have acquired otherwise as a result of gender prejudice. Second, he allows Mina to exert her importance to the group as the maternal figure who nourishes the band of male vampire hunters, whom I will argue are representative of a larger concept of nation. Third and finally, he asserts his skepticism of the monster definition in creating Mina's monstrosity as the very thing that leads to Dracula's death.

Count Dracula is the antagonist of the novel and the consummate example of the aforementioned definition of a monster. He is mythical, inhuman, frightening and

wicked. His villainous nature is justly assigned. Led by Van Helsing, the band of male vampire hunters whose diaries narrate the novel are portrayed in contrast with Dracula's monstrosity. They are referred to as the "Crew of Light." Each is stricken with his own internal battles, ranging from drug addiction to hysteria, which is contrasted with their good intentions to kill Dracula combined and their valor as a team. It is important to note, though, that as they are attempting to fulfill the bravery asked of the male figure, they ultimately objectify Mina and strip her of power, calling to question their goodness.

Throughout most of the novel, Mina conforms to a classic Victorian model of pure womanhood. Van Helsing gives testimony to her character in saying, "She is one of God's women, fashioned by His own hand to show us men and other women that there is a heaven we can enter, and that its light can be here on earth" (Stoker 226). Mina, however, is bitten by Dracula and forced to drink his blood, thus beginning her transformation to vampirism. Upon aiding Jonathan, Van Helsing, Dr. Seward, Quincey Murray and Arthur Holmwood in the hunt for and murder of Dracula, she is presumably healed of all vampire characteristics.

The importance in this brief summary of the novel is to extract what is at stake in Stoker's decision to transform the novel's most seemingly virtuous character into a monster, who is a woman. Stoker uses Mina as an experiment in the advantages a female could be endowed with by losing some of that perceived "purity" and, in turn, gaining power. Christopher Craft notes Stoker's initial deliberate portrayal of Mina as the ideal woman in the eyes of the male characters (Craft 117). Thus, Mina originally appears to uphold Victorian masculine standards of the perfect, pure woman. Craft asserts that Van Helsing's religious reference to Mina transforms her into a "stable sign or symbol

performing a fixed and comfortable function within a masculine sign system” (Craft 118). Craft defines this sign system as, “the process by which women are construed as signs determined by the interpretive imperatives of authorizing males” (118). The first thing to be noted from Craft’s assessment is that Stoker represents Mina as a product of the male desire. She, as a representative of all Victorian women, is nothing more than a thing to be instructed and watched. The males gave her certain roles and duties within this sign system and, ideally, the Victorian woman is expected to oblige. Although she does not completely sever ties with this expected persona, Mina challenges the expectations.

The majority of investigation into Mina’s character has been done in regard to her struggle with both resisting and conforming to Victorian society and the “New Woman.” Her desire to be a proper Victorian lady insists that she be both a wife and mother. At the same time, though, because of a subtle and often stifled, but nonetheless powerful desire to be seen as equal to Jonathan, especially through her employment as an assistant schoolmistress and her desire to learn how to use the typewriter, I do think that Mina pressed the limits of the average Victorian woman. This conflict is what defines her as such a dynamic leading lady.

Charles E. Prescott, author of several articles on literary monsters, explores the duality of Mina as an example of the pure Victorian woman and the “New Woman” that was emerging in Victorian society. Prescott writes, “She frequently casts herself as the assistant schoolmistress of etiquette, the devoted helpmate of Jonathan Harker, and the compassionate, maternal shoulder that “manly” men turn to when overcome by emotion” (Prescott 488). This identity she adopts exemplifies the challenge that she poses to

society. For example, the last portion of Prescott's excerpt describes Mina as having a "maternal shoulder." The Victorian woman was expected to bear children and raise them well, and Mina fit that role yet, at the same time, Mina's career indicates her success as a self-made Victorian woman. It suggests that she does not come from an affluent Victorian family and that her career is the product of hard work, which is not to be expected of a woman at the time. The significance of this aspect of her life is that Mina possesses the potential to be a powerful female figure. She does not hope to merely fulfill the expectations of a Victorian wife, but instead to exceed them by proving her strength as comparable to that of a male.

Stoker's exposure of the dichotomy of Mina's character is apparent in her dismissal from the group of vampire hunters even though she had been of great help to them as a record keeper. Van Helsing exclaims that even though Mina possesses a "man's brain," her womanly heart puts her at a disadvantage in the search for Count Dracula, thus blaming her womanhood fully for her rejection (Stoker 256). Van Helsing's logic is a reflection of the male attitude toward women at the time. He states,

We men are determined—nay, are we not pledged?—to destroy this monster; but it is no part for a woman. Even if she be not harmed, her heart may fail her in so much and so many horrors; and hereafter she may suffer—both in waking, from her nerves, and in sleep, from her dreams. (Stoker 256)

Van Helsing first suggests that because Mina is a woman, she would not be brave enough to handle such a situation. Through undermining her gender, he questions her dedication to the goals of the group. Further, he suggests that even if she is left physically unscathed, the horror of the event will be too much for her soul to bear. It is unsettling that Van Helsing thought Mina, the editor of the entire adventure who must be credited

for the record keeping of the group, to be a woman unable to cope with Dracula to the same degree to which a man would be able. Through her participation in the group, she has proven herself to hold equal significance up to this point. Ironically, Van Helsing's refusal to risk Dracula damaging Mina in any way is the very thing that leads to her harm.

Mina's reaction to her dismissal is anything but positive. She describes it as "a bitter pill to swallow" and explains that, at the thought of being left out, her "heart begins to fail" (Stoker 264). Despite her resentment in the group's decision, she succumbs to their wishes and states, "I could say nothing, save to accept their chivalrous care of me" (Stoker 264). Mina's words of acceptance contradict her dissatisfaction. She writes, "And now I am crying like a silly fool, when I know it comes from my husband's great love..." (Stoker 279-280). It went against Mina's nature to attribute this prejudice as chivalrous, but she recognized her limitations as a woman and recognized that the actions of the men don't just stem from their love of her.

The group is made vulnerable by the loss of Mina's involvement in the vampire hunt, therefore having the opposite outcome of Van Helsing's intentions. Dracula attacks Mina in her sleep by drinking her blood and forcing her to drink his. The attack forms a spiritual connection between the two. Luckily, the men intercede and fend off Dracula by revealing a sacred wafer. It is too late, though, and Mina begins to slowly lose physical strength as she progressively transforms into a vampire. Stoker is deliberate in this chronology of events. As soon as Mina's power is taken away, the group is compromised.

Dracula's attack disables Mina's health, but paradoxically enables her ability to contribute to the group, thus giving her power. Mina is able to use her supernatural

connection with Dracula to aid the men in the hunt to kill him, rather than to commit any act of evil. She offers the opportunity to use this connection to track him by requesting that Dr. Van Helsing hypnotize her and ask her where Dracula wishes she come to him.

Van Helsing reports to the other men upon embarking on their journey to kill Dracula:

We have now to deal with a new factor: Madam Mina. Oh, but her soul is true. It is to her an agony to tell us so much as she has done; but it is most right, and we are warned in time. (Stoker 357)

Despite the agony that it may cause for the monster that is slowly taking over her soul, she reports to the men everything she sees, such as the onward motion of his ship (Stoker 364). Thus, Stoker infuses Mina with a monster in order to give her comparable authority and power to the men in the group, very much complicating her categorization as a monster, as a monster exhibits “extreme cruelty or wickedness” (“Monster”).

The maternal aspect of Mina’s personality is what allows her to be analyzed as a matriarchal monster despite her lack of offspring until the end of the novel. Mina’s maternal nature is very much present in her friendship with Lucy Westenra, her dearest friend who is fatally harmed by Dracula’s bite. Mina is dedicated to Lucy’s recovery and well-being until her ultimate demise. Stoker foreshadows Mina’s impending motherhood not only through her personality, but also through the way the other characters describe her. During Mina and Van Helsing’s first meeting in person, Van Helsing praises Mina for her overall loveliness. He exalts Mina as a woman whose life “may make good lesson for the children that are to be” (Stoker 201). From this small comment in their conversation, Van Helsing insinuates the necessity of such a noble character as Mina to become a mother. Mina fulfills his belief in the final chapter, which is a note written by Jonathan Harker seven years after the death of Dracula. He explains that he and Mina

have a young son named Quincey. Jonathan records, “His bundle of names links all our little band of men together, but we call him Quincey” (Stoker 413). Mina’s son’s identity is a reflection of the identities within the group, which is not just a heartwarming sentiment on Stoker’s part. Mina is unique from the other two maternal monsters in that her motherhood has an abstract nature. Although she does eventually become a mother to baby Quincey, I will argue that her classification as a maternal monster is due to the matriarchal position she serves within the band of men.

Mina exhibits her maternal strength to one particular member of the band after Lucy’s death, Lucy’s fiancé. Arthur Holmwood expresses his overwhelming grief for the loss of his beloved in a scene of hysterical, agonizing fits of tears. Mina states, “With a sob he laid his head on my shoulder and cried like a wearied child, whilst he shook with emotion” (Stoker 250). Mina provides for Arthur what no other member of the group seems to be able to provide: comfort. She continues to nourish them in their distress even after she is ostracized from the group. She is aware that she is being left behind, yet she is not resentful solely because of her isolation. Instead, her maternal nature bears itself as she recalls, “Man-like, they had told me to go to bed and sleep; as if a woman can sleep when those she loves are in danger!” (Stoker 264). It is notable that Mina feels such strong emotion toward a group of men who she does not share an incredibly deep connection with, excluding Jonathan.

Mina’s love for this hodgepodge assembly of men directs me to my argument for her maternal position within the group. Physical placement of characters is very important to Stoker. The six men originate from various geographic regions ranging from Texas to Germany, yet they form a cohesive group in England sustained and

nurtured by Mina's maternal temperament. I propose that Stoker utilizes Count Dracula as a character in opposition to Mina's group. Mina recounts his speech to her in a dream:

And so you, like the others, would play your brains against mine. You would help these men to hunt me and frustrate me in my designs! You know now, and they know in part already, and will know in full before long what it is to cross my path. They should have kept their energies for use closer to home. (Stoker 314)

This excerpt demonstrates the isolation that Dracula faces as the "Other" within the novel. He reveals his recognition that this group may have over him. He counteracts their threat with one of his own, suggesting that they will be punished if they do not leave him out of their plot to rid vampirism and monstrous evil.

Judith Halberstam further supplements the claim that Dracula is the "Other" in conflict with the community sustained by Mina. She writes,

But the otherness that Dracula embodies is not timeless or universal, not the opposite of some commonly understood meaning of "the human"; the others Dracula has absorbed and who live on in him take on the historically specific contours of race, class, gender, and sexuality. They are the other side of a national identity that in the 1890s coincided with a hegemonic ideal of bourgeois Victorian womanhood. (Halberstom 335).

Specifically, Halberstam contrasts Dracula with a characteristic describing Mina, Victorian womanhood. The irony in this contrast is that the two sides are connected at the very core of themselves, through their blood. In this claim, Halberstom suggests that the group of humans and the "other," Dracula, coalesce as a community in opposition to the homogeneity of Victorian society. As a result of the blood transfusions given to Lucy using the blood of the men, Dracula contains the blood of each man within himself. After being bitten by Dracula, Mina is then transfused with the blood of her comrades. In the end, each identity which contributed blood to these connected communities is combined with the rest in the creation of Mina and Jonathan's son. Therefore, Mina's very

motherhood is monstrous in that it is the culmination of the monstrous act of the vampire bite. Mina is threatening to the Victorian ideal because, through her maternity, she creates a “hybrid breed” consisting of not only Dracula, but also the different nations, classes and sexualities of the “Band of Light.”

Mina’s monstrosity is the impetus which allows the vampire hunters to kill Dracula and put an end to the horror he has caused. This being said, the problem that this causes in identifying her as a completely evil monster becomes frustrating. The evil that invaded her body gave the group the power to defeat Dracula. I previously stated that I would argue that much of the motivations behind these three women committing “monstrous” acts are for the protection of their children. In Mina’s case, I believe her motivation stemmed from the protection of her ability to have a child, or children, and fulfill her responsibility as a woman. Following the scene of Arthur Holmwood’s outbreak of grief and hysterics, Mina states, “I felt this big sorrowing man’s head resting on me, as though it were that of the baby that some day may lie on my bosom” (Stoker 250). Stoker uses this reflection as foreshadowing for the baby that Mina will one day bear, the baby that she must protect by sustaining her mortality.

In the final paragraph of the novel, Van Helsing pronounces, “This boy [Quincey] will some day know what a brave and gallant woman his mother is” (Stoker 414). This statement describes Mina in that dual role; she is both a mother to Quincey and a woman who possesses qualities that would not normally be assigned to the Victorian woman. I argue that this is the moment when Van Helsing’s finally acknowledges Mina as a woman with the power of a man.

Following my analysis of Stoker's three objectives that I have proposed, I will finally portray the challenge that Mina Harker provides with the aforementioned definition of "monster." I have identified that the accepted definition of "monster" requires a character that may be of supernatural form or appearance, or one who "exhibits extreme cruelty or wickedness" ("Monster"). Although Mina does fulfill the requirement of the supernatural, she in no way fulfills the second part of this accepted definition. Mina is an example of a character who is trapped in the shell of a monster, a vampire, but who does not comply with the expected behavior of the monster. Thus, a major portion of my defense against the entirety of this definition is her willingness to become a vampire. After she is attacked by Dracula and forced to drink his blood, Mina makes the pivotal transformation from a pure paradigm of the proper Victorian woman to a creature that is tarnished by the evil of vampirism and yet simultaneously and conversely capable of acting with great good for the benefit of the group, a dichotomy that Stoker produces solely to obscure the line between good and evil.

Although Mina does indeed begin the evolution into vampirism, she resists the conversion that has been forced upon her and even requests that the men destroy her should she transform. Dr. Seward, the doctor at the asylum in which much of the story is set, recounts Mina's speech to the men telling them her wishes in regard to her current transformation. Mina explains, "There is poison in my blood, in my soul, which may destroy me; which must destroy me, unless some relief comes to us" (360). From this statement it is made clear that Mina recognizes the monster taking over her body. She separates herself from that monster, though, when she says that it is taking over her, confirming that the two are separate entities in her mind. Toward the end of the hunt for

Dracula, Dr. Seward describes Mina's condition in saying, "She was looking thin and pale and weak; but her eyes were pure and glowed with fervour" (Stoker 405). Although the poison that had entered her body was physically draining Mina of life, she mentally remained true to her untainted, good self. Thus, Mina Murray Harker does not wholly fulfill the traits outlined in the definition of the monster.

Again, it is important to emphasize that when Mina allowed the qualities of the vampire to consume her body, it was only for the benefit of the search for Dracula. Her supernatural connection to him allowed her to act as a medium for the group. Stoker uses Mina's monstrosity as the only solution to her loss of power due to gender. Mina's heroic value is seen in her choice to work as an aid to destroy Dracula, rather than as another vampire to join him.

If a "monster" by the accepted definition must be "a person of repulsively unnatural character, or exhibiting such extreme cruelty or wickedness as to appear inhuman; a monstrous example *of* evil, a vice, etc.," then, after careful consideration, it seems utterly absurd to classify the pure womanly heart and valiant manly intentions of Mina Harker strictly as monstrous ("Monster"). Instead, Mina becomes heroic. Stoker's intentions in infusing Mina with vampire blood may not have been to add to the catalog of literary monsters present throughout the novel. Instead, he may have used her character to force the questioning of what actually constitutes a monster. She was certainly undergoing the transformation into a vampire, which is a monster indeed. However, the conditions of her transformation should exempt her from identification as such. Mina is not a monster, but is instead a representation of the limitations of a Victorian woman. Stoker infuses her with the blood of a monster as a demonstration of

the means a woman had to undertake to be granted any legitimate type of power. Furthermore, Mina's maternal nature over the crew of vampire hunters is proof of her power as a mother both to form a community and to deconstruct it. This community, it must be noted, is dedicated to the pursuit of goodness, despite its flaws. Stoker gives Mina a monstrous characterization to declare his skepticism that a monster who results from a struggle for power and who has the intention of sustaining good should be considered an entirely evil monster at all. Instead, he uses Mina's character as the powerful creator of a hybrid breed of human, whose blood is infused with that of a vampire and the "Band of Light." Through the birth of Quincey, the character who allows her to be considered a matriarchal monster in the first place, Mina rejects the societal norms and acts as a character that builds rather than destroys.

Chapter Three

Both the haunting flashbacks and the emotional reunions of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* are products of a centralized event, infanticide. The protagonist, Sethe, is an African American mother who kills her eldest daughter, whom she calls the "crawling already? baby," in response to the threat of her daughter's enslavement. Sethe planned to kill all four of her children and herself, but was discovered before the completion of the acts. As a mere instance taken out of the context of the novel's setting, such an act would be unintelligible. However, it is impossible to separate this decision from its circumstance. Sethe's act is monstrous, but not necessarily evil. Morrison's intentions are not to portray her as such, but, instead to challenge the mind to comprehend an unintelligible act as utterly intelligible. Much like the entirety of the novel, this "monstrous" act must first be grappled with by the deconstruction of preconceived judgments and the ensuing reconstruction of historical implications. In so doing, I will reject the character's perceptions that Sethe is a crazed animalistic monster and suggest that she is a character who instead proves to be an utterly human, utterly self-sacrificing mother. Finally, I will suggest that Sethe's infanticide is "apotropaic," meaning an action that is intended to prevent evil. Thus, Sethe's resulting behavior is reflective of the purity of her intentions.

The theme of "rememory" and patching together of events and flashbacks is woven throughout the accounts of Sethe, her youngest daughter Denver, her two sons Buglar and Howard, and her lover Paul D. Descriptions of Paul D's past reveal that he and Sethe met as slaves on the land called "Sweet Home." Sethe describes her time at sweet home as rampant with torture, rape and mistreatment. Sethe escaped from Sweet

Home prior to the infanticide. It is the arrival of the white slave driver, schoolteacher, and three other white men which forces Sethe to retreat to her backyard shed and begin killing her children.

This theme of a patchwork of memories inspired my concept of deconstructing the “monstrous act,” and later reconstructing it as an act of love. I will use a specific passage from the novel to support my claim that deconstructing and reconstructing are imperative in analyzing Sethe’s actions. On the final pages of the novel, Morrison writes:

There is a loneliness that can be rocked. Arms crossed, knees drawn up; holding, holding on, this motion, unlike a ship’s, smooths and contains the rocker. It’s inside kind—wrapped tight like skin. Then there is a loneliness that roams. No rocking can hold it down. (Morrison 323)

First and foremost, it is important to note that loneliness is present throughout the entirety of the passage. Thus, loneliness seems to be a product of infanticide outright. I view the initial action of rocking as symbolic of the deconstruction process. The single act of infanticide must be torn apart, jostled, and perceived from all angles. Rather than simply using the term “shaken” or another of the sort, I believe Morrison chooses one which also connotes an action that a mother performs for her baby. This connection with motherhood is made in the second sentence as well, when a bodily reaction is described. Such a reaction can easily be viewed as the fetal position, which is usually assumed during a state of shock, confusion, or paranoia. Dissecting the idea of the murder of a child by her mother can easily have similar effects. Additionally, the rocking action is said to “contain the rocker.” It is the “inside kind.” I have perceived both of these statements to refer to the heart. The heart is the human’s deepest core, and it figuratively

contains the very person who is performing the deconstruction. Thus, I argue that Morrison wishes the deconstruction of the infanticide to be a matter of the heart.

The transition from deconstruction to reconstruction occurs in the final two lines of the passage. Its sprawling nature denotes freedom from that shock and confusion that deconstruction causes. In deconstructing the infanticide, freedom for Sethe results; that is, freedom from guilt, criticism, and judgment. My reading of the final line is the most important and most intricate. Morrison firmly states, “No rocking can hold it down.” I read this line in a possibly unconventional manner. My view can be more clearly understood if it is read as “No[t] rocking can hold it down.” Thus, the absence of rocking is what holds freedom down, rather than the possible reading that freedom can escape the constraints of rocking. I believe Morrison uses this passage to beg for deep evaluation of infanticide, and I will now oblige.

To someone who did not live in Ohio in 1873, or who is not familiar with such a time, Sethe is a murderous, animalistic mother. To those who did live in that time but who did not share her skin color, Sethe was a murderous, animalistic African American mother. Therefore, it takes knowing Sethe’s life and circumstances on a more personal level to see her as anything but. I will argue that the reasoning for which the community within the novel classified Sethe as a monster is a direct result of her race. Consequently, the reasoning of modern scholars continuing to classify Sethe as a monster is also a direct result of her race. Modern judgment of Sethe stems from a lack of awareness of the sufferings that an African American woman faced under the bonds of slavery.

Much of Sethe’s harsh criticism by the larger American community within the novel is based upon perception, specifically white perception. Christopher Peterson claims that,

within the realm of the novel, because Sethe was African American she was already perceived to be a monster. He states, “For racist ideologues, slave infanticide is further proof of an animality inherent in black motherhood: a propensity to violence from which white motherhood is exempt” (Peterson 553). To the white people perceiving her, Sethe commits a crime that is horrendous, yet somehow expected. The result of this tragic and utterly depressing mindset is Sethe’s isolation, which lends itself to the spookiness of 124 Bluestone and the monstrous reputation that surrounds her.

The judgment that stems from this white perception is a reflection of the wild, animal-like disposition that Sethe is believed to have assumed simply by being African American. Much of the scholarship on Sethe’s character confronts the conflicting views of her humanity. Even Paul D insinuates that Sethe’s actions were inhuman. In a dialogue between the two, Sethe explains to a resistant Paul D that she knew the life of a slave and that she loved her children too much to let them go back to Sweet Home. He questions whether being killed is equivalent to returning to slavery. She confirms his questions absolutely and, still not understanding, Paul D states, ““You got two feet, Sethe, not four”” (Morrison 194). The animalistic suggestion made by a fellow African American who would have supposedly been her equal is jarring. However, it is important to remember that Paul D is not a woman and, consequently, not a mother.

According to some scholars, the savage nature of the death of the “crawling already? baby” suggests that Sethe retreats into temporary insanity in the moment when she sees schoolteacher approaching her home and takes her children to the shed to kill them. I argue that rather than fleeing into a state of insanity though, Sethe actually does

quite the opposite and comes to a logical conclusion for the safety and protection of her children. Morrison writes:

And if she thought anything it was No. No. Nonno. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carries, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. (183)

The beginning of this excerpt suggests that Sethe did not actually have to think in order to decide what was best. It was a simple decision for her. The love she has for her children is apparent in the adjectives that describe them: precious, fine and beautiful. By deciding to kill them all and herself, she is removing harm, rather than allowing it. Fuston-White supports my claim and notes that Sethe engaging in the “rememory” of this tragic event indicates a sense of rational agency and deliberate decision (464). Sethe’s decision to commit infanticide is not savage or animalistic in any sense. Instead, it is logical and deliberate. The simplicity of Sethe’s decision stems from her own harmful captivity by the four white men on horseback approaching her home: her time as a slave at Sweet Home.

Sethe was enslaved all of her life prior to escaping Sweet Home and moving to 124 Bluestone Road. Therefore, I argue that her behavior and general mindset is a direct result of those conditions, rather than a result of her ideal world. Fuston-White agrees and argues that the definition of African American humanity was a “social construction, placed in them by the inhumane and inhuman treatment they suffered at the hands of the uncivil and uncivilized white man” (467). The inhumanity that Sethe supposedly committed was a result of the inhuman, racist treatment by schoolteacher which she had experienced prior to freedom. Slavery and Sethe’s infanticide act cannot be separated.

Yet another predominant theme of *Beloved* is the act of claiming another person as property. Most explicitly, this theme is demonstrated by slavery and the ownership of an African American by a white man. Morrison parallels this ownership with that of a mother to her children. Sethe states, “Beloved, she my daughter. She mine” (Morrison 236). Sethe exercises explicit ownership over her children and their well-being. The paramount moment of her exercising this ownership is in the act of infanticide, which is perceived as monstrous. However, when the slave owner beat the slave, this was simply classified as his right. I propose a simple explanation for how the two situations realistically differ. Slavery kills as a result of pure hate. Infanticide, within the parameters of this novel, kills as a result of pure love. This discrepancy leads to one of the biggest contradictions I have uprooted in the novel: the law is allowed to claim and kill another human, yet love is not. Barbara Christian further explains this theory. She notes Morrison’s deliberate indication of the contradiction in saying, “Morrison makes it clear that while loving one’s flesh is power, one still must contend with those four horsemen, backed by the power of the law” (40). According to the law, the public sphere, Sethe is accused of being a monster for doing the very thing that the law itself allows and even promotes. By continuing the classification of her as a matriarchal mother, modern literary scholars are maintaining the tradition of unjust discrepancy.

One of my strongest arguments to end this tradition is a portrayal of the pure foundation of Sethe’s claims on her daughter. Christopher Peterson views Sethe’s claim on the “crawling already? baby” in a similar way. He states,

One of the fundamental questions that *Beloved* raises is whether there can ever be a pure ethical relation to the other, that is, whether Sethe’s maternal claim on

Beloved might not in some way repeat the master's (paternal) violence that it seeks to prevent. (551)

Sethe asserts her claim over her children as the ultimate display of her freedom. Sethe rejects the unfairness she faces by placing "the value of human life over the value of the dollar" (Heller 2). Even through her intentions to save, though, Sethe's maternal claim does repeat the violence she once faced as a slave. Beloved, or the ghost of the baby that Sethe killed, returns to Sethe as a sort of parasite which progressively sucks the life out of her. The result of her return is utterly damaging to Sethe, just as the institution she is avoiding through infanticide was.

Unlike slavery, ownership of a child does not lend itself to selfish gain or greed. Instead, it marks sacrifice, as demonstrated by Sethe's grief. In further deconstruction of the act of infanticide, I will demonstrate yet another reason why Sethe cannot be considered evil. Sethe's comments throughout the novel about motherhood and the grief she suffers following the death of her daughter are clear indicators of the purity of her intentions. Sethe describes to the returned character of Beloved her initial reaction to the death:

When I put that headstone up I wanted to lay in there with you, put your head on my shoulder and keep you warm, and I would have if Buglar and Howard and Denver didn't need me, because my mind was homeless then. (241)

This passage demonstrates not only the love she had for the daughter she killed, but also the deep love she had for her three children that remained with her. At a time when her mind felt "homeless," Sethe did not give up on her motherly duties toward her children that lived. This sacrifice during a time of deep emotional pain reflects the incredible love that Sethe had for her daughter.

Sethe also explains the love she feels towards her “crawling already? baby” as “thick love” (239). On one level, this description refers to the thickness of blood that runs through both a mother and child. On another it expresses the mighty bond of love that connected Sethe with her daughter. Morrison would not have created these references to Sethe’s deep love if she were actually a character who was evil in nature.

Further proof of Sethe’s innocence in the act of infanticide is the clear grieving process she faces following the death. Olivia McNeely Pass uses the five stages of grieving outlined by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in application to the character of Sethe (117). Pass argues that the gripping hold that the house haunted by Beloved has over Sethe “reveals the literal stranglehold that grief has on Sethe” (122). Sethe is tortured by her decision, although she remains firm in her belief that she did what was best. If Sethe committed the act of infanticide out of hatred, evil or rage, she would not have actively demonstrated the same grieving process that is assumed by any “non-monstrous” human being after the loss of a child.

My final argument for Sethe’s challenging of the classification as “matriarchal monster” is that the action of murdering the “crawling already? baby” is apotropaic, which was initially theorized by Kathleen Marks. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term as “having or reputed to have the power of averting evil influence or ill luck” (“Apotropaic”). The term is not solely literary, as it can be used to classify any object, action or intention. Sethe assumes the maternal responsibility of protecting her child from harm, despite the fact that in doing so she ends her baby’s life. Although the apotropaic quality of the infanticide is indeed debatable, I argue that Sethe absolutely viewed it as such. The scene prior to the infanticide is evidence for Sethe’s belief that

she was “averting evil influence.” Once labeled as an apotropaic action, the infanticide allows Sethe to fulfill the role of a heroic mother, rather than a monster.

Sethe struggles with reconciling the past in Beloved’s eyes. She states, “I’ll explain to her, even though I don’t have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn’t killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her” (Morrison 236).

This excerpt reveals three very important apotropaic aspects of the infanticide. First, at this very moment Sethe views the murder in a peculiar fashion: as life-giving. Initially, she is firm in her conviction that she chose the best option for her daughter. However, Beloved’s return reveals the violence that the act of infanticide required. Although Sethe’s action clearly has consequences, it is important to note that Sethe’s intentions were not to harm.

The second revelation within this excerpt appears in the Sethe’s willingness to “explain to her [Beloved].” Although in this situation the “her” to which Sethe is referring is her daughter, it should also be applied across a broader spectrum. It can be seen as a reference to the community which had rejected her. The community to which I refer is that which surrounds 124 Bluestone Road. Sethe would explain her clear decision-making process, if only given the chance. The irony of Beloved is that, however monstrous she herself may have been, and however disastrous her return, her appearance allows Sethe to reconnect with that community at the end of the novel. It is that very community that saves Sethe from the cycle of violence her infanticide has created. By the end of the novel, Beloved has progressively drained the life from Sethe, both physically and emotionally. In one of the most monumental scenes of the novel, that which Sethe finally escapes the harmful influence of Beloved, the women of the

neighborhood gather outside of 124 Bluestone Road. Morrison writes of Denver, Beloved and Sethe, “they saw the rapt faces of thirty neighborhood women. Some had their eyes closed/ others looked at the hot, cloudless sky” (Morrison 308). The women sing to Sethe in hopes of exorcising the demon that they believe Beloved to be. Their voices “broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (Morrison 308). Morrison describes an almost religious moment shared by the thirty neighborhood women, Sethe and Denver. Sethe succumbs to the power of their song and releases herself from the hand of Beloved. At the culmination of the scene, Morrison writes,

Sethe is running away from her, running, and she feels the emptiness in the hand Sethe has been holding. Now she is running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again. Then Denver, running too. Away from her to the pile of people out there. They make a hill. A hill of black people, falling. (Morrison 309)

This reconnection heals Sethe both physically, following Beloved’s harmful stay in the house, and emotionally, following the infanticide she committed.

The third revelation is made through the line, “I’ll explain to her, even though I don’t have to.” In promising an explanation, Sethe insinuates again that logic and reasoning informed her decision. Simply put, Sethe sees the unexplainable as explainable. Mad acts of insanity cannot often be elucidated, yet this act can in Sethe’s eyes. Sethe clearly and logically views her decision as apotropaic, and is willing to explain if anyone would like to listen.

As stated previously, the term “apotropaic” is applied to this infanticide by Kathleen Marks in “Toni Morrison’s Beloved and the Apotropaic Imagination.” Marks reiterates Sethe’s view of the murder as logical, deliberate, and the best option for her daughter. She explains:

Although the death itself is an arch moment of dismemberment, wherein her child's head is nearly severed by a handsaw, Sethe sees the murder as an action that is whole and complete, a 'perfect death' that succeeds in preventing her baby from living an enslaved life. (Marks 41)

The gruesome details of the murder can only be justified by the ghastly accounts of Sethe's life at Sweet Home. The act of infanticide is a resistance to the even worse act of enslavement. In noticing the encroaching white men which Sethe knew were there to return her and her family to Sweet Home, Sethe relived the torture and rape that she faced as a slave there. I argue that her apotropaic imagination compared the option of that same horrific fate for her daughter and the option of escaping while she could, and convinced Sethe to be a good mother and do the latter.

In contrast with the other two matriarchal monsters, Sethe is categorized as a monster because her monstrous act was the murder of her own baby. Sethe's story is based on a true account. I believe Morrison's goal in the portrayal of infanticide was to challenge the easy decision of casting a mother who kills her child as crazed and inhumane. Sethe's story proves that situations such as this are not necessarily black and white. She defends herself throughout the novel as a character who should be a hero, rather than a villain, because of the deep love she gives all of her children, including the one that she murdered. Her reasoning, which is very much rational, is a reflection of the apotropaic nature of all mothers. Mothers protect, even at the risk of becoming a monster in the eyes of another. Sethe's patchwork story abolishes the hasty classification of her action as evil, and properly adheres it to other literary heroic acts. Morrison demonstrates that pain that Beloved's murder caused for Sethe, and asserts that the solution to that pain was not Beloved's return, but instead the return of community in Sethe's life. Through

the murder of her child under the conditions in which she was set, Sethe demonstrates an act of valor and power, an act of pure motherly love.

Conclusion

Through my analysis of Grendel's mother, Mina Harker and Sethe, I have explored three very important characteristics of the matriarchal literary monster. I believe that my conclusions can contribute to the narrow study of this specific type of literary monster among the more vast studies of those monsters who are only female and may not be mothers. The first quality that I have discovered is that a purely evil matriarchal monster does not exist. I have disproved the notion that these women are more evil than other monsters, which is often a result of the unsettling quality of a monstrous person who is also a mother. The unsettling reaction that they cause is a result of the expectation of a mother to be benevolent and gentle. Instead, I have displayed that these matriarchal monsters tend to align closer to the qualities of a hero than they have often been credited. They challenge the definition of "monster" in that they are not entirely evil beings who "exhibit extreme cruelty and wickedness." Instead of being motivated by evil vices, these three characters are motivated by love and maternal instinct. Their monstrous acts result from a struggle for the power necessary to protect their children.

The second conclusion I have drawn is that the creators of these three monsters used them to demonstrate or warn, drawing on the original meaning of the term "monster." These women should be seen as precautionary examples of the negative results of robbing both a female and a mother of her power. The matriarchal character does not succumb to obeisance or objectivity. She rejects it. In so doing, she challenges the accepted roles and responsibilities of a female, maternal character. Her rejection of the place she is supposed to maintain, as seen in the cases of these three characters, leaves

her with the option of doing nothing at all or doing something evil. In her attempt to protect her family, the matriarchal mother's struggle somehow forces her to become monstrous, rather than heroic.

The final and most unexpected conclusion I have drawn is one that I previously introduced as a possibility, but not as a guarantee. Through my study of these three characters, I hoped to isolate the common quality of all matriarchal monsters. I argue that I have discovered it. The actions and identities of matriarchal monsters differ from one time period to the next and with the discretion of every writer who creates them. One thing that remains the same, though, is the matriarchal monster's ability to maintain, create or reinstate a community through her monstrous act. Whether that community may be a family unit of an arguably supernatural mother and son pair, a team of vampire hunters who represent the amalgamation of various nations or the members of a town who save a fellow member from the life-threatening presence of her past, some identifiable community is established by these women. Grendel's mother is killed after avenging the death of her son, an action done in the defense of her small community of which she is the matriarch. Through the course of Mina's vampirism, she creates a heterogeneous community out of the group of male vampire hunters. Finally, Sethe's infanticide and the ensuing violent return of her daughter result in the reunion with the African American community surrounding her. The matriarchal monster is a separate population of monsters for this very reason. Rather than destroying a society with her evil action, the matriarchal monster creates one through the motivation of the very thing that sets her apart, her motherhood.

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