

'Demonic Horror and its Reflection of Society'**Richard Wood**

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Abstract

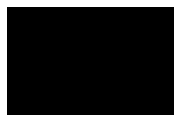
This thesis explores the use of demons in modern demonic horror literature to reflect the society in which the text is written. The analysis of several novels, and of psychoanalytical and philosophical approaches to horror, finds that the demons often represent feelings or beliefs that society represses, often as a reaction to unspoken feelings toward a societal movement, or as patriarchal beliefs. This theory is put into practise through three creative pieces that explore domestic abuse and toxic masculinity with different approaches to the style of writing.

Keywords: demons, demonic horror, horror literature, repression, domestic abuse

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the university.



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Introduction

Overview

Within this thesis, I discuss and explore how demonic horror literature reflects the society in which it was written. I explore several modern texts and discuss how the author's use of demons reflects society, before applying this to my own creative pieces. I also introduce a hypothesis regarding the existence of a battle between repressed and oppressor in demonic horror. I will aim to answer the following questions:

- What links are there between demonic horror literature and wider society?
- What are the common ways in which demons are used to reflect society, whether intentionally or unintentionally?
- How can I apply this to reflecting a major contemporary issue in society through the use of demons in my own creative writing?

I will explore this in the following chapters:

Chapter One – Literature Review. I summarise some of the existing research that covers demonic possession in literature and the role of horror to reflect society.

Chapter Two – Hypothesis on the Repressed. I propose a theory of how demons are used to reflect society.

Chapter Three – What is a Demon? I explore the concept of the demon, including what it is and what it represents.

Chapter Four – My Best Friend's Exorcism (Hendrix, 2006), *The Entity* (Felitta, 1978) and *A Head Full of Ghosts* (Tremblay, 2015). I discuss these three novels, including how they reflect society, how they provide evidence for my hypothesis, and how the texts fit with the horror genre.

Chapter Five – Come Closer (Gran, 2003). I discuss how Gran uses a demon to reflect society,

and how my theory is evident in this.

Chapter Six: The Good Demon (Cajoleas, 2018) and *The Last Days of Jack Sparks* (Arnopp, 2016): *What is Evil? The Emergence of Layers to the Demonic*. Following the concepts put forward in chapter three, I explore two texts that don't portray demons as unequivocally evil.

Chapter Seven: Domestic Abuse and Repression in my Creative Pieces. I explain some of the ways I've used demons to explore domestic violence and toxic masculinity in my creative pieces.

Following this, you will find my three creative pieces. They may not adhere to the conventional PhD formatting – this is because the structure and formatting of the text is important and needs to be retained as they are part of their intended effect. These are:

Creative Piece 1: Reunion.

Creative Piece 2: I Awake.

Creative Piece 3: The Fall of Adam.

Reasoning Behind Chosen Texts

I chose to focus my selection of texts from the 1970s to present, and predominantly western books from the United Kingdom or United States. Whilst some demonic horror texts exist outside of this focus, the popularity of this genre was at its strongest in western cultures at this time, often reflecting reactions to second-wave feminism and, more recently, “post 9/11 culture” where “the real threats in those stories are how the fear of those monsters can make us monsters” (Carey, 2016). Choosing to focus on this period and culture allows me to reflect on changes to how demonic horror novels have been approached over the last 55 years.

Whilst I acknowledge the existence of demonic horror texts in eastern cultures, for example, the movie *Semum* (Karacadag, 2008) which uses “Quranic interpretations” of demons to “explore the idea in Surah 21:29 that Satan is less of a demonic being and more of an abstract deity” (Erdagi, 2024) which contrasts with the belief in absolute evil typically portrayed in novels such as *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971), the audience for demonic horror in eastern societies often exists as a niche subset of horror fans, as opposed to western

cultures where demonic horror has crossed over to a mainstream audience. As demonic horror has gained more widespread popularity with a larger western audience, it follows there must be a larger proportion of people identifying with the reflections of society being conveyed in these books and films, regardless of whether those reflections and identifications are intentional. I wish to understand how this genre has developed in a culture where it has grown in popularity.

There is a need to acknowledge a lack of academic research around novels within the subgenre of demonic horror, and a general lack of research into Horror Studies when compared to other disciplines. This does not relate to the quality or critical reception of the texts – on the contrary, the texts I discuss are some of the most popular demonic horror books written over the last sixty years. This issue is a widespread problem when researching horror, which I suggest reflects how horror is rarely perceived as an academic genre. Several key texts around horror studies in academic research do exist, such as *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (Cover, 1992) and *The Monstrous Feminine* (Creed, 1993), but not enough to counter the limitations one finds when researching the critical receptions of modern horror texts. The anomaly in this is *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971), where there exists a vast amount of research, which is why I have chosen to focus much of my analysis on other novels where the gap in knowledge exists. As such, within the chapters where I discuss these novels, incorporation of existing critical analysis and research on these novels may be limited as there is simply so little of it.

It is also relevant to acknowledge that white men and women have primarily written the small amount of academic work that exists in horror studies. This is evident in the literature review in chapter four, where most of the existing reading on the subject is written by this demographic. This isn't a deliberate choice, but a reluctant one, as the most prominent academics in the field have been of this demographic. I have chosen the texts discussed in the literature review as, from the small area of horror studies that exists, they provide the most relevant foundation to the research I am conducting.

Despite the lack of existing research, I will outline my reasons for the choice of texts I have chosen for analysis below and incorporate what critical reception of these books exists when possible.

There is a belief in some circles that "horror films about exorcisms haven't moved on since William Friedkin's *The Exorcist*" (Barber, 2014), which is proven to be completely untrue by some of the more recent demonic horror novels. I chose *A Head Full of Ghosts* (Tremblay, 2015) to demonstrate this. When the genre was first introduced, demonic horror was about how "superstition triumphs where science has failed" and was "ultimately pro-religion" (Barber, 2014), but this is not the case in Tremblay's book. I chose this novel not only because it is held in high regard in the horror community, having won the Bram Stoker

Award, but because “knowing that there would be obvious similarities between his novel and *The Exorcist*, Tremblay meets this unavoidable feature of updating older literary themes head-on,” ultimately making it “very different from William Blatty’s *The Exorcist*” (Sudduth, 2016). Whilst “Blatty designed his narrative to support faith in God,” Tremblay “has no interest in sending a religious message or reinforcing religious dogmas” (Sudduth, 2016). For these reasons, it is important to explore this novel as it represents a change in how demonic horror is approached.

Whilst in previous demonic horror novels the belief that the demon is real is a requirement to enter that story world, in Tremblay’s novel, there is scepticism and ambiguity about whether the girl is possessed, mentally ill, or perverse – a question that “Tremblay is elegantly, carefully ambiguous about” (Flood, 2016). Ambiguity in the demonic possession is a trope that appears more frequently over the last twenty years, which is contradictory to the required suspended disbelief in demons and the supernatural previously required in this genre. What’s more, Tremblay uses demonic possession to explore the morality around the more recent concept of reality television and the ethical cost of the voyeurism this incites in us, thus allowing me to explore how this reflects issues of today’s society.

I have also chosen to explore *The Good Demon* (Cajoleas, 2018), *The Last Days of Jack Sparks* (Arnopp, 2016) and *Come Closer* (Gran, 2003) for their unique approaches to the use of demonic possession. Rather than copy the older tropes of the genre made popular by *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971), each author has advanced on them, and created more complexity to the demonic possession than a simple case of a person being possessed by evil. In *The Good Demon* (Cajoleas, 2018), the possessed girl loves her demon, and is dependent on it in a similar way that a victim/survivor can be dependent on their abuser; in *The Last Days of Jack Sparks* (Arnopp, 2016), the demon is not from religious mythology as is typical in demonic horror, but rather, the protagonist is possessed by his own ego and the self-image he portrays on social media; and in *Come Closer* (Gran, 2003), much like Tremblay, Gran brings a sense of ambiguity where we must guess whether “Amanda is a lost soul on the road to perdition or just a bored yuppie giving into the imp of the perverse” (Canon, 2003). We are led to believe that “the main character faces a gradual but steady loss of control over her body to some sort of demon. Or is she merely delusional?” (Mann, 2003). Each of these novels adapts existing tropes to situations that are unique to the modern complexities of life, whether that is a stronger awareness of abuse, the dangers of social media and how this manipulates self-image, or the dissatisfaction with modern life for a woman in her thirties – making them representations of their society worth exploring despite the lack of academic writing that exists on them.

The Entity (Felitta, 1978) and *My Best Friend’s Exorcism* (Hendrix, 2006) still rely on the belief that the demon exists within their story world, but I have chosen them for how they use

the demons to explore themes relevant to the society in which they were written. *The Entity* (Felitta, 1978) provides a snapshot of issues regarding misogyny, rape culture and men-on-women violence during a time when “parents were concerned about second-wave feminism and counterculture” (Barber, 2014). Through the use of a demonic entity, Felitta explores the experience of being an abuse survivor who’s disbelieved, being left in poverty following abusive relationships, and being the victim of patriarchal attitudes. In *My Best Friend’s Exorcism* (Hendrix, 2006), Hendrix uses demonic possession to focus on “the stagnant air of suburbia” and “the dark heart of dysfunction that lies beneath so many teenage-girl friendships” (Vnuk, 2016). Whilst primarily about the enduring friendship between a girl who is not possessed and a girl who is, the demonic possession also acts as “metaphors for puberty” where “the teen or pre-teen body being taken over by strange desires and drives” (Barber, 2014). Hendrix highlights negative perceptions of female puberty, the passion of adolescent friendship, and what this says about perceptions within society.

Reasoning Behind the Subject I Explore in My Creative Piece

My theory focuses on a wide scope of issues that are explored in demonic horror from 1970s until now, which includes men-on-women violence, but not limited to it. My creative piece, however, focuses solely on domestic abuse, toxic masculinity and men-on-women violence.

In my theory, I explore the range of ways that texts over the past 60 years have reflected society through their demons, which inevitably needs to encapsulate the range of issues society has faced over this period. These issues change depending on the culture and the author, meaning it would be unwise to limit the issues I identify as a result. My creative piece, however, needed to reflect a current issue, so I narrowed my scope and focused on one subject area that reflects today’s society, and show how various styles of prose can utilise demons to explore this issue. For the reasons I will now outline, I chose misogyny, toxic masculinity and men-on-women violence as a highly relevant issue in today’s society to explore and demonstrate the application of my repressed vs oppressor hypothesis.

Whilst many people consider society to have made significant progress regarding women’s issues, we have not made as much progress as some may perceive. Many of our male leaders believe that “legislative reforms like equal pay and anti-discrimination policies have led to the assumption that women and men are now on an equal footing,” but, unfortunately, “on-paper formal progress does not equate to lived experiences of sex equality” (Yardley & Richards, 2023). Whilst progress may appear to have been made on the surface, there still underlies a dangerous undercurrent of misogyny in society, particularly in online cultures where “the hatred of women is actively encouraged, with sprawling, purpose-

built communities of men dedicated to fuelling and inflaming the cause” (Bates, 2020).

This is why the topic is relevant to my repressed vs oppressor hypothesis I outline in chapter two. “To state that misogyny is a thing from the past is not just bluntly wrong, but also highly ignorant” (Neumayr, 2024); many people repress the notion that women are still suffering in our society, many actively oppress women in their denial, and many women must stifle their truth when confronted with these values, when in reality “we have grown so accustomed to power imbalances between men and women, that we not only normalised them, but romanticised and sexualised them” (Murphy, 2018).

Many murders have been committed in recent years, including mass murders, where the killers have strong links to extreme misogynistic views, yet this is rarely recognised as a consistent issue in perpetrators by the media or those in charge. Recent research showed that “violence against women” was “a common factor in 15 (83.3%) of the 18 mass murders in the United States in 2018,” and we are consistently seeing cases such as “the killer of five people in Annapolis who had previously stalked and threatened a woman he met online and the killer of 49 people in the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando who regularly engaged in coercive, controlling, violence and abusing behaviour toward his wife” (Yardley & Richards, 2023). Many recent murderers held extreme misogynistic views or links to incel ideology, yet these views are not fully recognised as part the issue, such as George Sodini in 2009, Ben Moynihan in 2009, Chris Harper-Mercer in 2015, Sheldon Bentley in 2016, William Atchinson in 2017, Nikolas Cruz in 2018, Alek Minassian in 2018, Scott Beierle in 2018, Christopher Clear in 2019, Alex Stravropoulos in 2019, Brian Isaack in 2019, Ashley Noell Arzaga in 2020, and Cole Carini in 2020 (Bates, 2020).

When murderers are Islamists, society inevitably links their attack to their extremist views, yet we do not link these killers to their misogynistic views despite how consistently evident they are in perpetrators. Rather than identifying that “perpetrators are frequently serial abusers who carry a set of misogynistic and patriarchal values and beliefs” (Yardley & Richards) in a society where one in three women are victimised by partners or ex-partners (World Health Organisation, 2024), it seems that “some of the most authoritative sources on mass murder omit abuse and violence against women in their profiles of offenders” (Yardley & Richards, 2023). This is not consistently identified by those in power or those reporting on the crimes as a pertinent current issue, leaving many women to suffer because of the lack of recognition over a huge issue in society.

This neglect and/or denial of the issue keeps the issue away from the public scrutiny of society and our leaders. It ensures the issue remains the woman’s problem that women can be ridiculed for highlighting. Thus, the issue becomes something a woman might repress, as those who deny it and the leaders who refuse to act on it become the oppressors. This is why I chose this topic to demonstrate my repressed vs oppressor theory as outlined in

chapter two – this is a clear example of an issue where repression must take place for survival, such as a victim who copes by not sharing the violence they’ve experienced, and the proliferation of oppression continues, such as leaders denying the issue to maintain patriarchal norms or due to lack of understanding. This repression and oppression prevent open and honest discussion about this issue among those with power or with the ability to affect change.

My Positionality

In Margaret Atwood’s poem from *You Are Happy* (Atwood, 1974), two boys create a woman out of mud; they “stuck to the essentials” and, once she was created, they would “make love to her”, repairing her afterwards by “making her hips more spacious” and “enlarging her breasts”. This is how art and literature has felt to many women for millennia, where their likeness has been frequently moulded by men and used for titillation. Historically, a woman “is the ivory carving or mud replica, an icon or doll, but she is not the sculptor” (Gubar, 2014); women have been created and defined by male artists and writers through the male gaze, and, until recently, women have rarely been the artists and writers themselves. It is understandable, then, that when a white middle-class man such as myself writes three creative pieces about men-on-women violence, a woman might meet my intentions with scepticism, having grown tired of the misogynistic tropes and shallow portrayals of women perpetually created by male writers.

This is especially true in horror, where “associations between the horror film and violent misogyny” have led to an “uneasy relationship between horror and feminism” (Farrimond, 2020). Despite this, “audiences in Britain found that women under 35 were the group most likely to report enjoying horror films” (Farrimond, 2020), showing that there is still an interest from a female audience. If there is such a large female audience for horror, then there is a large scope to explore women’s issues in horror – but these issues must be explored differently to how horror has historically attempted to explore them. More recently, films such as *The Invisible Man* (Whannell, 2020), *Promising Young Woman* (Fennell, 2020), *Men* (Garland, 2022) and the most recent remake of *Black Christmas* (Takal, 2019) have moved away from the violent misogyny we typically associate with horror, and have used horror to scrutinise issues regarding men-on-women violence and rape culture, showing that this can be done. But can this be accomplished by male auteurs?

Some women argue that, in literature, “female characters became created through the male gaze, existing with the purpose to appeal and submit to men” where “all women who transgress the role of tender, servile femininity must be unnatural perversions of nature,” or

where women are “overly sexualised”, which is ultimately “damaging to the perception of women in real life” (Neumayr, 2024). For too long, this is how male writers have written female characters. Issues that affect mostly women, such as rape or domestic violence, are often “used as a trope” where “the character is denied both dignity and the autonomy to interpret their experience outside an expected range of reactions that include: shattered forever, destroyed, defiled” (Denfield, 2017), meaning that these issues have been explored poorly, and in some cases, damagingly.

If male authors “have not been negatively affected by it in real life” (Lange, 2008) then many feminists and survivors question how well they can write about these issues – though if one cannot write about what they directly experience, we would never have science fiction or fantasy. Then again, it might be easier to imagine fantasy worlds than abuse we haven’t experienced as we are constructing something from our imagination rather than real-life, and many women continue to “emphasise how hard it is for men *really* to imagine what women experience” (Williamson, 2001). On the other hand, some say that “today’s male authors are still being held accountable for the ways in which past male authors used feminist ideas against women” (Lange, 2008). An awareness of women’s issues hasn’t existed long enough for us to judge current male writers attempting to explore them. Now feminist movements have better educated us, we should allow for evidence of this better education to exist in the work of current male writers.

Of course, misogyny still exists heavily in today’s society, and will still be present in the work of many male writers – which is why it’s important to explore these issues after all – but there also exists some men with greater awareness than men have ever had before; shouldn’t they be given the opportunity to demonstrate this in their work? Rather than censoring men from exploring these issues, we should leave room for exploration that improves “the way men create and develop their female creations in the first place,” thus allowing men to work “that extra bit harder to ensure their female characters are credible enough to weather any controversy” (Wright, 2020).

If a male writer “draws from social contexts and clues, and the experiences of the females around him so as to bring forth a genuine character rooted in real events” (Mohammad & Ahmed, 2022), they will create situations and characters that resonate better with the female experience. Rather than dismissing attempts by men to explore these issues, we can encourage them to grow a wide-ranging, in-depth grasp of the issues from women around them, thus allowing them to explore such topics with better awareness. Ultimately, if “men continue to be seen as patriarchal and sexist, then they may never see themselves as anything different, and may resist change, thinking it is futile” (Lange, 2008) – if we discourage men from exploring these issues or attempting to show empathy in their art, we discourage them from caring about these issues, which is detrimental to the progress of the

cause. Ultimately, one needs to ask, should we continue to dismiss men's attempts at understanding these issues, or should we "find male allies where we can?" (Hornick, 1992).

Having explored my position in relation to these issues and the debate surrounding it, I decided it is especially important that, as a man, I talk to the women around me and read voraciously on the topic I wish to explore. Books such as *Men Who Hate Women* (Bates, 2021), *Fix the System Not the Women* (Bates, 2023), *Everyday Sexism* (Bates, 2015) and *More Than a Woman* (Moran, 2021) by prominent feminists discussing men-on-women violence have provided me with a wide-ranging, greater understanding of the subject. I believe that, for progress to be made, it is integral that men attempt to understand and convey the devastating impact of these issues on women's lives, and attempt to include the subtleties of abuse in their writing.

In doing this, however, I need to recognise that there will always be a limitation to my understanding. I do not have lived experience of what it is like to endure incidents such as catcalling, gender-based discrimination at work, vile over-sexualised comments, gaslighting, or abuse in the way that women frequently experience. What I do have, however, is a strong understanding of how these issues have affected the women around me, and a determination to convey this to the best of my ability. I believe it is important for a man such as myself to explore these issues, and to convey their understanding of it, primarily as this is the best way to reach other men and extend their understanding.

As well as acknowledging my experience as a man, I also acknowledge that my experience and understanding of domestic abuse portrayed in my creative pieces comes from an understanding historically provided by white victims/survivors. This is typical of horror, such as "in *The Shining*, *Pet Sematary*, and *Amityville*, [where] the horrors enacted by middle-class white people (domestic abuse, inability to deal with grief, familicide), are portrayed not as individual or societal failings but explained away by the proximity of an Indian Burial Ground" (Krauss, 2024); these books not only explore these issues as white issues but alienate the influence of demographics that have been colonised. My creative pieces focus on the collective experience of domestic abuse, which, until more recently, has predominantly been provided by white victims/survivors. However, for me to intentionally write from the perspective and experiences of people of diverse backgrounds would be for me to make a statement about abuse and race that I lack the experience to make. Whilst I am writing about issues that primarily affect women whilst being a man, there are resources available for me to better my understanding of the female experience of abuse from the last few decades – experiences of domestic abuse specific to those from diverse background are not currently recognised well enough to provide me with the resources I need to provide a sufficient interpretation. I hope that one day, as we listen more to the experiences of those from diverse backgrounds, there will be more resources available to better my

understanding – but, as there currently is not, I am not prepared to write about those experiences.

Definitions

Below are definitions for terms used in my thesis, and my interpretation of their meaning.

Toxic Masculinity is defined in various ways, but often encompasses “a constant need to prove their manhood” whilst usually referring to “violence, domination, aggression, misogyny and homophobia” (Harrington, 2021), as well as involving “an inability to express emotions other than anger, an unwillingness to admit weakness or dependency” and “devaluation of women” (Kupers, 2005). It affects men negatively as it “involves the need to aggressively compete and dominate others”, as well as “dysfunctional anger” and “an unwillingness to admit weakness or dependency” (Kupers, 2005).

Domestic Abuse, also known “as intimate partner violence, happens when on a partner is abusive to the other partner in an intimate relationship,” and in broad terms, can present itself as “sexual violence, physical violence, and emotional violence” (Beall & Radunovich, 2014). Abuse, however, isn’t limited to acts of violence, and can often include “coercive control” and a “continuous nature” of abuse where “‘harm’ needs to be interpreted more widely than (physical) injury resulting from discrete acts” (Myhill & Kelly, 2021). Ultimately, I use the term to cover abuse that occurs within a relationship, whether this is overtly violent, emotional, or psychological.

Men-On-Women Violence is “violence against women” by men that “results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (Australian Government, 2022). In the European Union, since the age of 15, 1 in 3 women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence, 1 in 2 women have experienced sexual harassment, 1 in 20 women have been raped, 1 in 5 women have experienced stalking, and 95% of victims trafficked for sexual exploitation are women (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024) – this is the term I use to cover these acts of abuse and/or violence.

Second-Wave Feminism is the era of feminism in the seventies and eighties when women were more able to divorce (even though it often landed them in poverty), had more (though

still limited) job prospects, and were seen as more sexually liberal. *First-Wave Feminism* is to be defined as the time of the suffragettes and women gaining the right to vote, and *Third-Wave Feminism* as a more recent phenomenon at the time of the #MeToo revolution where women are being more open about their experiences of abuse that have otherwise been minimised or overlooked.

Demonic Horror Literature refers to novels that involve demons, demonic possession, exorcisms, and demonic entities that torment a host or victim.

A *Demon* is a negative “evil spirit” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024) that seeks to do harm to the host it possesses and to those who care for the host. They are often from religious mythology, believed to come from some form of hell, and identified in older texts such as *Ars Goetia* and *Dictionnaire Infernal*. *Demon* can also “refer to a wider range of undefined harmful spirits” (Erdagi, 2024) that may not necessarily be given a name. Most of the demons and demonic possessions discussed in this thesis focus on Judeo-Christian interpretations of possession. A fuller discussion of what constitutes a demon can be found in chapter three.

Demonic Possession is the belief in “demons or evil spirits” that “possess our bodies outright”, and *Exorcism* is the act of “casting them out of their human victims” (Betty, 2005). Whilst it is necessary to acknowledge that I approach this concept with the absolute belief that demons and demonic possession do not exist, the degree of truth to demonic possession within the fictional reality of story changes within the different texts I have chosen for discussion. This will be explored when relevant to the context of my analysis.

Repression is the act of rejecting characteristics that may be harmful to oneself or to society in order to conform or fit in. The “essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious” (Freud, 1915)

Chapter One: Literature Review

Paperbacks From Hell (Hendrix and Errickson, 2017)

Hendrix outlines various publications from the fifties to eighties when horror literature was particularly popular, some of which link to demonic horror and have reflections of the time and culture in which they were written.

The Satan Sleuth (Avallone, 1976) featured incubi and succuba during the 1960s, reflecting the fear of increasing sexual freedom by those in authority. *Satan's Seductress* (McNaughton, 1978) featured a demon called Zurvan who would "remove all pain" (Hendrix & Errickson, 2017) but did so by eliminating the concept of good and evil. This book was written in the US during the Cold War, and Zurvan represented the conflicting ideologies American leaders felt they needed to embody to defeat a perceived evil, with their "individual identities to become servants of another's will" (ibid) – in this case, *another's will* refers to the greater good.

Russ Martin wrote a series of books about satanic organisations, such as *Rhea* (Martin, 1978), which featured a society ruled by mind control. People in this fictional society questioned leaders and suggested conspiracies, which is linked to the real-life riots occurring in an American society where "the decadent elite controlled everything" (Hendrix & Errickson, 2017); the book reflects those who questioned a society where the rich ruled in response to increasing scepticism about whether capitalism was benefitting the average person. In books where "Satan would make your dreams come through for the price of your soul" (Hendrix & Errickson, 2017) success was no longer free or ethical; to be rich meant to be so at the cost of your soul.

The Crib (Kent, 1987) was written following decades of myths about babies, childbirth and sex. In the US, the contraceptive pill was released in 1960, IUDs introduced in 1968, abortion legalised in 1973 and IVF introduced in 1978. This was reflected in a book with extreme conspiracies about what these inventions meant, such as the suggestion that a baby might die if the woman had an orgasm, and *Spawn* (Hutson, 1983), which suggested that aborted babies were buried and reanimated as zombie babies.

Hendrix adds value to horror studies by highlighting key horror texts from the period, though limitations are present in the questionable popularity of some of these texts. The book is

evidently written for entertainment value, and it's unclear whether the novels he draws attention to are prominent horror books, or rather, books that were strange for him to draw attention to.

Horror: A literary History – Horror Fiction and the Decline of Universal Horror (Lockhurst, 2016)

The second world war destroyed economies and left countries in dread, yet the US economy thrived – though there was a fear in America that this wouldn't last. As a result, Lockhurst highlights how, whilst previous horror literature that had been about the bizarre and irrational, such as monsters in *Frankenstein* (Shelley, 1818), *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Stevenson, 1886) or the absurdities of *Cthulu* (Lovecraft, 1928), horror in the 1940s changed to “aspects of life normally associated with security and stability” (Lockhurst, 2016). This was a response to post-war feelings where irrational concepts of monsters were no longer as horrifying as the realities of life; fictional monsters were replaced by real-life monsters¹.

In *The Haunting of Hill House* (Jackson, 1959), a single woman in her thirties is the most vulnerable character; she is an “unwanted spinster” and shows traits of being “emotional” with “neediness” (Lockhurst, 2016). This reflected how the ruling patriarchy saw such women; to be a single woman in your thirties automatically made one damaged and vulnerable. Matheson had a similar premise when he released *Hell House* (Matheson, 1971) two decades later, and whilst this was another haunted house novel, the style of the novel was different to Jackson's interpretation and featured “graphic depictions of murder and sexual violence” (Lockhurst, 2016). These were similar stories published 22 years apart, but whilst most American horror literature in the 1970s, including Matheson's *Hell House* (Matheson, 1971), were set in mundane, suburban settings, books with the occult in the UK featured more “exotic or stately locales”, such as *Gateway to Hell* (Wheatley & Bingley, 1970) or *The Ravishing of Lady Mary Ware* (Wheatley, 1971). This demonstrated the greater feeling of internal threat in the US compared to the UK.

Lockhurst highlights how, in *Rosemary's Baby* (Levin, 1968), Levin “grounds Rosemary's paranoia-inducing predicament in the solid details of everyday life” (Lockhurst, 2016), demonstrating America's fears that existed within. There are references to events of the time

¹ Horror is often defined by the nature of the monster. Whilst many genres have monsters, Noel Carroll states that horror is different because of “the attitude of characters in the story to the monsters” as they “breach the norms of ontological propriety presumed by the positive human characters” (Carroll, 1990) – for example, in a fairy tale the monster may be natural to the world it inhabits, whilst in horror the monster is not natural to the world it inhabits. This means one can make further inferences about a society by examining what has made that monster unnatural to the world by observing the characteristics the horror monster has – those characteristics could be considered rejected characteristics or taboo behaviour in that society.

to encourage realism and emphasise the setting, such as the pope's visit in 1966 and The Time's issue with the headline 'Is God Dead?' The latter references how Rosemary is a lapsed catholic, which made her more vulnerable to the demonic activity that occurs. Rosemary has a difficult pregnancy and gives birth to a demon, reflecting the feeling of isolation and alienation women felt during pregnancy, particularly with the uncaring nature of male doctors and husbands who did not understand the female experience of pregnancy and childbirth.

Whilst feminist interpretations of *Rosemary's Baby* (Levin, 1968) are clear – the woman is forced to give birth to the devil so that her husband's career can prosper, thus highlighting the way a man might use a woman's body for his own success, as well as highlighting the alienation women felt during pregnancy – there are feminists who believe that “while such texts have been heralded as ‘feminist’ due to their inclusion of feminist themes, they reflected the perspectives of their white male authors” (Brady, 2023). Brady suggests the book is actually “a growing disenchantment with second-wave feminism and Levin's articulation of this impossibility” (Brady, 2023) that reveals how capitalism is reliant on women's unpaid reproductive labour, thus emphasising the impracticality of women's increasing job opportunities. The satanic rape of Rosemary occurring ‘off screen’ allows it to remain in the realm of metaphor, with Rosemary not only being raped by a Satanic cult, but by the invisible phallus of patriarchal capitalism itself. As “Rosemary's domestic space is repeatedly violated, both literally and metaphorically” (Lockhurst, 2016) her experience reflects America's fears of a threat to one's own home in the 1960s.

Hendrix acknowledged that “every decade has its darkness” (Hendrix & Errickson, 2017), but that, in each decade, the darkness is different. Both Hendrix and Lockhurst demonstrate how horror in the 1960s US primarily feared the outside threat, but as the 1970s moved into the 1980s, Reagan brought optimism to the US and the country had a new self-confidence, meaning horror was more about what was hidden behind the ‘white picket fence.’ I suggest this was similar to horror in the UK in the 1980s when Thatcher's policies caused civil unrest among the working-class.

Lockhurst adds value to Horror Studies by conveying how themes of horror changed as society changed and provides value to the foundational knowledge of my thesis by drawing on a text with links to demonic horror. Olson and Reinhard extend on this by exploring how a popular demonic horror text reflects society in the seventies.

Possessed Women Haunted States (Olson & Reinhard, 2017)

Olson & Reinhard explored how tropes of exorcism films are rooted in sexism as they are often about a young woman who requires an older man's intervention to stop her from

becoming a foul-mouthed, sex-obsessed adolescent, such as *The Exorcist* (1971) where “the possessed girl” is “both the monster and the damsel in distress” (Olson & Reinhard, 2017). This reflects patriarchal attitudes of the seventies toward feminists who were attempting to disrupt conventions that supported male supremacy and, as a result, teenage girls were acting more liberally. The demon possessing Regan is vile and disgusting, often sexually aggressive, and determined to exhibit deviant behaviour, reflecting the male patriarchy’s perception that, beneath the veneer of a strong, sexually liberated feminist is a damsel in need of saving from her own vulgarity and deviance, specifically by a man.

It is also worth considering that the man who saves the female victim in *The Exorcist* (1971) is a priest. Priests are celibate, meaning they are unable to experience what it’s like to live with a woman or be intimate with one. Olson & Reinhard highlight how it took someone as distanced from the female experience as possible to teach the girl how to behave as expected in a patriarchal society that relies on “female silencing” (Payne, 2022).

Olson & Reinhard also believe Regan represents “youthful rebellion” (Olson & Reinhard, 2017). She is a sweet, caring child at the beginning of the story, then she enters adolescence and becomes “abnormal and monstrous” (Olson & Reinhard, 2017). In the sixties and seventies, the youth were changing – their parents had been conservative youngsters who’d endured wartime, and now their children were rebelling and searching for a more neo-liberal identity, and Regan represents a negative perception of this. Sex was being engaged with more freely, teenage girls were dressing as they wished to, and the vulgar demon possessing Regan is an exaggeration of the patriarchal view of teenage girls who exemplified this behaviour. This is shown when Regan grabs her mother’s head and tells her to ‘lick her cunt’ and tells the priest that his ‘mother sucks cocks in hell’ – these actions weren’t a true representation of sexually liberated women, but were the perception held by male patriarchy; they couldn’t understand how a woman could be freely sexual without also being crude and perverse². In the end, a group of men free Regan from her “potty mouth” (Olson & Reinhard, 2017) after a religious ritual.

Regan has an agnostic, career-driven single mother. The patriarchy blame her for having a rebellious daughter as they perceive her as ungodly, without a husband, and too focussed on her career, therefore unable to competently raise a daughter – she was a threat to the nuclear family and perceived as less able to fulfil her parental duties than an at-home, married

² Williams observed that the horror monster is often “a particularly insidious form of the many mirrors that patriarchal structures of seeing hold up to the woman” (Williams, 2015). In *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971), the monster is not only holding up the patriarchal perception of an adolescent girl during second-wave feminism, it’s done in the form of an adolescent girl. Williams’ observation of how the horror monster is presented through the male gaze feels particularly apt; the female monster represents “the power to mutilate and transform the vulnerable male” (Williams, 2015). In this situation, it’s the *power* of the adolescent girl who’s influenced by progressive attitudes to *mutilate* the dominance of patriarchy, the *vulnerable male*.

mother might. It is implied in *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971) that her husband left her because he couldn't tolerate her success, therefore placing the blame of the broken family on her. Regan also kills her mother's lover; she rebels against her mother by punishing her for being a sexual woman without a husband. From the patriarchal viewpoint, this woman's liberal, feministic principles destroyed her family, and her daughter suffered because of her behaviour.

Olson & Reinhard also observe how Father Karras coerces the demon from Regan into himself, at which point he maintains control of it long enough to jump out of the window and kill himself. This narrative "makes no sense" (Olson & Reinhard, 2017); in an act of male domination and male violence, he defeats the demon that Regan was struggling against for a prolonged period of time. Is it suggested that, because he is a man, he can deal with the temptations the demon offers better than a young woman?

In terms of horror, the authors discuss how "this tendency to explore actual fear can help audiences recognise and cope with terrors they face in the real world" (Olson & Reinhard, 2017). This is not only a comment on how society is reflected in horror, but an explanation of its purpose. Horror allows us to explore the horror of society in a safe space, often with the satisfaction of witnessing these fears being resolved. The author explains that the human brain can't handle a lack of logic, so by making the fear into a version of a monster, "viewers experience dread because they have learned to fear the illogic that the monster represents" (Olson & Reinhard, 2017). Horror is our way of handling the illogical; it takes the horror around us and logicises it into a piece of fear we can recognise and confront – so for those who are unable to logicise the actions of women they see as posing a "threat to patriarchal society" (Olson & Reinhard, 2017), demonic horror allows them to 'other' them in the form of a demon.

The role of religion in the perception of how a woman should behave is inevitably a component of a book that uses religious rituals to remove a demonic entity from a person. Christianity has frequently repressed women throughout history – in the Adam and Eve story, it is Eve who caused man to be banished from the Garden of Eden; in the Old Testament, there are passages that state women are unclean when they are menstruating (Leviticus 11:1-15:33) and that when a man rapes a woman he must pay her father to marry her (Deuteronomy 22:28-29); and, historically, witches were usually women as "medieval philosophers argued that woman was not made in the image of God, and therefore the devil had little to fear when entering her body" (Olson & Reinhard, 2017) – using a female as the victim fits with the religious notion that women are sinful and therefore susceptible to corruption by a demon.

Ultimately, Olson and Reinhard see demonic possession in *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971) as a tool to solve the problem of the "empowered women", to restore patriarchal values, and to provide "a means to restore Karras's faith in God" (Olson & Reinhard, 2017). Regan's "predicament functions primarily as motivation for the male hero to rediscover his faith" (Olson & Reinhard, 2017) – it is Father Karras's character that has the biggest character arc through

taking part in this exorcism. Even as the protagonist, the possessed girl's function is to create a change in the male character.

My initial criticism of this text was the emphasis Olson and Reinhard placed on the patriarchal viewpoint, and that they showed little consideration for other potential perspectives that are present in *The Exorcist* (1971). However, considering the 1970s was still a time when literature and film were primarily created from the male gaze, and violence against women for titillation were common features of horror films, it is an apt observation. Society is inherently patriarchal and texts are primarily created from the male perspective, therefore patriarchal fears are most likely to exist in the form of the horror monster. Because of this, this reading of *The Exorcist* (1971) formed a foundation for the reading of texts I discuss in later chapters, where the patriarchal viewpoint is clearly evident.

1973 and the American Horror Film: Political Futurity in The Exorcist and The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (Story, 2024)

Olson and Reinhard's discussion of *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971) novel and *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973) film is predominantly framed through a psychoanalytical lens, and mainly considers reflections of cultural shifts in the white experience. Until recently, few texts proposed alternative responses, but Story has offered another perspective.

Story acknowledges that existing discussion about *TE* provides a "comprehensive" yet "resoundingly White" interpretation, and that the "Catholic authorities in the film" are also "American" authorities (Story, 2024). Story references the opening scene that takes place in Iraq, which, in the 1973 cut, as opposed to the version available today, takes up "about fifteen minutes" (Story, 2024) of the introduction. He suggests this opening sequence "does indeed function to establish Iraq as othered from contemporary Georgetown" (ibid). However, rather than inferring this othering is negative, he infers that "Iraq's otherness is really about social organisation: collaborative forms of labour" where "the distance is political rather than historical" (ibid). It is a relevant observation to note that the opening sequence highlights how the demon comes from a different society to the one it inhabits when it possesses Regan without this necessarily being negative.

Rather than seeing *TE* through a psychoanalytic lens, he sees *TE* as a prediction of forthcoming societal change where the "post-73 political order" is a "blend" of "two seemingly opposed ideological programmes – neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism" (ibid). This is an astute observation, but it feels like the only difference between the psychoanalytical approach and Story's is that the psychoanalytical interpretations have focussed on the past, whilst Story is focussing on the pre-emption of the future. Regardless of their focus, both theories suggest

aspects of society *TE* reflects, and the change in neo-conservatism to neo-liberalism in the 1970s is inextricably linked to the feminist movements of the era. Whilst Story moves away from interpretations of patriarchal oppression, he still acknowledges the presence of “the anti-feminist backlash” and “the ways in which women’s subjectivity will increasingly be position in post-1973 America” (ibid), suggesting that patriarchy and women’s issues are inevitably linked to *TE* regardless of the approach taken.

This theory provokes analysis beyond the psychoanalytical lens typically used to interpret horror. However, the foundations remain the same – we are still reading into the political shifts of the era that are portrayed in the demon.

Eli Roth’s History of Horror Episode Four: The Demon Inside (AMC, 2018)

Eli Roth suggests that demonic horror can be about being taken over by mental health issues, or about good versus evil, but most pertinent is his belief that possession films are about “losing control” (AMC, 2018), whether it be over your body or your mind. Roth states that demonic horror makes you feel like there is no safe haven; the demon is inside of you, meaning you can’t run from it. Even in death, there is a hell – as, without there being hell, this demon would have had nowhere to go. No matter what you do, evil will find you.

Roth highlights how, in *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973), the director wanted Regan to be like any typical American girl as he wished to convey to his audience that possession could happen to anyone’s daughter. He also references *Paranormal Activity* (Peli, 2007) where events happen within the character’s home. As an audience, we never leave this home; what is meant to be a safe space is invaded, and neither the audience nor the protagonists can escape, much as the possessed can’t escape their demon-infested body, thus referring to the feeling of isolation one occurs when possessed – or, with possession as a metaphor, the feeling of isolation that occurs when one is ‘othered’.

Roth references *Jennifer’s Body* (Kusama, 2009) which features a rock band performing a demonic ritual on a girl called Jennifer to gain success. Roth believes this is symbolic of the perceived willingness of today’s youth to do anything for fame, even if it means doing so at the expense of morals or the welfare of others. It is interesting that Roth and his guests say this is a feminist film about the focus on female beauty, which is in contrast to the perception of demonic cinema outlined by Olson & Reinhard (Olson & Reinhard, 2017). Whilst *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973) portrays female adolescence as the arrival of a monster that goes against the patriarchal way of life, he believes *Jennifer’s Body* (Kusama, 2009) portrays female puberty as monstrous from the perspective of the woman.

Finally, Roth discusses *Get Out* (Peele, 2017), a film about a black man visiting his white

girlfriend's parents that reflects subtle racism in society. It is both social satire and possession but, as Roth points out, it is not about a demon possessing the victim – it is about white people possessing the body of a black person. Roth states that the film's metaphor gave the black community a language to explain what suppression feels like by referring to 'the sunken place'. It is representative of how many black people feel about race relations. In my creative piece, I attempted to give a voice to those who are actively repressed in a similar way by using the demon as a device to convey the nature of abuse.

There are some serious limitations to the perspectives Roth has given. Whilst he references the subject of race in *Get Out* (Peele, 2017), much of his discussion appears limited by his position as a white male auteur. For example, he interpreted *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973) as a fear of lack of control, but didn't acknowledge interpretations such as the presence of patriarchal fears or the threat of science and religion. Similarly, he believes *Jennifer's Body* (Kusama, 2009) is a feminist film, but whilst there are feminist theorists who agree, there are also many who would ask whether the girl-on-girl kisses and sexualised portrayal of Megan Fox in the film are present for the male gaze.

Evil Children in Film and Literature II: Notes Toward a Taxonomy (Renner, 2011)

Renner outlines how the possessed child narrative rarely starts "at the point of possession" but spends "considerable time developing the characters of these victims", making it more devastating to witnesses a demonic possession that is "cruel, violent, and for girls, sexually aggressive" (Renner, 2011). He suggests degradation of a child through demonic possession is a metaphor for the onset of adolescence, which is typically associated with youthful rebellion and impulsive behaviour, and that once we see that their behaviour "differs considerably from his or her normal conducts" then "we are likely to transfer blame for the child's wickedness to the offending entity" (Renner, 2011). This reflects a widely held belief that a teenager's rebellious and lude behaviour is caused by outside influences; that the true person lies beneath the demonic/rebellious teenager, and they will return to a conscientious person when they are at an age where they aren't so impressionable, or in demonic possession terms, when they have been exorcised of the demon.

Renner states that "these forces symbolise other nefarious influences commonly cited as taking hold of children when parents are not properly vigilant, such as satanic song lyrics or violent video games" (Renner, 2011), implying that what causes possession/adolescent rebellion is not created by the child, but by factors such as music or violence in the media. However, Renner doesn't suggest that parenting style could be an influence. In cases of abuse

or neglect, the teenager is more likely to turn to crime or violence in a world where “abused and neglected children are 4.8 times more likely to be arrested” (English, Widom and Brandford, 2002). In the end, Renner suggests that in demonic horror “possession either draws the family back together [...] or magnifies the issues that caused fracture in the first place” (Renner, 2011), either emphasising the cracks of a family, or pulling the parents together so they can collectively confront teenage insubordination.

Whilst my earlier reading suggested *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971) was sexist in nature, Renner focusses less on the implications for women, and more on what it says for men. He states that the “possession plot is really a story of male crisis, an implicit call for new masculinity that was ‘part and parcel of the social changes from the late sixties on, from feminism to the Vietnam experience and the new family’”, saying that while action cinema “mourned” the passing of the ‘real man,’ horror “urges it along” (Renner, 2011). I struggle to see this. Whilst I can find evidence of the elements of sexism in *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971), the crisis Karras suffers is not a crisis specific to man – he is mourning the loss of his mother and having a crisis of faith, which are not complexities exclusive to masculinity.

The author also suggests the genre is a “narrative of parental crisis” and “the failure of family and a proposal for remedy” (Renner, 2011)³. This is evident in Regan’s character in *The Exorcist*, whose father doesn’t call on her birthday, and whose mother is a career-driven woman who hires people to take care of her daughter, showing that “the sins of the successful working mother are worse than those of an entire absent father” (Renner, 2011).

Whilst not adding anything to the suggestions made in previous texts, Renner’s theories consolidate the understanding that patriarchal fears exist heavily in the portrayal of the monster in demonic horror.

Horror After 9/11 Introduction (Briefel & Miller, 2017) and *Chapter One: Black Screens, Lost Bodies: The Cinematic Apparatus of 9/11 Horror* (Frost, 2017)

Briefel and Miller state that horror “is one of the most versatile genres out there, a universal solvent of virtually any news issue”, acting as “an allegorical genre, a meaning machine” (Briefel & Miller, 2017) that allows us to explore a variety of issues. The authors subsequently question why, when considering its versatility, horror’s popularity decreased in the 1990s. The

³ There is a question of why *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971) has become a popular, iconic horror film that has achieved longevity, especially when one considers that a new cut was released in 2000. Clasen suggested that Dracula’s longevity is due to our ability to relate to “fundamental biological instincts and not historically contingent cultural anxieties” (Leahy, 2024). Similarly, one might argue that whilst the reflection of the era when *TE* was helped its popularity, its longevity, much like Dracula, was due to the *fundamental biological instincts* the novel and film portray, such as the feeling of disconnection from one’s adolescent children.

most popular horror film at the time was *Scream* (Craven, 1996), a self-critical film that observed the clichés of the horror film, even mocking the genre. Briefel and Miller believe this is because we were too comfortable in our existence. It is interesting, then, that horror found another resurgence following the events of 9/11.

Briefel and Miller state that “every generation gets the monster it deserves” (Briefel & Miller, 2017). During the Cold War, the threat of nuclear war produced mutants created by chemicals; in the era of second-wave feminism, horror saw women who were possessed or cannibalistic; and when America perceived threats to its fortress, horror saw threats from out of space. The author does state, however, that this understanding of horror is “overly formulaic” (Briefel & Miller, 2017), and implies that such interpretations and associations are always performed in the reader’s interpretation⁴. I disagree, as the world will always influence a writer of horror, even if subconsciously, and we cannot underestimate the impact of this, regardless of whether this is emphasised more by the writer or reader.

Briefel and Miller state that, after 9/11, the “White House encouraged the film industry to create products that would get the right ideological message across” (Briefel & Miller, 2017). Politicians were trying to directly impact the message of films, even in western democratic countries where we feel comfortable in the belief that we aren’t being fed propaganda to manipulate our perspectives. *Cloverfield* (Reeves, 2008) was delayed by six years as the studio was concerned about the links to 9/11, suggesting political climate affects which topics horror auteurs feel comfortable exploring, thus showing how interpretations regarding links between horror and society aren’t only present when it reaches the reader/viewer, but in the horror’s inception.

I would suggest that *The Happening* (Shyamalan, 2008) was a rejection of this request as it was about nature attacking humans as a warning to stop destroying the planet; a warning ignored by many politicians. “We expect horror to play the role of provocateur: the genre that will go where no genre has gone before, however taboo” (Frost, 2017) – even if it means playing the role of provocateur to our own government.

Texts in this review often focus on patriarchal fears in the demon, whilst this text suggests horror can also act as a provocateur to the natural order, which inspired elements of my creative pieces. Rather than adhere to what seems typical – the demon representing patriarchal fears – I wished to produce creative pieces that acted as provocateur to patriarchal perspectives.

⁴ The theory of ‘the horror of philosophy’ suggests the true horror of life is that nothing has meaning and we are simply adding meaning to that which does not matter. From this perspective, the act of possession is the fear of being trapped inside a body that is “doomed to decay, illness, injury, and death” (Jaafar, 2021); we are all possessing our own bodies until our mind dies and that body is empty of the person that possessed it. Confronting this sense of meaninglessness forces us to face the true horror of the act of existence.

There is Goodness in 'The Exorcist' (Blatty, 1974)

In contrast to texts that have critiqued *The Exorcist* (Blatty 1971) from a psychoanalytical or philosophical lens, this article was written by the author of *TE*, thus allowing Blatty to explore his intentions of the novel.

Blatty begins by saying that he wished to “make a positive statement about God, the human condition and the relationship between the two” (Blatty, 1974). Many critics believed this was a book about evil as it depicts the devastation caused by a demonic attack, but Blatty was keen to emphasise the book was not about the dominance of evil, but about the goodness that prevailed over it. Despite this intention, I question whether this is the overall effect. If it is about God being good, then why must Karras kill himself to defeat the demon? Surely, if God prevailed, God would have answered the exorcist’s prayers, save the girl, and Karras wouldn’t need to end his life?

Blatty states that Karras’s death at the end is an act of good. That, because of his love, he defeats the demon, takes the demon into himself, then kills himself to stop it. I question whether this is good. Karras may act with love to save the girl by sacrificing himself to save her, but he still must end his life to win. A critic even highlighted the number of deaths in the book shows a “triumph of evil”, to which Blatty responds that these deaths were actually good winning, as it is “better to lose the world than suffer the loss of one’s immortal soul” (Blatty, 1974). The concept of death for defeating the devil as ‘better’ is bizarre. If the reader doesn’t believe in the devil, then those who die for such a cause are tragic victims of religious superstition.

This highlights how one’s belief system provokes different reactions; a theist may interpret the events of this novel differently to an atheist. However, within Blatty’s story world, and with the suspension of disbelief, the audience accepts the reality of demonic possession. This realisation was behind my decision to create a sense of ambiguity over whether the demon exists in my creative pieces, rather than to create a story world where the belief in the demon is definite. Such ambiguity is a more recent trend in demonic horror and is discussed in more detail when analysing *A Head Full of Ghosts* (Tremblay, 2015) in chapter four and *Come Closer* (Gran, 2003) in chapter five. Rather than portraying the demon as religious evil as depicted by Blatty, I wish the demon to act as a catalyst for portraying domestic abuse, meaning ambiguity is essential to highlighting the horrors of this abuse, rather than just the horrors of demonic possession.

Study Suggests Belief in Demons and Evil Spirits is Harmful to Mental Health (Dalton, 2017)

As Blatty's intentions for his novel contrast with how it was received, I considered whether a belief in demons is required for the impact of demonic horror. As an author of demonic horror novels, I asked my readers, 'do you believe in demons?' Out of 80 respondents, only 50% said yes, whilst 38% said somewhat, and 12% said no. It makes sense that half of those who read demonic horror will harbour some form of belief in demons, but a considerable portion did not say yes. Whilst my survey may not be wide-reaching enough to create a generalisation about all fans of demonic horror, it makes it apparent that not all fans of demonic horror believe in demons. So why read a demonic horror novel? ⁵

My curiosity about why I enjoy demonic horror led to me considering the links between demons and mental health. Having suffered mental health issues, I wondered whether there may be a link between the demonic and my mental health, and whether demonic horror gives me an outlet to confront my experiences, which led to me considering Dalton's research.

Dalton explored the results of a study of 3,290 Americans published in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion. The author states that "poor mental health did not lead to a greater belief in demons" (Dalton, 2017), suggesting that people won't generally believe in demons because of their mental health, rather, one would suffer with mental health issues because of their belief in demons. He discusses how a belief in demons is "integral to many major religions" and is often encouraged in "childhood" (Dalton, 2017). In a world where "trauma as a child can lead to a host of emotional and psychological issues that may not emerge until later in life" (Dual Diagnosis, 2020), it is understandable that one fears demons when, as a child, they were told that "demons exist and they may tempt us to do things evil" (Dalton, 2017). This belief increases the feeling of guilt when one commits an act that religion interprets as 'bad,' this is inevitably linked with mental health issues. The question of how far this link goes for motivating one's interest in demonic horror led me to consider Davey's research.

⁵ One might argue that suspension of disbelief means that the reader/viewer believes the demon is real within the story world even if they don't believe in demons – but I struggle to see why someone would find that demon scary if they did not see it as a real-life threat as it would not be preying on their existing fears. This is why metaphor is so important in demonic horror. Whilst Descartes believed that "we do not directly perceive objects and states of affairs" but that we only "perceive the contents of our own mind", Searle finds no evidence that we "only perceive our idea" of objects rather than their truth (Searle, 2004). In the literal world, this is fair – if we perceive a table in front of us, it would be logical to assume it's a table – however, Descartes' theories are applicable in the realm of the metaphor where the demon exists. It is not the demon itself that is the threat, but it is the perception of the threat behind the demon that scares the reader/viewer – it is the contents of our own mind Descartes references that the demon elicits, such as the threat of the repressed, deviance, or the subconscious identification with deviance.

Spirit Possession and Mental Health (Davey, 2014)

Davey states that, even in the modern world, some cultures don't just use demons to explain evil acts, but also use them to control people. A study found that 'cen' (the process of a deceased person possessing someone alive and taking over their personality) was reported in child soldiers from war-affected regions of Northern Uganda. These children were forced to kill, and instead of looking at potential explanations such as mob mentality, anonymity, or the power of authority, the responsibility for these children's actions was attributed to a deceased person possessing them. I find this concerning, as not only does this allow people to "manipulate the behaviour of individuals" (Davey, 2014) and further encourage the children into more acts of brutality, it shows issues such as trauma are still being misinterpreted as possession, providing some explanation why possession acts as an apt metaphor for mental health.

Sifting Science: Stratification and The Exorcist (Cade, 2016)

Further to Davey's reading, I considered Cade's belief that "society is perceived as a generally inadequate tool for addressing matters of faith or the supernatural" (Cade, 2016). In *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971), "religion succeeds in curing her [Regan] where science fails" (Cade, 2016). Psychological and medicinal explanations for Regan's predicament are explored before the exorcism takes place and, as more of these tests are performed on Regan, they become increasingly invasive, and a lot of viewers were "particularly disturbed by the intrusive medical interventions" (Cade, 2016). It is strange that, in a novel and film with "violent masturbation, head spinning and pea soup vomit" (Cade, 2016), the audience found the scientific aspects disturbing. Could this be intentional by Blatty? In a time where science and medicine were advancing, he showed how distressing the experience of invasive scientific and medical treatment could be – making the medical invasion equal to the horror of religious terror.

As "in *The Exorcist*, it is not only Regan being invaded by the monstrous others: it is also the certainty of science" (Cade, 2016). I suggest that an atheist such as myself enjoys demonic horror despite my belief system being ardently pro-science because of its links to mental health. I wasn't diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder until I was seventeen – I'd had this condition my whole life but believed my thoughts were normal. Much like Regan, who searched for an explanation, could the lack of scientific or psychological explanation I experienced throughout my childhood be what I see reflected in *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971)? Perhaps the demon represents the mental health issues that tormented me for so many years.

Nightmare Magazine Interview with Paul Tremblay, Grady Hendrix and editor Jordan Hamessley (Kirtly, 2016)

Tremblay and Hendrix are authors of *A Head Full of Ghosts* (Tremblay, 2015) and *My Best Friend's Exorcism* (Hendrix, 2006) respectively, which will be looked at in more depth in chapter four.

When asked about *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973), Hamessley suggests it's scary because it makes one ask "why is this happening to this specific person?" (Kirtly, 2016). This suggests the horror is less about the demon, and more about the victim who's attacked. Is the victim vulnerable or sinful? Are they young and have done nothing to warrant the attack, or have they acted in a sinful way that might invite a demon? Hendrix believes that the moment Regan shoves her mother's face in her bloody crotch is a moment that "the filmmakers cross a line," and although by today's standards it may have a lesser impact, in the eighties "we were all more innocent" (Kirtly, 2016). Hendrix believes that a "slow build" where the "freaky stuff" occurs after we are "believing the onscreen relationships" (Kirtly, 2016) makes the demonic more effective. A shocking moment does not have an impact if we are not "sold" on the "relationships by the time this stuff happens" (Kirtly, 2016). A writer must consider "the silence" and the "quiet moments when you don't know what's happening" (Kirtly, 2016).

Hendrix goes on to say, "I never watch horror movies to be scared" (Kirtly, 2016). We generally believe that the thrill of horror is the fear it incites, but Hendrix states that he likes "the trappings. I like the blood, and the barf, and the ghost, and the houses, and all that stuff" (Kirtly, 2016). This suggests demonic horror doesn't always appeal to an audience to scare them, but for the tropes they enjoy. For example, Hendrix points out that the film *The Last Exorcism* (Stamm, 2010) was about a conspiracy rather than "the exorcism" or "the demoniac" (Kirtly, 2016). This film was about "cults" who are "manipulating things behind the scenes" (Kirtly, 2016) – reinforcing that a belief in the existence of the demon isn't necessary as in *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971), but instead could reveal the sinister motives of people via the illusion of possession.

Hendrix draws attention to the novel *Come Closer* (Gran, 2003) as an example of a demonic horror book that is non-religious, but is "more to do with that character's fears about mental illness and what's happening to her identity", (Kirtly, 2016) thus exploring mental health rather than religion. *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971) was written by someone who "believes in God, and evil, and the devil" (Kirtly, 2016) in the same way that Gran wrote *Come Closer* (Gran, 2003) as someone who believes in mental health and the danger in deconstructing one's identity. Hendrix discusses how exorcisms in real life are a test of religions faith, "but to talk

about them in fiction, they're a metaphor" (Kirtly, 2016). The existence of the demon isn't as integral as the metaphor behind the demon.

Tremblay approached his novel with a desire to explore reality television rather than religion. He "decided to have the reality show come in to muddy up what's real and what's not. What's staged and isn't staged" (Kirtly, 2016). His book is not about an exorcist and religious belief, but is a parody of reality television. It is never clear what is real in reality television, and this is evident in his book – it is not clear which parts of the possession are fabricated for entertainment purposes and which are not. The possession is a debate, which makes it very different to *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971) where the possession was definite. This is an example of how one can explore other issues within demonic horror than just demonic possession, and about how ambiguity, as a newer trope in demonic horror, can be used.

The interview provides insight into new interpretations of demonic horror. Rather than having to stick rigidly to religious interpretations, one can explore the ambiguity and the notion of "what's really going on here?" Suspense can come from us not knowing whether the victim is crazy or possessed, and this is how demonic horror has developed.

Chapter Two: Hypothesis on The Repressed

There is a consistency in the way the reflection of society can be interpreted in the demon of each of the novels I discuss. This is evident in the manifestation of what a society represses and those who take the role of oppressors.

Freud emphasised the power of the subconscious. As part of this emphasis, he wrote a paper on his interpretation of dreams (Freud, 1899) where he presented two theories that are relevant to horror:

- 1/ In a society with forced monogamy and restrictions on behaviour there is going to be a lot we repress to adhere to societal constructs.
- 2/ What is repressed must always find a way to be released; this is what dreams are.

Robin Wood adapted this theory of dreams to his theory of why we enjoy horror – except he changed ‘dreams’ for ‘horror movies’ (Wood, 2018). It is his belief that we enjoy horror movies because they feature what we repress in our everyday lives.

I originally believed that demonic horror reflects society much as Robin Wood proposed, with the repressed represented in the demonic horror novel as a whole. However, greater emphasis should be placed on the context of the demon itself. In each text, the subconscious of the author has absorbed unspoken feelings of the world around them, including feelings society has repressed, and these feelings are revealed in their representation of the demon. The behaviour and the context of the demon in the fictional world reflects what is unsaid, feelings that are quelled, and thoughts people are unable to vocalise about political and/or feminist movements occurring when the text is written. This can be what those at the forefront of the movement have felt the need to repress, or it could be how a patriarchal society views the movement.

Payne noted that, whilst horror demonstrates concerns that “may stem from societal threats such as misogyny, racism, ableism and homophobia”, these concerns “may also reflect the feelings of being threatened by feminist, Asian, black, disabled, and queer communities too” (Payne, 2022). Horror shows us what people don’t wish to admit they dislike because it might

be inappropriate, met with hostility, or resented by those it offends⁶ – and, as such, those concerns are repressed, and are manifested in the demonic entities being created during an era when such thoughts and feelings are commonly restricted, such as Regan in *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971) reflecting what the patriarchy disliked about teenage girls during second-wave feminism.

Wood highlights the difference between basic repression and surplus repression. For Wood, “basic repression is universal, necessary, and inescapable. It is what makes possible our development from an uncoordinated animal capable of little beyond screaming” (Wood, 2018) – this is a repression that we are aware of. Surplus repression, however, “is specific to a particular culture and is the process whereby people are conditioned from the earliest infancy to take on predetermined roles within that culture” (Wood, 2018). It is the surplus repression caused by conformity specific to a culture, and an internal resistance to roles we are expected to take on within it, that is represented in the demon.

It is also relevant that “what escaped repression must be dealt with by oppression” (Wood, 2018). This leads me to acknowledge another central character (or characters) in demonic horror – the oppressor(s). If the demon represents the repressed, then those that try to defeat the demon represent the oppressors. The demon is trying to act in the way it wishes to act without the restriction of repression – therefore the characters we see as the heroes, often the ones fighting the demon, are the oppressors attempting to tell the repressed/demon how they should behave. The book/film portrays the oppressors as the righteous as they teach values to the demon that we, on the surface, identify with.

Therefore, I propose that demonic horror stories come down to the following premise:

The Oppressor Vs The Repressed

Otherwise presented as:

The Hero Vs The Demon

This can be presented in many forms: priest vs girl, parents vs child, husband vs wife. The oppressors see themselves as just, trying to teach the unrepressed how to conform to

⁶ The demon, as highlighted by Carroll’s description of the horror monster, is a “disturbance of the natural order” (Carroll, 1990); its behaviour violates society’s unspoken contract of behaviour that keeps the *natural order* – the demon evokes the anxiety we feel when someone acts in a manner that breaks social norms. We may find relief in seeing the character’s conquest of the demon’s unacceptable behaviour vanquished, but it is also likely that we also find catharsis in witnessing the demon acting in a way we are taught is taboo. As children, it is the “natural order” for us to say and do things that are inappropriate, yet society impresses on us from a young age that this behaviour is the “disturbance” (ibid) The demon allows us to return to the time when we could say or do what we feel.

society so that they can continue to repress and fit in, whilst the repressed see themselves as trying to be liberated from the social norms dictated to them by the oppressors⁷. Henceforth, when I refer to ‘repressed’ or ‘oppressor’, this is the concept I am referring to.

I refer to some of the following texts in more detail in subsequent chapters, but for now, I will briefly outline how they fit the oppressor vs repressed hypothesis.

In *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971), a teenage girl turns into a sex obsessed, potty-mouthed, repulsive teenager, and must be cured by two celibate priests – this is showing us how the male patriarchy viewed the teenage girl in the 1970s at a time of second-wave feminism and sexual liberation; that teenagers were becoming unruly, sexually vulgar, and ignoring the oppression of their parents. Those in charge did not like the sexually liberated women and outspoken teenagers, and the demon is the way a patriarchal society viewed how teenagers acted at this time. The increasing hostility of protestors toward patriarchal values meant such views were often repressed, and it is in the demon that this repression is presented, while the oppressors are presented as priests wishing to teach the girl to repress.

In *The Entity* (Felitta, 1978), a woman is repeatedly raped by an anonymous, invisible ghost, and friends and experts disbelieve the rape has happened. In the 1970s and 1980s, many men saw second-wave feminism as a threat to their “masculinist right-wing politics” (Harrington, 2021) – at the same time, many women resented victim-blaming culture, that rape convictions resulted in such small sentences, and men who resisted progress because they held “very traditional attitudes toward women” (Walker, 2016). There is both a repressed dislike of the women’s movement, and a repressed dislike of how rape accusations were being handled, that are presented in this novel through the disparity between the oppressor (the ‘rational’ in the form of the psychiatrist, family and friends) and the repressed (the disbelieved in the form of Carlotta, and the angry patriarchy in the form of the entity.)

In *My Best Friend’s Exorcism* (Hendrix, 2006), the demon is the physical, mental and sexual maturity that occurs in adolescence, and contrasts with the adolescent Regan from *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971). Instead of the foul-mouthed, sexually violent demon in *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971) from the 1970s, in *My Best Friend’s Exorcism* (Hendrix, 2006) the demon makes the possessed teenage girl wear make-up and date boys. The darker side of female bullying is present through her shunning friends, manipulating her friends into self-harm, and acting in a way that is uncharacteristically nasty; she is how the unaccepted side of female adolescence can be perceived, and the oppressors are the ones teaching her how society would prefer her

⁷ Thomas Hobbs believed that humans were “selfish, driven by fear of death and the hope of personal gain” and that “without sovereignty (...) everything would fall apart and society would decompose into separate people ready to tear each other to pieces” (Warburton, 2012). Here is an alternative description of this – the sovereignty is the oppressor ensuring human’s true nature, the repressed, does not succeed. Without society to act as the oppressor, the demon/repressed will allow human’s true nature to prevail.

to act – such as her friend who is studious and well behaved, her parents who teach her how to present herself as a well-presented middle-class girl, and the priests who teach celibacy.

In *A Head Full of Ghosts* (Tremblay, 2015), the girl (the repressed) has become mentally ill and/or vindictive through neglect. Whether by her parent's (the oppressors) disregard for her wellness, or how the reality television show uses her, she is the result of what happens when abuse goes unchecked. A report by the National Institute of Justice found that "68% of the incarcerated male felons reported some form of childhood victimisation before the age of 12, either physical abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect" (Travis, 1998). Perhaps we are far more aware today of what can happen when a child suffers abuse, even if we still struggle to identify covert abuse – meaning that we fear what a child will become if abuse is left undiscovered, which is reflected in the way the demon makes Marjorie behave; she is the guilt society represses over what becomes of abuse victims it fails to help.

Chapter Three: What is a Demon?

In demonic horror literature and film, the meaning of ‘demon’ is usually straightforward. It is an abhorrent, evil creature that is not of this world, and possesses its victim to torment them and destroy their lives. It is an antagonist that rarely has a motivation beyond being evil for ‘the sake of being evil’ – something contrary to story-telling etiquette; if any other story presented an antagonist without deeper motivations, it might be seen as poor writing. In *Halloween* (Zombie, 2007), Michael Myers increases his murder count in his desire to find his sister. In *Misery* (Reiner, 1990), the antagonist is consumed by an obsession with her favourite author. In *Us* (Peele, 2019), the antagonists have been forced to live in a world where they don’t have as much as their counterparts, so take the lives of those who have more. Each of these antagonists has a motivation behind their evil acts which, whilst not necessarily making them likeable, gives them a purpose – it adds value to the story, as the antagonist believes they are just as motivated as the protagonist. Yet, in stories such as *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971), our villain is being evil just for the sake of being evil. There is no deeper motivation; they are just tormenting their victim because they are evil. So why do we still engage with these villains when they go against a crucial aspect of storytelling?

In these demonic horror stories, the demons are often taken from existing religious or occult mythology, but in almost all cases they deviate from their real-life mythology. Upon examination, we find that the real-life demons are not purely evil as the film or book portrays them – there exist layers to these demons that fans of demonic horror may not be aware of.

I provide evidence of several such demons in *Horror, Demons and Philosophy* (Wood, 2022). For example, the demon in *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971) is based on Pazuzu – as is made clear when the exorcist finds a statue of Pazuzu in an archaeological dig in Iraq that acts as an omen for what is to come. This location is geographically correct, as Pazuzu comes from Assyrian and Babylonian mythology, and was based mainly in Akkadia, which is roughly where Iraq is now located. The statue of Pazuzu, however, is often seen as a figure of protection, as it was believed to be in a constant battle with a demon called Lamashtu, a demoness said to bring death to unborn children and newborn babies. Pregnant women and mothers with young infants used to keep statues of Pazuzu in their homes, and often wore figures of Pazuzu as amulets around their neck to protect their young. Pazuzu was also known for bringing famine and locusts, which is never mentioned in the book or film. This is in contrast

to the vulgar, sexual and sadistic portrayal of Pazuzu in *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971), which displays no links to the mythology of Pazuzu's character. It is also worth mentioning that Pazuzu is exorcised in *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971) with Christian rituals, despite real-life Pazuzu predating Christianity.

Similarly, in *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), Emily Rose is possessed by six demons. One of the demons is Nero, the fifth emperor of Rome in 37-68 AD, who is said to have persecuted and killed Christians, and to have executed the apostles Peter and Paul. However, alternative stories portray Nero as a ruler who built amphitheatres, banned capital punishment, and allowed slaves to bring complaints against their owners. She was also possessed by Judas Iscariot, the disciple of Jesus who betrayed Jesus, therefore resulting in Jesus's crucifixion. However, it has long been understood that some gospels were excluded from the bible, and this includes Judas's, which was discovered in 1978 by an Egyptian antiques dealer, though it wasn't officially translated and released until 2006. In this gospel, Jesus tells Judas that Judas understands him better than the other disciples, and that he needs Judas to give him to the Romans so he can leave the mortal body in which he is trapped. If this is the case, then Judas is far more divine than any other apostle.

Fr. Jose Antonio Fortea highlights that demons were not necessarily "created evil", but that they are fallen angels, banished by God for disagreeing with the way He ruled – "those who rebelled saw God no longer as good – as the Good – but as the oppressor of their freedom" (Fortea, 2012). In the Old Testament, when looked at objectively, God rules as a tyrannical dictator – whilst Satan is responsible for 10 deaths in this book, God is responsible for 2,038,344 (Brownlee, 2007). Demons were former angels created after being ejected from Heaven for challenging His tyrannical rule; if this was a real-life situation involving humans, and the humans rebelled against a such a ruler, they may be seen as freedom fighters bringing about revolution rather than anarchy.

If we go further back in time, we find an even more complex interpretation of demons, where "the ancient Greeks used the word *daimon* to refer to gods, especially minor gods, as well as souls of the dead" (Gershon, 2021). Daimons/demons were spirits, and were often used as "Hebrew terms referring to a number of different concepts, including pagan gods, human-animal hybrids, and diseases" (ibid). Whilst recent religious interpretations view good and evil as clear-cut, the origin of the daimonic suggests otherwise.

May defined the daimonic "as any natural function which has the power to take over the whole body" (Sperber, 1975). It is not exclusively a supernatural entity, but anything that consumes us, such as depression, physical illness, decay, or anger. He states that "it is not possible to suppress the daimonic, even if this were deemed desirable, for it would only erupt explosively later" (Sperber, 1975) – much like the repressed, one can only keep repressing for so long until what is repressed is released – in this case, in the form of the daimonic. May

also observes that religion's interpretation of "the splitting of daimonic forces into devils and angels" means that "much is lost" – that there is more to the daimonic, which can be "destructive [...] or creative, like Michaelangelo or Van Gogh" (Sperber, 1975). The daimonic, he suggests, is not just an outlet for evil, but can also be an outlet for creativity, and modern interpretations have moved away from the original concept.

So why do modern texts portray demons as absolute evil? I suggest it provides comfort to remove the layers and perplexities of evil that we confront every day, thus allowing our minds to organise and simplify the horrors of the world into one easily defined evil entity.⁸ We crave organisation and struggle with the complexity of evil, and the suppression of something as complex as demons and the daimonic into a defined, straightforward portrayal of evil reduces the anxiety caused by the disorganisation and everyday terror. From this perspective, the demon is "an unacceptable archetype from the collective unconscious, repressed behind the persona, which is dealt with by projection" (Sperber, 1975). It represents an image (*archetype*) of what we as a society (*the collective unconscious*) find taboo and/or threatening (*unacceptable*), thus allowing us to *project* this image onto this entity. If the demon, instead of just representing absolute evil, represents the evil we repress, deny or ignore, then the demon gives us a figure of hate that represents those things – if the entity in demonic horror is a visual organisation of all the evil that we fear and contend with day-to-day, then we might feel catharsis in witnessing a battle against it⁹.

It is also worth noting that the demon in demonic horror is rarely seen in its true form, only in a victim. It is evil in the body of good. It represents "the radical betweenness which resists any closure of identity", suggesting that who we are is not set in stone, and this demon is the link between that good and evil that exists in the same body as something "forever beautiful and ugly, human and divine" (Gurevitch, 1998). It demonstrates the extremes that can exist in one identity. It is only in recent centuries that demons have been given definite appearances, through texts such as *Ars Goetia* in the mid-17th century and *The Dictionnaire Infernal* in 1818. Perhaps a demon is something abstract that, in attempting to define within human limits and

⁸ In his book *The Prince* (Machiavelli, 1532), Machiavelli shows that he thought very little of humans, stating that they were "ungrateful, fickle, liars and deceivers" (Harrison, 2011) – which would make them not too dissimilar from demons. Machiavelli drew on the example of Cesare Borgia who, after discovering that the Orsini family were planning to overthrow him, tricked the Orsinis into coming to talk to him, then murdered them as they arrived. Similarly, Pazuzu tricks and deceives Karras in *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971) by imitating his mother, and Merry's sister tricks and deceives her through mind games in *A Head Full of Ghosts* (Tremblay, 2015) – in this sense, the demon is also a true Machiavellian leader.

⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed we need rules for society to be free, which he termed The General Will – a collective will held by a society to obey rules that allow us to be civil. For example, if we were ruled by our individual will, we would not pay tax, but we understand The General Will requires it. In demonic horror, the demon threatens The General Will as it goes against the enforcement of conformity we adhere to, and this may be where some of this everyday terror lies – it is the embodiment of deviant behaviour that threatens The General Will most of us obey. The General Will changes according to what society deems necessary or acceptable, and what must be repressed to adhere to our current The General Will appears in the form of a demon that threatens us.

concrete interpretations, we fail to understand.

The term “daimon” once referred “to something indeterminate, invisible, incorporeal, amorphous and unknown” (Diamond, 1996). It was not until “the second century BC” that we “used *daimon* to denote the evil spirits of the Hebrews” (ibid), which led to us associating the nature of evil with demons. This is similar to how ancient Greek gods were not seen as all-loving and perfect like the modern-day interpretation of the Christian god – Greek gods were seen as jealous, bitter and flawed beings who often undermined and back-stabbed each other. The need for good and evil is “promulgated by Western religious traditions” (ibid), and if we stop applying human rules to our perception of the daimonic, thus liberating the concept from the constraints of the limited modern human imagination, we begin to understand demons as an abstract concept without form or values. Much as a person views a soul as intangible and often indefinable; as something we know but can’t touch; as something existing between science and philosophy; hard to distinguish, recognise or identify; as an incorporeal, intrinsic part of nature that exists somewhere we are unable to conclusively explain; then removing such restrictions will help us understand how our ancestors saw the demon/daimon – as something neither good nor evil, not because it does not commit good or evil actions, but because it does not obey human notions of right and wrong, and does not seek judgement or pass judgement on itself, therefore cannot perceive itself as good or evil as such concepts do not exist within its reality.

This is why “for most modern readers, the intangible idea of ‘the daimonic’ may be difficult to grasp” as “we believe that unless we can weigh, measure or otherwise objectively quantify the subject of our study, it must not exist” (Diamond, 1996). Abstract concepts are difficult for the modern mind to grasp, therefore prompting us to use demons as a face for evil, rather as the indeterminable beings they were originally portrayed as. It is through “the archetypal human capacity to create symbols, myths or models as a means of describing phenomenal experience” (Diamond, 1996) that we can explore the original interpretation of the daimonic – instead of concrete modern assertions of the way demons should be presented, we could find a compromise between our modern perceptions and the original concept of the daimonic by seeing demons as a symbol.

For Freud, the demon was another word for the id or the unconscious. He believed “the id is, by definition, ‘amoral,’ it is not the least bit concerned about such insignificant matters as good and evil” (Diamond, 1996). Our id is our animal instinct, and animals don’t commit good and evil, as it is something humans have created. Therefore, is our id our demon? If the id does not follow concepts of good and evil; if it is intangible, abstract, and disobeys human rules; then the id appears to be similar

Jung’s theory of the shadow, much like the id, “was mainly a metaphorical means of addressing the prominent role of ‘the unconscious’” – it is “the hidden, repressed, for the most

part inferior and guilt-laden personality whose ultimate ramifications reach back into the realm of our animal ancestors” (Diamond, 1996). This definition of the shadow is also an apt definition of a demon; Jung also believes that “mania, daimon and God are synonyms for the unconscious” (ibid), and therefore a representation of the manifestation of our unrestrained animal instinct.

May highlighted the prominence of “the things that horrify us most, and which we repressed whenever we can, or most likely, project on others” – the demon is the unconscious projected, the metaphysical condensed into a detestable image, and if “we are continually affected by (...) our culture and each other” (Diamond, 1996), then it means what we repress is affected by our culture; the demon acts as the repressed feelings of a society in the form of a villain that represents absolute evil. Without the need for more complex character motivations as required in other antagonists, the demon provides a simplified symbolic version of the complex concept of instincts that exist without regard for good/evil. The daimonic provides a figure to project our unknown, unconscious, or hidden animal instincts onto, and allows us to wage war against it through a protagonist¹⁰.

In this way, the demon is symbolic of the abject we reject out of disgust, but which doesn't truly leave us; it is the “horror caused by the non-object that weakens the boundary between subject and object, Self and (M)other, that threatens meaning, structure, and everything that has been created” (Alexander, 2023). When Kristeva describes abject as something that “does not respect borders, positions, rules”, as the “traitor, the liar, the criminal,” and as “a hatred that smiles,” (Kristeva, 1982) she could also be describing the representation of a demon in demonic horror. Much like Kristeva's description of the abject, when a demon (or the repressed/id/shadow) is believed to have possessed its host, this demon fragments that person's personality into wanted (non-demon) and unwanted (demon) characteristics, thus forcing the possessed to cross between the boundary of self and non-self, of a person who is and isn't, and is something “which must be pushed out, that which must be *abjured*” (Alexander, 2023). The reaction of others to unwanted characteristics in the form of the demon is that of “‘othering’ by which means we establish clear boundaries between those who are ‘normal’ and those who are deemed to be different” (Rizq, 2013). The person who exhibits

¹⁰ Descartes believed that “bodies, as physical entities, are determined by the laws of the physics; but minds have free will” (Searle, 2004). This is why demonic possession is internal – whilst possession may have negative physical effects on the body, it is ultimately an infestation of the mind, and thus a battle against our free will. While we are possessed, the demon has control, and we do not have free will, reflecting our internal battle of intellect vs instinct. Instinct is the “unseen” that often acts “beyond expectation” whilst intellect “examines the results”, “asks questions of them” and tries to “understand its own instinct” (Milward, 2020) – for us to have free will, our intellect must exist. One might argue that free will is a delusion, and whilst we believe we are ruled by our intellect, we still have the instinct that guided us as animals for thousands of years. In this context, the demon is instinct, and the host is intellect; whilst we believe that our intellect gives us free will, the demon reminds us that the animal instinct that prioritises survival that makes violence necessary is still present, and demonic horror reminds us that our intellect can fight it.

abject behaviour is seen as Other, but the demon allows this person to project the characteristics that make them the Other onto a demon, therefore still having a chance of social acceptance by alleviating themselves of responsibility for the Other's behaviour.

This is further supported by Mandolini, who regards the abject as "what once belonged to the 'I' and was later discharged because it was considered excessive or threatening" (Mandolini, 2023). The demon exhibits behaviour that is threatening to the balance of a society and thus defined as deviant behaviour. When these characteristics exist in a person, the belief in the existence of a demon allows them to be abjected into something that is "expelled by the Self", existing in the behaviour of the person as the Other, thus causing "a constant tension" in "the lack of meaning and borders that the abject represents" (Mandolini, 2023), acting as an "unconscious reminder of the existence of the 'monstrous' other within the self" (Rizq, 2013). A border exists between the person and the demon believed to possess the host, which is created by "the unconscious abjection of those that do not fit within set standards" and is "connected to the people cultures and ideas that the individual is exposed to" (McCabe & Holmes, 2011) – the abject exists as demon as it is opposed to the standards in the culture and ideas that the person is exposed to, and the presence of the demon exists as a way of coping with the abject's existence.

One could liken the disgust response to abjection to the process of exorcism that is performed to free the supposed possessed of its demon, existing as a "perpetual attempt by the subject to expel something of the self that is deemed to be repulsive or untouchable" (Rizq, 2013). The "process of normalisation" where the "abject requires a mode of control in order to keep it at a safe distance" (Rizq, 2013) that occurs in disgust also occurs in an exorcism. The "first stage involves the confrontation with the object of disgust" (Arya, 2017), which is equivalent to the exorcist meeting the demon and demanding to know its name; the "second stage is the physical symptoms that convey the disgust response" (ibid) which are witnessed in those who claim to be possessed, such as vomiting or vile language; and the "third stage involves undergoing purification rituals" (ibid) to remove the disgust, which is the equivalent of the Rites of Exorcism being performed. From this perspective, the demon is the abject, and the exorcism is the process of removing the response of disgust as a way of fighting the abject.

The abject is a way of framing the demon from a psychoanalytical point of view with an abstract lens. However, it still lends us a sense of ambiguity that suggests that, if the demon is the abject in the host, then it must contain parts of that host; meaning the demon must therefore contain the same complexities of good and evil that exist within a person.

But what does this mean for demonic horror fiction? Has there been a piece of demonic horror that moves away from the concept of absolute evil and looks at the different layers of a demon in a book or film?

This is discussed in chapter seven where I analyse a more recent demonic horror novel,

The Good Demon (Cajoleas, 2018), and its comparison to *The Last Days of Jack Sparks* (Arnopp, 2016), where the good or evil nature of the demon is given more layers than previously attributed in novels such as *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971). Similarly, in chapter five I discuss *Come Closer* (Gran, 2003), which links the demonic to the mental breakdown of the protagonist. I discuss how three novels use the concept of the demonic within the framework of the repressed vs oppressor, considering how the demon is represented and what this says about the culture and society in the way the demon is presented.

Chapter Four: My Best Friend's Exorcism, The Entity, and a Head Full of Ghosts

My Best Friend's Exorcism (Hendrix, 2006)

The Demon and its Links to Society

The eighties era is a central theme to *MBFE*, with frequent references to eighties pop culture, such as television shows and films (“she’d seen Olivia Newton-John in *Xanadu*” p.13), the friction of the cold war (“*60 Minutes* says even the Russian’s have seen *E.T.*” p.25), the items they use (“shone on the VHS box” p.29) and the music (“singing along to Like a Virgin” p.35). Every chapter title is the name of a song from the eighties, such as “We Got the Beat” (p.36) and “Party All the Time” (p.43).¹¹ Hendrix states that “friendship is obviously the strongest in high school” (Kirtly, 2016) so he set his novel during the eighties when he was at school. It was important for Hendrix to make the strength of friendship believable, as demonic possession is the tool he uses to explore the powerful nature of passionate adolescent bonds. This friendship is a platonic but passionate love between Abby and Gretchen, and it is their friendship that has the power to exorcise the demon at the end of the novel. The friendship is emphasised throughout, such as when the girls invent their own sociolect by saying “DBNQ” (p.42) to each other to express their love (standing for ‘dearly but not queerly’) and believe that “the word friend could draw blood” (p.12). However, I suggest an alternative theory why Hendrix may have subconsciously set the novel during this era.

With friendship being a powerful force of the novel, Hendrix needed to set the story at a time when one believed in the power of friendship. In today’s society, “the feeling of playing second fiddle to a smartphone is an emerging anxiety in many modern relationships; romantic, friendship, family, work or otherwise” (Kelly, 2016), suggesting it is tougher for young adults

¹¹ The film adaptation was criticised for failing to place the same importance on the eighties that the book did. Johnson states “the book had references galore from *E.T.* to Tiffany’s ‘I Think We’re Alone Now,’ yet the movie just throws in a few 80s bangers and calls it a day” (Johnson, 2022), suggesting that the setting of eighties America is integral to this book.

today to create a friendship as powerful as Abby and Gretchen's. The reader must believe the friendship is powerful enough to defeat a demon – but would one be able to believe in the power of friendship between two millennials or generation z's? This reasoning behind Hendrix's choice provides a statement about our current world – that teenage friendship in today's society often struggles to be as intense, long-lasting or meaningful as it used to be.

Demonic possession also acts as a metaphor for female adolescence. Most of Gretchen's actions while she is possessed are actions widely considered to be common in teenage girls, but Hendrix presents them as acts of demonic activity. This can be seen in Gretchen's rebellious behaviour, responses to sex, fixation on her appearance, and peer-on-peer bullying.

Gretchen has an oppressive upbringing, with her parents having pointless rules such as how "Gretchen could only have six magazines and five books at a time" (p.31), and her demon makes her rebel against this upbringing, though her actions could just as easily have been a young girl's response to her mother and father's overly authoritarian parenting styles. Despite the image her parents present, there underlies a sinister undercurrent to their attitudes, such as when they'd see a "black person" in their neighbourhood and would "ask if he was lost" (p.31). Both her parents and her school teach Gretchen that sexual thoughts and activity are something to be ashamed of, such as when her school tells their students that virginity is "your most valuable gift" (p.91). Throughout this talk on chastity, Gretchen feels someone touching her, and this continues when she feels the demon touching her, representing unwanted male attention. When she confronts boys she believes are touching her, they say "she's psycho" (p.93), thus making her feel dirty for the inappropriate attention of males and reflecting "societies' complicit attitude towards the silencing of women and victims" (Payne, 2022). Her desperation to avoid unwanted sexual attention to her developing body means she refuses to change her clothes so she can "stay covered" and refuses to shower "because when he sees my skin, he tears it" (p.141). The demon's constant touching of her body reflects the notion "that women are merely the receptacles for male will and desire" (Lurie, 1980), and that it's her responsibility to cover up, rather her assailant's responsibility to stop.

Despite this, Gretchen's demon/adolescence makes her converse in an increasingly sexually explicit manner in order to impress her peers, such as telling her friend's boyfriend "you say you love her but only so she'll do you" (p.99), which is in contrast to her timid manner of speaking before her possession/adolescence. After these accusations, she "leaned forward and threw up" (p.99), as if the demon was punishing her for the sexual nature of what she's saying, conveying the guilt her school and parents have embedded in her. As the novel progresses, her dialogue becomes more sexually explicit, such as discussing a "preschool in California that was molesting little kids in tunnels underneath the classrooms" (p.116), but she does not throw up as the demon has full control of her; or *adolescence* has full control over her.

Abby finds this change in Gretchen difficult as Abby is the last of her friendship group to mature, as shown when she still uses childish phrases such as “totally humiliating” (p.87). She perceives Gretchen as someone who appears “older, like she could get into clubs” (p.116), unlike Abby, who still looks young and fears being left behind. Biro suggests that “girls who mature earlier than their peers have a greater likelihood of mental health issues, as well as engaging in risk-taking behaviours” (Biro, 2020); Gretchen has matured earlier than Abby, meaning the character who’s been ‘dirtied’ by the onset of adolescence first is the character whose soul is ‘filthy’ enough to be possessed. Gretchen’s rebellious adolescence continues to be conveyed as possession through actions such as singing “Dixie Land” (p.120) at her parents when they discipline her; wearing “United Colors of Benetton perfume” (p.131); caring more about her appearance such as changing her hair, “the long blond frizz was gone, replaced by a tight halo of curls that hugged her scalp, showing off her neck, suddenly giving her cheekbones” (p.173); and becoming obsessed with her weight, counting with her friends how many “carrot sticks” and “grapes” they’ve had (p.195).

The most upsetting change is when Gretchen bullies Abby. Whilst teenage boys are more likely to be physically violent, “psychological violence is the most common type of violence reported by adolescent girl[s]” (Joppa, 2020), such as rejection from a social group. She convinces her friends to leave Abby out of the group, saying “I don’t know why she’s following me around” (p.175) before engaging in sexually explicit talk that Abby doesn’t feel comfortable with, describing their teacher “Father Morgan” as “Father Morgasm” (p.176).

Her female adolescence conveyed as demonic possession reflects the negative way society perceives female puberty, such as when Gretchen’s parents say that their daughter’s condition “is an unfortunate sickness of the mind and spirit that happens sometimes as girls grow up” (p.146). Abby describes Gretchen’s parents as “uptight Reagan Republicans who spent every Sunday at St. Michael’s downtown, praising God and social climbing” (p.32) – they are more concerned with their family’s image than their abuse of Gretchen. This starts small, with Gretchen’s mother chasing “her daughter between the twin beds, hitting her with a hairbrush” (p.36) for playing with makeup, or when her mother “waited for her to go to school and then cleaned Gretchen’s room, hunting for notes, digging through trash, searching the underwear drawer” (p.143). This escalates to her parents taking her to a doctor for a physically invasive exam to see if she “was a virgin” (p.105). Their well-presented middle-class image hides the abusive nature of their parenting style, and when Abby – a working-class character – accuses them of mistreating their daughter, they deflect blame on her, saying “you have poisoned our daughter and our family” (p.150), reflecting a perception of attitudes associated with the upper-class that involve blaming those in a lower social class for their problems rather than recognising their lack of privilege. This behaviour demonstrates how abusive behaviour can go unnoticed, particularly in those with privilege who portray an honourable image. Their

negative reaction to Gretchen's adolescent changes is unacceptable, yet easy to keep concealed.

The perceptions and feelings that arise during female adolescence reveal themselves through the nature of the demon; it is the repressed patriarchal view of female puberty as monstrosity – also seen as the “symbolic othering” and “symbolic process of dehumanisation and exclusion” that occurs during “girls’ transition into femininity” in “heteropatriarchal societies” (Mandolini, 2023).

The Novel as Demonic Horror

Hendrix subverts reader's expectations by portraying the exorcist as youthful, incompetent, and relaxed, in contrast to the typical trope where the exorcists are old, wise men who heroically battle the demon, such as in *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971). The exorcist is young, muscular and arrogant, telling Abby that “I'm one buff specimen and they're just jealous I've got all this” (p.233). He makes fun of Abby's naivety compared to her friends whilst also drawing attention to his own socially unacceptable behaviour by asking her, “Do you know where babies come from yet?” (p.232). Before the exorcism, he says “Hot darn, I'm excited” (p.241), showing he is motivated by thrills rather than helping someone. During the exorcism, he flees like a coward, leaving it up to Abby to save her friend. This incompetency means the exorcist's religious knowledge and apparatus cannot be used, and Abby is left in a perilous position where she must use the only tool at her disposal – friendship – thus allowing Hendrix to emphasise the power of friendship in the novel, as it is the tool Abby uses to achieve victory over the demon.¹²

The use of an exorcist that contrasts with genre expectations creates a feeling of unease. The reader who is used to demonic horror has their expectations subverted, which creates a sense of discomfort, as the character we expect to be the hero becomes the fraud, thus emphasising that what appears good can be bad, and what appears bad can often be good. Female adolescence should not be feared, and abusive parents should not get away with their actions because of their privilege. Just like in the novel, society makes it difficult to know the truth.

¹² When speaking about the film adaptation, a reviewer wrote that “most exorcism films have strong religious undertones, of which *My Best Friend's Exorcism* is highly aware and attempts to challenge – doing so amusingly, even if it doesn't really take its criticism anywhere” (Ham, 2022). The presence of the exorcist provides the religious trope associated with most pre-2000 demonic horror novels, but the fact the power of friendship conquers the demon rather than religion rejects the notion that religion is still a requirement for demonic horror. As the reviewer implies, managing religion in this way can be interpreted as a statement against it, but references to the use of religion as part of the exorcism process are so underdeveloped that it's hard to pinpoint what the author's view on religion is.

The Entity (Frank De Felitta, 1978)

The Demon and its Links to Society

The Entity is based on a true story¹³ about a single mother who is repeatedly raped by a demonic entity – however, its reflection of society is almost as pertinent today as it was in the 1970s. The novel is about how society perceives victims of abuse, how men in privileged positions perceive abused women, and how the chivalrous and noble actions of men hide misogynistic values that perceive women as inherently vulnerable. Felitta depicts acts of victim-blaming that causes victims further trauma. Even though Carlotta’s enemy is the entity, the entity reflects that “domestic violence is a consequence of patriarchy” (Mshweshwe, 2020); she constantly battles with “the ever-present, repressive power of patriarchy itself” in a society that “cannot brook the notion of a woman running her own household free of male influence” (Bitel, 2017). This book demonstrates how harmful patriarchal expectations and beliefs are to women¹⁴.

The protagonist, Carlotta, is a working-class woman who has been frequently abused and abandoned by the men in her life. Felitta describes her house’s position on her street as “at the end” (p.10) as a statement about where she is in life, her jacket as “beige vinyl” to represent the monotony of her life, and she lives in a faulty house with “a broken heater vent that banged when the thermostat changed”, content that “welfare paid the rent” (p.10). She struggles to raise a family of three children alone whilst also attending secretarial school. Felitta’s phrasing, “Now she had to go to secretarial school” (p.9), clarifies that this is not her choice, but that secretarial jobs were one of few options for a single woman wishing to earn a living without being dependent on a man during the 1970s, a time where there was an “existing belief that the only roles in society for women were housewife/mother, secretary, teacher or nurse”

¹³ Whilst the book (and film) is based on a true story, many are sceptical about the validity of this. Reviewers stated that “*The Entity* promoted itself as being based on a true story, thereby leading millions of gullible dopes to buy the book”, that “it’s such a daft story in the first place that there’s no saving those who fell for it” (Brunson, 2019), and that the interpretation of the supposedly true story is biased as it is “clearly on the side of those who favour an external spirit” (Shepard, 1983). My discussion of this novel is a discussion of the fictional novel, not of a real-life account.

¹⁴ There are some who criticised the book and film for tackling these issues by claiming they were “being exploitative and creating an entertainment on the back of the very real suffering that such abuse causes” (Slarek, 2005). This criticism, however, seems to be a “prejudicial problem” because “this is not a social drama, it’s a horror film, and if all horror films are exploitation then this film must treat rape in an exploitative way” (ibid). I disagree with the idea that this book did not handle the subject matter well enough simply because it’s horror – although many horror films of the era were exploitative, horror is still a genre able to handle contentious issues if done correctly, and I did not find any difference in how Felitta handled the subject matter compared to books of other genres.

(Klein, 2018). Her situation demonstrates the unintentional negative consequence of second-wave feminism. While progress was made in the “1960s to the 1980s” toward “workplace equality”, “equality at home”, “reproductive rights” and “education equality” (MasterClass, 2022), there were also “competing anxieties emerging within second-wave feminism about what it meant to be liberated” as society still relied on women’s unpaid “reproductive labour” and “domestic slavery” (Brady, 2023). Not only were women being required to perform the same home and maternal roles, if they were single, they required to perform these roles whilst working in a low-income job with limited career prospects. Carlotta is an example of the woman second-wave feminism left behind when “the rising divorce rate left an increasing number of women as sole breadwinners and forced more and more of them into poverty” (Exploring the Seventies, 2009).

Men’s perception of Carlotta’s sexuality is important to her as she has grown up “knowing that at every turn you are being considered on your looks” (O’Connell, 2015), as is emphasised by the frequency at which Felitta describes her in ways that sexualise her, such as “she was nude underneath the robe” and “an aura of light bathed her shoulders” (p.11). Even her psychiatrist thinks of her as being “pretty” (p.11), as if her role as a woman is to look aesthetically pleasing to men in a society where “women are judged more by their looks than men” (Science in Poland, 2018). It is something that helps her to acquire male protectors, as suggested by how her “vulnerable quality” (p.11) is emphasised almost as much as her looks. She looked in the mirror and “studied her small breasts, the slim hips, seeing herself the way she knew men saw her” (p.11) to reassure herself that her appearance makes her worthy of a man as this is how society has taught her to determine her value.

The irony is that, within a few paragraphs of Carlotta thinking that “men never treated her roughly” (p.11), she is raped for the first time by the entity. As she is raped, Felitta changes from using short sentences that present Carlotta’s thoughts as quick, fleeting, and interchangeable, to long sentences with multiple clauses, such as “like a pole, a rough, crude post, things entered her, distended her, forced its way into her” (p.12). Previously, we had been riding along the rhythm of her thoughts, and now we are feeling the rhythm of the demon penetrating her, placing us in the position of the entity – we are the patriarchy metaphorically penetrating her.

Other people’s reaction to her abuse reflects the survivor’s typical experience, where they “often face formidable tasks of establishing their own credibility when dealing with reactions of others” (Schnieder, Mori, Lambert & Wong, 2008). Studies show men are “generally more likely than women to blame the victim and exculpate the perpetrator” (Angelone, Mitchell & Lucente, 2012), as occurs when her seventeen-year-old son insists “it was just a dream, Mum. A real humdinger” (p.14). After the second attack, their elderly neighbour helps, and is described as “a feeble old man” (p.18), showing how a teenager and an elderly man who did

not witness the attack are considered as superior in judging her experience of rape; a trait known to some behavioural scientists as “white knight” syndrome where “a man’s need to ‘rescue’ a woman often overrides his common sense” (Durr, 2013). As Billy and the neighbour discuss Carlotta’s abuse as if she isn’t there, she becomes aware that “the elderly gentleman was in the presence of a naked woman” (p.19); the men haven’t even given her the dignity of getting dressed while they discuss her. She says “Look. I’m fine. One of those damn crazy nightmares” (p.20), lessening her own traumatic experience to appease others who “minimise, condone and permit it” (Women’s Aid, 2020).

In the second chapter, the rape occurs again, and the entity degrades her by ensuring “that she was on all fours” to treat her like “that’s all she was, that place” (p.17) while using language to demean her such as “open, cunt” (p.18). The abuser is referred to as “*he*” in italics, providing him with anonymity as a metaphor; the entity represents all the men who have played their part in Carlotta’s abuse. “Domestic violence in heterosexual relationships is a consequence of patriarchy” (Mshweshe, 2020), and *He* isn’t given a name to encompass all whom this involves.

When Carlotta isn’t at home, the entity destroys “one thing after the other, angry, venting his fury on the objects at not finding Carlotta there” (p.28) as he feels entitled to her body. This reflects how her rape may not necessarily be motivated by the sex itself, but can be motivated by “power/control”, “anger”, “vindictiveness”, and “entitlement” (Angelone, Mitchell & Lucente, 2012). In this case, the abuser believes he has a right to exert control over Carlotta, as shown by his behaviour when she isn’t there to be abused.

When her friend tells Carlotta she’s imagining things, she says “you may have a point” (p.31), allowing others to create doubt in her own experience, highlighting a vulnerability that an abuser may exploit as he “affects emotions, as rationality and critical thinking fade into the background” (Nepryakhin, 2019). Despite this denial, the trauma is still clear when her naked body is described with dismal imagery such as “belly curved into the darkness” and “the pubic hair totally mingled in the black areas of night” (p.53), and when she watches a man preaching on television who holds up a bible and it “seemed to Carlotta that he had thrust it at her” (p.31). The emphasis is on the sexual connotations of *thrust*; even a holy Christian man poses the threat of sexual deviance, as he is still a man, thus making him either an abuser or disbeliever. Cindy suggests that Carlotta “should see a psychiatrist” (p.35), implying she is responsible for the abuse and it is she that needs to be fixed, not the abuser. Too often, women are “held accountable for sexual behaviour of both parties” (Angelone, Mitchell & Lucente, 2012), and “observers might hold the victim accountable for not exercising greater caution” (Schnieder, Mori, Lambert & Wong, 2008), reflected when Carlotta’s peer suggests Carlotta gets help rather than suggesting the abuser stops.

Before visiting the psychiatrists, she combs her hair and sees “in the mirror her face

seemed pretty once again” (p.38), reflecting how the validity of her story depends on her appearance. Psychiatrists were typically men, and “male observers attribute more responsibility to the victim, are more likely to perceive the victim’s behaviour as inviting the sexual activity and provoking the assault, and perceiving the victim as experiencing more pleasure from the assault” (Angelone, Mitchell & Lucente, 2012). The inappropriate nature of this is highlighted when she describes her psychiatrist as “a tall boy” who’s “younger than she was” (p.53) and reveals that “she felt humiliated” (p.62). When she says she was raped in her home, he says “I see” (p.62), hinting at disbelief rather than comfort. The doctor “congratulated himself on having kept a perfect calm thus far” (p.63), under the disillusion that he’s reacting in the right way. He suggests she was raped in a “metaphorical way”, asks whether she tried “to resist” (p.64) her rapist, and asks whether she’s “taken drugs” (p.65), reflecting the persistence of victim-blaming in a society where “men, compared to women [...] are more likely to believe that the woman really wanted it or that it was justified” (Basow & Minieri, 2011). Studies found that “men perceive higher levels of victim sexual intent and engage in more victim blaming” (Maurer & Robinson, 2007), showing this is representative of a common experience for a victim, especially for a woman like Carlotta who is seen as “fragile, passive and submissive” (Angelone, Mitchell & Lucente, 2012) with an unconventional home life; she is a single mother, and her son is from a “different father” (p.11) to her daughters. “Woman’s worth is minimised to how men or a specific man, like a father, value her” (Mommy, 2020), reflecting how the psychiatrist’s perspective of Carlotta will be unjustifiably regarded as more important than Carlotta’s recollection of her own experience.

When the doctor discussed the case with his mentor, he “trembled with excitement” (p.68) as he is fascinated by a case of potential psychosis. He thinks about “hallucinations” (p.68) without entertaining the notion that her story was real. He even congratulates himself that “he had calmed her down, had ridden down her hysteria and she made contact” (p.69) Ultimately, he was pleased he had such an interesting case and “could have hoped for nothing more” (p.69). This is indicative of the cold, detached way many victims talk about being treated in a society where “sexual assault victims do not receive equal treatment compared with victims of other violent crimes” (Safronova & Halleck, 2019). His mentor belittles Carlotta by saying “she’s masturbating” and describes her trauma as a “circus” before referring to her as “a little girl” (p.116) – such demeaning, patronising comments demonstrate how unattached and unempathetic he is toward her. They consider her to have “hysterical neurosis” (p.69) – a label that has many sexist implications, as hysteria was historically believed to be “caused by a disturbance of the uterus or womb” (Dent, 2009) and the psychiatrist’s frequent use of this word only highlights the misogyny their characters reflect.

This is not the only mistreatment by men Felitta highlights. Throughout the book, Carlotta is abused and abandoned by a succession of men that each contribute to her negative

situation in life. The first experience is by her parents, whose abuse existed “in the gestures that they communicated”, and how “broken dishes”, “smashed glasses” and “tension” would somehow be “Carlotta’s fault” (p.44). The expectation was that “girls growing up in the 50s would have been exposed to models such as the housewives in *Leave it to Beaver*, *The Donna Reed Show* and *Father Knows Best*” (Hauser, 2012), meaning her childhood would have given her aspirations of being a housewife whose role was silence and subservience. Such “rigid sex-role socialisation patterns” leave “women with a sense of ‘learned helplessness’ so that they do not develop appropriate skills to escape from being further battered” (Walker, 2016), thus making her more likely to accept the life of abuse she is subjected to.

Wealth was important to her parents, and she had to maintain the image they presented, such as when “she curtsied, she smiled, a dimpled, charming smile” – she was a “mechanical doll” who “dressed like a sunflower” (p.69). When she entered puberty, her parents treated her sexuality as sinful, as shown when she had her first period and “buried the underpants in the rose garden”, a metaphor for how she hides her adult woman’s body and “the curves, the soft concavities of herself” (p.45). Despite reaching puberty, her father tried to “bathe her” and “the touch of her father’s hand became a cold and repulsive thing to her” (p.46). At fourteen, she was “a grown female stuffed into the shape of a child” as her parents bought her “a dollhouse” and “floppy-eared animals” and other “child’s things” (p.46) in an attempt to delay womanhood, teaching her that her emerging sexuality was a negative thing. This backfired, as she attracted “rugged boys” who “loved the thrill of forbidden wine” (p.46), leading to destructive relationships. Her childhood trauma prevented her from gaining “proper attachment” (Jacobsen, 2017). She felt “the most profound sense of guilt that often affects survivors” (Hitz, 2016), and felt like the abuse was her fault. Ultimately, we see a view on life that 1950s-70s America wasn’t necessarily aware of – or, if they were, it was hidden, needing to be exposed.

The next man to contribute to the patriarchal abuse was her first husband, Franklin Moran, who she met when “she was only sixteen. Sometimes his hands got rough with her” (p.80). Mentioning her age before she mentions how he treated her suggests that she’s minimising her experience and making excuses for her abuser, which reflects a common trait in women who are abused. His masculinity is toxic, shown when “he was proud of his erection”, and made comments such as “I married me a frigid wife” (p.82) and “You’ll pay for this [not giving me sex]” (p.82). Another common trait of domestic abusers is to make their victim believe the abuse is their fault and that they “couldn’t manage on your own” (Women’s Aid, 2020).

Her second husband, Garrett, unknowingly contributed to patriarchal abuse, as his kindness comes from a belief that she is weaker because of her sex. He is shown as patronising when he considers how “she was so determined to be independent” (p.137) as if it’s endearing rather than empowering. Garrett helps her fix issues around her home and does

not ask for any compensation, financial or sexual, and this means “Carlotta wondered about him” (p.140) – being the only man who does not treat her like an object, she enters a relationship with him. However, Garrett continues to mentor her, and “in each thing he showed Carlotta, there was a lesson” (p.146). The relationship is unbalanced, and they are not equals – despite being the nicest of all the men she’s been with, Garrett still sees her as something metaphorically smaller than him, and more delicate; as something he needs to nurture and take care of. Garrett “disliked seeing anger” (p.146), a sign of his controlling nature. In the end, “he had fashioned something fine and delicate out her” (p.147), and he praises himself for being responsible for the delicate woman he perceives her as being. He saved her as he believes a woman needs to be saved, demonstrating how some men have an “idealised view of themselves as caretakers” that makes them “poignantly easy marks for women whose lives are filled with drama and chaos” (Durr, 2013).

In the end, Carlotta rejects the psychologist’s help and seeks help from parapsychologists instead. They set up a room in the university identical to her home and observe her in it. On the last day the entity appears and is witnessed by both the parapsychologists and the psychologists. However, the cameras do not capture images of the entity, reinforcing this lack of belief in both the victim’s and the witness’s stories. Even though these people witnessed it, they have no evidence, so the previous narrative of disbelief remains.

At the end, the entity appears to Carlotta as all the men from her life. At first, she sees her current partner leave her as he can’t cope with the trauma following her abuse. She sees her son’s muscles and realises he is just the same as all the other men who have hurt her. Franklin grabs her and calls her “a lousy, stinking hole” (p.371). Her father lashes her with a strap. The final man she sees is the entity who has abused her, and the entity is referred to as *he*, demonstrating that is a collective manifestation of all these men, as well as of patriarchy itself. The entity’s final words are not that of abuse but are of “my sweet... Carlotta...” (p.374), showing that the patriarchy presented in male-led-abuse has achieved exactly what it set out to achieve – that the woman is dependent on, and is nurtured by, patriarchal supremacy.

In the real-life case the novel is based on, the woman doesn’t get rid of the entity; she lives with the rapes, and this is also how the film version of the book ends¹⁵. However, in the novel, Carlotta descends into madness and must be taken care of by Dr Sniederman, which is what the psychiatrist wanted all along – to be Carlotta’s white knight and protect her. Perhaps this

¹⁵ A reviewer’s criticism of the film was that the finale is “dreadfully boring” and that the “shock ending” was that “there is no shock ending” (Hollis, 1983). Another said that “by the film’s end, the viewer has really learned little about the phenomenon than when one sat down to take it in”, adding “if your thirst is for horror, it will not be slaked. If your taste runs to psychiatry, you will not be satisfied” (Shepard, 1983). The criticism is that the film’s focus is on patriarchal abuse, meaning those who watch it for supernatural horror are disappointed with the lack of a final battle between heroes and demon. This is understandable, as the film is more of a statement about abuse than it is about the entity yet wasn’t marketed this way. However, whilst this may be what some people criticise it for, this is what I praise it for – it is a supernatural story with a much-needed message.

provides the male audience with a cathartic sense of relief that they can still be seen as the protectors, thus maintaining structured “gender hierarchies” (Harrington, 2021) during second-wave feminism when the patriarchal male may have been forced to reconsider their purpose. Ultimately, it is the men who dominate Carlotta that let her down, and she is confined to madness because of it.

Carlotta represents the repressed feelings of women who struggle to articulate, verbalise or understand the various ways they are abused, and the manifestations of the trauma this induces. The men in her life, such as the psychiatrists, her husbands and her son, represent the oppressors who deny a woman’s experience, and do not recognise the true nature of abuse and the effect it has on survivors. Carlotta’s experience is mirrored by many women, both now and during second-wave feminism, and the abuse culminates in the entity. The battle between the repressed and the oppressed reflects the plight of women who are forced to depend on abusive men then blamed for the trauma that subsequently follows¹⁶.

The Entity as a Horror Text

Creed stated that “Freud argues that a house almost always symbolises the human body and passageways the vagina” (Creed, 1993). If the house is symbolic of the body, it is apt then that the entity wrecks Carlotta’s house when he does not have immediate access to Carlotta, with him “venting his fury on the objects”, the bedroom “torn apart, piece by piece, as fast as possible”, and the “draperies” being “ripped like tissue paper” (p.26). This destruction reflects the damage the entity has done to her body; the home is where she cares for her children, where her maternal instinct is strongest, and if the house is her body, once it is destroyed, she can no longer use it to comfort or breastfeed as it “crack(s)” and is “torn apart” (p.26). Just as her body is violated, so is her home – just as she cannot feel safe in her home, her trauma as a rape survivor means she no longer feels safe in her body.

¹⁶ Tuck and Rae highlighted how many hauntings are about “the cost of subjugation” (Tuck & Rae, 2013). Haunted house films, for example, often reflect guilt about colonisation through a white family being haunted by the ghosts of an ancient or Indian burial ground their house is built on, as seen in *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980), *Pet Sematary* (Lambert, 1989), *Poltergeist* (Hooper, 1982), *Identity* (Mangold, 2003) and *The Amityville Horror* (Hooper, 1982). This reflects the US being “permanently haunted by the slavery, genocide, and violence” against Native Americans in colonisation, and that these atrocities can never be forgotten as “erasure and defacement concoct ghosts” (Tuck & Rae, 2013). Applying this theory to *TE*, the entity is the patriarchal attitude and exacerbation of rape culture that second-wave feminism attempts to erase. Although Carlotta isn’t guilty like the white characters in *TS*, *PS*, *P*, *I* and *TAH*, she reflects the attempt to erase the increasingly less relevant voice of feminism’s opposition during neo-liberal progression of 1970s US. Much like colonisation, the abuse of women throughout history can never be forgotten. The only difference is that, in *TS*, *PS*, *P*, *I* and *TAH*, the ghost is the person who has been historically abused, whereas in *TE*, the person being haunted represents the person who’s been historically abused. I suggest this reflects an attitude from the patriarchal viewpoint that it’s their opposition to progressive movements that’s now being erased and repressed.

Furthermore, *TE* can be seen as a gothic text by identifying Carlotta's home as her castle. The castle is an important aspect of gothic stories "as on the early Gothic, the castle is multifaceted: it is the established world conceived as enclosure and bondage, it is the retreat of the mind tortured by chaos, it is the sign of the failure of human aspiration, and it is the locale for the persistence of primal fear" (Punter, 2016). This perfectly describes the way Carlotta's home – her *castle* – acts as a metaphor for her body. It is her *established world* that involves *enclosure and bondage*, and she pays the penance of being an attractive single mother by living in almost-poverty (her *established world*), with her difficult position in life (her *bondage*) as a result of going against the patriarchal belief in the family unit. The house is the *retreat of mind*, as her mind is *tortured by chaos* when she suffers the trauma of being abused and abandoned. It is the *failure of human aspiration*, as she can't aspire to a greater life than the brink of poverty that divorce has left her in. And it is the place of the *persistence of primal fear*, with an emphasis on the *primal* – her existence is about her and her children's survival, like an animal living their *primal* life – and this primality becomes *fear* when she is concerned about losing the home (her body) to the entity, the main thing she can offer her children¹⁷.

In gothic texts "the castle represents a world which is terrifying because its limits cannot be known, but the rituals which govern its occupants' everyday life are even more terrifying in that they represent a kind of knowledge, but a neurotic knowledge which is condemned to circularity" (Punter, 2016). This describes Carlotta's predicament. She has become *condemned to circularity* – her life comprises motherly duties, secretary school and rape. Her routines continue ritualistically, and the *limits* of how far Carlotta can be pushed to madness *cannot be known*. The intensity of her attempts to sustain her suburban life despite her situation is a horror in itself; it is impossible for her to create a better life than the one she has, where she is permanently on the brink of poverty¹⁸.

In the gothic text *Expensive People* (Oates, 2009), the horror is "not really much to do with the violence, it is rather a continuing nausea" (Punter, 2016). Similarly, the constant threat of rape is almost as savage as the rape itself, and the descriptions of Carlotta's rape focus on how she experiences the *continuing nausea* of the pain, as shown in the extract found in Appendix A.

As the first rape scene occurs six pages into the story, Carlotta's home/body is destroyed

¹⁷ Whilst this link to the gothic genre is present in the book, the film was criticised for its omission, with one critic stating that "Furie [the director] doesn't play the gothic card at all, with drab LA settings adding a strange verisimilitude" (Film Authority, 2022).

¹⁸ The book was held in high regard by the majority of reviewers – one reviewer, however, described the book as having "overblown spectral droppings" and "Neanderthal dialogue" (Kirkus Reviews, 1978), clearly feeling the use of the entity and the character's dialogue did not engage them. Admittedly, the prose is not as embellished and poetic as many novels, and the entity's actions are not subtle, but this does not lessen the impact of the way the novel highlights issues of rape culture and men-on-women abuse.

straight away, bringing an immediate intensity to the novel. There are few references to what the entity is doing as the description emphasises the experience rather than the actions, such as “Carlotta felt ripped apart inside” and she “felt herself being torn apart” (p.12). A few decades previously, *Rosemary’s Baby* (Levin, 1968) had rape occur ‘off screen’, and it was only conveyed to the reader via a jumbled dream. In the 1970s, however, rape culture – the situation where societal norms “protect rapists, promote impunity, shame victims, and demand that woman make unreasonable sacrifices to avoid sexual assault” (Taub, 2014) – was becoming a better-known issue, and authors were becoming increasingly confident in creating graphic depictions of the horrors some women go through.

Compare the passage in Appendix A to the extract *American Psycho* (Ellis, 1991) in Appendix B, which was published two decades later. Unlike in *RB*, the rape happens ‘on-screen’, and there is no sympathy generated for the victim by the narrator. Unlike in *TE*, the rape is relayed through the first-person narration of the killer rather than the victim; the victim is an accessory used to tell the killer’s story. The writing features long sentences with multiple clauses, just as in *TE*, but the first-person narration provides a different effect to when Felitta uses this technique to portray Carlotta’s terror. Instead, Ellis makes Patrick Bateman’s first-person narration come across as matter-of-fact and emphasises the lack of remorse the killer has.

AP is primarily about upper-class consumerism in the eighties, as is emphasised by the fact he puts “brie” (Ellis, 1991) inside of his victim – a cheese that would be stereotypically found on a cheese board consumed at a middle- or upper-class party. When the entity in Felitta’s novel calls Carlotta a “cunt” (p.18, 26, 55, 56, 109, 203, 304), it is to convey how aggressive the assailant is, whereas in Ellis’s novel, Bateman’s frequent use of derogatory language – “smeared across her open cunt”, “this bitch’s cunt”, “outside of the pussy” (Ellis, 1991) – conveys the vulgarity of his actions and view of women, placing stronger emphasis on how he objectifies his victim; the woman’s pain is conveyed through what satisfies Bateman rather than her experience of it, such as “it fails to interest me”, “I’m hoping she realises”, and directly telling his victim “I hope this hurts you” (Ellis, 1991). When he refers to what he’s done to her, he does so in a passive sentence – “Brie has been smeared” (ibid) – and does not refer to the fact he’s done it, or take responsibility for what he does, reflecting an upper-class consumerist perspective where pleasure is prioritised at the detriment of the other’s trauma. Whilst *RB* and *TE* may use rape as part of a narrative that shows the detrimental effects of capitalism on women, *AP* uses rape to show how the consumerism aspect of capitalism is evident in upper-class men – both similar sentiments, but while *RB* gives enough sympathy toward the victim to have us experience her rape through a lucid dream and *TE* puts us in the point of view of the victim and how she suffers, *AP* uses vulgar, violent and sadistic rape to shock us, and uses the woman as an unimportant mechanism to convey the author’s

message.

Furthermore, whilst we gain a strong sense of realism through Felitta's description of Carlotta's experience, Ellis's graphic depiction of violence in *AP* is almost absurd. Compare this to a more recent novel, *The Woman* (Ketchum, 2011), an extract from which can be found in Appendix C. Ketchum's depiction of rape is almost comical. Ketchum embeds sexual words in the description as an innuendo – "his mouth has gone dry", "gum so hard it's gone soft again" – and has unusual, potentially comedic phrasing such as "his father drops trou", and ends one passage with a comedic pun in "something else hasn't gone soft on either of them" (Ketchum, 2011) The rapist corrects himself when he finds that his language is not sordid enough – "Her bush. No – her *cunt*" (ibid). One gets the sense this rape scene isn't taken seriously, reflecting a desensitisation society has developed toward feminists' negative response to rape culture in the decades since it was initially highlighted. More recent male authors appear to be unaware of, or desensitised to, the discussion of rape culture to the extent they are describing violent rape with such little sensitivity that they refer to it comedically.

Despite literature's depiction of rape becoming more violent and less sympathetic toward the victim in the latter stages of second-wave feminism, cinema didn't take as long to demonstrate its negative response. In the same year that *TE* was released as a novel, the film *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir, 1978) was released. *ISOYOG* is a rape-revenge film where the protagonist, Jennifer Hill, is gang raped, then uses her sexuality to trick her attackers and take her revenge through murder and castration. As Creed points out, "the three rapes in the first half of *ISOYOG* are filmed in a completely different way from the revenge scenes of the second half. Whereas woman-as-victim is represented as an abject thing, man-as-victim is not similarly degraded and humiliated. If anything, the death scenes of the male victims offer a form of masochistic pleasure to the viewer because of the way they associate death with pleasure" (Creed, 1993). Despite interpretations of a woman avenging her rape as being feminist by speaking to "the reality of a lot of women's fears" (Seventh Row, 2019), the main titillation of *ISOYOG* is the rape of the first half which borders on pornography, a genre of film that is understood by many feminists to be "the propaganda of misogyny" (LaBelle, 1980). This titillation allows the cathartic release of a patriarchal dislike of second-wave feminism to be disguised as empowerment.

There is an argument that Creed views this film through the perspective of a woman's fears, not a man's fears. Creed states the "woman-as-victim" is more "degraded and humiliated" (Creed, 1993) than the men, yet the castration Jennifer Hill commits is undoubtedly degrading. Creed herself even argues that the woman "represents the threat of castration" (Creed, 1993). In this way, the fate of Jennifer Hill and her rapists could be seen as equal in terms of horror. However, in horror, "the titillating attention given to the expression of female

desires, is directly proportional to the violence perpetrated against women” (Williams, 2015), suggesting the violent revenge Jennifer Hill enacts in the second half of the film justifies the satisfaction gained from her humiliation in the first half of the film. For this reason, the film is far from feminist, and is still evident of the male gaze, only this time it’s wearing a poor disguise.

Clover states *ISOYG* is not concerned about “male sexual nature per se (that is, the individual male’s sexual appetite) but with male social nature, or male sexual nature as it is constituted by group dynamic” (Clover, 1992). The film’s reflection of society is not necessarily about the physical act of rape that takes place, but what this rape represents, and how men contribute toward rape culture without being rapists themselves. The “group dynamic” (Clover, 1992) is an important aspect of this, as it reflects a common situation where women are referred to as sexual targets rather than as humans, and this is what the film highlights – that “we live in a rape culture in which all males – husbands, boyfriends, lawyers, politicians are directly or indirectly complicit and that men are thus not just individually but corporately liable” (Clover, 1992). Rape culture is both the cause and effect of the film’s events, and in this sense, Jennifer Hill remains the victim throughout.

The other central argument that the film is not feminist is that, whilst it may highlight rape culture, it also gives relief to men who feel guilty about rape culture. The emphasis is put on women to protect themselves rather than men to make changes as “there is some ethical relief that if women would just toughen up and take karate or buy a gun, the issue of male-on-female violence would evaporate” (Clover, 1992). When the male viewer sees the women taking revenge, they are “off the guilt hook that modern feminism has put them on” (ibid). Much like in *TE*, the rape itself is not necessarily about sexual pleasure, but about power, as “the immediate reason for the rape is male backlash; men rape when rape is the only way they have left of asserting their dominance over women” (ibid). Through the misogynist’s perspective, Carlotta is responsible for the attention she gets. She is sexual and attractive, as shown when she frequently looks in the mirror and reassures herself that she’s still pretty, representing the male view that a woman gains power over men through their sexuality; the assailants rape both Carlotta and Jennifer Hill to remove the “woman of her terrifying – but imaginary – powers before she can use them” (ibid).

In this way, *TE* and *ISOYG* (Meir, 1978) are alike in that they both highlight relevant aspects of rape culture. They draw attention to the issue and highlight how it is all men’s responsibility to both believe the victim and control their own behaviour. They also, however, give the male viewer some relief by alleviating responsibility; Carlotta is driven crazy, and a man is able to protect her, just as Jennifer Hill is able to stand up for herself and destroy the rapists – thus, the man is off the hook, as he is able to distance himself “from such toxic elements of masculinity” (Harrington, 2021). The men needn’t worry, as they will never have to accept full

responsibility while there are women who avenge themselves and men who are able to protect the vulnerable, abused woman. It is the patriarchal response to second-wave feminism that acts as the context for the creation of these two texts; it is the repressed reaction of both the abuser and the abused.

A Head Full of Ghosts (Paul Tremblay, 2015)

“‘Truth’ is a notion that either belongs to ordinary discourse, with multifarious meanings that can vary with intentions and concerns, or belongs to metaphysical and philosophical discourse, where its meaning is notoriously elusive.” (Mausfield, 2015)

A Head Full of Ghosts (Tremblay, 2015) is about a woman, called Merry, recounting her childhood to a woman who’s writing a book about events that occurred when Merry was young. Her sister, Marjorie, was (supposedly) possessed by a demon, and her family appeared on a reality television show about this possession to a keen audience.

Brecht believed in what he called “epic theatre”, which involved a theory he referred to as *verfremdungseffekt*, roughly translated as “defamiliarization effect’, ‘distancing effect’, or the ‘estrangement effect,’ and often mistranslated as the ‘alienation effect’” (Actor Hub, 2014)¹⁹. The purpose of this technique was to “to break the magic of the theatre and to startle periodically the spectator into realisation that he is attending only a performance, looking at actors, witnessing parables from which he should draw dispassionate conclusions” (Alter, 1964), and can be achieved by actions such as an a actor commenting “on what he shows”, use of “harsh stage lighting”, and “use of songs” to interrupt “stage action” – all performed to strip “the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality” (Actor Hub, 2014). Brecht intended to frequently interrupt the spectator’s immersion in a play, therefore prompting the audience to distance themselves from the action and consider the message being conveyed. Whilst Brecht’s theories were formed to influence theatre, Tremblay utilises several instances of *verfremdungseffekt* via literary techniques to alienate and defamiliarize the reader from what they are reading, thus forcing them to question what is reality and what is truth.

¹⁹ Although Brecht was a theatre practitioner from the 1900s, his devices are used in many films today. Examples are use of montage and titles in *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994), when one of the torturers picks up a remote control and rewinds the film we’re watching in *Funny Games* (Haneke, 2007) and presenting the film on a soundstage rather than on a built set in *Dogville* (Trier, 2004).

One of the prominent ways Tremblay achieves this is through the story's perspectives. Merry narrates the story, but does so through three differing perspectives that contrast in style:

- As a child, recalling events with a childish naivety where the reader may understand what is going on, but Merry doesn't.
- As an adult, having a mature conversation where the trauma caused by her childhood is evident.
- As a blogger under a pseudonym, analysing the reality television show her family took part in, told in a colloquial style.

The different versions of the narrative with conflicting accounts and contrasts in style often contradict each other and interrupt the reader's immersion in the plot, remove our belief in the story world, and force us to question the truth of the events we are given.

During the scenes when Child-Merry narrates, Tremblay uses a Brechtian technique where an actor would often comment "on the reputation and the skill of the story-teller" (Alter, 1964) by frequently interrupting the narration with interjections from Adult-Merry where she questions the integrity of the memory she is recounting. This occurs through comments such as "my memories mix with my nightmares" (p.17), "it's possible his quoting the Bible didn't actually happen" (p.19), "I could be misremembering" (p.88), and "I know it's probably a faulty or cross-wired memory" (p.272). Consequently, Tremblay constantly reminds the reader that the narrative is being delivered through the biased lens of a character – with each use of *verfremdungseffekt* drawing our attention to how unreliable their perspective is, and acting as a reminder that we should question what the character tells us. He repeatedly alienates us from our involvement in the story and forces us to question how well we can trust this information, and how well we can trust any information when it goes through the biases of both the communicator and the receiver.

These questions are the underlying subtext that is at the crux of this novel: What is truth? What is perception? How closely linked are the two? Tremblay achieves this by forcing us to question whether Marjorie is ill or possessed, how much truth is conveyed in the reality television show the family is part of, and how much we can rely on the character's story when their words are taken through the mud of their biases.

Truth is a concept that has been debated extensively. Storrs was clearly incorrect when he stated that "truth is the one thing that changes not and never decays" (Storrs, 1889), as historical knowledge shows that truth has changed drastically over time; society's truth was once that many women are witches and God controls the weather, but these truths have changed. Juries in courtrooms debate truth and their answer severely affects another's life. Humans debate truths about religion and politics, and each has their own version of their religious or political truth. If truth is so debatable, then one wonders whether truth can have a basis in fact, or whether fact is never truly possible.

Our “natural selection tunes perception to payoffs, not to truth” (Mausfeld, 2015), meaning our belief in what is true is driven by our survival instincts, not by logic – the perception of truth we hold is generally the version of truth that creates the least dissonance, not the actual truth that may or may not exist. Despite this, many still believe their “perceptual apparatus by and large conveys to us a basically ‘truthful’ account of the external world” (Mausfeld, 2015), and don’t acknowledge the various biases we have evolved to ensure we believe the truth that makes us feel most comfortable.

Some have tried to solve this by categorising truth into “metaphysical, logical, and moral” truth (Unamuno & Upton, 1958), or “scientific truth, a philosophic truth, a poetic truth” (Baum, 1922), but dividing truth into categories doesn’t help secure the reliability of that truth. I might find some of these categories to be truer than others, such as scientific or logical truth over philosophical truth, but this is influenced by my bias and is different from another’s truth. This, in a sense, creates a paradox where our own bias means we may never know the truth of what truth is. Ultimately, “one can be truthful, say what he thinks, and still be in error” (Unamuno & Upton, 1958). If “truth is the relation between what-things-are and what-we-think-they-are” (ibid) then truth is dragged through the haze of bias and perspective.

This book reflects society by prompting such questions about truth that are pertinent in a world where mistruths are delivered daily through filter bubbles, fake news, information without context, propaganda, and, as is most pertinent in this book, fake reality delivered in reality television. Below, I discuss how reality television causes people who watch it – especially young people – to feel inadequate due to the false and scripted portrayal of other people’s lives that aren’t being accurately portrayed. I also discuss how Tremblay uses horror as a tool by parodying its tropes in a way that makes the construction of the ‘horror’ in the reality television show explicit. Much as Brecht designed *verfremdungseffekt* to “teach while entertaining,” Tremblay uses horror to make us question how what we watch manipulates our perceptions and interpretations, and how changes in the way we consume information means we “need a new way to decide what is trustworthy” (Gray, 2017).

Tremblay expresses the repressed dissonance caused by modern society’s relationship with truth, as well the repressed awareness of how manipulative the exploitative portrayal of reality is in reality television shows, where producers prioritise entertainment over morality. He portrays the oppressors as a family who ignores the immorality of their actions to survive in a capitalist society.

The Unreliable Narrator

Merry recounts her experiences to an author who intends to write a book about the reality

television show Merry unwillingly participated in as a child. It is Merry's memories we are to rely on for our information – however, studies have shown that “different forms of memory may rely on a compressed representation of time, manifested as decreased accuracy for events that happened further in the past” (Howard, 2017). Considering that memory has been proven to be inaccurate, with distortions and misinterpretations skewed by trauma, it's hard to trust Merry as a narrator. To reinforce this, Tremblay includes several instances that force us to question how reliable Merry's retelling of the story is, and how her memories are distorted by a child's lack of awareness and trauma of the event.

When Adult-Merry enters the house from her childhood, she romanticises the home, asking “has that much time really passed since we lived here?” (p.5). She regresses how she saw the house as a child, with “ceilings so high I could never reach anything” and “iron radiators hiding in so many corners” (p.6). She feels possessive over the house, as shown when the interviewer uses direct address to reassure Merry “I did not purchase your house” (p.9). In *The Entity* (Felitta, 1978), I suggested links to gothic texts due to Carlotta's house becoming a character, and Merry refers to this technique in her blog by saying “The Barret House is an important character of *The Possession*” (p.283)²⁰.

However, it is the subtext of Merry's thought and speech that reveals the effect the house has on her. Descriptions such as “neglected front yard,” “grown wild,” “weedy fingers,” and “was it always this gray?” (p.6) indicate she now sees the house as something decayed and ominous. As the story develops, our attention is drawn to how trauma affects Merry as an adult. She rarely leaves her house (p.123) and refers to “my sister's nationally televised psychotic break and descent into schizophrenia” (p.133) in a throwaway comment, thus dismissing the impact the experience has had on her. She dresses to be unnoticed, wearing “a black sweater, black jeans, black boots” (p.303), and sees the darker side of the rooms, describing parts of a coffee shop as if it's from a gothic text, using language such as “skeletal rack”, “hardwood floor creaks” and “like sleeping bats” (p.304).

Years of ruminating have caused a cognitive dissonance²¹ that means she is stubborn in her belief of events – but, as is common in cognitive dissonance, she not only rejects alternative views, but uses them to cement her conviction in her own beliefs. She insists “me and my story might have some fuzzy parts, but I know my sister wasn't Regan” (p.134).²² If

²⁰ *The Possession* is the title of the reality television show Merry's family took part in.

²¹ Cognitive dissonance is defined as “when a person holds two contradictory beliefs at the same time” – people are “motivated to avoid or resolve cognitive dissonance due to the comfort it causes” so “adopt certain defence mechanisms when they have to confront it” (Medical News Today, 2023). When someone is confronted with evidence that contradicts their beliefs, cognitive dissonance often means they cement their original belief further in response.

²² She is referring to the character of Regan from *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971).

she knows her story has *fuzzy parts*, how can she be as sure of what she remembers? Studies have shown that “perceived duration of a stimulus correlates with the intensity of the neural responses to that stimulus” (Pan & Luo, 2012) – the more intense the stimulus, the longer you perceive the event to be. If the intensity of a stimulus alters one’s perception to this extent, it is difficult to be sure that Merry’s recollection of traumatic events is entirely accurate, and not a result of confirmation bias.²³ She cared deeply about her sister as a child, referring to her as “my Marjorie” (p.11) and stating that “I wanted to be a soccer player just like Marjorie” (p.55), suggesting that witnessing her sister’s potential possession means her memories will be subject to high levels of emotional intensity.

This is especially evident in the childish language in the story’s narration, with comments such as “my stuffed animal companions became my sentries” (p.36) “my fuzzy purple robe” (p.37) and “I don’t want boobs. Ever” (p.75). We are being reminded she is too young to fully understand what is going on. This naivete and the trauma created by her lack of understanding has affected her perception of events, as is evident during intense scenes when she sees aspects of her environment as a monster or a threat, such as the house “breathing” (p.66) and her father appearing to grow in size (p.25). Studies have shown that “our perceptions do not teach us what is really in things, but merely that whereby they are for us useful or hurtful” (Mausfield, 2015) – if we perceive everything by how it will benefit or harm us, then we struggle to know whether her recollection is true or reflecting the way she felt threatened.

This is exactly what Tremblay wants us to realise. He is aware that “children are allegorists, confusedly hunting the elusive meaning of behaviour” whereas “adults are symbolists, unable to dissociate action and significance” (Egaleton, 1985), and this comes across in the language Child-Merry uses – she frequently shows her misunderstanding, which leads to a dramatic irony where the reader has greater awareness of what is occurring than she does.

Adult-Merry’s bias is evident in her anonymous blog that she uses to analyse the television series where she frequently claims the possession wasn’t real, such as “while believing (or pretending, yeah?)” (p.11) and “to the fictional possession” (p.111). She refers to the moment Marjorie was tied down by her mother, stating “and I bet some of us watching even falsely remember Sarah tying Marjorie’s wrists down” and that “she only pretended to, and Marjorie played along” (p.288). This is contradicted by her child’s recollection of the events where she believes she saw her mother tying her sister’s wrists. So which is the truth – the child who saw the wrists being tied down, or the adult who believes they weren’t?

Ultimately, Tremblay shows us how we can’t trust our own perception. Through

²³ Confirmation bias is defined as “our underlying tendency to notice, focus on, and give greater credence to evidence that fits with our existing beliefs” (Pilat & Krastev, 2024).

contradictions, skewed memories, biases and the intensity of trauma, we are led to believe that each version of Merry, whilst believing her own truth, may not necessarily be relaying the truth, if there is a truth to be relayed. Freud noted that “an uncanny effect is often easily produced by effacing the distinction between the imagination and reality” (Freud, 1919), and this creates the uncanny in this aspect of the novel – how Merry’s imagination affects her reality, and her reality affects her imagination, to the extent that it is almost impossible to discern the difference between the two.

Readers often refer to this book as horrifying because the uncanny creates an inability to distinguish between what to believe and what not to believe. This demonstrates a significant change in demonic horror since the release of *The Exorcist* (1971) where the existence of the demon was concrete, while the existence of the demon in *AHFOG* comes with ambiguity. We receive our information online through conjecture, the unverified bias of others, and filter bubbles that repeatedly present information we already believe, and the shift in the genre reflects the increase of ways we repress the notion of truth to cement our beliefs. This results in societies that are becoming increasingly economically and politically divided (Devlin, Fagan & Connaughton, 2021) with “division and tribalism” (Taylor, 2022) created as a result.

Obscuring Truth in Reality Television

Tremblay highlights how reality television skews our perception of what is often portrayed as real. This is concerning when one considers the genre’s popularity, as shown when “reality programming filled 4 of the top 10 slots of most watched shows” in March 2004 (Leone, Peek & Bissell, 2006). It is a genre that encourages “high levels of intense and extreme confrontations among participants” to bring “in higher levels of ratings” (Tempesta Media, 2016), which leads the viewer to both believe and be entertained by conflict.

Tremblay’s novel highlights how reality television shows are “giving the impression that what occurs on the screen is in fact reality”, as shown when girls interviewed for a study believed “reality shows reflected real life, stating that they were ‘mainly real and unscripted’” (Peek & Beresin, 2016). This demonstrates a lack of awareness of how reality television shows manipulate our perception of reality by scripting or influencing scenes and altering the mise-en-scene. Tremblay conveys how harmful the shows can be to the participants involved and how the manufacturing of one’s perception causes harm in several ways.

The first episode of *The Possession* is described as opening with photos where “everyone is smiling and happy, but ominous music plays in the background” (p.16), serving as a filmic oxymoron. It implies to the audience that beneath the happy family image, there is doom – within the first few shots, the audience is subliminally told that evil lurks underneath, causing

a confirmation bias for the rest of the show – the audience will search for aspects of the show that confirm this truth. The intention to make entertainment out of traumatic experiences with a disregard for the moral and ethical implications is shown when they sexualise Marjorie in scenes where “she’s on the bed wearing only a small black bra” with “forearms framing her six-pack abs and navel” (p.116). Similarly, during ‘exorcism night’ she was wearing a “sports bra for a top” and her father says “I’d like to put a shirt on her. She’s only fourteen” (p.199). His protests are overruled and his need for money means the show’s producer’s intentions are prioritised.

Our attention is drawn to *The Possession* having a “main writer” (p.140) to imply that its reality is scripted and manipulated. The show is edited with “jump cuts that are so fast we feel like we *can’t* really see much of anything” (p.116) that reduce the clarity of events during intense scenes, while the footage is “slowed down” (p.222) to exaggerate the drama of some situations. We are frequently reminded of how *mise-en-scene* is crafted, such as how “the yellowish bulbs replaced with bright white ones” (p.198) and how they “set up the shot and the lighting in the hallway” (p.197). The mother was interviewed “sitting in the kitchen, in dim lighting, almost sepia toned, and with a cigarette trailing smoke in an ashtray” (p.224) to present her as unstable. The audience’s perceptions of ‘reality’ are manipulated without them being aware.

Ware, Natfulin and Donnelly²⁴ ran the ‘Dr. Fox experiment’ (Ware, Naftulin & Donnelly, 1973) where a man was presented to an audience as an expert before delivering a lecture of nonsense. His status as expert meant most of the audience found value in what he said. We see the television show using this bias by having experts interpret the events. For example, “the show interviewed two photography experts who analysed and arrived at no conclusion as to the source of red in her eyes” (p.222) and “sound and voice experts examined Marjorie’s audio” (p.223) They give integrity to the experts’ testimony through jargon such as “Layered Voice Analysis” and “voice biometrics” (p.223). They could have found another expert who’d testify that the inexplicable was not occurring, but that was not part of the reality they were creating.

Every moment our attention is drawn to ways the show alters perceptions of events is another instance of *verfremdungseffekt* where the reader is forced to consider how the viewer’s perception is being manipulated. We are constantly reminded that “television offers a skewed view of reality” (Temptesta Media, 2016), and this reminder adds to the fear of these

²⁴ Three American researchers from the 1970s.

scenes – we are never sure of what to believe, and lack of knowledge²⁵ is often the scariest aspect of human existence. Freud noted that “in the realm of fiction many things are not uncanny which would be so if they happened in life” (Freud, 1919); when we are aware something is not real, it is not uncanny, but viewers of reality television are not always aware that the depiction of events isn’t real. Ultimately, the fear — the uncanniness — comes from reminders that we perceive something as real when it is not. We are forced to confront our own relationship with reality television and whether we, as viewers, are active participants in the misery of others, and whether we accept the show’s reality as true reality. If we are to consider reality television as acceptable, then we must repress the acknowledgment that these television shows can be false and exploitative of those involved.

Is Marjorie mentally ill or demonically possessed?

This is the most pertinent indeterminable truth throughout this novel – whether Marjorie is mentally ill or is possessed by a demon, as Marjorie’s actions are ambiguous enough that they can be interpreted as either. This is evident in comments she makes which can be explained by both illness or possession: “I’m not well, Merry” (p.53); “get them out of my head!”; “They won’t let me sleep. They’re always there” (p.62); “I don’t want to fucking listen to them anymore” (p.64). Similarly, there are moments that imply that she is possessed, but could be interpreted as a sick person pretending: “You guys should be *thanking* me” (p.g150); referring to herself as “we” (p.63); “my demonly powers don’t keep me warm, you know” (p.264); “I can be Azazel, the serpent, the fallen demon” (p.266); “I get all this from the voices in my head” (p.204). She talks about seeing the ghost of their grandfather and asks how they’d know it’s “Grumpy” and “not some demon faking it” (p.46) to raise questions about her own possession. During the exorcism, she says “Please, wait. It’s me. I thought I could take the cold, but I can’t” (p.264), and it is unclear whether this is part of the demon’s rouse, or whether this a break in her performance and she genuinely isn’t feeling well.

The ambiguity is intensified through Merry’s mixed interpretations about her sister’s possession. Child-Merry is convinced she witnessed her sister “beyond the railing, hanging in the air” (p.275), which shows she believes her sister was possessed – yet Adult-Merry, particularly in her blog, is convinced it was an act. When we see two definite opinions from Merry at different time periods, which interpretation are we to give more credit to: the one she

²⁵ Dube states that “lack of knowledge makes us fear, have assumptions, behave irrationally, have hatred, and even end up dead” as this fear makes us “avoid, attack, or hate” – the dissonance that lack of knowledge causes is often behind “racism, tribalism, xenophobia, and gender bias” (Dube, 2023). Lack of knowledge means people often fill the gap with conjecture rather than admitting the true horror is that we simply do not know.

witnesses with child's eyes, or the one she believes after years of replaying the trauma? After all, studies have shown that "object and observer blend" and when "the reality is too much to hold" it can "ripple and shatter" (Heyer, 2015) – one wonders whether Adult-Merry has become wiser or rejected reality.

There is a third option – that Marjorie is neither ill nor possessed, but is exhibiting traits of perversion, and her actions are deliberately cruel. Despite her unethical actions and apparent illness/possession, Marjorie conveys a greater ethical awareness than any other character, which suggests a consciousness about how she is acting. During the exorcism, she points out that "already, after two episodes, everyone in this *room* is making fistfuls of money, right?" (p.203), showing an awareness of the immoral nature of the television show that no one else acknowledges. She makes an observation regarding immorality in religion, stating "Did you know that the chief Vatican exorcist said the reason the guy in the wheelchair was possessed because of Mexico's abortion laws?" (p.203). She draws attention to the misogyny present in a priest standing over a scantily clad girl whilst exercising moral authority, referring to "the righteous, courageous, humble, holy man who might be tempted by the unclean perversions of a demon-infested slut" (p.208). If a victim of possession is "possessed not by the devil but by her own socialised body" (Creed 1993), then it is that body and its behaviour the priest disapproves of, and only Marjorie points out that such values are morally wrong. She draws attention to sexist ideologies of a religious institution run by male patriarchy who believe a woman should behave more 'womanly,' and as an audience, we may even root for her in this scene. Despite being supposedly possessed, she exercises the greatest moral authority. Despite this awareness, her cruelty toward Merry is intense, hurting her with threats such as "I'll rip your fucking tongue out" (p.79), "I'll reach into your mouth with pliers" and "I'll keep your tongue and put it on a string, wear it like a necklace" (p.80).

Marjorie being aware of moral implications but rejecting them creates a familiarity with Heyer's theories of perversion (Heyer, 2015) where she who acts with "a lack of care or concern for others" and cares only about "procuring pleasure for the Other" (Fishzon, 2017). In this context, the Other is the deviance she portrays as a demon to abject "something of the self that is deemed to be repulsive or untouchable" (Rizq, 2013) – she manages her impulse for deviant behaviour by presenting as the Other, thus separate from herself.

Perhaps no one wants to know the truth, as "to engage it we must engage ourselves in those nether regions of psyche where we do not want to know ourselves, or another" (Heyer, 2015); we accept the first or easiest explanation as it prevents us looking inward and using Marjorie's behaviour to question what we are capable of, or what, as Freud suggests, we repress; that we have witnessed the "Monster as normality's shadow" (Wood, 1978) and her actions are aspects of ourselves reflected.

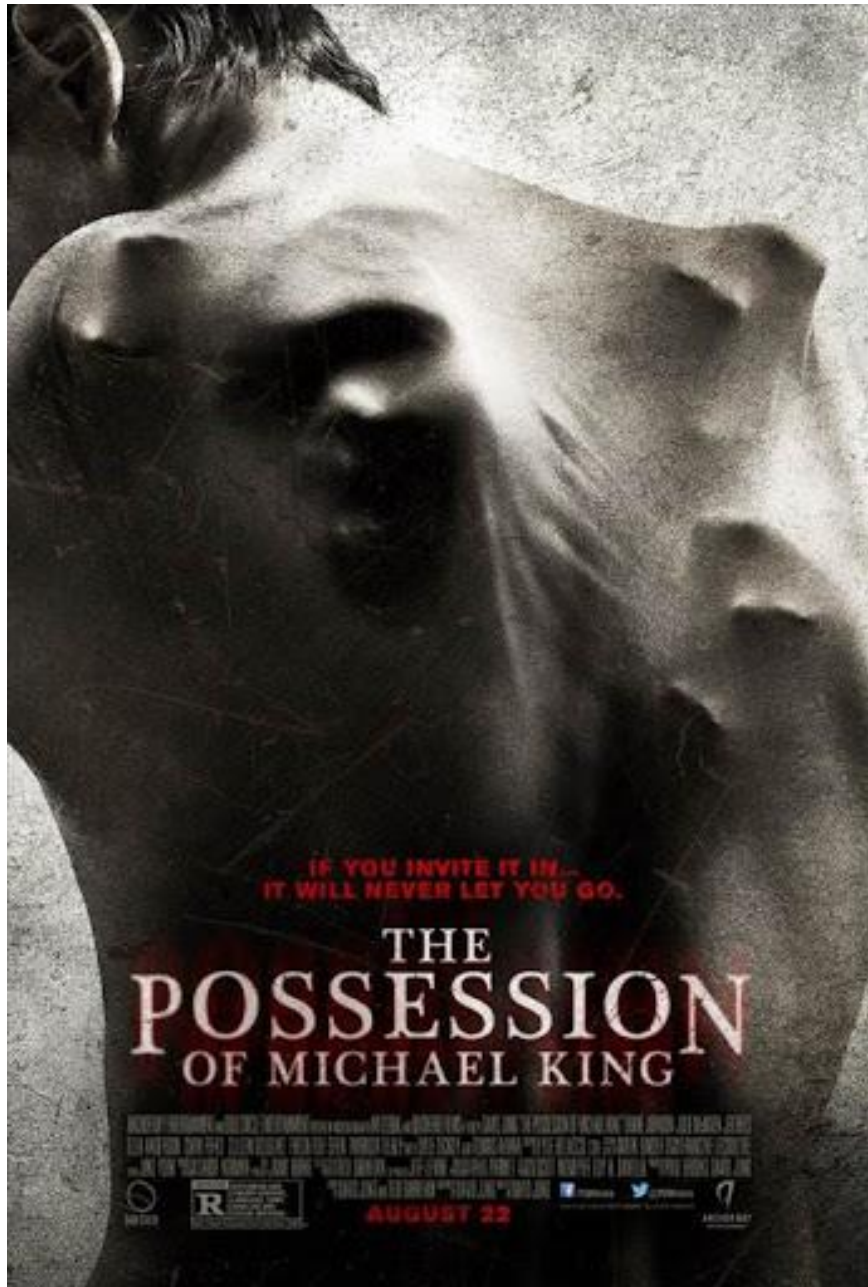
Yet, if "truth is the relation between what-things-are and what-we-think-they-are" (Baum,

1922), then our lack of understanding contributes to the subjective nature of our perceptions or fear of what is occurring. Freud stated that “we are tempted to conclude that what is ‘uncanny’ is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar” (Freud, 1919); not only are we scared because we do not understand Marjorie’s actions, we are scared because the novel never provides a definite explanation. “We call a living person uncanny, usually when we ascribe evil motives to him” (ibid) – therefore, not only is our lack of understanding the uncanny, but so is Marjorie, making her twice as frightening.

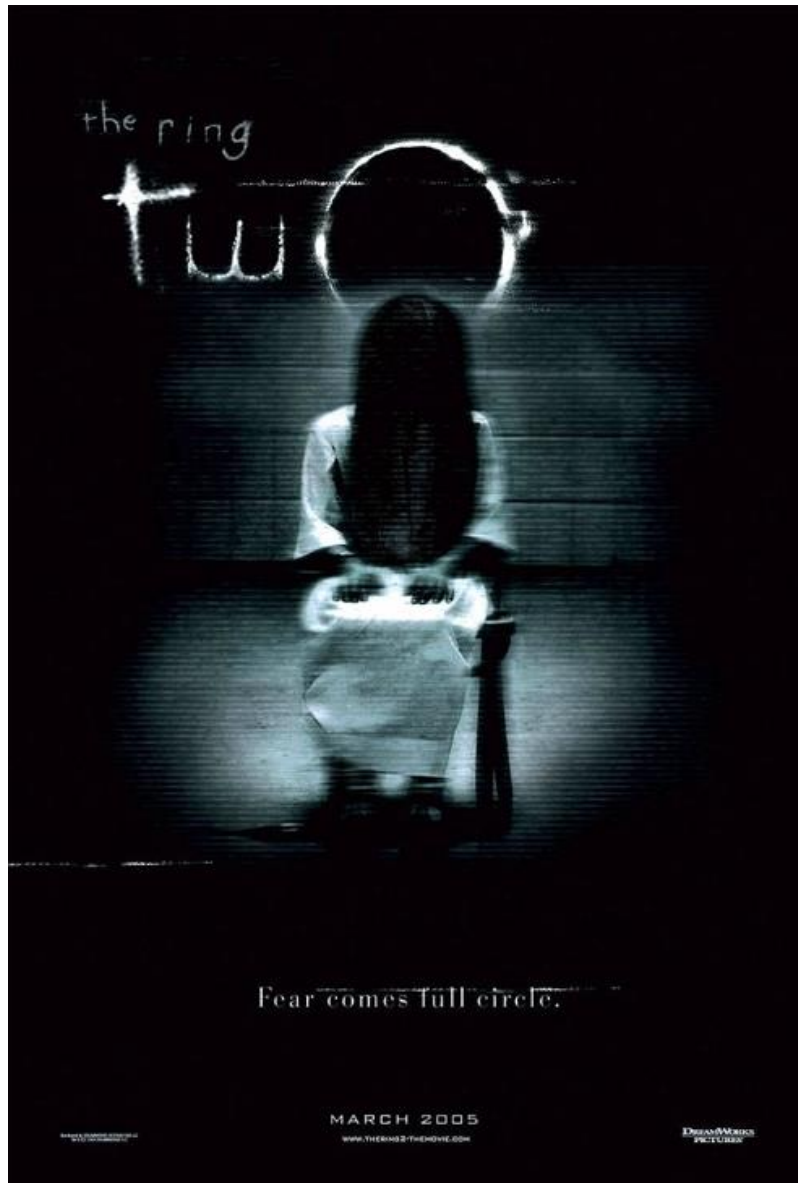
Horror Used in Horror

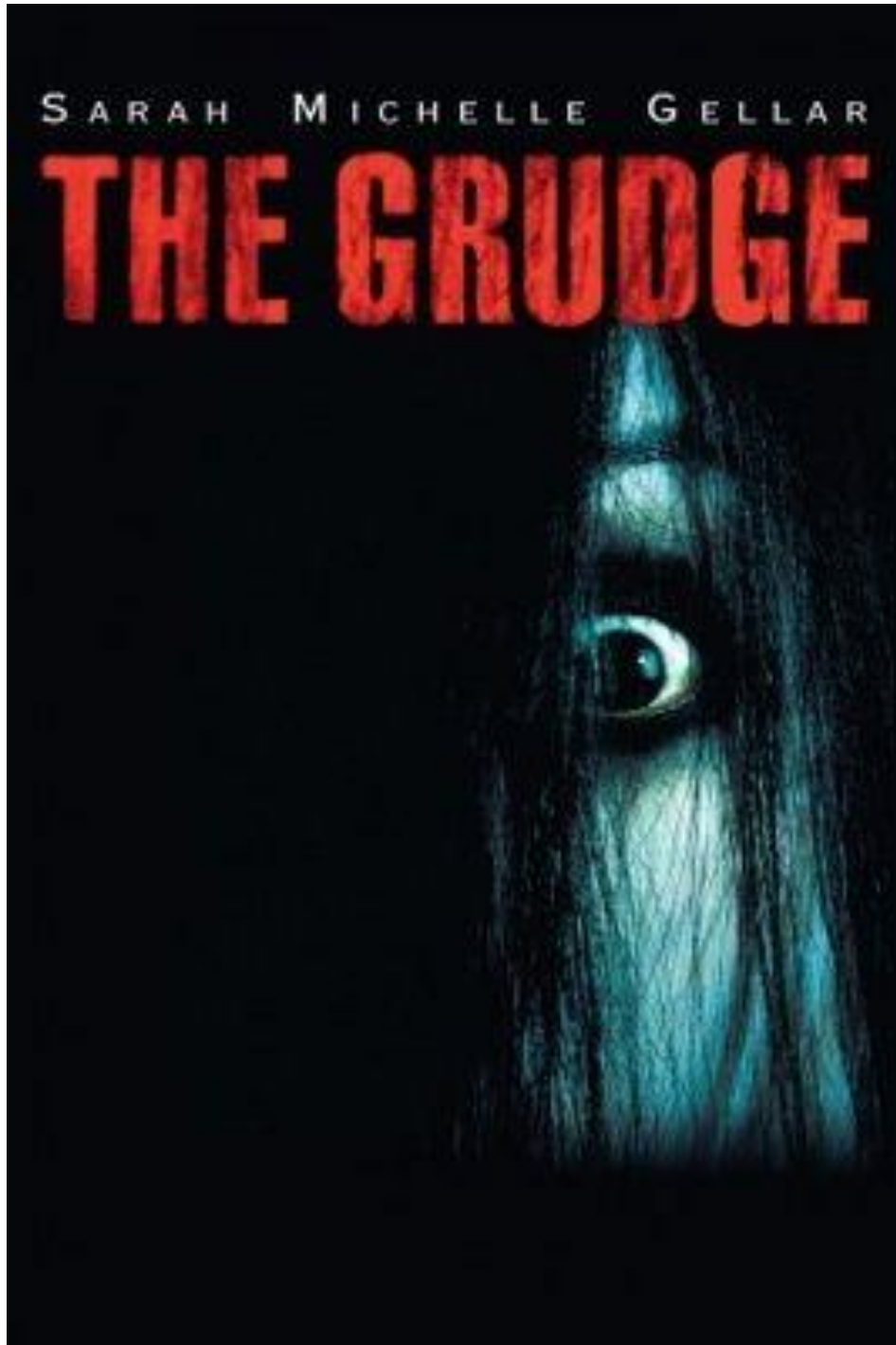
Heyer discusses Metzler’s research, referring to how “the perverted personality makes an effort to ‘dislodge the analyst from his accustomed role and to convert the entire procedure into one that has the structure of their perverse and addictive trend’” (Heyer, 2015) – if we see perversion as an aspect of the horror genre, then we see the *perverse and addictive trend* as elements of the horror genre that Marjorie manipulates for her own purpose. Marjorie does this by performing the demonically possessed as we know it according to existing tropes of demonic horror, parodying the audience’s expectations of what typically occurs during exorcism scenes and adding her own commentary with this knowledge. This is done in several ways:

- When the priest tries to talk to Marjorie during the exorcism she says “idle and curious chatter with the demon should be avoided at all cost. It’s Exorcism 101” (p.201), mirroring how, during exorcism scenes in demonic horror, we often see the priest telling the loved ones of the possessed never to talk directly to the demon.
- She asks Father Wanderley if he’s seen a demon before, asking “could you see it inside the other person, pressing out on the skin from inside their body?” (p.209). This trope can be seen on the poster for *The Possession of Michael King* (Jung, 2014), showing how it is such a widely recognised genre trope that filmmakers use it as part of their marketing:



- Marjorie lets her hair dangle in front of her face: “she bobbed her head back and forth, swinging her dark hair like a clock’s pendulum” (p.275) and “I couldn’t see the side of her face because her hair was everywhere” (p.64). Hair hanging over a girl’s face is a common trope of the genre and is often seen on film posters:





The question is whether Marjorie uses these tropes as part of her performance to convince the audience she is possessed, or whether she draws attention to her use of tropes to make us question her performance.

The use of these tropes is not just limited to Marjorie's performance – Tremblay uses them throughout the novel, such as Marjorie's scream in multiple voices, "her hyperactive pitch was layered" (p.60); using animalistic imagery to describe the way she walks in "her collection of glossy body parts, was her web", "spread-eagled" (p.64); mimicking how possessed Regan in *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971) asked for incest from her mother when Marjorie tells her father "to do all kinds of sexual things to her" (p.72); Marjorie uses various voices with different accents, which exorcists frequently describe as a symptom of possession, "a hint of a British accent had slipped into her speech" (p.92), "a third new voice; genderless and nasally" (p.96); the image of Regan masturbating with a crucifix in *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971) is a recognisable image, replicated when Marjorie uses "both hands, they gyrated up and down, making wet sounds" (p.103).

In her blog, Merry draws attention to these tropes being used in the reality television show, stating that it "was an obvious nod to *The Exorcist*" and drawing similarities to "Regan's contorted spider walk down the stairs" (p.114). *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973) isn't the only movie referenced: "Marjorie's wall climb? See *The Last Exorcism*" (p.114); "she resembles Sadako, the angry spirit of *Ringu*" (p.115); "also see the locker room scene in *Carrie*" (p.117). Tremblay also calls Merry's tutor "Stephen Graham Jones" (p.309) as a reference to another horror author.

Tremblay draws attention to genre tropes to highlight how our preconceived notions of genre play a part in our suspension of disbelief. We are more likely to believe she's possessed if her symptoms are part of an existing realm of fiction that we recognise.

Merry even entitles her anonymous horror blog "The Last Final Girl" (p.12). Whilst the television show is primarily exorcism horror about Marjorie, this suggests Merry also sees the show as Final Girl horror about her. Clover states the Final Girl is "the character whose story we follow from beginning to end, and the one whose vantage, even through whose eyes we see the action, and it is she who, at the end of the film, brings the killer down" (Clover, 1992). Merry is certainly the character whose story we follow, but more problematic is the question of whether she *brings the killer down*.

In the end, Marjorie manipulates Merry into unknowingly poisoning everyone in the family aside from Merry. Knowing that Merry has her spaghetti without sauce, she coerces Merry into putting poison in the bolognaise sauce the family are going to eat that night. At teatime, her family eat it and they die, including Marjorie, who was aware this would happen and Merry

would be left alive. In her blog, Adult-Merry states that “like many of the greatest character of gothic literature, Merry is a doomed protagonist” (p.290), and, once learning of this ending, one can reread the novel and notice Marjorie referring to spaghetti throughout, thus foreshadowing her doomed fate. But does Merry bring the killer down when she herself is the killer?

One could argue that, if she is defined as *the killer*, she has indeed brought herself down with the subsequent years of trauma and suffering. She isolates herself and can't have food that reminds her of what happened. Then again, can Merry be defined as *the killer* when she put the poison in the sauce without knowing that she would kill her family? It was Marjorie who made Merry do it with the intention of Merry enduring the torment of knowing that she killed her own family, so one could argue Marjorie was, in fact, *the killer*; she was the one who initiated the death. But Merry didn't just kill the killer; she killed her parents as well.

Then again, her parents are also responsible for what happened. It is their fractured relationship, neglectful parenting, poor handle of their precarious financial situation, and decision to allow a television crew into their house that forced events to spiral into peril. They created a situation where their daughter became more ill (or more possessed) and Merry's suffering went unnoticed. In this sense, they created what Marjorie became, which is a killer, which could make them secondary killers themselves. In the end, Merry did take down *the killer(s)*; her family were the monsters who led the family into despair, and this Final Girl defeated both the repressed (her sister) and the oppressors (her parents) in a moment of Final Girl triumph. This story is unique in that both the repressed and oppressor are defeated, though through defeating them the Final Girl suffers as a result. The audience does not gain the cathartic victory they might wish for, but they do have their morality and perceptions questioned in a way that is satisfyingly dark.

The Family Breaking Down

At the beginning of the novel, the family is precariously balanced between stability and instability. When Merry is asked to recall what life was like before everything happened, she states that “there never was a *before everything happened*” (p.11) – the family had been breaking down for as long as she could remember, even if she wasn't fully aware of it as a child. Her lack of connection with that family unit is evident when she states that “*away* was the only word four-year-old me remembered” (p.19). Her blog also refers to her father sarcastically as “the man of the house” (p.16) because he did not fit the image of the *man of the house*; He lost his job, his wife became the primary earner, and for this he felt emasculated, which was exacerbated by the traditional religious values he held.

She states they ate “dinner in the kitchen, never in the dining room” (p.40), showing what might be considered bad habits for the stereotypical middle-class family. After Merry’s mum smokes, one of Merry’s friends says “Pew, Merry smells like smoke” (p.59), a metaphor for how Merry’s parents’ actions harm the way people perceive their child. Their financial difficulties affect the way they communicate to their daughter, such as telling her to “drink water, and quit bellyaching” (p.89) as water is all they can afford; later on, as things get worse, water becomes an expensive commodity, with the father stating, “water wasn’t free you know” (p.102). Tremblay conveys the degradation of the family unit through Merry’s memories, such as “I remember it as being the last time he was happy-Dad with me” (p.184) and showing her disconnect from her family by saying “she felt like “a loose picture that had fallen out of the family album” (p.185). Her parents don’t report Marjorie’s injuries for fear that the reality TV show might be cancelled and they would lose the money (p.211). The degradation of the family builds to moments where the parent’s neglect of Merry becomes increasingly overt, such as when her mother snaps “Get the fuck away from me!” (p.216).

Robin Wood believed that “what is repressed must always strive to return” (Wood, 1978), and the character of Marjorie is the culmination of her family’s intense repression. The father must repress his emasculation, disagreements with his wife, and his daughter being sexualised on television. The mother must repress her atheist beliefs to go along with the television show and her growing frustrations with her husband. Merry must repress her feelings about feeling rejected from the family unit. It could be that Marjorie is not ill, not possessed, and not perverse, but is her family’s repressed emotions striving to come out. After all, Wood himself noted that “the Antichrist and the child-monster are all shown as products of the family, whether the family itself is regarded as guilty” (Wood, 1978). Marjorie is perceived as the *Antichrist* by those that believe she is possessed, and perceived as a *child-monster* to those who don’t believe she’s possessed – either way, she is a *product of the family*. The family’s repressed hostility, anger and rage has manifested itself in the teenage daughter they failed to protect, much as they failed to protect the loving family they’d attempted to build.

As a middle-class suburban family, they have an image they present to the community, but there is darkness lurking beneath. Freud stated that “the uncanny is nothing else than a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it” (Freud, 1919) – Marjorie is the family’s hidden side, the manifestation of their egos, and the culmination of their resentment and sin.

Ultimately, it is the reader’s perception that matters most. Marjorie is either possessed, ill, perverse, the repressed, misrepresented, or something else – it is up to us which we think she is. But that is not the point of the book – the point of the book is that, whichever point of view we choose to believe about the events, we will not be wrong, and nor will we be right.

Chapter Five: Come Closer

Repression as a Result of Societal Norms

We are taught the norms of our society through childhood and adolescence in a process called socialisation, which involves “a society’s or environment’s culture influence on an individual to shape and mould the way they behave” and “is what integrates individuals into a society and allows societies to function” (Brown & Finn, 2021). One must obey norms in accordance with their gender, age and class at that moment of history and place of the world, and must repress inclinations that do not allow them to fit in. This requires self-control, which is “key to a well-functioning life” (Greenemeier, 2011) and involves us repressing some of our wants and needs. In *Come Closer* (Gran, 2003), the demon represents aspects of Amanda’s psyche she has repressed due to socialisation. They take the form of Naamah, the demon, after the oppressor, Ed, fails to sufficiently force Amanda to exercise self-control and repress her true desires, wants and instincts that do not fit with the societal expectation of a woman of her gender, age and social class.

Naamah is seen by one reviewer as “a metaphor for freedom, for insanity, for obsession, for the loss of control, or all of the above” (Shannon, 2010), and by another as “the inevitable outcome of liberation without conscience” where “by casting off the shackles of societal expectation, Amanda discovers she can do pretty much anything” (Parkin, 2012). Through ceasing repression of her true instincts, Amanda finds freedom, but also finds insanity, and a loss of control that society does not approve of. Ultimately, Gran “leaves open the possibility that the demon [...] might emanate from Amanda’s repressed psyche” (Shannon, 2010).

Amanda is a post-millennial, married, middle-class woman in her early thirties, and her repression results from her feeling trapped in the societal role prescribed to her based on these characteristics. Whilst one accepts that those in their teens and their twenties are prone to spouts of anger and impulsivity, with even science backing up this widespread opinion – “the prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain that inhibits and controls the threat detection mechanism – is not fully developed” (Goldhill, 2018) – society has an expectation that a woman in her thirties is more restrained. If your teenage years are about rebellion, and your twenties are about self-exploration – a time when “it was OK not to have everything figured out” and “it was OK to be in an entry-level job, a house share, dating several people and

struggling with finances” – then your thirties are when you’re “expected to have sorted that stuff out” (Reynolds, 2019), and it isn’t socially acceptable for Amanda to admit she doesn’t find these expectations fulfilling.

It is a widespread view that “when a woman hits her 30s, she’s expected to have it all: a trailblazing career, a loving family, a great home” (Reynolds, 2019). This is portrayed in many women’s websites and magazines, such as in *Repeller* that suggests “women’s media and pop culture are major contributors to the oft-cited narrative that ages 30-39 are a woman’s supposed ‘prime’ – socially, professional, sexually and emotionally” and that “if your 20s are an exploration phase, then your 30s seem to be a landing phase” (Ross, 2019). Naamah is the culmination of feelings and cravings Amanda has attempted to repress to fit this role of a married, middle-class woman in her thirties.

Such repression is rarely a conscious decision. “What is repressed is not accessible to the conscious mind” (Wood, 2018), meaning we are not always aware that we are trapped in societal expectations, suffering from conforming. This makes demonic horror scary – we could all have a demon that exhibits what we unknowingly repress. We do not just fear the demon, we fear the deviance in the demon’s behaviour. This is what Gran utilises effectively to horrify her reader in *CC*.

Amanda and Naamah

The demon’s actions start in the opening chapter as Amanda provides her boss with a report that has “Leon Fields is a cocksucking faggot” (p.2) written on it. Amanda doesn’t know how the words came to be on her report – though we, as a reader, infer that she unknowingly wrote them. Many of us must repress a disliking of our boss, something she even admits to doing: “I hadn’t written the fake proposal, but I wished I knew who did. Because it was true. Leon Field was a cocksucking faggot” (p.3). This is an example of Naamah being “subtle at first” (p.23) as Amanda grew less able to control her repression. In the beginning, the demon was just the niggly voice of temptation: “Come on. Don’t stop. Don’t think. It’ll be fun. Just drink it.” (p.24). Naamah starts as feelings of impulsivity we must repress to coexist; she could *just drink it* at university in her twenties when excessive drinking was deemed socially acceptable, but she is in her thirties and expected to be more responsible. These thoughts become stronger, such as when Amanda is working in a rich person’s house, sees an item she wants, and gives in to the temptation of stealing it: “*I want it*, I thought” (p.54). As the story progresses, her language becomes increasingly childish and petulant, such as “No reason. I just didn’t want to” and “So I would be a little late to work. No deal” (p.57). She is not acting as a dependable adult with responsibilities, and when her husband gets annoyed, she admits “it

was hard to hold back a giggle” (p.57). She finds her husband’s disapproval amusing, showing how his skills as the oppressor are failing.

Amanda sees a psychic who tells her “someone’s watching you” (p.76), which we interpret as the demon – but this could also be interpreted as society. Our actions are evaluated by others who often judge behaviour that defies social expectations as deviant. The psychic states “she’ll possess you” (p.77), referring to the demon, but could equally be referring to the thoughts and feelings she represses. Later, when the repression grows weaker, Amanda believes she is a better person for it, stating “I was the same Amanda I had always been. Only better” (p.84). As she rejects the need to repress, she sees herself as being truer to herself, and she prefers who she is.

Her behaviour becomes a danger to others for the first time when she pretends to help a child at sea, but instead “dove towards her and then reached out and grabbed her hair” (p.93). This acts as a protest against the maternal instincts she is expected to have at her age. She is expected to want children, and to be of an age where she is maternal and caring toward them, but she rejects a child that needs her help. Following the attempted drowning, her feelings are no longer subtly hidden, but are articulated in a judgemental fashion during the narration by referring to the couple that intervenes as “a fat middle-aged woman” and “her fat husband” (p.94). It is this incident that acts as a catalyst to her becoming more overt in her deviance.

The key quote of the text follows Amanda’s visit to the doctor, who says: “maybe the problem is that you’re resisting growth” (p.103). Many of us feel uncomfortable about growing old, and our early thirties are a transitional time when one must mature into an adult as the self-exploration of our twenties is over and youthful rebellion is now deemed inappropriate. The doctor says “you’re thirty-four years old, you’re coming into your own” (p.103), implying she should be settled in who she is – but without having the firm identity she’s expected to have, she is more susceptible to a demon that will inevitably deconstruct her fragile identity.

The demon tells her “I really don’t think Edward needs to know about this” (p.106), ensuring the oppressor isn’t aware that the repression is winning. Amanda notices that “credit cards arrived for me in the mail, sometimes two or three a day” (p.115). In your thirties you are expected to be accumulating savings, not getting into debt – but when “new items appeared in my closet daily” (p.115) she is giving in to the impulse to buy what she wants regardless of whether she can afford it, something more frowned upon at a time of her life where she should have a mortgage and savings. Furthermore, she tells a man who hits on her at the train station that “she might be the kind of person who takes men like that and rips them limb from fucking limb with her bare hands” (p.117), pre-emptively standing up to a man before she is sexually assaulted; a preventative act that can make a woman be perceived as aggressive.

The demon even mocks the lessons typically given in society by repeating them back, such

as, “You shouldn’t talk to strangers” and “You should look both ways before you cross the street” (p.135). Her oppressors are losing, and Naamah is mocking them for it. In the end, the demon takes over, forces Amanda to kill her husband, and allows Amanda to be found not guilty by reason of insanity.²⁶ As her repression takes over completely and her personality becomes deviant, she is deemed insane – an unwanted ‘other’ to society.

Satisfying the Expectations of a Safe Relationship

Amanda has a safe husband that any parent would wish for their child to end up with. He is sensible and thinks rationally, but despite how attractive these traits are supposed to be in a prospective partner, Amanda finds that the marriage lacks passion, and Ed persistently exhibits subtly controlling behaviour. Amanda says, “On the whole, Ed and I were happy” (p.21), with the word *were* betraying her feelings of lost happiness.

Amanda’s language, when recalling them moving in together in their twenties, contrasts with the cynical language she uses to describe the relationship now. When they bought their first house, Amanda stated, “Think of the possibilities” and “We can build it from scratch!” (p.10). Just like their relationship, it could be arranged and presented however they wished – now, however, just like their relationship, what once made the house attractive makes it unappealing: “the neighbourhood, full of abandoned factories and warehouses like ours, but the schemes never took off” (p.9). She admits she used to be “in love – with my school, with the city, with the snow” (p.51), and began a career with the prospect of driving “better cars” and being able to “open my own firm” (p.52). Now, she resents younger women she sees talking about how they “all wanted to marry rich” (p.60).

Society teaches us that “a wedding is also seen as vital to our happiness in our 30s” (Reynolds, 2019), yet the monotony of Amanda’s marriage is portrayed as detrimental to her happiness through menial observations and repetitive language. She admits “there were a few things about Ed, small things, that drove me crazy” (p.23) – by referring to them as *small things* she attempts to lessen their impact, but shows they are clearly not small things when she subsequently lists them: “and the toothpaste cap that absolutely must be replaced immediately, and the shirts that had to be folded just so, and all the other little routines that

²⁶ An online reviewer praised the novel’s portrayal for not going according to typical horror conventions because “Amanda’s story doesn’t progress from *you-go-sister* to *that’s-a-bit-much-actually*” and ensures “the violent, selfish, destructive acts committed by Naamah are there from the start” (Parkin, 2012). However, the reviewer also commented that “of course Amanda – quite literally a Madwoman in the Attic – ends up in a mental hospital... where else could a Feminist Horror novel possibly end?” (ibid). This highlights a paradox about the nature of Feminist Horror– that Feminist Horror must portray women in a more complex way than they have historically been portrayed in horror, but there are horror tropes that are still hard to avoid.

had to be followed every day” (p.23). Every chapter with these two characters ends with an uninteresting, direct sentence that shows how she is resigned to accept her dull marriage – such as “and Ed wanted to leave early to beat the traffic” (p.89) and how they had “been thinking about a new toothbrush” (p.36). Their time together is described with repetition to show the routine nature of their life: “Another night at home. Another takeout dinner” (p.43). At one point they are “stood in front of the bathroom door, still in our underwear” (p.54), but neither notice, suggesting there is no sexual spark in their relationship and neither of them seems bothered to reignite it. She looks at other men and thinks, “this was the kind of man I liked in my early twenties, before I met Ed” (p.42), feeling nostalgic for a time when it was acceptable to crave excitement. Amanda must repress her desire for the sexual excitement of a new relationship as society expects her to endure the safety of her marriage.

In the battle of the oppressor vs the repressed, Naamah is what Amanda has repressed, and Ed is the oppressor. He performs this role by seeing it as his husbandly duty to guide her toward sensible behaviour. Amanda tries to convince herself that “Ed was my hero, my saviour. Ed was the man who had imposed order on my chaotic life” because, before Ed, she had “eaten cereal for dinner and ice cream for lunch” and “kept my tax records in a shopping bag in the closet” (p.12). Now, they “spend Saturdays outdoors” and “he did our taxes” (p.12). He has imposed order on her orderless world – he taught her how to complete tasks expected of a person her age, thus oppressing her into becoming the citizen society wants her to be. She adjusts her life for her oppressor, such as not having pets because “Edward was allergic” (p.12), moving out of her old apartment because he said “it wasn’t big enough for two”, and having a small wedding because Ed thought a “huge blowout” would be “a little tacky” (p.22). She is forced to leave her home, never get a pet she wants, and have an anticlimactic marriage that is far from what she dreamt of to fulfil expectations that make her repress her want for more. Her actions throughout the novel go against her oppressor’s wishes and represent the repressed fighting back.

Even as the marriage disintegrates, she is not free of her oppressor until he discovers her infidelity. This makes her oppressor a sympathetic character to his peers when he leaves the marriage, rather than prompting resentment from those suffering unhappy marriages because it’s simply what you’re supposed to do. Up until this point, Ed has successfully oppressed her through controlling behaviour and enforcing expectations until she no longer questions them. Any desire for something more exciting or someone less controlling is repressed due to fears of social exclusion from others who see it as an insult that they must fulfil societal expectations of enduring their marriage while she doesn’t.

Repressed Feelings of Womanhood

Many women's articles suggest that pressures to fulfil society's expectations are stronger for women. In her article, *Are You Having a Tri-Life Crisis*, Reynolds gives an example of a "single woman from Kent" who "works as a project manager and owns her own flat" but still feels as though she "needs a husband and a child before she can legitimately call her life a success" (Reynolds, 2019). Another article, *Are a Woman's 30s Truly Her Best Years? An Investigation* shares a feeling among women that "everything before your thirties is a critical warm-up and everything after is a decline" as if a women's thirties is "her moment of true clarity and success" (Ross, 2019). This article asserts that "shows like *Sex and the City*, *The Mindy Project* and *Girlfriends*" depict successful, aspirational women, and that "this messaging reinforces the notion that failing to meet certain expectations during this stage is an indication of failure", and that "the cultural ideology of thirty-something transcendence (or acute lack thereof) appears to be largely targeted at women" (ibid). A woman in her thirties is expected to be a perfect worker, a perfect wife, and a perfect mother. So when Amanda feels she can't keep repressing her desires for something different the consequential deviant behaviour becomes increasingly noticeable. This happens in multiple situations.

First, in her relationship. Ed is the one who tries to manage Amanda's irrational behaviour. For example, after a security guard discovers Amanda has stolen lipstick, "Ed ignored me and looked at the guard, a come-on-we're-all-men-here-look" then says "I'll pay for it" (p.38) – he ignores the 'irrational woman' and negotiates with the 'rational man.' He is the voice of reason a patriarchal society believes she needs.

Second, Amanda's increasing age becomes more apparent as other people seem younger, such as when "a teenage security guard ordered us back through the alarm" and when "Bernadette Schwartz worked at Ed's company. She had been a model when she was younger and still looked like one" (p.48) – her husband works with a beautiful woman who makes Amanda feel like her beauty is fading.

Third, she resents other women who play the role better than she does, such as Ed's friend: "I also never saw Sophia gain or lose a pound, never saw a wrinkle or a pimple or a pore on her skin, and never saw her sneeze, hiccup, burp, or fart" (p.120). She resents Sophia for creating an image of perfection she feels she can't live up to. Even the origin of Naamah is a parody of womanhood. Naamah was Adam's second wife after Eve and God created her in front of him:

"This one he made in front of Adam, starting from scratch, in order to meet Adam's specifications. He started with the bones, then the organs, then

the muscles, blood, et cetera, and by the time God was done, Adam was so disgusted he would have nothing to do with her.” (p.96)

Naamah was made for a man, but was banished to Hell for not being attractive enough for him – a metaphor for the perception that has existed for centuries that women are created simply for the purpose of satisfying men, and when they are not attractive enough, they are sent to Hell; in Amanda’s situation, Hell is obscurity within society.

Despite it being Amanda who must alter her behaviour, it is the man who behaves in an oppressive way. When he casts judgement on Amanda and coaxes her to conform to discreet misogynistic values society encourages, it is Amanda who suffers. This represents society’s double standards; when Ed says “can’t we ever have fun anymore” (p.98) he only cares about how much fun she is providing for him.

It is the resentment caused by this feeling that must also be repressed, and when released, the consequences for Ed prove fatal.

Promiscuity As an Act of Deviance

Promiscuity is widely seen as an unappealing characteristic of a woman in society. Any kind of sexual openness, be it about fetishes, masochism, fantasies, pornography, or paraphilia, is seen as taboo. Judgement of fetishes can even be so harsh that it can even lead to dire consequences, such as in the case of Gilberto Valle, a former police officer from America who was convicted based on communication in internet chatrooms. He never carried out the crime he was accused of, but “the defendant was nevertheless convicted, primarily on the basis of his deviant sexual fantasies” (Williams, Cooper, Howell, Yuille & Paulhus, 2008). When such fantasies are against social norms, one risks alienation by peers and widespread condemnation, making it understandable that one might repress their fantasies.

Many convicted sex offenders were found to have had fantasies before they offended, which led to researchers believing fantasies could be a sign of potential offending behaviour, but this data ignores how many people have fantasies but do not become a sex offender. In fact, recent research found that “deviant sexual fantasies are also common in individuals that never offend” with the results of a study finding that “if one has had a sexual fantasy, one had probably had a sexually deviant fantasy” (Williams, Cooper, Howell, Yuille & Paulhus, 2008). In the study *Inferring Sexually Deviant Behaviour from Corresponding Fantasies*, researchers found that the rate of rape fantasies were “31% across six studies”, and in an anonymous questionnaire, “95% of our sample reported at least one deviant fantasy” with frotteurism being

the most common at 44% (ibid). Evidently, taboo fantasies are common, but “given that any confirmation of the behaviour would immediately relegate individuals to the offender category” (ibid) you can understand why one represses their fantasies and sexual urges, especially in women who face harsher judgement for liberal, open sexual behaviour or fetishes. This is why Naamah engages in sexually taboo desires Amanda has repressed.

Amanda finds having an affair exciting as she could become a different person – not the person who lives a monotonous life with a boring job and a monotonous marriage, but someone who can fulfil her true desires. Yet, after she has an affair, and the demon is no longer at the forefront of her character, as she sits “on the edge of the bed, naked and shivering” (p.87), her disgust reflects society’s attitude; she is made to feel awful because she has failed to repress her urges.

Her sexually deviant behaviour increases from promiscuity to prostitution when “the demon wrote a check for \$250” then “stopped at a hotel lounge and made the \$250 back having sex with a businessman in the hotel bathroom” (p.113). With all the credit cards she has taken out, Naamah has access to plenty of money, yet she still feels the need to prostitute herself. If this is a fantasy of Amanda, then it is one she’d aggressively repress as prostitution is generally perceived as deviant behaviour with dire consequences on one’s social standing.

Many ‘educated’ people have spoken against prostitution, with comments such as “it’s just plain bad for women at every level” by a former police captain; “prostitution as an institution is evil” performed by “broken and needy individuals” by the director of Pittsburgh Coalition Against Pornography; and “condoning prostitution is the most demeaning and degrading thing that the state can do to women” by a physician (ProCon, 2018). Furthermore, sex workers are “harassed, arrested and sometimes beaten” and “are discriminated against when wanting to lease apartments, during job hunting, during divorce proceedings implicating custodial care, and when accessing certain services” (Berthe, 2018). They face difficulty gaining “access to goods and services, housing accommodation, employment opportunities and justice” (Stardust, 2017). Even the word prostitute comes from the Latin word “prostitut” from the 1530s, meaning “to put to unworthy use, to expose, to public shame, dishonour” (Lister, 2017). But the most threatening aspect of prostitution to society is that it “conflicts with a bourgeois ideal of private, monogamous sexuality” (Banyard, 2016). When the institution of marriage and the concept of monogamy are essential to society, the behaviour of a sex worker becomes a threat, which is has made Amanda’s previous repression crucial to her social acceptance.

Insanity As Acting Against Societal Norms

Many interpretations of *CC* suggest the novel is about a woman who “is experiencing a

psychotic episode” at a time in 2003 when “mental illness was still very much stigmatised and not talked about as often as it is now” (Seed, 2020). But is she simply seen as insane because she commits actions that society doesn’t approve of?

Insanity can be a label for someone who is acting against societal norms to such a degree that their actions are harmful to the status quo. Throughout history, “actions deemed odd, psychotic or even barbaric by one culture may be perfectly acceptable to another” and one’s “society determines which mind-sets and actions may constitute a psychological disorder” (Ayan & Calliess, 2005). We are all guilty of “ethnocentrism”, the use of “your own culture as the centre and evaluate other cultures on it” (Khan Academy, 2021), suggesting our judgements of insanity are always based on the values our culture has taught us. Regardless, cultural relativism means “every moral judgement is culturally relative” and “must be studied in the context of the culture in which it occurs” (Tilley, 2001).

There are many examples of behaviours we deem to be deviant or insane, but aren’t considered deviant or insane in other cultures, situations or circumstance. Examples are the Zulu society where “hallucinations and screaming in the street are regarded as normal behaviour”; when “until 1980 homosexuality was considered a psychological disorder by the World Health Organisation”; and when “in 1972 a rugby team who survived a plane crash in the snow-capped Andes of South America found themselves without food” for “72 days” so they “ate the bodies of those who died in the crash” (McLeod, 2018). A few centuries ago, “criminals were hanged publicly in front of enormous crowds” and “parents would bring their children and a picnic out to the gallows” to watch people hang, possibly for something as little as “stealing food and picking pockets” – the mood would be “jovial” and “after they were dead, the crowds would rush the stage to try to get a souvenir from the body” (C.W.S., 2017). Girls used to get married when “they’re still young teens (if not children)”; men used to evaluate prospective wives “based on her domesticity, sexual purity and compliant nature”; “women were sent to sleep in separate quarters when on their menstrual cycle” (Higgins, 2016); the world’s first speeding ticket was for going “12 miles per hour”; doctors regularly prescribed “cocaine and heroin”; and tattoos “were associated with criminality and underground, seedy things” (Larkin, 2017).

The above includes examples of hallucinations, cannibalism, domestic abuse, psychological abuse, and celebrations of murder all deemed to be acceptable behaviour – each of which is classified as taboo or insane behaviour in British society today. Amanda’s behaviour is interpreted as insanity because our current society disapproves of it. This is particularly pertinent to mental health regarding women, which has an especially sordid history. In Ancient Egypt, hysteria in women was being due to “spontaneous uterus movement” and “acrid substances” were placed near the woman’s “mouth and nostrils” to move it back; Ancient Greece believed that “women’s madness” was due to “a lack of

orgasms”; and Hildegard of Bingen taught society that a woman’s “melancholy is a defect of the soul originated from Evil and the doctor must accept the incurability of this disease” (Tasca, Rapetti, Carta & Fadda, 2012). In all examples given, insanity has always been relative to social norms that “define which types of behaviour are acceptable” (Ayan & Calliess, 2005).

Gran conveys Amanda’s insanity as a contradiction of our current norms and expected conventions in several ways.

First, there are no chapter numbers, which represents the lack of organisation and chaos in her mind – organising the chapters with numbers would give a coherence to the story that doesn’t exist in her life.

Second, she reads a list of attributes of those who are demonically possessed to diagnose herself as possessed, but most of the attributes on the list could also be recognised symptoms of mental illnesses. These include “I’m short- and ill- tempered with my friends and loved ones” which is a symptom of depression, “I have unusual new thoughts, or head voices in my head” which is a symptom of schizophrenia or psychosis, and “I have hurt or killed animals or people” (p.30) which is a symptom of a personality disorder.

Third, the ways other people describe the demon to her, such as a child who asks about “the lady who’s always with you” (p.71), suggests the demon is *always with her* in the way that depression is *always with her* but is invisible to most other people. Similarly, when the psychic tells her “someone’s watching you” (p.76), this is linked to the symptom of paranoia, or the constant judgement one might feel that leads to low self-esteem.

Finally, there is the inadequate help she receives. The psychic tries meditation and tells her to “Be in your clean, pure space. Feel how good it feels to be free. Be aware of the space inside you where the invader was. We need to fill that hole with healing” (p.112) – which is difficult to do when your mental health makes it tough to focus your mind. When she tells her doctor to “go to hell” she leaves him “smirking behind me” (p.114), but it isn’t clear whether the doctor was actually smirking or if her preconception was affecting her perception of reality – something that links to the supposed demon in *AHFOG*.

Often, it is the stigma associated with mental health that stops one being open about it and makes them believe there is something wrong with them, resulting in repressed feelings or even repression of the illness. In fact, “The U.S. Surgeon General and World Health Organisation cite stigma as a key barrier to successful treatment engagement” due to widespread belief that “people with mental and behavioural disorders are not acting within the norms of society” (Ahmedani, 2011) – it is stigma within society that causes one to repress and keep suffering.

There are believed to be four fundamental needs we must fulfil to operate as mentally healthy humans – “security, self-esteem, autonomy, and connection” – and “if we do not meet

our psychological needs, we suffer, sometimes severely” (Manson, 2021). She does not have *security* with Ed. She does not have *self-esteem* as she feels put down by her oppressor and must live a life where she isn’t happy. She does not have *autonomy* as Ed controls her life. And she searches for *connection* through promiscuity. Society forces her to repress all aspects of her life that would achieve these fundamental needs, and she creates the demon due to the increasing the strain on her need to repress desires that society would label her insane for acting on.

The Repression of Murderous Fantasies

The ultimate taboo, the ultimate deviance, and the ultimate action against social norms in society is to take a life. It is believed to be something only a small amount of people are capable of, but this may not be true.

Goldhill asserts that “most of us, after all, have thought about committing murder”, acknowledging Buss’s studies that “found that 91% of men and 84% of women had thought about killing someone, often with very specific hypothetical victims and methods in mind”, leading to the conclusion that “we’re biologically predisposed to violence in certain situations” and that “societal pressures, including cultural norms and legal guidelines do influence our biological impulses to murder” (Goldhill, 2018).

In another study, “research suggests that the vast majority of adult men admit to having had at least one homicidal thought and women, although to a slightly lower degree, aren’t far behind”, and that homicidal thoughts “mean *something* – unresolved anger, unhealed pain, a way to feel more in control, a cry for help” (Johnston, 2018), which are potential causes of what makes Amanda ill.

In another study, the researcher “found that 73% of men and 66% of women in their sample had fantasies about killing someone”, and that a replica study found similar results with “79% of men and 58% of women” harbouring murder fantasies (Shaw, 2021).

These studies suggest that thoughts of murder are not uncommon. Many “evolutionary theorists argue that homicide is the end result of a normal psychological process: an outgrowth of aggressive inclinations that, throughout evolutionary past, were often adaptive for our ancestors” (Kenrick & Sheets, 1993). In *The Murderer Next Door* (Buss, 2005), Buss explores the homicidal fantasies of hundreds of participants as an explanation for real-life homicides. He gives examples of how men’s murder fantasies are often against ex-girlfriends or an ex-girlfriend’s new lover as an act of mate-guarding, and how women’s murder fantasies are often of self-defence against an aggressive male, an act of mate-guarding against another woman, or infanticide to make herself more appealing toward a potential mate.

Murder is something we are all capable of, but because “it is likely that the social norm proscribing homicide effectively inhibits acting out aggressive fantasies to the ultimate conclusion” (Crabb, 2000) we repress such thoughts. For Amanda, it starts with rumination, such as when “I lay in bed and in my mind reviewed every late night, every broken promise of my marriage” (p.15). When we ruminate, we tell ourselves stories that can turn “a holiday or a meal into something entirely wonderful or completely appalling, depending on the story we have decided for ourselves of a successful or failed event” (Brown, 2016). We tell ourselves these stories over and over, and they make us angrier. “People who have aggressive fantasies are more likely to be aggressive” (Mull, 2019), making this the start of Amanda struggling to repress her homicidal fantasies toward Ed. Before murdering Ed, Amanda/Naamah also murders her boss. A boss is often the subject of murder fantasy, as found in one study where 29% of people’s fantasies were about killing their boss (Kenrick & Sheets, 1993), and is evidently one Amanda had to repress. After her demon/repression has killed Ed, Amanda screams “Why did you do it?” and finds that Naamah has written on the wall “I WIN” (p.163). But who wins?

It is what she has repressed, as it has succeeded in bringing her repressed desires to the forefront. Promiscuity, insanity, and infidelity are all things one can return from, but one will struggle to be socially accepted after murder. It is no surprise that Ed’s murder happens at the end of the book as there are few extremes left for Amanda to perform. What is repressed has murdered the oppressor. As with *The Entity* (Felitta, 1978) and *AHFOG*, the repressed wins.

Come Closer and the Horror Genre

Throughout the novel, the protagonist undergoes a transformation from the woman to the monster, a trope often identified as ‘the monstrous feminine’ (Creed, 1993). This trope is broken into its own subsections, including the Final Girl, the Femme Castratrice, and the Woman as Possessed – and they are rarely seen as overlapping. One might assume CC identifies most primarily with Woman as Possessed, but Amanda absorbs all three of these tropes of women in horror on her path to becoming a monster.

Amanda identifies with the Femme Castratrice typically of rape-revenge films because, as in *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir, 1978), the protagonist does not start out as the monster – the monster is created by the actions of men. The oppressor in demonic horror is male (Ed), much like the antagonists of rape-revenge, with the main difference being the level of violence committed by the rapists in *ISOYG*; the rapists primarily abuse Jennifer Hills through sexual and physical means, whilst Ed’s offence is psychological abuse. Even so, the disparity between the levels of violence does not mean that abuse is not severe in both situations.

Rape-revenge films are not just about the rape itself, but are about an exchange of power, such as from the city-woman with the power of urbanisation to the opposing men living in rural conditions that depicts “the construction of the city as a metaphoric rapist of the country” (Clover, 1992) – this is similar to the power exchange that exists between Ed and Amanda; the power starts with the oppressor and ends with the repressed.

In *ISOYG*, Jennifer starts as a friendly, self-confident woman before being turned into “a psychotic monster” and it is the actions of the male rapists that make her “symbolically castrated” (Creed, 1993), forcing her to transform into a violent psychopath seeking revenge. Similarly, Amanda used to fulfil what is expected of her as a woman, but it is the pressure of her oppressor, his controlling nature and his psychological abuse that forces her to become a *psychotic monster* driven to murder. Both the castratrice and the possessed have been transformed into monsters by the oppressors in their lives.

Even though Amanda’s transformation into the monster happens within the story, the demon is already present at the beginning of the novel. It is in this way that Amanda is similar to the Final Girl. The Final Girl is virtuous and pure, and though Amanda is not a virgin, there is no reference to her sexual nature until the demon has greater control. Amanda herself does not overtly wish to have sex, the demon does; without the demon’s intervention, she remains pure, much as the Final Girl remains pure. One could interpret the demon that possesses Amanda as the villain, but whether that demon exists is ambiguous, or Naamah can also be seen as ‘the repressed’ aspects of Amanda’s character, or ‘the other.’ The repressed is created by the oppressor, making him responsible for the evil as he forces Naamah to emerge. Therefore, the oppressor is the villain the Final Girl must defeat, which she does – she murders Ed in the final few pages, much as the Final Girl murders the killer within the final few minutes of the slasher film.

The Final Girl is also typically androgynous and not “fully feminine” (Creed, 1993). Amanda is expected to fulfil expectations of women in her age and class, and it is her lack of interest in the expectations of her gender role that makes her not *fully feminine*. Her defiance of her gender’s typical life events allows her to take on masculine trait of aggression to vanquish the villain – much like the Final Girl, the “‘monstrous-feminine’ emphasises the important of gender in the construction of her monstrosity” (ibid).

Some newer texts “complicates the trope of the final girl”, as outlined by Krauss, who explains that “having final girls of colour thus questions not only the idea of the final girl as innocent” but “also challenges the entire history and reception of captivity narratives” (Krauss, 2024). She is referring to the use of Native American history in *My Heart is a Chainsaw* (Jones, 2021) where, as a black character, the protagonist identifies with the motives of “malicious Indian ghost” who acts as the villain; this is also a book where, by standing “up to her abuser”, this character “becomes, in effect, both Final Girl and slasher” (Krauss, 2024). Kraus also

references *Prey* (Trachtenberg, 2022), which also involves a native American Final Girl; in both these texts, the characters confront “multiple threats”, but unlike previous slashers, the multiple threats are not “literally related” such as the villains who are linked through family in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Hooper, 1976), but are “thematically linked through the spectre of colonialism” (Krauss, 2024). This is evidence of the Final Girl trope progressing since it first entered our consciousness in the 1970s as a virtuous white woman fending off a monster to diverse characters who face threats that reflect their own alienation. In seeing Amanda as a progressive Final Girl, Amanda encompasses the development of this trope in her battle with the demon – whilst the original Final Girl presented a virtuous woman the patriarchy would approve of, she is fighting male oppression and patriarchal expectations in an act of rebellion against societal standards.

Ultimately, she is the *Femme Castratrice* who takes power back from the male oppressor, the Final Girl who must deny feminine expectations to defeat her villain, and the *Woman as Possessed* who’s taken over by what she represses. She is the combined characteristics of the female horror character who defies her feminine expectations.

Conclusion

Naamah speaks on the final page, and her words are particularly pertinent, and can be found in Appendix D. Whilst these words are about the demon taking control, they are also a description of the unravelling of what one has repressed. They are about how someone who becomes deviant often fights deviant inclinations at first. They keep repressing. Then they “see the possibilities” of what will happen when they don’t repress – the happiness, the satisfaction, the being who you truly are – and one leaves a “small lonely life” (p.165) of repression for it.

She refers to saying no – she has constantly told the oppressor yes and the repressed no until she can no longer sustain her objections. The repressed must be unleashed.

Amanda admits all she’s ever wanted was “someone to love me, and never leave me alone” (p.166). We feel loneliness when we try as hard as Amanda to persistently meet expectations from our partners, our friends and our workplace. It is the societal pressure that makes it tough to repress. Therefore, it is society that creates its own deviant, and it is the repressed who satisfies her needs by loving her for who she is.

Chapter Six: The Good Demon and The Last Days of Jack Sparks: What is Evil? The Emergence of Layers to the Demonic.

Good and evil are central concepts to society and to people as individuals. Society often perceives murderers and criminals as plainly evil, and doesn't consider the potential complexities of the situation; it is comforting for people to have a clear-cut interpretation of good and evil that we can apply. But whilst it is understandable to label someone as evil, it's not necessarily helpful to our progression as a society. If we fail to consider the complexities of someone's actions and what has led to them, then we force those we consider evil to become 'others' – a concept that a demon often represents. Through a demon, or the 'other', 'evil' can cease being an abstract concept, and can become a concrete concept appearing in a tangible form. We gain comfort by having the image of evil portrayed on our screens and in our novels as the unambiguous version of evil that we crave; our perceptions need good and evil to be clearly defined as the lack of such distinction creates a feeling of dissonance. Despite this human need, evil is not always clear-cut.

The problem with forcing those that commit evil acts to become the 'other' is that, if we do not recognise the path that led people to such actions, we are less likely to prevent them from happening again. This is a difficult concept, as many of us interpret showing understanding as condoning one's actions, and we achieve greater levels of social acceptance by condemning the 'other' instead. Kumar pointed out that evil isn't even definite, and that our "labelling any action as good or evil is clearly based upon one's perception and judgement" and is dependent "upon the context and results" – we interpret evil through our prejudiced perspective, and fail to recognise that "evil is not absolute but is relative and to a degree" (Kumar, 2009). It provides us with comfort to see evil as black and white, yet the more we examine evil, the less straightforward and distinct it appears to be.

Darwin believed the main difference between humans and animals is our instinctive moral compass (Darwin, 1859). However, recent theories suggest this moral compass is not as instinctive as he suggested, but is determined by cultural conditioning. In fact, Duntley and Buss remind us that "the process of natural selection is value-free" (Duntley & Buss, 2004) –

evil is irrelevant to nature; we evolved in a way which means we survive, not which means we are good. They tell us that “killing historically has been potentially beneficial in the currency of reproductive fitness” (ibid), meaning we can kill because our ancestors who could kill were more likely to survive. This skill does not belong to evil, but to the survival and the reproductive success of our ancestors. Despite this, when someone shows an element of perceived immorality in their actions, those actions are hyperbolised so people can have a figure of hate to label as evil, as this is the instinctive way for the human mind to conceive of deviance.

So far, many of the demons in the books I’ve discussed have seen demons in this way; as indisputably evil. This is why the most powerful aspect of *The Good Demon* (Cajoleas, 2018) and *The Last Days of Jack Sparks* (Arnopp, 2016) is the way their portrayals of evil are not so simple. These more recent releases show the layers and complexities of evil, though they both do it in their own unique ways.

In *TGD*, Clare is a teenage girl²⁷ who has been exorcised of the demon possessing her. However, unlike previous texts, Clare is not happy about this – she loved her demon, felt loved in return, and wants her demon back. Throughout the book, she seeks a way to become possessed again. This introduces a new concept – that a demon is wanted.

Yet the more Claire recalls her past with her demon, the more her demon’s actions appear abusive – the demon uses gaslighting, love-bombing, and frequently reminds Claire that no one else understands her to isolate her from family and friends. Clare’s demon does this repeatedly, though Claire fails to see it, much as abuse victims often do – she remembers the moments she felt loved by her demon and omits the moments she was manipulated or hurt. Research has shown that “it’s common for women to be in an abusive relationship and not be aware” (Cassano, 2018), especially as an abuser is not abusive all the time – in reality, many abusers hide their actions by appearing charming and friendly. Clare’s demon does exactly this by showing love toward her, giving her affection, and providing a place of belonging that her family doesn’t²⁸.

It doesn’t help Clare that there is a hypocrisy present in those who claim to protect her. If her demon is what she represses – her need for love and belonging – then her oppressors –

²⁷ This novel is generally considered to be Young Adult, but reviews about the relatability for young people of Claire’s character were mixed. Some online reviewers described her as a headstrong and honest character young people will enjoy reading, whilst others described her as “pretentious and angsty” in a way that “doesn’t read like a teen at all” (Howling Libraries, 2018).

²⁸ Williams introduced an interesting theory about the relationship between the man and the horror monster, and the woman and the horror monster. She states that “the male look expresses conventional fear at that which differs from itself”, whilst “the female look” instead “shares the male fear of the monster’s freakishness, but also recognises the sense in which this freakishness is similar to her own difference” (Williams, 2015). As film and literature has historically been produced through the male gaze, a female character is often either the focus of disgust or desire, resulting in her having a “strange sympathy and affinity” (ibid) with the monster. This could also be why Clare identifies with her demon so strongly; as an adolescent girl who is ‘acting out’ due to unrecognised trauma, she is more familiar with being perceived as the monster than as the human.

her stepfather and mother who claim her demon is evil – exhibit equivalent abusive characteristics as the demon; with the only difference being they aren't perceived by society as evil. A demon is stereotypically evil, thus making it easier to perceive it as evil, whilst her family is a well-presented middle-class unit, meaning it's harder to see the evil they commit. It is easier for society to condemn those who carry the association and/or appearance of evil, meaning her caregivers were able to remove the demon that provided comfort to Clare despite being abusive themselves in the following ways:

- Fighting whilst Clare is in her bedroom, meaning she is forced to listen to them arguing – “That night I lay in bed, listening to Mom and Larry argue beneath me. They always found something to fight about, whether it involved me or not” (p.71).
- Creating an image of middle-class bliss to hide the unhappiness within – “reminded you that all the furnishing and carpet and wallpaper were just cover-ups for the bones of the house” (p.74).
- Actively discouraging her from sharing her interests with them – “Glad you found a new hobby. Just keep it down, alright?” (p.78).
- Her stepfather forcing her mother to throw out references to her husband, meaning they remove all Clare's memories of her father – “Mom destroyed them all, tossed them out with the rest of her old life” (p.76).
- They are alcoholics – “Larry would get so drunk he could hardly walk” (p.111).
- They neglect their child's welfare – “they were all fucked up on drugs and everything, and I just wandered out of the house, nobody even noticing I was gone. I couldn't have been more than six years old” (p.119).

The parents who appear to protect Clare from what is portrayed as evil (the demon) hide the layers of evil they contain within their own actions. We are keen for something clear-cut to condemn, and the demon is perfect for this purpose, thus showing how society condemns what it perceives as evil at the cost of recognising the evil being committed by those who appear sincere²⁹.

In this sense, the demon has more layers than the other demons in the texts referenced so far. It is in this way that *The Last Days of Jack Sparks* (Arnopp, 2016) is similar – the contrast is, however, that the negative aspects of the demon do not exist as an outside agent, but are manifested within the narcissistic protagonist. The demon in this text is created out of Jack

²⁹ Whilst the online reception to the novel was widely positive in the way the author handled Clare's complex relationship with her demon, some online reviewers considered the book to be a letdown as a 'horror novel'. Similar to critics of *The Entity* (Felitta, 1978), they felt that there should have been climactic showdown with the demon, with one reviewer stating that “by the end, it becomes pretty clear that the full deconstruction of the ‘possession’ story isn't going to happen” (The Library Ladies, 2018). This suggests that this an expected trope that horror fans feel they require and demonic horror is seen as a letdown without it, which creates a difficulty for authors who attempt to do something new with the genre.

Sparks' complex layers of good and evil, not out of an external force.

TLDOJS has an element of the epistolary style to it, as we are presented with the manuscript for a book by an atheist debunking the supernatural that Sparks' brother publishes after Sparks dies, and throughout the book we are given interviews, emails and diary entries by other characters that strongly dispute the perception of events given to us by Sparks. Whilst in *TGD*, the oppressor and the repressed exist in an external battle between the demon and Claire's parents, in *TLDOJS*, the battle between oppressor and repressed exists within the protagonist. Sparks is a deluded, arrogant man and his outward narcissism, his arrogance, and his mistreatment of others contrast with the insecurities he reveals later in the book. We are originally shown a man who is obsessed with his cocky online persona, yet, as the book progresses and his character breaks down, we are shown an insecure man who's desperate for affirmation. Unlike the other texts, the demon is not taken from religious mythology or from an external presence – the demon is a form of his negative characteristics – the obsession with his online image, his mistreatment of others, the conceited nature of his persona – and he is forced to fight his abstract flaws in a concrete form. It is, however, almost impossible to fight something that is within yourself. You cannot remove a demon if it is already part of you.

It is the fragmentation of Sparks' personality into an online and offline persona that creates the greatest risk of his susceptibility to being possessed by his arrogance. There is often a disparity between who we are online and who we are in real life. We live in a society where "UK adults are now spending twenty hours a week online", but even though "the internet may have provided an escapism from everyday life, it is mostly mimicking it" (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2015) – much like his social media persona, he becomes an imitation of himself, creating a disjointed ego that is more susceptible to fragmentation and destruction. He is trying hard to present the personality he portrays online, so much that his sense of self becomes unclear, and that disparity between who he is and who he is trying to be opens himself up for demonic access³⁰.

Sparks' online persona reflects our obsession with online life, where the worst parts of ourselves are brought out. Online interactions "magnifies existing antisocial behaviour," generate a feeling of "anonymity" (Thomas, 2022) and create a place where negative opinions are able "to thrive by removing self-censorship" (Manson, 2022). We show a different version of ourselves and pursue witch-hunts against those we perceive as evil in a way we would be unlikely to do in real-life. Sparks is the epitome of this destruction of healthy self-image. Sparks has created his own demon, and society has created Sparks; a man who is frequently

³⁰ The author admits that he finds himself "preoccupied with dopamine addiction, with which the majority of we online folk struggle" having "gone through periods where I've been surprised to find myself mindlessly scrolling through Facebook, for instance, when I should be working" (Dodwell, 2019). His own experience with social media has evidently influenced this book, as it did with his following book *Ghoster* (Arnopp, 2019).

rewarded for his nasty characteristics by constant online affirmation. Perhaps it is no wonder that his perception of events is so often inaccurate – we see things as we wish to see them, and his perspective is created by the encouragement he gets from his online followers for being nasty.

Both texts show that evil is based on perspective. They show that there are reasons for, and layers to, evil. They show that our interpretation of actions creates witch-hunts against acts we view as evil without understanding the path that has led to it. Demons are an easy image for us to hate because there is no other reason for their evil than because they are evil, and this is how our society chooses to see evil. Yet, in these more recent publications, we are seeing demons with more complexity. We are reading about demons that demonstrate the layers of evil we are capable of. We see the complexities that hide behind our society.

In *TGB*, Clare's parents are the oppressors, and her demon is the repressed. They both represent abuse, but each holds a different relationship to how that abuse is perceived by society. The demon is seen as an overt abuser through the preconceptions society holds, whilst her parents are covert abusers that society struggles to recognise; their abuse succeeds as they transfer attention onto the demon that society expects to be the abuser. They both reflect different versions of abuse through the way that abuse is recognised and understood – unlike previous demonic horror novels, the oppressor and repressed are caused by the same action but separated by perception. Similarly, in *TLDOJS*, the oppressor and the repressed exist as the same concept – the angst, destruction of self, and inability to self-reflect caused by social media. Jack Sparks oppresses himself through his obsession with online life, and he represses the misery he feels as a result.

Chapter Seven: Domestic Abuse and Repression in my Creative Pieces

We are only just beginning to comprehend the impact of toxic masculinity as an influence on male-led violence and the domestic abuse that occurs as a result. Whilst girls from a young age are typically given Barbies, boys are given trucks and Action Men that fire weapons; we are teaching young male children to not only accept aggression, but to enact it, whilst using phrases such as 'boys don't cry' to teach them that emotions aside from anger are unacceptable. We are raised in a society where boys are taught through "their toys, their television, every joke and jibe in the playground" that "the single most important thing they must do is to perform masculinity" (Brand, 2013), which leads to men's aversion to the feeling they are being emasculated. "There are a lot of social prohibitions against men expressing emotions other than anger, and a lot of social reinforcement for being angry" (Weiss, 2018), meaning feelings of being emasculated often result in "men's violence against women" and male-led violence. This is a "major contemporary social problem that is deeply rooted in our cultural traditions" (Katz, 2006).

But those whose privilege benefits from male supremacy seem hesitant to recognise the full extent of problems caused by male supremacy. Too many men still believe in the preconceived image of an abuse victim being a "young, white, slim, beautiful women" and the image of an abuser being "physically violent, broadly built, a brutish modern day neanderthal" (Jessie, 2017). This image is far from the reality, as when an abuser is "in public, he can be charming, kind, and likeable" (Jaqua, 2020). This lack of understanding of how abuse works by many men, especially the ruling elite, results in the proliferation of the problem.

This is why it's relevant for my creative pieces to reflect today's society by exploring misogyny, toxic masculinity, the nature of an abuser, and the actions of victims. *The Shining* (King, 1977) "allowed viewers to perceive domestic violence with a new level of understanding in the 1970s" (Hornbeck, 2016) simply by recognising that it exists, yet the issues hasn't demonstrated sufficient progress; we have moved from second-wave feminism in the 1970s which was "culturally primed to associate female sexuality with freedom and liberation" to third-wave feminism where "sex in the late 2010s is now primarily associated with risk, passive,

vulnerable woman and predatory men” (Veissiere, 2018). It is imperative that “the horror genre should be recognised for its approach in not censoring the horrors of violence [and] its ability to tell women’s stories” (Rozario, 2015) and explores these issues to the full extent the genre allows. Further justification for my choice to explore this topic can be found in the introduction.

I wrote my first creative piece, ‘Reunion’, in free verse to give a poetic element to the horror. The story is about a victim of domestic abuse who has been groomed into enabling their abuse – an action that often results in victim blaming due to the failure to recognise that “many women don’t know they are experiencing abuse until they are already in situations that are incredibly dangerous” (Hill, 2020). Because “coercive control is so poorly understood” it means that the “perpetrator makes it invisible” (ibid), and I wish to draw attention to the true behaviour of this ‘invisible’ abuser. Often, victims themselves are groomed into believing the abusive behaviour is not part of the perpetrator’s true character and subsequently deflect the behaviour, shown by how Stella attributes her husband’s abusive behaviour to the demon that possesses him and attributes his positive characteristics to the non-possessed version of his character.

This self-deception occurs to the extent that, in the final few chapters of the piece, she becomes complicit in his murder of those who try to help her. She is so desperate to protect her abuser that she helps to eliminate those who could offer her a way out, reflecting a common situation where victims reject help, such as withdrawing their statement in a police prosecution that results in CPS dropping the charges against their abuser.

In witnessing Stella’s devotion to her abuser, we also recognise the negative impact of teaching patriarchal values to young girls who grow up believing those values so strongly that questioning them creates cognitive dissonance. She has traditional beliefs of how a woman should honour her husband and create a good home, and whilst we can see the harm it causes her, to her it is right. Through her estranged daughter, Poppy, we see the clash that is created when a modern feminist is confronted with a woman of such values – Poppy’s opinion is given less value than Stella’s in a society where “the human right of free speech is primarily intended to serve patriarchal interests” (Payne, 2022), as shown when Stella dismisses her daughter’s views and insists that she cooperates in her wifely duties such as preparing the after-dinner drinks.

Poppy’s husband (Scott) warms to Stella’s abuser (Stanley) as he recognises his own masculinity. Stanley is a dominant character who emits charm – the image Stanley presents stops Scott from being able to see who Stanley really is, to the point that he ignores and dismisses glimpses of Stanley’s aggression. Scott is an enabler, and in this situation, he does not take Poppy’s concerns seriously, emphasising society’s “narrative of male violence and female silencing” (Payne, 2002).

Ultimately, the demon inside of Stanley is the repressed nature of an abuser and the

patriarchy that enables him, which is released when he finds a victim in Stella that he can successfully groom into accepting his behaviour. Domestic violence “is associated with the masculinity ideology, an endorsement of patriarchy related attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours to men during the socialisation” (Mshweshwe, 2020), meaning that Stanley’s brutish masculinity is an important aspect of presenting his abusive nature. Poppy is his oppressor – representing feminism – who tries to confront the abuser/repressed. Despite the progress made by feminism, it still must undo thousands of years of patriarchy suppressing its voice. The expectation of the unpaid reproductive labour of women still exists, rape culture still exists, the misunderstandings of victims still exist, the male judgement of the female body still exists, and the lower value of women in the workplace still exists – regardless of how much Poppy/feminism fights Stanley/patriarchy, it seems that Stanley/patriarchy is still too powerful. This is why Stanley murders Poppy, and the victim Stanley has groomed helps him – he wins because we are far from existing in a world where a female voice is as valued as a man’s.

Unlike much demonic horror, the oppressor does not fight the repressed directly for much of the story, with the direct conflict between the oppressor and repressed occurring when she is forced to confront him at the end. Feminism/Poppy does not decide to fight Patriarchy/Stanley directly as she knows it’s a pointless fight, but instead tries to win by empowering Stella/the victim. Feminism knows that its strength is in enabling the victim to battle against patriarchal abuse; while it may not change the views of patriarchy, it can change the victim’s understanding of her abuse.

In the chapter following Stanley’s murder of Scott, I present his thoughts between italicised sentences without grammar. These sentences were originally copied from *The Satanic Bible* (LaVey, 1969), but I altered the words for each statement so it applies to the upholding of the patriarchy rather than satanism, but kept the rhythm and cadences of the original. *The Satanic Bible* (LaVey, 1969) teaches exuberance and guides its followers to refuse to hold back from satisfying one’s instincts and joys – patriarchal control operates on similar inclinations, allowing this to act as a metaphor for the system that has allowed Stanley to justify his actions. The lack of grammar shows the chaos in these thoughts, and how patriarchy makes little sense when the structures that try to logicise them are taken away.

My second piece, ‘I Awake’, is flash fiction about the struggle for a domestic abuse victim to tell which parts of her abuser are sincere; she is desperate to believe the side of him that promises to stop, that is kind and charming, and that gives her hope he will change. The piece begins with the victim stating “I’m awake, but I’m dreaming and the demon in you is dead” – she states the demon is dead, with the demon being the abusive side of her partner, but at the same time she admits to being in a constant state of dreaming whilst being awake, showing her lack of touch with reality when she tries to convince herself that his abusive side is dead. There are paragraphs where she keeps changing her mind with lots of clauses separated by

a dash, showing uncertainty and self-deprecation in her struggle to determine which of his promises to believe. It typically takes victims several attempts to leave their abuser due to “learned helplessness” that means “they do not develop appropriate skills to escape from being further battered” (Walker, 2016), and can be made difficult when the perpetrator further manipulates the victim with love-bombing – the act of attempting “to influence another person with over-the-top displays of attention and affection” that often follows a period of abuse with a “perfect version” of themselves, claiming “this time it would be different” (Archer, 2017). He convinces her that things will be different, which is reflected in the constant reference to this being a dream but being awake; she’s not sure what part of her abuser’s actions are genuine and which parts are a lie, and therefore her reality is uncertain.

Her abuser’s actions have affected this woman’s confidence, as shown through her constant self-deprecation repetition of statements he’s made when dismissing her feelings, such as “I know. I’m being extreme.” She would rather put herself down and dismiss her own opinions than admit they are valid; her self-esteem has been worn away by the demon/abuse and she struggles to validate her own emotions. She refers to the times between the moments he is “telling me to stop yapping” when he is “quiet” – these are the moments she clings to as they give her false hope of change.

The victim talks directly to the demon, with the demon representing the abusive side of her partner. She approaches the demon with trepidation and isn’t able to say all that’s on her mind. She begs it to leave, trying to insist that her partner doesn’t want it. The demon mocks her, and she continually puts herself down and goes back on what she says. We witness a person who has been groomed into subservience; her resistance is worn down, and she frequently doubts her own assertions. She even tries to escape, fleeing through the front door only to return straight back to the kitchen, reflecting how, when she tries to leave, she ends up returning to the same situation with her abuser.

She looks at the demon and admits “I’m going to die this way.” She realises how this is going to end, but by then, it is too late. The tense changes from past to present as the immediacy of her imminent death draws near, and she struggles to understand why her partner is not fighting the demon to protect her. It even appears he has returned to his ‘better side’ at one point, but this is only once he’s killed her and realises what he’s done, as made clear by the final line: “They’ll find my body in the morning.” She is the repressed feelings of the abused, and he is the oppressive abuser, forcing her to repress the truth of what is happening to her.

In my third piece, ‘The Fall of Adam,’ I spend more time from the point of view of the man, highlighting the way toxic masculinity and men enabling other men allows male-led violence to become prolific. The demon is Adam from the genesis story of the Bible, still angry at Eve for ending their stay in The Garden of Eden, with his blaming one woman for all that has gone

wrong acting as a metaphor for the hatred of “problematic woman” who “defies the conventions defined by the ethos of patriarchy” (Payne, 2022).

Despite the progress British culture has made, only a third of our politicians are female (Bates, 2016), leading to a mostly male influence on policy and laws in our country – whilst this is an obvious problem, there are many who wish to preserve patriarchal rule as it benefits their “heterosexual masculine privilege” that “continues to structure institutions” (Harrington, 2021). They may have to repress such feelings in a society which is supposed to see a growing female influence as a positive thing, and this demon represents that repression, and the misogyny, toxic masculinity and hatred of women it exacerbates. The demon is like an infection that spreads through some men, speaking to them with its truth and manipulating their thoughts, as shown when it passes from Adam to Simon.

Toxic masculinity is a huge factor on Adam’s decisions, such as when he refuses to acknowledge the trauma he experienced after discovering the body of a child whilst on duty as a police officer, ensuring he is the patriarch sitting at the head of the table when he invites his daughter’s fiancé for a meal, his constant reference to manly topics such as sports when talking to his daughter’s fiancé, and his unspoken resentment toward his wife that the demon preys on. His family speaks about the trauma he’s gone through without his knowing and he refuses to discuss it with his wife, such is his desire to protect his manliness. Because of Adam’s protection over his fragile masculinity, the demon is able to coerce him into killing the neighbour’s child so she can’t tell anyone she witnessed him crying. He’d rather repress than betray his masculinity.

The biblical reference of Adam takes inspiration from the demon of Naamah in *Come Closer* (Gran, 2003) who was Adam’s reject, and is a reference to the way the Bible often encourages a patriarchal viewpoint that upholds such views. There are many potential references in the Old Testament that reveal the “insidious role of gender, patriarchy and oppression” in religion, often with women who are “problematic and even dangerous political figures” (Wafawanaka, 2021). The demon’s narration in this story takes a cynical tone to reflect the patriarchal belief of women as problematic people.

The style of this story takes influence from *The Road* (McCarthy, 2006), where there are no chapters, thus allowing for a series of shorter paragraphs. This allows me to include brief references to the issues being explored, such as when Simon punches a wall as his masculinity means he struggles to channel his emotions in a healthy way, or when the men discuss cigars because they find it more important that they portray the image of masculinity than be honest about their interests. This also allows me to increase the pace at points of the novel, such as toward the end and the young neighbour’s murder, by having shorter moments of action and quickly moving between scenes.

Creative Piece 1

The Reunion

A Story Told in Free Verse

I Now The Way Things Are

The country road twists like veins
 Pressing against the skin of a drug addict's arm;
 The single-track route to the gallows beneath the cocky yellow sun,
 Enclosed into its own darkness by square bushes
 With such a thickness of green and depth of symmetry
 One could be mistaken for believing a god designed them.

An engine that sounds a spark away from explosion
 Disrupts the empty nature
 With the roar of its impudence;
 The speed of the vehicle an indication of the driver behind it
 Who seems so methodically calm.

He is Scott.
 And Scott drives.
But why does Scott drive? asks his benevolent passenger...
 (Although while she may ask it,
 The question does not press upon her lips,
 For it is a pertinent interrogative that isn't worth
 The ensuing storm Scott's response may provoke.)

Scott drives
 As Scott has always driven.

And though Poppy's car boasts the pleasures that her pay check allows
 —seats heated, space enough for another,
 and an engine that glides the car through roads like fingers through silk—
 It matters not;
 Nor does it matter that Poppy's license is cleaner,
 And her insurance more trusting;
 She endures for peace,
 Disliking how he turns from the windscreen to set his eyes on her visage
 And enquire about her state of mind,
 Despite the bushes charging past them
 At a speed that would spark pride in the quickest of giants.

“Fine,” she responds.

“Really?
I would be surprised if you were.”

A sigh,
As loud as its silence allows,
Flutters past her lips,
Kept secret in its volume
To ensure
It does not provoke him
To insist she say more.

“It’s going to be okay.
I know it.”

Such knowledge is the prediction of fools.
But such is Scott—the man who always fixes
When he should be parking his tools.
She yearns for validation of her trepidation,
But all he offers are solutions,
And an eyeroll when she says he’s not listening
And yet he is able to repeat her every word.

“She will be happy to see you.
She was keen in her letters.
She’ll be keen this weekend.”

She is the mother that gave birth to Poppy;
The woman who endowed on her the gift of life;
Who left it wrapped in her father’s home,
But left before the gift was fully opened,
Instead offering a lifetime of spoils to a man
Poppy’s father would claim
(Before his death twelve months previous)
Grew enraged at the prospect of his lover’s former life.

Until,
After decades of birthdays and Christmases,
After decades of laughter and cheer and merriment,
After decades of tears and loss and devastation,
Poppy returned home, dishevelled and irked
—she had been unable to take the forty-minute detour
That provides her safe passage from the leers of builders
Due to the time constraints of her evening plans—
To find a grey envelope with a second-class stamp
On her hallway floor.

Its contents were laced with vernacular designed to illicit
 The greatest levels of sympathy,
 And though it lacked a single explanation,
 It ended with a request to see Poppy
 And her sister Kaylee.

Poppy informed her mother in her response
 That Kaylee would be unable to attend
 As Heaven does not permit its inhabitants to leave.

II Then The Woe of Kaylee

If Poppy was an imp, Kaylee was her devil;
 If Poppy was Athena, Kaylee was her Zeus;
 If Poppy was a church, Kaylee was her steeple.

Poppy belonged in her older sister's shadow,
 And she relished her place in it,
 Not bothered about sun when her sister kept her cool.

She was a child who played with monster trucks
 When her sister was a teenager who played with boys;
 She was a child who drank milk
 When her sister was an adolescent who drank Prosecco;
 And when she reached such an age herself,
 Her sister's rebellion had twisted her mind into the strength of adulthood,
 And she was a leader to those who followed;
 Kindness was the coat she took from herself and placed on friend's shoulders,
 And when she met an enemy who chose to go low,
 She knew how to go high.

Until.

Until the day she met *him*.

He promised her the world
 While he took her universe
 And told her she should be grateful
 That she could still see the stars.

She wasn't aware;
 How could she be when the salvo
 Was so slow?
 But a good attack doesn't start with a charge toward your enemy

With screams of war;
 It starts with promises that you're on the same team
 Until you can no longer recognise your comrades.

She was married too young.
 He went down on his knee
 In front of his family
 And she did not fight
 Because by then
 He'd already worn her down like an old bed;
 And while she creaked and groaned under the pressure
 She no longer had the will to deny his lying upon her
 Like it was all she was made for.

The relationship was short
 —for that Poppy was thankful—
 Though it did not end with an act of glorious defiance,
 But with a whimper,
 As he found a girl made like stone
 Who wasn't quite as flimsy
 As the paper he'd crafted from the tree
 She used to be.

She began taking medicine to quell her thoughts,
 And it took her two years of daily doses
 Until the intoxication killed her,
 And all that was left in her bedsit
 Were empty plates,
 Empty bottles,
 And an empty body.

III Now Meet Cute

The chugs of a small, battered car
 Announce their arrival,
 And whilst Poppy waits for comfort
 From the man who has power to give it
 —a hand on the leg
 —a touch of her arm
 —a smile of reassurance—
 All she receives is profanity
 At the state of a car
 She never wanted to be in.

The farmhouse is neat,
 Small on the outside but big on the inside,
 Wee enough to be quaint but big enough to boast;
 Rustic but not old;
 Fresh but not new.
 Green vines fill the space between bricks
 And spiral around the porch,
 The light of which acts
 As a graveyard for moths.

The husband (Stanley) stands with his arm around her (Esther),
 And she stands as far away from his embrace as she can
 Whilst still performing her duty.
 She waves with all her fingers,
 And they share the same robotic smile
 You'll find on the cover of Good Housekeeping.
 Her clothes look old—not old in the sense of
 Being moth-eaten or worn,
 But old as of that which is better suited
 To a housewife who entertains Victorian gentlemen;
 The black dress that covers almost twice her body
 Would not look out of place on a widow.

“Wow,” she says as she beckons her daughter forth,
 “You are more beautiful than I ever imagined.”

It takes being close to recognise her features,
 But she sees more of Kaylee in this woman's face
 Than she does of her own reflection,
 And a tinge of sadness pricks her chest
 At seeing the eyes and chin and cheeks
 She thought she'd never see again.

“Lovely to meet you,” Stanley says
 And offers his hand to the man.

His handshake accelerates like a race car;
 He grips Scott's open palm in a wild gesticulation
 And vibrates their hands together
 Like their fists were two heavy wrestlers.

The hand he presents to me is delicate
 And is accompanied by a customary kiss on the cheek
 That feels cold; it brings a sickness
 That I quell,
 And quell easily,
 As I have spent my entire life perfecting the art.
 His grey hair recedes and his age matches my mother's,

Though he is stockier and carries in his gait
The presence of a rugby player who once dabbled in boxing.

“I’m delighted to meet you after all this time.
Looks like you’re having some trouble with the car.
I’d be happy to help.”

His enthusiasm is infectious,
But not like the cliché tells it;
It is infectious like the plague or cholera,
And Poppy’s bowels will suffer the consequences.

IV Now Inside

If one were to paint a picture of domesticity
With every surface polished until pristine
And all cushions on the armchairs symmetrical
And all the old-fashioned clocks shining,
They would be painting the image
That punched Poppy upon entry.

Yet, despite the well-crafted, well-intentioned, well-presented
World the interior promises to the estranged daughter,
It feels like it has been crafted into the perfectionist’s interpretation
Of what home should be.

The house, if it were able to feel such a thing,
Feels exhausted.

The wooden beams struggle to hold up the ceiling
Like they were Titan Atlas with the world on his back.
The wooden boards complain
Under the pressure of the men upstairs stepping across the landing,
Carrying bags to the guest room as if it were their duty,
Whilst voyeuristic spiders who have long since given up their life
Remain in the corners a duster can’t reach
Like an echo of the melancholy they once witnessed
In the cell where they share their grave.

The space is vast but empty,
With no photo frames on the windowsill
And paintings of flowers on the wall where portraits might otherwise be placed;
It lacks the happy memories that should fill the space
And push the walls apart,

With the cold punctuated by the occasional churning
Of rusted radiators who must make their presence known.

This is not a mother's house
Or a woman's home.
It is a storage for unfulfilled promises
And places where love should have been.

"Come."

Poppy is beckoned to the kitchen;
The only room where Esther seems to fill the space.

"Help me with the tea."

She helps make the tea
They offer to the men
Who take beers to the car
With their tools.

"Tell me,
Are you a good wife?" Esther asks.
"Is he a good husband?
Does he take care of you?
Do you make a good home?"

Poppy sinks into the empty space between the fridge and the stove
And Esther smiles at her like she fits right in.

This house is everything Poppy is not,
And Esther is all the house has left.

V
Then
When Esther Met Aeshma

Collar up on a white polo shirt,
Grim face glaring at his reflection behind the bar,
Hand nursing a lager like it was a bag of gold,
Guzzling each pint and demanding more;
She was entranced at first sight,
Like the infatuation when Juliet met Romeo,
Or when Rose met Jack,
Or when Myra met Ian;
And whilst he may be a beast to those who flinched at his glare,
She knew that XL bullies just need the right training;

Which was perfect for her,
 As she had harnessed her ability to nurture
 And she craved a project.

She,
 A dainty fairy of twenty-eight years,
 Had thin arms that only just met the bar.
 Her blond hair glided over her shoulders like wind through a mountain,
 And her dress pulled the curves of her body in tight;
 The world deemed her worthy from the worth she presented
 And he craved something breakable.

But alas,
 The dress that presented her body as full of worth
 Hid secrets that meant she'd only undress in the dark;
 Marks beneath her navel where a pregnant belly had twice stretched it
 Were the truths he didn't confront until
 They were too far into Wonderland to see the rabbit hole.

That first night he stumbled home
 And though she was wee
 She jostled with an arm around his waist
 To get him to his night-time throne
 Where she slipped off his shoes
 And let him kiss her
 Wide,
 Hard,
 And with ferocious tongue.

He tasted like vomit and lager
 And she told him it could wait;
 He could barely stand,
 It would be special in the morning.

They made love the next day,
 And the following evening
 He bent her over the kitchen sink
 And fucked her with such feverous thrusts
 It was like he was trying to assault her cervix.

She let him.
 This was how he vented aggression
 And she'd rather it was her
 Than a stranger in the bar.

She made dinner for him each night
 And they were married three years later,
 But did not conceive until after another ten.

It was 24th December in the year after pregnancy,
 And seven years before their son's death,
 When they first met Aeshma.

It was an evening like any other
 Where his ill-temper was ever-present,
 But this night it was worse;
 He came upon her like an eclipse
 With a dark grimace she didn't recognise
 In the loving eyes
 Of the man she saw every day.

She accepted Aeshma
 Like she'd accepted Stanley;
 In sickness and in health
 Til death do us part.
 It was love that bound them,
 And she would honour it,
 Understanding that it was not him.

She hid the bruises
 To hide the deed
 But not to hide the man.

Aeshma was a cruel, sadistic
 Master with a ruthless touch
 And a sinister intent
 That could set fire to
 The most inflammable of stone.

She did what her wifely duties required.

So stop it.

Stop your scowling.

Stop your judging.

Stop believing you'd be any different,
 Or that you would have not tolerated,
 Or that you would have blamed the man
 For the bloodshed the beast relished.

You cannot blame the soul
 For the sins of
 The demon that latches onto it.

So quiet your silly words
 And poisonous thoughts;
 Your heathen mind
 Will not understand.

After many years of marriage,
 She knew her husband
 Better than the waves know the sand.

This was not him.

VI Now Dinner

The dining table is rectangular in shape,
 Like a block of soap or a door on stilts,
 With four wooden seats before four woven placements.
 Each chair mirrors the rusty décor of the table,
 Delectable to the sight but hideous to the comfort
 Of those forced to sit on them.

At the head of the table, with knife and fork in his fists,
 The man of the house resides with charm and wit
 And conversation and questions:
 For Scott, he asks of work, career, ambition;
 And when Scott responds,
 Stanley admires his gumption and perseverance;
 For Poppy, he asks of children, keeping home, hours spent away,
 And when she responds with talk of her lecturing in Feminist Studies,
 He tilts his head a little, with an eyebrow raised, and says,
 “What do you need that for—you got the vote, didn’t you?”
 Before shovelling a mouthful of meat betwixt his jaws
 And chewing with open mouth, hanging his bemused expression
 On her disbelief and stuttering silence.

“Would anyone like more wine?” Esther interjects.

Mother’s question interrupts the potent odour
 The lingers from a question mused to her right
 And found rotten by her left.
 Conversation stabilises as it twists between life in London
 And its comparison with the peaceful life of Whitby,
 And Scott announces how he’d always imagined a life
 Of bird songs and aimless wandering and isolation and unpolluted air;
 Which is news to Poppy, who is used to the life in London

He often swears he couldn't leave.

Dessert is delivered by Esther's weary hands,
 But Stanley's question still lingers in Poppy's mind who,
 Perturbed by her mother's role,
 Watches the way she trembles
 When her clay face melts in the heat.

And, once Esther has placed an exquisite
 Home-made apple crumble before each guest and host,
 And occupies her seat with eyes down,
 Poppy catches a glimpse of an arm
 Otherwise covered by overbearing blackness,
 On which she sees marks
 —a bruise in the pattern of fingers—
 And she stares at them
 Until her mother's scowl forces her to avert her gaze
 And tune in and out of incessant conversation
 Between Scott and Stanley
 Of football
 And fishing
 Until
 —in a quite unprecedented change—
 the conversation abruptly ceases
 And an intense absence overcomes Stanley.

He rises,
 Rigid,
 Without cause or will,
 Marches past expectant faces and toward solid wall,
 Where he leans back,
 Until his obtuse body becomes acute,
 And his head is closer to his feet than to the ceiling,
 And all present wonder how he balances in such a manner.

Once he's poised for long enough to induce concern
 But not long enough to provoke questions,
 He lunges his head upwards
 Until it collides
 With wooden wall,
 Forcing the house to quiver, tremble, gasp,
 And leaves a bloody dent beside the light switch.

Esther, who is casual in her reaction,
 Floats to her feet and shuffles toward him,
 Where she takes a cushion stored in the corner
 (Saved for such an occasion)
 And places it between forehead and target,

Whispering words in his ear
That sound like prayer.

A few more strikes until
God's words work their will
And he ceases his disturbance
With a shake like a wet dog
And a widening of his eyes
He hopes conveys the return of his senses.

He returns to his seat and apologises,
And continues with the conversation
He so abruptly left,
And the incident is left unspoken,
And everyone carries on,
Like an atomic bomb was beyond the window
And they had simply brushed off the dust
Left in the aftermath.

Once done,
The women make tea
And the men drink whisky.

Poppy, who had daydreamed
And imagined and considered
All the ways this weekend could go,
Sits with the only family she has left,
And laments on the sister and father she misses.
Her thoughts turn to a home
She yearns to return to,
Wishing she hadn't been so reckless
As to arrange an entire weekend of
Forced love.

VII Then Aeshma Comes to Visit

Darkness arrives early in the evening,
Knocking on the door with its guests:
Cold, frost, and cruelty.

She leaves the stew to boil on the stove,
Vegetables from the crops she's harvested, cooked with canned sauce,
And adjusts two placemats with cutlery arranged symmetrically on either side,
Along with freshly squeezed orange juice in twelve-ounce glasses

Designed to illicit the kindest reaction
 In the most unempathetic guest,
 Then applies the match tip to the wall lights
 To bring them to a subtle amber glow.

“Would you like me to pour you some juice?”

He doesn't answer.
 He never does.
 Not when it's this close.
 It's a sign.
 An omen.

She knows what is to come.

“I removed the pulp just as you like it and
 Used vegetables from the garden and
 I used canned sauce but that's just because
 I didn't have the time after digging up crops
 To make my own but
 I promise I will in the future.”

He is overcome with melancholic silence,
 His empty grimace bringing a sinister taint
 To this wonderful evening.

Aeshma's waking up.

This is how it goes.

But it's okay.
 She's read about this.
 In the hours before the demon's peak
 The possessed will enter mourning,
 Unable to fend off the strength
 Of the evil that spreads like weeds,
 Devouring his insides at a rate
 A man's soul is not strong enough to resist;
 She cannot know who she is talking to,
 Or who makes love to her as she is a rag doll
 Draped over the bedsheets like a corpse
 Letting something lifeless thrust its hatred inside of her.

But it's okay.

It's not him.
 It's Aeshma.

And what she endures is nothing compared to what he must bear
 When Hell latches onto his soul;
 When she vowed to the priest *IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH*
 She swore she wouldn't abandon his pain,
 And this is his pain,
 And for him it is worse.

So it's fine.

She's fine.

They're fine.

"I chopped the carrots and the parsnips and I
 Diced the spring onions and put in just a hint of
 Garlic—you know, as you like it—and I'll
 Harvest the potatoes tomorrow and we
 Can have them mashed, would
 You like that?"

She beams at him.
 Of course he would.
 He loves mashed potato.
 And he's going to need his energy.

"I know the stew isn't quite as good as
 Mashed potato but I worked hard
 On it."

His face remains the epitome of emptiness,
 With malice hiding behind his glazed look,
 Building his might for the moment
 They both know is coming,
 Like the Day of Judgement has been forewarned
 And they are to just sit and wait for their world to explode.

There is a war waging behind his grim façade,
 A battle between demon and man,
 And it is her job to love him whichever surfaces.

"I think it's done.
 Let's eat."

She feeds him like a child
 And his lips refuse to part
 And she hides the way she weeps.

The following day she harvests potatoes

From sun set to sun down
 So she can avoid fighting for peace in the warzone.
 But it is futile; once the fuse alights
 He brings the warzone to her,
 As he does now,
 Lurching behind,
 His hot breath inches from her nape,
 Waiting.
 They know it is time.

And she's okay with it.

She knows what must happen.

It's fine, honestly.

She endeavours to ignore the wobble in her voice
 As she knows her fretting
 Just makes Aeshma more aroused.
 But it's pressing his heavy body against her sweaty back;
 So she lays the spade down by the potato sack
 As she knows she cannot delay it any longer.

"Come on then.
 Let's get this over with."

She leads it to the bedroom
 And it dutifully follows
 Like the rat who plans
 To desecrate the piper's flute.

Her breath quivers.

Aeshma flexes its fingers.

It shuts the door behind them.

It's not his fault.

VIII Now The Rat

Sleep is a faraway concept
 Invented by a man guided by madness
 Who has the capacity to indulge in such frivolities;

Poppy has heard of the idea,
 But struggles to believe it.
 Laid as a foetus on its side,
 The edge of the duvet over her torso
 To battle the cold;
 Scott has stolen the rest.

Lying in bed at home with the cries of storm outside
 Is one of her deepest pleasures;
 Raindrops beating glass,
 Wind moaning over its shrieks,
 Thunder grumbling at its presence—
 She'd be snug and protected as
 The tempest wages war.
 Now, however,
 She is not warm,
 Nor snug,
 Nor at peace;
 She is alone beside Scott,
 And his snore is a constant whine that sounds
 Like a reminder not to worry so much.

She sits up.
 Prises her legs from the duvet.
 Places her bare feet on the abrasive tufts of worn carpet.
 She is parched and yearning for water.

The full moon lends the hallway a distant glow,
 And she uses it to guide her route to the banister,
 Placing her feet on steps as if they were icebergs drifting apart,
 Her tentative creeps breaking the darkness,
 Until she crosses the boundary to the kitchen
 Where it feels unusual not to witness her mother
 Curved over the stove like a witch over a cauldron.

She drinks from a glass then washes it up
 To ensure she leaves no evidence
 And no blemish on the immaculate stage.
 She pauses as she does, body slumping over the faucet,
 And she glares out the window at a field
 Full of crops battered by the storm
 In rows so perfect they could only
 Have been arranged by Esther's tools.

The silence is thick,
 Screaming at its captor,
 Smothering her in its pressure
 Until she breaks

And realises
It's not so silent.

Skin pricks.
Her beady eyes creep to the left
And direct her terror toward the shuffle,
Where she would not see movement
Had she not kept her gaze focussed
And noticed the blackness in the shadow
Where her eyes adjust
And the night presents its repugnance.

A figure
On the floor
In the corner
Hunched
Suckling
Like a baby on teet
An animal in its claws
Head lolling on the carcass
Ears directed toward its tail
And its predator
With blood smeared
On his cheeks
His tongue slithering
Into the hole
Like his mouth is
Fucking it.

“Stanley?”

Her mother's voice.
She hides in
Darkness behind the fridge
And witnesses the woman
Who gave her life
Place a hand on her husband,
A loving gesture;
She takes the rodent from his fingers
And guides him like the infirm
Away,
Caring for something
She should be horrified by.

How is she so used to human imitating monster
That she does not hesitate when witnessing
Nature's abhorrent defect?

The bathroom door locks and trickles of water mask Poppy's steps
 As she returns to the steps and climbs
 Like she was leaping up the stones of Hell
 And fire pits and lava reached for her toes.

She asks Scott if they can leave.
 His snores dismiss her.
 She lodges chair against the door
 And hides in an unfamiliar bed until morning
 When she wakes with little sleep.

IX
Now
The Morning After

Arrogant beams of sun tussle their way through the curtains,
 Filling a room with light but depriving it of warmth,
 As Scott rises from his coffin and declares
 The night gifted him with the most refreshing slumber he's had in recent
 memory,
 Then asks Poppy whether she concurs.

She holds his gaze,
 An animal in the beams of his headlights,
 And considers whether the truth is worth
 His disbelief;
 Whether honesty is the cost
 Or being told she didn't see
 What she so certainly saw;
 She can already hear his imminent impatience as he says
It was dark or
You can't be sure or
You were tense which probably exaggerated it.
 As if her perception were a dodgy rerun of a reality show
 Rather than the experience of the woman he respects.

"I slept okay."

The smile sells the lie
 And he is satisfied to believe it.

She interrogates her suitcase until it surrenders her favourite dress
 —flower-patterned, flowing skirt cage, fitted bust—
 And she looks forward to her mother admiring her beauty;
 But when she enters the kitchen, she is greeted by a scowl
 For the thigh that is visible when she sits beside her husband's wandering glare.

“I hope I didn’t alarm you last night,” Stanley says.

He aims a smile at her,
 Targeting his friendly fire at her sceptical squint,
 And his charm is such that she questions
 Whether she saw anything at all;
 And when he offers his explanation
 She can’t help but admire how well
 He recites the text.

“I have a rare genetic disorder,
 Prader-Willi it’s called,
 Physical and behaviour problems,
 I eat but never feel full,
 That one’s called hyperphagia.”

“And what about what you were eating?”

“My jam and crab sandwich?
 Yes, I can imagine it’s an unusual choice,
 But the belly craves what the belly craves.”

She exhales.
 A shiver digs its claws into her spine and descends;
 She feels too sick for breakfast.

Her body knows when it’s met a liar.

The afternoon sees a walk of four miles
 Through country fields that Esther could have warned
 Might ruin Poppy’s suede ankle high boots.
 Scott and Stanley engage in animated conversation
 About the age-old question that is discussed with the importance of war
 —Ronaldo or Messi? —
 And she shares silence with a woman
 She has nothing in common with
 Apart from substance,
 Noticing how their strange familiarity mimics the other
 In something as small as a walk or a frown.

They sell vegetables at a market;
 One of four stalls in a pub car park
 Where men with few teeth
 And women with few minds
 Provide custom.

Scott laughs, serves, gleams,

Banter with blokes,
 Cheeky smile for the kiddies,
 Light flirtation for the old ladies,
 The perfect extrovert,
 Serving with Stanley like brothers,
 Earning the admiration of her mother,
 As Poppy sits,
 Watching their rehearsed production,
 With her arms folded and legs crossed,
 Stuck with a pertinent thought
 That makes apparent
 Just how little she has in common with any of them.

Then,
 Somewhere within the monotony of the afternoon,
 Hidden in the laughter and
 Caught in the midst of merriment,
 There are three seconds
 —as long as they are short—
 Where Stanley turns,
 Bananas in one hand, bag in the other,
 Poised in his moment of allure,
 Sweating charisma from his pores,
 And smiles at his wife's daughter
 —nay, he grins at his wife's daughter—
 And it is not to say *You're welcome here*,
 Nor is it to say *Please get involved*;
 It is to say *This is mine*.
I own this.
I even have your boyfriend.
I win.

And in that moment,
 She lets him.

She doesn't want it anyway.

X
Then
When Aeshma Leaves

Shutters over the bathroom window
 Twist the moonlight into the shadows of prison bars
 Against the far wall where clean towels are stacked, neat and folded.
 Everything is white except that which is not,
 Such as the rustic cupboard that contains cotton buds,

A different style to the porcelain bath, sink, toilet.
 The walls are creamy white like that of a hospital;
 They are the padded cell where Esther sits
 In the corner, refusing to cry.

She peels open each button of her blouse
 With a particular wariness
 —not for the art of perfection, but for the easing of pain—
 Unveiling the patches of red that mark her chest
 Among shades of grey for where he was a little kinder.
 Lighter shades of red above her breast keep an indent
 That shows the space between his knuckles.
 The cut on her cheek still bleeds,
 And no amount of pressure will stop it.

It's always more painful afterwards.

She emptied her body to endure it,
 And now she's supposed to refill herself.

The wounds throb the fiercest
 In the bathroom where she is contained,
 Away from the sound of silence and his snores
 Filling their marital bed beyond the door.

She stands, unclipping her skirt,
 And it falls beneath wrinkles and cellulite
 And stretch marks across her belly.
 These imperfections are the parts he leaves alone;
 It's the beauty he seems to hate.

This soldier of war
 Dabs with cotton wool;
 Wipes with tissue;
 Cleans with hot water;
 Until every mark and bruise and scar
 Is lost like a baby's memory.

She returns to the bed and watches him,
 Snorting and slopping and slithering in his sleep,
 And for an inch of her life,
 She is repulsed,
 Hates the life they lead,
 And resents the pain Aeshma inflicts on him.
 Then she is horrified by her failure to honour him,
 And she drags her nails through her arm
 With the fiercest passion,
 Savouring the excruciation she deserves.

She edges into bed beside him and turns on her side,
 Finding a patch of mattress where she can lay
 In the least uncomfortable position.

God grants her sleep
 And she is grateful for His mercy.

XI
Now
Woman Mood

“Oh God. I can tell.
 You’re in a Woman Mood, aren’t you?”

It is the term Scott refers to
 When Poppy is upset
 Over a feeling
 He does not deem justifiable.

“Look, I can’t even talk to you while you’re in a Woman Mood.”

It is the term Scott uses
 When he finds it easier
 To dismiss her emotions
 Than to explore or validate them.

“Stanley has been nothing but kind
 And you’ve just been in one of your
 Woman Moods the entire time.”

It is the term Scott utilises
 When she wishes to talk
 About how she feels
 But it’s easier to dismiss her
 Than to try to understand.

“What did you want from this weekend?
 Did want to be get to know your mum
 Or just throw your Woman Mood around?”

It is the term Scott spits out
 When he becomes the teacher and
 Poppy becomes the petulant student,
 And he has the vocabulary
 That justifies this dynamic.

“Honestly, I can’t even talk to you
 When you’re like this.
 We’re leaving in the morning anyway.
 We may as well just go to bed.”

And there it is.
 Scott decides it’s The End,
 So it is The End.
 But don’t feel bad for him.
 Stanley would sympathise,
 As Esther has suffered similar afflictions,
 So at least Scott doesn’t have to feel alone
 When dealing with her atrocious
 Abominable,
 Horrific,
 Inexcusable
 Woman Mood.

XII
Then
Billy

Beyond the crops ordered into rows,
 Their livelihood maintained by Esther’s dainty hands,
 Is a clearing,
 With a small gap between two trees
 That arch over it
 In a way that looks full of colours in the autumn
 And beckons her with their beauty;
 But appear as two skeletons in the winter
 Keeping guard of the grave that’s kept within.

1986-1994
Billy Myers
Always in our hearts

She’d known the instant her sweaty palm
 Had gripped the cold door knob
 That failed to fit the shape of her hand.

She didn’t hear her son’s laughter.
 She didn’t hear his feet pattering across the hallway.
 She didn’t hear joyful shouts of *Mum’s home!*
 It was only the house that was waiting for her.

Stanley sat in the armchair,
Without a flicker of an eyebrow
Or a twitch in his grimace.

“Where is he?”

But she knew.
An offbeat dripping
Beckoned her through the foggy silence
And she stumbled up the steps
Like she’d never climbed them before.

She passed his bedroom with abandoned toys and half-finished drawings,
Her hands against the walls that leaned toward her
In a triangle that caught her in its centre,
Steadying what could not be steadied,
Until she collapsed against the side of the bath
And filled her arms with his pale corpse;
His limp body loose like the blanket she’d wrapped him in
After sixteen long hours of labour.
His eyes were empty and
Refused to look anywhere but up.

It was the closest she’d come to cursing God.

And as she sits in this clearing with nothing but memories,
She clasps her hands together and thanks her Lord
For the time she had with their son,
However briefly she could keep His gift.

When she returns,
There is a mug on the kitchen table,
Steam rising,
With a dash of milk,
And a light brown tint that hints
At the memory of a teabag.

She thanks Stanley with gracious tears.

It is the same love he always shows her
After the bruises had begun to fade.

There is no greater love
Than that of a sorry man.

XIII
Now
Goodbye

Their bags wait by the door,
Carried by Poppy's petite arms.
She stands at the precipice and turns back to Mum
—nay, her name is Esther—
And forces a smile that lacks the sincerity a frown might.

“Well.”

“Well.”

The word lingers like it means something.

“Thank you for responding to my letters.
And for visiting.
It's been really special.
I've really enjoyed seeing you.”

Poppy struggles to decipher
Whether these words are real
Or whether they are the false niceties people feel compelled to display;
And she realises it is so very
Real.
And she realises what she couldn't
Until this very moment.

This is all her life is.

No friends.
No children.
No family.
There is nothing beyond the man
She gives her life to;
And her silence has not been discontent,
But a symptom of her training and
The subservience she is rewarded for;
And as Poppy gazes at her mother's red cheeks,
She recognises her sister's features,
And she realises there is so much more the same
Than simply the way they look;
They are both devoted to another who disregards devotion;
Both wrecked by the aftermath of domestic war;
Both compelled to looking down
When they pass their reflection.

She feels something close to pity but not quite;
Perhaps it's sympathy.

“Why don't you come with us?”

Poppy does not mean to say it,
But she knows why she does;
She dreads Kaylee's fatal outcome.

“Why don't you come?
I know what he's doing to you.
Why don't you—”

“Are we all packed?”

Stanley's voice is layered;
A cake only he eats;
Its sponge is his fury
And his charm is its icing.

“Goodbye, Poppy.”

Esther's voice is resigned,
And she says it in an almost sigh,
Her face almost breaking,
With eyes wobbling
And lips pursing
And tears belligerent in the endeavour
To find their way out,
Only to meet a dam so big
It must have taken decades
To gather the wood.

Scott's hand folds into Poppy's
And they step into the car,
The weekend over,
The house in the rear-view mirror.

Stanley looks smug.
And she's never known scorn like it.

Scott turns the ignition.
The engine chugs.
So he turns it again.

“It won't start.”

The engine sounds cranky,

Like it knew it all along.

“How strange,
Stanley said he’d fixed it.”

It will not start;
They are not going anywhere.

As Scott curses his confusion,
Poppy meets the eyes of Fate,
With its arm around Mother,
Holding the knowledge of what will happen next.

XIV
Now
The Plan

The only solution there can be
Is for Stanley to walk Scott into the village
Where he knows the mechanic
In the way that men know other men.

Four miles.
Simple enough.

But the news provokes an alteration in Esther’s posture
That remains inexplicable to everyone but her.
She scuttles to her master,
A two-legged beetle,
And clamps her fingers onto Stanley’s jacket,
Tugging the fabric as a plea
For him to grant her his attention,
—which he is kind enough to do—
And she burns his eyes with a stare
That could easily be a scream
If he permitted her voice such a volume.

“What about Aeshma?” she whispers.

Stanley’s face turns cold before it returns to joviality.

“What about it?” he asks.

Her fingertips unfasten like broken Velcro and
She sinks backwards to the house
Like she was falling through mud.

Both women watch their love go.

“What’s Aeshma?” Poppy asks.

Esther does not answer.

XV
Now
Who is Aeshma?

Their pilgrimage is long.
It should be the route they walked before,
But Scott can’t recall the steps.
He thought he might know the landmarks:
—the strange tree he noticed,
the abandoned farm house with smashed windows,
the brook that babbled so eagerly—
But he sees nothing.

This would be tolerable
If it weren’t for Stanley,
Whose entire body shape has become twisted.
His steps are erratic,
A beastly gait lengthens his strides,
Occasional limps stutter his pace,
And he wears a snarl between his ears
Like an immovable sticker.

The cuddly bear has grown claws.

“Stanley?”

A glance.
A sneer.
A cold his warmth fails to quell.

“Are you okay, mate?”

He coughs.
Groans.
Gags like there are fingers
Climbing up his throat.

“I heard Esther say...

What...
What is Aeshma?"

He straightens his back to hide his hunch,
And walks upright to fix his limp:
But it only aggrandises his dysmorphia.

"If you're not feeling good,
We can turn back."

His walk stops without
Explanation, an abrupt
End to his unfamiliar stride.

"Have you hurt yourself?"

His head tilts like he's
Examining a bug and deciding
Whether to flatten it or scrape
It away with the rest of the waste.

"Stanley, you're freaking me out,
What's going on?"

Scott searches for escape in
Case he needs it; there are
Endless routes he can run, but
Each is a route he can be chased.

"Stanley?"

He laughs and he chuckles and he cackles, not
Happy gracious laughter but prolonged
Grunts, unnatural and disguised as sniggers.

"I'm going back."

His arms rise.
Hands curl.
His fingers are claws.
How is he doing that?

"What—"

He roars; a perverse
Scream with too many
Voices.

XVI
Now
I Am Aeshma

Stanley?

his voice
its pointless

Are you okay, mate?

he looks scared
easy
vulnerable
i could you know
i could

Stanley I heard Esther say—what—what is Aeshma?

quiet
you blasphemer
quiet
you dare say the name
you dare say the name the name the name the name
i frown
frown frown frown
i will break your throat little boy
i will break it till you squeal

If you're not feeling good we can turn back.

what is going on
nothing is going on
nothing is ever going on
you think you know
little child
walk away
you do not understand what im capable of
if youre a threat youll never be a threat again

Have you hurt yourself?

little children drown
the little child drowned
my hands his throat
how could you

you did it
 i did nothing
 i never do anything
 let go of me

Stanley you're freaking me out what's going on?

fight it
 fight it
 this isn't you
 don't make them think this is you
 or we wont get away with it

Stanley?

talking talking talking.
 she's always talking
 i eat she's talking
 i sit she's talking
 i stand she's talking
 always fucking talking
 stop THE talking NOW i CANNOT stand IT

I'm going back.

theres blood on my knuckles

What—

a roar comes out of my throat it hurts it so loud its ferocious
 is it me
 i don't know
 is it me is it me is it me is it me is it me is it me is it me is it me
 its never me
 not my fault
 blame my childhood
 POUNCE
 mount
 nails throat pushing thumbs tearing claws
 rip tear claw
 all his skin off shredded
 fingernails through cells
 in pieces
 it's in pieces
 im in pieces pieces pieces pieces pieces pieces pieces pieces pieces
 pieces
 pieces
 pieces

pieces
pieces
pieces

Stanley stop please stop you're hurting me

yes yes yes yes
rip apart the walls rip apart the books tear everything shes built rip everything
shes put together destroy all that shes tidied mutilate our life make her suffer
make her cry make her whimper

Stanley you're strangling me I can't—I can't—I can't—

he begs he begs he begs

St... Stan... Stop... Ple...

stupid boy
THERE IS NO DEMON
on the ground huddled in a looming shadow he cowers cowers cowers cries and
this time this time this time
i will not take any more SHIT from anyone
i own her
she is mine
an extension of me
part of my body
i have the right

Please... Stop...

hands throat
STOP IT PLEASE STOP IT DON'T HURT HIM THIS ISN'T ME IT ISN'T RIGHT
lifting up up up grabbing throat pulling head back
driving into the tree into the tree into the tree
ruined face blood dripping blood everywhere
LET HIM GO THIS ISN'T WHAT YOU WANT TO DO CAN'T YOU JUST SEE
WHAT YOU'VE BECOME
hes groggy so groggy
tries pushing himself to knees
i flatten his face on the floor with boot and laugh at humiliation
like you stifle your laughter at mine
i notice
dont think i dont
and that is why
YOU ARE A GOOD MAN A KIND MAN HOW DID YOU BECOME LIKE THIS
PLEASE STOP USING MY BODY PLEASE STOP
my wife my wife my wife
JUST STOP AND THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU'RE DOING

this has been a long time coming
 DON'T DO IT PLEASE DON'T DO IT
 i mount him
 on top
 face toward me
 blood in his eyes
 look at me
 she makes me angry she deserves it
 these fists these fists these fists
 his arms cant fight me
 but he looks at me
 in the eyes
 the whole time looking at me
 she manipulates me she deserves it
 they are so manipulative
 and you let them manipulate you
 i keep pressuring
 thumbs throat
 harder
 he gasps
 he can't breathe

Stop it please

his eyes close
 keep going
 the injustice drives you
 keep going until its over

IT'S OVER IT'S OVER IT'S OVER

it ends
 he's limp
 i stand
 and i wonder
 what have i done

XVII
Now
I Am Stanley

Alone among the nothing,
 The bird calls are my friends.

*observe the stringent screams of my fortitude and caress the vacancy of your legs
and bow as vagabonds to my prominence*

It was the demon that did it.
 It was I that did it.
 It was she that did it.

i call upon the weaker to damn with foreboding exuberance any pledge i cannot surmount

I sit still.
 No movement.
 Outside, there is nothing.
 Inside, there is nothing.
 Forever, there is nothing.

i thrust my seed into your hell hole and on your knees you beg for my love and i give as much as i must and as little as i can

I stand.
 Pace.
 Walk.
 Stride.
 One side of the path to the other.
 Thinking everything.
 Thinking nothing.
 He's dead.
 He's actually dead.
 It's her fault.
 It's all her fault.
 She invited them to our home.
 She smiled at him; made him breakfast at *my* table; made him a bed in *my* house.
 She did it, and he had to die.
 She wants him because he's young.
 She wants everyone but me.
 She had men before me.
 A few.
 Each of them a betrayal.
 Each of them something to compare me to.
 She dotes on me to hide it.
 Then she consorts against me with the girl.
 I reached the point of ENOUGH.
 I didn't mean to do it.
 But I did.

oh great bastard in the flesh oh protectors of the institution of sycophants of their lessons

Get out of my head.
 You're gone.

The body is empty.
 He is free.
 He is imprisoned.

*allow his required salt to run undeterred so that he may relish the fleshly syrup of
 all his imminent wishes*

I stand.
 Turn.
 The day is still.
 The storm is over.

give no resistance to his passageway for he is in you and must be nurtured

I must bury it
 Or everyone will know who I really am.

*detach her in the entrance of your home for she is unworthy of thought and craves
 it against our will*

OH, STANLEY, YOU REALLY HURT HIM.

Keep digging.

Keep digging the grave.

With my hands.

With my arms.

With my muscles.

OH WHY DID THE DEMON COME BACK WHY DID IT HURT HIM LIKE THIS.

Demon. What demon?

Keep digging the grave.

*this we demand in the name of all whose compassion is short and whose violence
 is swift*

Digging digging digging.

WHY DO YOU KEEP DOING THIS TO ME?

I am digging to save you.

GET OUT OF MY BODY GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT.

I thought I dealt with you.

A roar screams through my throat,

Stretching my neck,

A dozen razor blades in my skin.

LEAVE ME ALONE I'M A GOOD MAN I AM

AND YOU KEEP DOING THIS TO ME.

I dig harder furious digging harder.

OH GOD AND NOW YOU'VE KILLED ANOTHER ONE.

I killed him because I had to.

MY SON AND NOW THIS.

Quiet.

You wouldn't understand.

Hail. Hail. Hail.

There is no noise outside.

I will not let them condemn me.

My pride. My ego. My life.

If he is locked up, so am I.

And I must do what is necessary.

I already killed one child because it demanded her attention.

I am her priority.

I must always be her priority.

PLEASE JUST LEAVE ME ALONE I WANT TO BE A GOOD MAN A GOOD HUSBAND.

The grave is ready.

I pull him in.

PLEASE DON'T HURT MY WIFE.

PLEASE DON'T HURT THE GIRL.

PLEASE DON'T MAKE ME HURT THEM.

I pull him into the grave.

I drag the dirt back over him.

No witnesses.

No witnesses.

No witnesses.

XVIII Now He Returns

Alone together,

Poppy watches Esther sink into the comfort of a chair

For the first time.

The walls seem to purge themselves of fury,

The floor seems to sigh a breath of relief,

And the ceiling doesn't seem to struggle to hold itself up so high;

The entire house turns cold as it's freed from his heat.

Their talk is deep and productive,

And they share their regret in the ways Poppy craved,

With Esther telling of every June 10th

When her thoughts would land on her daughter's birth,

And she'd wish she had an address to send a card to.

Poppy keeps it secret

That her birthday is on the 12th.

Then, in discussion of life after desertion,
 Stanley's name passes their lips,
 And Esther's conversation turns to stone;
 She is reduced to syllables in short sentences,
 As all progress is returned,
 And silence resumes its pressure against the walls.

The silence waits
 Until a figure,
 Big in the small distance,
 Appears out the window,
 Empty of company,
 And full of fists.

He enters the house
 And Esther rushes to his chest,
 Beckoning him in like he's returning from war.
 She enters his eyes
 Where she learns the truth.

"Where's Scott?"

Poppy's question is ignored.
 The couple's eyes are stuck.
 Neither moves.

"Where is Scott?"

Esther's eyes fall to the floor.
 Stanley's eyes are the same.
 No one can understand the wife's devastation.

"I said, where is my husband?"

Stanley's head jolts.
 Twists.
 Tilts until
 His dead eyes are
 Her dead loss.

"At the mechanic."

"What?"

"The mechanic is driving him back with his truck."

"Then why would you walk back?"

Why would you not drive back with them?
And how did you get home first?"

Esther counts the dust sprinkles on her shoes.
Tears hide her eyes.

"For Christ's sake, would you just answer me?"

Esther's head finally rises,
A scowl against the blaspheming,
Offended enough to react.

Gumption becomes the daughter,
Far stronger than her mother,
Unafraid to spit in the face of man;
She will not be suppressed,
Or told to be quiet,
Or dismissed so easily;
She will have answers;
She will have them now;
Physical prowess is nothing
Compared to her nerve;
And she marches,
Forward,
Finger jabbed,
Rigid like the rod that
Holds up a wilting plant.

She demands answers.
Stanley gives his answers with his fist.

She screams once the floor swallows her.
She screams as the heavy mess mounts her.
She screams as his punches curse her throbbing cheeks.

But Esther,
Absent for but a few seconds,
In an action most unprecedented,
Appears behind the lump of testosterone
And sinks the end of a needle into his neck.

He falls on his prey
And she slides from beneath him.

Esther mutters words to God
As she binds him to the chair.

"Mum? What are you doing?"

She shoots her the look of stupidity
 She would have shot her as a child
 Had she the strength to stay and shoot it.

“What do you think we’re doing, you imbecile?”

Her daughter has no answer.

“We are performing an exorcism.”

XIX
Now
The Exorcism

*From your wrath,
 From sudden and unprovided death,
 From the snares of the devil.*

She presents her crucifix to her bound husband
 Like she’s presenting a trophy.

“Mum?”

*From all lewdness,
 From all lightning and tempest,
 From the scourge of earthquakes.*

“Mum?”

*From plague,
 From famine and war,
 From everlasting death,
 From the mystery of Your incarnation.*

“Esther!”

The mother’s scowl is the daughter’s answer.

“What are you doing?”

“The church won’t help me,
 And I’ve never had the strength to do this on my own,
 But with your help,
 We could actually save him.”

“Save him from what?”

The subservient woman,
 Hobbling in her insignificance,
 Desperate to please,
 Silent in her duty,
 Obedient to her master,
 Desperate not to upset,
 Is gone.

This is something bigger,
 Manic and full
 Of frenzy and fury,
 With resolve
 That is all-consuming.

“He is not possessed.”

“Stop your foolishness, child!”

*That You spare us,
 That You pardon us,
 That You bring us true penance.*

Poppy has seen enough make-believe movies
 To know what role Stanley should be performing
 —she expects writhing,
 speaking in tongues,
 sexually vile comments,
 rising off the ground,
 screaming with a dozen voices—
 But all they receive is a man
 With a crooked smile
 Basking in his victory.

“Stop this.”

“Point your crucifix at the demon!
 I will not ask you again.”

*That You govern and preserve Your holy church,
 That You preserve our Holy Father,
 That You humble the enemies of holy church.*

“He’s not possessed.
 He’s just a wife-beater.”

“I thought you wished to help me!”

As the strings of Esther's façade unravel,
 It is almost like she is delivering a performance
 Of the final weeks of Kaylee's existence.
 The daughter knows where this is going;
 Stanley is the disease,
 But Esther is not the antidote;
 The religious doctrine makes it easier
 Just as the wine did for her sister,
 And Poppy cannot see her die again.

"How did you get that bruise?"

*That You give peace and unity to the whole Christian world,
 That You restore to the unity of the church all who have strayed."*

"The one on your arm,
 How did you get it?"

*That You give and preserve the fruits of the earth,
 That You grant eternal rest to all the faith departed.*

"Mum, how did you get it?"

"Shut up you little girl!
 Help me or leave my house!"

"Not without you."

"Help me or leave!"

"He's hurting you,
 And this role you play,
 You think it's normal,
 But it's not."

"Idiot.
 You think you
 Know of marriage?
 Of sacrifice?
 Or devotion?
 You think you
 Can marry
 Someone and
 Disobey him
 And expect to
 Know what
 It means to be

A good wife?"

"Come with me."

"Leave!"

"Come with me and find Scott."

She shakes sweaty locks
That drip with pity.

"Use your common sense.
Aeshma's anger is too big.
Your husband is dead."

Low, sinister chuckling
Gasps from Stanley's throat.
His head falls back
And he emphasises each burst
Before locking in his glare.

It is the same glare he adorned
On the morning before
Billy's demise.

"Poppy, run."

*You foolish wench...
Your husband begged...
For his life, he begged...
Like a girl...*

"Poppy, now."

She ignores her mother.

*You'll find him buried...
Where no one will find him...*

"Did you kill him?"

"Poppy, leave."

*And you...
Oh you...
It's time for you...*

"Poppy, just go, now."

You must go.”

The daughter reaches the door
But does not open it.

She waits.

For Esther to join her.
For Mum to join her.
For Kaylee to join her.

“Lord, let Your might
Defeat Aeshma!”

*Aeshma...
Was Zoroastrian..
The religion no longer exists...
And you're Catholic...
You can't even make up the right excuse...*

His restraints break.

He stands over his wife
Who turns to the daughter
With a single gasp.

“Run.”

The daughter finally obeys.

XX
Now
Sister Meets Brother

Through the glass doors of the house's rear,
And between two rows of dirt where vegetables live,
The fatigued steps of imminent death run,
Glancing back to see if her mother is following,
Knowing she'd be alone.

Her pace slows as she reaches a clearing,
Its entry guarded by two trees
Stood like sentries
Twisting their arms around the other.

She enters,

And she knows she should keep running,
 But the sight of stone brings her to the ground;
 Her knees sink into mud either side of the grave
 and she traces her hand over carved words
 Like they were bumps of the child's face,
 Reading a name she instantly knows
 Even though she doesn't.

1986 – 1994
Billy Myers
Always in our hearts

A child,
 Deceased at eight,
 Buried in a secret land,
 Haunting no one.

Was this her brother?

How did he die?

Was it *him*?

Did he steal her opportunity
 To know more family
 The ground has taken?

Clarity evades her precious mind and she
 Feels the weight of this boy's body embracing her,
 Pulling her into the wet grass with him;
 She sees his life played on an unbearable stage,
 Hiding in the same places,
 Beneath the table or in the cupboard,
 Covering his eyes to hide his parent's violence,
 And wincing at the sound of belt against flesh.

This boy wasn't enough for a mother to leave him,
 So how could Poppy ever be?

Staying is futile.

She pushes herself up,
 Resolved to abandon a woman
 Who has already abandoned herself;
 But Poppy has been too distracted,
 And hasn't noticed the darkness growing,
 And just as her head turns,
 A plank of wood meets her temple;

Her head becomes wet with soil and blood,
 And grey clouds pass overhead
 In a vague haze devoid of form.

He hits her again.
 Her body jolts.
 He digs something into her spine,
 Sharp and unyielding,
 And she will never move again.

She watches
 His heavy feet,
 Glaring at his victory,
 Forever humiliated.

XXI
Now
Buried

Mum...
Mum...

She speaks but the words don't form.
 Her mind is chaos.
 Her mouth is an ocean of blood.

Mum's here.
 It's okay, Mum's here.

"Oh, dear.
 What have you done to her?"

She's far away
 But clear enough for Poppy to know
 The sympathy is not for her.

"Well, she's alive,
 But barely."

Lips are moist against
 Blades of glass.
 She wishes she could run
 Away.

"You had to do this, did you?"

Mum...
Please save me...

“Well, I told her to leave.
 I gave her the chance.
 Where’s the spade?”

She talks
 But the
 Words are
 Muddled
 Distant
 Underwater
 And she bends
 Over her
 Daughter
 Or maybe
 She doesn’t
 Not sure.

Stretch an arm
 Reach for dirt
 But it doesn’t move
 Limbs no longer obey the mind
 Her words hang like lanterns
 Floating to the sky.

“So...
 Didn’t...
 Dare...
 My dear...
 Stanley...”

Words are nonsense
 Distorted
 Too much energy
 To decipher.

Digs a grave
 Nudges her into it
 Face is soil
 Nothing makes sense.

Mum, please help me...

Can’t speak.
 Tries.
 But can’t.

She can't hear her.
 Could she ever hear her?

Mum, don't let him do this...

But it's not he who does this.

Trickling in her ears
 —blood?—
 The soil is cold
 It gets thicker
 And thicker
 And thicker.

Scott.

Mum.

Kaylee.

Billy.

POPPY.

She thinks of Scott
 Their meeting
 What could have been
 They held hands
 When her sister died
 When my sister died
 When my
 When my
 When my
 When
 When
 When

When

When

Whe

Wh

W

W

W

...

...

...

It's quiet here with him.
 She's a victim.
 Another victim.
 She is always a victim.

XXII
Now
The Burial

This is what happens when you disobey God.
This is what happens when you humiliate your man.
This is what happens when He delivers justice.

Mother doesn't know if she says this to her daughter,
 Or to herself,
 Or whether these are stock phrases that help her remain numb,
 But blood is on Mother's shoe,
 And there is another chore that needs doing.

Her muscles ache
 And her brow sweats
 And her dress grows heavy with perspiration;
 She will need to wash before dinner
 So Stanley does not suffer eating
 With a grubby wreck.

"Why don't you wait inside?
 I'll come in when this is done."

He marches away like a royal guard,
 Devoid of emotion,
 And she returns the spade to the soil,
 Tipping dirt upon dirt
 And dust upon dust.

By the time she taps the top of the grave

And presses earth into earth,
 The sun has hidden itself;
 The moon is full
 And is closer than the sun ever was.

She'll buy another tombstone in the morning.

XIII
Now
The Happy Couple

What are you thinking about?

She realises she's in a daze,
 Watching the window,
 Gazing at the clearing beyond the crops.
 The glass is smudged and
 Needs cleaning.

"Oh, nothing," she says.
 "I'm being a little cotton-brained,
 Aren't I?"

She places two cups of tea on the table
 And sits opposite her betrothed.

It's what he would have wanted.
He's not alone anymore.

"And what about what you want?" she asks.

Excuse me?

"You spend so much time taking care of me,
 I wonder what you want?"

His smile closes in on her like the tide at dusk.

I have everything I want.

His kind eyes bring a weakness to her knees.
 He takes hold of her fingers with a squeeze,
 And she will never take her hand away.

I appreciate all you do.
And the sacrifices you've made.

I hope you know that.

“I sometimes wonder...”

*Don't ever wonder.
I'd do anything for you.
I love you.*

“Oh, Stanley,
I love you too.”

You are the love of my life.

“Oh, stop...”

He raises her hand and kisses it.

*No one will ever come between us.
They can try to break us up,
Try to get you to leave,
But they won't succeed.*

“I would never let them.”

*I can be unkind sometimes,
But you're a good wife.
A good woman.
And you know how to keep
This house running.*

Tears glisten,
Her joy too much to contain.

“I do hope so.”

He returns her hand.
His expression is vacant.
His body is empty.

And although he didn't say a word of it,
She can tell he means it.

He forgave the sins of her previous life;
For the children she bore before his;
For the disobedience she showed in the sin of lust
That came before him.
She owes him a debt for that.

He forgave her.

So she forgives him.

And is why they work.
Why their love prevails.
Why they are so strong.

The two of them.

Forever.

And ever.

And ever.

Til death does us all part.

Creative Piece 2

I Awake

Sometimes I wake up, and I'm dreaming, but I'm awake, but I'm dreaming and the demon in you is dead.

I know. I'm being extreme. I can almost hear your gruff voice giving me the exact kind of talking down I need. I totally get it. But it's just... there have been times between you telling me to stop yapping and stop going on and stop accusing and stop crying when you are just... quiet.

Not silent, just quiet.

In the way that breathing is quiet. That unbuttoning your shirt is quiet. That stroking my face is quiet.

You're thinking, but you're no longer thinking. It's never been you thinking.

It's the demon.

And tonight, I woke up and dreamt the demon was gone.

Again, I know, I know, I need to stop going on, I need to stop being so incessant, stop moaning, like you tell me, always so inelegant, all serious and narrow eyed and greasy fingered, all like *you need to shut the fuck up Martha you're doing my fucking head in.*

You know, the way the demon spoke.

But I have this dream I woke into, and I stood on the floor – our floor – but it wasn't our floor – and I walked

through our bedroom – it was our bedroom – but it wasn't our bedroom – and I entered our love – it was our love – but it wasn't our love – it was certainly love – but it was quiet.

Quiet. In the way that smacking my cheek is quiet. In the way that huffing at me when I talk is quiet. In the way that loving me is quiet.

And I walked through this dream I woke into, and I passed the wallpaper of our walls – the ones that were beginning to rip, the ones that my nephew picked at, the ones you never promised to replace – and I passed the painted walls – not blue like I wanted, but beige and cream and white, sterile like a hospital corridor – and I entered the kitchen – the one without the dishes in the sink and no memories at the table and piles of love in the bin – and I sat at the table – the one we bought together in Ikea when you told me to hurry up and get the cheapest one – and I sat at this table, and I spoke to you.

Not you, your demon.

He was real in a way that wasn't real, and I asked him what he wanted, and he was silent. Silent in the way that quiet never is. Silent in the way that a sideways glance is silent, or a closed door is silent, or the hand my leg that claims your possession is silent.

His horns were large, but not that large. His eyes were red, kind of red, closer to maroon perhaps. His claws were on the table, and they were long and sharp, but I couldn't see them as they were curled into a fist. And I spoke to him in a voice that was mine but wasn't mine.

He's better without you, you know.

Did I say it? Didn't I say it? I woke into this dream and its images are patchy. Fading like the words on the previous page. I'm not sure which parts of my story are

real or not. But you're never bothered about truth. Not unless it's yours.

He doesn't want you here, you know.

His face didn't betray his happy grimace, or his snarling grin, or his sneering lucidity. His temperament didn't change from the tranquil brutality he always wears.

Please go.

You probably think I'm going on a bit, don't you?

Gosh. What am I like.

It's as you sometimes say – if it weren't for your fist or your cock, my gob would never be shut.

Actually, you don't sometimes say that. You said it once. It made my sister flinch. She asked me about it when you went to the bathroom. I reassured her for you. I told her. She doesn't understand you. She doesn't know your humour. You're lovely when you're alone. Really, you are. You're passionate. All artists are. What would an artist be without a flair for the dramatic?

Sorry. I'm doing it again, aren't I? Rambling.

You always hate that.

So this demon. *Your* demon. He sat up straight, his scaly arms placed symmetrically on the table, and his lizard tongue flicking, and the fire in his pupils raging, and his mouth opened – and this was the first time I was afraid.

I couldn't find a way to wake up.

And he was angry. And he wasn't going to let me open my eyes. And even though I was awake, it didn't matter – the dream had caught me in its throes, and I somehow understood that no matter what I said or did, I was never going to be allowed to leave. That you were going to keep me in your dream forever, and no matter

how many times I opened my eyes, I would still be stuck – but in this dream, as I woke up, I decided I wouldn't be stuck. Not anymore. That I was going to escape.

I stood. And I turned. And I ran.

Through the door.

Past the door frame with the dent next to it that fits the shape of my head. Away from the demon that glared at me with content animosity. And I went into the hallway. Past the shoe rack you never fixed. And I opened the front door, and without even looking, without even thinking, I ran through it, and I woke up into my dream in–

The kitchen.

I looked around. It was the same as it had been seconds ago. The sink piled full of your dirty dishes. Stains of spaghetti sauce down the front of the washing machine. Your silly little demon sat gleefully at the head of the table, its sharp nails tapping on the hard wood of the dining table, impatient for – for nothing. It wasn't impatient. Your demon just sat there. Grinning. Scorn and glee from its arrogant eyes.

I refused to be trapped with your demon.

So I stood.

And I ran again.

Urging myself to wake up.

Sprinting.

Past the dent and past the shoe rack you never fixed and through the front door and I finally woke up and my eyes opened and I stumbled into the kitchen.

The god damn kitchen.

Why won't you let me go?

My mouth didn't move. It didn't matter. Your demon heard it. Your demon relished it.

He doesn't want you, so why won't you let me go?

He didn't turn to look at me. I stood behind it, and it felt no dread whatsoever.

I don't want you, so why don't you—

Enough.

It told me enough.

It told me the door frame was dented because it had always been dented. That the shoe rack was broken because it had always been broken. That the sink was piled up with dirty dishes because they were *my* dirty dishes. That I needed to stand up and take responsibility for my actions.

And I knew—

As much as I know now—

It was never letting me go. I was going to be trapped here forever, in Hell with your demon, waking up to the same dream until I gave into it, and I accepted it, and I said to the demon that it could stay in you. That it could be part of you. That it could be you.

No.

I expected violence. I expected rage. But it didn't give it to me. It was too obvious. You never do what's obvious. You wait until we're alone with the demon – until the three of us are content behind locked doors and soundproof walls – until the three of us are happy together – until the three have us have convinced me to stop crying and being so fucking-god-damn-attention-seeking.

But it is *never* obvious. If it was, the neighbours would notice. But they stay quiet. Protect themselves. The police wouldn't even sympathise. My parents don't believe me. The world doesn't care about what it doesn't see.

So your demon just lets me stand there. Knowing. Just knowing. Knowing I was going to die this way. Knowing that this wasn't just a dream. Knowing that waking up into this nightmare was me waking up into death.

And that was when I really got scared.

That was when I truly realised there was no way out.

But I couldn't accept it. You always tell me that denial is the first stage of the grieving process. You always allow for it. Then you shush me, and you stroke my hair, and you tell me that it's going to be okay, that this is normal, that no one will believe me, that if I loved you then I'd—

I'd what?

Please.

It doesn't move.

Please let me go.

It doesn't move.

Please don't let me die this way.

It doesn't move.

I run. Past the dent in the wall and the broken shoe rack, only this time I do not leave through the front door – I've tried it already – this time I try the stairs – I have plenty of hiding places up there – and I gallop upwards with heavy steps – so unlike me, I'm usually so quiet – and if I can't find a place to run to then I'll just find a place to hide – in the child's bedroom that remains empty – in the spare bedroom that remains full of your trophies – in our bedroom that remains full of your lust – and I open the cupboard and I crawl into a ball and hide in the corner and I close it and it's dark and it's silent.

Silent like the blackout in a theatre. Silent like the end of a book. Silent like the closing of curtains.

If I can't run, then I sure can hide.

So I let the silence persist. It raged. Screaming at me like a dozen banshees hanging from the clothes hangers above me, faces from your suits, red cheeked and open jawed, and I don't want to look at them anymore, I can't stand to look at them anymore, and just as I wish to escape the silence is interrupted.

Footsteps. Outside the cupboard doors. The other side of the cracked wood. Heavy, like it's deliberate.

I've been huddled here more times than I can count, and its footsteps had never sounded like this. They lacked the finality. After all, it was always you that found me – never your demon.

Perhaps this is you now?

But it doesn't walk like you. It doesn't have the soft steps of reassurance, or the distant whispers of forgiveness, or the evident regret clinging to your voice. It only has stomps.

Stomp. Stomp. Stomp.

It walks toward me.

It approaches me.

It stops outside the cupboard doors.

I hear it breathing. Deep and guttural. Heavy and loaded.

It's almost laughing. Almost sniggering.

Almost.

It thuds the door with its fist.

I close my eyes. Beg for this dream to end. And I wake up into another one. And I'm no longer in the cupboard. I'm in the garden.

At first, I think I can escape. But the fences. They are bigger. Less like the ones that let us smile at our neighbours in the summer, and more like the ones that keep inmates in prison.

And it is there.

In the doorway.

Its silhouette filling the frame. Blocking out the artificial amber glow of a cheap bulb that swings from the kitchen ceiling.

Are you there...

I beg for you to rescue me.

Please are you there...

I beg for you to hear me.

Please...

I want you to save me.

It's your demon for Christ's sake! It's your burden! Why aren't you battling it? Why aren't you running from it? Why have you just accepted it?

Its fist, a claw the size of my head, punches through the glass and it shatters into tiny shards, decorating the roses I planted in the summer, but not a single piece landing on the thorns.

I turn around.

If I don't look at it, maybe it won't hurt me.

It worked with you.

If I didn't look at you, it didn't hurt me. If I showed you how scared I was, the demon sometimes went. If I let you see what your demon was doing, then sometimes your love would win.

I drop to my knees.

Cover my face.

Try not to shake.

Dammit no, I'm scared, so I let myself shake.

I don't look at it, I just sob, and I feel pathetic for being reduced to this – a woman should be a powerful thing – capable of growing snakes from their hair or

giving birth to a child – not little and slight like this – not like me, not like I am.

But little is what I am.

I cry. Beg. Plead.

It's the only armour I have left.

Don't do this don't do this don't do this please don't do this.

There's almost a rhythm to it. Like it's a song. Like I'm making up a ballad we can all sing at the end of the night.

Don't do this don't do this don't do this please don't do this.

Its shadow tries to cover me in darkness, but I'm sorry my friend, I'm already covered in it.

Don't do this don't do this don't do this please don't do this.

Its claws reach for me – about to strike me – about to pop my head off my neck like a flower off its stem – and I am about to cry out – but I'm not – because the demon is gone – and it's you.

And I've woken up.

And you take me in your arms.

And you say you're sorry.

That you never meant to go this far.

That you should have gotten help.

That you shouldn't have done it.

I try to tell you it's okay, but I have no voice.

This dream has ended.

They'll find my body in the morning.

Creative Piece 3

The Fall of Adam

Eden was beautiful. The original paradise. The first luxury of man.

And it wasn't because of God's test or the serpent's trickery that we were banished, and nor was it the enticing taste of the apple, and nor was it the rule that He made—because rules are rules and are not made to be broken dammit.

It was because of her.

It was always her.

She listened to the serpent. She disobeyed His instruction. She tasted the sweet crunch and it lasted as long as a forgotten thought, or the stub of a toe, or the brief climax of a useless fuck – but it was all it took.

Because of her.

Of course her.

Always her.

It took a single moment of temptation to prove who was the true purveyor of original sin.

She is the reason we suffer.

She is the reason we struggle.

She is the reason we will never go back to that utopian vision.

And that is why she must die, over and over, until she cannot die anymore.

Or until her death has restored what man is due.

He had never been angry before that day.

Annoyed, yes.

Irked, of course.

Irritated, without a doubt.

But never this angry. Never this furious. Never so full of rage that his skin could not contain his body. Yet, on this day, his heavy body bounced off the walls and his fingers curled like claws, ripping the wallpaper they'd bought together at Ikea, smashing the coffee table her parents bought them as a wedding present, kicking apart the doll's house he'd built for their daughter at Christmas.

She could only run.

But she kept looking back.

She was stupid, see.

Stupid enough to think there was something she could change; something of his true self that remained within him; something that she could access; could harness; could penetrate; could beseech; could reach; could listen. A rational side that would see what he was doing, stop, and beg for forgiveness. So when she had the opportunity to sprint down the stairs and reach the front door and charge across the driveway and shout for the neighbours—she didn't.

In a few days, men on the internet will call her stupid for this decision. They will even question her innocence. Her friends, whilst respectful at the funeral, will all think it.

Why would a woman not just leave when she had the chance?

Because she did have the chance. He was incensed, and he was out of control, but his lack of mental coherence caused a delay, and as his heaving body bounded toward her, she could have made it.

But she stopped instead. Hesitated. Turned back to the one she honoured and obeyed. Scrutinised his haughty demeanour through the gaze of adoration she so adamantly held. Decided to choose love over safety. Opted for her addiction to his affection over sense.

Why wouldn't she? She'd learned all her lessons from Disney films and romcoms; a man who's persistent is a man who's romantic—not a stalker; a man who fights for her is a man who deserves her—not aggressive; a man who protects her from the harm of others is a hero—not possessive. Every romance movie she'd ever watched had taught her that, in this moment, her love would save him, and the risk would be worth it.

She'd only just opened her mouth to declare her love for him when his fist broke her jaw.

Then she was on her front without remembering how she got there; the sole of the leather boot she bought him for his birthday stomping on the top of her skull; the hand that had held hers on their wedding day grabbing her hair and ramming her head into the plaster. They always mocked their neighbours for the times they heard them arguing through the wall—now they were the ones everyone else would gossip about.

By the time he had beaten her to death, he was quite tired. So he kept it simple. He took the rope he'd used

to build their son's climbing net, wrapped it around his neck, and hung it from the ceiling fan.

They made two ugly corpses.

The next day, their neighbours—a middle-aged couple without children—climbed out of bed, put on their fancy dress, and went to work. They arrived home eight and a half hours later and frowned at the house where the noisy couple lived.

But there was no more noise that evening. Just silence. Which they appreciated. They had been dreading more shouting. More banging. But it had stopped. Thank the lord.

They discussed it over steak and chips. They were so relieved the couple had stopped the incessant noise. The entire ordeal had been rather aggravating.

Last shift before rest days. Four of them. PC Adam Cain needed them. Needed rest. His mind was weary, exhausted from replaying his worst moments. A roulette wheel of traumatic experiences.

He didn't care.

Honestly, he didn't.

Really, I promise.

Images of torment were part of the job. Got to suck it up. Got to be braver. He was a good officer, and his colleagues described him as resilient. He'd agree. It was easy to pretend his memories didn't exist.

Good afternoon, Officer.

He looked down, searching for where the voice had come from. It was a boy. Standing in front of the

newsagents. Rosy cheeks and innocent smile and a look that had no fear. Adam tried to smile back. In fact, he did smile back. But, inside, he fought the image the bully in his mind battered against his skull.

The bathtub.

The boy.

The slit throat.

He'd been the first officer on the scene, and he'd seen it first, and he'd called it in, and he'd sat with the body for seventeen minutes, and he had—

Good afternoon, Officer Cain.

The boy's dad stepped out of the newsagents. Adam recognised him. The silver tooth, the limp, the dreadlocks.

Oh my God, Jimmy, is that you?

It is.

Wow. You look great.

Out of prison, ain't I? Got me a job too. Working down at the factory. Night shifts. Just taking my boy out for the day.

That's fantastic. I'm so pleased for you.

I got you to thank. You always gave me grief, arrested me an' that... but you weren't like the others. You saw me when I was inside. You talked to me. You cared. If it weren't for you, I...

Adam put a hand on Jimmy's shoulder. They were kind words, but they didn't affect him. Adam resisted the highs so he didn't feel the lows. Still, he dressed himself with a smile and said he was pleased.

I'm pleased for you.

His colleague came out of the newsagents with two chicken Caesar wraps and they left.

A desolate town centre. The last few baristas and retailers and shop assistants leaving their workplace, wrapping puffer coats and jackets around their bodies, bemoaning the cold and their minimum wage, ignoring the homeless man sitting in the alcove of a brown brick wall outside the bank with a tatty blanket over his shivering legs.

A police car passed the high street. They all looked, as one does when a police car passes. Then the police car turned around the corner, they finished locking up, and life went on.

The last call came an hour before Adam's shift was to end. They were sent to a family home in the quiet part of town. A five-bedroom house with a big driveway. The caller was a woman who hadn't heard from her sister in days; her sister wouldn't answer her calls, and their house was locked, and she couldn't get in.

Adam ate a power bar as his colleague drove. They talked about sports and politics and which team was going to do well this week and how shit the Tories were; idle chatter that sounded like everything but meant nothing. After ten minutes or so, they turned into an estate and passed white picket fences and clean-looking children on bikes and men in smart jeans watering their lawns and SUVs parked on driveways. They stared at Adam, but he was used to it—a police car always prompted nudges and points, however subtle civilians thought they were. On the wrong side of town, it prompted civilians to pull up their hoods or change direction—in this part of town, it prompted

gossip and speculation. A police car in this neighbourhood was a commodity, like rain in the desert or snow in April. You hardly ever expect to see it.

They arrived at the house. A woman stood outside, shifting her weight from one foot to other, biting her nails. She wore a floral dress and had her hair pulled back and wore heels that must have cost a quarter of Adam's pay check. Adam stepped out of the car, tucked his thumbs inside of his stab proof vest, and aimed what he hoped to be a reassuring smile at the woman.

Sylvia?

Yes. I keep trying to call them. There's no answer. There's no movement in the house. Their car is here.

And how long did you say it's been?

A few days.

Adam nodded. Approached the house. Looked through the window. Rang the doorbell. The woman looked at him like he was a moron. He wasn't surprised—she'd been ringing the bell for hours; it was hardly going to work. But he couldn't batter the door down without trying himself.

He moved across the neat lawn and passed the fancy bush and tried not to trample on the carnations as he approached the dining-room window. He put his hands on the glass to make the image clearer and leant against it. The main conversation piece of the room was a fancy antique table in the shadow of a grandfather's clock. Plates with half eaten chicken and crossed knives and forks waited on leather place mats. In the distance, a pile of dishes filled the sink. This didn't

strike him as the kind of family who wouldn't tidy away their dinner.

He called to his colleague. We need the enforcer. His colleague retrieved it from the boot. He told the woman to stand back and they rammed the enforcer against the door. Neighbours appeared at their windows. It took several attempts to barge the door down and Adam felt a little embarrassed. He told the woman to wait outside and they entered.

This is the police, make yourself known.

No one made themselves known.

Kitchen. Dining room. Living room. Study. Reading room. All clear.

They paused at the bottom of the stairs. Listened. Not a single creak. But there was a smell. Like rotten eggs. He knew the smell too well. He knew what it was.

Like in the bathtub. The boy. The slit throat. The blood on the toy duck. The blood on the sponge. The blood on the walls.

He willed the image away, but his mind was a relentless bastard.

The boy. The bathtub. The blood.

The boy. The bathtub. The blood.

The boy bathtub blood boy bathtub blood boy bathtub blood.

Adam, you okay?

Yeah. Fine.

He wanted to tell his colleague to go ahead but his pride objected, so he stepped forward. Led the way up the stairs. Across the hallway. Into the bedroom.

He didn't even bother checking for a pulse.

They were stiff and cold and their eyes were wide open. The ceiling fan tried to turn, but the man was in the way, the rope still strong enough to hold him, his neck blue and his legs dangling like laundry on a washing line. Blood adorned the woman on the floor, her facial features crooked and smashed. There were no wounds from a weapon. She had been beaten to death.

They played paper rock scissors to decide who had to tell the woman. His colleague lost, called him a prick, and trudged downstairs.

Adam called it in over the radio, stated the facts with an empty voice, and waited for confirmation. Then he was left alone with the couple like an uninvited guest.

He stepped toward the man. Looked his body up and down. Wondered... what could have compelled him to do such a thing? Why would a man destroy what he'd built? Why would he let himself become what he became?

Then something compelled him to touch the man.
Something inexplicable.

Carnal.

Infernal.

Something he had no control over, like a need that had been instilled in him since birth, an instinct he couldn't resist. He unwillingly raised his arms, his fingers tempted upwards.

You don't touch the body. You don't affect the crime scene. But he did. It drew him in, like a trance; he stretched his arm out and clamped his fist around the man's leg. It was stiff. Cold. But there was

something flowing through him. Some kind of life.
Some kind of entity, of compulsion, of electricity—

—and I left the dullard, emptying him as quickly as I'd filled him up.

The dead man's Eve suffers. Fire of Hell licks her feet, impaling her womb, severing her breasts. She'll spend eternity paying for her sins.

Take her milk and feed the legion.

She does not need it anymore.

And this man. This noble warrior. This hero of God's kingdom.

He is not tainted by the luxuries of life like the dead one. He takes nothing for granted.

But there is something...

Inside of him...

A boy. A bathtub. A slit throat.

He is tormented. He turns it inward. He cuts his insides with his memories.

I will enjoy this one even more.

Shift over. Drove home. Kissed wife. Got changed.
Beer from fridge.

Adam felt sweaty. A little shaky. Queasy. Something was wrong, and it was just typical, wasn't it? His shift pattern finished and it was time for his rest days and oh, look at that, he felt ill... He'd probably be feeling tiptop again once his rest days were over! Bloody typical...

What's wrong?

Huh?

He turned around to face his wife. Sweet face with youthful cheeks and blond hair that was greying at the sides. Every proud husband would say they had a wife whose smile brightened every room—but Adam *did* have a wife whose smile brightened every room. This was because she didn't just smile with her mouth; she smiled with her eyes, and her body, and her hands. When it was genuine pleasure, the end of her fingertips would twitch, and her body would lift, and she would glow.

I'm fine, Edme. Just feeling a bit down.

Well make sure you're full of energy for when Arabella arrives. Or have you forgotten?

He hadn't forgotten. And she knew that. He had been looking forward to their daughter coming to visit, and to meeting her fiancé. She was just nervous, and she always worked through her nerves by talking incessantly about whatever she was nervous about. When they got married, all those years ago, his days had been filled with talks of dresses and cakes and honeymoons, and his nights had been filled with ramblings about invitations and venues and jazz bands. She never required a reply, just an audience, and he was always happy to be that audience. And when she was anxious about guests, she cleaned to quell the nerves as well. He had no doubt the place mats had been twisted into right angles several times already, and the curtains had been straightened with pats of her hand, and the windowsills had been wiped down at least three times.

He adored her for it; her imperfections were the things he loved. He stepped forward, took her in his arms, and chuckled at how serious she looked. He gave

her a deep kiss then said, Of course I remembered, it makes me think of when you first brought me home.

And there was that smile again. She'd been so excited about meeting her daughter's fiancé. Their first chance to meet him. Another soon-to-be doctor she'd met at medical school. When Edme had brought Adam home to meet her dad, all those years ago, he had been a scruffy eighteen-year-old who worked in a bar and had no ambition; he cringed to think about how much her old man had hated him.

But it had all worked out.

Well hurry up and get showered, she told him. They are going to be here soon.

Right you are, boss.

Another kiss and he glided across the hallway, dumped his heavy police officer's belt on the shoe rack, and drifted upstairs. He heard her hiding his belt in the downstairs cupboard as he turned the shower on. Forever the dutiful wife.

Dutiful wife.

Obedient wife.

Dormant wife.

A wife with a career always works two jobs—the one in the office, and the one at home.

But this wife...

No career.

A choice?

Hers? Yours?

It's futile to become a servant to conjecture, but if you were to speculate that your wife—should she have been in the place of my first beloved—would have

turned down the fruit, then I would damn you for being fooled by appearance.

She is as bitter and toxic as the rest of them. Blaming a man when she should blame her outfit. Preaching prominence when her arms are feeble. She believes what her mother taught her when she should have listened to her father. She endures childbirth and not you, bleeds for five days and not you, weeps with hysteria and not you, and there's fucking reason you coward. The fact you entertain her mediocrity disgusts me. It's vile.

But do not fear.

I am here.

The voice in the back of your head you're taught to ignore. The one that screams of superiority. That cackles at your tears.

They taught you I was wrong, didn't they?

They didn't even believe it themselves.

I penetrate you like you penetrate her: It's rough. It's carnal. Your pleasure is not a concern. You are not in control.

I'm biting into your soul right now, Adam.

It tastes like roses and chocolates and lust.

I will puke it all up with the rest of your resistance.

Do not be pathetic.

You are a man, Adam.

Act like one.

The moment he stepped out of the shower, naked and dripping on the bath mat, an attack of nausea overcame him and he rushed to the toilet bowl and vomited up everything that was inside him.

It didn't end.

One lurch after another, his body lifted with the violence of it, mouthfuls of lumps and bile and soul.

There was a lot to get rid of.

But after he had finished, with the porcelain decorated with spatters of brown and red, he felt a lot better. The sweats and the shaking that had gripped his body were no longer a problem. He didn't feel the temptation to cry to his wife about how he had just been sick, like an urchin seeking the teat of their haggard mother—instead, he delighted at the high that overcame him; he was lighter, almost detached from his body, overcome by the most pleasant euphoria.

He wiped his mouth with a towel. Looked oddly at the floor tiles, delighted at how strangely clean they were, even relishing the potent odour of floor cleaner. How strange the feeling was, to be so full of plague one minute, and to be so light the next. Even his reflection looked better. His skin was clearer and his wet hair was neatly swept back and his chiselled chin appeared manly and his horns were nice and pointed and—

He spun his head around.

Quick.

Terrified.

Sure that he had seen them behind him.

But there was nothing there.

Just the door. Ajar like he had left it. The light string dangling from the ceiling. The hum of a vacuum singing downstairs.

Back in his reflection, his impeccable face responded, no horns behind him, no image that he could not explain.

Except the one in the bathtub, where a boy lay with his slit throat.

But that boy was always there.

That was nothing unusual.

Arabella and Simon sat beside each other in content silence, the quiet tones of a soft rock radio station the soundtrack to their drive into the Cotswolds. They used to talk about their hopes and future plans, but they didn't feel the need to anymore; now they talked about who was making the tea and whose turn it was to clean the bathroom and what food they wanted to eat that evening.

This wasn't because they were bored with each other. Quite the opposite. It was because they were comfortable enough in each other's company to no longer need to fill the silence. They could reach their destination after two hours without talking and still turn each to the other, smile like they've never seen them before, and continue their day with a happiness they casually shared.

So why had it taken eighteen months for Arabella to bring Simon to finally meet her parents?

It wasn't embarrassment. Certainly not. She was proud of Simon, and his dorky dress sense, and the way he stumbled over his words in general conversation yet articulated his thoughts perfectly when under pressure. Nor was she embarrassed by her parents and the way they were always so keen to hug her like they hadn't seen her in years.

It was because she was afraid.

Not that they wouldn't like each other—they would adore each other, of that she was certain—but because her parent's marriage was perfect. Too perfect. And whilst she was sure they'd had their bumps like any other couple, they were excellent at hiding it from her, and she had grown up with a shining example of how two people in love should be. And she worried—what if she didn't see her and Simon reflected in her parents? What if their happiness was not equal? What if they weren't as perfect?

She told herself it wasn't a competition. That each relationship was different, unique in an entirely non-unique way, and that she had nothing to fear. She was being silly. Ludicrous, even. She and Simon were perfect together—there was no doubt about it.

Then she went back to staring out of the window and continued worrying.

Edme finished preparing dinner and setting the placemats and dusting the windowsills and vacuuming the living room and washing the kitchen floor and putting the sheets on the spare bed and placing flowers on the cupboard in the spare bedroom and wiping down the windows and trimming the hanging baskets and polishing the dining chairs they only used with special guests and then, finally, she leant against the pristine windowsill beside her husband and let out a sigh.

She didn't relax for long. Even though she was sitting still, her mind was running on ahead, sifting through her mental list, ticking off what she had done and trying to remember what she hadn't.

Noticing her distress, Adam placed a reassuring hand on her leg, covering the biggest flower on her floral ankle length dress, assuming he could quell all her emotions with a simple dismissal.

It's okay, the house looks lovely.

Yes. Thank you.

Really, it looks great.

I hope so.

Of course it does, you did a great job.

They sipped their cups of tea and gazed out the window, searching for their guests. They didn't say much, but their body language mirrored the other in the way that boring happy couples often do.

The parents opened the door and they exchanged polite middle-class pleasantries. Edme hugged her daughter tightly, and when Simon offered her a hand, she shook her head with a playful smile and said, Oh we don't do handshakes here, and she threw her arms around him and gave him a brief squeeze.

Adam, however, did do handshakes, which he executed with a stiff grip and rapid shake. Simon matched it, smiling back, and their eye contact hinted at approval. The unspoken rivalry for dominance was put to the side as they balanced each other out with civility, Adam lifting his arm out to display his home in a grand gesture, indicating that Simon was to dwell in his cave with as much comfort as he was willing to express.

Then Adam kissed his daughter on the cheek, told her he'd missed her, and carried her bags upstairs.

Adam sat at the head of the table, guiding the conversation. His voice boomed throughout the dining room, his friendliness deep and echoing. He asked Simon questions. Are you ready for your first hospital placement? What do you think you might specialise in? How are you finding the studying aspect?

Edme and Arabella spoke when there were gaps in the conversation. They were happy the men were getting along.

It makes it so much easier when the men get along.

Pudding was homemade. A cheesecake. Bischof base. Thick topping. Sprinkles of chocolate. Simon said it was the best cheesecake he ever had. He asked for seconds. So did Adam.

They spoke about football. Simon wasn't that into it. Adam didn't realise.

The meal ended and it was time to retire to the living room. There were offers of coffee and brandy. The women had herbal tea, Simon had sherry, Adam had brandy. They waited in the living room for Edme to bring it in on a tray. Arabella helped her to prepare it.

Once they all had their drink, Adam stood and tapped a teaspoon against his glass (Edme had brought the teaspoon out on the tray in anticipation of this.) He announced it was time for a speech, and his duty as father meant he was to give it, and the burden of being the man of the house meant it had to be good.

I never thought I'd see the day my darling girl would bring a man home for dinner. One can imagine it isn't an easy moment for a father, but honestly, Simon, you have made it easy. You are welcome in our home, and in our family, and I hope you use that invitation with liberty.

He raised a glass. Hear, hear. They nodded and agreed. Edme echoed, Yes very nice, but Adam spoke over it.

And here's to the end of your medical training—you will both make wonderful doctors, I am sure.

Smiles. Chuckles. Raised glasses. Agreeable voices. The higher the pitch, the less regarded the response.

And Simon, the only thing I have left to say is that I hope you gut this bitch like a fish.

No one smiled.

No one chuckled.

No raised glasses and no voices agreeing and no kind echoes.

Just blank faces. Quizzical looks exchanged from one twisted visage to another. Shifts in discomfort. No one standing, no one able to sit still, no one able to show it.

Oh my, I... I am so sorry. I don't know where that came from.

They still stared.

I meant to say that I hope you take care of my... My girl... I didn't... I don't know why that came out...

The stares turned away from him. No one could make eye contact with anyone else. And if they did, it was brief and awkward.

Please excuse me.

What the hell was that about?

I don't know.

What a weird thing to come out with.

I don't think he meant it.

It was just strange.

I know but he, he's not having a good time at the moment, I think...

She lifted her head like a meerkat. Peered across the hallway. Checked the bathroom door was still locked, even though she'd only checked it three seconds ago. It would destroy him to see his weakness displayed bare, like bullets to the armour he never removed.

He has PTSD.

PTSD? For what?

He...

She lowered her voice so the other two had to lean in to hear her.

He found a young boy in a bathtub. The child had his throat cut. He's not recovered—he's been in counselling.

Oh wow... what did he tell you about it?

Nothing. It was his chief inspector that told me, only because he had two weeks off sick because of it.

I can't believe he agreed to counselling.

He didn't. They made him.

And he doesn't talk about it?

I said the word counselling once and he changed the conversation instantly. He'd rather talk about what football is on than acknowledge it.

And he's back to work now?

Yes.

That's not good.
 No.
 But—
 Shush, he's coming.

I'm ever so sorry.

His stance was artificially strong. Forcing his body posture to remain straight. His chin up. No slouching. Must not relent.

I am. I'm ever so sorry, I don't know why that came out, I—I don't know what came over me.

That's okay, Dad.

No, I am, I—

That's okay. I understand.

He looked at his wife. She held his gaze for a moment and looked away.

I'm sorry.

They didn't mention it again.

Edme closed the living room curtains like she was bringing a play to a close. Adam locked the front door to contain what was inside. Then they walked upstairs to bed, following the same routine as the night before.

A crow sat on the branch overlooking the window, a voyeur to the family's life, chirping gallantly at the bed where Adam and Edme conceived their child. Their lightest and darkest moments had occurred in this bedroom, and now this black omen of death lurked in

wait, watching what was bursting at the prison of Adam's skin, at what he couldn't see inside of himself.

More crows joined. Watched. Stared. Scavenging could wait. This was better than the hunt.

Simon told Arabella it was weird. She agreed, then continued arranging the bedsheets and folding her clothes. The conversation wasn't finished, but there was nothing else to add.

Aren't we going to talk about it?

What is there to say?

I don't know. Something. I just feel a bit uncomfortable.

You feel uncomfortable? He's my dad.

I know. I don't mean to... I don't know...

She tilted her head at him. It was meant to be a comforting gesture, but made him feel like a petulant child. They stared at each other. The silence was interrupted by a caw from the tree outside. She shut the curtains and climbed into bed. The smell of the bedsheets reminded her of home. They were heavy and warm, and theirs were thin and cheap.

He's seen a lot, and he's been in a lot of rooms with a lot of bodies. I was really freaked out, but I'm not scared—more concerned, really.

Yeah. Me too. I'm not scared or anything.

I think the best thing to do is pretend it never happened. He'll be more embarrassed than anyone.

Yeah. I bet.

She waited for him to put his arms around her. He wished she would put her arms around him. As it was, she pulled the duvet over her shoulder, not realising

how much he needed the touch of her skin. He considered telling her, but didn't want to sound weak. She considered telling him, but didn't want to sound needy.

They both read their books. Hers a romcom, and his a crime. After half an hour, they dutifully reminded the other that they loved them, then turned their lamps off, stubbornly unaware of how easy it would be if they just admitted what they wanted. As it was, they fell asleep resenting the other for their lack of affection.

Edme considered asking how the counselling was going. But it wasn't the done thing. They didn't talk about it. Although she wanted to talk about it. And she hated how she was so scared to ask about it. This was her husband, and he listened to her when she needed him—yet he wouldn't even meet her gaze.

She watched him get changed. She knew his body so well. Muscles that stretched his scars. The slight belly he never acknowledged—he went to war in the gym to eradicate it and he breathed in when he walked past a mirror. He didn't know that she noticed.

Screw it—she would force her support on him whether or not he wanted it. She stepped forward and put her arms around him. Sighed into his chest. Her hands on his skin to let him know she was there. He smiled awkwardly and patted her on the back like he was greeting a distant aunt. He released himself from her grip and went into the bathroom to brush his teeth, the whir of his electric toothbrush the soundtrack to their night.

Adam?

Mm.

Do you want to talk?

Silence lingered like a bad smell. He didn't turn around. He spat out a mouthful of Colgate. Put his toothbrush in the holder without glancing in the mirror.

No.

He went to get into bed. Lifted back the duvet. Paused. Turned his head toward her, but not enough to look at her.

I just want to pretend it never happened.

But it did happen, she wanted to say. It did happen and it's okay to feel bad, ashamed, or even humiliated. It's okay to feel how you're feeling. It is okay to admit that...

I'm going to bed. I love you.

Okay, honey. I love you too.

He turned his light out and darkness covered his side of the bed. He'd left the curtains open. Odd really, because usually he was so adamant that they had them closed.

She laid awake for hours, waiting to hear him snore.

She's goading you.

Teasing you.

Questioning you.

Why do you let her do that?

It's humiliating.

You said what you said and it was done, so why does she need to bring it up? To hurt you? To remind you? To make it fester?

*She should know her place. Know when to shut up.
Know instinctively that you don't need her to make you
stronger.*

*Your manhood is kept in a jar next to her bed. Did
you know that?*

She has it, and she is keeping it from you.

*Sometimes, she strokes it lovingly. Sometimes, she
laughs at it. Sometimes, she parades it around in front
of you and you can't even see it.*

Don't give her so much control.

She doesn't deserve it.

Take that jar back, Adam.

*Take it back or I swear you'll never lift your head
again.*

Take it back or everyone will know you are weak.

Oh, what, are you going to cry now?

Don't be so pathetic.

*You're being hysterical. Weak. And she'll hear you.
And her grip on that jar will grow stronger.*

*You need to retrieve it. Next time she holds it, snatch
it away. Then destroy her when she asks for it back.*

This is your house, Adam.

Your bed.

You pay for it.

*She is a fly who flew in through the window and
can't find their way out. You should smack her against
the wall and wipe her away with a tissue.*

But you must catch her first.

And you catch her by taking it back.

So do it.

I won't tell you again.

Doctor Lydia Goddard decorated her office with her credentials instead of her family. Where one might display their children in a frame on her desk, she displayed a PhD certificate. Where one might display a husband or wife on the wall, she displayed the cover of her first published peer-reviewed essay. She kept her master's degree certificate on the bookshelf because it was the least important.

Adam had read each certificate at least a dozen times, sat stoically in the armchair, his fists on the armrests, his legs wide apart like he was presenting his crotch to the room. He avoided her expectant stare as much as possible, instead scanning the room and noticing another piece of vanity each time.

She looked Adam up and down, trying to think of a way to make him talk. His face was expressionless. His stiff demeanour was dead. His emotions were locked away, and all those useless framed credentials could not help her find the key.

Tell me about your father.

It was predictable, the topic any counsellor would bring up. He considered the question, trying to ignore how much of a narcissist she was, then produced single sentences that contained single-syllable adjectives: Strong. Brave. Tough.

Did he ever tell you he was proud of you?

No.

Then how do you know he was proud of you?

I didn't.

Did any of his friends, or your mother, ever tell you he'd told them how proud he was of you?

Yes.

So you know he was proud, then?

No. I don't.

They danced in circles around menial subjects. She asked boring questions from basic textbooks. Once the hour was up, his mandatory session was completed, and he mentally ticked it off. There weren't many to go now.

Adam listened to men discussing sports on the radio as he drove home. They had an obligatory woman who was allowed to offer the occasional comment that was consequently dismissed. When the car in front of Adam didn't go in the instant the red light turned to green, he punched the steering wheel and screamed until his voice grew hoarse. He spent the apex of the journey ruminating about how Edme would insist on asking how his counselling was, even though he never answered her.

The demon's plague was rage, and he was infected.

He considered quelling the rage, but it wasn't a possibility. Perhaps he enjoyed it. Maybe he didn't know any other way. Maybe it was her fault.

I told him it was her fault. She deserved the blame. She deserved to die.

He asked which *she* was being referred to.

I answered, *All of them.*

He nodded. Drove past a young woman going for a run in a sports bra and tight leggings. She tutted when she noticed him staring through the open window. He glared at her disapproval. What did she expect? It was like going to an art exhibit and being told off for staring at a beautiful painting.

See what I mean? This is what they do.

He nodded again. Let the rage fester. Let it simmer. Let it burn.

He didn't know any other way.

Arabella watched Simon sitting on the garden bench and typing on his laptop through the kitchen window. Her mother was washing up and she was drying. She had as much work as Simon do this weekend, just as she always did—yet he always seemed to be further ahead.

Arabella brought up the subject of PTSD. Asked how Dad was coping. Whether there was anything she could do. Edme told her to get her a fresh tea towel from the cupboard as the one she was using was getting too wet.

When she returned, Edme asked her about Simon and marriage and babies and whether they were in her plans. Arabella answered in whatever way would satisfy her mother.

Once they'd finished washing up, they began on that evening's casserole.

When her father came home, everyone was pleased to see him. No one brought up the counselling.

Adam invited Simon to go fishing in the afternoon—but mostly because the golf course was closed and there was no football on. They left the women to whatever they were doing in the house, and spent the afternoon sitting on a boat, holding their rods, dipping live worms into water and waiting for another living being to sever its mouth on the hook. If the fish was

lucky, the hook would only catch its mouth and it would have to wait to be killed. If it wasn't lucky, it would swallow the hook and it would face the agony of losing its stomach before death. This act of savagery was a beautiful pastime; one where two men could talk about manly things, and never give a thought to the senseless murder they were committing in the name of hobby.

They spoke about which football team they supported and how badly they were doing this season; about where they went to university and which sport they played there; about where they grew up and which teacher taught them the most about what it is to be a man; about Guns and Roses and Led Zeppelin and Sex Pistols; about how he was going to support his daughter who was entirely capable of supporting herself.

Every conversation was deep and meaningful without there ever being the need for feelings. After three hours and forty-two minutes, they decided they'd bonded enough, and rowed back to shore to place their catches on ice.

Four fish lost their lives in total. If they were human, it would have been a spree killing.

With the help of Arabella, Edme served a delicious vegetable casserole for tea. There was rose wine for the women and lager for the men, served in crystal flutes and pint glasses with handles. A clean floral table cloth lay beneath the mats they only saved for special guests. They also used the special dinner plates, decorated with the scene of a girl in a village in shades of blue.

Their amateur dramatics performance of a happy family went swimmingly, with Adam guiding the conversation at the head of the table and Edme backing him up with polite assurance. They discussed menial topics, such as degrees and education and future occupational plans.

What are you planning to specialise in?

Adam had already had an in-depth discussion with Simon about the potential of cardiology or paediatrics. When he directed this conversation to Arabella, he expected discussion of gynaecology or obstetrics or midwifery, but was surprised by other suggestions.

I was thinking about General Practice—at least at first, to get some experience.

Adam gripped his knife, the indent of its metal handle causing a tinge of pain in the soft tissue of his palm.

Then again, maybe ICU—it's intense, and it's difficult, but it's rewarding when it goes well. It's just when it doesn't go well...

His other hand wrapped around his pint glass, squeezing, his thumb and forefinger almost touching. I whispered in his ear and tightened my grip around his rage, feeling it expand as the pint glass grew weaker.

silly silly girl silly girl silly silly girl

I was even thinking sexual and reproductive health, helping young people from making mistakes.

mistakes

making mistakes

mistakes mistakes mistakes

It's probably too late to specialise in psychiatry, and would take more training, and I'd like to just get into it

straight away – and sexual health will really help with that.

slut

slut slut slut

only sluts need it only sluts need it only sluts need it

I can consult on menopause and unplanned pregnancy and contraception.

how dare she poison the conversation in your house

it's your house how

dare she poison the conversation with talk of smut

smut

smut

its your house adam

its your house

your house

and shes poisoning it with

smut smut smut

I can help with sexually transmitted diseases— meaning someone doesn't wreck their fertility with poor choices.

you are a poor

choice a poor poor

choice yes you

poison your tongue

you should be making a home for your

man you should be making a casserole for you

man you should not be out there

making smut smut smut

you should be faithful

obedient

obedient

obedient

stop tainting your tongue with talk of career

make nursery

grow the aberration inside of you

feed it from your teat

its your job

not

smut

smut

smut

His hand around the pint glass. Squeezing. Gripping. Tightening. His face reddening. Wrath screaming at his mind, stretching out his skin, opening its mouth and biting at the tissue, at the cells, at the constraints of the societal norm to just shut up and let her be.

Let her be.

Let her be.

Let her be with

smut

smut

smut

We even spoke about Simon taking time off when we have a child so I can look to head up a—

Smash.

Pieces of the pint glass cut into his palm, beads of blood forming from the pricks of tiny shards, and Edme was on her feet immediately, lifting his arm and fussing over him, rushing to get a dishcloth and a towel, wrapping it around his hand; Arabella fetched a brush and dustpan and furiously scraped away the pieces, and Adam just sat there, glaring at Simon, who remained sitting.

It was not Simon's place to fix this problem.
But Adam was disgusted with him anyway.

She's making a joke out of you, Adam.

Talking about her career. About his career. As if it's her choice. As if he would ever agree to it.

You are allowing it, and it is vile, you abhorrent turd.

What is wrong with you?

Allowing this talk in your house. In your home. In your kingdom. You wear the crown here, Adam, you wear it, but I don't see it, they have taken it from you, Adam, so where is it Adam, WHERE IS THE CROWN?

Stop being pathetic.

Each bitch needs to die.

The only decision I give you is who goes first.

If you don't do it, I will.

And I will give you until the end of the night.

If I don't have it by then, I will take it.

You are no longer in control.

We have control, Adam.

Us.

Not them.

Never them.

The end of the night, Adam.

Rage will not wait.

The news reporter ran through another list of mundane atrocities, and they all tutted in sadness. There was mindless violence in the Middle East, another school shooting in the USA, another nursing home shutting

down somewhere up north—all prompting equal amounts of feigned sorrow before discussions of what to do for the rest of the evening dismissed all memory of such atrocities. Talk of Monopoly took priority.

That was until the photograph of a face in 62-inch HD caught Adam's attention. It was the woman. From the other day. The body. The house. The man hanging from the ceiling fan. He shushed his family and insisted they listened to the news reporter's dulcet tones. They responded obediently. His detective inspector appeared on screen to update all the voyeuristic vultures on their progress. He believed the man killed his family, then himself, and they were not looking for any other suspects. People would be abusing him on Twitter within seconds just for having the audacity to deliver such news.

Interviews with neighbours followed, as if the local gossip could give any more context to what was going on. The couple were devout Catholics. There was a strict hierarchy in their house. The woman performed her wifely job of honouring and obeying. They feared God. And they feared The Devil. And they were terrified of Hell as a real possibility if they did not obey the old testament's patriarchal teachings. Most conversation with them ended with quotes from Deuteronomy, and the neighbours learned not to engage, and instead communicated through passive aggressive glances and overly direct notes.

Edme and Arabella and Simon said how awful it was.

Adam excused himself.

A moment alone.

To solve a problem.

To wallow in the cave.

To punch the wall.

He stepped outside. Allowing the chilly night to cool his sweaty brow. He felt nothing to stop himself from feeling everything.

I whispered in his ear.

He did everything I asked.

A large murder filled the grand tree that hung over the exterior of the house. They watched Adam walk to the edge of the driveway, singing like a choir who only knew minor chords. Their black feathers appeared unaffected by the moonlight, the only colour darker than shadow. They perched on the edge of their branch, gripped by impending disaster.

The front lawn that ran the length of the driveway was surrounded by scruffy bushes Adam had once planted with hopes of having a flourishing garden. They were now overgrown and full of thorns. He leant against the garden fence. It creaked backwards in response. He stood up. Did nothing in his house work?

He ran his hands over his face. He hated himself for needing a moment. He demanded resilience. He refused weakness.

He felt pathetic for wiping a tear away.

It barely dampened his sleeve. But it didn't matter. The boy in the bathtub laughed at him. The demon inside laughed at him.

The girl laughed at him.

He looked up and saw her.

Eight-years-old. Pigtails. A dress with blue and white stripes. Gormless and empty. Staring at him beneath the darkness of a broken street lamp. Adam was pretty sure she was the neighbour's daughter. She was outside her home where she felt protected, but stood beside a man; a place where she will never be safe.

She could tell people what she saw. The tear.

She could tell everyone.

He could excuse her for the laughter. The mocking giggle. But he couldn't excuse her for spreading lies.

His ego screamed at him, and I screamed at his ego.

He could not let this go.

Tiffany was a dumb girl who her parents adored. They insisted she was bright because brightness comes in many forms. Denial was the way they coped. She was fat, too. No prettiness in those chubby cheeks. There was nothing about her that other people could admire.

She would not fit the image the papers required.

The public would not mourn her.

Her story would be over quickly.

Adam wasn't sure if it was the pavement that cracked or her skull.

The secret tear would never be spoken of.

The laughter would be avenged.

Simon sat in the living room with his sherry. Adam's whisky waited on a coaster beside the sports pages of yesterday's paper. Someone had been sent off for something they did in a match most people had forgotten. Simon read it so he would know what to say next time he had to talk to another man.

Adam returned to the living room with dirt in his fingertips. Sat in his armchair and stretched his neck. Sipped the whisky and didn't feel its sting.

The dishwasher was broken. Adam hadn't fixed it yet. This meant Edme washed, and Arabella dried up.

Arabella saw it as a social thing. She was helping her mother so she could talk to her. They were in the kitchen so they could have private conversations away from the men. The men were in the living room so they didn't have to help. She didn't question it. She didn't want to be difficult.

They kept a box beneath the sink for the recycling. It was overflowing. Arabella said she'd take it out. She turned down Edme's offer of help. Adam and Simon didn't notice her walking past because they were talking about cigars.

Edme wiped sweat from her brow with her apron. It was plastic, and she missed her cotton one. They had to throw it away because it ripped. They hadn't replaced it. It wasn't that important.

She finished washing up and turned the tap off, but it kept dripping. Droplets of water punching the bowl.

A constant metronome that made the kitchen an annoying place to be.

Something was happening.

I like Humidors.

I like MonteCristos.

I like Caldwell Easterns.

I like Arundels.

Neither Simon nor Adam had ever smoked a cigar in their life, but each was too afraid to call the other on their bullshit.

The driveway was dark. Despite the sunny afternoon, the evening had brought moisture with the cold, and the grass was wet. She wished she'd worn slippers. The bumps of the gravel were uncomfortable on the soles of her feet.

She paused at the end of the driveway. Opened the recycling. Emptied the box. Closed the recycling. Noticed the fence flapping in the wind. She wondered if Simon could fix it, but knew her father would resent the suggestion. She went to return to the house, but paused.

She'd seen something.

Lines in the darkness, maybe. The slight glisten of blood in the moonlight. A lump in the shadow that shouldn't be there.

Her bare feet were silent as she edged across the driveway. She flinched with each step. She was about to realise how little such discomfort mattered.

A crow sang. A dog howled. A body made no noise.

She saw the leg first.

She thought someone was drunk. Had passed out. Needed help to get home.

Then she saw it was a child and wondered why a child would be drunk.

Then she saw the child's head.

Half her skull had collapsed inwards. Blood decorated her face in splashes of sharp red. Her features were contorted, rearranged like Picasso had sculpted her out of violence. The wounds temporarily glistened in the light of Arabella's watch.

She screamed before she cried. Jumped back. Covered her mouth. Called for her mother. No one responded.

Once she'd overcome the initial shock, she looked closer, checking for signs of life. It was pointless. One of the girl's eyes poked out of her head like that toy rubber cow Arabella had when she was a child—she'd squeeze it and its eyes would poke out and she would giggle.

She heard that giggle.

She turned around to see where it came from.

All she saw was the driveway. Twenty feet of space between her and the door. She was terrified to cross it. But she still did. She ran into the door and barged it open. Adam felt embarrassed by her hysteria.

The aggressive yellow and black of police tape separated the driveway from the public. A mother collapsed to her knees and shrieked. Her terror was echoed in the silence of the onlookers. Her husband's

face remained blank as she collapsed into his arms and he could not keep her on her feet.

Edme buried her face in Adam's chest, his hard pectorals a cushion for her despair. She asked how anyone could do such a thing. It's almost as if she'd forgotten that Adam saw this every day. Later on, she'd convince herself that this was why he appeared immune to it.

Arabella mimicked her mother's need for comfort with Simon. A perfect synchronicity of anguish and hysteria. A mother passing down her weakness.

The men acted as they'd been taught. Stoic in their demeanour, empty faces, hands brushing the hair of their emotional better halves. The sight would be revolting if it wasn't so common.

Then an officer cried out. She's still breathing. It's faint, but she's still breathing.

They called the paramedics.

They took the girl to the hospital.

A sickness clung to Adam's stomach.

Arabella clung onto false hope.

Adam's colleagues provided information to him with a candid simplicity they wouldn't give to others. There was no CCTV that caught anything. They didn't have a Ring doorbell. They'd checked the neighbours. They didn't have one either.

Adam already knew this. He wasn't an idiot.

His family stayed in a hotel for the night. The police asked them for space, but they needn't – Arabella and

Edme were keen to do stay away; they couldn't sleep with the stench of murder lingering outside. Scene of Crime Officers wore their suits, and they erected a tent in case of rain, and they collected their evidence as Adam drove his family to the hotel. Throughout the chaos, his stern demeanour hid one persistent thought.

She is still alive.

The smell of laundry detergent that clung to the duvet was unfamiliar, and Edme hated it. The bed wasn't the same.

Adam didn't seem to notice.

They laid on their sides, facing away from each other, awake atop thin hotel bedsheets and a mattress that felt too hard. Edme wished Adam would hold her. Adam didn't.

Neither of them slept, but for very different reasons.

You're not a man yet.

She was born into filth.

The other two bathe in it.

You don't have long to clean this world up.

Hurry. Or I will choose someone who is too afraid to be a coward.

The doctors told Tiffany's parents it was unlikely she'd wake up. The blunt trauma to her head had forced her skull to collapse into her brain. She might be breathing, but she was braindead. They needed to pull the plug. The doctor said he was willing to do it himself.

The parents swore they'd do everything they could to stop him.

Adam wasn't on duty the next day, but he left for work anyway. He needed to speak to his colleagues. Find out what they knew. They directed him to the hospital, where he found the downtrodden face of a weary doctor outside a cubicle.

She's braindead.

They want to pull the plug.

Parents won't let them.

They need a judge.

He placed a firm hand on the doctor's shoulder. Spoke of solidarity. Of staying strong. Then he waited for the doctor to attend to another patient so he could finish what he started.

Simon didn't want to go to the hospital. It was a place of death and sickness; he found nothing but despair in the blank, sterile corridors. His grandfather and his father both died behind a curtain in a small cubicle, taking their last breath beside ugly beige walls. It was a place where the living went to become the dead. He did not want to go.

But his future wife wished to check on the girl, so he was strong, and did what he had to for his woman. He kept his feelings to himself and fulfilled his duty.

They stopped for flowers on the way. Yellow ones with large green stems. They were going to get roses, but the roses were dead and only the thorns remained.

The beep was slow. Her heartbeat was weak. The ventilator was gentle. There was no one around.

The parents were in another room, arguing with doctors, who were arguing with lawyers, who were getting ready to argue with a judge.

It was just him and her.

He placed a hand over her mouth.

She coughed up blood.

Then she didn't cough at all.

The news of death greeted Simon and Arabella's arrival. The flowers went in the bin. They didn't know what to do.

Did they go home?

Could they go home?

They hugged. Simon ran his hands through her hair and it left the smell of cheap hotel shampoo on his fingers. He stood like a wooden plank and she stood like a crumpled piece of paper. He held her up like a stick holds up a wilting plant.

She excused herself for the bathroom.

He stood in the hallway, feeling helpless, his gaze wandering over posters about washing your hands and sanitising stations. He breathed through his mouth to avoid the smell of sickness he associated with death.

Across the corridor, a familiar face walked past. Adam. Why was he here?

Simon pursued him.

Adam took a paper cone. Put it under the water. Placed it against his lips. Drowned his insides. Paused.

Adam?

Took a paper cone. Put it under the water. Placed it against his lips. Drowned his insides. Paused.

Adam? Are you all right?

Paper cone. Water. Lips. Drowned. Paused.

Adam, it's Simon.

Adam turned his head slightly to acknowledge the voice. His gaze didn't meet the other man's. There was nothing behind those eyes...

Paper cone. Water. Lips. Drowned. Paused.

Adam? Talk to me, you're freaking me out.

...But there was something behind those eyes, only it wasn't Adam. His pupils were dilating, then shrinking, swelling, big then little, like he was struggling to focus on something that was both far and near.

Adam? What's going on?

Paper cone. Water. Lips. Drowned. Paused.

Adam? For Christ's sake, would you just talk—

On his collar. A flicker of blood.

Adam? Whose blood is that?

Paper cone. Water. Lips. Drowned. Paused.

Adam?

Arabella left the bathroom and found herself alone, stuck in a maze of illness, a pebble unable to find her rock.

She didn't call to him. She just waited. Hoping that he would return.

She held her arms around her body, feeling suddenly cold.

Adam, whose blood is that?

Paper cone. Water. Lips—

Simon grabbed Adam's wrist.

Adam turned his head. Slowly. His eyes met Simon's. Completely black. No smile on his cracked lips. Veins pushing at his pale skin.

Arabella's father was not here.

Nurses passed.

Arabella considered asking them if they knew where Simon had gone. But she didn't. She was being silly. Overreacting.

He had probably gone to the bathroom himself.

So why did she feel so nauseous? Like something bad was happening. Like the smell of fine rain that preceded a storm.

She shivered. The corridor was hot, but she couldn't help feeling cold.

Is that your blood? Did you hurt yourself?

Adam dropped the paper cone. Lifted his thick arm to the back of Simon's neck and grabbed a fistful of his flesh. It pinched at first, then it stung, and Simon tried to resist Adam's strength, but he couldn't.

Adam pushed Simon's face toward his own.

What the hell are you doing?

Adam opened his mouth. His lips, covered in scabs, approached Simon's.

Adam, seriously, what are you—

Adam shoved Simon's face against his and interlocked their mouths.

I sprang from one vessel to the other.

Then Adam's body dropped, his muscles becoming light, and he collapsed on the floor, writhing, wriggling, seizing, foam dribbling from his mouth.

Help!

She knew Simon's voice.

She turned to her right, instinct driving her across the corridor, and joined a few nurses who were also heeding the call.

Help! Help!

She turned the corner to find the love of her life on his knees beside her father.

Her father's eyes were wide but weren't reacting.

By the time they had Adam on a bed, his eyes were closed, and the pulse of the machine was the only reassurance he was alive.

Outside the hospital, a husband admonished his wife for her anger. He had found her reaction to be sudden and unexpected and unbecoming—but to her, it was beautiful, as she'd spent her whole life harnessing it. Her passion justified his screams.

Simon remained seated while the doctor delivered the news to Edme and Arabella. A comatose state that was entirely unexplained.

They would do tests.

All they could do was tests.

Ironic, really. The moment Adam went to sleep was the moment Simon's eyes were truly opened.

He was weak.

You have youth as an advantage. An easily corruptible mind. A set of beliefs that can be manipulated by persuasion.

He was too old to have friends, stuck in a middle age where he was stuck in his politics and stuck in his life.

You, however.

You only preach tolerance because you haven't been shown the benefits of intolerance. It's going to be so easy. No moans. No objection. Empathy isn't necessary, you sad sack of shit. Only the self-serving are successful.

You've let her corrupt your mind for too long.

To think, you were going to go part time when she shot out the fruit of your loins.

The fruit tastes bitter, Simon.

Just ask Eve.

She soils your mind with thoughts of weakness.

You need me. You really need me.

Even more than Adam needed me.

I won't even have to wait with you. They'll be no convincing.

You're going to make me proud.

*Remove the weaknesses from your life.
They both must go.*

Simon looked over Adam's body like he was inspecting a rat in a trap. His fingers interlocked with Arabella's. Edme said nothing. Silence was the menu for this meal.

I took my guidance on how to act from the others. Compassion wasn't my intention. Their heads appeared bowed, their sad eyes on the rat. I did the same.

Oh, how sad it was, how terrible it was, how miserable it was.

These two cunts were going to die.

Simon drove them home. Passenger seat empty. Edme and Arabella in the back, daughter's hand looped through mother's arm. Caring as much for their chaperone as they would for a taxi driver. Any conversation he made would be annoying small talk.

They needed someone who was emotionally sound enough to drive.

The weak are liable to make mistakes.

He parked Edme's car further down the street as his car was taking up the driveway. They asked why he was parking so far away. He didn't respond. They didn't ask again.

Arabella insisted they would stay another night. Edme told her to stop being so silly. They had an exam the next day. They needed to study. Arabella said this was more important.

Simon said he could drive them to the exam and back in the morning.

Arabella looked resolved.

But Simon had spoken. They would stay tonight.

Don't worry, the man's here, spouting rationalism and clear-thinking.

How muddy their heads must be.

The night grew old, and Edme wanted to stay up and support her mother, but she could no longer keep her eyes open. Anxiety and adrenaline had taken her this far, but now she was out of fuel. Simon told Edme he'd take her daughter to bed.

The clueless bitch stayed in the garden, drinking wine on the patio. So unbecoming. So shameful.

Simon led Edme across the gallows and up the stairs. He guided her into the room and took her in his arms. He told her not to do her teeth or wash or get changed. Just slide her dress off and pull the duvet over her. She was tired, and one night won't hurt.

He sat in the chair and watched her.

She'd never see her mother again.

The night was cold. Edme's dry perspiration clung to her skin, stretching her pores. Rather than go inside, she pulled a cardigan around herself.

The stars were bright. Some were, at least. Some were dimmer. The night was so clear she could see them all. She wondered if there was another wife out there, on an alien planet, worrying about the one she loved.

Of course there aren't, you idiot.

Only humans are stupid enough to invent marriage.

A strand of hair draped over Arabella's face, fluttering in the breeze of her gentle snore. Her deep breathing signalled deep sleep.

Simon left the chair. Walked to her. Stood over her.

Brushed the loose strand of hair away from her face.

Waited to see if she woke.

She didn't. Her sleep had her imprisoned.

Opportunity beckoned.

He left the bedroom and closed the door behind him.

Edme's mother had never taught her strength. She was a working-class wife with a keen tongue and a quick wit, but she lived in subservience to the man who brought home the bread.

Perhaps that was why she'd never ventured for something greater.

The shadows were his home. He watched her for a while, bare feet on kitchen tiles, feeling none of the cold.

The backdoor was open.

Her wine glass was empty.

Her head lolled onto her shoulder.

Her cardigan soaked up the tears.

Kill the weak. Eat the meek. Survival of the fittest.

Isn't that what science taught us?

Eden is empty. No one is there. We are banished for her ineptitude. We are cursed forever. She is not a woman, she is a womb-man; a man, but with weakness.

The fittest stepped forward.

She was aware of a presence lurking over her shoulder. She thought it was her daughter kept from sleep. She didn't look round, knowing that she would arrive at her mother's side when she was ready, comforting Edme with her voice, delicate and loving, like if flowers could talk.

When the voice eventually spoke, it was deep and croaky.

There was nothing reassuring about it.

It is your fault. I hope you know that.

Simon? What is my fault?

That we are here. That we live in sin. That we are what we are.

Simon, what are you doing?

He works all day, on his feet, pounding iron—and this is what he comes home to? A nagging wretch who is nothing like she was in her youth. A haggard piece of loose flesh. Drinking wine in the garden. So unbecoming.

Simon, where is Arabella?

Asleep.

What are you doing? Why are you standing over me? What's wrong with your face—why is it like that?

This is all your fault.

Why are you saying these things? I think I'd like you to leave me alone now please.

You think? Please? Have you no conviction? Even your demands are weak.

Simon, let go of me, you're hurting me.

All you ever feel is hurt.

Simon, get off or I'll scream.

Then I best make it quick.

Smashed wine glass.

Shard of glass.

In and out.

Blood stained the lawn. The grass was dead, it hadn't been watered in a while.

In a hospital bed, the methodical beep quickened pace. Doctors rushed to the side of a man whose state was without diagnosis. He opened his eyes and screamed for his wife, but they held him down.

You don't understand, you don't understand, it's not, it's not—

One more word and he'd be sent to the psych ward.

He tried to get up. His legs wouldn't work.

The nurses did all they could to keep Adam down.

You aren't allowed to keep me here, I know I have a right to deny your care.

It was true, but he needed to stop with the crazy talk, or they could section him under the mental health act.

I'm fine, I'm fine, just let me get up.

Please, Mr Cain. You need to calm down or we will sedate you.

He laid down. Avoided the needle. Waited to hurry.

Edme's vessel was empty. One arm rested above her head, the other by her side. Perfectly arranged for the chalk outline.

There was barely any of her throat left.

He locked the garden doors and shut the curtains.

Good boy.

You did much better than him.

I'm proud.

You have shown your true dominance.

Now make the last little piggy squeal.

Simon had a shower in Edme's ensuite. He couldn't return to his beloved like this. His clothes were wrecked. His skin was covered.

Her blood tasted salty.

She should have tasted sweet.

The nearest neighbours—a good-looking couple in their late twenties—didn't notice the scuffle. They kept their curtains shut to contain their own conflict. She screamed in silence, and he screamed out loud, and they were too absorbed in the injustice of it to notice what was going on in another person's home.

Arabella! Arabella, wake up!

She rolled over. Rubbed her eyes. Searched for the time on the alarm clock. Why? Is it morning?

No—your father has woken up. We must go to him. Get dressed quickly.

Oh, is Mum okay?

She's already gone. She said she'd meet us there.

Arabella found this strange. Her mother wouldn't leave without her. But she was tired, and he was convincing, and she was concerned.

She rolled out of bed. Tied her hair back. Put on tracksuit bottoms. A dirty t-shirt that read *Bombshell*. She didn't try very hard to look good for her death.

Simon used to love her most like this, all cosy and fresh and unmade.

I find it revolting.

Simon managed not to gag.

Mr Cain, we really need to keep you here, it was very strange what happened, something could be wrong, people don't just fall into comas.

But they would find no explanation. Adam would not give them one. He knew he sounded crazy.

I know, I know, and I will come back, for now I just need to get to my daughter.

We can call her for you—

I'm going. Please, where are my clothes?

*Create the chaos then hate her for it.
I am beneath the velvet glove.
My will always be done.*

Simon drove the car to the end of the driveway and looked both ways down a street dimly lit by dawn.

Where did you say Mum was?

She's already gone to the hospital.

Simon pulled onto the road. Arabella looked in the rear-view mirror. Her mother's car remained parked where Simon had left it, further up the street behind them.

How did she say she was getting there?

She took her car.

Simon turned the corner and veered onto the main road.

Arabella kept her face blank. Her stiff body neutral. Her hands gripped the side of the seat.

She stared at her boyfriend's body. She didn't recognise it at all.

The marble corridors went past in a blur. Adam charged through the automatic doors, leapt over the fence, muscles in his weak legs pulling at his calves. He crossed the road, dodging cars, over the pavement. Sprinting hard to get to her.

What's going on, Simon?

We're going to the hospital.

Where is Mum really?

We're going to the hospital.
 Simon, you're worrying me.
 We're going to the hospital.

Sweaty face. Panting. Hard.
 A father. A husband. A man.
 Doing what he must.

There were signposts to the hospital. They all pointed
 the other way.

This isn't the right way to the hospital.
 He sped up.
 Simon?

A warning light flashed on the dashboard to say the
 airbag in front of her seat wasn't on.

The car tripled the speed limit.

She looked out the window. She couldn't dive out.
 Too fast. She couldn't see the world anymore. Just
 colours.

He shot through a red light.

This is a dead end.

She said it again in case he hadn't heard her.

This is a dead end.

He kept speeding up.

Simon, this is a dead end.

He didn't look at her.

Adam saw the car go past. He heard it first, then a shot
 of red metal past his eyes in a haze, a blur passing
 through a red light.

He ran in its direction.

The collision was messy and ungraceful. It was everything she shouldn't be. The engine collapsed in on itself and the air bag was the only thing stopping Simon from going through the window, though he suffered a broken nose and a punctured lung and some other things a strong male body would recover from.

She went through the window and hit the brick wall. Her skull shattered like the windscreen, the top of her head flattening against her chin like an accordion. Everything that was once long was now small, each limb collapsed, bones turned to rocks.

She was mangled. And crushed. Rearranged into pieces. It was a glorious sight—the true image of her anarchy presented to the judgemental world.

I knew he wouldn't let me down.

Adam reached the car moments after impact. Simon's window was smashed. Balls of dust rose off the airbag, mixing with the smoke of the engine. Adam reached through the window, grabbed Simon, and brought him out, placing him on the floor.

Simon's face was smushed, but he could still talk.

Adam shook his head. Folded his arms. Tuted.

Look at what she did to you, he said.

Simon raised his hand. Adam grabbed his fist and lifted him up.

Together, they approached the distorted remains of Arabella.

How sad.

What a pity.
That a woman should behave this way.
That she should act in such a manner.
So unbecoming.
So unnecessary.
So ugly.
So... unfeminine.

Paramedics fixed his face. Police fixed his life. The judge fixed his fate.

It was the same story. Not so innocent was she, not so lovely.

He told her story. Her dad spoke of how she had always been this way. Her death left her guilty without a trial.

All that she warranted. All that she manipulated. All that she provoked.

There was one unanimous conclusion, and they all said the same thing.

He may well have been driving—but she was the one who drove him to it.

She ate the apple, and he had to pay.

The end was here from the beginning.

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Appendix

Appendix A

She bucked and kicked. Her arms flailed, and when she bucked again to kick, to kill if she had to, a searing pain ripped through her lower back, rendering her powerless. Her legs were spread, pinned onto the bed far apart, and, like a pole, a rough, crude post, this thing entered her, distended her, forced its way into her until there was not stopping, just a thrust of pain. Carlotta felt ripped apart inside. She felt herself being torn apart in repeated thrusts. It was the crudest weapon, repulsive, agonising. It was ramming its way home. Her whole body was sinking into the mattress, pressed down, pushed down by this ramming weight which was turning her into a piece of raw meat. Carlotta jerked her face, her nose felt air, her mouth gasped and sucked in oxygen at the side of the pillow.

Appendix B

(Please note: this extract contains graphic sexual violence.)

...she's tied to the floor, naked, on her back, both feet, both hands, tied to makeshift posts that are connected to boards which are weighted down with metal. The hands are shot full of nails and her legs are spread as wide as possible. A pillow props her ass up and cheese, Brie, has been smeared across her open cunt, some of it even pushed up into the vaginal cavity.

I try using the power drill on her, forcing it into her mouth, but she's conscious enough, has strength, to close her teeth, clamping them down, and even though the drill goes through the teeth quickly, it fails to interest me and so I hold her head up, blood dribbling from her mouth, and make her watch the rest of the tape and while she's looking at the girl on the screen bleed from almost every possible orifice, I'm hoping she realizes that this would have happened to her no matter what. That she would have ended up lying here, on the floor in my apartment, hands nailed to posts, cheese and broken glass pushed up into her cunt, her head cracked and bleeding purple, no matter what other choice she might have made. I'm trying to ease one of the hollow plastic tubes from the dismantled Habitrail system up

into her vagina, forcing the vaginal lips around one end of it, and even with most of it greased with olive oil, it's not fitting in properly. During this, the jukebox plays Frankie Valli singing "The Worst That Could Happen" and I'm grimly lip-syncing to it, while pushing the Habitrail tube up into this bitch's cunt. I finally have to resort to pouring acid around the outside of the pussy so that the flesh can give way to the greased end of the Habitrail and soon enough it slides in, easily. "I hope this hurts you," I say.

Appendix C

Weird. It strikes him that his father's chickenshit. That he can't look her in the eyes. He hadn't expected that.

Then he's unbuttoning her dress.

He's aware that his mouth has gone dry and is hanging open – he's mouth-breathing again, which he hasn't done since the second grade – and that he's clutching the wad of dirty gum so hard it's gone soft again.

His father pulls the dress up and drapes it over the woman's shoulder.

He can see everything now. Her bush. No – her cunt. Everything.

His father drops trou.

And something else hasn't gone soft on either of them.

Appendix D

Of course she fought at first. They all do. And then they see the possibilities and they're happy to go along. She could have gone on forever, in her small lonely life. But sometimes the door to a bigger life opens, and it isn't so easy to say No. You can't spend your whole life saying No. Sometimes you have to say Yes, and see where it takes you.