

CHILDBIRTH AND
PARENTING IN HORROR
TEXTS

The Marginalized and the
Monstrous

ALTERNATIVITY AND MARGINALIZATION

Series Editors: Samantha Holland and Karl Spracklen

CHILDBIRTH AND PARENTING IN HORROR TEXTS

The Marginalized and the
Monstrous

BY

AMANDA DIGIOIA
UCL, London, UK



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amanda DiGioia is currently a doctoral student at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, UK. Amanda's thesis examines women in the Finnish heavy metal music scene. Her research interests include horror texts, feminist theory, and Finnish culture and society and her work has been featured in *Metal Music Studies*, *Horror Studies*, and *Fan Phenomena: Game of Thrones*.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Samantha Holland is Senior Research Fellow at Leeds Beckett University, UK. Her work is interdisciplinary: her educational background includes English Literature, Sociology, and Cultural Studies. Her first monograph *Alternative Femininities. Body, Age & Identity* (2004) was at the forefront of the current interest in ageing and subcultures. Since then she has published two other books: *Remote Relationships in a Small World* (Peter Lang, 2008, edited) and *Pole Dancing, Empowerment & Embodiment* (2010). Her research interests are gender, leisure, non-mainstream subcultures and ageing, utilizing feminist, ethnographic qualitative methods. She is currently the Acting Editor of *Journal of Gender Studies*, and book review editor for *Loisir/Leisure*.

Karl Spracklen is Professor of Leisure Studies at Leeds Beckett University, UK. His research encompasses sociology of leisure, leisure studies, leisure theory, cultural studies, and popular music studies. He is a world-class academic in metal music studies and the editor of the journal *Metal Music Studies*. He has published over eighty books, edited collections, papers, book chapters, and other outputs. Karl works across disciplines and subject fields, using history and philosophy to make sense of sociology and cultural studies.

DEDICATIONS

With love to my Uncle Barry

*For Dana Sonnenschein for allowing me to
become part of her pack*

*To my parents, for allowing their daughter to
embrace darkness without judgment*

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Monsters occasionally have many victims, and every now and then many midwives are necessary for something to be born. I would like to thank everyone who has been a part of the gestation and birth of this book, the child of my brain and the child of my heart. Dana Sonnenschein, to quote a character in one of the texts in this work: you are indispensable to me. Dana, I do not know what I would have done without you. Continue to spread your sunshine to everyone around you. To Karl Spracklen, for allowing me to talk to him about *The Wicker Man* for an hour in Helsinki, and to Sam Holland, for giving me this opportunity. Uncle Barry, thank you for making me a horror junkie. I am in deep gratitude to my parents for supporting me (the child they affectionately call ‘Nosferatu’) every step of the way. Titus Hjelm: thank you for supervising my PhD thesis! To ‘Titus’ Babies: never put us in a corner. “To my SCSU Women’s Studies cohort Class of 2016 (and in particular Lauren, Kate, Betsy, Dayeshell, and Dixie): from slashing metaphorical tires to writing books!” To my friends in The Garden Halls: from unfinished kitchens to lifelong friends. Jennifer Altavilla, I am so happy that I can call you my soul sister and best friend: thank you for all of your support throughout the years. For Sam Shaughnessy: ‘I know, I saw’. For Jules Bakes, Fabian Schäuble, Brooke Mealey, and Imani Williams: the roommates of my heart forever. Heather Louise Creel and

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CHAPTER ONE

CONCEPTION

My Uncle Barry was the first person in my life to tell me that girls could love monsters. When I was young, Uncle Barry assured me that there was nothing wrong with a little girl who loved horror, who wanted to be a werewolf, or who rooted for Dracula and not Van Helsing. Uncle Barry not only encouraged my love of monsters, he created one, morphing me into the horror fiend that I am today. This affection for horror has followed me all of my adult life and has sometimes spilled over into my work. When I worked in a therapeutic group home as a counselor to teenage girls, I was always the staff member that the residents called into the living room when a horror movie was on television. The residents loved to watch them with me, mainly because I wouldn't flinch during the "scary" moments of those PG-13 films, which was a novelty to them. While they giggled and shrieked, my mind wandered. These young women were all in the custody of the Department of Children and Families. This means that the State of Connecticut had determined that the previous custodians of the girls sitting in front of me were not capable of ensuring that the best interests of the girls

were served. Many of the horror films that the girls loved to watch had some element of abysmal parenting in them, and, more often than not, the negligent parent was the mother.

Motherhood and birth have simultaneously fascinated and repulsed horror writers and filmmakers for centuries. This study examines motherhood, fatherhood, and birth in horror novels and films and therefore considers some of the omnipresent connections between gender and horror. Fathers and, in particular, mothers are both marginalized in horror texts. Mothers are relegated to tropes, and are often “others,” and are strictly irredeemable. Often, the act of motherhood itself can be marginalizing: In order to become a mother, women often have to abandon parts of their lives, such as working outside the home (although this is admittedly a fact geared toward cultures in which women work). In particular, this study focuses on how birth and motherhood are represented and changed by those within the horror genre. I ask, in the context of horror texts, do bad mothers make monsters? Are bad fathers held as culpable as bad mothers are?

Motherhood and reproduction have been at the center of the feminist discourse about women’s rights ever since its onset (Neyer & Bernardi, 2011, p. 163). Discourse on reproduction and motherhood has varied. For the first and second feminist movements, discourse on motherhood and reproduction focused on the right to abortion as well as the public recognition of motherhood (Neyer & Bernardi, 2011, p. 163). For the last several decades of the twentieth century, assisted reproductive technologies have started new conversations and new feminist dialogues (Neyer & Bernardi, 2011, p. 165). Essentially, the feminist contribution to the understanding of motherhood as a structuring category has been its insistence on the distinction between biological and social motherhood (Neyer & Bernardi, 2011, p. 165). I will be addressing both.

Motherhood is sacred to the patriarchal Western female identity. The Western ideal woman is a mother who relishes even the most mundane of childhood tasks, who is patient with her children, hopelessly devoted to the man that fathered them, and whose life is dedicated to their well-being. Simone de Beauvoir once claimed that many women “are made to see motherhood as the essence of their life and the fulfillment of their destiny” (Neyer & Bernardi, 2011, p. 163), which marginalizes women to being nothing but wombs. Motherhood virtually defines adult femininity in the West, and those who remain childless are often relegated to the derogatory category of “spinsters,” stereotyped as lonely, shriveled women with empty lives. This demonization is correlated to the revulsion caused by someone “going against nature,” as being a mother is seen as an innate part of a woman’s identity, equal to or more important than many other aspects of identity that a woman might develop (Neyer & Bernardi, 2011, p. 167).

Motherhood’s deep cultural connotations provide numerous opportunities for scares in the hands of horror text creators. The horror film plays up the anthropological notion of taboo, or what is defined culturally as unnatural (Price, 2004, p. 150). A taboo is a set of explicit prohibitions governing speech or behavior that are surrounded by powerful social or supernatural sanctions, the violation of which is accompanied by a sense of sin or defilement (Price, 2004, p. 150). Motherhood, as previously mentioned, is perceived by many as “the essence” of the female life. What is more terrifying than a childless woman? A mother who is a monster. The physical reality of women’s genitalia and anatomy as revealed by childbirth. A bad mother. A woman who is a mother but loathes her children. Or, paradoxically, a mother whose love is so powerful it causes her to do things that are unthinkable to protect or avenge her offspring. The last is particularly

horrifying, as this protective mother can represent the untamable power of nature itself. It is no wonder that horror writers and directors capitalize on these taboos to create their horror masterpieces. This book will address all these aspects of what makes motherhood and fatherhood horrifying.

Motherhood begins, as it were, with vulvas and vaginas, those hairy/scary passages that provide access to the uterus and often figure for all of female genitalia. In *The Thing*, the eponymous creature turns into a labial, gaping, bisected maw. In *Antichrist*, a film by Lars Von Trier, the forest becomes a manifestation of a mother's sadism. The aspect of nature being a horrifying mother (connected with the ancient reverence for female fertility and motherhood) can also be found in the 1973 British horror movie classic, *The Wicker Man*. In *The Wicker Man* (Hardy, 1973), a police officer is lured onto an island of pagans who worship both gods and goddesses, and perform various fertility rights: One of the most poignant scenes of the film is of heavily pregnant future mothers strolling through fields of apple trees, touching each tree, as if to pass their own fertility onto the land. The climax of the film occurs during the May Day festivities on Summerisle. The May Day festivities are at first glance a benediction to the sun-god (Nuada). But they are actually benedictions and sacrifices to the goddess of the orchards (Avellenau), to express gratitude in times of plenty, and to appease her if the crops fail. The sole example of Christian virtue in the entire film, Sgt. Howie, is torched to death in a large wicker man to placate Avellenau, who, the villagers believed, caused the crops to fail during the previous year.

As the above suggests, horror texts and films are fascinated with women's genitalia and anatomy as revealed by childbirth, as well as the ways motherhood represents the power of nature itself. The second chapter in this book offers an in-depth analysis of Rick Yancey's *The Monstrumologist*,

Clive Barker's "Rawhead Rex," and the 2011 incarnation of *The Thing*, developing an argument focused on the contrast between the *vagina dentata* and patriarchal expectations for good mothers.

The third chapter of this book discusses the difficulties that accompany a mother raising a child with an invisible disability as well as the horror surrounding the verbalization and representation of motherhood being a less-than-perfect experience for women. In *The Babadook*, the main text analyzed in Chapter Three, the mother has had only one child. Studies on first-time mothers indicate that they come into motherhood with unrealistic expectations due to various societal pressures (Miller, 2007, p. 340). Birthing experiences are also a turning point for many first-time mothers (Miller, 2007, p. 354), and so they are discursive turning points in horror texts such as *The Babadook*.

One of the first questions posed by the women who founded the feminist movement was whether or not men could be feminists at all. Nancy E. Dowd questions why men are absent from feminist theory in "Men, Masculinities, and Feminist Theory." Dowd provides two answers to this inquiry: The first is that women have been the focus of feminist theory, and rightly so, due to their places of inequality, oppression, and unequal status as a whole "exposed their absence and invisibility in virtually all academic disciplines" (Dowd, 2010a, p. 13). The second conclusion Dowd draws is that men have been included, and are central to, feminist analysis (Dowd, 2010a, p. 13). Dowd elaborates:

Feminists have sought to explain and understand women's subordination and the persistence of patriarchy despite frontal legal, social, and cultural challenges, and to devise strategies to define and accomplish gender equality and justice. Feminists

have focused on men's power and dominance, how it is conferred and reinforced, how it operates through a complex set of institutions, social norms, cultural constructs, and formal legal rules. (p. 13)

Dowd concedes that men have been absent from feminist theory as “an object of gender analysis,” and are instead viewed as a basis for comparison, as a class or group, or as a source of subordination due to their gender privilege (Dowd, 2010a, p. 13). Dowd specifically focuses on fathers later on in the chapter, stating:

Fathers were simply not studied for a long time, and they remain understudied in comparison with mothers, reflecting the assumption that mothers care for their children while fathers do not. Research about fathers has demonstrated their ability to care and their important role for children...the construction of masculinity is a major factor that hurts and undermines fathers' care of children.¹ (p. 22)

Dowd goes into other aspects of fatherhood in her book, acknowledging that fathers are not limited to husbands, nor are they limited to those biologically connected to children, or coresident with children. Horror texts feature numerous aspects of Dowd's definition of fatherhood, and some of the fathers featured within this work are those who are not biologically connected to children, instead, they are social or spiritual fathers.

As my fourth chapter argues, father knows best in horror texts. A bad father being redeemed by action or sympathy can be found within John Connolly's “The Erlking,” a short story in a collection entitled *Nocturnes*. In “The Erlking,” the narrator's father warns him about various dangers when he was a boy, telling him of the Sandman, Baba Yaga, and

Scylla, but fails to inform the boy about the Erlking, a horrible monster that devours children, wears a coat of their scalps and skin, and a crown of their bones. The father notably tells the boy that “There are things out there...wolves and worse-than-wolves” (Connolly, 2015a, p. 74). By lying by omission to protect the boy narrator, the boy’s father exposed him to the greatest of harms, as the Erlking does come for the boy narrator after briefly encountering him in the wood. When the Erlking succeeds in crawling through the boy narrator’s window, the boy escapes the creature’s grasp, and the monster grabs the boy’s infant brother instead. The narrator, instead of blaming his father for not warning him about the Erlking, blames himself, saying that “I should have run to my father then” (Connolly, 2015a, p. 80). As his mother dies from grief and his father becomes a sad old man, the narrator once again blames himself for the family’s predicament, saying: “I could not confess to him that I had denied the Erlking and that he had taken another in my place. I carried the blame inside me, and vowed that I would never let him take another being who was under my protection” (Connolly, 2015a, p. 81). The narrator reveals now that he is a grown man, and warns his children of the same monsters that his father told him about, except he adds the Erlking to the list. Thus, in “The Erlking,” the narrator’s father is never demonized (only sympathized with, as he grows into a sad old man), and the narrator himself is redeemed by passing along the knowledge of the evil Erlking to his own children.

In general, bad dads are painted with more sympathy than bad mothers in horror texts; they are often represented as having the best intentions before they pave the road to hell. And, though bad mothers are almost always damned, bad dads are typically given a “redeeming moment.” Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* offers both an example of a bad good father (Van Helsing) and a counterexample (the Count is abusive

and exploitive in all his paternal relations). Victor Frankenstein of *Frankenstein* is the grandfather of all horror bad dads, leaving his creation to suffer in the world alone, while he pursues his own selfish needs. In 2016's *The Witch*, a bad father (William) redeems himself before his untimely death by acknowledging his sin of pride: William's wife, Katherine, does not acknowledge her misplaced wrath; she attempts to strangle her daughter and is stabbed violently in a struggle.

The fourth chapter focuses on treatments of fatherhood versus motherhood in Stephen King's *The Shining*, as well as the novel's sequel, *Doctor Sleep*, examining how bad fathers, particularly Jack, are redeemed by the novels, which kill off the bad mother and physically and psychologically cripple the (relatively ineffectual) good mother, Wendy.

Feminist approaches to narratives in texts have expanded throughout the decades, yet several of the issues raised in the early stages of academic scholarship remain (Clark, 2011, p. 174): How does narrative engage with the sociohistorical? In what ways does it codify existing structures? How does it resist them? Which stories are not being told, or read (Clark, 2011, p. 174)? Scholars like Teresa de Lauretis re-read the story of Oedipus and drew attention to the female monsters within the texts (Medusa and the Sphinx) (Clark, 2011, p. 174). de Lauretis argues that gendering these monsters as female and their power to incapacitate Oedipus are "signals of women's narrative status as obstacles to overcome and threats to the bodily integrity of men" (Clark, 2011, p. 174). de Lauretis offers alternate approaches to reading the Oedipus tale. de Lauretis asks about the Sphinx's fate after Oedipus meandered onward to Thebes, as well as wondering how Medusa felt when she saw her reflection before being slain (Clark, 2011, p. 174). Reading with attention to these untold stories is what might be called "reading as a woman"

(Clark, 2011, p. 174). This practice also involves focusing on characters that might be “othered” in texts, as woman readers are “othered” in life, and therefore on being attuned to issues of power and hegemony in and around a text (Clark, 2011, p. 174).

Marianne Hirsh builds off de Lauretis’ argument, focusing on Jocasta, the mother in the Oedipus text (Clark, 2011, p. 174). Hirsch asks: “What earns the Sphinx, a non-maternal woman, privilege over Jocasta, the mother? Why do feminist analyzes fail to grant Jocasta as a mother a voice and a plot” (Clark, 2011, p. 174)? Hirsh goes on to argue that mother studies, even more than women’s stories, have been silenced and ignored in such a way that this silencing extends from creator to reader (Clark, 2011, p. 174).

The feminist study of narrative offers solid foundation for the feminist study of horror. Over the last century the study of horror in expressive culture has undergone a drastic change. Historically, the genre was not esteemed at all and was deemed “second-class,” mainly because of its sensationalist content and popular appeal. Now, a begrudging respect for horror is emerging in many academic factions. Branches of cultural studies, ranging from Marxism to feminism, suggest that all texts can be usefully subjected to critical investigation, if not for literary merit, then for what they reveal about culture. Critics have established a solid foundation in the study of motherhood and horror.

In 1993, Barbara Creed published *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, in which she provides a psychoanalytic reading of the female monster in horror films, building on Kristeva’s theory of abjection, as well as more familiar Freudian–Lacanian models. Creed’s work indicates that critics had previously ignored the feminine as monstrous in horror, instead focusing on the feminine being depicted as heroine or victim. Creed claims that the feminine

in horror texts falls into one of the two models: the Freudian female monstrosity that plays off male fears of castration anxiety, and the Kristevan, which focuses on the reproductive function of the feminine, as well as the feminine association with the corporal (Peters, 1994, p. 182). Creed's theory is further critiqued in Chapter Two, as it is applied to both 1982's and 2011's *The Thing*.

One of the most prominent studies was completed in 2000 by feminist critic and philosophy lecturer Cynthia A. Freeland (2000) in *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror*. Freeland (2000) draws on Noël Carroll's argument that the emotions of horror are prompted by monsters, with these creatures being essential to the horror genre (p. 8). Carroll argues that these monsters are threatening primarily because they are "impure" or "categorically interstitial" (Freeland, 2000, p. 8). Freeland's intellectual engagement with horror is the cognitive challenge of trying to understand and conceptualize these beings (p. 8). She notes that Carroll's work falls short on analyzing horror films within a feminist framework, as Carroll wrote from a cognitivist perspective, not a feminist one (p. 10). She explains that this is unacceptable, noting horror's roots in Gothic novels, a genre filled with an unusual prevalence of women as writers and readers (p. 11). Ultimately, she argues that the reoccurring emphasis on childbearing and nurturing in horror texts reinforces a biological conception of female nature as well as a narrow vision of women's domestic and social roles (Freeland, 2000, p. 82).

Freeland is interested in human understandings of evil, and she concludes her discussion of her methodology by saying: "We must recognize that horror movies often have very complex, mixed representations of women as well as of larger issues about the nature and existence of evil" (p. 15). Of particular interest for this thesis is her argument that films that

have been historically maligned for exploiting women can be seen as critiques of patriarchal ideologies (when viewed from a feminist perspective). For example, in Part One of *The Naked and The Undead*, Freeland discusses “Mad Scientists and Monstrous Mothers,” mainly focusing on nature and romanticism in the various incarnations of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. This chapter also sets the stage for the rest of Freeland’s work, as in Part Two she discusses what happens in horror films when both the monsters and scientists are female, and in Part Three, when she discusses what happens when male mad scientists in horror experiment with female reproductive power. The results often end disastrously for the scientist, society, and the creation, making the feminized fathers disasters.

Freeland also discusses film version of *The Shining* and *Eraserhead* in depth, in a section entitled “Uncanny horror.” Freeland (2000) writes:

The defeat of the male in his traditional heroic role seems associated with uncanny evil...does the uncanny here cause or rather result from the man’s displacement from his traditional positions of authority and privilege? (p. 215)

Even though the fathers in *The Shining* and *Eraserhead* have homicidal ideation toward their own children, Freeland does not believe they are culpable for thinking or acting on those thoughts, stating that neither man is a true monster. Freeland instead states that

...I would contend that neither man is a true horror film monster. Rather, they are signs and perhaps even victims of the vague yet powerful cosmic evil that the movie posits. These films describe a world dominated by a foreboding of fate or doom that has

no clear, obvious explanation. In keeping with the dislocated force of evil here, much of the violence in these movies is implied rather than literal, anticipated rather than shown. (p. 216)

The true horror of these films lies in the “concerns about masculinity, its powers, expectations, and limitations, all of which are heightened by the experience of fatherhood” (p. 239). But instead of becoming the villain, feminist fathers either die heroically or save the day, combating the image of the unnatural failure, (yet ultimately redeemed) “bad dad.”

Nina Auerbach also discusses motherhood in horror in *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (first published in 1995). Auerbach reflects several times on motherhood and birth, mainly in her analysis of *The Lost Boys*. *The Lost Boys* is a 1980s film about vampires. Auerbach’s interpretation of *The Lost Boys* indicates that the film is a cautionary tale about women not prioritizing motherhood. While Michael (the main protagonist of *The Lost Boys*) is becoming sicker and sicker via his vampire transformation, his mother Lucy is out gallivanting with her boyfriend, Max. Lucy has abandoned her children (and her gender role) to pursue her own sexual fulfillment. Because Lucy abandoned her children, she is the one that is directly responsible for Michael’s loss of humanity. *The Lost Boys*, from Auerbach’s examination, can also be viewed as a cautionary warning to women who “want it all.” *The Lost Boys* was filmed in the Reagan era, which coincided with a Republican push toward traditional family values in the United States. Lucy rejects those values by placing her dating life and personal happiness before her children. Lucy is not focused on parenting; Lucy is focused on working and dating. And Lucy nearly pays the ultimate traditional gender role price: losing her sons and her human life.

Feminist methodology incorporates strategies and knowledge appropriate for feminist research (Jaggar, 2014, p. vii). Feminist methodology is also inherently tied to an interdisciplinary model, as feminist analysis relies on exploring parallels and themes that continue across a diverse set of disciplines (Jaggar, 2014, p. xii), including but not limited to sociology, psychology, anthropology, and economics. Lines between disciplines can become blurred in feminist studies, as scholars in one discipline often borrow methods from others (Jaggar, 2014, p. 5). Like much feminist research in the humanities, my study is interdisciplinary, and discussion of ideas and evidence from several fields helps with developing an understanding of the complexities of literary motherhood in horror texts. Various chapters feature textual analysis of fiction, which is a close reading of language focused on word choice, particularly figurative language, imagery, and symbolism. In relation to films, textual analysis includes consideration of framing, lighting, plot, dialog, and image; where necessary. In some cases, authors and directors offer insights in the form of prefaces and interviews; when available, these materials are also referenced as part of the critical conversation on the text or to clarify what an author's intent may have been. A number of chapters interpret fictional representations of reality by applying feminist insights based on current events. Sociological and medical understandings of behavior and the human mind are also applied throughout all of the chapters of my book.² I have also made a conscious effort to include texts that have been previously unanalyzed, or, in the case of *The Shining*, analyze older texts in new ways. So, texts like *Aliens*, *Psycho*, and *The Hills Have Eyes*, which are often referenced when discusses motherhood, fatherhood, and parenting in horror are absent from this work for this reason. Many more monstrous mothers and frightening fathers appear in their stead.

NOTES

1. It is important to note that Dowd acknowledges the antifeminist and antifemale backlash, in the guise of sympathy for men or boys, which sometimes arises from masculinist studies on fatherhood (Dowd, 2010a, p. 22).
2. I have limited my analysis to texts that have been distributed within the United States, with English being the texts' primary language.