

The Monster Underneath: Subversion and Ignored Realities in Literature in the Age of Imposed Normalcy

Veniz Maja V. Guzman*

Abstract: Aided by Michel Foucault's concept of panopticon and a discussion on the function of fairy tales and modern fiction, this paper aims to deal with the question: If human beings truly are civilized, then why do we glorify the Other in our literature? History has shown that human beings have been forming and developing societies for thousands of years. This development also constantly shows that societies have been dealing with or acting upon violent impulses in order to produce a certain level of normalcy; and considering how modern societies have relied upon surveillance and discipline to produce normalization, we could say that this process of production of the normal would also produce the unacceptable non-normal, the Other. However, from the fairy tales to the more modern forms of fiction, we keep on finding this paradox: the portrayal of the non-normal Other to the point of acceptability.

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Introduction

According to Rene Girard,¹ human beings do not have the ability to stop violence and they instead resort to

♦ Veniz Maja V. Guzman teaches Philosophy at the Ateneo de Manila University. She is currently taking up her doctoral degree in Philosophy at De La Salle University, where she also finished her masters degree. Her research interests include environmental philosophy and Filipino philosophy. She has worked on topics such as transpersonal ecology and compassion; she is currently interested in working on blameworthiness and environmental beliefs. She is also an avid reader of fairy tales and anything suspenseful or mysterious. Her email: veniz_guzman@dlsu.edu.ph.

¹ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1979).

blaming methods directed toward a singular object—a scapegoat—and in the process, legitimating and saving society from its own self. All throughout the years, from the primitive to the contemporary, humans have been establishing societies and civilizations. However, this does not automatically mean that people are capable of living and working together peacefully, hence the need for the formation of certain mechanisms that enable the creation and exploitation of outlets. This is usually more apparent in religion where the killing of a chosen Other restores harmony and reinforces the social fabric,² although recent literature also shows that human sacrifice was done to reinforce the current social structure and legitimize the people in power.³ However, the end product of the act is still the same: sanity. In ancient cultures we have the Aztecs practicing human sacrifice⁴ and other Austronesian cultures took part in that practice as well.⁵

The concept of the Other has been present and featured in ancient literature. In the Bible we have the sacrificial lambs and bulls from the Old Testament, while in the New Testament we have Jesus of Nazareth as the ultimate sacrifice. In Greek literature we have the seven men and women who are sent yearly to the labyrinth to be fed to the fearsome Minotaur,⁶ Medea's infanticide,⁷ and other stories. From the *Epic of*

² Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 8.

³ Joseph Watts et al., "Ritual Human Sacrifice Promoted and Sustained the Evolution of Stratified Societies", *Nature* 532, no. 7598 (2016): 228-231, <https://doi:10.1038/nature17159>.

⁴ Lizzie Wade, "Feeding the Gods", *Science* 360, no. 6395 (2018): 1288-1292, doi:10.1126/science.360.6395.1288.

⁵ Jan N. Bremmer, ed., *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice*, Vol. 1 (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2007).

⁶ Edith, Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1942).

⁷ Euripides, *Medea And Other Plays*, trans. E.P. Coleridge

Gilgamesh to the fiction of present times, there is always the antagonist—however, in some cases, this Other is the main character of the story.

When the modern judicial system developed, and the process of discipline was integrated into society and punishment was sanitized,⁸ one would expect that our literature would follow suit. The Other should have been relegated to the status of an outlier or an outsider, but our literature shows that this is not the case. From the famous fairy tales written back in the 1600s to the more recent literature showing our need for release, it seems as if some things just never change.

This paper thus aims to discuss the question: If human beings are already civilized, then why do we still glorify the Other in our literature? It does this in two parts: a) an explanation of Michel Foucault's theory of Panopticon and b) a discussion on fairy tales and modern fiction.

Foucault's Panopticon

Foucault's Panopticon shows that the role of the observatory mechanism is to build a good, stable society.⁹ In *Discipline and Punish*, He discusses Jeremy Bentham's architectural creation and how the arrangement of its spaces abolished the collective to create a collection of individuals that are much easier to monitor and track.¹⁰ Rather than being a singular piece of architecture which encloses the people that need to be watched, the Panopticon has inched itself into the

(Stilwell: Neeland Media LLC, 2014).

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1975).

⁹ Ibid., 195-228.

¹⁰ Jeremy Bentham and John Bowring, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, Vol. 7 (Edinburgh: W. Tait, 1843).

everyday lives of people unnoticed in the form of everyday institutions such as hospitals, schools, workplaces, prisons, and other seemingly harmless societal apparatuses.¹¹ The main idea behind this is discipline achieved through constant surveillance because the knowledge that one is continuously being watched forces one to start acting in certain ways.¹² Instead of behaving in such a way that would be questioned by society, one submits to what the institutions want without having to be thrown in a cell. In other words, constant recording and tracking of

¹¹ Cf. Foucault's definition: "What I'm trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus [*dispositif*]. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. Secondly, what I am trying to identify in this apparatus is precisely the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements. Thus, a particular discourse can figure at one time as the programme of an institution, and at another it can function as a means of justifying or masking a practice which itself remains silent, or as a secondary re-interpretation of this practice, opening out for it a new field of rationality. In short, between these elements, whether discursive or non-discursive, there is a sort of interplay of shifts of position and modifications of function which can also vary very widely. Thirdly, I understand by the term 'apparatus' a sort of—shall we say—formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function. *This may have been, for example, the assimilation of a floating population found to be burdensome for an essentially mercantilist economy: there was a strategic imperative acting here as the matrix for an apparatus which gradually undertook the control or subjection of madness, mental illness and neurosis.*" Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon, translated by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 194-195. (italics supplied)

¹² Foucault, 176.

everyday transactions and everyday movements become second nature in such a way that one acts in accordance to laws of discipline and punishment regardless of actual volition and will. But the Panopticon is not operated by any one individual; it is operated by whoever wants to, effectively making individuals be in constant surveillance of one another. The human being takes it upon herself to control and limit her own actions in the same way that she, through her constant surveillance of others, makes them act in such a way that society would find acceptable. Instead of a single, dictatorial type of institution like Big Brother from George Orwell's *1984*,¹³ the public becomes the Panopticon, although they are largely unaware of it.

One important characteristic of the Panopticon is the classification of the observed. The people in the different institutions have labels to make it easier for them to be seen and differentiated from one another.¹⁴ This individualization (subjectification) is beneficial for the institution's work of carrying out training and control of each subject while testing out different experiments at the same time.¹⁵ Moreover, it also exists to distribute individuals in a way that would utilize them best. Different methods of discipline evolved and the utilization of the individual has become a better way of preventing future mishaps than violent punishments.

The eruption of the disciplines also promoted something else—the idea of normalization.¹⁶ Those who are predictable are less scrutinized than the unpredictable such as children, the mentally ill, and criminals. The idea of the Other is unacceptable, that is why even those who are still somewhat normal are also

¹³ George Orwell, *1984* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949).

¹⁴ Foucault, 218.

¹⁵ Foucault, 203.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 183-184.

placed under scrutiny.¹⁷ For the system to keep on working, the human person must be as formulaic as possible. Those who are less conformist to norms and rules are schooled toward docility and complicity so as to be integrated or reintegrated into the society of normals.¹⁸ The point of the normalizing schema is that it is supposed to disappear into anonymity while each individual is highlighted to be as visible as possible, and these individuals subscribe to what the schema promotes as normal, acceptable, and real.¹⁹

This schema is applicable to different kinds of organizations because of the imposition of behavior that it enables, all the while permitting more and more individuals to be under the influence of fewer and fewer people.²⁰ The very nature of the schema itself highlights its role as a preventive measure, rather than a cure for possible infractions.

The idea of a Panopticon then, has evolved from a singular architectural project to a way of life and to life's project. There becomes a normalization of observation which in turn produces a conformity amongst individuals, all the while promoting that each individual becomes a productive member of society. The people conform because of cultural conditioning since birth and they have also learned that conformity means safety and security. There is no need for violence because the individuals themselves police one another. And how could they not, when in the end, it benefits society as a whole?

¹⁷ Ibid., 193.

¹⁸ Ibid., 182-183.

¹⁹ Ibid., 193-194.

²⁰ Ibid., 204.

From Fairy Tales to Modern Fiction

However, as was mentioned earlier, one would expect that our literature would follow suit—considering how the Other is even more “othered”. As society introduces and reinforces the concept of normalcy and creates a reality which disallows non-conformity, one would expect that even in the stories we read and the ideas we consume, we would enforce the same rules we enforced in ourselves. It is rather surprising that this is not the case, and it is even baffling that certain ideas that we shun in society becomes more acceptable, likeable even, when placed within the pages of novels and other forms of stories, like fairy tales and crime fiction.

Fairy tales have an important function that seems to be overlooked: they feature an assigned Other whose persistent presence also subtly subverts the idea of a stable and normalized self. Crime fiction and certain satirical pieces also provide a similar function: overt subversion. But the two converge in the third function: they show realities we shun in the real world because of how they mangle what we believe should be normal.

a) Stability, subversion, and the self

Fairy tales by definition are children’s stories which involve magical beings, amazings feats, and faraway lands, and in which conflict resolution lead to a happy ending. We typically see them as stories which involve princesses; or at least, princesses-to-be. For example, Cinderella²¹ was an orphan girl with a rich stepfamily who turned her into a helper, while Beauty²² was a

²¹ Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, “Aschenputtel,” in *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, 7th edition (Göttingen: Verlag der Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1857).

²² Jeanne-Marie LePrince de Beaumont, “La Belle et la Bête,” in *Magasin des Enfants* (1756).

merchant's daughter. After a series of events, the antagonist or antagonists in the story are defeated, and the protagonist lives happily ever after. But fairy tales are not simply tales to entertain; they have their roots either in history or in culture. They do not just tell stories to show the listener that there is a rainbow after the rain, that improbable events can lead to a good outcome at least for the protagonist. For one, they have multiple uses. According to Zipes, "Fairy tales are informed by a human disposition to action—to transform the world and make it more adaptable to human needs, while we also try to change and make ourselves fit for the world."²³ This is why fairy tales focus on the acquisition of magical items or people which would enable the main character to resolve the conflict and to live a life of peace and contentment. For example, Aladdin was the son of a poor tailor and was what one would call a 'street rat,' and the magic lamp being in his possession gave him the ability to become someone he was not: a prince. The mermaid from the original Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid,"²⁴ and even from the Disney adaptation both wanted the same thing: legs, and they both went to the sea witch to acquire it. This is one of the main problems that human beings face not just back then but even in today's society: Many times, we feel like an outsider, an Other, and this is what pushes us to do things that we would not normally do. With power comes change, and with change comes acceptance.

This seems more in line with Foucault's discussion on the imposition of normalcy. We do not want to be the

²³ Jack Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012).

²⁴ Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Mermaid" (1836), http://hca.gilead.org.il/li_merma.html.

Other, and so we do everything in our power to make ourselves fit in.

However, as was mentioned earlier, fairy tales subvert the idea that we are perfectly sane and acceptable. The stability is not looked for in the community only; it is also looked for in the self. We noticed the evil stepmother, the witch, but no one noticed that Prince Charming fell in love with Snow White while she was a corpse, and that he was going to take her back to his castle when the apple got dislodged from her throat and woke her up. No one noticed that Cinderella was a liar who cried on her mother's grave for pretty dresses. No one found it disturbing that Beauty fell in love with an animal. No one found it creepy that the little mermaid sacrificed her world and would rather feel like she was treading on knives every time she took a step, just so she could be with someone she saw once. No one found it questionable that Aladdin lied his way into the princess's arms and poisoned his uncle. From the beginning the reader is conditioned to think that the main character is acceptable and could do no wrong. The reader and the listener end up condemning the assigned Other because they were portrayed to be shunned right from the start.

If we think about it, this is also what goes on in many of our current literary pieces. "Morality is seen pragmatically, as whatever keeps the system going, and individuals who depart from the norm are ignored or condemned."²⁵ It is the concept of the Other that scares the people accepted in society, and it scares us even more that the Other could be us. We know what would happen to us in a 'civilized' society such as ours if we are ever to commit rebellious acts and act as one of the outsiders. In a society that thrives on surveillance and

²⁵ James Roy King, *Old Tales and New Truths: Charting the Bright-Shadow World* (Albany: State U of New York, 1992), 2.

control, a society that upholds the idea of discipline and individualization, we know that people would find out if we put a toe out of line. What would happen to us then?

But we also see in our more modern stories forms of overt subversion of the idea that the self is stable and sane, and for some reason these people who would be considered as an Other are the ones we root for. In stories like *Fight Club*,²⁶ we have an unnamed character who is not even allowed to feel, and that is why he joins support groups where people are dying until he creates a club where people with mundane jobs and mundane lives could beat the living daylights out of each other. In that story, Tyler Durden, his other persona, is literally the type of person who does everything he can to make the people who live such boring, normal lives feel unsettled and disturbed. And we like him for it. In *A Clockwork Orange*,²⁷ we have the character of Alex who commits crimes from rape to murder, and we like him despite it. In *The Silence of the Lambs*,²⁸ the readers do not root for Clarice Starling; they root for Dr. Hannibal Lecter, the prim and proper psychiatrist-slash-cannibal. In *American Psycho*,²⁹ the readers root for Patrick Bateman, the high-society man who literally thought he was butchering people. In fairy tales, the main characters still look like decent people—at least, they are portrayed as such. The existence of the assigned Other makes the main character look better in comparison. However, in more modern forms of literature we see that it is blatant that the main

²⁶ Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (London: Vintage, 2006).

²⁷ Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (Cutchogue, N.Y.: Buccaneer Books, 1962).

²⁸ Thomas Harris, *The Silence of The Lambs* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).

²⁹ Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York, NY: Vintage Contemporaries, 1991).

character is the Other. What does it say about us then, when we still root for characters who are so blatantly horrible?

b) Ignored realities

Fairy tales, although at first glance look like stories for children, do not just talk about a single problem—they are complex stories about complex problems.³⁰ Fairy tales thrive in conflict; they show that the situation is never so simple that a main character would simply need to do a good deed for them to be incorporated in the community they want to call home. In many cases, the stories are unsettling. In many cases, it leaves one asking themselves, “What in the world did I just read?”

Once a fairy tale is read, the listener or the reader understands that there is something else beneath the story. The original fairy tales are typically morbid. Take Bluebeard³¹ for example. He goes out and marries a girl then takes her home and tells her to not go into a specific room then gives her the key, and when she does enter the room, he kills her. His last wife, Fatima, survives only because she was able to hold him off long enough for her brothers to come and kill Bluebeard for her. The story of Bluebeard is not just a scary story meant to terrify girls, so they would learn to be wary of the men pursuing them; the story of Bluebeard is one about a serial killer. “If we take any of the classical fairy tales such as “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Cinderella,” or “Beauty and the Beast,” we can trace them as best as we can to tales of antiquity, perhaps even prehistory, that concern rape, sibling rivalry, and mating.”³²

³⁰ Zipes, 8.

³¹ Charles Perrault, “Bluebeard,” in *Stories or Fairy Tales from Past Times with Morals* (Paris: Léon Curmer, 1697).

³² Zipes, 9.

This is exactly how fairy tales serve their purpose in the context of the Panopticon. Since the Panopticon in and of itself has been established as an institution that enforces and perpetuates normalcy and conformism without overt structures or mechanisms to do so, fairy tales serve as grim reminders of what is still normal beyond the Panopticon's influence. It is just that these fairy tales serve them up in a way that makes them more digestible and palatable to the sensitivities of modern times and people.

Simply put, fairy tales tell us stories that we do not normally want to hear. They tell us truths that cannot be talked about directly, that is why we hide them safely within the pages of our children's books. No one wants to know that there are disturbing issues that need to be talked about and dealt with. We value peace in our everyday lives; we value pretending that the homes we see around us are perfectly safe and warm, and that all the people we meet are perfectly sane.

According to King, "But above all traditional narratives have generated in certain readers and listeners the firm conviction that other worlds (i.e., patterns of experience) exist, the worlds where these stories take place, beyond the world in which most of us spend our lives, and that it is possible to enter these worlds and draw strength from them."³³ The realities that we see in fairy tales are most definitely the types of realities that we try to keep as far away from ourselves, but we still like to see them from time to time for some unexplainable reason. It would do us well to remember that these stories that discuss these disturbing themes that show us both the capabilities of the people around us and our personal need for acceptance in a society which we hope does not host these types of personalities

³³ King, 3.

are placed in children's storybooks. These are realities that we would usually shield our children from, but instead we willingly introduce them to safe versions of these. According to King, "Fairy tales and folk tales, which are so often grounded in the bizarre, the abnormal, even the supernatural, carry out certain creative functions as they summon their hearers out of the normal, the accepted, the rational, the modern to possibilities that are speculative but also experience-enhancing."³⁴

In crime fiction, we do the same thing. From the seats of the readers and the listeners all the experiences that could be had and all the doors that could be opened are opened and the contents of their rooms recognized. All they had to do was to open the book. In crime fiction, the readers learn about the serial killers and the plotted crimes and the cover-ups that take place. In *A Pocketful of Rye* by Agatha Christie³⁵ from the Whodunnit type of crime fiction, the reader learns about grudges and how the word 'family' can lose its meaning. In Clue-Puzzle the readers learn that the butler is rarely guilty; that the criminal is more often than not within the social group. In Hard-boiled the readers learn that the crime is more often than not, not the only one at work, that there is something else going on that lead to the main crime in the first place. Everyone is guilty of something. In Police Procedural the readers learn that people are not staying away from a life of crime because of their high moral ground but because they are scared of the law.

The real issue is shunned and considered as an evil, but once put in a story, it becomes more acceptable, even entertaining. We do not have to go out into the night and experience the crime itself to know what it is

³⁴ Ibid., 2.

³⁵ Agatha Christie, *A Pocket Full of Rye* (Fontana, 1953).

about; all we have to do is take a book and read. And this is because we all know what is going on out there, but we do not want to face that reality. This is one of the problems that people end up facing because of the structures of society.

Conclusion

One price of the enlarging of experience which I am postulating may be a certain reimagining of the nature of the human personality, the unsettling realization that it is not nearly so stable as had been imagined.³⁶

Both in fairy tales and in crime fiction, the readers get their own dose of a certain reality that, as was stated before, they do not want to face. People want the image of a safe community. People want stability, not the idea that somewhere, someone is lurking in the shadows, ready to do them harm. In fairy tales, the subtle subversion of the stability of the self allows the main character to get away with the wrongdoing because there is already someone else to blame. Acceptance into the community is still a big part of the story, if not its priority. However, in the more modern types of fiction, it is the main characters themselves who unapologetically break away from the rest of the relatively stable community, and they like it that way. There is a certain satisfaction that comes with knowing that there is someone else to blame for all the wrong things that are going on in the story, but there is also a certain satisfaction that comes with knowing that the Other in the self can come out and still turn out okay. In a society whose stability depends on the sanity of its members, one would think that the idea of being different would be unacceptable even in the literature

³⁶ King, 8.

we read. However, what it looks like is that the readers would want to see—deep down, more than their desire to see the restoration of order—they want to see the criminal win.

Perhaps what one could surmise from all these things is one thing: That even in the face of a society that thrives on imposing normalcy, we still have that urge to be the Other—and we want to be accepted despite being one.

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