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Research Article



Monstrous-Feminine: Grotesque Physicality and Offensive Body in Emily Carroll's *When I Arrived at the Castle*

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

This paper, drawing on the theoretical insights of Barbara Creed and others, argues that the female characters in Emily Carroll's graphic novel, *When I Arrived at the Castle* (2019), manifest the monstrous-feminine through their grotesque physicality and metaphorical monstrosity. The paper posits that the image of the monstrous-feminine is created through the depiction of the characters' grotesque physicality and their metaphorical monstrosity. In addition to analyzing the facets of the monstrous-feminine, the research categorizes these into grotesque physicality and metaphorical monstrosity. By analyzing the graphic novel, this paper offers a new perspective on the representation of women in media and provides a new reading of Carroll's work.

Keywords: Monstrous-Feminine, Grotesque, Body, Horror, Graphic Novel, Feminism

Introduction

The misrepresentation of women in media is a pervasive issue that reinforces gender bias and harmful stereotypes. This portrayal is often one-sided, characterized by commodification, damaging beauty standards, and the marginalization of women's contributions. Gaye Tuchman (1978) describes this phenomenon as the "symbolic annihilation of women," where their presence in media is either underrepresented or trivialized. This concept highlights how media often oversimplifies women's experiences, reducing them to archetypes or one-dimensional representations (Tuchman, 1978). Furthermore, the sexualization of women in advertising and media perpetuates a culture where a woman's value is primarily linked to her physical appearance and sexuality (Lazar, 2006; Projansky, 2001). These false representations not only mislead the public's perception of women but also contribute to social problems such as gender inequality and discrimination.

Monstrosity and Women

Socially deviant behavior, which breaches generally accepted norms, is often depicted as monstrous or grotesque, reflecting a society's hidden anxieties about threats to its established order and values. This perception is based on the idea that deviance unravels the social fabric. Anindyo Rai (2004) discusses this idea, linking the "monster-terrorist" figure to sexual and racial deviancy. Rai (2004) highlights that such figures are deemed monstrous because they deviate from the norms of the heterosexual family and represent "otherness" in a postcolonial context. Similarly, Barbara L. Gasior (2014) examines how female agency and deviance in literature are portrayed as monstrous, suggesting that the transgression of gender codes is often equated with monstrous behavior. The resistance to the advancement of women was particularly harsh in earlier times, as illustrated by the character of Beatriz in Felipe Pérez del Puerto's *Satanas in Felipe II*. These studies demonstrate how social norms stigmatize any behavior that transgresses acceptable standards, characterizing such acts as a form of monstrosity.

There is a recurring theme of presenting women as monsters when they deviate from acceptable social standards, which reveals an underlying gender bias and fear. This is a metaphorical reflection of the anxiety associated with women who defy traditional roles. Gasior (2014) provides further insight into this topic in her

analysis of *La segunda Celestina*, where she describes Beatriz as a character who rejects traditional gender roles and is consequently portrayed as monstrous, mirroring society's fear of independent women. Likewise, Lars Feldt (2003) explores the concept of monstrosity in religious and cultural discourses, which often reflects a fear of the "other" — women who do not conform to traditional roles and thus challenge established power structures. These analyses show how monstrous reputations serve to police and punish women who venture beyond the boundaries of conventional femininity.

The Monstrous-Feminine

In her seminal work, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Barbara Creed (2007) challenges the patriarchal view that in horror films, women are always the victims of monsters. Instead, she argues that in these films, the monster is often the female reproductive body. Creed's concept of the monstrousfeminine is a reversal of the male monster. She notes, "Men fear women, not because women are castrated but because they are not castrated" (Creed, 2007, p. X). In other words, the fear of the monstrous-feminine stems from the idea that she may castrate the male. Creed (2007) identifies five faces of the monstrous-feminine in film: "the archaic mother; the monstrous womb; the witch; the vampire; and the possessed woman". She also adds a sixth face: the "woman as castrator," an image born from men's fear of castration (Creed, 2007, p. X). The image of the woman as castrator, according to Creed (2007), has at least three forms: the *femme castratrice* (the female castrator), the castrating mother (who threatens her children through her "lack"), and the *vagina dentata* (the toothed vagina), which again threatens men. Creed's theory draws primarily from Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject (as cited in Creed, 2007).

Facets of the Monstrous-Feminine

The first face of the monstrous-feminine, the archaic mother, is contrasted with Kristeva's mother of the semiotic chora. Creed (2007) defines the archaic mother as a figure "who gives birth to all living things," a mother goddess with primal powers (p. X). The fertile female body is often constructed as abject, as Kristeva observes (as cited in Creed, 2007). However, Creed (2007) identifies the critical characteristic of the archaic mother as "her total dedication to the generative, procreative principle" (p. X). Creed (2007) concludes that archaic mother figures in horror are depicted as "a negative force" with a "cannibalistic mouth," "toothed vagina," or a "mysterious black hole" that threatens to give birth to "horrific offspring" and destroy everything (p. X).

The second image of the monstrous-feminine, the possessed woman, is constituted by "aberrant feminine behaviour," which provokes the abject (Creed, 2007, p. X). By presenting a woman as a vulnerable body that can be possessed, the image of the abject renders the female body as unclean (Creed, 2007).

The third face, the monstrous womb, is constructed by considering the womb as a symbol of the abject—both clean and dirty. For Creed (2007), this monstrous-feminine is identified by the womb giving birth to the monstrous. As she delineates, "...[the] womb is depicted as grotesque, thus giving concrete expression to its monstrous nature" (Creed, 2007, p. X).

In the fourth face, the woman as a vampire, Creed (2007) situates the woman as a menstrual monster. This image positions the monstrous-feminine as the living dead. Referring to sexuality, abjection, and the symbolic representation of women's bodies in horror films, Creed (2007) focuses on the woman as a vampire, which signifies "darkness, the undead, moon, the tomb/womb, blood, oral sadism, bodily wounds and violation of the law" (p. X). She states that the female vampire is often represented as a sexually predatory figure characterized by lesbianism, which links to the traditional view of blood-sucking as an intimate and erotic act (Creed, 2007). Creed (2007) discusses how this representation relates to cultural and mythological stories about women and blood, particularly menstruation. She posits that the vampire myth refers to menstrual and hymenal flow, as women's wombs are terrifying because of blood. This dread and fascination are captured in the vampire, who lives on blood (Creed, 2007). She mentions films such as *The Hunger* that create a figure of the female vampire who is at once abject and desirable due to her association with women's blood (Creed, 2007). Though the female vampire is sometimes seen as an archaic mother, she is also seen as a vagina dentata. In the discourse of lesbian vampires, Creed (2007) observes that this figure is monstrous because she destroys order and identity, driven by a thirst for blood and disregarding "healthy" sexual conduct. As Creed (2007) pinpoints, "it is the sexual desires of the lesbian vampire that render her the most abject of all vampire monsters" (p. X). Thus, the female vampire undermines patriarchal order by transgressing the boundaries between life and death, human and animal, especially through her lesbian relationships (Creed, 2007).

The fifth face of the monstrous-feminine is the woman as a witch. Creed's (2007) representation of the witch is one of the principal images of monstrosity associated with women. Based on the film *The Witch*, Creed reveals that a witch is often portrayed as monstrous, with magical abilities and a lust for evil, even when she has played significant roles in society as a healer or seer. The image of the witch always inspires "both awe and dread" (Creed, 2007, p. X). Creed refers to the witch as an object of the abject within patriarchal discourses and depicts her as a threat to "the symbolic order" (p. X). She is regarded as a diabolical and malicious being who can employ her dark powers to disrupt the community's order. The witch symbolizes the disturbance of the borders between the rational and the irrational. Her evil powers are part of her feminine nature, linked closely to Nature, and her power works with natural forces such as storms or hurricanes (Creed, 2007). As Creed (2007) remarks, "The witch is also associated with a range of abject things: filth, decay, spiders, bats, cobwebs, brews,

potions and even cannibalism" (p. X). Witchcraft in horror texts is often associated with female reproductive organs, especially the uncanny power of menstruation. Creed (2007) observes that although the subjects covered in other genres are diverse, explicit references to menstruation exist almost exclusively within horror texts.

The Making of the Monstrous-Feminine

In her characterization of femininity in horror, Barbara Creed (2007) addresses what she calls "the monstrous-feminine," the female monster as a source of fear and terror. This construct is deeply rooted in the association of the feminine with the abject, particularly the female body and its reproductive functions. Moreover, it undermines traditional patriarchal visions by portraying elements of motherhood, such as the archaic mother and the monstrous womb, as threatening rather than nurturing. The monstrous-feminine also represents the concept of a castrating woman, thus posing a mythical threat to male authority and power because of her "certain resemblance to the castrating mother" (Creed, 2007, p. X). This representation usually includes the violation of societal and gender standards, where women display active sexual desires and supernatural powers that deviate from usual social-gender norms. As Creed (2007) indicates, "Woman as castrator constitutes the most significant face of the monstrous-feminine," which threatens the male (p. X). In other words, the fear of female power and sexuality has led to the formation of a monstrous-feminine that is intrinsically separate from women's real capabilities as autonomous human beings.

Grotesque Physicality

The concept of grotesque physicality encompasses various aspects that fall outside the principles of regular aesthetics and provoke strong emotions. Nam and Park (2004) describe grotesque aspects of modern fashion as "devilism," characterized by shocking and destructive images, and a hatred of the human body expressed through cruel physical acts. These components represent fear, death, and social disturbances (Nam & Park, 2004). The same study also discusses "playfulness," which deforms and hypernaturalizes human shapes, and "heterogeneity," including primitivism (human-animal hybrids) and cyborgs (merging humans with machines). According to E. Davey (1978), the grotesque in literature possesses a distinct abnormality, usually involving obesity or emaciation, which makes the characters out of sync with their regular settings. Seo (2003) identifies grotesque images in fashion illustrations through discordance, uncanniness, and deformation; antiplay visual tensions convey fear and mystery. Furthermore, Wolfgang Kayser (1963) and Ulrich Weisstein conceptualize the grotesque in art as something that generates feelings of fear, repulsion, or revulsion in the viewer, but which is also close to comedy, where laughter meets horror. Taken together, these studies demonstrate the multifaceted and often contradictory nature of grotesque physicality, which incorporates fearful connotations as well as perversion, humor, and abnormality.

As Wolfgang Kayser (1963) remarks, the grotesque is constituted by a "clashing contrast between form and content, the unstable mixture of heterogeneous elements, the explosive force of the paradoxical, which is both ridiculous and terrifying" (p. X). Such an amalgamation of contrasting elements, for instance, beauty and ugliness, produces the grotesque. The grotesque is created through two elements, "one ludicrous, the other fearful" (Jennings, 1963, p. 23), a combination of the "diabolic and angelic" (Baudelaire, 1961, p. 980). Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) explains that the most crucial feature of the grotesque is having "two bodies in one," where "from one body a new body always emerge[s] in some form or other" (p. 318). The grotesque is not only a blend of two contrasting elements, but it also stimulates mixed feelings, which, although it may seem as if one feeling is predominant, "concur when both of them are equally prominent" (Ruskin, 1874, p. 119). In simple words, "the grotesque is always a civil war of attraction/repulsion," as Geoffrey Galt Harpham (1982) puts it (p. 17). This exhibits the ability of grotesque physicality to provoke horror. According to Noël Carroll (2003), grotesque physicality produces horror when impure and harmful elements, such as decomposing corpses and bodily wastes, are joined with clean entities. To sum up, the grotesque occurs when two contrary forms are coupled together, and the mingling of the pure with the impure creates horror.

Metaphorical Monstrosity

Monstrosity in literature and culture often reflects undesirable behaviors that break social norms, thus representing societal fears. Asier Albizu (1996) elaborates on the portrayal of monstrosity in relation to urban phenomena and modern art as a monster of excessive size representing social pathologies such as terrorism. Analogously, Fred Botting (2003) discusses the mutation of metaphor and monstrosity through information theory and biotechnology, suggesting that scientific research and popular culture are based on a recognition of a monstrous quality in the connotation of "genetics". The works presented above offer an opportunity to question the use of metaphorical monstrosity in the critique and analysis of norms and behaviors, as well as how technology and terror influence human perception and the social order.

Yana Sazonova (2018) investigates the pragmatic potential of the "subject-source of terror" in horror discourse, stating that monstrosity as a metaphor reveals latent phobias and norms in society. Looking at the use of the monster metaphor, Marco Pinfari (2019) focuses on terrorism and how it is presented as a monster, alongside its function in political agendas and counter-terrorism. The foregoing studies show how the concept of metaphorical monstrosity is used to criticize and analyze societal norms and behaviors, as well as the effects of technology and terror on human cognition and the social hierarchy.

When I Arrived at the Castle

The protagonist arrives at a castle, drenched by rain, and is met by the Countess. The first impressions create an atmosphere of tension and discomfort. The Countess's hospitality is tinged with an underlying menace, as she peels the cloak from the protagonist's "damp skin like she was dividing dead flesh from the living" (Carroll, 2019, p. X). The protagonist's initial feelings of being "oily and exposed" give way to a compelled fascination (Carroll, 2019, p. X). A pivotal moment occurs when the protagonist enters a black, viscous bath and feels "nothing" (Carroll, 2019, p. X). This surreal encounter marks the beginning of her transformation. The Countess is the monstrous-feminine. Her palace, a maze where the protagonist descends into a house of mirrors, bears witness to her authority and her mysteries. She is portrayed as a predator, with her "breath hot" and "touch icy" (Carroll, 2019, p. X). Her dialogue is taunting and dominant as she challenges the protagonist's intent to kill her.

The protagonist confronts the Countess, who reveals that the others who came before her willingly "threw themselves into my arms" and "unraveled into the things behind the doors, in ecstacy, in trembling heat" (Carroll, 2019, p. X). Despite this, the Countess challenges the protagonist to kill her. What follows is a graphic and surreal depiction of a violent and sensual struggle, culminating in the protagonist's own monstrous transformation. The ending reveals the cyclical and inescapable nature of the monstrosity within the castle. The protagonist, now monstrous herself, has seemingly taken the Countess's place, perpetuating the cycle of predation and transformation (Carroll, 2019). The final story about the girl and the cat suggests the possibility that the protagonist was a monster from the beginning (Carroll, 2019).

In Emily Carroll's *When I Arrived at the Castle*, the Countess embodies the "archaic mother," a key facet of the monstrous-feminine. This archetype, as defined by Barbara Creed (2007), is a "negative force" dedicated to a "generative, procreative principle," often depicted with a "cannibalistic mouth" or as a "mysterious black hole" that births "horrific offspring" and threatens to destroy everything (p. X). The protagonist is drawn into the castle, a space described with a "powerful" and "thick and rich" smell of the earth, suggesting a primal, chthonic force (Carroll, 2019, p. X). The Countess's invitation to "share" the bath, filled with a dark, viscous liquid, is an invitation into a symbolic amniotic fluid, a space of transformation and potential rebirth into monstrosity. This is further indicated by the narratives in the story, in which characters are directed to the castle by acts of self-mutilation and bloodshed, indicating that entry into such a monstrous-feminine space demands a brutal cleaving from the outside world and subjection to a procreative force (Carroll, 2019).

In When I Arrived at the Castle, the archetype of the "monstrous womb" is a pervasive and central theme, visualized through the architecture of the castle itself and the transformative horrors that occur within its walls. According to Barbara Creed's (2007) theory, the monstrous womb is a face of the monstrous-feminine where the womb is depicted as grotesque and gives "birth to the monstrous" (p. X). Carroll applies this theory to a narrative context, making the entire castle a metaphorical, monstrous reproductive organ. The castle is mainly a symbol of the monstrous womb, an actual place that confines and alters its inhabitants. As soon as the main character enters, she is surrounded by a territory that is both alluring and menacing. The Countess invites her to take a bath, which is filled not with water but with a black, viscous substance in which the protagonist feels "nothing" (Carroll, 2019, p. X). This scene symbolizes a descent into a corrupted amniotic fluid, a liminal space where the protagonist's former identity begins to dissolve, preparing her for a grotesque rebirth. This womb is not a place of protection and sustenance, but of chills, sensory deprivation, and the feeling of change.

In When I Arrived at the Castle, the archetype of the witch is a foundational element of its horror, primarily embodied by the Countess and the recurring motif of a supernatural cat. According to Barbara Creed (2007), the witch is a monstrous-feminine figure who inspires "both awe and dread," possesses magical abilities, threatens the "symbolic order," and is associated with "a range of abject things: filth, decay," nature, and potions (p. X). All of this is projected in the Countess and the world surrounding her. The Countess is presented as a quintessential witch figure, a "diabolical and malicious" being who commands supernatural power (Creed, 2007, p. X). Her castle, filled with the "powerful" scent of "churning loam," links her directly to the untamed, natural world (Carroll, 2019, p. X). Her physical description connects her to the abject; her nails glitter like "the backs of ten scuttling beetles," and her smile is as "wet as my sodden cloak" (Carroll, 2019, p. X). She possesses magical abilities, knowing of the protagonist's arrival and her intent. The black, viscous fluid in the bath acts as a witch's potion, a transformative brew designed to strip the protagonist of her purpose and begin her corruption. The Countess's power is a clear threat to order, as she presides over a domain where women are lured in and grotesquely transformed, a magical and horrifying disruption of the natural world (Creed, 2007). What the protagonist witnesses is a clear display of the witch's terrifying and supernatural power. She sees the Countess's head suddenly and grotesquely explode into a formless, bloody mass before just as quickly reforming (Carroll, 2019). This moment of horrific, magical transformation aligns with Creed's (2007) description of the witch as "monstrous with magical abilities".

In Emily Carroll's graphic novel, the Countess is a quintessential representation of the monstrous-feminine as a vampire, embodying the key traits of bloodlust, predatory sexuality, and the abject as outlined by Barbara Creed (2007). Creed's (2007) female vampire signifies "darkness, the undead,... blood, oral sadism, bodily wounds," and is often a "sexually predatory figure almost always characterized by lesbianism" (p. X). The Countess and her affairs with the protagonist are a bright example of this archetype. From the opening scene, the Countess is coded as a vampire. She is an undead creature of darkness, her touch is "icy," and her castle is a tomb-like space that exudes a "vibrating chill" (Carroll, 2019, p. X). The theme of blood saturates the

narrative. The cover art itself depicts the Countess with a bloodied mouth, and her dialogue is laced with violent, sadistic invitations like "How will you draw my blood?" (Carroll, 2019, p. X) and "Unless you are so eager to bare your teeth?" (Carroll, 2019, p. X). This is supported by the fairy tales in the novel, where blood is a required pass into her realm; one of the girls has to stab herself to create a trail of blood to the castle (Carroll, 2019). This aligns with Creed's (2007) assertion that the vampire archetype is fundamentally tied to "blood" and "bodily wounds." A more specific instance of the vampire archetype is visible in the grotesque vision the protagonist has while peeking through a keyhole, which powerfully visualizes Creed's (2007) concept of the vampire as a "menstrual monster." In this scene, the hero can even observe how the head of the Countess explodes in an ugly, indistinguishable capillary of blood (Carroll, 2019).

Coda

As a concluding episode of this investigation of *When I Arrived at the Castle*, it is possible to state that the text supports the main assumption of this study: that these female figures represent powerful embodiments of the monstrous-feminine, realized in the horror genre through a critical collusion of grotesque physicality and metaphorical monstrosity. The grotesque physicality is rendered in visceral detail, from the Countess's nails being like "scuttling beetles" to the violent, bloody explosion of her form seen through the keyhole (Carroll, 2019, p. X). These images of an unsteady, fragmented, and synthetic body can be considered the physical background of the horror (Bakhtin, 1984).

Simultaneously, this physical horror is inextricably linked to a metaphorical monstrosity, which is defined by the characters' transgression against societal norms (Gasior, 2014). The monstrosity of the Countess is not simply her vampiric character, but her predatory and non-normative sexuality, which devours and changes her victims. Her explicit disgust for the protagonist's "meekness" further frames her as a monster who actively rejects and seeks to destroy prescribed passive femininity (Carroll, 2019, p. X).

Ultimately, the tangible and the figurative are tied together. The protagonist's final transformation into a monstrous "ANIMAL" is the ultimate physical manifestation of her psychological and social transgression (Carroll, 2019, p. X). She turns not only into a monster but also becomes a metaphor for female power and rage released from social expectations. Thus, Emily Carroll's work brilliantly maximizes the potential of the monstrous-feminine to examine the underlying fears about feminine identity, power, and sexuality, serving as a confirmation that the greatest monsters are those who oscillate both toward and against the ideals that society wants to assign them.

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