

More than Murderers, Other than Men: Views of Masculinity in Modern Crime Fiction

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Introduction

In the crime novels *The Silence of the Lambs (SL)* by the American author Thomas Harris,¹ *The Mermaids Singing (MS)* by British Val McDermid, and *Night Sister (NS)* by Norwegian Unni Lindell² the murderers in these texts are discussed, explicitly in two cases and implicitly in one, as not being homosexual, transsexual or transvestite. The narrative technique is subtly elaborate: to propose that someone is not homosexual, for example, concurrently verbalizes homosexuality. Furthermore, considering the fact that the characters are so firmly located in a narrated environment characterized by heterosexuality and heteronormativity, they stand out as being, to say the least, and for want of a more appropriate word, non-heterosexual. This article argues that the murderers' non-heterosexuality is depicted as contributing to, or is even suggested as the reason for, their violent behavior; it drives them to murder and ultimately to their own death. Joseph Grixti describes Jame Gumb in *The Silence of the Lambs* as "the psychopathic loner who turns into a vicious beast, largely as a consequence of serious gender identity problems [...]" (91). This is true of all three killers: in the novels 'gender identity problems' are equated with psychological problems. By providing these characterizations, masculinity as a result is represented as being 'sane,' normal, and more or less stable.

¹ Director Jonathan Demme's film adaptation of *Silence of the Lambs* will also be referred to when relevant. The novel and the film are two different narratives of course, but the major themes are the same.

² *Nattsøsteren* has not (yet) been translated to English; I have therefore made my own translations when necessary.

The novels' criminals are characters who cross perceived gender boundaries. The novels themselves cross the boundaries of the crime genre. The deaths and the murders that are portrayed in these novels are only a conventional part of crime fiction since violence is a prerequisite of the genre itself. When a gender and sexuality perspective is added, however, the narratives can be read as horror stories, and the influence from the genre of horror movies is difficult to ignore. This is so for three reasons; firstly there is the link between the homosexual and the monster, secondly there is the theme of metamorphosis and thirdly, the motif of the mask.

Mixtures, madness and monsters

In this article connections are made between heterosexuality and masculinity because they are linked in the novels too, which of course in no way makes them unique. Without this thing called gender there would be no classification called hetero-or homosexuality. Eve Sedgwick formulates this herself when she maintains that "to be gay, or to be classified as gay" is to be "sexed or gendered" (54). Michael S. Kimmel writes that from a historical and developmental point of view, "masculinity has been defined as the flight from women, the repudiation of femininity." What every young man —boy—must do is form "a secure identity for himself as a man." He concludes that "[m]asculinity is irrevocably tied to sexuality" (185). In the descriptions of the killers' childhoods, we are told a similar story over and over again, only slightly altered. They do not—as boys—develop and secure a masculine identity. They, instead, develop in a feminine direction. In the case of Alf Boris Moen in *Night Sister*, for instance, we are told that he forced his younger sister to take off her dresses and nightgowns so he could wear them instead. As a consequence, his violent behavior starts at an early age too; he viciously chooses to bite his sister's ankles, for example. It furthermore becomes apparent that the love and affection he feels for his mother is based on her feminine qualities, illustrated here by Alf Boris Moen saying: "I have always loved my mother; the smell of her, her dresses, hats and stockings. Not that she dressed particularly well" (*NS* 323). His femininity is highlighted further by his comment in passing on how his mother was in the habit of dressing shabbily.

Angelica Thorpe of *The Mermaids Singing* illustrates the same insecure male identity and explains: “*About that time [at the age of 16] I discovered that dressing in women’s clothes made me feel good about myself*” (MS 353-354, original italics). This is described as a very active decision on Thorpe’s part, because she had “*seen enough men to know that [she] didn’t want to grow up like them*” (MS 353, original italics). This means that she actively repudiates manhood and what manhood implies, and that the identity she wants to secure is outside the boundaries of masculinity.

All three murderers in these crime narratives are depicted as inviting femininity; they deliberately cross the boundaries of masculinity. Richard Tithecott writes about real serial killers and the relation between their acts and homosexuality and homophobia,

[t]he motivation of serial killers is frequently explained in terms of the need to expel: to expel the feminine, to expel the homosexual. The idea that serial killers kill repeatedly in order to demonstrate their manhood (and its associate, heterosexuality) is expressed in the negative; that is they are represented as attempting to destroy manhood’s ‘opposite(s).’ Such maneuvering allows masculinity to be literally silent.

(57)

Masculinity and heterosexuality are ‘associated’ and masculinity in a type of pure form is thus an ideal state—‘silent’ as Tithecott expresses it—and ostensibly has the status of a concept that does not require critical investigation or questioning. The killers in these three novels do not kill in order to expel anything feminine, instead they kill because they do not engage in expelling at all. They break the bond between masculinity and heterosexuality and embrace femininity, and in the end then also non-heterosexuality, as in the example of Angelica Thorpe. Yet, as Tithecott mentions: “The question (and its problem) becomes not masculinity but femininity, or rather femininity’s invasion of masculinity” (58); it is when masculinity (manhood) is disturbed by femininity that homosexual tendencies can surface and threaten not only the person in question but also the general public. Moreover, this disturbance leads to a mixture of gender attributes,

The mixture of femininity and masculinity can be seen as representations of what Philip L. Simpson calls a “cultural phobia” (2) and the mixture furthermore, in many ways, transforms the murderers into the familiar monsters of the horror genre. In his article “The Monster

and the Homosexual,” Harry M. Benshoff recapitulates a study of anti-homosexual viewpoints, and locates three chief areas of interest. Anti-homosexuality is evidently born and nurtured in the sense of feeling threatened and the three forms of threat are: homosexuality as a threat to the individual, as a threat to others, and finally as a threat to the community itself. He summarizes: “In short [...] homosexuality is a monstrous condition” (91). The first threat we can link to the business of expelling: the possibility that you yourself might be homosexual. The second and third dangers are displayed in the novels quite clearly. There is nothing subtle about murder, it is an immediate threat to others, as well as to the community, since, in two cases, the characters are serial killers. If we linger a bit on the issue of community, we can moreover see the killers in yet another perspective: the main threat that they represent is not death itself but their un-normative masculinity/sexuality. Their unconventionality threatens the traditional values of the community. Benshoff points out that both monsters and homosexuals have lived in the closet, and when they dare enter the world they cause panic and fear (92). In other words, the closet works as a guard of gender boundaries where those who transgress them are hidden or choose to hide.

The symbolic closet in the case of Angelica, Alf Boris Moen, and Jame Gumb is the basement, a commonly depicted sphere in the horror movie genre. Angelica has built her torture chamber in the cellar. When Tony Hill is being held captive there he notices that “[s]he moved well in her heels, her stride measured and feminine. It was interesting, since she had obviously reverted to more masculine movements under the stress of kidnapping and killing” (*MS* 343). This viewpoint shows the sharp line that is drawn between feminine and masculine, and that a mixture of genders is so remarkable that it is worth contemplating, even though Tony Hill is at the time being tortured.

Furthermore, it is in this area below ground Alf Boris Moen in *Night Sister* keeps his tools to step out of masculinity and into femininity: his mother’s clothes, makeup and so on. Like a vampire or werewolf he is usually active at night. Hiding in the dark he can transform himself into a woman: “*I am your night sister. You can’t tell anyone, because you want a big sister, don’t you?*” (*NS* 332),” as he tells his younger sister. When it comes to Jame Gumb in *The Silence of the Lambs*, Thomas Harris describes his basement as resembling a nightmare vision: “Room onto room, Jame Gumb’s basement rambles like the maze that thwarts us in

dreams. When he was still shy, lives and lives ago, Mr Gumb took his pleasure in the room most hidden, far from the stairs” (*SL* 232). Harris speaks directly to the reader here, making the dream of the maze a shared one, and in a similar fashion to Unni Lindell emphasizes nighttime. This basement is very much linked to masculinity and violence since it is now the place where he imprisons his victims and also where he keeps his moths. The female victims provide him with the skin he needs to make himself a woman suit, and the moth is a symbol of Gumb himself, the transformation he is going through.

The clothes, makeup and new skin are in the novels versions of the mask of the horror film, and thus enhance the monstrosity of the quest for femininity the murderers have embarked upon. Benschhoff also stresses the monstrous quality of the dangerous mixing of gender characteristics: it is the male gay or queer’s display of femininity that makes him monstrous. Femininity “taints” masculinity (94). The choice of the word ‘taints’ signals that the mixing of femininity and masculinity entails the mixture of something not so good with something good. The attributes that are associated with masculinity and femininity respectively may have changed over time and are changing still, but the evaluations of them have not changed to the same extent. An example of this tainting can be seen in *Night Sister*. Here, the killer’s apartment is described and the feminine aspects of the apartment are highlighted. Lindell writes that “the furnishing was a strange mix of masculine and feminine elements” (*NS* 54). Stereotypical examples of femininity are given such as a pink, knitted tablecloth with lace, a thermos with a pattern of pink roses, and a book by Virginia Woolf (*NS* 54). Moen has some ultra-masculine attributes in his home too: antique weapons hanging on the wall. The combination of weaponry and pink roses underscores the unnatural quality of the apartment. The police also note that Moen “was apparently proud of his apartment” (*NS* 55) and thus questioning why, when evidently, as the author puts it, it is ‘strange.’ The apartment is thus constructed through what seems to be a dialogue between masculinity and femininity, and what makes it strange is not the mixture *per se*, but that Moen is a man living there alone. He is even a man who works at the department of defense, a masculine type of job in a masculine type of space. Despite his gender and line of work Moen displays feminine emotions and almost starts to cry (*NS* 62), making the two police inspectors—one man and one woman—who visit him in his home

equally embarrassed. When it is eventually discovered that Moen dresses in women's clothes, his mother's clothes to be precise, reiterating *Psycho*'s Norman Bates, the question arises if "he had other dangerous secrets too" (NS 355). What the dangerous aspect of cross dressing actually is, is not elaborated on but a question left to the reader to ponder.

Cross dressing as a dangerous activity is apparent in the 1960 classic horror movie *Psycho* by Alfred Hitchcock. In separate yet similar discussions of this film, both Brian Baker and J. Tharp claim that Norman Bates's issues with his mother, and the cross-dressing that follows, have influenced many subsequent killer narratives. J. Tharp makes specific links between *Psycho* and *Silence of the Lambs*, the movie, saying that "there are so many common threads between *Psycho* and *The Silence of the Lambs* that I cannot imagine the latter not to be subconsciously imitating the former" (107). Baker cites Carol J. Clover and stresses the impact *Psycho* has had on the genre (of horror film), "the killer propelled by psychosexual fury, more particularly a male in gender distress, has proved a durable one, and the progeny of Norman Bates stalk the genre up to the present day"(72).

There are traces of *Psycho* and other horror movies as regards the treatment of masculinity and violence in all three novels. The masks which cover or obscure the faces of Jason in *Friday the 13th*, Leatherface in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, *Halloween*'s Michael Myers and countless others, are replaced with heavy makeup, cross dressing, body remodeling and other changes. Angelica Thorpe in *The Mermaids Singing* is at one point referred to as "she, he, it" (MS 380, my emphasis) to stress a monstrous quality she possesses. Furthermore, the theme of metamorphosis is prominent, as in any vampire or werewolf movie. In *The Silence of the Lambs* metamorphosis is the key theme above all others, highlighted by the motif of the moth. In addition, but also as a parenthesis, both vampires and werewolves are monsters often linked to the topic of sexuality.

In quite a striking manner, the narratives place substantial emphasis on the killers' personal psychological history and development into killers. Two of the murderers, Jame Gumb and Angelica Thorpe, are found by medical expertise to be unbalanced and consequently denied a sex change operation. *The Mermaids Singing*'s Angelica Thorpe "has been examined by psychiatrists and found to be unstable" (MS 368), or, as one male police officer states, "was definitely a few butties short of a

picnic” (MS 368). He has no medical background or expertise necessary to make comments on somebody’s psychological state of mind, but as a male authority figure he can make this comment, since his position is still one of power. Thorpe is indeed a male in gender distress, to use Clover’s term again, “because of her lack of insight into her own sexuality” (MS 384), as psychologists stated.

In his turn, Jame Gumb in *The Silence of the Lambs* is described by medical authorities as someone who did very well on “the Wechler Intelligence Scale—bright normal—but the psychological testing and the interviews were another story” (SL 358). He is ‘revealed’ in the psychological tests, tests that the second serial killer in the same novel, Hannibal Lecter, is described as too intelligent to let himself be labeled by. The last of the three murderers, Alf Boris Moen is called a mad, evil failure (NS 345) and he claims himself that he is losing his mind (NS 347). Unni Lindell writes:

He liked having control over others. He knew he had a limited behavioral pattern, which he kept repeating over and over again. He had read in an article that it was called grave pathological narcissism. He was not so stupid that he did not realize that he was sick, he had read about narcissistic anger. (NS 342)

There are no medical experts that comment on his psychological health; Alf Boris Moen himself is depicted as showing great insight into his own psyche.

The narratives thus blur the line between gender distress and insanity, making it hard to separate the two states, as well as to determine what leads to what, if indeed one is a result of the other. What is clear, however, is that the blurring is also a strategy to avoid explicitly expressing homophobia. Two of the characters are even portrayed as being homophobic themselves. Angelica Thorpe is said to be someone who “despises those who express their homosexuality openly” (MS 188) and explains in her own ‘queer’ narrative within the frame hetero-narrative:

I was a woman trapped in a man’s body. That explained why I’d never had much sexual interest in girls. And although I found men attractive, I knew I wasn’t a poof. They disgust me, with their pretence at normal relationships when everybody knows that it’s only men and women that can fit together properly. (MS 354, original italics)

She not only despises openly gay people, she finds them repulsive. In addition, Jame Gumb was arrested for assaulting homosexual men (*SL* 358). Through presenting the killers as homophobic, other homophobic tendencies in these stories can flourish more easily. For example, Tony Hill, a clinical psychologist and a profiler and thus the major authority in *The Mermaids Singing*, states—“mildly”, too—that “[n]ot all gay men dislike women,’ [...] ‘But a lot do [...]’” (*MS* 151). Tony Hill’s authoritative position and the allowance for Angelica Thorpe’s version of events contribute to the view that the novel is in fact not anti-gay or homophobic, and we should only regard the characterization of Angelica Thorpe as a characterization of an individual person who had a terrible and tragic childhood.

As mentioned above, Angelica Thorpe is given a voice in *The Mermaids Singing*, and her words might serve as a redeeming factor when we are confronted with her violent crimes. We ‘get to know her’ in a manner of speaking, and learn first-hand of her tragic childhood. However, Thorpe may speak—she is not silent—but she is given meaning in the frame narrative, the heteronormative narrative, more than in her own. This is due to the fact that it is in the frame narrative that the medical experts, Tony Hill and other authorities are situated. They represent the norm, and have the power to define her as abnormal. As a result, in the normative story, Thorpe is abnormal and a threat to the order of society. We find the detailed descriptions of her sadistic streak and how she tortures her victims in her own narrative, however. “*I stroked his soft hair and said, ‘Welcome to the pleasure dome’*” (*MS* 92, original italics). Every bloody detail is graphically described and as she dehumanizes her victims she is herself simultaneously also dehumanized and the metamorphosis obviously does not lead to femaleness but monstrosity. Torture sexually arouses her and adds to an aura of disgust around her person.

The way the non-heterosexual killers are represented is evidence of what Eve Sedgwick calls “ignorance of a knowledge:”

Insofar as ignorance is ignorance of a knowledge—a knowledge that may itself, it goes without saying, be seen as either true or false under some other regime of truth—these ignorances, far from being pieces of the originary dark, are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth. (8)

The particular ignorance of knowledge that circulates in the novels deals with aspects of sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular. The link—which is blurred but still discernible—between ‘non-heterosexuality’ and mental un-health adds further to this particular knowledge production. The murderers in the narratives are repeatedly pictured as gender confused and psychologically unstable, two ‘states’ that are intertwined and ultimately hard to separate from each other. Thorpe “is not comfortable with his own sexuality” (*MS* 188) and Jame Gumb is “not a real transsexual” (*SL* 187) yet “thinks he is” (*SL* 189). *Psycho*’s Norman Bates was created in and for a different medium, but his cross dressing and transgression—moving from male to female, being a ‘psycho’—have obviously become stereotypical in the genre of crime and horror, literary or otherwise.³ These stereotypes indeed ‘circulate as part of particular regimes of truth.’

Construing the norm: The silent heterosexual frame narrative

Conventionally in the genre of crime fiction, law represents order and crime disorder or anarchy. When focusing on gender in these novels it is biology that represents order and the disturbance of biology that represents disorder. The major theme in the three narratives is the fatal consequences of non-heterosexuality, or to use Richard Tithecott’s words, “severe anxieties about gender” (57). The link between gender anxieties and violence almost overshadows the mystery. The novels confirm the stereotypical and fundamentally homophobic suggestion that anxieties about gender lead to murder. The novel *Night Sister* is the only one which never specifically mentions the words homosexual, transsexual or transvestite in connection with the killer. It also differs from the Anglo-American ones in not dealing with serial killing but with ‘ordinary’ killing. A serial killer is still quite an unusual character in Scandinavian crime fiction. Homosexuality is mentioned once and then it is regarding a female police officer. The protagonist stops himself just

³ As a parenthesis, Bates’s issues with his mother have also been inherited: all three killers in these novels have unresolved problems with their mothers. But that is a topic for another article.

before pronouncing the ‘L-word’ and also saying something judgmental about it (NS 99). The characterization of the protagonist opens up for the interpretation that homophobia is one of the elements that produce masculinity itself, as has been established many times by, for example, Michael Kimmel.⁴ The protagonist and, following the conventions of the genre, the one who will eventually capture and defeat the murderer in the nick of time, police inspector Cato Isaksen, is described as a very masculine man. He has great sexual needs and evaluates the physical appearances of the women he meets and fantasizes about them on a regular basis (NS for example, 22, 46, 51, 86, 89, 90, 127, 164, 167). His affairs have caused him trouble over the years, mainly because he is also a married man. He ponders his former affair with a co-worker:

It had been easy to have Ellen as a mistress, easy and hard at the same time. They understood each other. There was never any fuss afterwards. Ellen had once told him that she was the one who was using him, and not the other way around. He thought that was a beautiful thing for a woman to say. (NS 13)

Isaksen is described as someone who is aware of gender constructions, the traditional male and female roles in a romantic relationship and also that this particular relationship was modern from that perspective: he and his mistress had switched roles. His male partners at work tease him for being such a ladies’ man, something that undoubtedly suggests envy. A comparison can be made between the very masculine Cato Isaksen and the ‘less’ masculine Tony Hill in Val McDermid’s *The Mermaids Singing*. One common denominator is the homophobic tendency that surfaces at times, as is seen in the above mentioned comment made by Hill concerning gay men and their dislike of women.

McDermid’s narrative thus also establishes heterosexuality as the norm, even though the author adds some unconventionality to it: she lets Dr Tony Hill be a sexually insecure character who regularly engages in

⁴ See Kimmel’s article “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity” in Peter F. Murphy (ed), *Feminism and Masculinities*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

telephone sex.⁵ Nevertheless, as soon as he meets the female (heterosexual) protagonist D.I. Carol Jordan they are attracted to each other. Carol Jordan is “instantly aware of the smell of him” (*MS* 84), and Tony Hill “found himself staring at her face” (*MS* 85). Their flirtatious behavior (*MS* for example 31, 42, 55, 77, 80, 84, 85, 111) is emphasized to the extent that it alters the mystery into a twofold one: will the killer be caught and will Carol and Tony start a romance? “‘Will you marry me?’ [Carol] asked, mock romantic. Tony laughed again, to cover the lurch of apprehension that shifted his stomach, a familiar response to even the most idle of flirtations” (*MS* 80). Will Tony overcome his sexual insecurity and become a more masculine man?

Furthermore, when in the narrative the police believe they are chasing a homosexual murderer the male police officers go undercover at a gay S&M club and are described as feeling very awkward. “Merrick felt like Snow White at an orgy. He didn’t have a clue how he was supposed to behave” (*MS* 125), and “[m]ostly, [his colleagues at the club] looked as uncomfortable as he felt” (*MS* 125). They are clearly depicted as men who cannot put on the proper mask, because they lack the knowledge—they are as innocent as Snow White—or talent, and do not want to put on a mask either, pretending to be homosexual. Disgust is also described when a gay man approaches police officer Merrick and Merrick tries hard “not to let his revulsion show in voice or expression” (*MS* 128).

The Silence of the Lambs can on the one hand be understood as a feminist text. It is a story about the young and talented FBI trainee Clarice Starling who struggles with and stands up to the dinosaur FBI and male domination, and eventually is the one who captures “Buffalo Bill.” Yet, on the other hand, the stage is also a more traditional, quite familiar and Freudian one: Starling’s dead father was a town marshal so Clarice wants to follow in his footsteps. She has two male, older mentors and father figures in her life: FBI agent Jack Crawford and serial killer

⁵ Telephone sex makes him feel like a real man: “For now, it seemed he’d have to settle for the mysterious stranger who managed to make him feel like a man for long enough to drive the demons underground. [...] She was everything anyone could desire in a fantasy lover, from gentle to raunchy.” (53)

Hannibal Lecter. Both are men who have power and are in control. Lecter is almost ultra masculine: he is behind bars throughout most of the narrative but still has power (over both women and men) and is in a clear authoritative position. Despite the fact that Lecter the only one who is openly labeled a “monster” in the narrative and thus of course induces fear in people, he induces as much respect. Jame Gumb, in comparison, inspires only fear mixed with repulsion. The never outspokenly mentioned heterosexuality that helps define Jame Gumb as a non-heterosexual is also of the often brutal and sexist kind. Starling is a sexual target for both Dr Chilton and an inmate who ejaculates on her when she walks by his cell on her way to see Hannibal Lecter.

While the other two novels use the oppositional relationship between the protagonist and the antagonist, Thomas Harris invites the reader to make comparisons between the two killers of the novel. Harris contrasts a secure, sophisticated (yet, cannibalistic) and super intelligent Hannibal Lecter with the psychologically unsound killer who, to use Lecter’s phrasing, “wants a vest with tits on it” (*SL* 173), using women’s skins. His crude way of expressing himself here is, in addition, a narrative method to show one of the many great differences between the two killers of this particular novel. Lecter’s choice of words corresponds to a deliberate descent down the social ladder; he specifically uses the other killer’s words, and not his own, always very cultivated way of expressing himself. In short: he is depicted as more intelligent. In a reception study of the movie, Janet Staiger mentions several critics who also underpin the characterizations of Lecter and Gumb as being binary opposites. Lecter is a vicious genius, straight and upper-class, while Gumb is stupid, working-class, grotesque, and gay (284). Staiger continues, “[a]nother reviewer writes that the film has ‘two villains who represent quite different incarnations of evil. Buffalo Bill a grotesque enigma, has absolutely no redeeming virtues. But Lecter is strangely sympathetic, a symbol of muzzled rage’” (284). In comparison to Gumb, and even Dr. Chilton (on the right side of the law), the portrait of Dr. Lecter is basically more positive. It is not so unexpected then that Clarice Starling prefers Lecter to Gumb, since Gumb is constructed in a way that makes it impossible to understand him. Moreover, by giving Gumb the very

masculine nickname Buffalo Bill⁶ the ‘grotesque enigma’—to reuse Staiger’s choice of words—is stressed even more, since he turns out to be a non-heterosexual unmasculine perpetrator. Gixti touches on the subject of crossing the line between fiction and non-fiction and argues:

The prototypes are not Harris’s invention, but appear to derive from a popular tendency to stereotype murderers as either ‘making sense’ because they are ‘obviously’ psychotic and sexually messed up, or else, when the label doesn’t appear to fit, as somehow being associated with a realm of supernatural evil. (91)

Finally, Lecter and Clarice Starling form together a traditional heterosexual couple, albeit with a morbid twist. This could not have been accomplished if Starling had teamed up with the non-heterosexual Jame Gumb.

Towards the end of the novel we are told that: “At least two scholarly journals explained that [Gumb’s] unhappy childhood was the reason he killed women in his basement for their skins. The words *crazy* and *evil* do not appear in either article” (SL 411, original emphasis), suggesting that these words should have appeared in any attempt to recapture the events, or ensuring the reader that *The Silence of the Lambs*, never mentioning evil or crazy either, is not a prejudiced narrative when it comes to descriptions of unconventional sexuality.

The True Crime? The Mixing of Femininity and Masculinity.

David Schmid, in *Natural Born Celebrities*, a book on the state of fame of serial killers in the US, underscores the fact that the term monstrosity is never explained. It is in fact so wide and simultaneously vague that it can encompass a large variety of meanings. Its opposite, normality, is used in the same way. He too makes the connection between these terms and the issue of sexuality and asserts that we can “map the terms ‘normality’ and ‘monstrosity’ onto ‘heterosexuality’ and ‘homosexuality,’ thus demonizing homosexuality by arguing that it is

⁶ Angelica Thorpe is also given a masculine nickname in *The Mermaids Singing*. She is called Handy Andy.

intimately connected (indeed, almost identical) with violence” (209). This intimate connection is seen for example when Angelica Thorpe reaches climax during torture:

If he'd worked like Adam had [another victim], the pleasure would have lasted longer. As it was, his screams of agony mingled with my grunts of pleasure. I came like a Guy Fawkes rocket, fire flashing through me and erupting in an orgasm that had me buckling at the knees. (MS 181-182, original italics)

The mingling of the two voices here, one marked with pain and one with pleasure, shows that for Angelica Thorpe to reach a sexual climax, violence is a prerequisite, and violence is born out of severe aggression, born and bred in non-heterosexuality.

The killers are limitless, monstrous, they aggressively transcend the boundaries of maleness to invite and eventually reach femininity, but since these are moral tales, they must fail too. Harris writes: “A lot of electrolysis had removed Gumb’s beard and shaped his hairline into a widow’s peak, but he did not look like a woman. He looked like a man inclined to fight with his nails as well as his fists and feet” (SL 155). The mixing of femininity and masculinity is ridiculed rather than depicted as a sign of monstrosity but the result remains the same: male femininity signals aggression as well as craziness, since he physically looked like somebody ‘inclined to fight.’

All three of the killers’ physical appearance is accentuated to in turn accentuate their unnatural masks and the theme of metamorphosis. They are also themselves preoccupied with their bodies and looks. The most obvious example is of course Jame Gumb whose goal is to sew himself a new body. His life is lonely, resembling many other stories about killers. His only friend is his poodle Precious and it is to the dog Gumb tells his dreams and life goal: “‘Mommy’s gonna be so *beautiful!*’” (SL 330, original emphasis). His last words, which he utters to Starling before he dies, are appropriate and a sign of his ultimate failure: “‘How ... does ... it feel...to be... so beautiful?’” (SL 400), suggesting that for him never finding the answer to that question is worse than losing his life.

The murderers’ own view of femininity, which is also of course a long-established one, is linked to beauty. Angelica Thorpe works hard to reach that beauty, but fails because her face is so extremely unattractive, the reader is told by those who see him, as we are told above that Gumb ‘did not look like a woman’ but more like a grotesque parody of a

woman. Thorpe was “so distinctively ugly” (*MS* 337), that “[n]ot even her mother could have called her attractive” (*MS* 338), and “[f]rom the neck down, she could have been a model for a soft-porn magazine” (*MS* 341). It seems as if Thorpe comes close to beauty and almost succeeds in her metamorphosis, but her ugliness guarantees failure, because “[e]ven though she was skillfully, if heavily, made up, there wasn’t a lot she could do with the basic building materials” (*MS* 338). This is Tony Hill’s description of Thorpe when he meets her. His own masculinity, which has been described as a bit unconventional due to his sexual insecurity, becomes more secured and stressed here, considering the choice of the very masculine words ‘basic building materials,’ and the reference to pornography.

Jame Gumb kills to become beautiful and his beautifying procedures are described in detail, and here his insanity is given new dimensions in his blatant disgust with his own biological male sex: “Gumb used the dishmop to tuck his penis and testicles back between his legs. He whipped the shower curtain aside and stood before the mirror, hitting a hipshot pose despite the grinding it caused in his private parts” (*SL* 155). He “applied Friction des Bains, rubbing it over his chest and buttock with his hands and using a dishmop on the parts he did not like to touch” (*SL* 155). If he cannot even touch himself it becomes logical that he would have assaulted homosexual men: to him they represent something repulsive. Harris avoids the word penis in the above description of Gumb, he instead uses euphemisms as ‘private parts’ or only ‘parts,’ thus stressing the distancing on Gumb’s part from his maleness. He also lets Gumb use a typically feminine attribute in his cleansing procedure, the dishmop. There is no need for other characters’ point of view here, because the disgust is planted in Gumb’s own view of himself.

Concerning the descriptions of Alf Boris Moen, they are even more obviously coloured with disgust. Lindell uses an almost dated linguistic style, and rather simplistic ways to depict him. He smiles “viciously” (*NS* 360) and he once leans his head back and laughs, like a classical villain in an old silent movie. What makes him differ from the classical villain in this scene is that it is also raining, and his makeup is running down his cheeks (*NS* 335), making him look even more repulsive.

Moen’s cross dressing produces feelings of disgust in those who see him. His sister “feels sick from seeing him in his disguise” (*NS* 287). When his mother catches him in her clothes, he starts to paint black

stripes in his face, “where his tears usually fall”—simultaneously stressing femininity and insanity—and he can see repulsion in his mother’s eyes (NS 342). Despite his many years of secretly cross dressing, he comes across in the narrative as a person who does not quite master the feminine skill of applying makeup. Contrary to what he claims too, he dresses badly. He wears heavy makeup, with blackened eye brows, and bright orange lipstick. In short: he “looks like hell” (NS 321). His blouse does not fit due to his fat stomach, and his fake breasts are not on straight (NS 323). His pink nail polish has been applied too hastily.

In a similar fashion to Jame Gumb, Alf Boris Moen poses a great deal in front of the mirror, and his sister remembers that since childhood he has been both dangerous and an exhibitionist (NS 333). He accuses his sister of not knowing what femininity entails: “*You might not understand what it is to be a woman, he said sarcastically. You always dress shabbily, you don’t wear makeup*” (NS 345 original italics). This accusation, and the comment he made about his mother’s way of dressing, only mirrors the physical appearance of Moen himself, and becomes a sarcastic comment on his complete lack of self knowledge. Teresa De Lauretis says that femininity and masculinity are placed in “an antagonistic and asymmetrical position” (269), and then the murderers’ ultimate transformational failure becomes even more logical. As John Benyon puts it: “The still widely accepted view among the general public is that men and women fundamentally differ and that a distinct set of fixed traits characterize archetypal masculinity and femininity” (56). The fundamental differences, the asymmetry and antagonism all signal an essentialist view of gender. The killers illustrate exactly this: to transgress the borders of the genders is not permissible. The projects of transformation become death traps: first other people’s death traps, and finally their own.

Lastly, all three killers are described as speaking with strange voices. Angelica Thorpe uses an “odd, strained voice” (MS 124), Jame Gumb resembles the most the traditional monster: he has an “[u]nearthly voice” (SL 176), and when Alf Boris Moen in *Sister of the Night* dresses himself in women’s clothes he uses a high pitched tone, and—when in drag—all his lines are in italics, producing even more emphasis on the ‘unnatural’ quality of his voice. By defining and appreciating what is unnatural, the reader can also define and appreciate what is natural, without ever having

to discuss it openly. The words ‘odd’ and ‘unearthly’ are easily recognized as words with negative connotations.

When adding gender and sexuality to the discussion of these three novels, they can be viewed as part of a commentary on modern masculinity. Or to narrow it down even further: the project of trying to stabilize modern masculinity. It may seem like a contradiction, since masculinity and its associate heterosexuality remain unspoken (silent). From a historical point of view, the term homosexuality appeared in 1869, 11 years prior to the term heterosexual, thus “heterosexuality only comes into being as a consequence of the notion of homosexuality” (Barry 144). Accordingly, by providing illustrations of men who are ‘not heterosexual,’ we also know what heterosexuality is, and what it should be like. It is silent, yes, but it is a silence that reverberates with values and meaning. These authors write silence in perhaps an unorthodox way; it is not the powerful subject’s silencing of the oppressed minority but the silence of the norm. It is a comforting silence, heterosexuality simply *is*.

In extension, the novels are part of a commentary on our contemporary western culture, where it seems that masculinity and femininity should not be mixed. This message makes them ultimately also moral stories. As we have seen in the discussion above, what is produced in the hazardous mixture resembles in many ways more a monster than a human being; even the person’s speech is affected. In the words of Edward J. Ingebretsen, “[m]onster-talk [...] is narrative and meta-narrative, all at once; it tells a story, explains that story and draws moral conclusions, simultaneously” (43). As stated above, the novels here demonstrate how the men, due to their lack of heterosexuality, become monsters/killers, and the moral conclusions, which simultaneously are transferred into moral consequences, are blatant and unforgiving: they are in the end killed themselves. The dangerous quality of the mixture is thus two-folded: the killers kill others and the killers are (must be) killed.

Thus, the crime novels are stories not openly talking about masculinity, essential manhood or heterosexuality, but by talking about their binary opposites (femininity/lack of masculinity and non-heterosexuality), masculinity and heterosexuality are represented as sane, normal, and quite stable. The reader is encouraged to hate these men—they are, after all, killers—but should also feel disgust because they are

not real men. They represent people who have not understood that biology cannot be disturbed. The narratives are not unique in their stand, and Tithcott maintains that “[...] plots which construct murder or serial murder as an event arising from homosexuality are not only of the subplot variety” (74). Alf Boris Moen in *Night Sister* speaks of Virginia Woolf and says that women have functioned as looking glasses for men; they have reflected the men at twice their natural size (NS 345). Ironically, the illustration of Alf Boris Moen, works the same way. His crossing of gender boundaries reflect nicely upon, for example, the protagonist whose own masculinity in light of Alf Boris Moen’s unmanly behavior and appearance shines even brighter. These two characters are constructed and situated in an antagonistic and asymmetrical position where one represents law, order and masculinity and the other one death, disorder and non-heterosexuality.

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