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### Cultural analysis of Jonathan Demme's "The Silence of the Lambs"

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*The University of Montana*

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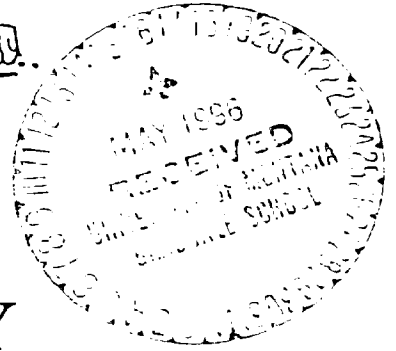
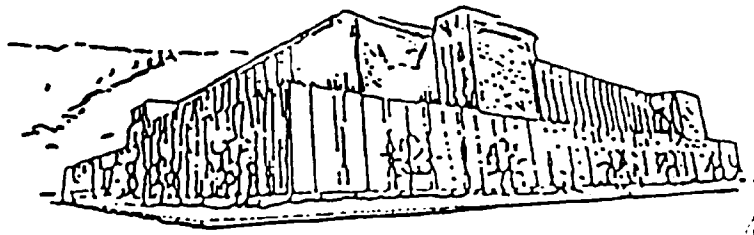
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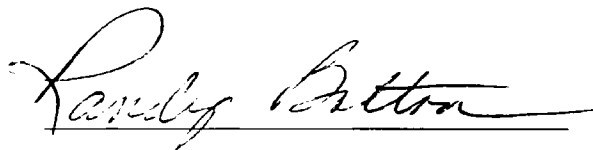
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A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF  
JONATHAN DEMME'S  
THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS

by  
Arthur S. Almquist  
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
The University of Montana  
1996

Approved by:



Chairperson



Dean, Graduate School

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To Amy

with thanks to

Randy Bolton  
Dora Lanier  
Michael Murphy  
James Kriley

## introduction

Mary told me that she tends to have a hard time with films that contain violence against women; I nodded, looked to Scott for support, and thought fast.

The three of us were teaching at a private boarding school in Connecticut during the spring of 1991, and had decided that a Friday evening at the movies would offer an escape from our daily adolescent-controlled chores. It was the nationwide opening night of Jonathan Demme's The Silence of the Lambs, and, as a long-time admirer of Demme's work, I was desperate to see it. While Scott was basically indifferent, Mary said that she was hesitant about viewing Silence because she did not know what to expect from the picture; if it were extremely graphic and/or disturbing, she knew that she would have a difficult time sitting through it.

Knowing precious little about the film's narrative but aware that it *did* deal with a serial murderer of women, I pointed out and stressed the fact that the film was receiving excellent reviews and boasted two superb actors (Jodie Foster and Anthony Hopkins) in the leads. I told her that Jonathan Demme, of Stop Making Sense, Married to the Mob, and Melvin and Howard -- all of them

films based in strong characters and personalities, each possessing a bittersweet take on our culture -- had directed the film. I explained that while Demme's career in film did begin under the wing of Roger Corman (notorious in Hollywood for producing and directing films cheaply and quickly, with wildly variant results), Demme's films have consistently risen above the more profit-minded projects which seem to regularly emerge at our theatres. Always intelligent and character-driven, his work emphasizes *story* over more "obvious" audience-friendly techniques. Silence could not then, I promised, be without a high level of integrity. Mary finally agreed to give the picture a chance, and I said a silent prayer that I was not about to lead her into a nightmare at the Torrington Cineplex.

Three-quarters of the way into the story. the serial killer nicknamed "Buffalo Bill" is taunting a young woman he has imprisoned in his basement well; she screams in terror, reacting to human blood and fingernails she has discovered embedded in the surrounding walls. He begins to scream himself, mocking her cries, pulling at his T-shirt to mimic breasts. Mary calmly got up, shuffled through the crowded aisle, and walked to the popcorn stand to catch her breath. "What movie are you seeing?" asked the young African-American hostess.

"The Silence of the Lambs," Mary replied.

The young woman nodded. "What scene they on?"



"She's screaming in the well," Mary said, "and he's imitating her."

The girl shook her head grimly. "Oh, honey," she said, "it just gets *worse*."

\* \* \*

It *does* get worse. The Silence of the Lambs is arguably one of the most effective and terrifying American films ever made, gradually tightening its grip on its audience as it builds to its heroine's final descent into a living hell. By the film's conclusion, we may forget that we have seen very little actual violence on-screen; rather, the *ideas* and *results* of violence are emphasized, forcing the film's harrowing and somewhat repellent subject matter deep into our souls. It is not a film to be easily dismissed or forgotten.

"Worse" in terms of its unnerving and chilling material, yes. Yet, this is also one of the most literate and intelligent films of the decade -- and, surprisingly, one of the most auspicious. Peter Travers wrote in Rolling Stone that "for all the unbridled savagery on display, what is shrewd, significant, and finally hopeful about Silence of the Lambs is the way it proves a movie can be mercilessly scary and mercifully humane at the same time."<sup>1</sup> A careful analysis finds that the film challenges our assumptions about human beings and their

labels, while considering and understanding our own human search for *meaning*. As the narrative unfolds, The Silence of the Lambs goes far beyond any ambitions of a simple "scare film." It is prolific with cultural perception and cognizance, tendering, for those willing to take the journey, profound insights into our very *culture*: insights which literally can help us to make sense and meaning out of our own lives within it.

In the six years since its release, I have often defended Silence as more than a horror film, and, in 1993, wrote an in-depth commentary for a Performance Theory course on the ways in which the film transcends its "genre." I discussed the film as literature, focusing on the film's strong characterizations and subtle handling of violence; Demme's Hitchcockian understanding of suspense; and, finally, the way that Ms. Foster's Clarice Starling develops in the course of the picture. I had, it happens, only scratched the surface.

The film does have many enemies. Upon its release, it ignited a fire of protest from many who challenged the script's treatment of women, and, especially, Demme's depiction of homosexuals. In 1991, Lisa Kennedy of The Village Voice invited a number of writers, many of them film critics both gay and straight, to comment on the furor surrounding Silence. Among their reactions:

The Silence of the Lambs is a dumb, stupid, manipulative, gripping, well-made, and ultimately unbelievable movie. It is not scary, it is just

unpleasant.

Larry Kramer

The director chose to make the symptoms [of Buffalo Bill's homosexuality] obvious through what the general audience accepts as typical gay male affect: nipple rings, swishing scarves, crude makeup, etc...it's clear that gay men are not a community Demme considers worth handling with care.

Jewelle Gomez

Jame Gumb [is] more a projection of homophobia than a credible character.

Martha Gever

...when we actually see Gumb in his natural habitat, he's endowed with all the fag clichés homophobes have doted on for decades: bleached locks, whiny voice, frilly glad rags, and, choicest of all, the love of a teensy white poodle named Precious.<sup>2</sup>

Stephen Harvey

The above critics have allowed the depiction of a character -- a character stressed in the script as *not* a homosexual, but rather in search of some sort of identity -- to blind them to the sagaciousness of Demme's film. I believe that the film *does* transcend its genre. But it also is extraordinarily erudite. My *cultural* analysis of the film, responding to the concepts of cultural interpretation developed by Victor Turner, Jerome Bruner, Clifford Geertz, Arnold van Gennep, and Mircea Eliade, finds that The Silence of the Lambs is a magnificent work, bridging rites of passage, transformation, and the ascension of the spirit into a modern work of art. This cultural analysis will eventually help make meaning of the

film, as well as elucidate its insights into our own culture.

We in America live and function within a culture of contradiction and paradox: our children, for example, can become anything they want to become, so long as the judging majority does not view their choice as deviant or in bad taste; we pay lip service to denouncing censorship and maintaining that America *is* the "Land of the Free" ... *provided that*, as evidenced by the recent Telecommunications Act, we do not behave "offensively" or say things which are "annoying" on the Internet; and many state leaders still demonstrate their abhorrence of murder and murderers by choosing simply to murder the accused. Mind you, I am not suggesting in these observations that there could ever exist a culture devoid of entanglements and impasses; the very presence of human beings ensures cultural predicaments. It seems, however, that many paradoxical dilemmas within our culture are uniquely American. The Silence of the Lambs, then, with all of its serial murderers, skinnings, beheadings, transsexualism, and torture both mental and physical, indicts our culture as being cornered by societal incongruity and dilemmas of its own making.

And finally, a cultural analysis of The Silence of the Lambs -- like all consequential works of art -- can help us to find and create greater meaning within our own lives. Kenneth Burke indicated in 1941 that works of art,

like proverbs, do actually offer *strategies* for dealing with the events of our lives:

[They should be seen] as strategies for selecting enemies and allies, for socializing losses, for warding off [the] evil eye, for purification, propitiation, and desanctification, consolation and vengeance, admonition and exhortation, implicit commands or instructions of one sort or another.<sup>3</sup>

As a work of art, The Silence of the Lambs is more than a relentlessly frightening film. It is truly, in Burke's words, "equipment for *living*" -- and must be reckoned with as such.

Chapter One:  
On Culture and Rites of Passage

"...to understand man you must understand how his experiences and his acts are shaped by his intentional states...the form of these intentional states is realized only through participation in the symbolic systems of the culture."

Jerome Bruner, Acts of Meaning

Everything about The Silence of the Lambs -- its heart, characters, themes, and dialogue -- could take place in no other country than America, and at no other time than this "family values"-conscious decade. Seeing ourselves as "The Land of the Free," along with the heightened perceptions of the rest of the world, has set us up to be in highly ironic place: while we believe that America is organized around a clear set of ideologies and symbols -- with freedom, the family, and opportunity at its center -- the *realities* faced by many Americans are not so consistent. Each detail in The Silence of the Lambs, from the pathology of Buffalo Bill to the intricacies of standard FBI procedure, derives from, reacts to, or is fed by the American *culture* of which it is a part. The film also deals explicitly with the notion of cultural and spiritual transition, particularly with what van Gennep refers to as *Rites of Passage*.

But what do we really mean when we discuss culture? The very word seems today to be taking on an elitist air: the word can conjure images for many of tuxedos and martinis, surrounded by discussion of the latest *cultural* event. Obviously, this is not the way of our thinking. To explore this notion of culture, I shall begin by

pointing to anthropologist Clifford Geertz's analogy of man as a being constantly suspended in self-spun "webs" of *significance*. "I take culture," he writes, "to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."<sup>4</sup> If, indeed, we "spin" these webs ourselves, then one might initially perceive Geertz's version of culture as being highly individualized; that is, a reaction to whatever outside forces come up against our own webs. Geertz, in fact, is diametrically opposed to this notion:

Culture is most effectively treated...purely as a symbolic system (the catch phrase is, "in its own terms"), by isolating its elements, specifying the internal relationships among those elements, and then characterizing the *whole system* in some general way -- according to the core symbols around which it is organized, the underlying structures of which it is a surface expression, or the ideological principles upon which it is based (*italics mine*).<sup>5</sup>

Culture is finally public, Geertz says, because *meaning* is public.

Like Geertz, Jerome Bruner also does not accept the conception of culture as monastic. In Acts of Meaning, the psychologist and professor coins the term "folk psychology," arguing that culture literally shapes our lives and minds, giving *meaning* to action "by underlying its intentional states in an interpretive system."<sup>6</sup> Folk Psychology, for Bruner, is a system by which human beings organize their experience with the social world. People hold beliefs and desires: we believe in the organization



of the world, we desire certain things within that world -- and, moreover, we believe that all of our beliefs should somehow *coalesce* and that others should not want things which seem to be irreconcilable. The very nature of Folk Psychology for Bruner is canonical: it "summarizes not simply how things are but (often implicitly) how they should be."<sup>7</sup> Naturally, the events of our lives rarely go gently down that path; as a means of coping, then, Bruner states that Folk Psychology has at its heart the notion of *narrative*.

Folk Psychology, invested in canonicity, empowers the "normal" with authority and legitimacy. But, Bruner states, the capability of a culture to survive lies not in simple harmony; instead, it "inheres in its capacity for resolving conflicts, for explicating differences and renegotiating communal meanings."<sup>8</sup> Here we begin to see how a "horror" film as "disturbing" as The Silence of the Lambs can be as rich in meaning and cultural relevance (if not more so) as a more obvious audience-pleaser like Terms of Endearment. Without chaos, Bruner says, there is no order; so, when the norms are shattered or left behind, we must possess a method of interpreting these departures and making meaning of them within our culture, or interpreting and making *new* meaning of them...to make proverbial sense out of chaos. It is narrative -- the *story* -- and the narrative structure which, he asserts, helps us to achieve this level of meaning.

We learn in early courses on creative writing that at the heart of every story is *conflict*: Man versus Man, Man versus Self, Man versus Society, and so forth. Conflict arises when there is a sense of disharmony, or an exception to the ordinary or the expected. Narrative, then, specializes in bridging the gaps between the ordinary and the extraordinary. Bruner sets forth two important properties of the narrative in this form:

- 1.) The narrative is inherently sequential. The events within a narrative do not generally have life or meaning on their own; it is only when they are *ordered* -- three follows two follows one and so on -- that the overall sequence forms a collective meaning.
- 2.) Narrative can be "real" or "imaginary" without loss of its strength as a story. The *sequence* of its ideas -- not the ideas themselves -- determine the plot.<sup>9</sup>

When "juicy gossip" travels through our social circles, for example, details will usually change, grow more "interesting," or even disappear. But the story remains a story, and one which bears repeating again and again, regardless of the "truth" of the individual details.

Just as every story has its own narrative voice (making it "somebody's" story), human beings also have their own individual prisms through which they see and filter the events of their lives. As a prism processes light, it follows that there must be a way for people to process their "life information." Consider as a solution, then, how many times *daily* we tell stories: be they as simple as recounting a miserable shift at work or as complex as dealing with the last moments before a spouse's

permanent departure, we sequence the events with varying specificity of detail into a literal, comprehensible narrative. The *telling of the story* helps to create meaning for ourselves, and others, within our culture.

Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep, in their respective works From Ritual to Theatre and Rites of Passage, offer crucial theories for our analysis regarding culture, and focus on this notion of *rites of passage*. In order that we will be able to make meaning of the film's story and events in relation to our own lives, I should like to briefly outline these ideas now so that we are fully armed as we move into a discussion of the film.

In Rites of Passage, van Gennep states early on that his objective in the text is to assemble all of the "ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another."<sup>10</sup> The term "ceremonial" should not, however, limit our application of his work to ideas to which we in 1996 America cannot relate, such as the small-scale societies on which he began his studies. In fact, Turner states as one of his objectives in From Ritual to Theatre to "revert to van Gennep's earlier usage in regarding almost *all* types of rites as having the processual form of '*passage*.'"<sup>11</sup> But what is meant by the term "passage?"

Van Gennep divides the concept into three distinct phases: *rites of separation*, *transition rites*, and *rites of incorporation*. In *separation*, sacred time and space

are distinguished from profane or temporal space and time. The *quality of time*, Turner asserts, must be changed -- that is, "beyond or outside the time which measures secular processes and routines."<sup>12</sup> An absolutely separate and unique world is created for the candidates, while the ritual subjects are detached from their previous social statuses to be placed into that world, with no contact from anyone or anything on the "outside." During the intervening *transition*, or "limen" ("threshold" in Latin) phase, the subjects find themselves moving through a time and space of limbo and ambiguity. "Whoever passes from one time to the other," van Gennep writes, "finds himself physically and magico-religiously...[wavering] between two worlds."<sup>13</sup> This phase can be looked at as a "preparation for union,"<sup>14</sup> a literal crossing of the spiritual threshold. Finally, after undergoing the mystifying betwixt and between quality of *transition*, symbolic actions and phenomena representing the return of the "initiands" to their "new, relatively stable, well-defined position in the total society"<sup>15</sup> are experienced; this is the phase known as *incorporation*. And there at the center of the entire transformative process lies a critical distinction of space, time, and action: the *sacred* as opposed to the *profane*.

Mircea Eliade, in 1957, examined the very nature of religion, passage, and myth in The Sacred and the Profane. I hesitate to use the word "examined" here, because it may

make the process sound purely academic -- when in fact it was and is anything but. In the introduction to his text, Eliade cites Rudolf Otto's 1917 Das Heilige (The Sacred) as ground-breaking in the way that it avoided studying the *ideas* of God, focusing instead on "the modalities of *the religious experience*."<sup>16</sup> Otto set himself, Eliade writes, to characterize the component parts of this experience:

He finds the *feeling of terror* before the sacred, before the awe-inspiring mystery, the majesty that emanates an overwhelming superiority of power; he finds *religious fear* before the fascinating mystery in which perfect fullness of being flowers...[these experiences] are induced by the revelation of an aspect of divine power.<sup>17</sup>

The sacred is the opposite of the profane, Eliade writes, proposing the term *hierophany* to characterize "the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane' world."<sup>18</sup>

As the entire story of The Silence of the Lambs hinges upon one character's desperate and murderous attempt to transform himself, it is important to here note the duality which must accompany hierophany. When an object or event manifests itself as sacred, it indeed does become something else, but it also remains *itself*. "A sacred stone remains a stone," Eliade writes; "apparently (or, more precisely, from the profane point of view), nothing distinguishes it from all other stones."<sup>19</sup> But if that stone did emerge as sacred for one person, its

earthly, profane reality is metamorphosed into a divine reality, while at the same time remaining in its original form. All of nature is capable of revealing itself as sacrality, then: "The cosmos in its entirety can become a hierophany."<sup>20</sup>

Eliade does not limit his exposition to any one culture, faith, or even religion; rather, he states as his goal the presentation of the precise dimensions of the religious *experience*, differentiating the religious from the profane experience of the world. The sacred and the profane are two modes of being, and to a degree are dependent on each other: for the religious man, Eliade writes, space is not homogeneous. Some parts of space for him are qualitatively separate from others, and there continually will surface breaks and interruptions in his space. These breaks, then, reveal the opposition between space which is sacred and that which is profane. Eliade calls this break primordial:

For it is the break effected in space that allows the world to be constituted, because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation. When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse.<sup>21</sup>

Experience within the profane space is static and neutral; there is no break to differentiate the qualities of its mass, and hence no point of reference. The discovery of the sacred for the religious man, then, offers a *center* and a literal way for him to open communication between

the cosmic planes and somehow begin to make connections within it all: "the experience of sacred space makes possible the 'founding of the world': where the sacred manifests itself in space, *the rest unveils itself*, the world comes into existence."<sup>22</sup>

In his exploration of space, Eliade points to the symbolic "opening above" which all forms of cosmos (house, temple, universe, body) possess. As we apply these concepts to the film, we should note the significance of this symbolism in relation to the work of van Gennep and Turner. This "opening," for Eliade, connects to the action of *passage* from one mode of being to another. From his beginnings, Man is predestined to passage on a large scale: he passes from pre-life to life to death to, for the religious man, new existence after death. With this, Eliade helps us to deduce a particular conceptualization of human existence:

when brought to birth, man is not yet completed; he must be born a second time, spiritually; he becomes complete man by passing from an imperfect, embryonic state to a perfect, adult state. In a word, it may be said that human existence attains completion through a series of "passage rites," in short, by successive initiations.<sup>23</sup>

This higher opening represents a desire to reach for the ascending direction of heaven, for transcendence. Passage is, Eliade stresses, treacherous: he cites cultural images of crossing a perilous bridge or opening a narrow gate (which, he says, occur frequently in initiatory and funerary rituals and mythologies), suggesting a precarious

journey founded on the ascension of the spirit.

With these notions of the *sacred* and *profane*, *transition*, and *transcendence* in mind, let us now turn our attention to the perilous passages of our narrative: journeys enveloped by the crossing of bridges; a rite of passage within a well; being led down an aphotic path by a menacing and decidedly anti-heroic conductor; and, ultimately, a harrowing confrontation in a modern version of the abyss.



Chapter Two:  
The Portrayal and Pursuit of Buffalo Bill

"Our Billy wasn't born a criminal; he was made one  
through years of systematic abuse."

Hannibal Lecter

"Everywhere around the world,  
They're coming to America today."

Neil Diamond

We meet him first as an enigma: "Buffalo Bill," a serial killer who has been successfully eluding police and the FBI in the kidnapping, murder, and partial skinning of five women, all under thirty, all relatively large. As the film progresses, we do learn more about him: he stalks during late hours, using night-vision glasses for sight and power; he relies on the kindness of his victims to lure them into his van by pretending to need help; his real name is Jame Gumb. By the film's conclusion, however, our information on this man still remains less than complete: we know that he was abused as a child, and thinks that he is now a transsexual; having been rejected for transsexual surgery, he has decided to create a female suit for himself using the skin and hair of real women. We are not given concrete details about his history, nor do we really know what his sexual orientation is.

This character has created a number of problems for many viewers of the film. Significant numbers of homosexuals (most of them male) decried the entire project, calling it a vicious attack on the gay community. Jame Gumb, as played by Ted Levine, was seen as a stereotype of paranoid homophobia: swishy, limp-wristed, and fey. draped in scarves and dancing effeminately before

a video camera. It is ironic that Jonathan Demme (who went on to direct Philadelphia, the first major studio-produced American film to deal with a homosexual couple and with AIDS), stated in an interview just prior to the film's release that "it was tremendously important to not have Gumb misinterpreted by the audience as homosexual. That would be a complete betrayal of the themes of the movie, and a disservice to gay people."<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, Demme's best intentions could not calm the rising storm which followed the film in its national release, leaving one to wonder what it would have taken to appease the offended viewer.

Demme's attempt to clarify Gumb's dilemma within the film begins with Ted Tally's screenplay. In one of Hannibal Lecter's (played by Anthony Hopkins) early interviews with Clarice Starling (played by Jodie Foster), he states that Gumb "hates his own identity, you see, and thinks that that makes him a transsexual...but his pathology is a thousand times more savage, and more terrifying."<sup>25</sup> This seems a satisfactory explanation, but the issue is confused by Starling's discovery of Benjamin Raspail's head, sealed in a jar, in Lecter's storage unit. Raspail, Lecter states, was "a garden

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<sup>25</sup> The Silence of the Lambs, dir. Jonathan Demme, with Jodie Foster, Anthony Hopkins, and Scott Glenn. Orion, 1990. All remaining quotations from the film are from this source.

variety manic depressive" who, as Gumb's lover, confessed fear to Lecter days before becoming Gumb's victim. As Gumb's relationship with Raspail is the only homosexual "encounter" we hear about in the film, the film seems to ask if having homosexual experiences *makes* one a homosexual. As if to answer its own question, the film then presents Gumb as being more a man who, loathing himself, searches for any kind of identity to grasp on to, resorting to the extreme as a *solution*. "At the very least," writes Julie Tharp, "[Gumb's] character exploits contemporary anxiety over gender and sexuality. His confusion and dissatisfaction with his own nature are expressed, as most dilemmas seem to be in America, in violent terms."<sup>26</sup>

Hostility about the film's supposed anti-gay undercurrent also indicates that these critics have missed a crucial point in the narrative. Lecter states that Gumb was not born a criminal; "he was made one through years of systemic abuse." (Although we do not learn in the film what sort of abuse this was, the word "abuse" alone is enough for us in 1996 America to draw substantial conclusions.) Gumb was beaten down, then, before he even had a chance. But remember what culture he lives in, and ask yourself: what do we tell our children as they grow up, and our citizens in struggle? *Be what you can be. Make something of yourself.* We pride ourselves on telling our citizens -- and the rest of the world -- that in

America, if you work hard enough, you can become anything you *want* to become. This is the land of opportunity and the land of achievable dreams. Of course, we all go through flashes of cynicism about this rhetoric, but who among us does not feel a misty sense of pride occasionally when hearing "The Star-Spangled Banner"? The huge success of Lee Greenwood's anthem "Proud to be an American" during the Gulf War makes very clear that we are a nation fiercely proud of our freedom and all that it represents.

Gumb hates his identity and wants *change*. We learn that, in an attempt to go through the proper channels, he applied for transsexual surgery at Johns/Hopkins, the University of Minnesota, and Columbus Medical Center. Lecter explains to Starling that "severe psychological trauma" in Gumb led to the subsequent rejection from each institution, which makes perfect and logical sense to *us* -- but to the already disturbed Gumb, his dream has been shattered by the very country which promised him a chance for *change*. We can then conclude that it is this denial, *not* a hatred of women and *not* homosexuality, which was the dominating factor in Gumb's murderous psychosis. In attempting to work within some of the key symbol systems of America (medicine, health care, assistance for all who need it), Gumb, in his mind, operated by the rules -- and was pushed away. Turner notes in From Ritual to Theatre that when implicit rules begin to surface within a culture which hinder the "possible combination of factors to

certain conventional patterns, designs, or configurations" (in this case, many Americans still believe that anything which strays from straight heterosexuality is literally a sickness), then

...we are seeing the intrusion of normative social structure into what is potentially and in principle a free and experimental region of culture, a region where not only new elements but also new combinatory rules may be introduced -- far more readily than in the case of language.<sup>27</sup>

Whatever reasons existed for Gumb's denial are irrelevant to him and to our discussion; the very fact that he was shunned while *trying* to work within the rules and symbol systems of America itself is what matters.

Bruner tells of a fascinating connection made in 1986 through scientific journals. He begins by quoting an article written by Hazel Markas and Paula Nurius for American Psychologist, in which they write on the notion of American self: "Possible selves represent individuals' ideas of what they *might* become, what they would *like* to become, and what they are *afraid* of becoming." The ideal of the American self, Bruner notes, highlights the degree to which we place value on not closing any proverbial doors. "Contemporaneously," he continues, "there began a trickle of clinical papers on the alarming rise of Multiple Personality Disorders as a primarily American pathology."<sup>28</sup> Demme, known and respected for his keen eye for detail, places images of America and Americana consistently throughout the film: a flag adorns a coffin in Lecter's storage space, and, near the film's

conclusion, a cake decorated with the FBI symbol and logo is cut into right at the word "Justice." Gumb's lair contains an American flag serving as a wallhanging; a World War II helmet on a windowsill, which catches the sunlight through shattered glass as Gumb is fatally shot; and, as Starling is stalked through Gumb's basement, the camera finds a small sign depicting the face of a blindfolded man above the insignia "AMERICA: OPEN YOUR EYES." "Be what you want to be" is not only deceptive; Demme reminds us that it clearly has the potential to be destructive.

In response to all that has occurred in his life, Jame Gumb has created his own symbol system: it has its own logic, its own set of meanings, and, Demme says, its own "motivation."<sup>29</sup> To recognize a figure such as Gumb, then, one must attempt to *embrace* the individual *system*. The comprehension of any symbol system, Geertz asserts, does not rest on gathering factoids in a foreign land and bringing them home for study; rather, it depends upon

the degree to which [the anthropologist] is able to clarify what *goes on* (my italics) in such places, to reduce the puzzlement -- what manner of men are these? -- to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally give rise.<sup>30</sup>

Here we see that Thomas Harris, the novelist on whose work both The Silence of the Lambs and Michael Mann's 1986 film Manhunter are based, treats his thrillers, if you will, anthropologically. In both stories, the serial killers have their own unique symbol systems; likewise, all

attempts to catch them are foiled until one character tries to look beyond the *outside* facts and deep into the "unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds."

In Silence, all but one of the FBI's agents -- males, all of them -- see Gumb as a force of pure evil who kills and mutilates women; never do they attempt to analyze *why* Gumb does what he does. Starling, through her interviews with Lecter, is the only agent who does; and she, the script reminds us, is an FBI trainee. Consider this dialogue near the end of the film, when Starling recognizes the motive behind Gumb's actions and attempts to alert Crawford by phone:

Starling.

He's making himself a woman's suit, Mr. Crawford, out of real women. And he can sew, this guy, he's very skilled. He's a tailor, or a dressmaker --

Crawford.

Starling --

Starling.

That's why they're all so big, he has to keep them alive so he can starve them awhile, so he can --

Crawford.

Starling --

Starling.

-- loosen their skin --

Crawford.

Starling, Starling, Starling! We know who he is, and where he is. We're on our way there right now.

Crawford does not seem interested: after all, he knows the killer's identity and is certain that he knows where Gumb



is. What else could matter? What is crucial to take note of here is that although Starling and the FBI have deduced Gumb's *identity* at the same time, it is Starling -- the "anthropologist" -- who pieces together the *reasons* behind his actions. But, as we soon learn, identity alone is not nearly enough. When Starling offers to drive to Illinois to meet them, Crawford asks her to stay in Ohio and research more information on one of the murdered girls and her connection to Gumb. "We want him for murder," he tells her, "not kidnapping." While this research seems a sort of busywork presented by Crawford while he gets to the *real* business at hand, it is through this dialogue with citizens of Belvedere that Starling ends up in Gumb's asylum. And although this exploration of Belvedere is obviously not nearly as extensive as the weeks, months, or years an anthropologist would spend in a village, the intention and *process* is the same. "Anthropologists don't study villages," says Geertz; "they study *in* villages."<sup>31</sup>

Demme juxtaposes the discovery of Gumb's sanctum masterfully, luring us, like Crawford, into a false sense of unearned confidence. We see the FBI agents ring the doorbell of the the supposed house. The camera then cuts to an interior shot of an elaborate bell structure jangling within Gumb's basement, and Gumb's reaction to it. The doorbell again is rung, and again we see the bell within sounding the alarm. These back-and-forth shots continue until Gumb finally opens the door, and the

camera, in a shot over Gumb's shoulder, discovers not the expected FBI agents -- but Starling. Demme then quickly cuts back to Illinois to find an agent telling Crawford that the house is empty. Most of us are taken in by this narrative surprise: having given up on the anthropological details and trusted the exterior facts, we believed, like Crawford, that knowing the killer's identity would suffice. We then understand his horror as the camera finds his eyes widening as he says one word: "Starling."

Let us look again at the interviews between Starling and Lecter, for it is here that Starling begins her anthropological pursuit. In their last conference, he reminds her that she needs to think more simply: "Of each particular thing, ask 'what is it in itself? What is its nature? What does he do, this man you seek?" He kills women, she says, to which Lecter vehemently responds: "No. That is incidental. What is the first and principle thing he does? What needs does he serve by killing?" Again, Geertz writes that the entire point of a semiotic approach to culture is "to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them."<sup>32</sup> By consistently allowing Lecter to help her *understand* Gumb's system, she is then and only then able to finally confront him, at the same moment that Jack Crawford and the all-male FBI task force are breaking into the wrong house in the wrong state.

There is no question that Jame Gumb is a horrifying figure, and my intention here is not to portray him as the victim in this story. Rather, I find the character -- and Levine's extremely rich interpretation of him -- to be much more layered than many critics of the film bothered to notice. Study his eyes as he hears Precious crying in pain; watch as a flash of doubt moves quickly across his face before he orders Catherine Martin to replace his lotion. Demme reminds us that to call Gumb simply "mad" is too easy; a cultural analysis finds that Gumb and all of his unique symbol systems need to be processed and *understood* before he can be contended with. Unlike the villains and psychopaths which stalk the majority of so-called "horror" pictures inhabiting our video stores, Demme and Levine have taken the time to create a *person* with a *history* and *grounds* for his descent. Clarice Starling, the only character in the story willing to literally spend time as an anthropologist, is finally the only one able to truly confront him and save the life of Catherine Martin...and put her own demons, at least temporarily, to rest.

**Chapter Three:**  
**And from Thence into Beauty**

"...in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection  
to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ;  
who shall change our vile body,  
that it may be like unto his glorious body."

Prayer Book, 1662

In Film Comment, Gavin Smith writes that Jonathan Demme seems in his work to be consistently interested in people who want to change, "who transform or experiment with their identities, who want to become something better."<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Married to the Mob's Angela (played by Michelle Pfeiffer) tries desperately throughout the story to create a new life outside of the mafia, and begins her journey towards self-actualization in a hair salon named "A Whole New You"; Something Wild's Lulu (Melanie Griffith) takes a superficially conventional businessman named Charlie (Jeff Daniels) on a life-changing journey of sexuality, confrontation, and danger; and, while Gray developed and performed the piece on stage long before meeting Demme, Demme's filming of Spalding Gray's Swimming to Cambodia, which focuses on one man's experience while acting a small role in The Killing Fields, becomes a literal odyssey. The Silence of the Lambs, however, is unique. Transformation and metamorphosis do not merely figure into the film; they are its axis. Jeanne Silverthorne writes in Artforum that Demme here describes "a society crying out for a transformation of its basic structures as they are ordered by gender, but harrowed by the process of change."<sup>34</sup>

Jame Gumb's desire for transformation initiates the story of the film, to be followed by the forced, terrifying, and resistant transformation of Catherine Martin; lastly, we find the evolution which provides the film's centerpiece: that of Clarice Starling.

We should look back to van Gennep and Turner as a beginning for this discussion; specifically, to the notion of *transition*, or *limen*. The passage from one social status to another, Turner writes, is often accompanied by a literal transition in space; that is, a geographical movement from one space to another, such as the opening of doors or "the literal crossing of a threshold which separates two distinct areas, one associated with the subject's pre-ritual or preliminal status, and the other with his past-ritual or post-liminal status."<sup>35</sup> The liminal period, then, is indeed the threshold:

...it is the analysis of culture into factors and their free or "ludic" recombination in any and every possible pattern, however weird, that is of the essence of liminality, liminality *par excellence*.<sup>36</sup>

*Limen*, no longer the positive past and not yet the hopeful future, may appear to be negative in connotation. Turner clarifies, however, that it contains both positive and active qualities. "Especially," he says, "where that 'threshold' is protracted and becomes a 'tunnel'...this is particularly the case in initiation rituals, with their long periods of seclusion and training of novices rich in the deployment of symbolic forms and esoteric

teachings."<sup>37</sup>

In describing Jame Gumb's murder of Benjamin Raspail, Lecter calls the act "a fledgling killer's first effort at tranformation." We have already established the reasoning behind Gumb's desire for change, but we have not yet looked at his use of symbol in this process, nor have we discussed his ritual and liminal period. Starling discovers in the course of the story that Gumb imports and raises Asian moths and butterflies, caring for them as if they were family: "Somebody grew this guy. Fed him honey. and nightshade, kept him warm...somebody loved him." He then places the cocoon of one specific line -- the *Acherontia Styx* moth, named for two rivers in hell -- into the throats of each of the women he has used. "The significance of the moth is change," Lecter tells Starling. "Caterpillar into chrysalis, or pupa, and from thence into beauty." Murder is incidental for Gumb; he does not kill for the pleasure of killing, or for the feeling of power, or for an immediate sexual charge. It is the desire for transformation which drives him, and the moth -- which, he describes, while gently stroking a particularly large one, as "so powerful, so beautiful" -- is his *symbol* of this metamorphosis.

Ritual, for Turner, is not in itself a grand dualistic struggle in which order, cosmos and form consistently triumph over chaos and the indeterminate. Rather, it is "a transformative self-immolation of order

as presently constituted...or self-dismemberment of order, in the subjective depths of liminality." Gumb, in the meticulous fashioning of his precise and elaborate "woman's suit," is literally trying to *reconstruct* his own dismembered identity, for it is only through devastation and reconstruction -- *transformation* -- that a genuine "reordering" may come about.<sup>38</sup>

In a film containing very little onscreen violence, one of the most surprisingly uncomfortable scenes for the audience to watch in the film -- particularly men -- is a sequence in which Gumb prepares himself for an unclothed ritualistic dance, to be captured by a video camera set upon a tripod. Before we look closely at this scene, however, a few additional words from Turner are vital in order that we may understand the *liminality* which Gumb believes he is creating for himself.

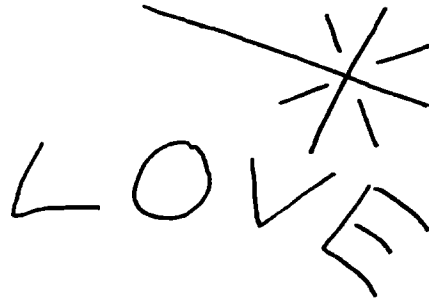
Ritual symbols [of the liminal phase], though some represent inversion of normal reality, characteristically fall into two types: those of effacement and those of ambiguity or paradox. Hence, in many societies...[the liminal initiands] are...stripped of names and clothing, smeared with the common earth rendered indistinguishable from animals. They are associated with such general oppositions as life and death, male and female... since they are at once dying from or dead to their former status and life, and being born and growing into new ones.<sup>39</sup>

We quickly realize as the scene opens that Gumb is literally applying a sort of tribal "mask." He wears the scalp and long, blonde hair of a woman; his eyes are shaded black; he uses a dark, "earthly" shade of tan to pencil his eyebrows; his left nipple is pierced with a

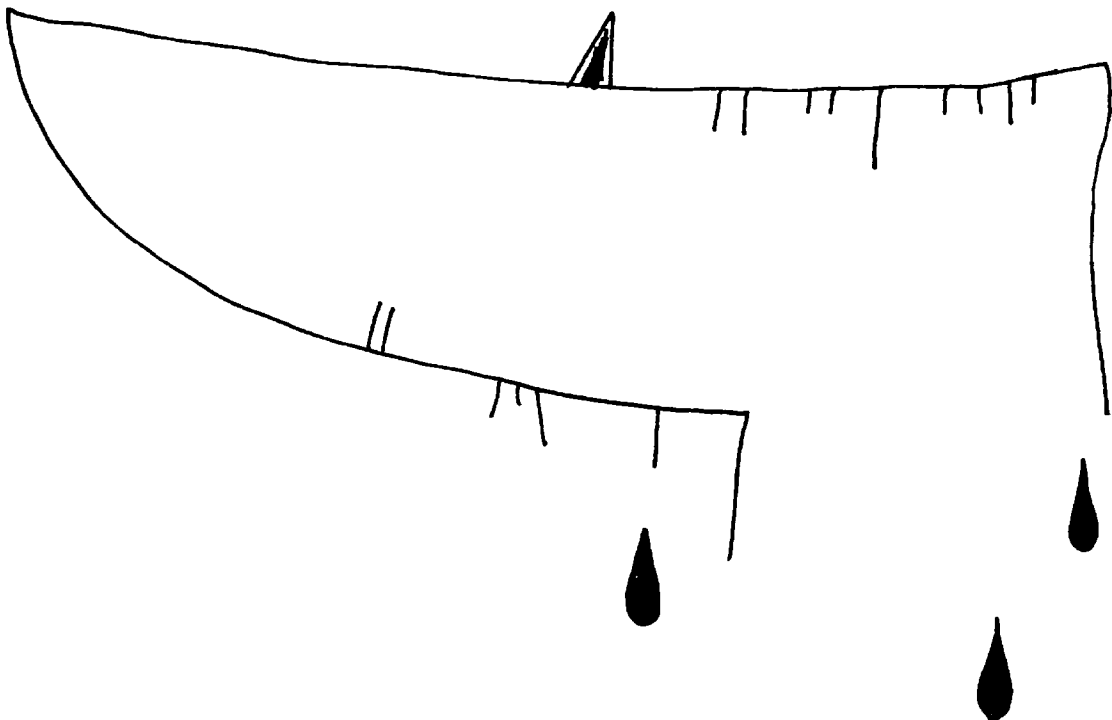


large gold ring; each finger on his left hand and three on his right carries a weighty silver ring; his chest and right hand are adorned with tattoos, the designs of which can be found below.

on the hand



on the abdomen



Masking, painting, art, and dance are significant components in the novice's liminal phase, and it is here that Turner's analysis of tribal ritual in the truly liminal becomes critical:

...the factors or elements of culture may be recombined in numerous, often grotesque ways, grotesque because they are arrayed in terms of *possible* or *fantasized* (italics mine) rather than experienced combinations -- thus a monster disguise may combine human, animal, and vegetable features in an "unnatural" way.<sup>40</sup>

As Gumb rises and begins his dance -- a slow and deliberate movement, involving mainly the upper body -- he veils his brightly-colored scarf over his shoulders, looking into the camera and singing aloud one sentence of lyrics with the music he has chosen to accompany his ritual: "I'm flying, crying, dying, over you." Unclothed and in general solitude, Gumb has set up his ritual very adroitly: "transformation occurs," Turner writes, "most radically in the ritual '*pupation*' of liminal seclusion" (italics mine).<sup>41</sup> The notion of association with general oppositions in ritual is here -- life and death, male and female -- and, as Gumb tucks his penis between his legs and steps back for the camera, raising aloft his scarf-draped arms, we see his illusion of rebirth: "so powerful, so beautiful." And with wings ready for *flight*.

Unlike tribal ritual, however, which is generally seen as beneficial for the culture of which it is a part, Gumb's animosity towards his culture turns his actions inward, focusing the ritual purely on himself and his *own*

transformation. He *believes* that he what he is doing is right for him. On staging this scene, Demme comments:

It was critical to understand that he *shouldn't* be doing this. He's *dead wrong*. This is someone who is so completely, completely horrified by who he is that his desperation to become someone completely other is manifested in his ill-guided attempts at transvestism.<sup>42</sup>

These "attempts" propel the story of Silence, as well as actuate two genuine transformations in the course of the narrative: those of Catherine Martin and Clarice Starling, two characters deliberately named for birds -- because they will each need, in the course of the story, to learn to *fly* if they are to survive.

**Chapter Four:**  
**Raised on Promises**

"I have come to the borders of sleep,  
The unfathomable deep  
Forest where all must lose  
Their way, however straight,  
Or winding, soon or late;  
They cannot choose."

Edward Thomas

"Well, she was an American girl  
Raised on promises  
She couldn't help thinking that  
there was a little more to life  
somewhere else..."

Tom Petty

She drives alone. It is night in Memphis, and with the exception of one pair of headlights behind her, there seem to be few other cars on the road. Her body moving in time with a song on her radio, she vigorously taps the beat on her steering wheel, singing and rocking along. The song is Tom Petty's "American Girl," and she is exactly that. She seems what we would like to be the quintessential young American woman: strong; stocky without being overweight; clearly enjoying this moment in the same way, we can guess, that she enjoys the rest of her life. As the story progresses, we will learn much about her, not the least of which that her mother is a United States senator. More important, however, is what will *happen* to Catherine Martin as the result of her imprisonment by Buffalo Bill.

Stepping out of the car at her apartment, she calls to her anxiously waiting cat, which gazes at her through the window. Hearing a noise, she turns to find a man with his arm in a cast trying to load a heavy recliner into a

van; she watches for a few moments, and we can see in her eyes the decision being made: should I or shouldn't I? She does, finally, and is quickly loaded into the van to be knocked unconscious. After having her shirt checked to be certain that she is the correct size, she is taken away to be imprisoned in a well in the home of Jame Gumb.

Here begins one of the most important *transitions* in the course of the film. We have seen that Gumb wants for himself nothing more than change and a crossing of thresholds; he cannot ultimately achieve them, and instead inadvertently forces these transitions into the lives of Martin and Clarice Starling. I use the word "forces" here because neither, particularly Martin, *wants* this transition to occur. She is taken against her will from just outside of her own home, and, until the story's conclusion, literally does not know from minute to minute whether she will survive to see the next.

Here I would like to briefly outline another structural model for finding meaning within Turner's theories of culture and transition, which will lead us further into an understanding of the characters' transitions: that of the *social drama*. "A spontaneous component of social process," the social drama is deeply connected to the concept of *rites of passage*. Referred to by Kenneth Burke as "dramas of living," social dramas occur within groups connected by common values and concerns, sharing a real or alleged mutual history.

Turner breaks the process down into four distinct phases: "breach, crisis, redress, and either reintegration or recognition of schism,"<sup>43</sup> or separation. As Catherine Martin's abduction fits Turner's model accurately, let us look briefly at each.

The social drama begins with the violation, or *breach*, of a norm within a public arena. The emotional climate of the group is suddenly made choppy and full of thunder: out of something as simple as an especially heated argument, as intricate as a deliberate and calculated demonstration of desired power, or even an act of violence, a public *breach* within the normal workings of society has occurred. A moral rule, law or custom has been publicly defiled, and a building sense of *crisis* follows. Turner refers to this as a turning point in which the event is processed by all members of the group, sides are taken, and factions are formed. "Critics of crisis" then seek to restore peace. These critics are usually those "with a strong interest in maintaining the *status quo ante*, the elders, lawmakers, administrators, judges, priests, and law enforcers of the relevant community."<sup>44</sup> Unless the conflict can be quickly sealed away within a smaller group, then

there is a tendency for the breach to widen and spread until it coincides with some dominant cleavage in the widest set of relevant social relations to which the parties in the conflict belong.<sup>45</sup>

All or some of the "peacekeepers," if you will, then

attempt to create and apply *redressive machinery* to remedy the situation, through the juridicial means of law and the juridicial process, or "the ritual means provided by religious institutions."<sup>46</sup>

*Redress* is, for Turner as well as the purposes of our discussion, the most crucial piece of the social drama, for it is where true reflection -- and van Gennep's notion of liminality -- can occur. This ritual tends to involve some kind of literal or moral "sacrifice," a casualty "as scapegoat for the group's 'sin' or redressive violence."<sup>47</sup> The final phase depends intimately upon the redress period; that is, there occurs either a *reintegration* of the disturbed social member or group (although personal and group dynamics will certainly have been altered to some degree). or an agreement to differ, which will sometimes lead to a spatial separation.

A social drama in Silence is, of course, set into motion by Gumb's actions: as the film opens, people seem aware that the serial murderer "Buffalo Bill" exists and is a threat; and, with all of the mystery which surrounds his actions, an oddly intriguing threat as well. The social drama does not reach a grand scale, however, until Gumb kidnaps and begins to starve Catherine Martin. The daughter of a United States senator (a *female* senator, no less), Martin's abduction suddenly creates a *true* crisis for the country, transforming the case into a social race against time, whose players go well beyond Martin and



Gumb to involve no less than the media, the police, the FBI, the senator herself, and even the President. The drama which I would like to focus upon on here, however, is that which occurs between Catherine Martin and Jame Gumb.

Turner reminds us that an extended liminal phase in passage is often marked by *physical separation* from the rest of society, as well as a parallel passage in space. The crossing from the world above and into the pit certainly represents a literal passage, but this transition actually begins when Martin, just prior to her capture, is asked by Gumb to step into his van so that she can help pull the chair into the back. After a brief moment of hesitation -- which Gumb reads, telling her how much he appreciates her assistance -- she *steps up* and *into* the van, literally crossing a threshold into her own rite of passage; which, like so many of the images being addressed, can be specially framed and highlighted within the medium of film.

After Martin's abduction (the *breach*), the next time that we see her is huddled at the bottom of a deep and lightless pit made of concrete and brick. Barefoot and stripped down to thin, flimsy cotton clothing, covered with soot and dirt, and soaked from sweat and water sprayed at her through a powerful hose, she is literally *in the depths*. In the following dialogue -- the first that we see between Martin and Gumb -- the camera moves

between shots from her point of view and shots from behind his head; in these shots, we see from the small light Gumb hangs into the chasm how deep in the well and small she is, dwarfed by the rock and blackness surrounding her.

Gumb.

It rubs the lotion on its skin, it does this whenever it's told.

Martin.

Mister, my family will pay cash, whatever ransom you're asking for, they'll pay it...

Gumb.

It rubs the lotion on its skin, or else it gets the hose again. (*Precious*, in Gumb's arms, barks.)  
Yes it *will*, *Precious*, it will get the hose.

Martin.

Okay...okay, okay...okay...okay...Mister, if you let me go, I won't press charges, I promise. See, my mom is a very important woman, I guess you already know that...

Gumb.

Now it places the lotion in the basket.

Martin (beginning to sob).

Please...please...I want to go home, I want to go home...please..

Gumb.

It places the lotion in the basket.

Martin.

I want to see my mommy, please...I want to see my mommy...

Gumb.

Put the fucking lotion in the basket!

Martin does so, letting her eyes move up the stone wall

before her. It is one of the first times she has been able to see her enclosings at all; she discovers scratch marks, blood, and a fingernail within its crevices. Terror overcomes her as *crisis* sets in: she realizes that she is not the first to be trapped here, and any who preceded her are most likely dead. She screams loudly and repeatedly; Gumb, studying her, then begins to imitate her shrieks, manipulating his shirt to mimic breasts.

In his analysis of the phenomenology of initiation (or "a spiritual maturing"), Eliade points out that the initiation ceremony begins not only with the separation of the candidate from his family; it involves a substantial period of time in the *bush*. "Here already," he writes, "there is a symbol of death; the forest, the jungle, darkness symbolize the beyond, the 'infernal regions.'"<sup>48</sup> The bush represents for many the swallowing of the initiate by a monster, in the belly of whom there is "cosmic night; it is the embryonic mode of existence, both on the cosmic plane and the plane of human life." Here the liminal and the redressive phases can be seen as one. As in the liminal phase of initiation, Martin is "at once dying from or dead to [her] former status and life, and being born and growing into [a new one]."<sup>49</sup> Covered with earth, she is stripped of *herself* in her symbolic grave. Her clothing and shoes are taken away, as are her name and gender: "*It* rubs the lotion on its skin," Gumb says, "or else *it* gets the hose again." It is at this point that

Martin breaks down in despair and horror at what is happening to her. In the *cosmic night* of her pit, she must symbolically die in order that she experience a "regression to the embryonic state."<sup>50</sup>

The next time we see Martin is in a series of scenes intercut with Gumb's previously discussed transformation dance and ritual. Martin has realized that "Precious," Gumb's tiny toy poodle, is his Achille's heel. "Thanks for the scraps, asshole," she says. "I've got a better idea." We can hear that her voice has deepened, turning her desperation into something more powerful. Left behind is the terrified "American Girl"; while still motivated by fear, her terror and dread have now sparked a determination to *survive* at any cost; the beginnings, for Eliade, of *rebirth*. As she speaks, we see that she is more wet, and dirtier even than before; she is more *primeval*. She breathes heavily, tying a long string to the bone of a chicken and a bucket to create a primitive trap: one which, she hopes, will be able to capture Precious and become her chance to escape.

Before she calls to Precious, the camera finds her looking *upward*, her face determined, her eyes hopeful. Eliade stresses that all forms of cosmos -- universe, house, human body, temple -- have an "opening" above. "The opening makes possible *passage* from one mode of being to another, from one existential situation to another,"<sup>51</sup> and she knows that this opening, at once a symbolic hell

and regenerative womb, is her only chance: not only for survival, but for a rebirth in which everything can begin anew.

Her words ring out as she calls to the tiny dog, writes Peter Travers, "like a call to arms,"<sup>52</sup> as she whistles and tries to not be heard by Gumb:

Precious? Come on, girl...come on, Precious! I got a yummy yummy snack for you...Precious? Are you up there, you little shit? Come and get it, pretty girl...please, come on...

Seeing no reaction to her endeavor, it is here that her faith begins to wane. She closes her eyes and begins to sob, her attempts at whistling nothing more than tiny exhalations of air. And just as she seems to have given up to the fear surrounding her, Precious pokes her head into the opening of the pit and barks. Demme here gives us a beautiful close-up of Martin's face: her mouth opens in a smile while her eyes -- and, we know, her soul -- open with *hope*.

While her first attempt fails -- ending with the bucket falling into the pit and onto her head, entangling her with string and forcing her to weakly collapse into a fetal position -- she eventually is able to succeed in seizing Precious. Gumb hears the dog crying, and calls to her, to which Martin responds: "Down here, you sack of shit!" We can see and hear genuine concern in Gumb's reaction here, and when he looks into the pit and sees that Precious is indeed hurt and trapped in Martin's arms, it is instantly clear that she has a chance. Precious is

his weakness: he gasps, begins to pace, and softens his voice. Catherine Martin and Jame Gumb each are desperate for transition here: either she will escape to be *reintegrated*, or he will regain control and be one step closer to completing his woman's suit and "metamorphosis." What follows, then, is not only a clash between two forces for survival; what we also see is a battle for *transformation*...and one in which Martin, though terrified, releases and reckons with her primal and animalistic instinct to *survive*.

Gumb.

Put her in that bucket.

Martin.

No! You get me a telephone and lower it down here *now!*

Gumb. (beginning to sob).

Little poodly-poo? Precious, darling, are you all right?

Martin.

She's in a lot of pain, mister. She needs a vet. She broke her leg on the way down, I know it.

Gumb.

DON'T YOU HURT MY DOG!

Martin.

DON'T YOU MAKE ME HURT YOUR DOG!

Gumb.

*You don't know what pain is!*

Starling distracts Gumb here by ringing the doorbell and beginning to pursue him through the house. When she enters the room which contains the pit, gun

drawn, she calls out to Martin, moving carefully about to be sure that Gumb is nowhere to be found. We realize from what Martin says in response, as well as the way she says it, that this *liminal* period has been worse than anything she could have dreamed -- and that her misery has awakened in her a reaction very different from the "Thank God you're here" we might expect. Note also that we never see her speaking these words; we only her voice wailing out of the depths of her pit.

Starling.

Catherine Martin?

Martin.

YES!

Starling.

FBI...you're safe...

Martin.

"Safe," *shit, get me out of here!*

Starling (locks door, continues to move about the room).

You're all right now, Catherine, now where is he?

Martin.

How the fuck should I know, just *get me out of here!*

.....  
Starling (looks into well, sees Catherine).

Oh my God. Catherine, I'm going to get you out of there, but right now you listen to me. I've got to leave this room. I'll be right back.

Martin.

*NO!* Don't you leave me here, you fucking bitch!  
 NOOOO! Don't you leave me here! This guy's crazy, PLEASE, I gotta get out of here! PLEASE!

Starling is finally able to help Martin escape, and, in the film's denouement, we finally get to see the senator's daughter in daylight: eyes focused on the ground (from where, symbolically, she has come), she is slowly led to the outside world. She has not been cleaned up: a blanket around her shoulders; she is still wet; still covered in dirt and filth; exhausted. As Eliade elaborates:

In initiatory contexts death signifies passing beyond the profane, unsanctified condition, the condition of the "natural man," who is without religious experience, who is blind to spirit. The mystery of initiation gradually reveals to the novice the true dimensions of existence; by introducing him to the sacred, it obliges him to assume the responsibility that goes with being a man . . . . (F)or all archaic societies, access to spirituality finds expression in a symbolism of death and a new birth.<sup>53</sup>

She holds Precious -- the only thing which we know Gumb loved -- tight to her chest, and we sense somehow that she will care for the tiny dog, coping with her own wounds through serving as guardian . . . while not allowing herself to forget her time in the depths. Catherine Martin's wounds and their memory will always remain with her. Through her time in the abyss, however, she has reached deep into the depths of her soul to discover a fierce determination, a new sense of being, a new sense of strength. Through the liminal, she has been *reborn*.



**Chapter Five:**  
**Fly Away, Starling**

"Therefore we, before him bending,  
This great Sacrament revere;  
Types and shadows have their ending,  
For newer rite is here."

**St. Thomas Aquinas**

While our first vision of Catherine Martin is that of the "American Girl," singing proudly with her radio on a late-night drive, our initial impression of Clarice Starling is that of a woman in struggle. As the film's opening shot fades up within a wooded area underneath a gray sky, Howard Shore's musical score combines a sense of impending danger with one of wonder. We are looking down a steep bluff, and it is here that we meet Starling: hair pulled back, sweatshirt drenched, and clinging to a rope, she pulls herself forward and up without hesitation or looking back. She digs her feet into the earth, using it for support and balance. What exactly is happening at this point is unclear: is she the first victim in the story, running from an unseen force? She stands and catches her breath, turning to face her next step. A bird loudly flaps its wings, catching her attention; she acknowledges it, inhales and moves on. We then follow her through the obstacle course into which she places all of her energy, and we realize that she is not in any immediate danger; she has placed *herself* here for training. "[She is] not fleeing from the killer, but maybe fleeing from her past, or her average self. It's Aspiration that drives her obsessively -- to change

herself, to become something better."<sup>54</sup> Covered in sweat, fiercely determined and unwilling to quit, we see that Starling's journey will, from the outset, be an uphill struggle.

Starling's physical regimen in these scenes connects immediately with Turner's notion of spatial movement in a rite of passage. While she does not necessarily cross a threshold here, the dirt around the hill she climbs resembles a sort of pit, similar to the one which will soon house Catherine Martin. Our first glimpse of Starling comes only when her hands emerge from below and slowly pull herself up the rope -- and out of the "pit" -- to stand before us. Again, we know that this is only the beginning for Starling. Turner writes that the spatial passage "may involve a long, exacting pilgrimage and the crossing of many national frontiers before the subject reaches his goal, the sacred shrine."<sup>55</sup> Starling will eventually cross state lines by air and automobile; she will pursue and be pursued; she will be left in literal and figurative darkness; her mind will be toyed with; semen will be thrown into her face. This journey *will*, without question, be exacting.

Starling is aware of the level of danger inherent in her work, and the opening shows her determination to be as prepared as possible for her expedition. In training for the FBI, we see her in various stages of initiation: running, boxing, gunfire, and staged arrests, during one

of which she is "shot" from behind. As she runs through the film's opening obstacle course, she passes a tree which offers a credo which will eventually save her life: with one word each painted on five small boards and nailed down the side of a tree, we read:

HURT  
AGONY  
PAIN  
LOVE IT

And the last board, weathered and barely legible:

OR DIE

By making the final sign difficult to read, Demme reminds us that we must be highly aware of our surroundings and constantly remain alert to avoid destruction and death; Starling's level of rigor demonstrates that she is doing just that.

We learn during the course of the film that Starling suffered trauma in childhood: after losing her mother at a very young age, her father, a town marshal, died a month after sustaining injuries while trying to stop a robbery. We get the sense early in the film that she is devoting herself to her work because it is something that she *must* do. Our feelings are confirmed near the film's conclusion, as she relates the story of her attempt to rescue a family of lambs from slaughter; their screaming -- which Starling tried but was ultimately

powerless to stop -- haunts and drives her. Starling *works* because she *has to*.

Turner points out a connection between this notion of *work* and the divine: in tribal, "simpler," and "small-scale societies," ritual is considered *work*; specifically, "what the Tikopia call 'the work of the Gods.' ... In the third chapter of *Bhagavad Gita* (v. 14-15), we find a connection made between sacrifice and work: 'From food do all contingent beings derive, and food derives from rain; rain derives from sacrifice and sacrifice from *work*.'"<sup>56</sup> In the course of her journey, Starling *will* need to sacrifice a great deal. These sacrifices, however, will become an intricate part of her rite of passage. In spite of (and possibly because of) tremendous opposition, Starling continues to move, to sacrifice, and grow closer to the sacred *transition* which only her work will bring her.

Starling, again, has her work cut out for her from the beginning. Demme reminds us consistently throughout the picture that Starling is a woman in a man's world. Starling -- herself no more than 5'4" tall -- is regularly being challenged or dwarfed by men. She enters an elevator to stand amidst six males, all taller than she and clad in red shirts, emphasizing the fact that she is absolutely *different*. Men turn to leer as she and her roommate, Ardelia (played by Kasi Lemmons), jog by; and, although he clearly admires her, she is often subtly

treated as inferior by Jack Crawford. As they drive (he in the front passenger seat, she in the rear) towards a West Virginia funeral home to examine the body of one of Buffalo Bill's victims, Starling attempts to maintain her professionalism while expressing her feelings of manipulation and dismissal:

Starling.

You haven't mentioned anything about the information contained in my report, or Dr. Lecter's offer, sir.

Crawford.

I'm considering it.

Starling.

That's why you sent me in there, isn't it? To get his help on Buffalo Bill, sir?

(Crawford looks at her.)

Well, if that was the case, then I just...I just wish I was in on it, that's all.

Crawford.

If I'd sent you in there with an actual agenda, Lecter would have known it instantly. He would have toyed with you, then turned to stone.

Before Starling can respond, Crawford turns away -- as the car drives through a tunnel, surrounding Starling in literal as well as figurative darkness.

It is Dr. Frederick Chilton, however, who provides Starling with one of her greatest obstacles and the film with one of its strongest insights into dilemmas within our culture. Her stance during their first meeting

in his office reveals that his very presence makes her physically uncomfortable, and not without reason. He has not said two sentences to her before making an advance: "You know, we get a lot of detectives in here, but I must say I can't ever remember one as attractive," he says, grinning into the camera. "Will you be in Baltimore overnight? Because this can be quite a fun town if you have the right guide." More embarrassed than humiliated -- her savvy choice of words indicates that she has been in similar situations before -- she politely wards him off.

As played by Anthony Heald, Dr. Chilton is clearly a "good man" in his own eyes: he is a Doctor, and in charge of the asylum in which Hannibal Lecter is a prisoner; he gains all necessary approval and credit for his work. But when Starling, enclosed in the varying shades of brown which dominate Chilton's office, makes clear that she is there to do a job, his entire mood and persona changes. His smile vanishes, the small talk and "conversation" turns to "Let's get this over with," and he quickly rises, grasping a photograph from his desk. As they near Lecter's cell, Chilton stops in a shadowed hallway to display the picture to Starling.

The photograph is that of a nurse, maimed nine years earlier when attending to Lecter. The doctors did manage to reset her jaw, Chilton explains, but were only able to save one of her eyes. Starling's reaction to this

picture, captured in close-up and bathed in red light, is one of revulsion shielded by a characteristic attempt at composure. Chilton's presenting this photograph to Starling could easily be justified as a necessity in preparing a subject to visit Lecter. The *manner* in which Chilton does so, however, is indicative of a highly intentionalized act. Lifting it from his desk immediately upon his rejection makes one wonder if, had Starling agreed to a date with him, he might not have simply *described* the nurse's injuries to her. As the faintest hint of a smile develops on his face, he tells her that Lecter's "pulse never got above 185...even when he ate her tongue." And so proceeds the relationship between Starling and Chilton; while he does not attempt another sexual advance, she consistently has to get past him -- the proverbial lion at the gate -- to reach Lecter.

While well-played by Brian Cox in Manhunter, it is Anthony Hopkins' interpretation which has burned the name *Hannibal Lecter* into our vernacular. Lecter is brilliant, manipulative, strong, courteous, terrifying, violent, and *fascinating*. As I watched the film for the first time that night in 1991, I recall growing sympathetic to and actually fond of him; perhaps, I thought, all of the murders and cannibalistic acts which led to his imprisonment were exaggerations, even mistakes. Serving as Starling's guide, he was so clearly doing *good* for her; he *couldn't* be a monster capable of such heinous, *evil*



actions. Then he attacked and killed two Memphis security guards, clubbing one to death and removing the facial skin of the other in order to make his escape, and my fondness drained away; this character was suddenly very much a figure of evil, and I was lost in frustration.

Demme wants us to feel this way. The Silence of the Lambs is a visceral experience. He wants us to react physically, so that we perceive the story's events with Starling, *living* the captivation and repulsion of Hannibal Lecter. The opposition between Lecter and Chilton represents one of the great paradoxes of our culture: the culturally honored and "respected" Doctor Chilton is actually selfish, self-centered, and out for little more than his own glory; Doctor Lecter, the cultural abhorration, is the most positive model for the growth and transformation of Clarice Starling, and never pretends to be anything other than what he *is*. It is what he *is*, of course, which is nearly inexplicable for us. Lecter tests Starling, becomes familiar with her spirit, and ultimately recognizes that she must go through a *rite of passage* in order that she may *fly*. This rite will be absolutely fraught with peril, but he knows that she *must* experience and be wounded by it if she is to transform. How beautifully ironic within our culture that her guide through darkness *is* darkness himself.

In many Native American cultures, there is an understanding of the "devil" as being not only a

malevolent force, but an educator. Stories of passage often find the initiand being guided through the liminal not by a friendly teacher or wise old seer, but by a figure of blackness, of *the wicked*; without this, they feel, there is no way to ultimately comprehend evil, of understanding the darkness of the world, which is within all of us. Frederick Buechner, American novelist, poet, and minister makes the following observation:

I suppose that the whole obsession of our time with the monstrous in general -- with the occult and the demonic, with exorcism and black magic and the great white shark -- is at its heart only the shadow side of our longing for the beatific, and we are like the knight in Ingmar Bergman's film The Seventh Seal, who tells the young witch about to be burned at the stake that he wants to meet the devil her master, and when she asks him why, he says, "I want to ask him about God. He, if anyone, must know."<sup>57</sup>

We learn during their first scene together what Lecter wants for Starling. To reach his cell, she must first walk down a long, darkened corridor, surrounded on all sides by men who have been labeled insane. One stares blankly at her; another leans against the bars of his cell to lasciviously say "Hi"; and finally, one bounces throughout his quarters, gaping at her and hissing that "I can smell your cunt."

When she reaches Lecter and begins her initial dialogue with him, he reveals that he was able to discern whispers in the corridor. After being shown her FBI credentials, the first question he asks Starling is what "Multiple Miggs" actually said to her. She responds

truthfully -- "He said 'I smell your cunt'" -- and Lecter does not flinch. "I see," he says. "I myself cannot." He then slowly raises his head towards the air holes in the glass of his cell partition, breathing in deeply: "You use Evian skin cream, and sometimes you wear L'Air du Temps...but not today." While in one sense as carnal as what Miggs said, Lecter goes immediately beyond the crass and into a different sort of carnal observation altogether: that of what she puts upon her body, her skin. Simple vulgarities are easy to dismiss; Lecter's intelligent, precise, and *accurate* observations are not. Here is an indication that this entire scene will serve as a *testing* of Starling: to have a man identify a skin cream worn possibly a day or more in the past, smelled through small holes in his plexiglass barrier six feet above the ground, could easily make anyone weak with intimidation.

Starling perseveres. She politely continues in an attempt at an informal questioning of Lecter, to which he responds with a soul-piercing gaze, reasonably neutral answers, and a smile. He warms up considerably when she clumsily attempts to make casual a request that he complete a questionnaire. He expresses disappointment in her lack of absolute honesty:

Oh, no, no, no, no. You were doing fine. You had been courteous and receptive to courtesy; you had established trust with the embarrassing truth about Miggs...and now this ham-handed segue into your questionnaire. It won't do.

Starling repeats the request, a stronger edge in her voice. Their dialogue continues, and just as Starling's guard drops, Lecter snaps into a brutal scrutinization of her character.

You're so ambitious, aren't you? You know what you look like to me, with your good bag and your cheap shoes? You look like a rube. A well-scrubbed, hustling rube...with a little taste. Good nutrition's given you some length of bone, but you're not more than one generation from poor white trash, are you, Agent Starling? And that accent you've tried so desperately to shed, pure West Virginia. What is your father, is he a "coal minah," does he stink of the land? You know how quickly the boys find you, all those tedious, sticky fumlings in the back seats of cars, while you could only dream of getting *out*, getting anywhere, all the way to the F-B-I.

It is here that Starling proves herself a formidable match for Lecter. She takes a breath, acknowledges that he sees "a lot," and quickly reverses his offensive: is *he* strong enough, she asks, to turn his razor-sharp insight onto *himself*? Initially, he seems to reject Starling and this challenge, turning away and walking to the other side of his cell. But as he moves, his words prove that he *does* see her as ready for initiation, if she so chooses: "You fly back to school now, little Starling. Fly, fly, fly." Starling having proven her mettle, Lecter recognizes that it is indeed time for her transformation; but, as with most of what he says, he makes this point cryptically. Regardless, like the bird after which she is named, it is time for her to learn to *fly*.

As Starling begins to move away from Lecter's cell, a naked and masturbating Miggs screeches "Look at the

blonde!" and throws semen into her face. This in itself is telling: Starling is clearly *not* blonde; Miggs, like most men in the film, is literally unable to see Starling for what she is or of what she is capable. Lecter, hearing the attack, throws himself with spectacular force and speed against the plexiglass wall of his cell. His calling out in her defense is the only time in the entire film that he raises his voice:

Lecter.

Agent Starling! Come back! I would never have had that happen to you. Discourtesy is extremely ugly to me.

Starling.

Then do this test for me!

Lecter.

No, but I will make you happy. I'll give you a chance for what you love most.

Starling.

And what is that, Doctor?

Lecter.

Advancement, of course. Listen carefully, look deep within yourself, Clarice Starling. Go seek out Miss Mofet, an old patient of mine. M-O-F-E-T. Go now, I don't think Miggs could manage again quite so soon, even though he is crazy. *Go now!*

We later learn that this final advice was also essentially cryptic: "Hester Mofet," an anagram for "The rest of me," never existed, and "Look deep within yourself" leads Starling to Baltimore's "Your Self Storage," where Lecter has rented a large space under Mofet's name. By making

this connection and literally looking into "your self," Starling proves to Lecter that she is meritorious and ready for edification.

Some critics of the film have dismissed Lecter's intentions as purely sexual. Elayne Rapping, in The Progressive, writes that Starling is Lecter's "prey, as much as the other monster is hers, and his sexual interest in her -- played out as a flirtation of the most stereotypically sexist kind -- is apparent."<sup>58</sup> Ms. Rapping's reading of the sexual into the relationship between Starling and Lecter entirely misinterprets the film's themes. Immediately following the incident with Miggs and the processing of Lecter's aggressively driven "clues," Starling walks slowly to her car and experiences an early memory of her father, spinning her in the air upon his return from work; within the flashback, the camera then pans up to a shot of the sky, once again bringing us an image of flight. Lecter *is* manipulative, and he *does* play elaborate mental games with Starling. But he does this not for his own sexual gratification. Recognizing that she *needs* to experience the *journey*, his questioning and ingenious "games" force her to find her own wings. As he says, he will give her a chance for what she loves most: "Advancement." He refers not, however, to advancement in the workplace; advancement of her *spirit* is what he desires.

Rapping's next statement, asserting that Starling

is left at the film's conclusion "in a state of permanent anxiety because [Lecter] may at any moment decide to come after her" is not only thematically questionable it is proven inaccurate by the script itself. "The only reason he does not do so, he makes clear," Rapping concludes, "is because he finds her cute."<sup>59</sup> Lecter, in point of fact, tells Starling that he has no intention of coming after her because "the world is much more interesting with you in it." Nowhere is the word "cute" mentioned in the scene, and a careful observer of the film will see that the intellectual dynamics between Lecter and Starling prevent the concept of "cute" even from implication. It is one thing for Ms. Rapping to interpret their relationship as being sexually charged; the sheer intensity of their dialogues makes this understandable. But to literally adjust the script to serve one's own needs is another thing entirely. Rapping, it seems, had an agenda which could not be bothered by a meticulous look at the film itself.

As the film progresses, it becomes clear that Lecter is the only man who refuses to socially categorize Starling; this refusal brings to mind what Turner refers to as social "segmentalization."

In people's social structural relationships they are by various abstract processes generalized and segmentalized into roles, statuses, classes, cultural sexes, conventional age-divisions, ethnic affiliations, etc. In different types of social situations they have been conditioned to play specific social roles. It does not matter how well or badly as long as they "make like" they are

obedient to the norm-sets that control different compartments of the complex model known as the "social structure."<sup>60</sup>

Chilton sees her as an object unworthy of real respect, and she is treated as a permanent student by Crawford, incapable of working in the harshest elements of the case until the film's conclusion. Only Lecter sees her as she is, understands that she must cope with her past before she can take flight, and then *forces* her to look into her "self" and become something stronger, through his *quid pro quo* line of questioning.

The notion of exchange and duality within Lecter and the film brings to mind Turner's encounter with the Entity known in Rio de Janeiro as *Exu*. "Lecter," writes Kathleen Murphy in Film Comment, "is consulted by cops as an oracle, and acts as high priest to those acolytes who strive, as he has, to transform themselves, triggering their evolution in rites of human sacrifice."<sup>61</sup> *Exu*, Turner says, is sometimes represented with two heads (one that of Christ; the other, Satan); he is

the Lord of the Limen and of Chaos, the full ambiguity of the subjunctive mood of culture, representing the indeterminacy that lurks in the cracks and crevices of all socio-cultural constructions of reality ... he is the abyss of possibility.

While other forces in the film attempt to hold Starling back -- in one scene, Crawford literally tells a West Virginia sheriff that they should discuss a brutal murder in a separate room so as not to include her -- Lecter himself represents *possibility*. Turner continues: for



Brazilians, *Exu* is "the one who must be kept at bay if the framed order of the ritual proceedings is to go forward according to *protocol* (italics mine) ... hence he has two heads, for he is both potential savior and tempter."<sup>62</sup>

Late in the film, after Starling has completely opened her soul to Lecter, he whispers, tears in his eyes, "Thank you, Clarice...thank you." Are these tears the result of a sexual charge? No; rather, Lecter knows that this is what she *needed* to do in order to move towards transformation. His tears are seen most clearly a moment later, as Lecter hears Chilton and Memphis security enter the room to remove Starling. This leaves one to consider whether his tears are furthered because he knows that he cannot now, with anyone else present, give her the information that she needs to *complete* her work. And just as we wonder if he is simply a misunderstood human being who truly is "good," he murders his two security guards, creating a mask from the face of one and mounting the butterflyed body of the other onto his cage walls.

Silverthorne continues:

He acknowledges a plurality of selves ... On one side in the movie [are] the many visual suggestions of outspread wings, and Hannibal's pressure, whispered to Clarice, 'Spread *your* wings, little Starling, and fly.' On the other side is a universe of Jame Gumb, who carves two diamond patterns (dressmaker's darts, a 'taking in' device) on a dead woman's back, fatally clipping her wings.<sup>63</sup>

Like *Exu*, Lecter is both liberator and destroyer. He seems to possess a certain deity-like omniscience: as the

first step in his master plan of escape, he manages to steal Dr. Chilton's pen while enclosed in a straitjacket and bodycage; he observes that Starling's leg wound achieved when exploring her "Self" has stopped bleeding without being able to see her leg or ever being told that she was even injured.

We have a tendency in America to label that we which cannot understand, and Silence, with all of its horrifying subject matter, points us to a questioning of our own symbol system. Hannibal Lecter is, actually, not the real "monster" in the story: while usually enigmatic, he is consistently truthful with Starling, treating her as an equal; and, most importantly, he acts *according to his nature*. Right down to his agnomen, there is never any question about who or what Hannibal "The Cannibal" is.

The real "monsters" of the story are those whose actions may not *appear* ominous or threatening outright, but whose inner workings within our culture *make* them dangerous to us and our psyches. From Dr. Chilton's first attempt at flirting with Starling and his angry reaction to rejection, we know that this is not a man who can be trusted: as was discussed, he moves from an attempt at charm to outright bitterness in a heartbeat. Even his initial reflections on Lecter -- from a research perspective, Lecter is their "most prized asset" -- give us a man out for little more than his own gain. As Clarice is a sexual object for Chilton, Lecter is an

object to enhance his notoriety. Recognizing Chilton's monstrosity, Lecter has refused to cooperate with him, leaving Chilton's dreams of endless accolades to crumble within a plexiglass cell. And now, when Lecter strays even remotely from Chilton's ideals, Chilton asserts his cultural position of *power* -- head of a psychiatric institute -- and systematically tortures Lecter: he attempts to lock away the creative spirit by removing Lecter's drawings; he broadcasts religious television programming at stentorian levels into Lecter's cell. Chilton's labeling of Lecter as a "monster" indicates that their battle is personal, and, having lost his desired fame, he is not about to waste his time trying to *understand* his prisoner in the way which Clarice Starling attempts.

Mid-story, we discover that Chilton has been using a microphone to listen to the interviews between Lecter and Starling, not for anthropological or research purposes, but to capture *the upper hand*. As Chilton later tries to pry further information on Buffalo Bill from Lecter, he lies back comfortably on a medical cot to taunt his strait-jacketed and wire-masked "patient":

You still think you're gonna walk on the beach and see the birdies? (He laughs.) No, I don't think so. I called Senator Ruth Martin; she never heard of any deal with you. (He smiles at Lecter.) They scammed you, Hannibal. (He gestures to his aide.) Stand outside. And shut the door. (The aide exits, leaving them alone. Chilton stands, and, close to Lecter, looks right into his eyes.) There never was a deal with Senator Martin, but there is

now. I designed it. Of course, I worked in a few conditions for my own benefit as well.

The psychological and emotional torment which Chilton's self-serving tunnel-vision inflicts on those around him make this character, "played to smarmy perfection by Anthony Heald,"<sup>63</sup> a more frightening presence within our culture than the other "psychopaths" of the story...and one whose type most of us will have a greater chance of encountering in our lifetimes than a Hannibal Lecter.

It is no surprise, then, that Lecter pursues Chilton all the way to Haiti upon his escape. "I thought," Demme states, "you really had to get a sense in a very brief time that Lecter had tracked Chilton to the ends of the earth, a place that redefines 'off the beaten track.'"<sup>65</sup> It also should come as no surprise that Lecter's final line in the film -- "I'm having an old friend for dinner -- actually carries with it an odd sense of justice and comeuppance, garnering audience applause and an understanding of the dynamics between these two very different men. Who, we must ask, is the real monster? And are we, in cheering this sort of poetic justice, briefly identifying with the dark side of ourselves? Certainly -- and this is *good* for us and our culture.

Lecter's straitjacket and masking are worthy of discussion here. According to Turner, "Liminality is both more creative and more destructive than the structural norm. In either case it raises basic problems for social

structural man, invites him to speculation and criticism."<sup>66</sup> As we reflect on our culture's method of dealing with that which is outside of its comprehension, it becomes clear that we can be impatient in America with anything which moves outside of the canonical; not knowing how to deal with these "challenges," we lock them away or cover their faces with protective masks. In his scenes with Starling, Lecter's voice is crisp, soft-spoken, and *polite*; it is clear that he feels trusted and respected by her for who and what he is, and treats her accordingly. he is also in some sense of control. Later in the film, he is transferred to Tennessee to meet with Senator Ruth Martin (played by Tracey Walter). Confined in a straitjacket, tied down, with a grotesque plastic and metal mask covering his mouth and jaw, Lecter's entire *manner* is literally altered by his masking. His voice deepens; his head, when he is being moved, tilts back as his eyes roll up towards his forehead; his hair appears darker, unkempt, wilder. Then, as he addresses the senator, he sounds and acts *like a different person*.

Lecter.

Tell me, senator: did you nurse Catherine yourself?

Senator Martin.

What?

Lecter.

Did you breast-feed her?

Senator Martin.

Yes. I did.

Lecter.

Toughened your nipples, didn't it? ... Amputate a man's leg and he can still feel it tickling. Tell me, mom: when your little girl is on the slab, where will it tickle you?

Senator Martin.

Take this thing back to Baltimore.

.....  
Lecter.

Oh, and senator, just one more thing: *love your suit.*

Lecter, perceived by his culture as a psychopath who needs to be concealed and robbed of identity, Lecter acts accordingly; the mask alters him. In a year in which we finally have seen the face of a "mad bomber," this way of coping with the incomprehensible seems in need of cultural scrutiny. Does labeling one "insane," like the placing of a mask, further "insanity?"

To return to Starling's journey, it may seem initially that Lecter's anagrammatic clues are a way of selfishly toying with her. Rather, this is Lecter's way of intricately assisting with Starling's transformation. Turner and van Gennep remind us that the rite of passage is, in its own way, a *life crisis*. Throughout mythology, we see that the transformation and passage are also treated as crisis, as is the power of the *wound*. In the story of the Fisher King, for example, the young king finds hot salmon at a campsite; he tries to hold it, but it burns his skin and is dropped. The scar from his wound

will remain with him: his first contact with what will later become his redemption -- as well as his primary experience of real *consciousness* -- comes immediately in the form of a wound. If we are not cast out of the Garden of Eden, there can be no experience of Holy Jerusalem.

We learn, through Lecter's *quid pro quo* with Starling, that she suffered trauma as a young girl through the deaths of her mother, and, more critically, her father. She *is* a wounded woman; Lecter, "psychopath" or not, remains a brilliant psychiatrist who clearly recognizes the need in us all to cope with our wounds. Myth teaches us that these wounds *will never fully heal*; rather, they and their scars offer us a graduation from a naive consciousness into a more meaningful consciousness of self.

Before Lecter even begins to probe Starling's past -- and hence, before her true journey has begun -- he sends her to his storage facility. She reaches "Your Self Storage" late at night, and attempts to enter the building with the business's owner; without a key or time to wait for morning, Starling realizes that she must *fight* her way into the space -- again, crossing a literal threshold. Using a car jack to raise the door a short distance above the ground, she dirties herself by lying in the dirt and attempting to crawl underneath the tremendous metal door which, she acknowledges, could fall and crush her in an instant. Forcing herself into the darkness proves

difficult indeed, as she hears the ripping of fabric and feels a flash of pain; glancing down, she sees that a nail has torn into the flesh of her leg, leaving a substantial spot of her own blood. She touches the wound with her fingers, crawling through the dirt -- the "ashes" of myth -- to reach into the blackness of her "Self." In this exploration of self, Starling has been wounded, and hence has moved to a new level of consciousness. And it is Lecter -- the dark teacher of Native American stories -- that brought her here. It is no coincidence that the first object she sees within the storage unit is a stuffed owl with its wings spread wide as if to attack: a symbol of death in many Native American cultures, the owl reminds us that this journey into the self will be fraught with menace...but like the owl, we must attempt to *fly*. For Starling, there is little hesitation; again, wounded, she does what she must do: she proceeds into the storage shed, *separated* from the outside by a huge wall of steel, thus beginning her own transformation.

The next and, arguably, most important threshold Starling crosses comes near the film's conclusion. Throughout the story, she has gradually revealed details to Lecter about the death of her father. These revelations do not, incidentally, need to be pried out of her; "I tell you things, you tell me things," Lecter says to her. "Not about this case, though. About yourself. *Quid pro quo*. Yes or no. Yes or no? Little Catherine is



waiting." Starling's response is played by Ms. Foster as a refusal to show hesitation, even if it exists in the soul. She knows that Catherine Martin will surely die if she does not follow him, and so she has no choice. Her eyes do not move from his as she responds simply: "Go, Doctor." He does so, enabling Starling to begin to cope with her own emotional and psychological wounds.

The final pieces of her story are told after Lecter has been transferred to Tennessee. He knows at this point that she and Crawford lied to him about a potential transfer to an island facility; unlike Chilton, however, he does not seem to take this personally. He acknowledges her use of the name "Anthrax Island" as being "a nice touch," and, when Starling begs him to continue telling the truth about Buffalo Bill to her in order that she may rescue Catherine Martin, he again picks up his line of inquiry. Through this questioning, we learn about Starling's failed attempt to save a family of screaming lambs from slaughter. In telling her *story* to Lecter, she makes meaning of her past and this event. "Meaning," Turner writes, "always involves retrospection and reflexivity, a past, a history. Meaning is the only category which grasps the part to the whole in life."<sup>67</sup> Starling here uses Bruner's concept of the narrative to literally create an act of meaning:

For one of the most powerful forms of social stability ... is the human propensity to share stories of human diversity and to make their interpretations congruent with the divergent moral

commitments and institutional obligations that prevail in every culture.<sup>68</sup>

Demme understands what is actively happening to Starling. Lecter sits behind the steel bars of a cell as they begin their final "telling of stories." The camera switches between individual shots of Starling and Lecter, and we see that it is steadily moving closer to each of them, filling the screen with her story and his questions. Starling tells him that she attempted to run away from a cousin's ranch after the death of her father. "What set you off, Clarice?" Lecter asks, and it is here that Starling, immersed in the liminal, must actively face -- through *story-telling* -- the sound which has haunted her for years and propelled her into the FBI: the sound of lambs screaming while being butchered. Starling continues the telling: unable to save all of the lambs, she attempted to save one by running away, beginning her first attempt at the *journey*. Lecter asks where she was going, and she responds:

Starling.

I don't know...I didn't have any food, any water...and it was very cold. Very cold...I thought, I thought if I could save just one, but he was so heavy...so heavy...I didn't get more than a few miles when the sheriff's car picked me up. The rancher was so angry he sent me to live at the Lutheran orphanage at Bozeman. I never saw the ranch again.

Lecter.

What became of your lamb, Clarice?

Starling.

They killed it.

Lecter.

You still wake up sometimes, don't you? Wake up in the dark and hear the screaming of the lambs.

Starling.

Yes.

Lecter.

And you think if you save poor Catherine, you could make them stop, don't you? You think if Catherine lives, you won't wake up in the dark ever again to hear that awful screaming of the lambs...

Starling.

I don't know...I don't know.

Lecter, the hint of tears in his eyes, thanks her for her *work*. His task is complete: he has used "the Socratic method to instruct Clarice Starling in criminal behavior, and manage[d] his protégé's psychological exorcism with the ease of a practiced demon hunter."<sup>69</sup> During the preceding dialogue, the camera has moved in to such tight shots that there no longer seem to be bars surrounding story-teller or listener. Through the *telling*, Starling has been able to make *meaning* of this event, freeing herself from her own prison.

Now, and only now, will Starling be able to confront Jame Gumb. As she travels towards Belvedere, she literally drives across a bridge -- Eliade's dangerous threshold -- to reach Gumb's lair. She is then literally

thrust into the blackness of Eliade's *cosmic night*, or the belly of the monster. After confronting him in his moderately-lit den, he flees downstairs; she follows, each step taking her lower and into greater *darkness*. The fluttering of moth wings and distorted music filling her ears, and the immediate discovery of a decomposed woman lying in a bathtub imprinted on her mind, Starling suddenly finds herself completely blind as Gumb eliminates all interior light and begins to stalk her. Wearing his night-vision glasses, Gumb is thrust into power. For the first time in the scene, we leave Starling's point of view and take on Gumb's: Starling, her eyes wide and rigid with terror, stumbles throughout his tomb-like basement; Gumb, moving slowly, closes in on her reaches out to touch her hair, pulling away before making contact. Living in the darkest and most immediate version of Eliade's concept of the "bush," Starling *knows* that she could easily be killed at any moment, and yet she does not beg, plead, or try to run: she relies on *herself* and the senses she has left. When the *click* of Gumb preparing his weapon to fire fills the room, her ears -- close to never again hearing the screaming of the lambs -- discern the sound, activating her to move to face it, fire, and survive. She has crossed the bridge and descended into the pit to save Catherine Martin and herself. "The process of filling her terrible emptiness," writes Kathleen Murphy, "of silencing the lambs for good, is [truly] completed only when,

through Starling's heroic descent into an actual hell, the real child in Jame Gumb's dark pit is released."<sup>70</sup>

Starling, having *lived* through each stage in the rite of passage, is transformed; and, while we see her graduating from the FBI academy in the film's conclusion (thus completing the *reintegration* phase), her *life* passage finds that she has earned something far more significant than an FBI badge: the *silence*, and not the screaming, of the lambs.

## Conclusions

"I'm having an old friend for dinner."

Hannibal Lecter

An analysis of a film as rich as The Silence of the Lambs could go on for an interminable length of time; in fact, Roger Ebert has written about his experiences during a weekend seminar on the film: frame by frame, the film is studied, discussed, and made *meaningful*. It does seem surprising initially, though, to have a thriller win such accolades. One expects certain films to have more meaning than others: Ordinary People, for example, is more easily called life-changing. But perhaps therein lies the genius in Demme's film: "mercilessly scary and mercifully humane," it has taken exceptionally unpleasant subject matter and a generally disreputable genre, using an intricate understanding of rites of passage, storytelling, meaning, and culture, to create a film of terror but not gratuitous violence; a film in which the canonical is challenged, forcing us to look twice before judging another human being (artist, "criminal," or "psychopath") as "mad"; a film in which the human drama supersedes and propels the plot instead of falling victim to it.

But did anyone *really* get it?

The Silence of the Lambs won five academy awards in 1991, including Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Adapted Screenplay. But did those who cast their ballots

for the film see it as just a marvelously constructed and performed story? Or did they go *beyond* the story, into the depths of questioning which we have just accomplished? Obviously, we will never know, but a part of me believes that, as Bruner insists that we use stories and narratives to make meaning within our lives, part of the depth of this intricate and precise story perhaps *did* make it into the thought-processes of more in its audience than might be expected. A brilliant work of art is a brilliant work of art, and the film's critical and financial success leads me to hope that Demme's fleshing out (if you will) of a genre known for producing mere "entertainment" *did* reach more people in a meaningful way than, say, an excellent but neglected exhibit at a small-town museum.

I want to clarify here that I am not suggesting that Demme and the film are asking us to release all serial killers from confinement and gather the family around the television to watch the life-affirming Silence of the Lambs. Rather, I maintain that Demme works with the images and realities of and within America to tell his story -- while dealing with rites of passage and addressing a number of subtle dilemmas within our culture. We in America are so intent upon denying *darkness* that we can create individuals who eventually must act out in horrifying ways. Perhaps, the film argues, if we had in place these Native American rituals which embrace the darkness in order to understand it, we might not



experience as much violent crime...and possibly not need a Hannibal Lecter to guide us on our own journeys.

In "Literature as Equipment for Living," Kenneth Burke writes that proverbs fall into many different categories which suggest the "active nature" inherent within them. Proverbs console; chart; foretell; show us how to live wisely; instruct.<sup>71</sup> Somehow, we feel that they *understand*. And, as Burke extends this analysis from proverbs to encompass the whole field of literature, perhaps we should look more often for this "active nature" in places previously unexplored: where we might not expect to find anything more than a good laugh, a simple distraction, or a scare. For when a carefully constructed work of art -- our "equipment for living" -- comes along, we must look at it more closely than we might be immediately inclined. A close look could produce insights about *us* and our culture; perhaps, then, there is a greater potential to change our culture and our lives through theatre, film, poetry, fiction, and art than we ever imagined. If we accept that the work of art *can* intimately possess an understanding of the ways in which we live our lives, perhaps then we can truly begin to seek out and perceive clues within it as to how to make meaning out of and survive our *own* dramas...and set into motion true cultural *change*.

And isn't that what art within a culture *should* accomplish?

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