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Cover Page Footnote

Margaret L Carter, editor of *Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics* and author of *The Vampire in Literature: A Critical Bibliography*, produces an annual vampire fiction bibliography update published in the Lord Ruthven Assembly newsletter.

Xenophobia and Its Subversion in *Darker Than You Think*

Margaret L Carter

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In classic horror the monster typically represents the Other, as in *Dracula* the Count stands for the foreign and racially alien invader. The racist and nationalist thread in Stoker's novel has often been analyzed; Clive Leatherdale links this theme with Van Helsing's endorsement of criminologist Cesare Lombroso's theory of atavism, which maintains that people with inborn criminal tendencies "are physiologically related to their primordial ancestors" (210). David J Skal notes that "fear of foreigners is a steady undercurrent of vampire literature" (222). The boundary between "our kind" and the Other, however, blurs in Jack Williamson's *Darker Than You Think* (1940). At first glance, this novel appears to project upon its outwardly human but essentially monstrous species of shapeshifters all the fear and loathing traditionally associated with the racial and ethnic alien. A strange reversal, however, occurs at the novel's climax. The protagonist's own shift in allegiance induces the reader to sympathize with the "monsters," now framed as a persecuted minority.

The characterization of *Homo lycanthropus* as racial Other reflects anthropological theories of "race" originating in the nineteenth century and persisting well into the middle of the twentieth. Stephen Jay Gould, in *The Mismeasure of Man*, discusses the nineteenth-century "polygenists" who "held that human races were separate biological species" (71). Although this idea fell out of fashion in the twentieth century, it did not die completely. Ashley Montagu cites a Nazi scientist, Lothar G Tiralá, and, more surprisingly, an American anthropologist writing in 1944, R Ruggles Gates, both of whom embrace the belief that "many of the races of men must be regarded as belonging to different species" (30). A curious book published in 1946, *The Racial Streams of Mankind*, illustrates the persistence of the polygenist view on a popular level. The author, Clem Davies, who traces the descent of human ethnic groups according to a biblically literal outline of history, regards the mating between human women and fallen angels in Genesis 6:4 as factual history and describes the consequences in ominous terms: "The Evil One thus succeeded in introducing another race, the progeny of the sons of God who had married the daughters of Adam. The *nephilim* tincture of evil was thus maintained throughout the strain of Cain, the cause of all the world's evil" (xiii). This statement almost perfectly summarizes the narrative premise of *Darker Than You Think*. It also resonates with Lombroso's theory of criminology, which attributes crime to an atavistic reversion to apelike behavior, thereby defining "born criminals" as other than human. As Gould puts it in his discussion of Lombroso, "Germs of an ancestral past lie dormant in our heredity. In some unfortunate individuals, the past comes to life again" (153). Those who supported the polygenist theory cited the existence of interspecies hybrids such as mules in rebuttal to the argument that human races must belong to a single species because they can interbreed. Miscegenation evokes particular horror in people who adhere to a belief in hereditary, immutable differences among races. Between the two world wars, eugenicists' claims of innate differences in intelligence inspired laws restricting the immigration of ethnic groups who, it was feared, would lower the average mental age of the American population through unrestrained breeding. The Immigration Restriction Act of 1924, reflecting this xenophobic philosophy, remained in effect for several decades. Williamson's 1940 novel translates the figurative "demonizing" of alien ethnic groups into a literal portrayal of the racial Other as demonic.

Though *Darker Than You Think* is customarily classified as a werewolf story, it also portrays its nonhuman race as sorcerers, witches, demons, and vampires. While the protagonist, Will Barbee, behaves as a werewolf for most of the novel, upon his “death” in Chapter 20 he rises as a vampire, with the implication that the transition to vampirism is a normal event in his species’ life cycle. Despite the brief space in the narrative devoted to his experience as a vampire, this transformation, as we shall see, clearly forms the climactic, pivotal event in his personal odyssey. Moreover, *Homo lycanthropus* has grown to “like the taste of human blood, and they couldn’t exist without it” (235), and like the undead of folklore, they require special treatment, after death, to prevent their rising from the grave. These creatures embody a synthesis of all the horrors we have imagined in our superstitions and myths throughout history.

Will’s ancestral race is not a species wholly apart from humanity, but rather a co-evolved race that has lived secretly among *Homo sapiens* from prehistoric times. Williamson’s novel proposes a sort of unified field theory of supernatural evil, attributing the darker side of human nature to crossbreeding with *Homo lycanthropus*. Psychic powers are rationalized in terms of manipulating energy fields through “direct mental control of probability” (93), a talent that enables those with dominant lycanthropic genes to project their essences into astral form, in chosen animal shapes. Sunlight and silver disrupt the energy networks that the witch-men utilize. While all present-day human beings have some trace of lycanthropic heritage, a few possess powerful combinations of such traits. Will, unknown to himself, is an almost pure throwback, the “Child of Night” or dark Messiah awaited by the witch-folk. In what he believes to be dreams, the almost equally powerful April Bell seduces him into using his powers. In astral form he learns to take the shape of wolf, saber-toothed tiger, snake, and finally a dragonlike winged lizard. In these shapes he helps April kill off his friends, a group of investigators who have uncovered the truth about the witch-folk. Torn between the exhilaration of his new powers and the guilt of murder, Will evades the dilemma for as long as possible by convincing himself that his nocturnal escapades are no more than imagination.

Somewhat like Jack Finney’s *The Body Snatchers* (1955), *Darker Than You Think* – the very title hinting at sinister secrets – embodies xenophobic wartime paranoia (analogous to Finney’s Cold War paranoia), the vision of a world in which evil entities who look exactly like ordinary citizens prowl among us. As Richard Hofstadter explains in “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” this world-view postulates the existence of “a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character” (23). The archeologist Mondrick in Williamson’s novel speaks of “a masked and secret enemy, a black clan that plots and waits unsuspected among true men – a hidden enemy, far more insidious than any of your modern fifth columns” (38). The foreigner and the racial Other, demonized to make their destruction a righteous crusade, stand apart from “true men.” To these Others Mondrick attributes “the world’s discord,” “the daily news of crime,” and the general “monstrosity of man”; he attributes “the malignant purpose behind misfortune” to *Homo lycanthropus* (38). This theory explains the “tragic division” in each individual, “the realization that your unconscious minds hold wells of black horror,” as the result of lycanthropic taint (38). Not only does the enemy prowl unseen among us, it lurks within us as well, an appalling revelation that, paradoxically, offers comfort: The evil within us does not belong to us, but to the aliens who have tainted humanity with their corruption. As Ken Gelder points out, this kind of fiction focuses upon “revealing an underlying horror which is governing or manipulating events at the surface level,” a horror “barely visible but nevertheless omnipresent” (125). Those few characters possessing the “paranoid consciousness” that enables them to see the hidden truth become the heroes, “measured against other characters who, by contrast, are not paranoid enough” (125, Gelder’s emphasis).

In *Darker Than You Think*, despite the Darwinian rationale for the evolution of the witch-folk, Will’s former friends make no pretense of viewing *Homo lycanthropus* with scientific dispassion. Instead, Will’s colleague, Quain, strives to convert Will to the “paranoid consciousness.” He explains how the “ice-bound nomads” destined to evolve into the witch-folk learned in prehistoric

times to “prey on their more fortunate cousins [ordinary human beings]” (234). In the distant past their “dreadful powers” made them “the hunters and the enemies and the cruel masters of mankind,” in a reign of “degrading, cannibalistic oppression” (235). Quain tops off this emotionally loaded anthropology lesson with the remark that the witch-folk served as models for “every ogre and demon and man-eating dragon of every folk tale” (235), like Maupassant’s *Horla* and C L Moore’s *Shambleau* (also portrayed as the hidden truth behind universal human myths), casting their shadow through legend and superstition. Quain expresses another paranoid fear, the dominant race’s horror of miscegenation. Like other ethnic minorities, the witch-folk are imagined as “strangely passionate,” possessed of hyperpotent sexuality (238). Quain calls the hybridization of the two races an “ugly fact,” which he attributes to “bestial ceremonies in which the daughters of men were forced to take part” (237). The analogy with Caucasian fear of rape by members of “inferior” races is inescapable. In Quain’s view, the “alien inheritance” left from the “terrible past” constitutes a “black river of that monstrous blood . . . in the veins of *Homo sapiens*” (238).

By the time Will hears the full story of humanity’s secret past, the presumption of *Homo lycanthropus*’ unambiguous evil has already been undercut by the protagonist’s discovery that he belongs to that “semi-human race” (233). He perceives his first astral transformation into lupine shape as the breaking of “painful bonds, that he had worn a whole lifetime,” a liberation from his “slow, clumsy, insensitive bipedal body” (96). Aside from the moral quandary associated with killing, his nocturnal adventures with April Bell prove to be positive experiences. He exults in his new-found power, recognizing his human life as “a dim nightmare of bitter compromise and deadly frustration” (151). Capitalizing on his “desperate eagerness for escape,” April tries to convince him that his “old, good friends” – his human friends – are his foes, “grasping every resource of science” to exterminate Will’s own kind (151). In a mirror image of Quain’s diatribe, she portrays her people as victims, not devils. Considering the novel’s 1940 publication date, it is easy to draw a parallel between the lycanthropic species and the Jewish “race,” whose supposed “taint” the Nazi regime attempted to eradicate through systematically “scientific” means.

Yet despite his pleasure in the “hot sweet taste” of blood, Will nevertheless feels “cold and ill” after slaughtering one of his former friends; though he views his physical body as a “narrow, ugly prison,” he feels morally obligated to return to it (156). His final transformation, the death of his body and his release as a vampire, bestows complete liberation. April responds to his initial shock with, “You’re a vampire now, and you might as well learn to like it” (280). And that is essentially what he does. His dilemma of conscience is not so much solved as simply forgotten in the ecstasy of attaining his full powers. He destroys Quain, not as a result of a considered ethical decision, but in pure self-preservation, casting his lot with his nonhuman heritage. The novel’s denouement leaves the reader with a radically ambiguous view of the “good” and “evil” dichotomy between *Homo sapiens* and *Homo lycanthropus*.

Thus Williamson’s text, while initially appearing to endorse the paranoid xenophobia of its ostensible heroes, finally subverts that worldview. The protagonist, and through him the implied narrator and therefore the reader, ultimately sympathizes with the “monsters.”

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