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The Curious Case of Vanessa Ives: The Portrait of a Witch in *Penny Dreadful*

“I see things sometimes. I am affected by forces beyond our world” (Miss Ives, “Ressurrection”).

***Penny Dreadful* as Vanessa’s Journey into the Demimonde**

Penny Dreadful (2014-2015)¹ is a TV show written and created by John Logan that takes the viewers to the Victorian London and revisits some epistolary Gothic literary works, bringing back to life characters such as the charismatic Dracula, Dr. Victor Frankenstein or Dorian Gray. Although remarkably influenced by the plots of these and other Gothic novels of the epoch, it is Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* that stands out as being the fundamental spinal cord of this reanimated literary and visually outstanding visual narrative. Indeed, capturing the sensational thrills provided by the penny dreadful cheaply sold in the streets at that period, the show is also enriched by the superb quality inherent in the characters’ dialogues and sublimely tainted with blood, gore and supernatural horrors.

Emerging from this Gothic narrative’s mist, is the slender figure of Miss Vanessa Ives (Eva Green), the protagonist of the show and one of the characters that John Logan creatively crafted. Emanating strangeness and being the owner of a profound gaze, she is liable to stand out amidst the crowd due to a dress code that verges on steam punk, elegance and lady-like manners. On the other hand, the intricacies of her intellect, her preternatural talents and the aura of mystery that surrounds her like a transparent veil, lend her an enigmatic nature. Always almost dressed in black, as a mournful Madonna, she will lead the viewer towards a painful, magical and dark adventure that can only come to full circle by means of a dramatic *denouement*.

Vanessa Ives dwells with Sir Malcom (Timothy Dalton) at a sumptuous Victorian mansion, located at Grandage Place, Westminster, number 8. Together with the sharp

¹ The scope of this essay only comprehends the first two seasons of *Penny Dreadful*.

gunslinger, Ethan Chandler (Josh Hartnett) and Dr. Victor Frankenstein (Harry Treadaway), the party engages in the harsh mission of saving Mina (Olivia Llewellyn), Sir Malcom's daughter and Vanessa's childhood friend, from the claws of a mysterious supernatural creature, a vampire. In order to accomplish that mission, they are forced to descend to the *demimonde*, a world that mediates between the real and the fantastic.

As the show progresses, the intrigue and the mystery become increasingly centred upon the character of Vanessa Ives, whose mysterious origins appear to date back to the beginning of time.

Miss Ives incarnates an adventurous, bold, refined and inquiring woman, qualities that contribute to define her as an active Gothic heroine. She dynamically integrates the investigation party formed by a league of gentlemen led by Sir Malcom: Victor Frankenstein and Ethan Chandler. However, in the course of the narrative, the viewer realizes that Vanessa is the one being sought by the Prince of Darkness and this fact endows the young woman with yet another role to play: the damsel in distress. Her quest to help Sir Malcom find Mina reveals itself to be essentially a search for her identity. This adventure will put Vanessa's faith in God and her Catholic upbringing to the test as she must come to terms with the fact that the source of the haunting that overwhelms her resides inside her. Throughout the episodes of *Penny Dreadful*, Miss Ives goes through a journey of acceptance: she must come to terms to the fact that she is a witch, but of a different kind. The way whereby Claire Kahane describes the protagonist of a classical Gothic protagonist's adventure echoes the story of Miss Ives,

...a protagonist, typically a young woman whose mother has died, is compelled to seek out the centre of a mystery, while vague a usually sexual threats to her person from some powerful male figure hover on the periphery of her consciousness. Following clues that pull her onward and inward – bloodstains, mysterious sounds – she penetrates the obscure recesses of a vast labyrinthian space and discovers a secret room, sealed off by its association with death (Kahane, 334).

John Logan openly said in an interview that the Gothic show would voice a female story, "I created *Penny Dreadful* to tell the story of a woman grappling with her faith, and the demons inside her. For me, the character of Vanessa Ives is the heart of this series."

In a clever fashion, *Penny Dreadful*'s creator sets out to revise the figure of the witch, endowing her with a composite nature. In order to come up with a classical figure of feminine monstrosity, Logan conflates ancient Goddesses, vampires and demons and

sews them together to create the final feminine version of *Penny Dreadful*'s witch. To spice up the flavours of this Gothic cauldron, Miss Ives can be said to prefigure a devoted Catholic witch, ardently clinging to her faith as she adamantly tries to defeat the demons that haunt her from within. This certainly contributes to render Miss Ives unique and certainly, paraphrasing Dorian Gray (Reeve Carney), "the most mysterious creature of London".

A 'Witchy' New Woman

"Things are so rarely what they seem" (Dorian Gray, "Demimonde").

Miss Ives seems to be the eccentric mixture of the Victorian New Woman² with a witch with psychic abilities. In fact, antipathetic discourses against this New Woman accentuated her alleged sexual promiscuity and her anti-maternal instincts. Depicted on these terms, not only did she represent a menace to the integrity of marriage, but also a danger to the Victorian *status quo* and moral *décorum*. In some written texts of the epoch, this New Woman was said to pursue men as if they were prey, a feature that seems to align her with the vampire (Ledger 13). In this vein, the New Woman, simultaneously a beacon of the feminine *avant-garde* and symbol for decadence, was deeply criticised for desiring more than the promised domestic bliss and for wanting to detach herself from the reproductive duties assigned to her gender. Above all, what men feared was the progressive "masculinization" of the social roles traditionally ascribed to women.

Contributing to this image of Miss Ives as an expression of the ideals behind the New Woman ideology, is the fact that Logan seems to connect her to the figure of the female Victorian writer. In "Close than Sisters," she gives the viewer access to the innumerable letters she has been writing to Mina, still hoping to find her and cure her from the curse that afflicts her. Interestingly these letters strongly resemble the register contained in a sort of private journal.

Miss Ives also displays some peculiar attitudes and behaviours that bring her closer to the opposite gender. She fearlessly walks through perilous neighbourhoods,

² The New Woman was 'christened' in 1894. Although multitudinous articles on the woman question had appeared on the periodical press throughout the 1880s and early 1890s, it was Ouida who extrapolated the now famous – and then infamous – phrase 'the New Woman', from Sarah Grand's essay 'The New aspect of the Woman Question'. (Ledger 9) Sally Ledger adds that this crescent debate then went on in the press, carved a space for this New Woman to emerge and to assume new contours, gathering female sympathizers with her cause.

alone, at night, and she is frequently showed smoking (not tobacco, as she informs Mr. Chandler, but weed, presumably).³

The combination of these characteristics transforms Miss Ives into the figure of what Sandra Lee Bartky classifies as the loose woman. According to Bartky, “her looseness is manifested not only in her morals, but in the manner of speech and quite literally in the free and easy way she moves” (Bartky 134). Moreover, her strong sexual instincts drive her away from the Victorian feminine ideal, inherent in the image of the ‘angel of the house’.⁴ This reluctance towards domesticity is clearly visible in the episode in which Miss Ives is tempted by Lucifer, that appears to her in the form of a doll.⁵ The Prince of Darkness offers her a romantic lifetime of bliss, married to Ethan Chandler, the man she loves, with their children, and Mina and her husband by her side. All happiness thus being achieved at the price of her soul. Not surprisingly, Miss Ives rejects such a tempting offer. In an obviously evocation of celestial heaven, the glimpse of this family bliss conveyed by Satan showcases white as the dominant colour; as if in a dreamy image, all the characters appear dressed in white while a soft light permeates the room where the scene takes place. By now, we all know that white is not definitely Miss Ives predilection and that she rather prefers the intactness of her soul to an eternity spent in a “white” hell.

In “Evil Spirits and Heavenly Spaces”, Miss Ives tells Victor Frankenstein that white is not her colour, which points to the fact that she is the embodiment of a much darker figure. In fact, Vanessa is seen dressed in black, or black and red (black a metaphor for the darkness and red a metaphor for blood), or purple, colours strongly linked to death and martyrdom. The fabric of her dresses is filled with arachnid patterns, an aspect that figuratively drags us back to Vanessa’s other life as an ancient Egyptian Goddess.

³ In fact, one of the most remarkable scenes of Miss Ives pleasurably indulging herself in the habit of smoking appears in the show’s opening credits. In “Grand Guignol” she offers a cigarette to Mr. Chandler, who is accompanying her that evening. In “Closer than Sisters” she evokes the portrayal of a modern writer, as she smokes while she writes.

⁴ Van Franz explains that, “...the demonising of the body was connected to an anxiety over masculine self-identity, and to a male concern with female sexuality. If the body was identified as a dangerous energy within the human subject, female sexuality was similarly seen as a potentially disruptive physical force within the male self.” (Van Franz, 25)

⁵ This fetish-doll, imbued with artificial life, represents Vanessa’s fears. As we will learn in season two, in the episode “Little Scorpion,” the girl feared the dolls that her mother insisted on spreading all over her room. This fear is rooted in Vanessa’s dislike of being looked at, as she tells Mr. Gray, in “Demimonde”. She experiences the same discomfort when she sees herself surrounded by portraits of people at Dorian Gray’s mansion.

By operating as a metaphor for the female darkness, Vanessa's body is transformed into the metaphor of the unknown, the 'dark continent', that fetishized conception engendered by the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. She incarnates the eternal darkness, the void, the opaqueness, the veil that men fear to lift. Dani Cavallaro, in *The Gothic Vision: Three Centuries of Horror, Terror and Fear* (2002), argues that,

Darkness has been invested with negative connotations by many mythologies and religions. Frequently, it is associated with the baser instincts, lack of clarity and order, a pervasive sense of fear and a face of unrelieved sorrow. (...) Christianity damns it by positing in the Devil, the Prince of Darkness, as the enemy of God's Logos (Cavallaro 21).

Indeed, in the episode "Little Scorpion" Miss Ives does experience a brief period of what can be deemed romantic domesticity by Mr. Chandler's side. However, despite their shared underlying complicity, they never get to become physically involved. At this stage, Vanessa knows that a sexual involvement with Chandler can trigger another episode of demonic possession, so she refrains from it.

Reinforcing Vanessa Ives's anti-domestic role, in one of the last episodes of the show, Renfield (Samuel Barnett), adverts Sir Malcom concerning Miss Ives, "She'll never be happy sitting by the fire in your loveless mansion. (...) let this wretched world end and let another begin. The world of the night. The world of the bat, and the owl and the spider. ("The Blessed Dark").

Contrary to Vanessa Ives, Mina Murray represents this angelical Victorian feminine ideal that Vanessa is incapable of integrating within herself. Although Mina has qualities that she admires, Miss Ives cannot identify herself with the feminine docile and submissive image inherent in the "angel of the house" so keen to Mina. As she deeply understands that she can never be like her friend, a feeling that takes root while both girls grow up, she, at an unconscious level, starts rejecting Mina. As they grow older, is perceptible that Vanessa does not stand the idea of losing Mina to a gentleman,⁶ but above all and, as she later confesses, she cannot bear the idea of the innocent Mina getting

⁶ In "Closer than Sisters", the scene in which Vanessa is seen holding Mina while both are on the bed is highly reminiscent of Sheridan Le Fanu's character Carmilla Karnstein. The way Vanessa holds her blond friend denotes a kind of sick and possessive love. Like Carmilla, Vanessa is a female friend that spends almost every day and night at Mina's house. That is the first iconic reference in the show that establishes a direct liaison between the female vampire and the character of Vanessa Ives. Likewise, in this same episode, Mina notices that her friend's preference for predators renders her bloodthirsty.

acquainted with the pleasures of flesh before her. She wishes she was in her place, a “proper woman” whose ambition is to get married and be happy, much like the princess in the traditional fairy tale. Her envious behaviour concerning Mina, turns Vanessa into a villain, since compelled by a selfish motive, she sets out to seduce her best friend’s beloved, Mr. Branson (Joseph Millson). One night, while spending the night at the Murray’s house, Vanessa seduces Mina’s future husband, thus fatally wounding the childhood friendship both girls shared. During the actual intercourse with Mina’s *fiancé*, that morbidly takes place at the taxidermy room, her eyes meet Mina’s eyes, in a contradictory mixture of hopelessness, guilt and triumph.⁷ Symbolically, she can be said to have replicated the forbidden sexual act, the primal scene, she has witnessed in the hedge maze of the Murray’s garden, between her mother and Sir Malcom.⁸

When Sir Malcom denies Vanessa Ives permission to enter their house, she adamantly pleads to make amends with her former best friend. To her despair, the gate is closed. The image where Miss Ives strongly clings to the gate bars is reminiscent of Eve being expelled from Paradise. This closing of the gates is acknowledged by Vanessa as the first step into damnation, as she affirms, “An unforgivable transgression that has marked me for life” (“Closer than Sisters”). The primal scene between her mother and Sir Murray together with her ugly sin, open her psyche’s door, enabling the release of the evil entity that dwells inside it. This episode is invested with a special meaning, because by means of a flashback, we are informed as to the origins of young woman’s troubled life. All in all, “Closer than Sisters” explains how a lady can become a monster.

Actually, Vanessa Ives’s alignment with the monstrous is first suggested in the pilot episode, “Night Work”. When Sir Malcom, Victor Frankenstein and Ethan Chandler, joined by Miss Ives, set out in an expedition to rescue Mina from a dangerous entity, whose true identity they are still not acquainted with, Miss Ives has a close encounter with one of those creatures that dwell in the darkness. In the meanderings of this encounter, the attentive viewer can perceive a clear identification between both,

⁷ The fact that Logan has chosen the taxidermy room for the locus of the primal scene enacted by Vanessa and Mr. Branson not only in symbolic terms reifies the relationship of the female body with death, but it also validates the young girl’s ghoulish appetites, turning her into a deadly night predator.

⁸ As a child, while looking for Mina and Peter in the garden (their usual playground), Vanessa Ives, inadvertently comes across Sir Murray and her mother having sexual intercourse. This scene is crucial to the further development of *Penny Dreadful*, as it provokes a change in the young girl. Logan intentionally positions this scene as the trigger of Vanessa’s curse. This involvement of Mrs. Claire Ives with Mr. Murray also hints at the fact that she and Mina might share the same father.

particularly when they come face to face. When Vanessa puts herself in front of the creature to protect Sir Malcolm, their eyes meet and there is a sort of mutual acknowledgment. The creature becomes sort of hypnotized by Vanessa's gaze and that is what makes possible for Sir Malcolm to kill it.

Something wicked this way comes

“I tried to pray that night and God didn't answer me, but another did.”
(Vanessa Ives, “Closer Than Sisters”)

Miss Ives appears in *Penny Dreadful* as an innovative version of the Victorian female witch. She not only stands for the witch as monster, but she is a Catholic witch afflicted by what she believes is a curse that lies at the heart of her possession episodes. Informing a quintessential gendered monster, the character of the witch enables John Logan to examine the contradictions that surrounded the female role at that specific time and to assess the effects of being different in a society governed by strict moral codes.

Historically, the witch has been featured as the most popular female form of monstrosity, usually appearing in the fairy tales as the infamous villain. Carol F. Karlsen, in *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (1998), contends that the story of witchcraft has effectively trailed an essential feminine path, as the author notes,

The story of witchcraft is primarily the story of women, and this I suspect accounts for much of the fascination and the elusiveness attending the subject. Especially in its Western incarnation, witchcraft confronts us with ideas about women, with fears about women, with the place of women in society, and with women themselves (Karlsen xii).

Monica Germanà adds that throughout the ages the witch has been regarded as a figure that instills fear (65). However, apart from being a beacon for female power, the figure of the witch has also played another role, that of an instrument for managing and curbing conducts which were not seen as socially acceptable. The author depicts the witch in a way that echoes Miss Ives personality, as “a nocturnal, underground force, operating beyond the boundaries of social acceptability” (65). As Renfield accurately remarks, Miss Hives belongs to the underworld, the nocturnal universe of the owl and the bat.

The witch, as a gendered monster, is suffused with potential for subversion as she is liable to shake, question and weaken the structures where patriarchal forces reside. Like

Germanà points out, “The witch, the hysteric, the dangerous woman, then, become metaphors for the destabilizing function of the female expressions free of patriarchal constraints. (...) The witch represents a critical stance against gender categorization. (66) It is no coincidence then, that one of the manifestations of Vanessa’s dark nature takes place precisely in a *séance* that takes place at the Lyle mansion.

Judith Walkkowitz, in *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (1992), contends that women were believed to be endowed with preternatural capacities, since they were more vulnerable than men to the spirits of the underworld. The author observes concerning the psychics of the Victorian period:

Female mediums were receptive vessels for other spirits – who acted as the medium control or ‘guide’ in the spirit world. This form of male impersonation reflected the contradictory dynamic operating around gender in spiritualist circles: women could authoritatively ‘speak spirit’ if they were controlled by others, notably men; their access to male authority was accomplished through the fragmentation of their own personality. (Walkkowitz 177)

The author underlines that the *séance*, a disseminated form of home-based entertainment at the Victorian era, operated as a means of subversion, since it provided a place for the women to speak rather than just being. While possessed by other entities, even at a fictional level, women could freely express themselves not fearing censorship, since the dangerous voice that was coming out of their mouths belonged to something or someone else.

Following her mother’s death, Vanessa abandons her home and indulges in a personal journey of discovery, “I went in search of answers to who I was.” (“Nightcomers). She then heads to the cottage of the Witch of Ballantree Moore. What the young woman encounters though are not easy answers for the dark question marks that hover over her fate. It is during her stay with Joan Clayton, also known as the Cut-Wife, that Vanessa acquires a great amount of knowledge in the arts of darkness. She undergoes an authentic training in witchcraft. She learns to perfect her inner intuition, about herbs and potions and she the divinatory powers of the tarot deck. She also becomes acquainted with her personal totem, the scorpion, a powerful arachnid with suicidal tendencies. This scorpion works as a protective amulet.⁹ Furthermore, the scorpion is also

⁹ In episodes such as “Fresh Hell”, Miss Ives cuts her thumb and, by candlelight, draws the scorpion using her own blood, with the intention to protect Sir Malcom’s mansion from the evil witches, known as nightcomers.

a reminder of Serket, one of the Goddesses that Logan has chosen to be a part of the composite nature of Miss Ives.

But it is not only with the scorpion that Miss Ives becomes acquainted; she also learns about the forbidden language, the idiom spoken by Lucifer, known as the *Verbis Diablo*. Joan Clayton admonishes Vanessa Ives concerning the dangers brought about by speaking such damned a language,

...you must remember, such incantations are dangerous. And you must never speak the devil's language idly. (...) If you believe in God, better you pray with all you got in you. Only if all else fails you speak the devil's tongue. But, mark it, girl, it is a seduction and before you blink twice, it's all you can speak. And so does a Daywalker becomes a Nightcomer ("Nightcomers").

Years later, in the episode "Fresh Hell", while Miss Ives is in a carriage with Ethan Chandler, these evil witches make their appearance. She then confronts them using the same language as they speak, the so-called *Verbis Diablo*. When asked how she learned that dialect, she replies it came to her instinctively, adding that she does not remember the meaning of the spoken words. This fact attests that something wicked is part of Vanessa, something that has the potential to be awakened whenever she is faced with danger, or whenever she must come to grips with strong emotions.

The cut-wife of Balantree Moore also shows Vanessa a powerful relic, a book which has a glyph on the side, claiming that it is the most cursed of the existing texts. She adds that it is a forbidden text because it contains the poetry of death. She exhorts the young woman never to open that evil book, unless she is before an overwhelming threat and her God cannot help her anymore, "If ever the day comes when my little scorpion is crushed and beaten, if her God deserts her completely, only then does she open it. And on that day, she will never be the same. She will have gone away from God forever" ("Nightcomers").

The older witch senses danger in Vanessa. She informs her that she has born with a gift, "You always been like you are, even as a little thing" ("Nightcomers"). This means that Miss Ives is a natural-born witch.

In truth, Miss Ives is a different kind of witch. She stands as a hybrid and complex character. She is a witch with all her traditional attributes, but she is also a vampire. Moreover, she is possessed by the ancient soul of a powerful feminine Goddess. Overall, she is the place where forces of the natural and the supernatural conflate. Apart from

being a metaphor for a femininity which is never deciphered, she stands as an original character, a female lever that impels the narrative towards its closure. *Penny Dreadful* begins and ends with Vanessa's body.

Leafing Through Vanessa's Gothic Body

“In our dolorous old bestiary, she's a truly...unique creature.”
(Ferdinand Lyle, “Glorious Horrors”)

Penny Dreadful, as the name of the show indicates, bears a strong concern both with textuality and discursiveness. The name Vanessa Ives constitutes itself an enigma. In a metaphorical dimension, the name Vanessa can be read as a synonym both of literary invention and creativity, because it was a designation that sprang out of a poet's imagination.¹⁰ In turn, the surname Ives recalls the term “eyes” or the expression “I'ves” which literally points toward someone who has more than one identity. The symbolism of the eyes is likewise connected to the Egyptian goddess. Interestingly, if we join the two words “miss” and “ives” we get “missives” which can be translated as messages. In Vanessa's case in all probability we are talking about messages from the so-called *demimonde*.

The body of the creature that they manage to kill and take to Victor Frankenstein's lab for an autopsy comports a text, it is a sort of book of flesh. When the doctor, with the help of his scalpel, removes the first layer of the creature's skin, what he names exoskeleton, he comes up with a set of symbols, more precisely, Egyptian hieroglyphs that form a sort of manuscript. Sir Malcom then decides to take the pieces of text to Mr. Ferdinand Lyle for him to analyse, since he is an expert on Egyptian art, at the British Museum. Ferdinand Lyle identifies some prophetic messages in the skin removed from the creature's corpse. He says that those pieces of text should not be shown to anyone, as they contain something rare. They depict Amunet and Amun-Ra together. According to

¹⁰ The origin of the name Vanessa is attributed to the Anglo-writer Jonathan Swift. He created it as an anagram for his close friend Esther Vanhomrigh. It appeared written for the first time in his poem “Cadenus and Vanessa” (1713). Afterwards, this name was used to name a species of butterfly. Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert refer, “It is significant... that Jonathan Swift's disgust with the monstrous females who populate so many of his verses seem to have been caused by the inexorable failure of female art. (...) Swift projects his horror of time, his dread of physicality, on to another stinking creature – the degenerate woman. (...) what emerges from his most furious poems... is a horror of female flesh and a revulsion at the inability – the powerlessness – of female arts to redeem or transform the flesh. Thus, for Swift female sexuality is consistently equated with degeneration, disease and death...” (Gubar & Gilbert 31). Probably these facts explain why John Logan decided to fuse Swift's admiration for Vanessa with the other side of his personality who looked down upon women.

the Egyptians, those two entities could never appear together, otherwise it would signal the end of the days, in other words, it would certainly bring the apocalypse upon the world.

Lyle explains to Sir Malcom that Amunet was the consort of Amun-Ra. He informs that Amun-Ra “was the first Hidden One. The original serpent prince. So named not for any particular reptilian qualities, but for the power of rebirth; like a snake shedding its skin. Everlasting, perpetual life Sustained by feeding on the souls of others” (“Little Scorpion”). He warns him that Amunet, much like Miss Ives, had a monster hidden within.

As aforementioned, the name Vanessa underpins a literary invention. Metaphorically, she can be said to inform a dubious textual character. On the one hand she represents an outwardly text, but on the other, she possesses an unconscious text which is claimed by an ancient creature; a repressed piece of literature yearning to be released.

The space where *Penny Dreadful* displays its dangerous adventures is actually the space where classical Gothic novels flourish, in the *demimonde*, to which Vanessa refers to when talking to Ethan Chandler. The *demimonde* announces the cracks in the symbolic order as it challenges the mind deeply entrenched in rational and logical precepts. As so, it constitutes a duplicitous location whose frontiers are not clearly defined.

Interestingly, the story that they are deciphering through the decoding of the Egypt hieroglyphs and through the relics left by a monk possessed by the Demon, is Vanessa’s story; unknowingly, they are digging into her past and delving into her future. Much like an Egyptian papyrus, she is a hieroglyphic text waiting to be deciphered. The story is not only written beneath the vampire’s exoskeleton, it is also written inside her, told by her alternative voice which comes to life whenever she is possessed.¹¹

It is likewise remarkable how Vanessa Ives shows an authorial voice in *Penny Dreadful*. She holds an assertiveness that brings her quite closer to narcissism. When Ethan Chandler asks to speak to Sir Malcom, she promptly affirms that she can speak for

¹¹ Valdine Clemens claims that the Gothic has always implicit a collapsed of the civilized and the emergence of primal fearful energies that inhabit ancient worlds. The author contends that Gothic tales and horror films essentially “stress the fragility of civilized constraints on human behaviour and demonstrate that the world is much older and less anthropocentric than we would like to think” (Clemens, 4) *Penny Dreadful* explores these fragilities of the civilised world, as the phenomenon of possession unites antique mythology and historical lore with primal forces of a preternatural nature.

him. In another scene, in “Closer Than Sisters”, Sir Malcom inquires Miss Ives about her part in the mission to rescue Mina, to what Vanessa dryly replicates, “My part is my own”.

Although Miss Ives’s friend, Dorian Gray, can conceive an accurate profile of her personality, she still has the power of leaving him intrigued since she persists as a mystery he cannot fully apprehend. When he is at his mansion with Ethan Chandler, he proposes a toast to the most mysterious creature in London, nothing else than Miss Ives. In the episode “Nightcomers”, despite Joan Clayton’s powerful intuition, she cannot discern whether Vanessa has a good or evil heart. Apparently, Miss Ives represents an enigma, not only for herself, but for the others alike.

Although Miss Ives is an articulated and educated witch, who displays an almost “Sherlokian” way of reasoning, it is her body that speaks volumes. Indeed, the body of Miss Ives when battling her inner demon in “Possession”, subscribes to the iconography of a body on the brim of collapse, a deeply traumatized body that is caught at the maelstrom between good and evil. Once possessed, Vanessa Ives’s becomes almost unrecognizable, all bloodied, as a result of scratching her skin; she is pale, anorectic-like and substantially weak. At Sir Malcom’s mansion, the room where she stays is rendered a living hell: windows shatter, lamps explode, the wallpaper is all ripped out; everything trembles such is the force of the female demon that lies within Miss Ives, confirming that “...it is the female body in the grips of out of control ecstasy that has offered the most sensational sight” (Williams 4).

Intriguingly, when possessed, Vanessa Ives releases not only her sexual instincts, but also her propensity for cannibalism. In “Closer than Sisters” she almost eats the psychiatrist’s face and in “Possession” she bites the priest’s face. The scene in which she is seen making love to Dorian Gray also explores feminine sexuality as monstrous, since the scene suggests a certain degree of cannibalism; after all, the viewer witnesses the young witch cutting and ingesting the blood that pours from Dorian’s wounds.

In this light, Judith Halberstam, in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995), professes that the monster is intimately tied in with the process of emergence of another identity, and identity that was previously repressed. Halberstam observes, “The monster is the product and the symbol for the transformation of identity into sexual identity through the mechanism of failed repression.” (Halberstam 9) The demon(ess) that Miss Ives tries to keep throughout *Penny Dreadful* under a strict control is, by means of possession, unleashed and spills all her horrors onto the onlookers. In

Vanessa Ives's curious case, the *döppelgänger(in)* is depicted as an endogenous phenomenon.

In hindsight, Vanessa struggle to recover her friend Mina from Dracula's claws was always her personal journey; it was her story being unfolded, being written in the course of each episode. By venturing down the tortuous and bloody paths of *Penny Dreadful*, Vanessa Ives's lifetime discovery is that the demonic presence that threatens her is her lover of antiquity, Lucifer/Amun-Ra, in the form of the blood-sucking monster, Dracula.¹²

As Claire Kahane remarks, "Gothic fiction encourages the heroine to explore the limits of identity" (Kahane 342). The exploration of Miss Ives's identity comes at a high price: reminiscent of other Gothic heroines, she will have to endure much physical and psychological suffering and will be forced to test the strength of her personal integrity.

Therefore, Miss Ives is not only a merely discursive and textual witch; she displays a magnetic physical quality that will eventually engrave her sensationalist biographical account upon her body, like a story taken from the bloodiest pages of a *Penny Dreadful*.

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¹² Dracula appears in the third season of *Penny Dreadful* as Dr. Alexander Sweet (Christian Camargo), the elegant and refined gentleman in charge of the Department of Zoology, in the London Museum of Natural History.

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