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The Human Body in Contemporary Literatures in English

Cultural and Political Implications

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The human body is a recurrent theme in contemporary literatures in English. The aim of this collection of essays is to explore its multiple representations and functions within a wide range of texts drawn together from various Anglophone cultures. For thematic coherence, this volume is divided into four parts: Diseased Bodies, Invented Bodies, Gendered and Transgender Bodies, and Fragmented and Mutilated Bodies. By adopting multi-disciplinary perspectives, each group of essays illustrates the different ways in which these become multiply signifying sites of cultural and political representation, whether the mode is realistic or daringly speculative and fantastic, as in the case of genetically designed bodies, monstrous and machine bodies. This book contributes to understanding the body as a culture-specific construct.

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**Mutilation and Monsters:
Transcending the Human in Garth Ennis/Steve Dillon's *Preacher***

Julia Round

Introduction

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the human body has never appeared more mutable. Clothing, hairstyles, and even the flesh itself may be altered freely, and manners or customs are now of little help in establishing any constant meaning. Indeed, class and gender roles are, at least superficially, deemed obsolete, as evidenced by labels such as 'celebrity chavs', 'ladettes' and 'metro-sexuals'.

In this context the body has never been more important – yet simultaneously less reliable – as a signifier. Within postmodern society's focus upon surfaces and aesthetics it has become a tool for self-expression: the only constant present upon which we can write our identity. However, its limitations may now be amended, its features modified, and its entire status redefined upon a moment's notice. In both these senses it exists in constant flux, simultaneously an indicator of identity and a constantly changing smokescreen.

Using examples drawn from the comic-book series *Preacher*, this article considers the limitations of the material body within the contexts of the monstrous and the human. It examines gender mutability (both behavioural and aesthetic) within the feminine body and concludes as to its effects on conceptions of the female and human. It proceeds to an examination of the monstrous body, considering the role of gendering in defining the (in)human. Finally, it explores instances of mutilation as a mechanism for transcendence – of gender, of the body, and, ultimately, of humanity itself. It concludes by reflecting upon the socio-political implications of these processes and the ways in which *Preacher* is enabled to transcend the limitations of genre.

Preacher, published by DC Vertigo, is one of the most daring and controversial series to emerge from the 1990s American mainstream comics industry. It tells the story of Jesse Custer, a small-town Texan minister who is slowly losing his faith until he merges with Genesis, a disembodied but powerful force. Kept captive in heaven for years, Genesis takes up residence in Jesse's consciousness, giving him the power of the 'Word of God' – a voice nobody can disobey – and also the knowledge that God has, in fact, quit and nobody in Heaven knows where he is.

is a misleading metaphor and that much of what we take to be internal is in fact constructed, or at the very least transformed through the interiorising process ("Preface", p. 95).

Other contemporary postmodern theories of gender⁴ also view the concept as constructed and refute the idea that it is exclusively connected to feminism or directly corresponds to biological sex. Terrell Carver argues that the term can help "to make visible the ambiguities of sexuality, orientation, choice and change that have been undercover for centuries",⁵ and postulates many different ways of mapping gender by utilising these concepts. His process relies upon considering various meanings of gender with reference to behaviour or sexuality, and it results in a postmodern definition of the term that allows for multiple options. This also draws on the principles of Foucault's work, which notes multiple ways of defining sex depending on the context (*Will to Knowledge*, p. 153).

Carver traces the meaning of the term 'gender' from its original use as something distinct from sex, when it was used to express "normal or characteristic ways of being of the male or female sex, called masculine and feminine [... that] are socially learnt rather than biologically determined" ("Gender", p. 21). Mapping this meaning of gender onto biological sex produces four genders: masculine men, masculine women, feminine men and feminine women. Gender then developed a further meaning with reference to the expression of sexuality, which produces a maximum of four genders: homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality and celibacy. However, if these concepts of gender-as-orientation are mapped back onto concepts of gender-as-sex then there may be up to eight genders, and sixteen if gender-as-behaviour is also incorporated.

In many of these instances biological sex becomes meaningless as a definition of gender identity and is transcended. This brief summary of Carver's work shows that gender can be defined in a number of different ways and that, in fact, there may be an almost infinite number of genders once we accept that the term is cultural. This article will now briefly summarise the possibilities of the comics medium in creating conflicting gendered discourses through a reverse iconography, before moving to close analysis of that medium.

The Comics Medium

As will be seen, *Preacher* uses gendered and material bodies to juxtapose and invert notions of the human and the monstrous, allowing for the resulting characters to be read as various socio-political allegories. The medium of comics has a vital role in achieving these effects as the text uses and exploits the tenets of comics' narratology to this end. These strategies include the creation of a successful interplay between words and illustrations (wedded in the comic-book

Together with his ex-girlfriend Tulip and the vampire Cassidy, Jesse sets out on a bizarre road trip to track down God and make Him take responsibility for His creation. They soon discover the Grail: a military organisation that has protected the lineage of Christ for centuries, intending to bring Armageddon down on earth and produce the new saviour. Jesse's new power makes him first choice for this role and the trio soon run into conflict, both with Grail leader Herr Starr and with Jesse's all-too-dysfunctional family.

Incorporating both natural and supernatural figures and events, *Preacher* transgresses its own genre expectations – at once a love story, a religious satire, a western and a 'buddy movie'. The result is a multi-generic, X-rated work of black humour, horror and social commentary that tests the limitations of concepts of gender, genre and the human in various ways.

Preacher's shock elements and 'lad's mag' humour hide its real agenda of social commentary. An essential aspect of this addresses notions of the human body – with reference to both its mutability and the impact of this on the identity discourses (and reverse discourses) surrounding it. Using a critical focus drawn from the work of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Terrell Carver, Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed, this paper examines the construction of three of the *Preacher* characters: Gran'ma, Cassidy and Herr Starr.

Critical Background

Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* may be defined as a counter-narrative to the popular historical view of Victorian sexual repression giving way to liberation and enlightenment in the twentieth century. Foucault's work rejects this 'repressive hypothesis' and explores the ways in which sexuality can be defined as cultural rather than natural, viewing the body as a metaphor on which history imprints cultural values. His focus is on the shift of emphasis by which aberrant sexualities are no longer viewed in terms of forbidden acts but instead as scientifically determined *conditions*,¹ which enables him to argue that sexuality should be viewed as a constructed and discursive category rather than as a discovered identity.

Foucault's theories inform Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, where she argues that gender is *performative* – an effect created through the repetition of certain acts and signifying practices. As "an ongoing discursive practice",² gender is without origin or end, and its processes construct the materiality of the body. Butler has emphasised in her later work that the cultural performances that create gender are not subject to deliberate choice – we do not select our gender daily with conscious action – but her model maintains that "... what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality".³ Consequently, it may be possible that the notion of the internal psyche

panel), and the role of the reader in constructing the complete story by providing the 'hidden' events in the gutters between panels, filling the space of literature.

Comic creator and critic Will Eisner comments that the cartoon style of comic-book art "makes it easier to digest and adds to humour".⁶ Just as cartooning works by exaggerating and simplifying images, visual stereotyping is often used in comic-book art as an aid to clarity: "it is inherent to narrative art that the requirement on the viewer is not so much analysis as recognition" (*Comics and Sequential Art*, p. 38). Traditionally, in comics the words and images align in the pursuit of easily recognisable character types and situations.

Some of the *Preacher* characters are recognisable archetypes. For example, the Saint of Killers could have been taken straight out of any Western and, in fact, he represents a combination of Clint Eastwood and Lee Marvin. The series' writer, Garth Ennis, describes the character as Clint Eastwood

... specifically in his later movies, the long coat, the wide-brimmed hat, the old Colt revolvers, but Steve [Dillon, *Preacher* artist] preferred Lee Marvin and that's why you've got this character who I always think moves, speaks and has all the mannerisms of Eastwood but has that kind of handsome ugliness that Lee Marvin had.⁷

However, iconography is generally exploited, subverted or discarded by the *Preacher* creators. Even before their fall, angels in *Preacher* curse, bicker and get drunk. Speaking of that battle, DeBlanc says "I FUCKED OFF TO THE CELLARS AND HID IN A BARREL OF BRANDY" (*Alamo*, p. 21.1).⁸ Sex, drink and drugs not surprisingly feature even more heavily in their behaviour once upon Earth (*Alamo*, p. 13.3-4). Similarly, and despite many instances of irreverent behaviour, Jesse continues to wear his ministerial collar throughout the series.

Throughout *Preacher*, Ennis and Dillon subvert much of comics' iconography in this way, rejecting the industry's traditional reliance upon visual stereotyping as an aid to clarity. Their method plays expertly with the comics medium by using its dependence on both the interplay between words and pictures – in this instance, a character's expressed personality versus their appearance – and the expectations of the reader, which are set up and knocked down repeatedly. This article will examine the effects created by these subversive gendered discourses (whether of sexuality, behaviour or appearance) on the material body.

The Monstrous Human: Gran'ma

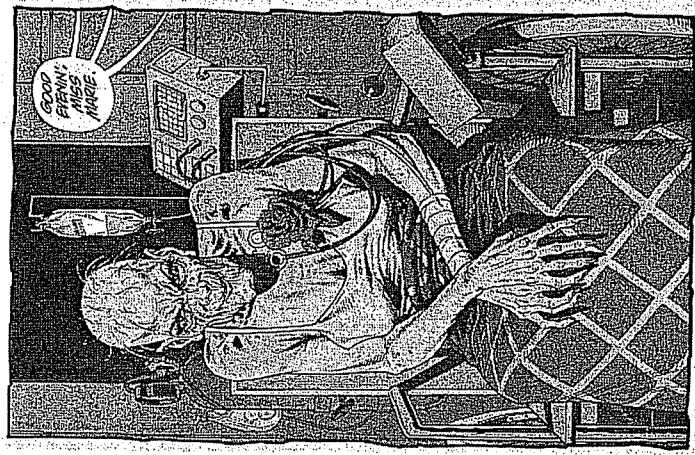


Fig. 1: Gran'ma (*UTEOTW*, p. 25)
© 1995 Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon

Responsible for the murder of Jesse's parents and for recurrent sadistic punishments throughout his childhood, Gran'ma is inhumane rather than human. However, visual strategies complicate her depiction. She is not drawn as completely sexless or masculine, but as femininity gone wrong, almost completely bald and wheelchair-bound; her strappy nightgown, polished nails and the red rose she wears only serve to accentuate the ugliness of her condition (see fig. 1).

By foregrounding her age and frailty, her gendering emphasises her humanity and mortality. This contrasts with more traditional interpretations of witches where gendering is often destabilised in order to undermine notions of humanity. The female monster has often been depicted as startlingly manly, for example in the works of Salvatore Rosa or Francisco de Goya, whose heavily

muscled witches have more in common with ogres than with old women. Alternatively, gender is undermined in other ways, for example by the addition of warts or the unnatural exaggeration of some features. Joseph Campbell comments that motifs such as the "long fingers and nose of the witch" create the "phallic mother".⁹ In this way, unstable or inverted gender motifs are used to dehumanise and create the female monster.

Despite the undermining of her femininity through baldness, Gran'ma's overall depiction uses her gender to emphasise her mortality. However, she remains a woman far removed from society's notions of femininity, and in this sense *Preacher* tests the limitations of gender identity. To return to Terrell Carver's model and terminology: Gran'ma's biological sex is female but, while her appearance may also be defined as female (in her clothing and obvious physical weakness), her expressed behaviour may be considered male, since her language and power are at odds with traditional definitions of femininity. For example, upon capturing Jesse and Tulip, Gran'ma promises him that

YOU'LL BE LEFT ALONE WITH HER TELL DAWN, BECAUSE GRAN'MA LOVES YOU AND WANTS YOU TO KNOW TRUE HAPPINESS... / AND THEN, BECAUSE GRAN'MA WANTS YOU TO KNOW THAT SHE'S IN CHARGE FOREVER... / JODY WILL BLOW THE LITTLE BITCH'S BRAINS OUT.¹⁰

As this statement shows, Gran'ma relies on her male entourage for all of her strength, as Jesse informs Tulip "... THEY BEEN SERVIN' MY GRAN'MA'S FAMILY SINCE TIME MEANT SHIT" (*UTEOTW*, p. 39.1). This again emphasises her femininity and weakness.

The transgressive, paradoxical nature of Gran'ma's gendering is used to emphasise this horror, both visually, as detailed above, and textually, as when Tulip says to Jesse "YOU WOKE ME, YELLING AT YOUR... AT HER" (*UTEOTW*, p. 29.2) – unable to name their captors as 'family' and resorting to labelling Gran'ma as a 'nameless thing', only identifiable as female. Gran'ma is all the more terrifying for being a subversion of femininity, rather than sexless or masculine. Through a display of systematic child abuse, *Preacher* desecrates any maternal expectations we may have, stressing the cultural nature of these gender assumptions.

In many ways Gran'ma's depiction aligns with Barbara Creed's notion of the 'monstrous-feminine'. Creed argues against contemporary society's visual depiction of the female in horror, which she claims is conceptualised as victim, and instead applies psychoanalytic theory to the notion of the female reproductive body. She defines this body as the prototype for all definitions of the monstrous – not because it has been castrated, but because it might castrate.¹¹

Creed analyses previous approaches to the female monster as falling into various categories: woman as man's castrated Other, as part of a male monstrosity, or simply the exclusion of such figures from the text. She in fact rejects the term 'female monster' on the grounds that this implies its referent to be the opposite of the male monster. This is not the case, since the reasons why it horrifies are quite different, and her term seeks instead to emphasise the importance of gender in the construction of monstrosity (*Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 3). Creed's argument hinges on redefining the female figure as castrator rather than as the Freudian castrated Other, reinterpreting Freud's "Little Hans" case study by highlighting the child's use of a knife to symbolise his mother's absent male genitalia (p. 88). She uses the resulting new model to establish the monstrous-feminine in its various forms, all of which, she notes, contain the strongest references to mothering and reproductive functions (p. 7).

Her observations certainly apply to Gran'ma, whose horror stems most strongly from a perversion of the maternal and familial. Her named identity ('Gran'ma') calls attention to these aspects of her character, our expectations of which are then desecrated. Her maternal status is warped both physically ("... YOU AIN'T GONNA BELIEVE THIS, BUT THE OLD BITCH HAD MY MUM WHEN SHE WAS SIXTY." [*UTEOTW*, p. 40.6]), and behaviourally ("WHATEVER IT TAKES TO KILL YOUR OWN KID -- TO COLD-BLOODEDLY DECIDE, THE GIRL'S NO USE ANY MORE [...] / GRAN'MA HAS IT" [*UTEOTW*, pp. 51.6-52.1]).

Creed's monstrous-feminine employs Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, which represents which is opposed to the self. Created by a disruption of "identity, system, order",¹² it is a horror that dissembles the personal. Kristeva cites examples such as food loathing or the figure of the corpse, identifying the expulsion of self via bodily fluids (blood, pus, vomit, excrement and so forth). Creed applies this model to both the images (corpses, blood and so forth) and the processes of horror; the latter via the linguistic import of terms such as "it scared the shit out of me" or "it made me sick" (*Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 10).

Kristeva links the process of abjection to maternal authority via the excremental, which threatens identity from outside, and the menstrual, which threatens from within (*Powers*, p. 12). While Gran'ma's unnatural pregnancy provokes abjection via the menstrual, her punishments also invoke the abject via the excremental. As children, both Jesse and his mother are subjected to the coffin' – sealed into a box with only a tube to breathe through and sunk to the bottom of the swamp for periods of days or weeks. While the process of entombing obviously recalls the image of the corpse, abjection via the excremental is also apparent as Jesse recalls "... THE STINK OF MY SHIT AN' PUKE AN' PLS5..." (*UTEOTW*, p. 54).

In this manner the visual depiction of Gran'ma's character uses the notion of femininity and, more specifically, of the maternal to emphasise her mortality and humanity, which is then contrasted with her monstrous behaviour. In this case, the visual attributes of the material body stand in opposition to the identity discourse formed by her actions, and that which is unmistakably human and mortal is shown to be simultaneously evil and monstrous.

The Humane Monster: Cassidy

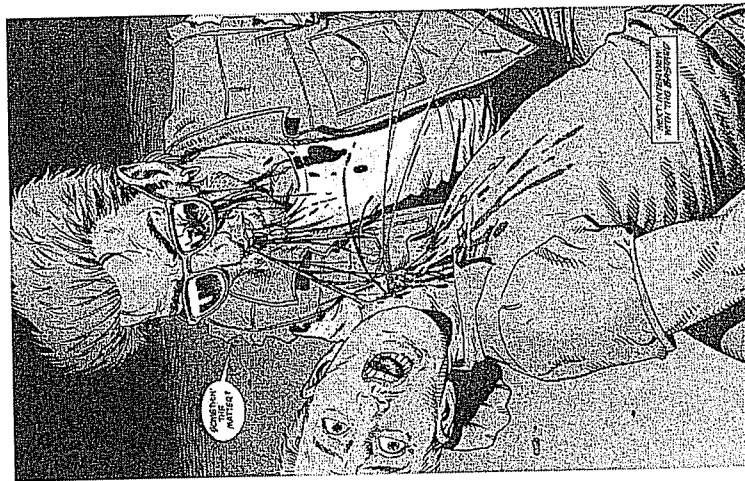


Fig. 2: Cassidy (GTT, p. 74)
© 1995 Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon

Ennis and Dillon's depiction of the Irish vampire Cassidy also uses a model of gendering to undermine expectations of both genre and gender, and thereby comments on the construction of both these concepts. Generically, the vampire

is the most sexual of all creatures of horror, immersed in myths of debauchery and violence. *Preacher* tests the limits of these parameters as its creators use Cassidy to invoke the surrounding twentieth-century vampire tradition – a genre that is currently the province of writers such as Anne Rice or Poppy Z. Brite.

Early folklore depicts the vampire as

... exceedingly gaunt and lean with a hideous Countenance [...] the nails are always curved and crooked [...] the quicks dirty and foul with clots and gouts of black blood. His breath is unbearably fetid and rank with corruption, the stench of the charnel.¹³

In contrast to this bestial version, the twentieth-century vampire is sexual, decadent and humanised. Modern media have broken down the Manichaean element in their portrayal still further: whereas Carol Senf notes that Dracula "is never seen objectively and never permitted to speak for himself",¹⁴ vampire narrators feature in Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) and *The Vampire Lestat* (1985). Recent films such as *Blade* (1998), where a half-vampire protects humankind, support this further, as does Rice's portrayal of the sensitive and reluctant vampire Louis in *Interview*. As Fred Botting comments: "The vampire is no longer absolutely Other."¹⁵

The vampire figure has thereby been brought closer to humanity, progressing from a simple outsider to an internalised element that represents our darkest impulses. Botting describes Dracula as "a pure inversion [...] the mirror and shadow of Victorian masculinity, a monstrous figure of male desire that distinguishes what men are becoming from what they should become" (*Gothic*, p. 149). As such, contemporary vampires are characterised by Otherness and torment, and enabled to transcend human biological and social rules, including those relating to gender.

Traditionally, vampiric feeding is associated with sex: biting almost always takes place on the neck, and as such is reminiscent of kissing. The stereotype of a virginal female victim and accounts of feeding as an ecstatic activity emphasise this parallel, as does the penetration associated with biting. Defining the vampire bite as a form of sexual penetration is at the root of the transgendered, debauched vampire stereotype: the male vampires must of necessity have been bitten or penetrated at their creation, while female vampires become able to penetrate.

This generic double-gendering of vampires is at the root of their extra-human nature, and is often represented visually by the androgynous deadly beauty that has become the stereotypical image of both male and female vampires. Modern films such as *The Lost Boys* (1987) or *Near Dark* (1987), and books such as Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* series, draw on these qualities and depict their vampires as transgressive, decadent, glamorous creatures – with

which *Preacher* invites comparison, for example by use of the caption "NEXT: INTERVIEW WITH THE *BASTARD*"¹⁶ when we first discover that Cassidy is one of the undead (see fig. 2).

By contrast, Cassidy's gendering is more complicated; subversive rather than transgressive. While, as a non-human, his biological sex is moot (which is evidenced in the comic by his healing after a brutal castration),¹⁷ both his appearance and his behaviour are humanised and strongly gendered towards the masculine. Heavy drinking, fighting and bed-hopping appear to be his three main activities. He is "...THIS REAL 24/7 PARTY GUY, HUNDRED PERCENT ATTITUDE"¹⁸.

Similarly, while his sexual history might technically be described as bisexual, this does not equate with the vampiric transcendence of human sexuality as discussed above. Cassidy consistently expresses his sexuality as heterosexual ("I JUST LIKE A FUCKIN' MASSIVE BIG PAIR 'VE TITS, MESELF" [DF, p. 143.4; see also DF, p. 21.1]), even though it transpires that he has a history of male prostitution in exchange for heroin.¹⁹ Although without pleasure as motivation it is possible to separate these acts from the sphere of sexuality, Cassidy is perhaps best seen as a figure of human excess, in contrast to the supernatural Otherness more usually associated with vampires. While he is a sexual character, these encounters are depicted as drunken one-night stands rather than lust-crazed feedings, and he generally only feeds during bar fights (as in fig. 2).

As Cassidy says:

BLOOD 'S BLOOD, ISN'T IT? DOESN'T MATTER IF YEH GET IT FROM A LAMB CHOP, SO LONG AS YEH GET YER FILL. / NO NEED FOR KILLIN' AT ALL, REALLY. UNLESS SOME PRICK TRIES TO DO FOR YOU, IN WHICH CASE YEH MAY AS WELL GO AHEAD AN' TREAT YERSELF.²⁰

Consequently, his vampirism is redefined in terms of violence rather than sex: although Cassidy has tried to feed on his female lovers in the past, this is characterised as out of desperation, not choice, and ends in violence (*AHAC*, p. 162.1-4).

It could be argued that Cassidy's choosing to feed violently on men over feeding sexually on women indicates an undisclosed homosexuality, which is supported by the presence of homosexual acts in his past. However, without further evidence it seems more likely that the separation of Cassidy's feeding from his sexuality is a device that enables Ennis to create a non-standard vampire: one that can remain human in his behaviour, appearance and desires.

As in the case of Gran'ma, humanisation is achieved through presentation of a strongly gendered performance. By replacing the sexual aspect of vampiric

feeding (which reflects its transcendence of social rules) with a human perspective (which equates the vampiric act with violence), *Preacher* uses gender to redefine the genre.

Within *Preacher* Cassidy is also contrasted against another vampire, Eccarius, enabling Ennis and Dillon to bounce their ideas off the *Dracula* myth. As a vampire who has only been dead for ten years, Eccarius has based his behaviour and lifestyle religiously upon all the various multimedia versions of vampires offered by twentieth-century life. Eccarius's library is composed exclusively of Stoker, de Sade, and Shelley, and he is the postmodern, intertextual embodiment of the gothic and vampiric.

Throughout *Preacher* the creators use Cassidy to satirise the stereotypes of the vampire tradition through his perceptions of Eccarius and the "PACK OF PONCEY GOTHIC RICH-KID WANNABES" (DF, p. 25.6) who follow him. Cassidy and Eccarius tear apart the *Dracula* myth: "DID YEH EVER TRY JUMPIN' OFF A ROOF AN' TURNIN' INTO A BAT? OR RIDIN' MOON-BEAMS AS A CLOUD OF DUST? / I TRIED THE BAT THING ONCE. / BROKE BOTH MY FUCKING LEGS" (DF, p. 35.4-6). However, in the process Ennis does use Cassidy to state his own vampire rules as he comments: "...WHAT'VE WE GOT TO FEAR EXCEPT THE SUN?" (DF, p. 36.6). Read this way, *Preacher* may be setting itself up as a metanarrative, redefining the vampire myth, a theory that is supported by Cassidy's subversive gendering. The text's parodic elements support this meta-fictional interpretation: *Preacher* can be read as overtly satirising the vampiric myth while simultaneously redefining it obliquely.

However, if *Preacher* does try and set itself up as contemporary vampire lore, then this is cleverly subverted throughout. A running gag throughout *Preacher* refers to Cassidy's eyes: he always wears sunglasses, and the three or four times these are removed during the series always provokes a shaken "OH MY GOD WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOUR EYES"²¹ from whoever is there. We accept this as part of Ennis's vampire myth. However, in the final showdown the truth is revealed: Cassidy's eyes are simply incredibly puffy and bloodshot, presumably as a consequence of seventy-five years of solid alcoholism. This sort of let-down gag prevents us from reading *Preacher* as serious vampire myth, debunking its metafiction.

The simple fact that Cassidy is one of the most human characters in *Preacher*, weak, fallible and prone to mistakes, also undermines any notions of a definitive rewriting of the vampire myth. As his actions are discussed and defined in human terms ("DO YEH THINK HITTING A WOMAN IS THE KIND 'VE NOT FOR ME, ANYWAY" [*Alamo*, p. 137.3]), it becomes impossible for us to view him outside these parameters. This is despite irrefutable evidence to the contrary

(i.e. his vampirism) and statements that explicitly align him with the inhuman: "YEH'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO HIT WOMEN. / YEH DO IT AN' YEH'RE ONE OF THE MONSTERS..." (*Alamo*, p. 138.3-4).

Despite the inhuman body he wears ("YOU'RE A[n] ANIMAL THINKS IT'S A MAN" [*AHAC*, p. 183.4]), Cassidy's characterisation constantly aligns with the human. On the one occasion we do see him looking truly monstrous – naked, with wasted greying flesh and chewing on a dead rat (*AHAC*, p. 164.1) – it transpires that this state has in fact arisen from heroin addiction, a particularly human cause. It should also be noted that he speaks as usual in this scene ("JUST GIVE'S A MINUTE. BE RIGHT WITH YEH" [*AHAC*, p. 164.2]), and his accent and colloquial phrasing emphasise his human nature over his animal appearance. It is ironic that *Preacher*'s only true monster should prove its most human character, and this is emphasised on the literal level as Cassidy is restored to humanity at the end of the series.

Cassidy's accent emphasises his human nature over his monstrous body, while also evoking the Irish vampiric tradition (as in the work of J. S. Le Fanu or Bram Stoker). However, as an Irish immigrant he may also be read as a figure of political allegory, for Ennis might be using Cassidy's contradictory status to redefine the notion of the immigrant, not as 'alien' (that is, monster), but instead as human. As an Irish writer working within the North American industry, Ennis is writing from a similar perspective and therefore this reading may also have metafictional relevance.

Ennis uses strongly gendered bodies to explore the human/monster dichotomy in both Gran'ma and Cassidy. Rather than subscribing to the transgressive sexuality and double-gendering of the traditional vampire figure, Cassidy's gendering instead connects him with the human. His resolution "I THINK I'LL TRY ACTIN' LIKE A MAN" (*Alamo*, p. 220.5) is the conclusion of the entire *Preacher* series, and this phrase implies that his humanisation has been achieved through performativity – by adopting a gender role that is both 'male' and 'of mankind'. Gender performativity such as this conforms to the model proposed by Judith Butler, who, as noted, defines the body as a *signifying practice*, arguing that the effect of gender is created by the repetition of certain acts.

This view of gender as a constructed category, not a natural state, follows from Michel Foucault's view of the body as a material metaphor upon which history imprints cultural values. Whether or not we accept an interpretation of Cassidy as political allegory, using this performative model prevents *Preacher*'s treatment of Cassidy from becoming a generic vampire myth and, in this sense, gender transgression enables genre transgression. The monster is shown to be humane.

Bodily Mutilation as Transcending the Human: Herr Starr

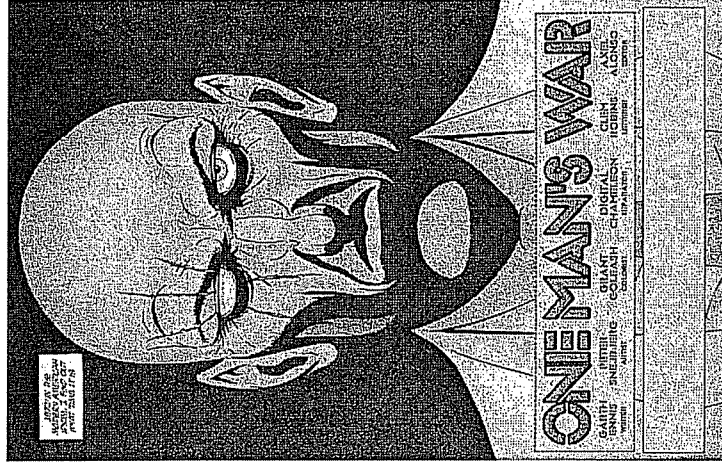


Fig. 3: Herr Starr (*WITS*, p. 1)
© 1998 Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon

Gender issues are also used to test the mutability of the human body, for example in the character of Herr Starr. Starr begins as a Lieutenant in the German *Wehrmacht*, a machine-like archetype of dedication and control whose only concern is personal advancement and the implementation of order: "TO LIVE WITH IT, TO INSTELL IT, TO IMPOSE IT: I BELIEVE THAT IS THE BEST WAY FORWARD FOR ALL" (*Alamo*, p. 20.1). He is initially invited to join the Grail army on the strength of his reaction after being part of a hostage rescue attempt in which a little girl dies ("THIS IS NOT THE WAY THE WORLD SHOULD BE" [*WITS*, p. 15]). This comment is given its own splash page as he cradles the dead girl's body, and so we are led to believe he wishes to save the world for humanity.

However, this scene is later revealed as misleading when, in response to a colleague's comment "I THOUGHT YOU'D WANT TO BUILD A WORLD WHERE LITTLE GIRLS WOULD NEVER HAVE TO DIE AGAIN" (*WITS*, p. 53.2), Starr replies "I AM AT WAR [...] AND I WOULD KILL A MILLION LITTLE GIRLS TO WIN" (*WITS*, p. 53.4-5). It is the lack of order rather than the death of a child that disturbs him: "UNCERTAINTY CAN REACH OUT AND SMASH US AT ANY TIME. SO LONG AS THAT CONTINUES TO BE TRUE, FAXATING ON A SINGLE DEATH IS POINTLESS" (*WITS*, p. 53.3). He passes his initial test (to dispose of an outspoken ex-Grail member residing in a lunatic asylum without arousing suspicion) by way of mass genocide: blowing up the asylum without a qualm and simply dismissing the loss of innocent life (*WITS*, p. 32).

Starr is described as "TACTICALLY BRILLIANT, EXPERT MARKSMAN, EXTREMELY INTELLIGENT, TOTALLY PROFESSIONAL, AND ABOUT AS LIVELY AND FUN AS A DEAD FISH" (*WITS*, p. 16.2). He is unemotional both socially ("I CAN'T BE BOTHERED WITH ANY OF THAT CRAP" [*WITS*, p. 23.1]) and sexually ("IT'S SUCH A SQUALID, MESSY ACT [...] / WHAT BOTHERS ME IS THE TEMPORARY LOSS OF CONTROL THAT COMES WITH RELEASE..." [*WITS*, p. 24.2-4]). However, he soon discovers that the humiliation of women arouses his sexual desire and misogyny thereafter characterises his sexual behaviour ("PERHAPS IF THERE WAS SOME ELEMENT OF DEGRADATION AT THE BEGINNING, THAT WOULD HELP ME TO PUT IT IN CONTEXT... / HMM. / HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO PISS IN YOUR MOUTH?" [*WITS*, p. 24.4-5]). His behaviour in all these spheres (vocational, social, sexual) uses an exaggerated masculinity (where the focus is on action and problem-solving) to achieve a model of inhumanity. His appearance is similarly gendered towards the masculine: his face is scarred since the loss of one eye in childhood, he is described as having an "UGLY, GRATING" voice (*WITS*, p. 41.4), and he is completely bald. As such, it is possible to read Starr as a figure of over-hyped masculinity and, more specifically, a figure of war (see fig. 3).

However, by the end of the series he has been anally raped, has lost an ear in a gunfight, has had his head cut to resemble a penis, one leg removed and eaten by cannibals, and his genitals eaten by a Rottweiler.²² As one of the Grail says to him "SO YOU HAVE BECOME A MONSTER IN ORDER TO SAVE THE WORLD" (*WITS*, p. 54.1), but ironically enough it seems that as his appearance becomes less human, Starr's character becomes more so. Whereas at the beginning of *Preacher* Starr is a model soldier, by the end he is exploiting his organisation for the simple (and all-too-human) motive of personal vengeance against Jesse: "ARMAGEDDON IS CANCELLED. THE GRAIL'S NEW OBJECTIVE IS REVENGE" (*Alamo*, p. 61.5).

While the humiliation of women initially characterises his sexual desires ("ANYWAY, STICK YOUR HEAD DOWN THE TOILET, I'M COMING" [*WITS*, p. 37.6]), his orientation changes after he is raped, when this preoccupation vanishes. As he explains to a female colleague:

... COULD YOU SEE YOURSELF KNEELING BEHIND ME WITH A SAWFISH AND THRUSTING IT INTO MY RECTUM YELLING, "WHO'S THE MAN, WHO'S THE MAN"? / BECAUSE THAT'S CURRENTLY THE ONLY WAY I CAN ACHIEVE EVEN A GLIMMER OF SEXUAL SATISFACTION. (*Alamo*, pp. 73.5-76.1)

Although Starr becomes the passive figure, the recipient, in effect taking on the role of the woman in his new sex life, there is no longer an association with degradation. Penetration instead becomes characterised by positive reinforcement through the phrase "WHO'S THE MAN?", although these words may also be read as blurring gender roles (if interpreted as a literal question). The expression also emphasises the subversive status of his new role since, although he remains male in his expressed behaviour, his biological gender has been complicated by the removal of his penis (various mechanisms are however employed to replace this: for example Starr chants "DOOM COCK" while handling large guns [*Alamo*, p. 36.1]). In this sense he may be said to transgress traditional gender roles.

Starr acknowledges and even embraces his monstrosities. However, the terms in which he confesses his new function (and the act of confession itself) seem to contradict an inhumane status:

FEATHERSTONE: GOD...

YOU REALLY ARE A MONSTER AREN'T YOU?

STARR:

YES, I SUPPOSE I AM.

I BECAME ONE A LONG TIME AGO.

AT FIRST IN ORDER TO SAVE THE WORLD. NOW MERELY FOR THE SAKE OF VENGEANCE.

I MEAN LOOK AT ME: MY HEAD LOOKS LIKE A PENIS, I'VE GOT ONE LEG, ONE EAR, ONE EYE, AND MY COCK'S BEEN REPLACED WITH A RUBBER TUBE. YOU CAN'T SAY I DON'T LOOK THE PART. SO I'M THE VILLAIN. I'M THE MONSTER. AND ALL I WANT IS MY REVENGE ON JESSE CUSTER. (*Alamo*, pp. 160.6-162.1)

Although Starr conforms to the visual stereotype of the monstrous (as he acknowledges), his new self-knowledge goes against this and he reveals that he became a monster long before his mutilation. In fact, his disfigurements have led to the complete abandonment of his mission of religious genocide in favour of a revenge that may be at least partially deserved. This seems to reinforce the notion of his humanisation through bodily alteration and gender transgression as Starr's monstrous appearance is coupled with a new-found humanity.

In his initial incarnation as an archetypal soldier Starr may also be read as a symbol of war. His material body represents the site of war, which is implicitly supported by his mutilations. This is also overtly indicated on some occasions – as in fig. 3 – and most obviously when he displays his mutilated genitals to the Grail chiefs while shouting "*GAZE ON THE FACE OF WAR!*" (*Alamo*, p. 63.2). As his subsequent betrayal of his military principles aligns with his humanisation, his body serves as a metaphor for the inhumanity of war. Much of *Preacher's* history takes place against the backdrop of the Vietnam War (in which Jesse's father fought) and the content of these sections also supports such an interpretation.

The Comics Medium (Revisited)

Preacher's treatment of the human body relies upon its exploitation of comics' narratology and convention, using factors such as the interplay between words and illustrations, and the role of the reader as both interpreter (of panel content) and contributory author (between panels). In so doing, form and content align; as the creators' methods defy their medium's conventional limitations, the characters and the story demonstrate a similar transgression of social norms by the unfixed nature of gendered and human material bodies.

By contrasting appearance with antithetical behaviour in these characters, *Preacher* exposes the contradictions inherent within the human (and inhuman) body. Although Granma is the character with the closest visual ties to the human body and its associated notions of mortality, her behaviour reveals her as a nameless thing, a witch, a monster. Conversely, despite his inhuman body and associated actions (such as killing and feeding), the vampire Cassidy is given human motivations and emotions that are at odds with the horror genre and redefining him as the humane monster. The mutilation and humanisation of Herr Starr further illustrates the unfixed and shifting nature of this dichotomy and ties it to the mutability of the human body.

The material body in these instances has wide-ranging social and political implications and may be read as political allegory (with reference to immigration or war) or as a symbol of social commentary (regarding child cruelty and matriarchal authority). It transgresses genre (such as vampiric convention) and is also used to redefine archetypal figures (as in the notion of the monstrous-feminine). In all three cases the body and its associated gender and genre assumptions are directly opposed to the underlying identity, and it is this juxtaposition of the exterior and interior that informs *Preacher's* social commentary. In this way, the creators use their transgression of gender and genre barriers to produce a work that comments on the cultural formation of gender roles and the

social production of identity, supporting a Foucauldian model of discursive sexuality and Butler's framework of gender performativity.

This social commentary is made overt in the character of Tulip O'Hare, Jesse's girlfriend. Tulip is beautiful, blonde, and sexy, conforming to the standard visual stereotype of the big-breasted comic-book heroine (see for example *UTEOTW*, p. 186.3). However, her upbringing revolved around more masculine activities (hunting, firearms, fighting and so forth) as she was effectively raised as a son by her father after her mother died in childbirth. We are introduced to her as a child aged six or so via a panel whose text reads "HOW WAS SCHOOL TODAY, LITTLE PETAL?" (*AHAC*, p. 24.1) while showing the exterior of a house. After the reader fills in the gaps and concludes that her father has accepted a daughter, the second panel subverts any traditionally gendered expectations we may have by revealing them cleaning firearms together while he tells Tulip about communists ("THEY'RE THE FELLAS WANT TO TAKE AWAY OUR GUNS, LITTLE PETAL" [*AHAC*, p. 24.5]).

By contrasting the two panels Ennis and Dillon use the tension between the visual and the verbal that is inherent to the comics medium, and also exploit its reliance upon the reader to complete the literary space by leading us astray and debunking our suppositions. Their more obvious attacks on society and gender are also achieved through different uses of the comics medium, such as the juxtaposition of two childhood scenes between Tulip and her male and female classmates. Tulip's question "DID YOU GUYS SEE KELLY'S HEROES ON SATURDAY NIGHT? WASN'T IT COOL?" is answered by the group of girls with "THAT'S A BOYS' MOVIE, TULIP..." and "WE DON'T WANT TO PLAY WITH YOU..." and by the boys with "THAT'S A BOYS' MOVIE, O'HARE!" and "GO AN' PLAY WITH THE OTHER STUPID LITTLE GIRLS" (*AHAC*, p. 28.2-5). The children's reasoning, the phrasing and the composition of the panels are all identical, and it seems obvious that the point here is to blur gender divisions in order to expose the performative nature of gender.

By recognising this, we must also acknowledge the role that perception plays in defining gender via the material body. Although less extreme than the examples discussed above, Tulip's appearance contrasts with her expressed behaviour in exactly the same manner and she represents the universal applicability of the points Ennis is trying to make about the inadequacy of the body as signifier. As such, Tulip provides an 'everyday' equivalent of the extremes represented by Granma, Cassidy and Herr Starr, thus making Ennis's social commentary relevant to contemporary society.

Conclusion

Within *Preacher* it seems that the visible attributes of the material body are frequently opposed to the identity discourse created by its limitations and possibilities. This comic exposes and sustains this contradiction by subverting industry stereotypes, plot expectations and genre conventions to create a reverse discourse of comic-book iconography where visual or generic elements do not reflect what lies beneath. This discourse also allows for these figures to act as political allegories of immigration (Cassidy) or war (Herr Starr), while providing a social commentary that attacks prescriptive gender roles (Gran'ma Tulip). By invoking and inverting the dichotomy between the monstrous and the human, the text seems to indicate that, while we may not yet be able to literally transcend the body, it may well be possible (in these postmodern and posthuman times) to transcend the body-as-identity.

Notes

- 1 Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Group, 1990), p. 43.
- 2 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 33.
- 3 Judith Butler, "Preface to *Gender Trouble* (1999)", in *The Judith Butler Reader*, ed. Sara Salih and Judith Butler (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 94.
- 4 See for example the work of Terrell Carver, David T. Evans and Jeffrey Weeks.
- 5 Terrell Carver, "A Political Theory of Gender: Perspectives on the 'Universal Subject'", in *Gender, Politics and the State*, ed. Vicky Randall and Georgina Waylen (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 20. Subsequently abbreviated to "Gender".
- 6 Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* (expanded edition; Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1990), p. 151.
- 7 *Writers on Comic Scriptwriting*, ed. Mark Salisbury (London: Titan Books, 1999), p. 91.
- 8 When quoting from comics I have used 'f' (or separate paragraphs where applicable) to indicate divisions between speech balloons or narrative boxes, and imitated the use of font and style so far as is possible in order to avoid inflicting my own capitalisation, punctuation and so forth on the text.
- 9 Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 73.
- 10 Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, *Preacher: Until the End of the World*, 8-17 (New York: DC Comics, 1997), p. 28.6-7. Subsequently abbreviated to *UTEOTW*. In some trade paperback pages are renumbered sequentially and in these instances I shall cite references as here, where 28.6-7 corresponds to page 28, panels 6-7. References given in a three-digit form (for example, 3.15.6) will refer to trade paperbacks where numbering is retained from individual issues (part 3, page 15, panel 6).
- 11 Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 7.

- 12 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, NY: Columbia UP, 1982), p. 4.
- 13 Carol Senf, "From *The Vampire* in *19th Century English Literature*", <http://www.uoregon.edu/~nateich/Vampire_backgrounds.html> (30.8.2001).
- 14 Carol Senf, "Dracula: The Unseen Face in the Mirror", in *Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics*, ed. M. L. Carter (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1988), pp. 93-103, p. 95.
- 15 Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 178.
- 16 Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, *Preacher: Gone to Texas*, 1-7 (New York: DC Comics, 1996), p. 74.1. Subsequently abbreviated to *GTT*.
- 17 Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, *Preacher: Proud Americans*, 18-26 (New York: DC Comics, 1997), p. 92.1 and p. 198.1. Subsequently abbreviated to *PA*.
- 18 Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, *Preacher: All Hell's A-Coming*, 51-58 (New York: DC Comics, 1999), p. 90.4. Subsequently abbreviated to *AHAC*.
- 19 *AHAC*, p. 159.1. See also Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, *Preacher: Alamo*, 59-66 (New York: DC Comics, 2001), p. 145.1. Subsequently abbreviated to *Alamo*.
- 20 Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, *Preacher: Dixie Fried*, 27-33 (New York: DC Comics, 1998), p. 40.6-7. Subsequently abbreviated to *DF*.
- 21 *DF*, p. 30.3. See also Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, *Preacher: War in the Sun*, 34-40 (New York: DC Comics, 1999), p. 224.3. Subsequently abbreviated to *WITS*.
- 22 See the following: *UTEOTW*, p. 173.5 and p. 212.4; *PA*, p. 165.4-5; *WITS*, 187.4; and *AHAC*, p. 193.1.