

**EXPLORING THE DIVERSE MANIFESTATIONS OF MONSTROSITY IN
GILLIAN FLYNN'S *THE GROWNUP***

Udita Banerjee

M.Phil Research Scholar

Department of English & Culture Studies

The University of Burdwan

West Bengal - 713101, India

Contact: banerjeeudita@yahoo.in

Abstract

*This paper deals with the different paradigms of monstrosity and shows why it cannot be straitjacketed as a monolithic structure. This paper takes into consideration Gillian Flynn's story *The Grownup* and seeks to explore deeper into the idea of monstrosity as embedded within the society. Flynn's representation of a child monster in her narrative poses a challenge to the dominant and conventional idea of a monster. My paper represents the new kind of monster as shown in *The Grownup* and seeks to discuss the debatable ideas of evil from various angles and subject positions.*

Keywords: Monstrosity, Society, Child, Deviant

This paper deals with the idea of monstrosity as presented in Gillian Flynn's story, *The Grownup*. Flynn, an American writer, has meticulously dealt with the concept of a new kind of monster in her narrative. The paper examines how Flynn introduces the child-monster in her narrative and challenges the dominant ideas of monstrosity since the concept of monster in Flynn's story has been presented as a deviation from the earlier representations of the same. This paper will seek to interrogate how the idea of evil pervades in the decaying society and is no more restricted to distorted beings or deformed creatures. This paper consists of three sections. The first section elucidates upon the author and the text. It defines as well as talks about the various concepts and ideas related to monstrosity and how the author chooses to deviate from the same. The second section throws light upon the story itself and how it contains the various representations of the monster and how the child becomes an important embodiment of evil. The last or the concluding section shows how Flynn has presented the idea of monstrosity as an abstract concept.

Section I

The first section of the paper introduces the text and the author. It also throws light upon the prevalent and dominant concepts of monstrosity and how Flynn's narrative is a deviation from the same.

Gillian Flynn, an American writer, has published novels like, *Sharp Objects*, *Dark Places* and *Gone Girl*. *The Grownup* was released in 2015 and initially published as a short story in the anthology *Rogues*, published in 2014. The story was edited by George R.R. Martin and Gardner Dozois, and the original title was, "What do you do?" It was later developed into a novella.

One of the definitions of monstrosity in the Merriam-Webster dictionary is 'an object of great and often frightening size, force, or complexity'. The same dictionary puts down another definition as, 'something deviating from the normal'. Monsters have occupied a major position in literature since antiquity. Rebecca Merkelbach in her article, *Monster Theory and the Study of Monstrosity in the Islendingasögur*, argues that philosophers like Aritoteles in the ancient and Augustine in the early medieval period talked about the existence of monstrous races (1). In the Anglo-Saxon text, *Bewulf*, Grendel and his mother have been presented as monsters. Shakespeare has presented various monsters in his plays from the evil witches in *Macbeth* to the noble savage Caliban in *The Tempest*. He has also depicted the almost monstrous protagonist Othello and transgressed the idea of a stereotypical monster. Other important monsters in literature include Count Dracula, Frankenstein's monster and so on. Etymologically, the word monster comes from the Latin word *monere*, which meant to warn and its noun form, *monstrum*, which meant an evil omen. Traditionally, monsters have been depicted as physically deformed beings who are capable of arousing fear whereas in the early modern period the notion started changing and people started classifying anything unnatural, anomalous or deviant as monstrous. Dragan says:

Theoretically, monstrosity is defined and perceived by people as an extreme form of abnormality, either physical or mental, and, particularly, as a single or multiple manifestation of deformities or infirmities that can be either innate, or developed, or imagined, or indicative of obvious forms of degeneration. Over the ages, monstrosity has represented, consecutively and sometimes simultaneously, a religious, medical, legal, social and/or anthropological issue. (1)

Monster may also refer to a person whose instincts are brutal or merciless. In *Foucault's Monsters, the Abnormal Individual and the Challenge of English Law*, Sharpe says: "The monster is, as Cohen suggests, a cultural construction, either completely fictitious or a designation made in relation to living flesh..." (385). Monstrosity is a concept that in the present scenario can have multiple connotations. A difference or a transgression is often considered a monster as well. Monster is therefore an umbrella term which contains a number of meanings and at the same time is a common usage in the English lexicon.

Flynn deviates from the normative patterns of monstrous representations and presents monstrosity as it is evident in our everyday life. She presents them through naive looking women and children who have always been stereotypical representations of the oppressed and thereby challenges these stereotypes as well. Besides that, she explores the devilish side of the society that fears its digressers but admires them at the same time. In Flynn's novel *Gone Girl* as well as *The Grownup*, we find the 'monsters' emerging victorious, almost standing out as heroes. These monsters are no more the physically deformed 'other' as the monster in *Frankenstein* or the Minotaur¹ in the maze but rather part of us, part of the larger mainstream society and are therefore often unrecognized and invincible. In a summary of the book, *Monster Theory: Reading Cultures*, it is said:

"The contributors to *Monster Theory* consider beasts, demons, freaks and fiends as symbolic expressions of cultural unease that pervade a society and shape its collective behavior...our fascination for the monstrous testifies to our continued desire to explore difference and prohibition."

Section II

This section of the paper deals with the story and how it intertwines the idea of the child and the monster in a single narrative. It also elucidates how gothic elements have been employed in order to enhance the eerie effect of the story.

In Gillian Flynn's novella, *The Grownup*, we encounter the child-monster who dominates the evil in the text. The child is an errant or deviant character that knows how and when to manipulate things into his favour. Flynn has maintained an eerie atmosphere throughout the story and successfully evoked horror in the minds of her readers from the very beginning. The unnamed narrator- protagonist of the story is a woman who tries to make a living by 'faking it as a cut-price psychic' (Flynn 84) or a fortuneteller. At the same time, she is involved with some illegal sex work. She deceives people by telling them what they want to hear. The protagonist had a troubled childhood and begged on the streets with her mother who trained her well in analyzing people by studying them minutely. This business was going on quite well until she meets Susan Burke, who she thought, would be an easy target for her. Burke informs the narrator that she has recently shifted to a house which is haunted and she has an errant stepson, Miles, to deal with. From the very beginning of the text, Miles has been described as a deviant and particularly disturbing child who is the veritable trouble-maker. Susan, herself, exclaims:

"Miles was never a sweet boy.... He's just empty. But in the past year, since the move...he's changed. Become more aggressive. He's so angry. So dark. Threatening. He scares me." (Flynn 22)

Simona Dragan in her paper, *Abnormality, Deformity, Monstrosity: Body Transgressions in Contemporary Visual Culture*, claims: "By transgressing body norms, monsters have always

caused reactions of fear that were accompanied by an irrepressible fascination for the ugly” (1).

But the representation of the child-monster in *The Grownup* contradicts this idea because it presents a young boy as the embodiment of monstrosity. In William Golding’s *The Lord of the Flies*, we come across a pack of young boys, who when lost in an island, exhibit their most demonic sides, baffling the readers, and adding an alternative perspective to the innocent and angelic image of children in literature. Flynn, a postmodern novelist advocates and expands Golding’s idea and presents in the text a child who turns out to be the cause of horror and dismay and therefore challenges the dominant monster narratives of mainstream fiction.

The protagonist, herself corrupt, finally decides to go to Carterhook manor as she and Susan had agreed upon some ritual cleansing of the house, though the narrator had less intent to solve the problem and more to seize the opportunity of making money and gathering various clients from the rich woman’s contacts. But once there, the protagonist feels an inexplicable eeriness around her. The house she visits is a strange amalgamation of Victorian and modern architectures where the outside, made in Victorian pattern, is old and intimidating but the inside of the house is like every other rich person’s house, beautiful, and it makes her cheerful. What is striking is that it is not only the house and the setting that is unsettling but also a strange diabolic presence around her, that feels creepy. She explains,

“It was the only remaining Victorian house in a long row of boxy new construction, and maybe that’s why it seemed alive, calculating...I watched the house. It watched me back through long, baleful windows so tall a child could stand in the sill. And one was...that kid matched the original house perfectly.” (Flynn 26)

The gothic elements in the text enhance the fear of evil that is still to be witnessed. Susan Burke has contacted the psychic² in the first place because she could feel strange incidents going on inside her house; a blood stain on the wall and a baby sitter who is scared and forced to flee the house. There is a hint on the part of the author, that it is Miles, who is responsible for the terrible incidents in the Carterhook manor. The appearance of the child with ‘black hair and eyes set against the porcelain skin of an antique doll’ (Flynn 28) clearly anticipates evil. His gaze, abnormal, non-conforming to the idea of innocence, makes him the uncontested villain, the antagonist in the story.

The contrast between Miles and his stepbrother Jack accentuates the idea of his depravity. Jack wraps his hands around his mother and lets her know that he misses her. Miles on the other hand calls his step-mother a ‘bitch’ and threatens the protagonist asking her to leave and never return to the manor. Six weeks after the narrator-protagonist starts visiting Carterhook manor, Miles starts scaring her. He stares into the boiling pot of water and traces a finger on its edge telling her that she is about to die. The narrator later comes to know from Susan that he has talked about killing them all in a similarly menacing way. He

also tries to scare her away by vomiting on her purse and putting a doll hanging from the light. The tale takes an even more grotesque turn when another child with almost similar characteristics as Miles comes into focus. In order to delve more into the haunting incidents in Carterhook manor, the narrator searches for the same on the internet only to come across a devastating tale of horror. On looking closely, she comes across a link from an article where she gets the details. In the year 1893, Patrick Carterhook moved into his mansion with his wife Margaret and two sons, Robert and Chester. Robert, like Miles, was the trouble-maker in this case. He was known for bullying his friends, neighbours and pets. He tormented his younger brother and burnt down his father's warehouses. He was later on kept locked inside a room but he continued destroying things with his excrement and vomit. The disaster happened on the night of January 7, 1897, when Patrick Carterhook was discovered stabbed to death in his bed, his wife found struck with an axe, young Chester drowned in a bathtub and Robert hanging from a beam in his room. He also dressed for the occasion, wearing a blue Sunday suit, covered in his parents' blood and wet from drowning his brother (Flynn 43). Beneath this story is an ancient photo of the Carterhooks, where the narrator discovers Robert's uncanny resemblance with Miles. The similarity between Miles and Robert is stark apparently but a deeper analysis might reveal differences. Robert was a mentally deranged child whose deformity and disability was known to his family. Miles, on the other hand, takes advantage of his father's support who refuses to believe that there is anything wrong with his son. Miles is cleverer and manipulative. He has sharpness to his diabolism. Disability in Robert, too, proves to be monstrous in the Carterhook manor but the monstrosity that Miles exhibits is perilous and treacherous at the same time.

The end of the novel sees some turn of events where Miles meets the narrator to let her know that it is not him but Susan Burke herself who is the real devil. He lets her know that it was Susan who had made that story about Carterhook manor and put it on the internet because she believed that it was the best possible way to take revenge on both- an irritating stepson and the prostitute that her husband used to hire, when in town. He tells her it was part of the plot to get both of them killed. After this revelation, the narrator protagonist plans an escape with Miles. But on their way, it is revealed that Miles is not the person who could be trusted. Miles needed a 'grownup' to escape the claustrophobia of the house and a dictating stepmother. He is the con boy who is just fifteen but has successfully befooled all the 'grownups' in the entire story. A shrewd, calculating, evil child, who paves his path in the larger world, by using others as mere aids. When asked whether he really pushed his brother's babysitter on the stairs, he denies having done that and says 'Please, she fell. I'm not violent, I'm just smart'(Flynn 51). The narrator, totally outwitted by the fifteen year old, could neither go to the police because of her past records nor get her car back towards the manor. She did just as she was told by Miles, totally under his control. She is helpless and justifies herself:

"I got on the highway. The kid was sharper at fifteen than I was at twice his age...I was starting to think this kid might be a good partner. This tiny teen needed a

grownup to move in the world, and there was nothing a con girl could use more than a great con kid.” (Flynn 65)

The narrator at the end of the story surrenders to her evil instincts as well. The monstrous idea of beguiling the entire world for their own profit appeals to her and she decides to help and accompany the kid that has put her into that situation. She conveniently accepts her role as a social monster, more so, because she always had that quality within her. Flynn ends the story symbolically, signifying the fact that dilapidation of the society has reached its peak and therefore, innocent and good-looking monsters are the ones that dominate the age and ironically enough they sleep at night without disturbances. The narrator ends the story with the lines: “I got in bed and watched the door of the adjoining room...Stared at the ceiling. Stared at the adjoining door...Nothing to worry about at all.” (Flynn 67)

Section III

The last section of the novel shows how the concept of monstrosity has been used as a larger and abstract idea and is therefore a deviation. Monstrosity has been given a newer dimension by Flynn and that adds to the uniqueness of the narrative.

Flynn has deliberately presented an ambiguity in the idea of monstrosity in *The Grownup*. The child exhibits monstrous qualities and appears as a stranger child, non-conforming to the idea of children as a whole, but so does the stepmother who remains indifferent and detached towards him. The narrator has her own evil side to which she again surrenders at the end of the story. Post world war novelists and dramatists have often portrayed the death of innocence in their works and Flynn’s story, published decades after that, advocates the idea of decay all the more pertinent into the roots of the entire society. The monstrosity acts not only as a part of the child or the adult but rather as a part of the society and that is where it becomes large and indomitable. The immorality, deception and cunning lurking within the society is the real monster and real cause of fear. *The Grownup* is, therefore, all the more different from the older narratives of monsters because here monstrosity is no concrete, ugly demon but an abstract idea that pervades the narrative. Flynn has thereby created a new form of monstrosity which poses a challenge to hitherto known theories and representations of monster in all other earlier narratives of this genre.

Notes

1. Minotaur: In Greek mythology, the Minotaur is a mythical creature portrayed in Classical times with the head and tail of a bull and the body of a man or, as described by Roman poet Ovid, a being "part man and part bull". It dwelt at the center of the Labyrinth, which was an elaborate maze-like construction designed by the architect Daedalus and his son Icarus, on the command of King Minos of Crete. The Minotaur was eventually killed by the Athenian hero Theseus. (Wikipedia)
2. Psychic : A psychic is a person who claims to use extrasensory perception (ESP) to identify information hidden from the normal senses, particularly involving telepathy or clairvoyance, or who performs acts that are apparently inexplicable by natural laws (Wikipedia)

Works Cited:

- Dragan, Simona. "Abnormality, Deformity, Monstrosity: Body Transgressions in Contemporary Visual Culture." *Studies in Visual Arts and Communication*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2016. Accessed 26 Sep. 2018.
- Flynn, Gillian. *The Grownup*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2015.
- Merkelbach, Rebecca. "Monster Theory and the Study of Monstrosity in the Íslendingasögur." *Academia.edu*, www.academia.edu/27365689/Monster_Theory_and_the_Study_of_Monstrosity_in_the_Íslendingasögur. Accessed 01 Oct. 2018.
- "Minotaur." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 30 Sept. 2018, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minotaur. Accessed 02 Oct. 2018.
- "Monster Theory [Electronic Resource]." *Google Books*, Google, books.google.co.in/books/about/Monster_Theory.html?id=hQWa3r-vMLwC&source=kp_book_description&redir_esc=y. Accessed 29 Sep. 2018.
- "Monstrosity." *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/monstrosity. Accessed 29 Sep. 2018.
- "Psychic." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 19 Sept. 2018, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychic. Accessed 01 Oct. 2018.
- Sharpe, Andrew N. "Foucault's Monsters, the Abnormal Individual and the Challenge of English Law." *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2007, pp. 384–403., doi:10.1111/j.1467-6443.2007.00316.x. Accessed 01 Oct. 2018.