



Mirrors of Disruption: Interrogating the Abject in *Brightburn*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*

Hiranya Mukherjee

Department of English, Presidency University, Kolkata, India

Received: 02 Nov 2020; Received in revised form: 22 Jan 2021; Accepted: 12 Feb 2021; Available online: 20 Feb 2021

©2021 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Popular-culture at large, and science fiction and fantasy in particular harbours various representations of abject bodies. In my essay I have analysed the formation of protagonist-antagonist duos in the 2019 film *Brightburn*, *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Harry Potter* series within a dynamic of conceptualising the protagonists and antagonists as mirror image alter-egos. The essay attempts to explore how the assertions of order, law and civility by the protagonist subjects of Clark Kent/Superman, Frodo/Bilbo and Harry Potter are disrupted by the antagonist subjects-- Brandon/Brightburn, Smeagol/Gollum and Tom Riddle/Voldemort through the impingement of abjection and the antagonists functioning as agents of abjection. In each of the cases a catalyst leads to the foregrounding of the abject body and the disruption of the identity of the antagonist subjects; leading to fragmentation and a resistance to acquiescence towards the “phallic object”.

Keywords— Abject, Shadow, Subversion, Alter-ego, Catalyst, Kristeva.

I. INTRODUCTION

Pop-culture in general, and fantasy and science-fiction in particular are filled with protagonist-antagonist duos that can be placed in the dynamic of the “shadow” in the Jungian sense of the term. Predicated on such a notion, these have a pattern of determining the position of the antagonists by embedding them in the sphere of the “abject”, and thus setting them as a foil to the protagonist who symbolises order. In my essay, I have analysed such manifestations of character dynamics in the Superman mythos, the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling and *The Lord of the Rings* series by J.R.R. Tolkien. In the Superman mythos, such a dynamic occurs between the canonical Superman and the reimagining of the character in the 2019 movie, *Brightburn*, directed by David Yarovesky. In the *Harry Potter* series, the mentioned dynamic manifests between Harry and Voldemort, while in *The Lord of the Rings*, it is between Frodo/Bilbo and Gollum. I shall begin with the analysis of the Superman mythos and then proceed to elaborate on the rest of the texts.

II. SUPERMAN AND BRIGHTBURN

The character of Superman first appeared in the first issue of *Action Comics* in 1938. The nascent man of steel who would become one of the biggest cultural icons of the 20th century and onwards was in his early years as Ian Gordon asserts in *Superman: The Persistence of an American Icon*, somewhat of a “reformist liberal” and a man of action. He was a character who “saved a woman who had mistakenly been condemned for murder, confronted a wife beater, prevented the United States from becoming embroiled in a European conflict, destroyed slums to force the government to build better housing (well, modern high-rise apartment blocks), tore down a car factory because its shoddy products caused deaths, and fought a corrupt police force.”(Gordon 18) As the mythology and the canon pertaining to the character expanded with the growth in his popularity, it led to many adaptations and readaptations of the character from the idealistic Superman of Christopher Reeves to the dictatorial cynical Superman of *Injustice: Gods Among Us*. That being said, in popular culture, the character largely has been and still stands being envisaged as, in the words of Daniel Peretti, “a fantastical Prince Charming who can rescue any damsel in distress” (Peretti 1) and a Herculean

hero who wages “a never-ending battle for Truth, Justice, and the American Way” (Peretti 5). He is a figure of morality, heroism, order and strength--the near-perfect hero. There have been numerous adaptations and reimaginings of Superman, that envision him as completely opposite, or at least veering towards a darker character; for instance, in *Injustice: Gods Among Us*, or in the 29th issue of *Justice League of America* as “Ultraman”, an evil version of the character hailing from a parallel Earth. Similarly, the concept of this heroic benevolent figure is destabilised and completely subverted in *Brightburn*. In the 2019 film, directed by David Yarovesky the figure of Superman is completely subverted into the “Anti-Superman”. Set in the fictional town of Brightburn in Kansas, the plot revolves around a farming couple, Kyle and Tori Breyer who stumble across a crash landed alien ship in the woods and find an infant inside it that seemingly looks like a human. Due to their protracted issues of conceiving a child of their own, they adopt the baby and name him Brandon. The film focuses on the gradual surfacing of the natural predatory instincts within the child as he grows up in the light of being raised in a loving home as a human child. The struggle between the forces of nature and nurture eventually tilts towards the former as Brandon ends up using his alien inhuman strength and powers for domination, destruction and evil, rather than good. This is a dark mirror of the origin story of Superman, as influenced by the loving environment and the guidance provided to him by his parents, Clark Kent uses his powers for good and becomes Superman. The character of Brandon, who ultimately assumes the figure of Brightburn is set up as a “shadow”, an alter-ego of Clark Kent/ Superman with the deft use of abjection and the subversion of key moments and symbols in the Superman mythos. On his twelfth birthday, the spaceship that he arrived in, that was subsequently hidden in the cellar by Tori begins to transmit an alien message to Brandon that puts him in a trance and pulls him to walk to the cellar in a trancelike state. The message is in an alien language, and is akin to a myriad of garbled and guttural voices. The message is the breakdown of language, a semiotic siren song reminiscent of the Kristevian “chora” as it pulls Brandon towards the ship, a symbol of his true origins, a symbol of the dark womb from which he rose. It is interesting to note that right after Tori intervenes and brings Brandon out from the trance-like state, she sings him a lullaby and puts him to sleep. The structured, legible symbolic language is here placed apposite to the semiotic burst of alien siren song that functions as a lullaby for the human subject of Brandon and gives rise to the demonic Brightburn aspect of his persona. On the subsequent day, as Brandon attempts to operate a lawn mower, he

accidentally launches it across the field and then curious to test out his newfound superhuman strength, he puts his hand inside the spinning blade of the machine, ending up unharmed and without a single scratch but breaking the blades completely. A sense of the uncanny is impinged upon the figure of the child, as a result, especially reinforced by the demonic siren song of the spaceship as it pulses with red light and draws in Brandon towards it in a trance-like state. Yet, this sense of the “unheimlich” is disrupted by the embedding of the figure of Brandon in the Superman mythos, as a parallel to the young Clark Kent with superhuman strength, who eventually uses it for good. But the imagination associated with this parallelism is challenged and the subject of Brandon as a symbol of despair rather than hope is reinforced by the events that follow in the film. Brandon’s dark side is initially revealed with an event that takes place during his birthday party. His aunt and uncle present him with a hunting rifle, which his father refuses to give him. The rifle here represents the Freudian “phallus”, as the father figure threatens to take away the phallic power from the child. Yet, instead of the child being absorbed in the symbolic register by the acquiescence to the Symbolic order, represented by the Name of the Father, Brandon puts up a disobedient resistance and refuses to give up the rifle. His father attempts to use force on Brandon to pull him from his chair, only to find that he is unable to move him. Brandon only complies after the supplication and intervention from Tori. Subsequently, in the plot, Brandon’s parents discover surgical diagrams and graphic photos of human organs among a pile of pornographic pictures in Brandon’s room. The natural proclivity of an adolescent child towards sexual exploration and discovery through pornography is impinged by the uncanny--the abject, by the inclusion of the aforementioned graphic elements. Julia Kristeva, when expressing her ideas about the abject asserts: “The corpse (or cadaver: cadere, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood.... It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. The border has become an object. How can I be without border? That elsewhere that I imagine beyond the present, or that I hallucinate so that I might, in a present time, speak to you, conceive of you—it is now here, jettied, abjected, into "my" world....The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity,

system, order.” (Kristeva 3-4) The inclusion of the abject in the film is visually represented at several moments, particularly at those during the sequences of murder done by Brandon as Brightburn-- namely, a glass shard piercing the eyeball of Erica, the breaking and loosening of the jaw of Brandon’s uncle and lastly the ritualised morbid crucifixion of Erica’s body in front of Brandon’s spaceship reminiscent of the explicit pictures found in his pornographic stash. All perpetuated by Brightburn. It is pertinent to note that throughout the film, other symbols repeatedly hint at the monstrous nature of the child, and contribute to the association of the image of the uncanny. One such symbol is that of the wasp-- as Brandon mentions in his class about Bees being pollinators and Wasps as predators. The predatory nature hidden inside Brandon, symbolised by the wasp is reinforced by the costume that Brandon designs for his Brightburn persona with a mask, clearly fashioned after the image of a wasp head. Similarly, another symbol that hints at his hidden nature is that of the double-sided “B” he repeatedly sketches in his notebook. Initially, projected as an insignia standing for Brandon Breyer, eventually becomes a sigil of evil when used by his masked persona Brightburn, in every scene of murder he commits, standing as an inversion of the symbol of Superman, signifying “hope”. The symbol is clearly inspired by a similar one in the *Berserk* manga series where the symbol represents an otherworldly evil, summoned by the unique symbol known as the “Brand of Sacrifice”. Another inspiration is the symbol as present in Grant Morrison’s *Nameless* comic series where it represents the insanity of an inter-dimensional deity. Brandon’s mother also finds a notebook with the symbol scribbled all over the pages and sketches of the murders he commits as his costumed Brightburn anti-Superman persona. The film portrays Brandon as a shadow of Clark Kent, and Brightburn as a shadow of Superman. Whereas Clark uses his newfound powers for example, to save his classmate from drawing, Brandon uses it to stalk and eventually physically harm his crush, Caitlyn. While Superman interprets his sigil for “hope”, and fights to save humankind, Brightburn uses his sigil to terrorize and uses his powers--seemingly identical to those of Superman, for domination, death and destruction. The presence of superhuman strength in a child, and the resultant monstrosity and the presence of the uncanny in such a predicament is neutralized by the benevolence in Clark’s character. In the case of Brandon, the monstrosity is reinforced by his nefarious usage of his powers and the presence of an alien voice in his head, emanating from his pulsing red spaceship that he interprets as instigating the notion of world domination within him. The mirror parallelism and the magnification of the monstrosity

associated with the anti-Superman is also prodded on by the inclusion of a proclivity to explore the abject in Brandon. Kristeva asserts that the abject is something that exists in the periphery, in the borders of the conscious psyche, and differentiates it with the repressed objects within the unconscious. Brandon’s proclivity to explore the abject and embrace it, embeds it from the periphery of his consciousness to its main focus, thereby placing him in a liminal space between human and inhuman, by associating him with the monstrous and the other, in the light of his inhuman powers and the symbolism associated with him.

III. FRODO AND GOLLUM

In J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, the malevolence and influence of the ring to affect and manipulate is among other instances efficaciously displayed through the character of Gollum. In *The Powers of Horror*, Kristeva asserts that: “When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk—harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring—I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream,.....I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself

within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish

myself.”(Kristeva 2-3) In the films, Gollum is depicted as a grotesque humanoid creature with a milky white skin akin to the “surface of milk”, bulbous cloudy eyes and disproportionate head and limbs. Indeed, his very aspect is akin to a perverted reimagination of a foetus. He is the very image of the abject, scurrying along in the dark subterranean, and gorging on raw fish. An aspect which adds more to this image is his repeated gurgling and guttering utterance of the name “Gollum” as if choking on it. Gollum is set up as a dark mirror, as the shadow alter-ego of Frodo. He was not always the slimy creature, as we get to know from Gandalf--he was once a Hobbit much like Frodo named Smeagol. Yet, when he stumbled upon the “One Ring”, he slowly descended under its malevolent influence. It magnified the avarice that was present in him and also led him, as an apt Biblical reference of Cain and Abel, to commit fratricide. Subsequently he fled into the underground caves which he made his lair and gradually as the hold of the ring on him increased, morphed into the creature Gollum. The influence of the ring is evident upon him by his protectiveness of it and by always being enchanted by its presence--epitomized by his yearning

utterance, “My precious!”. It is interesting to note the similarities between Brandon/Brightburn and Smeagol/Gollum. Both characters initially are embedded in a relatable atmosphere of “humanness” that gets disrupted by a schism created in the psyche through an alien catalyst which leads to the rise of an alter-ego within the psyche and the magnification of present impulses. In the case of Brandon, he is initially portrayed as a bright, playful young boy who is at the “1/10th of the 1 percent” in his class and enjoys playing hide and seek with his mother. The catalyst in his case, the space-ship leads to the rise of the alter-ego Brightburn in his psyche and magnifies his adolescent impulses of rebellion and self assertion to murderous proportions. Similarly is the case of Gollum--he is initially embedded in an atmosphere that is familiar, “homely” and “human”. Yet, the “One Ring” exerts influence upon him, magnifies his avarice and makes him murderously hostile. It leads to the rise of the alter-ego within him. Another similarity is the presence of the garbled and guttural voices instigating violence and domination in both the cases. In the case of Brandon, the alien voices emanating from the ship instigate him to “Take the world” and in case of Gollum, the voice of Gollum within Smeagol instigates him to betray Frodo and take the ring from him. Both the protagonist-antagonist duos present here aptly challenge the notion of civility, order and humanity. The antagonists in both cases that are identified by the abject, are portrayed to have shared a similar way of being and existence as the protagonist--yet the presence of a catalyst disrupted that existence and led to the descent into abjection. As Kristeva asserts, the very essence of abjection is disruption of established identity and order--it is the object that the subject excludes to form his/her identity as a human being. Yet, these objects are not repressed and engulfed in the void of the unconscious, but pushed to the periphery of the conscious. Through the depiction of order and identity descending into chaos and the abject challenges the notion of the stability of such an order--efficaciously expressed through the portrayal of the aforementioned protagonist/antagonist duos. The heroic figure of Clark Kent/Superman is disrupted by the malevolence of Brandon/Brightburn--it gives rise to the question as to whether Clark Kent would have developed into a similar malevolent figure if certain events acted as catalyst for it. Frodo, in the end is able to resist the evil influence of the ring to corrupt him and is able to let go of it, an act that Smeagol/Gollum was unable to do as he plummeted into the fires of Mount Doom with the ring. This hints at the notion of how the established innocence, order and the caricatured overt civility of the Hobbits is also stalked by the abject--although both Frodo and Bilbo fight against the influence and are victorious in the

attempt, it does not take away the fact that in the narrative both had been affected by it--leading to perverted changes in their personality. All of this challenges the solidity and stability of the notion of civilization and order and asserts the fact that one single catalyst can bring all of this down under the weight of the ever-looming abject.

IV. HARRY AND VOLDEMORT

A recurrent theme that runs along the narrative of J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series is setting up the protagonist Harry Potter and the main antagonist, Tom Riddle/Voldemort as mirror images of each other. Harry and Voldemort had “sister wands”, that is, their wands had the same core. Both contained feathers from the Phoenix Fawks. When the sorting hat assigns Harry a house, he initially sorts him to the house Slytherine, the very house that Tom Riddle belonged to during his years in Hogwarts. Both Tom Riddle and Harry are mentored extensively by Dumbledore, a father figure to both and they both attract the keen eye of Professor Slughorn, in choosing them as his protégés. Another key aspect that connects both these characters is their natural ability to speak in Parseltongue. Yet, with all the similarities between them, each of them choose a radically different path--Harry functions as a force of good, a protector against evil and Voldemort chooses a path to power and becomes the very epitomization of evil. Since the very initial stages of the narrative, Voldemort is treated as being a symbol of the abject in the wizarding world. He is “the one that must not be named”, the one who exists at the periphery of the collective consciousness of the wizarding world. He is the one who perpetuates the usage of spells in the muggle-world, a practice forbidden by the laws pertaining to the “Statute of Secrecy”, and he is the one who engages in active usage of forbidden spells and curses such as “Crucio”, the “killing curse”. The many instances in which Harry encounters Voldemort are always impinged by the abject--the first encounter as a parasitic face on the posterior of Quirinus Quirrell, the instance of his rebirth, that of his death and so on. There are many factors that reinforce the dimension of the abject associated with his character. Voldemort is reborn through the machinations of his followers-- the “Death-Eaters”, especially through the actions of Peter Pettigrew. Harry is restrained to Tom Riddle Senior’s grave marker and Pettigrew cuts his arm open and takes some of his blood to use in a dark potion along with sacrificing his own right arm to restore Voldemort to full power and strength. Thus, his birth is marked by blood, wound and a severed limb--all markers of the abject. Voldemort’s appearance also functions as a driving factor with his milky white skin, reminiscent of that of Gollum’s and his uncanny humanoid appearance

firmly embeds him in the realm of liminality between the “human” and the “monstrous”. A phenomenon prodded on by the fact that like Brightburn and Gollum he once was seen to be one of “us”, a human being. Through his quest for power, domination and the practice of the dark arts, he morphs into a “monstrous” figure, a post-human with a fragmented soul, an agent of the abject symbolised by his slithering companion-- Nagini. This brings to the foreground the notion of fragmentation associated by the impingement of the abject upon the subject’s identity. Brandon is split between the human Brandon and the monster Brightburn, Smeagol similarly split between Smeagol-Gollum and Tom Riddle/Voldemort is split between the two personas and also his very soul as Voldemort is fragmented into different parts: a phenomenon that symbolises the disruptive function of the abject. As mentioned, Voldemort himself functions as an agent of the abject in the wizarding world as his arrival and rebirth is marked by the reappearance of the Death-Eaters--marking the fact that, the perceived order of Hogwarts in particular and that of the wizarding-world at large were just a fragile status quo with the agents of the abject lurking in the peripheries, waiting for the chief catalyst to disrupt the order. A key scene in the narrative goes back to that of Brandon vying with his father to take control of the rifle, the “phallic object”, which is echoed by Voldemort plucking the Elder Wand from Dumbledore’s grave. A key event that concretizes Harry as the alter-ego of Voldemort, is when in the 2011 film--*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2* directed by David Yates, he breaks the Elder wand and discards it. Thus, unlike Voldemort he is smoothly assimilated as the subject by the Name of the Father, in the Lacanian sense whereas Voldemort resists this assimilation and instead turns to the abject. The Harry-Voldemort mirror functions similar to the ones mentioned before in this essay, as a dynamic that challenges the established order propagated through civility and the law and asserts the power of the lure of the abject upon the human psyche.

V. CONCLUSION

In my essay, I have explored the aforementioned protagonist-antagonist duos through the dynamics between the formation of the subjects of Brandon/ Brightburn-Clark Kent/Superman, Frodo-Smeagol/Gollum, Harry-Tom Riddle/Voldemort. I have explored how the assertions of order, law and civility by the protagonist subjects are disrupted by the antagonist subjects through the impingement of abjection and the antagonists functioning as agents of abjection. The whole phenomenon is pervasive throughout different texts in popular culture at large and fantasy fiction in particular, namely some other

example that I have not explored in my essay being-- Luke Skywalker-Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader in the *Star Wars* franchise and the Last Dragonborn-Miraak in the 2011 video game by Bethesda Game Studios and Iron Galaxy, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and so on. These dynamics assert the fragility of the formation of the subject within the sphere of law and order and the potential disruption of it through the eruption of objects of abjection that lurk in the peripheries of the conscious psyche.

REFERENCES

- [1] Gordon, I. (2017). Superman Mythos and History: Early Superman. In *Superman: The Persistence of an American Icon* (p. 18). Rutgers University Press.
- [2] Kristeva, J. (1982). Approaching Abjection. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (pp. 2–4). Columbia University Press.
- [3] Peretti, D. (2014). Superman and the Folkloristic Perspective: Who is Superman? In *Superman In Myth and Folklore* (pp. 1–5). The University Press of Mississippi.
- [4] Rowling, J. K. (2014). *Harry Potter: The Complete Collection*. Bloomsbury Children’s Books.
- [5] Tolkien, J. R. R. (2007). *The Lord of the Rings*. Harpercollins.