

“I don’t even feel human anymore”: Monstrosity and Othering in Ken Dahl’s *Monsters*

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Abstract

The idea of the monster has functioned within various Western discourses, always carrying with it elements of difference, deviance, exclusion, and marginality irrespective of spatiotemporal differences. The monstrous often signified a liminal state of existence, remaining well within the western dualistic logic that operates through a series of binaries such as natural/unnatural, human/animal, self/other, normal/deviant. Within the discourses surrounding body and illness, sexual transgression and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) such as AIDS, syphilis, and herpes, among others, are often portrayed as monstrous. Ken Dahl’s autopathography *Monsters* (2009) is a harrowing account of his experience of dealing with herpes infection and the personal, psychological and socio-cultural impact of encountering his own vulnerabilities as an STD-infected person. In close reading Dahl’s memoir, this article aims to investigate the author’s use of the monster metaphor and abject art to depict the stigma he faced as a carrier of an incurable and contagious disease. Drawing theoretical insights from Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva among others, the essay also seeks to examine the social mechanisms and the discourses surrounding body and illness which operate in stigmatizing and othering an STD patient as monstrous.

Keywords: comics, graphic medicine, abject art, monster, body, STD

Monster and the Western Imaginary

Margrit Shildrick in her *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* describes monsters as “figures of difference that haunt the western imaginary” (2002, p.1). Appropriately, if the religious interpretations of monstrosity suggest divine displeasure with the moral failings and wickedness of men (p. 12), then the secular treatment of the monster signifies hybridity, liminality, and transgression. Michel Foucault in his *Abnormal: Lectures at the College De France, 1974-1975* delineates the historical transformations that the monstrous as a concept has undergone from the Middle Ages to the Eighteenth century. A fundamental shift ensued in the discourses surrounding the monster towards the end of the eighteenth century: that is, rather than focusing on the corporeal monstrosity the emphasis was laid on the character of the individual, giving birth to a new monstrous species called the “moral monster” (Foucault, 2003, p. 91-92). Accordingly, individuals who violated social norms were deemed monstrous and were perceived as a threat to the society, leading to various forms of social censure and physical punishment.

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Though the advent of modernity has altered the hitherto dominant religious and fantastical conceptualizations of the monster, it still remains a key element of modern discourses (mainstream, popular and scientific) to depict society's anxiety and hatred towards the marginal, the deviant and the strange. As Derrida observes in *Points: Interviews, 1974-1994s*, for instance, “[a] monster is a species for which we do not yet have a name” (Derrida & Weber, 1995, p. 386) for, it simultaneously embodies strangeness, unimaginableness, and hallucination. Leo Braudy in his *Haunted: On Ghosts, Witches, Vampires, Zombies, and Other Monsters of the Natural and Supernatural Worlds* identifies what he calls “monsters of modernity” which embody repressed cultural fears and function as metaphors of horror, revulsion, and liminality (Maguire, 2016, n.p.). Braudy categorizes four types of monsters thus: “the monsters from nature (like King Kong), the created monster (like Frankenstein), the monster from within (like Mr. Hyde) and the monster from the past (like Dracula)” (as quoted in Maguire, 2016, n.p.). Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker are prime literary instances of the use of the monster. David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986) and Peter Jackson's *King Kong* (2005) are some of the cinematic improvisations of the monster figure.

Monstrosity and STDs

Although monster trope is used in the context of illness, it is widely deployed in the context of queerness and STDs, especially homosexuality and AIDS. As it turns out, the biomedical discourse has a long history of intersecting with the moral universe and social constructions of STDs. Calling attention to AIDS, Paula A. Treichler in *How to Have a Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* contends that “[t]here is a continuum . . . not a dichotomy, between popular and biomedical discourses” (1999, p. 15) in the conceptualizations of STDs. Hence, contrary to the claims of biomedical discourses, the scientific conceptualizations of STDs lack objectivity and factuality. Elsewhere, Veena Das in her article “Stigma, Contagion, Defect: Issues in the Anthropology of Public Health” demonstrates how the discourses surrounding STDs were always “hooked into the cultural concerns with sexual morality” (2001, p. 7). In a different vein, Allan M. Brandt in *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease* offers a perceptive account of the relationship between medical science and cultural values to demonstrate how even pure medical concerns collude with sociocultural discourses in defining “the sexually transmitted diseases as uniquely sinful” (Brandt, 1987, p. 202). Biomedicine blindly assimilates the moral universe of popular discourses in projecting sufferers of venereal disease as moral monsters and as abject beings.

Characteristically, the disfigurement or deformity caused by the STD is interpreted as a physical manifestation of the victims' inner monstrosity. Sander Gilman in his *Picturing Health and Illness: Images of Identity and Difference* (1995) observes that physicians considered diseases such as syphilis as ‘social diseases’ which are “not only deviations from an absolute aesthetic norm, [but] they disfigure the body politic through the ‘infection’ of the individual” (1995, p. 54). Gilman quotes Karl Rosenkranz who argues that “illness is the source of ugliness when it alters the form of the body” and syphilis “creates the most ghastly deformities” (as quoted in Gilman, 1995, p. 53). The disfigured and ugly body of the afflicted makes it convenient to uncritically establish a link among corporeality, embodiment and the social. As Das contends, the stigma associated with deformed bodies engenders feelings of shame, isolation, and guilt in patients as they are subjected to exclusion from the social community (2001, pp. 7-9). Hence it is the cultural

logic of contagion that deems the victims as monsters who must be eradicated to re-establish normalcy.

The vampire, perhaps, is the most invoked monster in the context of STDs, and usually functions as a discrete ideological system. Marty Fink in her article entitled “AIDS Vampires: Reimagining Illness in Octavia Butler’s ‘Fledging’” contends that “vampires have evolved as literary signifiers of racial and sexual deviance, embodying illnesses as wide-ranging as syphilis and tuberculosis” (Fink, 2010, p. 416). Fink locates the figure of the vampire in the cultural history of disease arguing that it forms part of the age-old practice of blaming the individual for her/his medical condition through racializing and sexualizing the illness (p. 424). What is evident here is the interpretive malleability with which the monster trope is appropriated (in its varied manifestations) both in popular and biomedical discourses to demonize and dehumanize people afflicted by (venereal) diseases. Particularly, Fink delineates the ways in which the vampire metaphor functions in popular discourses as a sufficient trope to represent individuals suffering from STDs, for the logic of vampirism signified unrestrained sexuality and contagion through body fluids (pp. 423-24). Dahl’s deployment of the monster trope to signify the socio-cultural othering and the self-censoring it entails is relevant in this context. Published in 2009, Dahl’s autopathography² *Monsters* revolves around Ken (an alter ego of the author) who on the diagnosis of herpes³ struggles to come to terms with the idea of himself suffering from an incurable, contagious STD. The narrative concerns with Ken’s alienation and his experience of social ridicule and ostracization, both real and imagined, which in turn evokes a feeling that he is nothing less than a monster. Torn between an intense longing for sexual intimacy and his own moral and ethical responsibilities as an STD patient, the protagonist’s psychic landscape shrinks to a battleground of passion and self-proscription. Despite his attempts at abstinence, Ken eventually dates Hannah, a girl who works in the library, while he is tormented by the thought of revealing his predicament to her. However, the support and affirmation from Hannah who is aware of herpes as a condition common to almost half of the American population assures Ken to gradually reconcile with his condition. The narrative ends on a positive note with Ken acknowledging the virus not as a threat to his existence but as “just another life form trying to survive in this weird, fucked-up world” (p. 200). The vampire trope, then, in *Monsters* embodies the stigmatized nature of Ken’s libido because of his identity as a carrier of an STD.

Monster in the Medium/Medium as the Monster

Katherine Shaeffer and Spencer Chalifour examine various functions of the monster within the medium of comics. According to the authors, “[c]omics are monstrous themselves,” (2015, Introduction, para. 2) for comics not only is a hybrid medium that coalesces the visual and the verbal codes but also the discourses surrounding the medium of comics such as “(frame, network, or sequence, text-dominant or image-dominant, closure or suture) call our [the readers] attention to their very visible seams: the gaps between panels, the borders between white space and image, the balloons which enclose the spoken word” (2015, para. 2). Comics at once offers “a space to showcase how the alien or Other is made monstrous” as well as provides “a platform from which monsters can speak out” (2015, para. 3). Invoking monster characters from the superhero genre such as the Hulk, the Thing, and the Swamp, the authors conclude that comics has a long history of engagement with the idea of the monster and the monstrous both in thematic and formal terms.

Given graphic medicine’s preoccupation with illness conditions and disabilities among others, it is not surprising that monsters and the monstrous are repeatedly invoked at the level of

theme and form. For instance, graphic pathographies such as Charles Burns' *Black Hole* (1995) and David B.'s *Epileptic* (2002) utilize monster and the monstrous aesthetic of the grotesque. While thematic monstrosity effortlessly develops in *Black Hole* in the form of grotesque mutations in teenagers who are infected by an unknown STD, *Epileptic* chronicles the life of a young boy suffering from epilepsy whose condition transforms himself into a monstrous being in someone's terms. In *Epileptic*, the illness assumes myriad visual manifestations including that of a ghost, a snake-bird and a monster and hence carries monstrosity in its visual vocabulary itself. The author calls the reader's attention to the use of monster as a metaphor when his mother pleads him to depict his grandmother's alcoholism as "some sort of monster" (p. 94). The formal monstrosity that the narrative expresses in the form of dark, dense, disproportionate and jammed panels and figures complement the treatment of epilepsy as a 'monstrous' disease condition. Further, thematic monstrosity coalesces with formal monstrosity when the boy's disfigured body envelops the panels as a thick border (pp. 296-301), signifying how the diseased body is not only the subject of the narrative but also its container. Burns' *Black Hole*, on the other hand, establishes a link between corporeality, STDs, and monstrosity in that the characters afflicted with the virus (called the 'bug') develop external deformations such as growing a tail, shedding skin, sprouting tumours on the face, and growing a mouth on the chest. Like their textual counterparts, graphic medical narratives deploy monsters to dramatize intersubjective anxieties and to enunciate phenomenological and experiential truths of illness.

Dahl's graphic enunciation of his monstrous body as "a festering bag of virions" (Williams, 2015, p. 124) resonates with the Western abject art that developed in the late twentieth century. The abject art which marked a fundamental shift in western art form "from the body-as-entity to the body-as-fragment" (Arya, 2014, p. 88) consciously foregrounds the somatic and the private such as puss, blood, and genitalia (p. 84) as it essays a phenomenological exploration of the lived body. The abject tradition in visual arts focuses on the gory, the grisly, the macabre and the repugnant aspects of corporeality. Accordingly, the visual idiom of *Monsters* deploys body-horror techniques in dark, violent and terror-inducing splash pages. Dahl realizes the familiar attributes of abject art in the comic medium, especially when he depicts the protagonist as a filthy bag of virus, as a leaky herpes monster, as a half-human half-animal creature, and as a rabid beast/serpent. In so doing, Ken's body is represented as chaotic and fragmentary not only to suggest the changing nature of his body and hence the physicality of bodies but also to signify the embodied dimension of the self. Comics artist and physician Ian Williams lauds Dahl for his mastery of sketching the complexities of illness experience thus: "Dahl is a talented artist who is able to convey meaning in a masterly way, where a less skilful comic artist might struggle to articulate what he is trying to say in graphic form and resort to an explanation of the narrative text" (Williams, 2015, 119). Williams discerns the iconography of Dahl in *Monsters* as "concealed," where the comic artist graphically reveals, at times employing the device of visual hyperbole, the psychological trauma of the sufferer whose disease condition is less manifest but deeply psychological (pp. 123-125). *Monsters* combines thematic monstrosity with the monstrosity of the medium not only to depict the marginalizing effects of illness within an intersubjective context but also to explore the dynamic mind-body interactions.

Making of the Monstrous: Creation and Becoming

Monstrosity functions in *Monsters* in myriad ways—for instance, the very book's title (*Monsters*) and its attendant visuals at once conjure up images of monsters. The idea of herpes-infected monstrous self, which is the primary concern of Dahl's autopathography, permeates the

peritextual⁴ aspects of the book. Accordingly, colonies of herpes virus spread over the book’s jacket cover (see figure 1), making the book itself appear infected, which is a deliberate invitation to treat the text within a cultural framework of monster/monstrosity and diseased identity. As such, the jacket cover is a graphic enunciation of the author’s self that has turned monstrous, not only at the level of the body but also at the level of his vision that perceives the world through the lens of monstrosity. In a personal email interview (Nov. 9, 2017), the author clarifies thus: “learning that I had an incurable, contagious STI really changed how I viewed the world and my place in it.” Moreover, the bright-coloured red signifies the precariousness of the monstrous vision which is ‘herpes-infected.’ The image also conjures the idea that an STD-infected individual’s perception of his own self and outside reality is systematically reshaped by the discourses that label him monstrous. Put differently, the sufferer is coerced to align his sense of reality with the society’s (mis)interpretations of herpes.

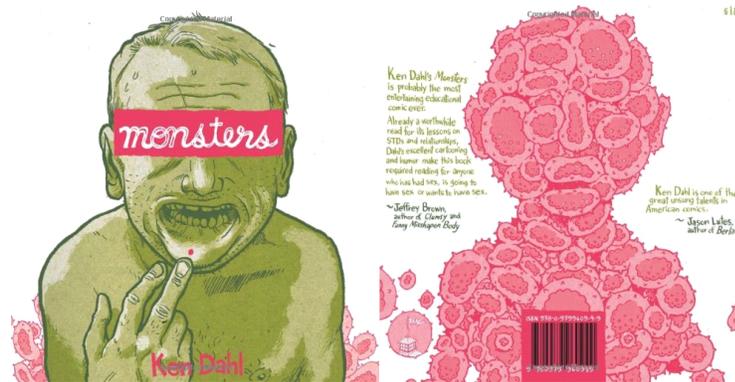


Figure 1: Ken Dahl. *Monsters*. 2009. New York: Secret Acres. n.p.

Furthermore, the image depicts Ken in a moment of crisis with sweat rolling down his temple, and his gesture/posture suggests emotional turmoil and mental agony. At a different level, the image implies the process of self-blinding through a complex mechanism of social labelling and exclusion when the author places the “monsters” label across the eyes of Ken, suggesting not only the act of viewing the individual primarily on the basis of the label thrust upon him but also through his own sense of being as an ‘ostracised other.’ Such an act of self-censuring where the subject identifies his self/body as monstrous is a result of the coexistence of personal and collective blinding often achieved through the intricate social mechanism where the subject endorses negative social attitudes as applied to the self.

The image on the back cover of the book accentuates the idea implied in the front cover, that is, it portrays the infected body of Ken as a filthy bag of herpes virus and establishes herpes as a primary mode of signification in the text. It also visually encapsulates how herpes “engulfs” his identity as a person making him at once vulnerable to social stigmatization and othering. The making of the monstrous self, the image suggests, is also an act of the individual accepting the subjectivity imposed upon him, thereby *becoming* it. Ken’s acceptance of his social exclusion and the subsequent identification of his herpes-infected body as monstrous illustrate Sartre’s third order of intersubjectivity: “I exist for myself as a body known by the other” (Sartre, 2003, p. 375). That is, Ken is “vividly and constantly conscious of his body not as it is for him but as it is *for the Other*” (Sartre, 2003, p. 376).

Encountering the Monster: the Lacanian Mirror

Monsters contains several mirror scenes and mirror images to convey the protagonist's gradual metamorphosis into a monster. In one of the scenes, Ken searches for herpes related images on the internet. On seeing the gross ways in which herpes is represented, he states thus: "it's like something out of a monster movie" (Dahl, 2009, p. 52). In the very next instance, Ken rushes to a lavatory examining the sores and mouth ulcers which he assumes are the symptoms of herpes infection. The four vertical panels, which are the mirror images of each other, capture Ken's moment to moment transmutation into a loathsome monstrous body and impossible states (see figure 2). In the first panel, while Ken is looking at a mirror, anthropomorphic herpes viruses lurk in the background, signifying his unconscious fears and chronic insecurities. The second panel shows the virus germinating from different parts of Ken's body. Much like Cronenberg's *The Fly*, the third panel delineates Ken's gradual transmutation into morphological monstrosity in visceral and dramatic ways. Suspended between half-human and half-virus form but is wholly neither, the last panel shows the protagonist's complete transformation into a leaky body, spilling colonies of virus all around him. This picturing of Ken's body as chaotic and repulsive curiously illustrates the abject art style which "involves the body being undone and taken apart" (Arya, 2014, p. 85). The fear and revulsion evoked through body horror and bodily transformation are not only about the mutability and vulnerability of the mortal body but also illustrative of the operative force of the 'social' towards a disease.

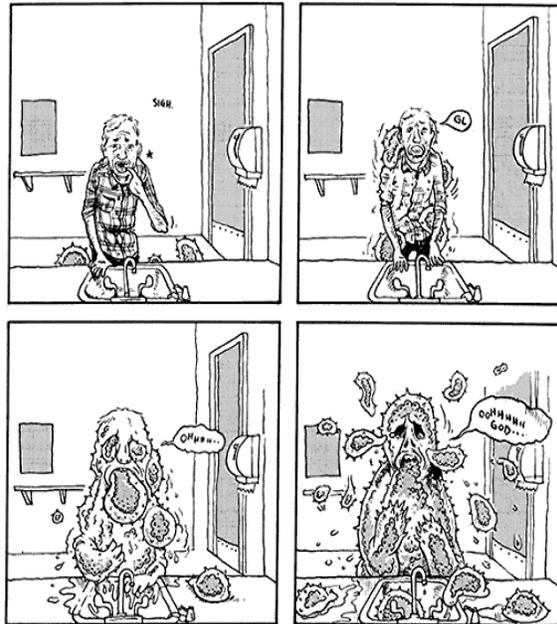


Figure 2: Ken Dahl. *Monsters*. 2009. New York: Secret Acres. 54.

Intriguingly, Dahl's mirror scenes effortlessly tap into Jacques Lacan's fundamental concepts, primarily from his provocative essay titled "The Mirror Stage" (1954) which enunciates the role of the mirror in the formation of self-image and ego. According to Lacan, the mirror stage represents a pivotal phase in an infant's psychological development where a relationship between the sense of self and perception of the body is established. In this phase, the infant becomes aware that its body and hence the self have a complete form in contrast to its sense of inner self that is volatile and fragmented. To quote Lacan: "[t]he mirror stage is a drama . . . which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that

extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality . . . and lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development” (Lacan, 1977, p. 4). The infant identifies with the mirror image, and hence this stage is also described as the one of (mis)recognition.

While the Lacanian infant sees its own body image in the mirror, what Ken perceives is a reflection of his fractured and turbulent inner self, steeped in fear of becoming an STD-infected monster. In the Lacanian sense, if the infant’s identification of its own image in the mirror leads to the formation of the ego and a definitive sense of self, then Ken’s (mis)recognition of his monstrous body in the mirror triggers a visceral reaction leading to a total collapse of his sense of self. Further, the mirror image impairs Ken’s ego as it reflects his id which betrays his previously intact body-self. Here the phenomenon of self-blinding is at work as Ken’s conception of his self-body is impelled by the mainstream depiction of the herpes-infected body as “something out of a monster movie” (Dahl, 2009, p. 52).

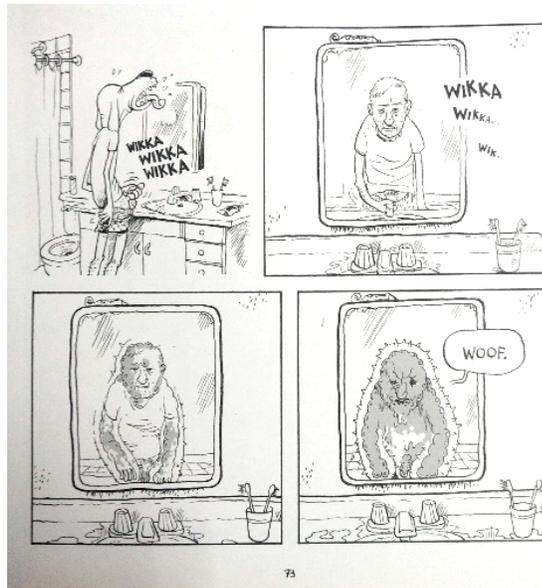


Figure 3: Ken Dahl. *Monsters*. 2009. New York: Secret Acres. 73.

In the second set of mirror images, Dahl portrays a gradual erosion of Ken’s masculine self and the degeneration of his desire into masturbatory (see figure 3). In the three horizontal panels, Ken is shown as trying to masturbate in front of a mirror in his lavatory. While the first panel depicts the protagonist with an expression indicating desperation, holding his half-erect penis trying to masturbate with “wikka..wikka..wik” (p. 73) sound in the background (signifying the action performed), the second panel marks the change in Ken’s corporeality to monstrous half-human and half-virus. Here, Ken desperately stares at his mirror image as he can no longer hold his flaccid penis and masturbate. The last panel portrays Ken as a herpes monster with no trace of humanness left in him. There is yet another instance in the narrative where the protagonist makes a futile attempt to masturbate and culminates in encountering his own monstrosity (pp. 121-124). The author employs four splash pages in which the first one is a literal re-enactment where Ken tries to masturbate while taking a bath under the shower. The second splash page takes us to the mental landscape of the protagonist with an enlarged thought bubble depicting his fantasy of making love to a woman. In the third splash page, Ken’s romantic imagination turns chaotic as his fears of himself as a carrier of an STD envelops him. Here, the author portrays this as a collage of

an enlarged thought bubble with the images of the infected and disgustingly leaky face and genitals of the protagonist and his imaginary lover. The last splash page is the most striking as it portrays Ken's infected penis acquiring life of its own and turning into a wailing monster. In the successive enlarged thought bubbles, the penis-monster half-swallows Ken's normal body before exploding and, in the process, the readers are immediately brought back to reality to witness a miserable Ken standing before the shower with a flaccid penis (pp.121-124). The horror created by the fantasy makes Ken's self-intimate masturbation an exercise in self-shaming and also a guilt-inducing act. These mirror scenes illustrate how Ken's unconscious fear of being a herpes-monster unsettles his sense of body-self to the extent that the imagined monstrosity devours his self. Dahl strategically deploys the Lacanian mirror as a disruptive force which allows the author foreground Ken's ego and his unconscious in a direct encounter with the self. If Dahl succeeds in drawing the readers' sympathy for his protagonist, such an encounter forces Ken to confront his own vulnerable inner self and existential entanglements, culminating in a traumatic awareness of his monstrous predicament.

Through the second set of mirror images which captures the protagonist's failed attempt at masturbation, the author draws a close connection between one's sense of self and libidinal desires and instinctual drives. Particularly, Ken's self-realization that he is a carrier of an STD virus and the consequent social stigmatization/othering it engenders strips him of his identity as a desirable heterosexual male into a masturbatory individual. Sigmund Freud in his psychoanalytic theory of child's sexual development refers to a stage in which the child learns the pleasurable exercise of masturbation or autoeroticism as the genital or the phallic phase. This phase, for Freud, is significant in that the child relates genitals with pleasure, which in turn contributes to her/his overall sexual development. Unlike the child in the genital phase of sexual development whose autoerotic tendencies eventually give way to heterosexual desires, Ken's libidinal desires undergo a reversal from hetero-eroticism to autoeroticism. However, this transformation is not a natural one as he is forced to resort to it as a result of socio-cultural estrangement and self-censure. In both the scenes which depict Ken's attempts to masturbate, it is the unconscious fear regarding his identity as a herpes monster that thwarts him from successfully indulging even in masturbation, resulting in the erosion of what Freud calls the phallic pride⁵. Elsewhere, Ken deplorably states about his infected penis thus: "I can definitely see myself living the rest of my life without sticking my useless, diseased dick in another person" (p. 62), making Ken's phallus a symbol of shame and aversion, thereby denting his phallogocentric⁶ universe forever.

In the second scene, his herpes-infected fantasy conjures Ken as a herpes monster carrying an equally monstrous penis that wails and explodes. This imagined monstrosity of the male organ stems from Ken's latent fear of castration. Here, the protagonist's unconscious fear of facing socio-political castration becomes evident as he conceives his infected-penis as a threat to the mainstream society (through the logic of contagion). In other words, Ken's imagined fear of his penis becoming a monster is a return of his repressed fear of castration, marking the entire experience an enactment of Freudian 'uncanny.' To quote Freud: "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud, 1919, p. 220).

Dahl's pictorial rendition of Ken's monstrous body is also peculiar in that it is depicted as spilling and leaky (hence appalling), as evidenced in the mirror scenes. Notably, the body has lost its status as pure/clean, and the transmutation that it undergoes from human to monstrous has transformed the body into an 'abject.' The abject, in Kristeva's formulation, not only connotes anything that transgresses the boundaries of the body such as body fluids and waste materials as it warps the elusive ideal of a clean and proper self but also signifies the provisional nature of the

self and body. To quote her: “[i]t is thus not [a] lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). Elsewhere, Shildrick includes the selves into the fold of abjectness and monstrosity thus: “[w]hat we see mirrored in the monster are the leaks and flows, the vulnerabilities in our own embodied being” (Shildrick, 2002, p. 4). In *Monsters*, Ken’s strong sense of abjectness demonstrates the ostracization that he has to confront as an STD patient. As Arya reasons, it is the logic of contamination which impels Ken to accept himself as a social outcast and bemoan thus, “[l]et’s face it: nobody wants to fuck a monster and become monsters themselves” (Dahl, 2009, p. 55). Staying true to the Kristevian notion of the abject, this encounter with the ‘Other within’ causes in Ken an irrevocable identity crisis. Ken’s ‘diseased’ identity is an outcome of social assumptions about herpes illness as well as self-censoring. Thus, in *Monsters*, Dahl articulates a certain way of life that has its roots in the social.

“Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill”: Vampire and the Cultural Logic of ‘Other’ing

Dahl invokes the vampire when he portrays Ken as Dracula, a dreaded figure in popular imagination who embodies monstrosity in multiple ways. Much like the old literary and filmic conventions of representing Dracula, Ken is drawn as a figure with long and pointed canine teeth, pointed ears, long nose, and claw-like nails, wearing a black cape. In re-contextualizing the vampire monster to the contemporary setting, the author not only exposes how the barbarous practices and mysteries of the dark ages uncannily operate the modern psyche but also reveals the cultural logic of exclusion which turns difference into abjectness. Accordingly, readers are introduced to vampire-looking Ken who is locked in a dungeon cursing, “[w]hat kind of a bullshit world is this” (Dahl, 2009, p. 56). Later, looking at the “clean homogenous faces” who are “content to hate and reject what they can’t be bothered to understand,” Ken laments thus: “when will they realize that they’re the real monsters” (p. 56). Here, the author uses vampire monster as a general metaphor not only to critique the toxic culture of hatred and apathy that characterizes everyday life and real social practices but also to expose unthinking and complacent public. Calling them as “the real monsters” (p. 56), the author uncovers a system where “a group, in order to protect itself, practices exclusions” (p. 17). Central to this imagining is the way “the clean, homogenous faces” (p. 56) conceal their monstrous selves in polished ways.

In the next set of panels, the vampire-like Ken walks through the pavement of the city and reaches a McDonald’s outlet and calls the customers “hypocrites!” (p. 57). Dahl takes to task the global food industry and its market logic of exploitation when he ridicules McDonald’s for “[e]nslaving, torturing and murdering billions of animals” just to get their “bloody meat wrapped up in a happy meal” (p. 57). Framing McDonald’s as a horrendous monster, the author imagines a world order as thriving on the lifeblood of the disempowered and the non-human. Amongst other things, while it is a support of animal rights, it is also an expose of neoliberal economies and maiming of animals by capital. In so doing, the author at once maps devastations and consequences of global capital, corporations, colonized mass-culture, and apathetic public. Dahl’s critique of the capitalist world order and its exploitative mechanisms through the prism of his own social alienation as an STD carrier is premised on the cultural logic of contagion which strategically displaces the marginal and the vulnerable.

The splash page which draws the scene to a close is graphically potent in that it represents Ken’s troubled inner self and bespeaks the unbearable nature of the trauma (see figure 4). Here, the vampire looking Ken walks through a muddy subterranean passage at midnight while a band of men including priests, Victorian aristocrats and the laymen representing different historical

epochs and socio-cultural order is in pursuit of the vampire. Carrying crosses, axes, fire, guns, and tridents, they shout, “Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill” (p. 58). The image which is an improvisation of medieval witch-hunt suggests how social outcasts (like Ken) who allegedly pose a threat to the social order are maimed by religious zealots, aristocrats, and modern capitalists alike. The word “SIGH” which is drawn in bold captures the desperation and self-pity. Ken’s silent exit through the underground tunnel is telling as it suggests how the ostracized have to grudgingly accept their social exclusion and choose an unseen, underground existence when the whole society is up in arms, both literally and figuratively, against them. Interestingly, Susan Squier in her article titled “The Uses of Graphic Medicine for Engaged Scholarship” parallels these figures in *Monsters* to “the torch-wielding, monster-hunting villagers in *Frankenstein*” (2015, p. 53). A striking analogy exists between Ken and Frankenstein monster in terms of stigma and segregation that both had to endure from an intolerant and parochial society. In fact, Ken echoes Frankenstein monster’s sentiment when he bewails thus: “[b]ut look at it from monster’s point of view. You just want what everyone else wants- acceptance; affection; inclusion . . . and of course survival” (Dahl, 2009, p. 55). Both the monsters emerge in their respective narratives as victims, maligned and maimed by a social order which persecutes dissimilitude and punishes difference.

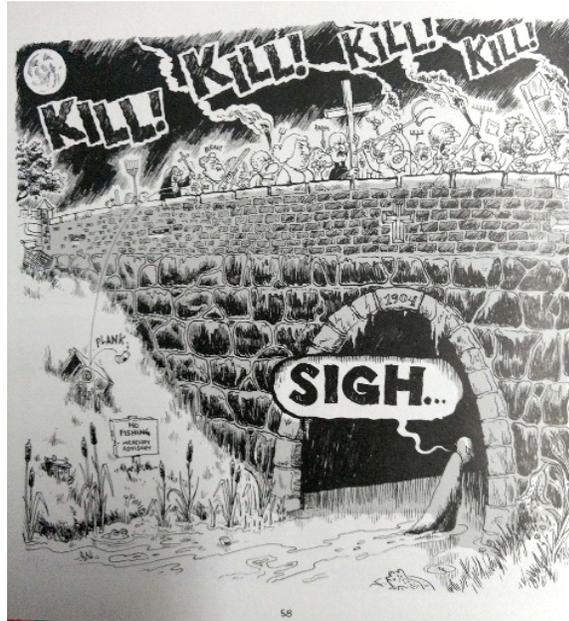


Figure 4: Ken Dahl. *Monsters*. 2009. New York: Secret Acres. 58.

Dahl’s vampire is also evocative of unbridled sexuality, sexual wishes, and conflicting sexual desires. Ernest Jones in *On the Nightmare* observes how the popular myth concerning the vampire “yields plain indications of most kinds of sexual pervasions” (as quoted in Bentley, 1988, p. 26). Further, Jones interprets Dracula’s nightly visits during which he “first exhausts the sleeper with passionate embraces and then withdraws from him a vital fluid” (as quoted in Bentley, 1988, p. 27) as suggestive of erotic dreams followed by nocturnal emissions. In this way, the vampire is a metaphor of the repressed and hidden sexual desires; after all, blood is an equivalent of semen in the language of the unconscious (p. 27). Through imagining Ken as a Dracula, the author makes full use of the myriad interpretive possibilities of the vampire trope in that it represents the protagonist’s uncontrollable libido which has turned animalistic and masturbatory. Ken’s imagining of himself as a rabid beast “drooling over women like an animal in heat” (Dahl, 2009, p.

70) and as a huge serpent wailing, “I don’t feel human anymore” (p. 104) are suggestive of unrestrained and uncontrollable sexuality. Dahl’s vampire, then, is an embodiment of unfulfilled and repressed sexual desires.

Commenting on the use of “a lot of stock ‘monsters’ of various cultures such as vampires, werewolves” as a metaphor for STDs, Dahl (Nov. 9, 2017) in a personal email interview states thus:

A lot of them are basically extended metaphors for our feelings about STDs and the people who carry them -- the highly sexualized means of transmission; the gruesome process of the infected body's transformation; the shame & exile from “normal” human society; the way the infected’s desires become threats to others and how they wrestle with their urges to pass their disease to others. It’s all so vividly parallel to herpes infection, to the extent that I have to wonder how much of these monster tropes were inspired by and deliberately based on their authors’ own experiences with sexually transmitted infections especially with more serious diseases like syphilis, TB, and HIV.

In essence, Dahl’s deployment of the various manifestations of the monster including that of the vampire, at once illustrates his predicament as an STD carrier, society’s preoccupation with the idea of the monstrous as a threatening presence and his own (bodily) insecurities within the circuits of pleasure and sex.

Coda

Monsters dramatize stigma, liminality, and otherness, and hence, it is utilized across discourses to annotate a range of social anxieties including racism, sexuality and even ruthless advances in capitalism. While popular discourses (such as films and literary narratives) have predominantly deployed monsters to signify forms of otherness that pervade modern society, the biomedical narratives have strategically incorporated the cultural theme of monsters to narrativize abjecthood, STDs, body panic and corporeal vulnerability. Given such flexibility, it is predictable that graphic medicine which combines comics and illness to map phenomenological nature of illness makes full use of the monster and the monstrous. The formal properties as well as the fragmented and visual nature of the comics medium suit the representation of monsters. Thanks also to formal and structural possibilities of comics which simultaneously allow monsters to reveal and hide within its spatiality.

Dahl in *Monsters* deploys the metaphor of monster to describe the marginalizing nature of illness and forms of othering in its diverse manifestations. Exploiting the faculties of the comics medium and utilizing the visual register of abject art, Dahl’s autopathography brings to the fore the various dimensions of the monstrous as a figure that upends both public and private conceptualizations of the self, embodiment, and subjectivity. The monstrous in *Monsters* at once signifies the prejudices, fears, and apprehensions of the mainstream society towards everything that eludes its logic of order and stability and the embodied self’s unconscious anxieties concerning its own corporeality, agency, and location. Ken’s imagined monstrosity (both physical and ontological) as a herpes patient is the denouement of the socio-cultural discourses of hate and isolation, making him internalize the subjectivity of the monstrous other. Notably, picturing the protagonist as a monster in myriad ways allows Dahl to concretize his suffered abjectness as an STD patient. Ken’s forced status as a monstrous other also gives enough ground for Dahl to stridently critique the puritanical excesses of religious bigots whose idea of purity has its origins in the middle ages.

The author also uses the monster as an extended trope to comment on the multinational conglomerates and the modern capitalist system which work through the logic of ruthless exploitation and individual coercion. Typical of a humanist, Dahl critiques all forms of othering and stigmatization (including racial and gendered) throughout the narrative, emphasizing the need to forge an inclusive and tolerant society that does not (mis)treat suffering and disempowered subjects. After all, Ken's acceptance of his condition and his subsequent reconciliation toward the end of the narrative is a result of the benevolence and affirmation extended by his girlfriend, Hannah. Ken's life itself is an allegory of social othering where STD sufferers are perceived as monsters who must be chastised or eliminated. *Monsters*, then, is an appeal from a suffering subject for an inclusive, just and equitable society.

Notes

1. Ken Dahl is the nom de plume of the comic artist Gabby Schulz.
2. The term autopathography was coined by Thomas Couser to denote autobiographical narratives that stem from and deal with the author's encounter with a disease/disability/psychological disorder.
3. Herpes is a viral disease caused by herpes simplex virus.
4. Peritextual elements include all textual and graphic elements that are not part of the main body of a published work.
5. Phallic pride refers to the sense of superiority and power that the male experiences when he realizes that he has a penis that females lack.
6. 'Phallogocentrism' is a portmanteau term coined by Jacques Derrida, which combines the ideas of phallogocentrism and logocentrism, to refer to the privileging of the masculine in language and in the construction of meaning.

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