

Zombie Desire, Queerness, and Race in *The Girl with All the Gifts*

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Although certainly not a twenty-first-century invention, the sympathetic, self-aware zombie became a staple of the genre in the new millennium. Its origins date back at least to films like George Romero's *Day of the Dead* (1985) and *My Boyfriend's Back* (1993). However, the figure has increasingly appeared in recent novels and movies, including Seth Grahame-Smith's novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) and its 2016 movie adaptation; the novel and film *Warm Bodies* (2010, 2013), and *iZombie*, which appeared first as a comic series in 2010 and subsequently a television series from 2015-2019. Diana Rowland's *My Life as a White Trash Zombie* (2011), and its multiple sequels continue the trend, as does Hugh Howey's *I, Zombie* (2012); *Maggie* (Henry Hobson 2015), starring Arnold Schwarzenegger and Abigail Breslin, and, of course, the subjects of this article, M. R. Carey's novel *The Girl with all the Gifts* (2014) and its 2016 cinematic adaptation directed by Colm McCarthy and written by Carey himself. While neither of these texts is therefore unique in featuring a self-aware zombie protagonist, both are distinctive due to the fact that their main character, Melanie, is a prepubescent girl who initially has no idea that she is a 'hungry', the novel and film's word for zombie. Her journey of self-discovery—a central concern of young adult literature—involves her coming to terms with her zombie identity and the abilities and appetites that derive therefrom.

The Girl with All the Gifts takes place twenty years after the infection of humankind by the fungus *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*, which is spread through blood and saliva, turning all who come into contact with it into hungries. The story begins on a military base, where Melanie

and a dozen or so other hungry children are essentially serving as lab rats. In contrast with the zombies of the initial outbreak, these second-generation hungries can maintain control over their zombie nature, so long as the humans around them wear a blocker to mask their scent.¹ They possess the ability to learn, and, in fact, their capacities for education—or at least Melanie’s—appear to supersede that of their their human keepers’. Those overseeing the children believe they are key to a cure and therefore merely consider them extensions of the virus and grant them no personhood.² As a result, the conditions to which the children are subjected are horrible, though Melanie doesn’t realize it at first because she has no basis for comparison. They spend most of their days strapped to wheelchairs in a classroom and their nights imprisoned in solitary cells, except for once a week, when they are wheeled into a large room, fed a bowlful of grubs, and then sprayed with the same blocker the humans wear. The only person who treats them with any kindness is Helen Justineau, a black, middle-aged behavioral psychologist upon whom Melanie (who is identified as white early in the novel) has developed a serious crush--initially because Justineau is the only human who treats the children with any respect and affection. As the novel progresses and Melanie increasingly allows her zombie self to emerge, her feelings for Justineau take on increasingly sexual dimensions, as do her zombie appetites.

That the central relationship in this novel is between a young girl and an older woman who is not a blood relative differentiates it from much young adult (YA) horror and science fiction, especially that of the dystopian variety. Such fiction frequently includes a romantic subplot as a necessary element of the protagonist’s character development, a trope that has been hotly criticized.³ *The Girl with All the Gifts* instead focuses on the relationship between Melanie and Justineau. However, this relationship functions comparably to the heterosexual relationships depicted in other texts: though she is young. In the novel, Melanie is ten while in the film she

was played by thirteen-year-old Sennia Nanua, Melanie's feelings for Justineau are as romantic and sexual as the emotions experienced by other YA protagonists. However, unlike those protagonists, Melanie never gets to fulfill her desires, for a variety of self-evident reasons, the most obvious being that Justineau has no romantic interest in Melanie, who is far too young and, in Justineau's eyes, somewhat monstrous.⁴ Melanie is unable to fully conceptualize her feelings in such terms because she has only a vague understanding of romance and sex; what she does know is based on the classical texts they read in class, and those models provide only patriarchal, heteronormative scripts.⁵ Melanie can therefore only express her desires symbolically, by comparing them to her zombie appetites.⁶

The Girl with All the Gifts is therefore distinctive, both in refusing to relegate its protagonist to a traditional romantic relationship and for openly portraying queer desires, which, according to critics, has been rare in YA dystopian literature (Basu et al 2014; Day et al 2014).⁷ However, because Melanie and the book symbolize those desires by relating them to Melanie's zombie appetites, it also, if inadvertently, codes them as monstrous. Even more problematic, however, is the novel's treatment of race, for Justineau, the only major character of color in the novel, becomes an object of sexual fantasy for almost all the other characters, whose desire could be read as a problematic fetishization and colonization of the exotic racial other. In short, while *The Girl with All the Gifts* diverges from YA's most trodden paths, it may also be paving the way for equally problematic issues.

Though mainstream reviews of the book have noted the romantic and sexual dimensions of Melanie's feelings for Justineau,⁸ most academic studies, if they mention them at all, gloss over them, seeing them as the natural emotions of a neglected child for the one person who treats her with any tenderness.⁹ This critical inattention to the queer undertones of the book is

surprising considering just how frequently Melanie ruminates about her feelings for Justineau and in such sexually charged terms. Certainly, Melanie is only ten, which might make her seem too young to experience true desire for anyone. However, the book repeatedly demonstrates that Melanie is far smarter and more mature than a human child would be at that age.¹⁰

Furthermore, although some passages describing Melanie's feelings do make them sound simply like the love of a young child for a beloved teacher and parent figure, others stretch that understanding. Melanie thinks early on, for instance, that '[t]here can't be anyone better or kinder or lovelier than Miss Justineau anywhere in the world' and admits to frequently raising her hand in class because 'what she most likes to hear, and to remember, is Miss Justineau's voice saying her name, Melanie, in that way that makes her feel like the most important person in the world' (Carey 2014: 15, 11). Melanie clearly wants Justineau to herself and feels frustrated whenever that wish goes unfulfilled. Melanie reveals that she gets:

Jealous . . . every time Miss Justineau talks to another boy or girl in class. She wants Miss Justineau's time to belong to her, and the reminders that it doesn't sting a little, make her heart do a gentle drop and thud in her chest. (61)

Even more striking is the fact that Melanie chooses to stay with Justineau even after she is freed from captivity, even though doing so means that she must also remain in contact with Dr. Caldwell, who still plans to vivisect her once given the chance. Even under these circumstances, Melanie claims that '[s]he doesn't think she'll ever love anyone else quite this much' (257). Melanie's love for Justineau is her character's primary motivating force, and though in some passages that love might seem merely storgic, the extent to which she will go to simply remain close to Justineau goes beyond the mere fidelity of a child for her main caretaker.

Melanie's feelings might be easy to overlook since the terms in which she expresses them are not directly romantic or sexual. However, this is as likely to be a result of her constricted existence, which has left her little understanding of the human emotion. Therefore, Melanie must resort to metaphors and symbols garnered from the classical texts she has read and her limited experiences. Tellingly, Melanie chooses to express her emotions for Justineau in the terms of a fairy tale, with Melanie serving the role of rescuer and Justineau the damsel in distress. She invents a story in which she saves Justineau and the two receive the happily-ever-after ending typically reserved for heterosexual agemates: 'And the beautiful woman hugged her to her mortal soul, and said, "You are my special girl. You will always be with me, and I will never let you go." And they lived together, for ever after, in great peace and prosperity' (16-17). Even after Melanie rescues Justineau from certain death, she continues to indulge in this fairy-tale fantasy, which eventually becomes an obsession in which 'Melanie wishes she was a god or a Titan or a Trojan warrior, so she could fight for Miss Justineau and save her [...] [S]he likes the idea of saving Miss Justineau so much that it becomes her favourite thought' (210). Melanie suggestively casts her relationship with Justineau into a framework usually reserved for heterosexual pairings.

In addition, Melanie's feelings for Justineau have a clear physical component that suggests attraction. Early in the novel, Miss Justineau, in a sudden burst of sympathy for Melanie, strokes her hair, even though touching the hungry children is strictly forbidden. Melanie's response is dramatic: one simple caress from Miss Justineau sends her into a veritable ecstasy of pleasure: '[L]ights are dancing behind Melanie's eyes, and she can't get her breath, and she can't speak or hear or think about anything' (23). Later, when Justineau saves her from Dr. Caldwell's scalpel, Melanie's relief is transposed into a desire for physical contact she:

Raises her arms in an instinct too strong to resist. She wants Miss Justineau to lift her up. She wants to hold her and be held by her and be touching her not just with her hair but with her hands and her face and her whole body. (62)

Such passages demonstrate the obvious physical desire that Melanie experiences for Justineau.

It is arguable—and Melanie herself even suggests—that the reason she is so focused on physical contact with Justineau is due to its utter novelty. After all, as Melanie notes, up until Justineau strokes her hair, she has only ever been touched ‘maybe two or three times and always by accident’ (23). However, when the base is overrun by hungries and junkers (human survivors) and Justineau and Melanie are forced to evacuate with Sgt. Parks, Private Gallagher, and Dr. Caldwell, touching Justineau becomes rather commonplace once Melanie learns to control her hungry impulses. Still, her pleasure never lessens. At one point, for example, Melanie describes ‘the Miss Justineau smell, familiar and welcome and wonderful. Pressed to Miss Justineau’s chest, she emits a satiated purr. She wants to curl to sleep there, like an animal in its burrow’ (114). At another, Melanie hugs her and ‘shivers deliciously as Miss Justineau’s arms close around her’ (233), and when they share a bed, she marvels over the feeling of Justineau’s shoulder against her back: ‘she can feel it moving rhythmically with Miss Justineau’s breath ... [It] fills her with a happiness so complete that it’s stupefying’ (256). Melanie’s feelings for Justineau only grow as she gains more access to her. As she herself admits, the emotions she feels for Justineau later in the book are ‘about a hundred times stronger’ (210) as those she felt on the day Justineau stroked her hair. In Melanie’s case, familiarity doesn’t breed contempt but only fans the fires of longing.

Melanie’s physical desire for Justineau is most apparent in the associations that both Carey and Melanie herself draw between those feelings and the hunger Melanie feels when her

zombie self is activated. Significantly, it is Justineau who first arouses Melanie's zombie self in a scene that bears similarity to an initial experience of sexual desire. When Justineau visits her cell without wearing enough blocker to mask her scent, Melanie finds herself struggling to control her hunger:

Something opens inside her, like a mouth opening wider and wider and wider and screaming all the time—not from fear, but from need. Melanie thinks she has a word for it now, although it still isn't anything she's felt before. It's hunger. (63)

Like a child feeling lust for the first time, Melanie finds herself confronted by physical sensations she doesn't understand and can only compare to stories she has read, in which:

People . . . want and need to eat, and then when they do eat, they feel themselves fill up with something. It gives them a satisfaction nothing else can give . . . Hunger is bending Melanie's spine like Achilles bending his bow. And Miss Justineau will be her bread. (63)

Melanie ultimately resists her urges and shoves Justineau away, but even in that moment, her desire is evident: 'she presses her hands against Miss Justineau's stomach *touching touching touching her* and pushes her violently away' (64). Later in the book, just the faintest whiff of Justineau's smell is '[e]nough to turn the pure pleasure of their proximity into something else entirely; something that threatens to escalate out of her control' (233). As if she is experiencing inappropriate sexual passion, Melanie feels shame when Justineau arouses her zombie appetites.

Melanie gives in to her zombie self when the base is attacked, and her experiences in these moments have a clear sexual tinge. When Justineau is threatened by a junker, Melanie

attacks without hesitation. The pleasure that results from feeding on human flesh sounds remarkably like a first climax:

Her body didn't need her permission for this, and it wasn't prepared to wait. Now she bites and tears and chews and swallows, the sensations filling her and battering her like the torrent of a waterfall pouring into a cup held right under it. (113)

Having discovered the pleasures of feeding, Melanie is quick to indulge again. She attacks the next man without hesitation, again the details sound sexual:

Melanie finds the point where leg joins body driven by some instinct so deep, she can't even tell where it comes from. She fastens her teeth on to the man and bites through the leg of his pants until the blood wells thick and spurting into her mouth. She knew it would. She sensed the artery singing to her through folds of flesh and fabric. (114)

The description mirrors fellatio, with Melanie a most enthusiastic partner seeking her own satisfaction. Only when the man cries out in agony does she remember that she is killing another human, but although 'Melanie doesn't like it [the screaming] at all,' she admits that she does like 'the way his opened thigh becomes a fountain, as though raw meat was a magic garden, a hidden landscape that she never glimpsed until now' (114). Melanie's zombie appetites repeatedly function as a metaphor for sexual desire that at times overwhelms her, with Melanie's experiences as a hungry initially cause her some shame because she finds she enjoys what she has been told is forbidden. Her feelings therefore bear much in common with teens who engage in sexual intercourse despite strong social and familial pressure to abstain and equally influential

norms that suggests that sexuality is a male privilege. As is frequently the case in YA fiction, ‘Melanie’s educative and behavioural experiences within the confinement has taught her to repress these animalistic urges’ (Christie 2019: 49). Thus, the novel employs a common trope of YA narratives, namely a tendency to depict female characters ‘as the more sexually aggressive gender or, at the very least, the more persistent sexual pursuers’ (Ames and Burcon 2016:45).

Significantly, Melanie links the almost orgasmic pleasure she feels from indulging the cravings of her zombie appetite to her previous contact with Justineau:

The shock of that first taste of blood and warm flesh is so intense that it almost makes Melanie faint. Nothing in her life has ever been this good. Not even having her hair stroked by Miss Justineau! The rush of pleasure is bigger than she is.

(113)

Although of a lesser intensity, Melanie suggests that the sensation sparked by Justineau’s touch exists on a continuum with the pleasure of indulging her zombie appetite, which has obvious sexual overtones. In a dream Melanie has not long after, the two are linked again, imagining ‘Miss Justineau gathers her in her arms and holds her close’; however, ‘as her teeth meet in Miss Justineau’s throat, she snaps instantly awake, her mind wrenching itself away from that unthinkable prospect. But she can’t stop thinking about it’ (161). Although she gains control over these feelings in time—mostly by gorging herself on stray animals until she no longer feels hunger—it is far from complete, remaining just below the surface and threatening to arise again.

Melanie’s feelings fit into a long tradition—both factual and fictional—of young women experiencing same-sex desire for older classmates or teachers. In fact, these experiences were considered such a common aspect of adolescent female development that Havelock Ellis even included an appendix to his 1897 work *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* entitled ‘The School-

Friendships of Girls.’ According to Martha Vicinus, ‘[t]he adolescent crush was so common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that it was known by many different slang words besides “crush”: “rave,” “spoon,” “pash” (for passion), “smash,” “gonage” (for gone on), or “flame”’ (604).¹¹ Vicinus demonstrates that educational texts and etiquette books from the time period didn’t treat such feelings as abnormal but simply offered advice ‘on how best to control the girls’ emotions so as to make their raves part of their moral development’ (618). Although Melanie doesn’t typically express her feelings out loud, they are obvious to those around her, and they specifically use the word ‘crush’ to describe them, tapping into this tradition. Certainly, Justineau is conscious of Melanie’s feelings, as they were what motivated her to first touch Melanie ‘[i]t was Melanie’s desperate, obvious, hero-worshipping crush that tripped Justineau up’ (26). Later, when the others ask why Melanie would ever return to them if released into the world, Justineau thinks, ‘*Maybe because she’s got a crush on me, and all love is as blind as it needs to be*’ (italics in original 228). Sgt. Parks recognizes Melanie’s feelings, too, noting that her hesitation to side with him against Justineau is proof that ‘there’s no way that crush is subsiding any time soon’ (337). The adult characters recognize Melanie’s feelings for Justineau and label them a ‘crush,’ calling upon a tradition in which such same-sex and age-disparate emotions were commonplace.

Nor is it unusual for monstrosity to be used to symbolize sexuality, especially in YA horror: in her book *Monstrous Bodies: Feminine Power in Young Adult Horror Fiction*, June Pulliam argues that works in the genre frequently feature ‘a monstrous Other and a teen protagonist (who are sometimes the same character) and explore issues that are of interest to adolescents such as sexuality’ (2014:12). The zombie, though, is less frequently chosen for such treatments,¹² likely because their grotesque—or at least uncanny--appetites and appearances

prevent them from being easily transformed into attractive characters. Pulliam's book itself only offers chapters on ghosts, werewolves, and witches; however, her claims about the symbolic work done by female werewolf characters relate to Melanie. Pulliam argues that the female werewolf is frequently a conflicted character, empowered to the extent that she is 'strong and able to express her anger and sexual desire' but handicapped by the fears she cherishes of 'not being both normatively feminine and normatively human' (20). The same can be said of Melanie.

By the novel's conclusion, however, a series of discoveries leads Melanie to fully embrace her zombie identity. She first encounters a group of second-generation hungry children who, though feral, have a clear social structure and are also capable of learning and begins to realize that their species is as deserving of inheriting the earth as humans. Then, she and her human companions learn that the fungus has entered a new stage of development: some hungries have begun to 'sprout,' allowing the fungus to flower and produce seed pods. Realizing that a fire will allow the pods to open and the spore to spread, Melanie convinces Sergeant Parks to light a large mass of them using a flame thrower. This course of action makes the fungus airborne, allowing it to easily infect the rest of humankind. Melanie spares Justineau from infection by ensuring that she is safely ensconced in the mobile medical laboratory they located when the spores go airborne. However, Melanie's choice here is motivated not only by love but also by a practical plan for the future: as the novel concludes, it is clear that Justineau will educate the band of young hungries whom Melanie now leads, effectively allowing these second-generation hungries to become the dominant 'human' species on earth.

The ending is a surprising and satisfying twist that demonstrates that Melanie has successfully rejected the labels of abject and inferior ascribed to her by her human companions,

from whom she has witnessed unceasingly cruelty. Melanie believes that she and the other children can create a new civilization that will be superior to the human world. When Parks asks her why she has chosen to end humankind, Melanie replies that if she doesn't, things will simply go on as they are, humans and junkers will continue to kill each other as well as any hungries they come upon, and in the end, there will be no one. She explains:

This way is better. Everybody turns into a hungry all at once, and that means they'll all die, which is really sad. But then the children will grow up, and they won't be the old kind of people, but they won't be hungries either. They'll be different. Like me, and the rest of the kids in the class. They'll be the next people. The ones who make everything okay again. (399)

Melanie imagines a world in which peace and unity are finally achieved—not by humans but by hungries.

Though the ending is bleak in terms of its estimation of human society, it is certainly in line with many works of YA dystopian literature, which often lead up to:

A stand-off between adolescents and adults that empowers young people to turn against the system as it stands and change the world in ways adults cannot, locating the utopian potential of dystopian scenarios within YA protagonists themselves. (Basu et al 2013: 7)

Due to the prevalence of this trope, much dystopian literature can be read as 'ultimately empowering narratives in which adolescents are allowed not only autonomy and agency, but, additionally, a say in how the world is run: a function denied to them in the 'real world' of the here-and-now' (98), a point made by Glennis Byron and Sharon Deans, among others.¹³ Melanie

represents the voice of the oppressed, no longer willing to accept their subservient and reviled position in society.

Since we have vicariously experienced Melanie's mistreatment by the humans she continues to help despite little reciprocation, we are likely to approve of or at least understand her actions, a tendency which is common in YA Gothic according to Michelle J. Smith and Kristine Moruzi (2018).¹⁴ Though we might feel sorry for Justineau, who will live the rest of her life confined to the mobile laboratory, the book suggests it is a fair fate; after all, she is sentenced to confinement by the same child whose captivity she aided. In addition, Justineau is, in a sense, owed this punishment according to the novel, for earlier in her life, she committed a crime for which she never atoned. Justineau killed a child in a hit-and-run accident and escaped punishment only because the zombie apocalypse broke out soon after. The fact that her sentence therefore involves enduring endless service to children seems fitting. Justineau herself believes her outcome is equitable: when she finally realizes her future, Justineau 'laughs through choking tears at the rightness of it. Nothing is forgotten and everything is paid' (402). Melanie's decision to end the human race is therefore presented as not merely self-affirming, but as a just resolution.

In many ways, then, Melanie's character arc is a welcome divergence from those experienced by female counterparts in other YA dystopian novels. She is not confined to a heterosexual relationship, or to 'remain constrained by the conservative, heteronormative ideals that privilege romance, often at the expense of the safety of the community', nor does she sacrifice herself or others for the sake of her love object, as Smith and Moruzi claim is common in gothic narratives (17).¹⁵ As Sara K. Day et al note, 'this parade of straight girls who fall in love with straight boys' in YA dystopian literature generally means that 'other possibilities seem to be ignored or marginalized instead of explored as logical options and extensions of

contemporary life', a tendency they claim is as limiting as consistent casting of white girls as protagonists in these novels (Day et al 2014: 90).

It is in this area of race that *The Girl with All the Gifts* proves most problematic. After all, the novel's conclusion could also be read as the enslavement of a black character by a white girl conscious of the social advantages afforded by her racial privilege and confident in the supposed superiority of her whiteness. At the very beginning of the novel, Melanie fantasizes about being a fairy-tale princess, primarily because she has 'skin like a princess [. . .] skin as white as snow. *So, she knows* that when she grows up, she'll be beautiful, with princes falling over themselves to climb her tower and rescue her' (italics mine, 2). The italicized words make clear that Melanie believes beauty and desirability are a direct result of whiteness. Melanie's attraction to Justineau partly stems from the fact that Justineau is racially different. Justineau is, in Melanie's mind, her racial inverse, 'as dark as Melanie's skin is light' (10). She includes racialized details in many of her descriptions of Justineau's appearance. About her hair, for example, Melanie thinks, 'It's usually down, and it's long and black and really crinkly so it looks like a waterfall' (10). Elsewhere, she describes her as having 'skin so dark she was like her own shadow, and long black hair that curled around so much it made you dizzy to look at her' (16). At times, she even imagines Justineau's appearance as a sort of commodity: 'Miss Justineau's face stands out anyway because it's such a wonderful, wonderful colour. It's dark brown, like the wood of the trees in Melanie's rainforest picture' (10). To the extent that Melanie's attraction is based on Justineau's 'different' appearance, her desire is clearly for an exotic racial other, one whose fate is an enslavement that is presented as largely justified.¹⁶

It is not only Melanie who objectifies Justineau, however, for even in the middle of an apocalypse, she serves as an object of sexual fantasy for both Gallagher and Parks, which

suggests that these sorts of biases might be part of the book's ideologies, not merely Melanie's. Private Gallagher, for example, 'thinks Helen Justineau has a sexy smile for an older woman, and he hopes one day she'll use it on him' (207). Later, we learn that, even during the direst of circumstances, Gallagher has had time to fantasize about her:

She's had star or co-star billing in a number of his sexual fantasies, mostly playing the role of the highly experienced and wildly perverted older woman picking up a boy young enough to be her son and showing him the ropes. (280)

Parks, too, ogles Justineau repeatedly, at one point remembering 'the flash of Justineau's crotch he glimpsed when she was pissing on the gravel outside' (160) and, another time, refraining from truthfulness because 'there's nothing to be gained by telling this very attractive woman that she's both a hypocrite and a whole lot stupider than he thought' (219). Unlike Gallagher, though, Parks gets to consummate those desires: although Justineau despises him when the tale begins, she accepts his advances before it ends. Though the men don't link their attraction to Justineau's race, the result is still that the only person of color in the novel serves as the object of desire for almost all the other major characters in the book. These racial dynamics make the novel's conclusion hard to accept entirely as merely the victory of the posthuman.

The racial subtext of *The Girl with All the Gifts* came to the forefront when the cinematic adaptation was in production and it emerged the role of Justineau had been given to Gemma Atherton, who is not only much younger than the novel's version of the character but also, and more importantly, white. Fans of the book protested this casting choice, and their outrage was only partly tempered by the announcement that Melanie would be played by a black actor. However, even if the casting choices were not racially motivated, as Carey claimed,¹⁷ those decisions shift interpretations of the film, thus revealing the important role that race plays in the

novel.¹⁸ The reversal of races in the film initially appears to yield more liberating connotations. Since the film version of Melanie is a person of color, her decision to wipe out the rest of the humans is more frequently celebrated as an act of revolution rather than evidence that Melanie has internalized—and will perpetuate--the racial biases of the human world.¹⁹ The very different responses to the racial casting of characters in book and film reveal that the race impacts our interpretation of Melanie's final choice.

Even if we strip away the racial implication of Melanie's actions, the hypocrisy of her decision to end the human species is evident. She believes that the world she will help to create will rise above the divisive biases and senseless violence that characterized the world that came before. She is so confident in the possibilities of a hungry-run world, in fact, that she is willing to commit genocide to achieve it, an act that ironically places her in the same camp as the very people she wishes to overthrow. Nor is it surprising that she has much in common with the human society that came before. After all, Melanie has already absorbed the problematic values of the 'old world' through her education: the novel suggests that the Greek myths, fairy tales, histories, and other artifacts of human culture to which she has been exposed were the perfect vehicles for instilling in her the most violent and militant qualities of human society. Furthermore, it is evident the curriculum Justineau will be tasked to teach will perpetuate these values. The novel ends with the lines, 'She draws on the side of the tank a capital A and a lower-case a. Greek myths and quadratic equations will come later' (403). As much as Melanie's final act can be seen as a triumph for her people, it unfortunately bears much in common with the violence of the human world upon which she seeks to improve.

The revolutionary potential of *The Girl with All the Gifts*, whether for the posthuman Melanie in the book or the racial other in the film, is rendered moot if we consider Carey's

follow-up book, *The Boy on the Bridge* (2017). Though a prequel, the novel ends with an epilogue set twenty years later, which places those events long after the ending of *The Girl with All the Gifts*. As it turns out, humans were not entirely wiped out when the fungus went airborne. A small contingent remains, and in the epilogue, they receive some visitors: a band of hungry children led by Melanie and accompanied by an aged Justineau. ‘We didn’t think there were any of you left,’ Melanie says to them. ‘It seemed too much to hope for’ (Carey 2016: n.p.). Aware that the group of humans will run out of supplies in a few years’ time, Melanie and her companions have come to help, ‘you’ll tell us what you need. What we don’t have, we’ll find or make’ (n.p.). When asked her motive, Melanie replies, ‘Because we thought you were all gone and we’re so happy that we were wrong’ (n.p.).

Melanie’s behavior here is entirely disconnected from the previous novel. After all, when Melanie makes the choice to end humankind in *The Girl with All the Gifts*, she exhibits little regret.²⁰ As Christine Prevas puts it, ‘the very same girl who set the world ablaze to protect those like her from the horror and destruction of a terrified and reckless humanity now offers herself up in service of those self-same humans’ (Medium 2017). Prevas argues that if the zombie figure in the novel is read as a symbol of oppressed people of all kinds, then this ending is a capitulation, ‘in which the monsters who finally escaped their own alterity in order to seize control and create a civilization for themselves turn back to the civilization that marginalized them and serve the remnants of that civilization’ (2017). However, I assert that Melanie, in this moment, is admitting the decision she made years before was a mistake and in seeking to forge community instead of resorting to violence to wipe out those she feels will oppose her displays the potential unifying qualities possible via the hungries evolution.

The Girl with All the Gifts incorporates many of the common themes and tropes of YA dystopian literature, yet it manages to resist some of its more troubling tendencies. The story is, quite unique in presenting a queer protagonist, but still avoids making the female protagonist's character arc dependent on her romantic relationship, after all, Melanie chooses actions that go against the wishes of her love interest. Furthermore, the novel not only gives voice to a character who, as a zombie, represents the maligned members of our own society but also makes her superior in terms of intellect, social awareness, and moral principles. Though the novel incorporates problematic racial attitudes, the reversal of races in the film that Carey penned allows both to be read as a triumphant rejection of a flawed human society, rather than reinscribing white superiority. In addition, the novel's sequel corrects the idea that conflict between different peoples can only be solved by violence. In the end, perhaps, our decision about whether Melanie's final choice represents capitulation or compromise reveals more about our own beliefs about the possibilities for peace and equality and the best ways to attain it.

Notes

1. Exactly how Melanie and her companions came into existence is not known, but it appears that they are not children who have been turned into zombies but rather the children *of* zombies. At one point, Caldwell hypothesizes that Melanie's parents 'might already have been infected when you were conceived' and that she was 'able to feed on the flesh of [her] mother until [she was] strong enough' (379, 380), but she also considers the possibility that the hungries, whom

the group observe engaging in some human behaviors, might also still engaged in sexual relations.

2. Dr. Caroline Caldwell vivisects the children at will with no remorse whatsoever—nor any anesthetic. ‘[Y]ou think you’re talking to children,’ Caldwell tells Justineau. ‘But you’re not, Helen. You’re talking to the thing that killed the children’ (54). Sergeant Parks, the lead military officer, calls them ‘frigging little abortions’ (4) and spooky little monsters’ (72) and tells Justineau, ‘Not everyone who looks human is human’ (14).

3. Michelle Smith and Kristine Moruzi claim, for example, that ‘[w]hile these girls become the heroes of their own stories, they remain constrained by the conservative, heteronormative ideals that privilege romance, often at the expense of the safety of the community’ (17). In *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, Sara K. Day, Miranda A. Green-Barteet, and Amy L. Montz also point out that many of these young women only realize their heroic potential and discover their ‘calling’ with the help of a man: ‘The fact that protagonists . . . ultimately become important parts of social movements is [. . .] undermined, at least partially, by the fact that these young women might never have joined such movements had they not pursued traditional romantic relationships and accepted their male partners’ goals as their own’ (90)

4. Although she treats Melanie with care and respect throughout the entire novel, after Justineau’s first witnesses Melanie’s hungry self, she thinks, ‘Sergeant Parks was right all along [...] Seeing the child turn into the monster, right before her eyes, has made her understand at last that both are real. There is no future in which she can set Melanie free, or save her, or remove that cell door from between them’ (66).

5. Heim notes that Melanie has also internalized the patriarchy in the story she creates in which she saves Justineau from a monster as well as in how she takes over leadership of the hungries-- by killing their former leader and 'scaring the rest of them into submission' (96).

6. Furthermore, from a publisher's perspective, a book that allowed a relationship to fully blossom between a prepubescent white girl and her much older female teacher would likely land firmly outside the boundaries of marketable acceptability.

7. In their introduction to *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers*, Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz write, 'Very few dystopias include queer relationships as a central focus, suggesting a reluctance to subvert dominant mores' (8); see also Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz, p. 90. Both studies, however, are now seven years old and so of course don't take into consideration more recent publications but progress in this regard has been slow to come.

8. Charlie Jane Anders, writing for *i09*, for example, says that Melanie's 'mind is constantly going in romantic directions. She has a doomed hopeless crush on her wonderful teacher Miss Justineau.'

9. As the title of her essay, 'An Ecofeminist Analysis of M. R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts*,' makes clear, Leah Heim, for example, is far more interested in the intersections between feminism and ecocriticism in the novel; Ruzbeh Babae, Sue Yen Lee, and Siamak Babae also focus on environmental issues. Lauren Ellis Christie examines, among other things, how Melanie has been impacted by her pedagogical upbringing while Kimberly Hurd Hale and Erin A.

Dolgoy, on the other hand, consider how the novel explores the political future of the posthuman.

10. That Melanie is well above-average intelligence for her age is evident from the beginning of the novel. At one point, for example, she uses highly complicated math to attempt to figure out

the future of the world outside the base: 'If she knows surface area and total population, she can work out mean population density in her head and then do regression analyses to guess how many people there might be in ten, twenty, thirty years' time' (6). And it is not only Melanie who exhibits such intelligence, for she notes, for example the 'new children' who arrive are unable to talk but 'g[e]t it fast' (1). It is therefore likely that the hungry children develop at a faster rate due to their hybrid biology. Later in the book, Dr. Caldwell struggles to explain the science behind Melanie's 'condition': 'You've never studied biology or organic chemistry. It's hard to put this stuff in words you can understand,' she says. 'Put it in words *you* understand,' Melanie retorts and appears to follow the long 'lecture' Caldwell delivers without problem.

11. The title of the 2009 film *Cracks*, set in 1930s England, is another such euphemism. See also Inness and Lee (377).

12. For collections about zombies as sexual beings, see Steve Jones and Shaka McGlotten's collection *Zombies and Sexuality: Essays on Desire and the Living Dead* and Ashley Szanter and Jessica K. Richards's *Romancing the Zombie: Essays on the Undead as Significant 'Other.'*

13. Victoria Carrington, for example, argues, 'If we are to believe in these newer models and to follow them through to their logical conclusion the new generation--an evolutionary move forward from our own--will create a new society that is better suited to the new worlds in which the young will find themselves and a new form of post-human' (33).

14. They claim that 'the humanisation of the monster and Othering of the human in contemporary YA Gothic' is common, for 'the story is focalised through the monster's perspective with empathy for their fight to survive among humans' (12).

15. They write, ‘While these girls become the heroes of their own stories, they remain constrained by the conservative, heteronormative ideals that privilege romance, often at the expense of the safety of the community’ (17).

16. That this zombie novel invokes race in this way is not surprising considering that it has been an element of the genre since its beginning: Carrington notes that the earliest zombie movies were ‘set against the evocative backdrop of [. . .] racialized sexual desire’ (23).

17. In a Reddit AMA (Ask Me Anything) thread, Carey claims, ‘We were committed to having as diverse and inclusive a line-up as we could across the board, but we didn’t ring-fence any one role. The casting process, in other words, was as neutral as we could make it, but with the explicit aim of ending up with a racially diverse line-up.’

18. As Anya Heise-von der Lippe, puts it, through this casting choice, ‘[t]he film version adds a discursive layer of racialized violence’ (72).

19. See, for example, Ziyad and Pulliam-Moore.

20. The book and film both include similar dialogue. When Caldwell justifies her dissection of a hungry child, Melanie asks her, ‘Why should it be *us* who die for *you*?’ When Sergeant Parks realizes what the outcome will be of lighting the seed pods on fire, Melanie says, ‘I’m sorry, sergeant. I’m so sorry’ and reassures him, ‘It’s going to be all right. It’s not over, it’s just not yours anymore.’

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