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Pure Souls, Monstrous Rules: A Monster Theory Analysis of Systemic Marginalisation and Institutional Prejudice in TJ Klune's *The House in the Cerulean Sea*

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ABSTRACT

"SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING." (Klune 121) – a warning hung everywhere in the village of Marsyas, which keeps recurring in TJ Klune's *The House in the Cerulean Sea*, portrays the bureaucratic influence in the minds of the villagers of Marsyas in considering the magical youth to be 'Monsters'. People who stay around them, guard them, study them, and oversee them are all bound by DICOMY's fabrications. But is magic their fault? Is expressing their heart a crime? Cohen's Monster Theory analyses Systemic Marginalisation and Institutional Prejudice represented in the novel. The 'monstrousness' of the magical youth is not a biological reality but rather a political fabrication engineered to police societal boundaries. This is in fact, a juxtaposition: the 'pure souls' of the marginalised youth versus the 'monstrous rules' of the bureaucratic hegemony. The paper reveals that DICOMY, which functions to isolate, track, monitor, label and suppress the Marsyas magical youth, is the true monster and not the orphanage children.

Keywords: Monster Theory, DICOMY, Systemic Marginalisation, Institutional Prejudice, political fabrication, Marsyas orphanage children, pure souls.

Introduction

"A witty, wholesome fantasy that's likely to cause heart-swelling". -Washington Post

Every area of literature has its own area of study and analysis. Whereas, on the other hand, one area of study that covers all possible curiosity and hypothetical areas under one umbrella term is 'Speculative Fiction'. Coined by Robert Heinlein in 1947, the term was initially associated with science fiction in the late twentieth century, later turning to feature speculative elements, thus deriving the term Speculative fiction. A genre that engineers its stories, starting from histories and myths to the near future and the supergalactic bodies, reimagines real existence. Though fantastical or dystopian, or set in a real world or a fictional one, Speculative fiction turns to study one predominant question as put down by *WHAT WE WRITING*, "That's the magic of speculative fiction – a genre built on imagination, curiosity, and the timeless question: "What if?"

This broad literary category replicates the real world through highly imaginative and extraordinary storylines tagged with curiosity. This "super genre", as put forth by *WHAT WE WRITING*, contains speculative elements portraying the real-world problems in a non-existing world. Speculative fiction works hard in reframing the set rules, beliefs, practices and systems that have been followed for a very long time. This paper studies one such marginalisation devised by DICOMY through Cohen's Monster Theory and strives to justify that the magical children are not monsters, but DICOMY's rules are.

Cohen's Monster Theory

The study of monsters has existed since the beginning. This is evident through *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of the world's oldest epics, which covers monstrosity. Though this has a very long history, as stated by *Perlego*, the study of monsters and the very term "Monster Theory was properly named in 1996, in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's edited collection, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*". Since Cohen's publication, Monster theory has started to flourish as an individual academic study in the process of voicing out the marginalised beings or monsters often referred to as 'the others.'

In his introductory essay, "Monster Culture: Seven Theses", Cohen studies the behaviour and characteristics of monsters striving to replicate the mere mistakes and errors of society. A study of monsters based on these cultural contexts can be analysed under the Seven Theses provided by Cohen. The marginalisation of the characters in TJ Klune's *The House in the Cerulean Sea* can be clearly analysed through Cohen's "Thesis I: The monster's body is a cultural body" (Cohen 4). How can a monstrous act turn to be more political or cultural? A perfect example to justify this statement is DICOMY.

DICOMY– The Master of Political Fabrication and Cultural Influence

“WE’RE HAPPIEST WHEN WE LISTEN TO THOSE IN CHARGE AND A QUIET CHILD IS HEALTHY CHILD and WHO NEEDS MAGIC WHEN YOU HAVE YOUR IMAGINATION?” (Klune 17). One heart-breaking rule that Baker reads while observing the magical children in an orphanage in the very beginning pages of the first chapter keeps the readers confused. What motive did the rules hanging on the walls of the orphanage have? It comes to light when the later pages reveal Linus Baker to be a case worker who works under an organisation named DICOMY – “Department in Charge of Magical Youth” (Klune 13). This never stops with one but follows with another named “Department in Charge of Magical Adults. . . . DICOMA” (Klune 16).

Klune portrays Linus as having memorised the entire book of “*THE RULES AND REGULATIONS*,” and kept on repeating “A caseworker must maintain a degree of separation” (Klune 22,43) like a mantra for his seventeen years of service in the department. Being an objective caseworker, he was summoned by the Extremely Upper Management to oversee, study, analyse and provide a brief, objective report of a Classified level four case. The Systemic Marginalisation of the DICOMY is clearly evident through various case classifications of the magical children. “Classified level four was the highest classification. He’d known it existed in theory, but was unaware that it was actually in use. He’d only had a classified level three case once before, and it been most troubling” (Klune 45). Linus had to observe six magical Marsyas orphan children named Lucy, Sal, Talia, Phee, Chauncey and Theodore under this case.

On arrival at Marsyas, End of the Line, Linus comes across a warning phrase, “SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING” (Klune 121), a tagline representing DICOMY’s prejudice and marginalisation. This tagline turns into a ‘gospel truth’ to the inhabitants of Marsyas. They considered the mere existence of the magical children on land a crime. When the magical children were out in the village shopping, a woman tends to see Talia, a bearded gnome playing with her kid. She immediately reacts as follows:

There was a little girl outside

She smiled, that is, until a woman came running up the sidewalk, snatching her away, a horrified look on her face. She held the girl against her, turning the girl’s head against her shoulder. She glared at Talia through the glass. “How *dare* you?” she snapped. “You leave my daughter alone, you freak!”

. . .

The woman spat wetly at the window and then turned and hurried away, the little girl held tightly against her chest. (Klune 268,269)

When the children are later taken to the ice-cream parlor, Norman, the owner, who initially welcomed them with a glee, gawks at the magical customers. He forcefully pushes them out of the place by shouting the so-called ‘gospel truth’. When Lucy, the son of the Devil, labelled by DICOMY as the Antichrist, tries to pick up his favourite records from the music store, he gets assaulted by Marty, who tries to exorcise him with the Holy Cross. The villagers gather on the docks near the ferry holding various signs, protesting to drive away all the magical children, including Arthur Parnassus, the master of the orphanage. They started shouting, ““They’re using *magic!*”” (Klune 320).

Believing all the accusations poured upon the magical children by DICOMY clearly aligns with Cohen’s line:

The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. (Cohen 38)

The true reason behind all the monstrousness of the magical kids is not their inherent biological deformities, but rather a political and cultural fabrication. A fabrication taught not only to the villagers of Marsyas but to the very heart of the little magical kids. Everything that a human being is today is simply a replication of what they have been taught or described as. If people appreciate one, he/she becomes overwhelmed and considers himself or herself to be great. On the other hand, if one is always pictured as a negative one, he/she tends to forget his/her own true form and slowly starts to believe that he/she is evil.

There is a story which pictures a lion cub that grows with the kittens, inherits the characteristics of the kittens, thereby forgetting its own nature. These six magical children are the same. They are the pretty, pure little magical souls who have inherited the fabrications of their previous masters, the people they met, and most importantly, DICOMY.

Cohen says, “Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again” (38). This means the monster is not naturally born but is actually reborn by culture and society. The magical children are born magical, tamed evil, and so are reborn where they have lost their pure states and have considered themselves to be evil and gore.

But they actually aren’t that evil. Every soul has a bright side and a dark side. This doesn’t mean that they are purely godly or purely evil. The monstrous characters are devised by DICOMY and the Extremely Upper Management, but the purity or the divinity these little characters hold is the major driving force in the novel and in Linus’s mechanical life.

The Six Magical Youth and One Master – Pure Vessels draped in DICOMY's Monstrosity

Klune brings in a shapeshifter, a bearded gnome, a forest sprite, a green blob with tentacles, a wyvern, a phoenix and most importantly, an Antichrist. These characters, termed 'monstrous', 'the other', and 'the thing' in the novel, turn out to be the major tools that shape Linus' mechanical devotion towards the prejudice DICOMY. The depiction of evil in each character turns out to be pure in the later parts of the novel. "The monstrous body is a pure culture" (4), says Cohen.

Lucy – A Threatening Antichrist to the Best Entertainer

Lucifer, in short, Lucy, the son of Devil, startles anyone he meets. Linus, who enters the orphanage to observe the children, is welcomed with the deadly words of Lucy. He is always greeted with Lucy's evil smirk.

"I am evil incarnate," the dastardly voice said. I'm the blight upon the skin of this world. And I will bring it to its *knees*, Prepare for the End of Days! Your time has come, and the rivers will run with the blood of the innocents!"

Talia sighed. "He's such a drama queen." (Klune 89)

Talia was right. Lucy is a perfect entertainer. He loves songs, loves to go on an expedition, dramatises beyond limits and keeps his surroundings happy. The only drawback he has is that his mind keeps witnessing spiders, and when they turn up, Lucy loses control. The spiders fear him, and thus he makes things float. But he is always comforted by Arthur, who says, "... But there is good in you, Lucifer, ... There has never been anyone like you before, and I see you for all that you are, and all the things you aren't. Come home. All I want you to do is come home" (Klune 245,246). All Lucy's monstrosity was because of the tormenting spiders in his head.

Sal – A Fearful Shapeshifter to the Best Poet

Sal, a fearful little fourteen-year-old boy, shifts himself into a little Pomeranian when he senses danger. Once, he turned into a Pomeranian and bit away the kitchen woman who hit him for stealing an apple. Parnassus says, "'Because he can pass on his shift with a bite'" (Klune 121). The woman underwent the change the following week. Sal was not aware of this. Since then, Sal was labelled as monstrous. This institutional prejudice scared Sal, and it was from then, he turned silent. He kept regretting his actions. He always feared that something like this would happen again. And so, he distanced himself from strangers. A breakthrough in his fearful life was when Linus appreciated his works: "Oh Lord, he writes the most beautiful words. They are poetry. They are symphony" (Klune 360).

Talia – A Blunt Bully to the Best Gardener

Linus records, "... gnomes are bad-tempered and will brain you upside the head with a shovel as much as look at you" (Klune 239). A troublesome gnome who keeps threatening Linus turns out to be the best bearded little one in the orphanage. She loves spades a lot and so does gardening. She has enormous varieties of plants and flowers and even invites Helen, the Mayor of the village, to visit her garden. She is completely brave and loyal and finds happiness in the least things. But she was always marginalised for being different and owing to her gender representation.

Phee – An Angry Sprite to the Best Horticulturalist

Phee, a forest sprite, initially dislikes Linus and shows attitude towards him. He was the one who burnt the entire camp and turned all the people into tall trees. This frightened the majority. But the main reason behind Phee's anger was the actions of camp men. They killed Phee's mother in front of her eyes and tried to hunt her down. Phee managed to escape from those monsters. This savagery is justified by Linus as he documents, "... under the occasional tutelage of Zoe Chapelwhite. And I believe because of this, it has enabled her to have more control, possibly greater than any other child sprite I've encountered" (Klune 238). It was Phee who taught Linus about roots and plant growth.

Chauncey – A Green Monster to the Best Bellhop

Chauncey, a green blob, doesn't look human. He's more of a gelatinous blob with tentacles. Linus records DICOMY's marginalisation of Chauncey: "He was told repeatedly he was a monster – by children, by master, by people in positions who should have known better. The more you beat the dog, the more it cowers when a hand is raised" (Klune 239). He keeps repeating to himself that he is a nightmare, and so, his duty is to hide underneath the beds and haunt the humans. But his arrival at Marsyas orphanage broke this nightmare. He discovered his love towards being a bellhop. He later befriends a bellhop in the village.

Theodore – A Tiny Beast to the Best Button Collector

Theodore, a tiny little wyvern, wanders the orphanage and always pecks. He never speaks in the languages human beings know. But keen observation can decode his screech. Linus files, “. . . we tend to think them nothing but animals. . . . Theodore is capable of complex thought and feelings, just as any human. He is intelligent and resourceful” (Klune 238). He is fond of buttons and collects enormous tiny possessions under his bed. The majority of the buttons were dear presents from Linus. Since Theodore was no longer like a human, he was not just different or magical in one way, but was completely animalistic. Institutional prejudice shut him in an alienated place.

Arthur Parnassus – A Fierce Phoenix to the Best Guardian

Arthur, the Master of the Orphanage, doesn't act as a mere master. He is, in fact, the father of these marginalised magical children. He tries his best to protect and care for the little hearts. He struggles hard to break the barriers of the corrupt little souls framed by DICOMY's prejudice, because he himself was once a prey to that Systemic Marginalisation and Institutional Prejudice. He is a fiery Phoenix who could burn an entire village with his anger. Once, he burnt down a metallic cellar. He did that to save his fellow inmates and to bring the egoistic acts of the master of the orphanage to the Department's notice. As he grew up, he was able to control his powers and was able to use them only when it was needed. Taming the children in such a way was his only goal. In such a way, he wished to prove to the world that magical children aren't evil, but are pure souls. He was a living example. Linus rightly highlights in his reports, “It is *because* of him that these things are possible. This isn't simply an orphanage. It is a house of healing, and one that I think is necessary” (Klune 240).

Conclusion

The fear, anxiety, suppression and depression of society are reflected in the mere rules laid down by DICOMY. A monster is a perfect metaphor for these societal emotions. The fear of DICOMY, which thinks that it cannot control the magical, powerful youth, suppresses and marginalises them under certain political fabrications. The institutional prejudice leads to a social construct where the villagers also consider them to be dangerous. The main purpose of these orphanages, as stated by DICOMY, is to tame them and incorporate them into society. But Linus rightly questions, “If the children don't feel welcome in the real world, how can we ever hope to integrate them into society?” (Klune 203). DICOMY and the world around it, including the Marsyas village, definitely hold a biased, unnecessary fear. Linus says, “I find our perception is coloured by what we're taught. Even as children, we're told the world is a certain way, and these are the rules” (Klune 239). The monster is within us and within every human being. Being normal doesn't mean they are pure, or being different doesn't mean they are evil. And that is why Cohen declares, “The monstrous body is a pure culture” (4).

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