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“Big on Family”:
The Representation of Freaks in
Contemporary American Culture

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INTRODUCTION

“Ladies and gentlemen! Everything you’ve heard is true. All that has been advertised is here, under this tent. Wonders. Curiosities. A plethora of the strange, the weird, the bizarre, the unusual! From jungles untamed, to forests enchanted. From the Dark Continent, to the spice-laden lands of India. Astounding mistakes of nature are gathered here for your amusement and edification. What you’re about to see will astound your very senses and harrow... yes, harrow your souls.”

(American Horror Story: Freak Show, “Monsters Among Us”)

“Family. The Binewskis are big on family.”

(Geek Love, 261)

In the TV series *American Horror Story: Freak Show* Ethel Darling – played by actress Kathy Bates – introduces the freaks performing in Fräulein Elsa’s Cabinet of Curiosities. Her words, quoted above, resume the essential traits characterizing freaks and the freak show: shockingly deformed performers from everywhere in the world, or at least this is what the showmen claim, gathered together in a single place and offered to the audience ready to pay to gawk at them.

In her presentation, Ethel uses a list of words that increase our curiosity, talking about a “plethora” of weirdness and wonders that will leave the audience amazed and dazzled, amused and edified. It is the presentation of a great show that is supposed to leave the viewers more than satisfied, especially with this kind of premise. But Ethel says something more. The forthcoming performance is going to harrow our souls, suggesting that it goes far beyond entertainment.

Of course, since *American Horror Story* is a TV series, her words are accompanied by images that add significantly to what she says. Not only do they show that herself is a freak, a bearded lady, but the freaks she introduces keep appearing on the stage out of the darkness, actually leaving us, the viewers, astounded in front of their diversity, and maybe, as she suggests, harrowed.

The combination of her words and the images displayed is evidence of a defining characteristic of freaks: their ambiguity. They provoke curiosity and wonder and, at the same time, horror and even disgust. Their appearance causes a crisis of what the audience knows, since freaks have the ability to merge reality and myths or legends, turning these into reality as well. As Ethel claims, in fact, “everything you’ve heard is true”. As a consequence of this ability, and their strikingly unusual physical aspects, freaks have always been considered as unnatural beings out of our ordinary world.

Freakish births have always been explained as omens, God’s punishments, or the results of devilish designs. Despite their physical aspects, as a matter of fact, freaks were simply the results of incorrect biological processes, and deformed babies were constantly coming to life in random families. Nevertheless, their striking otherness greatly contributed in creating a mythical aura and in their being constantly perceived as actual monsters throughout history.

As human monsters, freak performers have always had the talent to signify specific aspects of the culture they belonged to. Since the freak show has always been a typical form of entertainment in the United States, such show can thus be considered capable of reflecting American culture and its obsessions. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen claims: “The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read. [...] 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 in which it is received, to be born again” (4).

Monsters are our constructs and freaks are tangible, material, and real examples of this supposed monstrosity. Nevertheless, “the presence of the anomalous human body, at once familiar and alien [...] is fundamental to the narratives by which we make sense of ourselves and our world” (Garland Thomson 1). A monster is useful in helping us understanding our fears and anxieties.

With my dissertation, I intend to focus on these human monsters. Freaks have always populated the American culture in very different ways, and during the last twenty-five years they have started to appear in different media. Their diversified presence might signify the existence of new preoccupations. In the present time, in particular, they seem to be constantly linked to one of the foundational pillars of the United States: the family. My aim is to analyze several contemporary works to discuss how these diverse representations of freaks are often used to show that the real monstrosity is not in the human monster, but in the family to which it belongs. More specifically, I claim that these cultural products can be interpreted as challenging of a family order that is now perceived as obsolete and dysfunctional.

In the first chapter, I offer a brief account of the notion and presence of freaks in Western culture history and, in particular, of freak shows in the United States. Since the very beginning, through their different ways of presenting apparently abominable creatures to the audience, freak shows somehow played with the association of human oddities with the concept of family. In this chapter I also trace and discuss the significant presence of freaks in popular works in American literature, comics, graphic novels, and films.

In the second chapter, I focus on contemporary American novels, more specifically on Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love* (1989) and Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex* (2002). The Binewskis, in Dunn’s novel, are the epitome of the freakish family. Not only is their physical

aspect strikingly different, but their personal ideas about the creation of a traditional nuclear family are also completely distorted. Al and Lil, in fact, breed their freakish family through the use of drugs and radioisotopes, creating a grotesque representation of something that is definitely not a nuclear family. The Stephanideses in *Middlesex*, instead, with their incestuous relationships, secrets, and inability to really cope with Cal's hermaphroditism, show the shortcomings and failure of another supposedly fictional traditional familial structure.

In the third chapter, I analyze two graphic novels: Charles Burns' *Black Hole* (1994-2005) and Steve Niles and Greg Ruth's *Freaks of the Heartland* (2005). The terrible mutations in the teenagers in *Black Hole* underline the great flaws in the family systems and their social environment. On the one hand, the families portrayed are completely unable to fulfill their supposed tasks, forcing the kids (affected by the virus) to run away from home. On the other, these families turn into traps, trying to absorb their children in a flawed and unresponsive social environment. In both cases, the only way to be free is to try and find refuge in freakishness. In the Niles and Ruth's graphic novel, instead, families are the enemies of physically monstrous children kept prisoners by their own parents. Starting with the Owens, in fact, intolerance and violence are at the basis of the inability of all the families in Gristlewood Valley to cope with their freakish kids, whose freakishness can be seen as a symbolical representation of homosexuality.

Finally, in the fourth chapter, my attention focuses on two TV series: HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011-2015) and FX's *American Horror Story: Freak Show* (2014-2015). The show based on George R. R. Martin's fantasy saga presents the Lannisters as a dysfunctional family. The supposedly monstrous dwarf Tyrion shows how the real monsters in his family are his father, Tywin, and sister, Cersei, possessed by their thirst for power and narcissism. On the other hand, *American Horror Story: Freak Show* centers on the microcephalic Pepper.

After having being adopted by Miss Elsa Mars and included in her freak show, Pepper has the possibility to create her own family, although a very unorthodox one. It is only when she loses her own apparently monstrous family that she learns who the real monsters are: the Gayhearts, her lawful family. Pepper's sister, Rita, plots with her husband, in order to blame Pepper for the death of little Lucas and has her committed in an asylum.

The contemporary representations of freaks show, also ironically sometimes, that they are like the Binewskis in *Geek Love*: "big on family". But their greatness does not stem from their celebration of such institution, rather from their ability to reveal its dysfunctionality and the horror it is able to generate.

CHAPTER I

FREAKS IN AMERICA

1.1 – The Notion of “Freak” and the Freak Show

Since the beginning of time, freaks have always been associated with aberrations, mythical creatures, and monsters. In particular, the word monster derives from the Latin *monstra*, which means to warn, to show forth, hence the verb “demonstrate”, which is the concept at the basis of the freak show. As part of the entertainment business, freak shows put together two different aspects. On the one hand, “the feeling of being on display is something with which almost all disabled people have had to deal” (Gerber 44). On the other, that same desire to stare at freaks was used as the “basis of the marketing power of the freak show” (Gerber 48), which at least gave the performers the possibility to be paid and make a living out of it. Therefore, by demonstrating that human monsters were real, the freak show presented itself as a concept clearly based on the relationship between the visibility of the deviant body and its spectacularization.

Monsters were considered at first as the proof of God’s will and then as the representation of the power of nature. The term was mainly used to talk about those creatures that, with their existence, confirmed, repudiated, or revised what humanity considered as normal. Their mere presence challenged human boundaries and fused repulsion and wonder together (Fiedler, *Freaks* 20; Garland Thomson 3).

With the passing of time, the word monster started to include also other meanings. In Shakespearean times the same term was used to connote more specifically a moral flaw in the character of a person. At the same time, it remained of course, a common word to signify deformed bodies (Baldick 11-12; Fiedler, *Freaks* 20). It is actually in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611) that we can find a first clue of the future of freaks in the United States.

During the second scene of the second act, Trinculo reflects about the possibility of making money by displaying Caliban:

“What have we here? A man or a fish? [...] Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver: there would this monster make a man; any strange beast there makes a man: when they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian. Legg’d like a man! And his fins like arms!” (Shakespeare 98).

Trinculo is already anticipating something resembling what will become a very popular form of entertainment in the United States, the freak show, “the formally organized exhibition of people with alleged and real physical, mental, or behavioral anomalies for amusement and profit” (Bogdan 10). Moreover, through his relationship with Prospero, Caliban, as “the savage and deformed slave” (Shakespeare 2), raises issues related to colonialism and race (Vaughan 37).

These elements too were an interesting aspect of freaks at the freak show. Bogdan claims that, concerning human monstrosities, there was a specific distinction between “races” and “*lusus naturae*”. “Races” included all those individuals coming from the non-Western world, brought to the United States and showed as members of mythological tribes during a time of a still in progress exploration and colonization of the world. “*Lusus naturae*” instead were the real monsters, also known as freaks of nature, with notable bodily malformations, and extremely interesting for physicians (6).

Even if the human oddities were still considered and called monsters, it was the term freak that started to be used to designate them. Garland Thomson explains that the word “freak” was at first used to indicate an abrupt and unusual change, but it was with John Milton that it was introduced in common English, in 1637, with his poem *Lycidas*. In this case, the word meant “a fleck of color” and later on, during the seventeenth century, it was used with the meaning of whimsy and fancy. It was only in 1847, with the shift of the oddity

from monster to curiosity, thanks to the success of the freak show, that the term started to be used to signify deformed human beings (4).

With time, people imbued the term freak with a certain amount of negativity, since it was seen as something typical of a show that, despite the success, started to be considered as a form of low culture entertainment. Around 1898 freak turned into a term used to stigmatize the performers and it was even officially replaced at Barnum and Bailey Circus with the expression human curiosity (Garland Thomson 13).

Human curiosities were not common, and their legendary and mythical aura, impressed on their own bodies, was charged with significance. Garland Thomson claims: “Because such bodies are rare, unique, material, and confounding of cultural categories, they function as magnets to which culture secures its anxieties, questions, and needs at any given moment” (2). Given their role as such, the term freak has changed its meaning more than once, signifying specific changes and anxieties in society.

As Adams explains, despite its main use, freak turned into a word always linked to the idea of things that diverged from the perceived norm. It was already in 1941, in fact, that the term was used as a synonym for homosexual and, during the 1950s it was used to point out any type of sexual nonconformity (*Sideshow* 93). In this particular case, there was still a component underlining the idea of something going against nature. Adams goes on: “*freak* describes the allegedly unnatural condition of homosexuality, an affliction that is immediately visible in the subject’s appearance and personal demeanor. Like a sideshow curiosity, the homosexual’s deviance is prominently displayed on the surface of the body” (*Sideshow* 93). In addition to the word freak, queer was another expression used to talk with negativity about homosexuality, still underlining the supposed deviance from the norm, an element that will be dear to Carson McCullers in her literature (Adams, *Sideshow* 92; Jagose 74).

From human curiosity to homosexual, freak has acquired a new connotation during the 1970s too. During those years, young rebelling people participating in the cultural revolution of the time started to call themselves freaks to underline their distance from the strict and oppressive normal order of things, signified also by their use of psychedelic drugs (Fiedler, *Freaks* 14).

Today the word freak is still very common, to refer not just to someone perceived as strange, but also to someone obsessed with specific interests or activities. “Freak”, moreover, is not the only word coming from the freak show that has become of common use. In the amusement world, for example, a “geek” was usually a wild man who usually bit the head off of living animals, such as rats, snakes or chickens (Bogdan 262). Today the same term is used to dub, sometimes negatively, anyone who is excessively enthusiast about a subject; it is also used as a synonym for nerd.

Therefore, the notion of freak has always been used in several different contexts. Talking about specific notions, freaks are “human beings who exist outside and in defiance of the structure of binary oppositions that govern our basic concepts and modes of self-definition” (Grosz 57). As Bogdan claims: “being a freak is not a personal matter, a physical condition that some people have. [...] ‘Freak’ is a frame of mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people. It is the enactment of a tradition, the performance of a stylized presentation” (3).

1.1.1 – From the Monstrous Races to Bartholomew Fair

Disabled and monstrous bodies have always been part of history from antiquity. Already during the fourth century BC there were stories and records about monstrous births. An old cuneiform tablet discovered near the Tigris River, in fact, lists a series of



Figure 1: The Monstrous Races.

malformations of the body linked to omens, including an early example of classification of monsters, all symbols of specific warnings (Blumberg 18; Fiedler, *Freaks* 20-21).

Next to this tablet there is also one of the first accounts about the Monstrous Races (Fig. 1), mythical people living in the unexplored world of the time. Ctesias of Knidos is one of the first to talk about abominable people like the Sciopods or the Panotii.

His accounts, as well as those of Megasthenes, were later on at the basis of the transmission of the Monstrous Races in Greece and then in Rome (Wright 12-14).

Pliny the Elder, indeed, reports part of the accounts of those mysterious people living so far away from the civilized world of the time:

“On a mountain called Nulus, according to Megasthenes, there are people with feet turned backwards and eight toes on each; while on many mountains there is a race of dog-headed men who dress in animals skins, bark rather than talk and live on animals and birds which they hunt armed only with their nails. [...] Ctesias [...] says that there is a race of men called the Monocoli (‘One-legged men’) by virtue of their single leg which enables them to jump with amazing agility. They are also called Sciapodae (‘Shady-feet’) because when it gets too hot they lie down on their backs on the ground and protect themselves with the shadow of their foot. Ctesias says they live not far away from the Trogodytae (‘Cavemen’) and that to the west of the latter live men without necks who have eyes in their shoulders” (63-63).

The Monstrous Races not only were used to signify the monstrosity of the body, but they also created a line of demarcation dividing the self from the unknown other, bringing about

already a racial discourse which will then remain attached to most of the freak performers: “Within a European tradition that has its roots in ancient Greece, the categorical separation of the European subject from the ethnic ‘other’ is evidenced in early depictions of the Monstrous Races, whose deformed bodies function as literal, visual representations of cultural otherness. In this case, otherness is aligned with monstrosity” (Wright 18-19).

In particular, in Greece, human monsters were regarded as divine warnings about the future and linked to the Gods. Greek mythology in fact, is full of monstrous human creatures and Gods with freakish bodies (Grosz 57). On the other hand, during the Roman Empire, monstrous bodies were regarded as extremely valuable. As Trentin explains, deformed slaves were so sought-after that “monster markets” started to appear, as well as a real obsession for deformity, to the point that people decided to get their bodies deliberately disfigured (197). Moreover, it was not unusual at all for Emperors to exhibit their “deformed slaves in debasing and humiliating contexts so as to provide amusement and entertainment” (208) for their guests.

Differently, during the Middle Ages, monstrous births were mainly considered as the result of God’s actions. Fiedler explains that there were three different reasons that accounted for freakish babies. They were considered as “signs of God’s wrath, occasioned by sin; as a reminder that each birth was as miraculous as the original Creation; and as omens and portents, intended for our good” (*Freaks* 230). Therefore, the explanation was mainly theological, rather than scientific. Moreover, there was the addition of elucidations on the subject directly from popular superstitions, such as maternal impressions: the idea that women could give birth to monsters after getting scared as a consequence of horrific sights, underlining their ability in imprinting their fears and desires on the baby (Adams, *Sideshow* 187; Fiedler, *Freaks* 231).

Maternal impressions were one of the most used explanations to elucidate the audience on the birth of the freak performer. Lionel the Lion-faced Man's appearance (Fig. 2) was explained as the consequence of a case of maternal impression: when his mother was pregnant of him, she witnessed her husband being killed by lions (Fiedler, *Freaks* 168). Even Joseph Merrick (Fig. 3) himself, widely known as the Elephant Man, attributed his condition to an accident occurred to his mother, who was knocked down by an elephant at the circus (Fiedler, *Freaks* 172).



Figure 2: Stephen Bibrowski (1890-1932), widely known as Lionel, the Lion-faced Man.

Maternal impressions placed the cause of the monstrous birth within the family, by using the mother, whose power to create deformed babies was even stronger than the authority supposedly represented by the patriarchal figure. Families actually played an

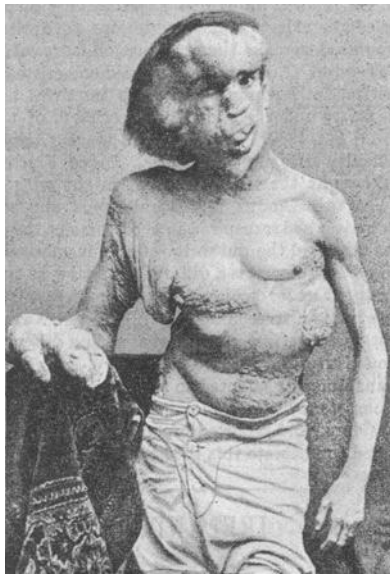


Figure 3: Joseph Merrick (1862-1890), the Elephant Man.

important role in spreading the interest for freakish individuals, right from the beginning. Fiedler notes that deformed babies did not come from some outlandish place, but they were simply born in random families. It was the parents themselves who firstly understood that they could make some profit by giving other people the privilege to see the little monsters, behind payment of course. Parents used to travel for days to show other people the monstrosities born in their families, exploiting their own children to get some money in return (Fiedler, *Freaks* 229-230; Gerber 43).

This is a first element that underlines the ambiguity not only in the cultural figure of the freak, but also in the families that had to do with them. In some cases, in fact, the deformed children were sold or even killed, since they were considered as creations of the Devil or evidence of God's anger towards the family. In the United States, in particular, such ideas were very strong during the Salem witch trials, in which monstrous births were seen as a clear sign of witchcraft (Fiedler, *Freaks* 230-231).

Therefore, families were among the first institutions to display disabled people for profit, in the way that became later on so characteristic of the freak show. Nevertheless, before this typical American show, in England there was a forerunner.

Bartholomew Fair (Fig. 4) was a monumental bazaar that included all the possible forms of entertainment of the time. Traces of it go back to 1133 thanks to a monk called Rayer, court jester for Henry I, who was the monarch to issue the license for the fair. In time, it grew so much to become the largest fair in England, held in West



Figure 4: Bartholomew Fair.

Smithfield, right outside London every August. It was then closed in 1855 because of the growing number of thieves and muggers, but also because of its vulgarity and lack of decorum that was disapproved by the Victorian era (Cavendish; Semonin 76).

Nevertheless, Bartholomew Fair represented a great opportunity to see a long list of human anomalies, especially dwarves, in a carnival setting that attracted more and more

people every year. Not even poet William Wordsworth could turn his nose up at the fair. In fact, in his autobiographical poem *The Prelude* (1798), the poet describes it:

“All moveables of wonder, from all parts,
 Are here – Albinos, painted Indians, Dwarfs,
 The Horse of knowledge, and the learned Pig,
 The Stone-eater, the man that swallows fire,
 Giants, Ventriloquists, the Invisible Girl,
 The Bust that speaks and moves its goggling eyes,
 The Wax-work, Clock-work, all the marvellous craft,
 Of modern Merlins, Wild Beasts, Puppet-shows,
 All out-o’-the-way, far-fetched, perverted things,
 All freaks of nature, all Promethean thoughts,
 Of man, his dulness, madness, and their feats,
 All jumbled up together, to compose,
 A Parliament of Monsters” (618).

In the meantime, while Bartholomew Fair was thriving, human monsters were still without a real explanation. Slowly, scholars from different parts of Europe started to try and find answers about monstrous births.

Most of them published works on the matter that included images that usually were depictions of clear frauds or of creatures coming from mythology. In particular, one of the first works that appeared on the subject was Ambroise Paré’s *Monstres et Prodiges*, published in 1573. Paré’s main intent was, of course, to explain the causes of the monsters that were drawing so much attention and he classified them in three main categories: monsters of excess (humans with more body parts than usual), monsters of default (humans with less body parts than usual), and monsters of duplicity (humans with specific doubled body parts). The classification was made on presumed causes of bodily malformation that

underlined his mixture of spirituality with hints to actual biology (Grosz 57). Nevertheless, Paré's focus on the early stages of development of the fetus was actually quite interesting, even though his actual understanding of the matter was still very limited (Blumberg 23-24).

Things changed with Etienne and Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. Etienne (1772-1844), a French anatomist and natural historian, in fact, was the man who actually created a science to study human monsters, while his son Isidore (1805-1861) was responsible to give it a name: teratology.

Thanks to Etienne and Isidore's efforts, a work like George Gould and Walter Pyle's, *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine* (1896), was possible. This shocking book was very different from Paré's. Whereas *Monstres et Prodiges* provided accounts of monsters accompanied by sketches or improbable drawings, Gould and Pyle provided a list of specimens, with actual photographs of real human anomalies.

In the meantime, while Europe was still studying and trying to find real explanations for the birth of freaks, in the United States the freak show was gradually becoming one of the most popular forms of entertainment and amusement in the history of the country.

1.1.2 – Freak Shows in the United States

First accounts about the display of human curiosities in the United States can be traced during the 1700s. A newspaper in the Carolinas advertised the exhibition of a woman from Guinea resembling an ape, already in 1738; while in Boston, in 1771, Miss Emma Leach, a dwarf, was showed to the public for the price of one shelling (Bogdan 25; Ostman 121). However, American citizens will have to wait until the 1840s to enter the actual freak show, thanks to P.T. Barnum (1810-1891).

During the 1830s, Phineas Taylor Barnum was already known as one of the most important figures in the American entertainment setting. About the exhibition of curiosities,

his most famous precursor was Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827), who created one of the first museums in Philadelphia in 1784. In the meantime, Barnum's fascination with the idea of a museum as a place for amusement and entertainment was constantly growing. As a consequence, he managed to buy the American Museum in New York, including the collection assembled by taxidermist John Scudder, and transformed it, in 1841, into an amazing place of culture and entertainment (Adams, *Sideshow* 11; Bogdan 32; Fretz 101; Saxon 89).

Barnum's intent was not only to make a great profit from the Museum, but also to create "a place of *family* entertainment" (Saxon 105), where parents and children could spend the day and learn something too. The Museum, thus, turned into the place where the freaks and families were together again. Barnum managed to overturn the role that family, as an institution, had in the past: whereas families used to display their freaks to a paying audience, in order to make a profit out of it, now it was quite the opposite. Normal families rushed to the freak show to pay money and see those very human oddities that in the past were seen as threats or divine punishments for the sins committed by family members. The relationship between freaks and families was changed and reinforced in a double way. Firstly, freaks were raised and bred by their families until they were able to find a job in the show. Secondly, families were an essential part of the audience, which contributed to the freaks' livelihood by paying to see them. Therefore, the relationship existing between the two was still quite strong, though ambiguous, since accounts of families that kept selling their freakish children were still common, such as in the case of Violet and Daisy Hilton (Bogdan 166).

Nevertheless, Barnum's American Museum (Fig. 5) turned into the primary attraction in New York City, where it was possible to see, among the other things, an endless number of freaks performing as well as clear hoaxes. Unfortunately, fires plagued the Museum. The first one occurred in 1865, but Barnum got easily back on his legs; while the fire of 1868

completely destroyed the Museum, forcing him to retire from that business and look for other ventures in the entertainment of the time, like the Barnum and Bailey Circus. (Bogdan 33; Saxon 101-108).

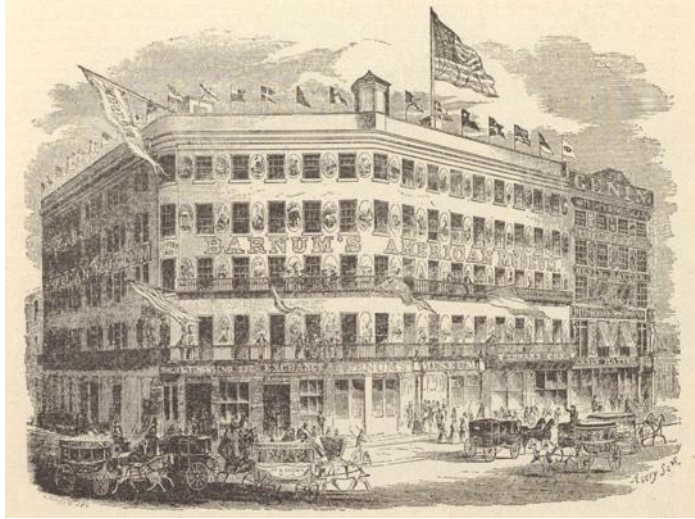


Figure 5: Barnum's American Museum in New York City.

Barnum's American Museum was not the only place where it was possible to see performing freaks. Dime museums, in fact, were extremely popular, especially during the 1880s and the 1890s, and New York was their capital. For the price of a dime, a greatly diversified audience could enter a place where freaks represented the highest peak of entertainment (Bogdan 35-37; Dennett 315). Even the circus contributed to the circulation of freak shows all over the country. As a sideshow, the freak show turned into an integral part of circuses. Up to the 1850s, freaks were already travelling with itinerant shows, but it was only after that date that they started to be organized in the modern sideshow, which included several other different forms. The ten in one, for example, allowed the public to usually see more than ten attractions in one single show, for the price of a single ticket. Moreover, World Fairs, amusement parks and carnivals, especially those in Coney Island, made the freak show the most common and successful form of entertainment that lasted almost a century (Bogdan 40-62).

Freak shows were not simple forms of amusement. They also greatly contributed to the development of new technologies in the United States, playing an important role in the development of professional photography. Adams explains that freak show promoters rapidly understood the importance of photography for their business since *cartes de visite*, small

images depicting freaks and including a description of their condition, were among the most popular souvenirs bought at the show (*Sideshow* 114). Consequently, many human oddities were photographed by emerging professional photographers, who started to have their own studios where, with the use of props, enhanced the strangeness of the performers. Charles Eisenmann was one of the most famous photographers of freaks. His pictures included almost all of the greatest performers of the time (Fig. 6) (Bogdan 14).



Figure 6: Ella Harper (1870-1921), the Camel Girl, photographed by Charles Eisenmann.

Pictures of freaks were considered extremely important advertisement components for the show and, just like the performers they depicted, their value changed over time. Started as souvenirs, pictures of freaks turned into interesting and valuable proofs of the oddities' singular conditions,

and physicians changed their status: "Whereas the freak portrait used props and setting to heighten the body's sensational features, the medical photograph stripped the body of clothing and adornment to provide an unencumbered view of its abnormality" (Adams, *Sideshow* 118). Physicians turned them from simple souvenirs into clinical evidence of case studies linked to ideas of illness and criminality, marking the decline of the show.

More pictures of freak shows and freak performers exist also thanks to the Farm Security Administration, a New Deal agency, whose main task was to assist farm families after the economic depression. In 1935, the FSA decided to gather a collection of pictures showing the positive results of President Roosevelt's policy. State and county fairs, full of sideshows and freaks, were FSA photographers' favorite places to do their job, giving

testimony of the importance the show still had in some parts of the nation during those difficult years, and showing how people were returning to some forms of entertainment after their adversities (Ostman 122-123).

The demise of the freak show started because physicians changed their mind about exhibitions. At first, in fact, their role was quite important during the show, since they were called to give explanations or vouch for the authenticity of the performer's condition in front of the audience (Bogdan 19). During the first years of the twentieth century, after the rediscovery of Mendel's laws of genetics, and a misuse of social Darwinism, freaks started to be considered under a new light. They turned from celebrities into extremely inferior representations of human beings, because of their bodily imperfections. The main idea was that "people who were physically and mentally imperfect would hand down their inferiority to the next generation", weakening an entire species. As a consequence: "one of the solutions the eugenicists advocated was 'negative eugenics', that is, keeping the bad gene carriers from breeding, through counseling, sterilization, and incarceration. The eugenics movement promulgated the idea that physically and mentally inferior people were far from being benign and interesting; rather, they were a danger" (Bogdan 62).

Slowly, freak performers were seen as sick people who needed to be cured and helped. They were supposed to be in textbooks, hospitals and asylums, not in the entertainment business. Medical intervention was also quite effective in curing specific pathological conditions associated to human oddities, so that the number of freaks started to decrease since they were not coming into the world in greater numbers, like in the past. Moreover, at the beginning of the 1930s, the scientific community started to officially dissociate itself from the practice of showing freaks so much that, by the end of the decade, the process of decline of the freak show was completed (Fig. 7, 8, 9) (Bogdan 62-68; Gerber 45).

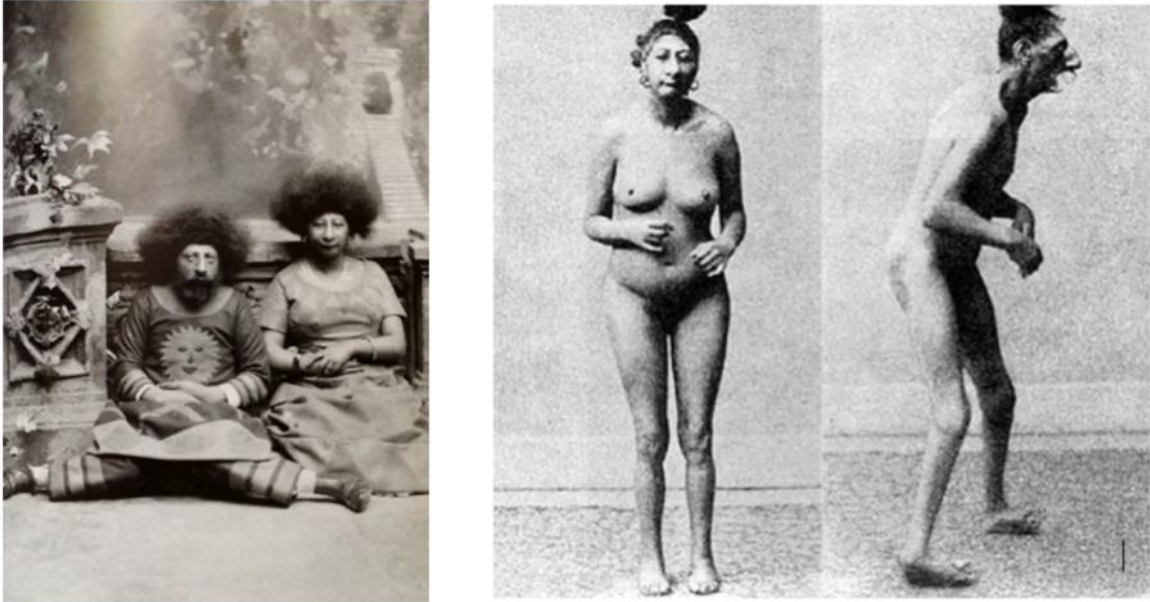


Figure 7, 8, 9: The pathologization of Maximo and Bartola from exotic oddities to clinical cases through medical photography.

Nevertheless, the freak show played a very important role in the United States, as Adams explains:

“Although they have often been treated as an ephemeral form of amusement, freak shows performed important cultural work by allowing ordinary people to confront, and master, the most extreme and terrifying forms of Otherness they could imagine, from exotic dark-skinned people, to victims of war and disease, to ambiguously sexed bodies. In a nation that prides itself somewhat contradictorily on its affirmation of individuality and its ability to assimilate differences, the freak show has political and social, as well as psychoanalytic significance” (*Sideshow 2*).

The freak show, in fact, embraced several different cultural aspects of the United States, reflected in different types of freaks.

Some human exhibits reflected a great attraction for mysterious and unexplored lands far away in the world. This interest was mainly caused by the display of non-Westerner performers, usually presented as missing links, wild men, members of uncivilized tribes, or primitive beings to awake interest and curiosity in the audience. This kind of discourse was made possible by focusing on the performers’ dark skin color, as well as their strikingly

different habits, which conveyed the idea that they must have been beastly and subhuman creatures, a status that was enhanced also with tales of their supposed cannibalism. These ideas were fueled also by Darwinism, which gave place to debates on the classification of human races, all of course indicating the superiority of whites and Western civilizations. Being the color of the skin the feature that set presumed wild men and missing links off from the civilized and superior Americans, racism turned out to be one of the main traits of the country underlined by the freak show. Its great success literally exploded at the end of the Civil War, a time in American history in which racial tension was still palpable, despite the abolition of slavery in the country (Cassuto 241-245).

Since “the United States has always been a racially obsessed society” (Cassuto 244) and given the ability of freaks to bespeak of specific cultural anxieties, the 1840s was

“a key decade in the history of American race relations, a time when American society was dividing along racial issues that would, in less than a generation, turn into battle lines. In just a decade or so, abolitionism had grown from a tiny group of agitators into a national social and political movement of transformative power. This antislavery force, aided by the recalcitrance of the Southern opposition, quickly matured into a juggernaut of popular opinion and political activity, leading directly up to the Civil War. It was this racially divided American society of the 1840s that nurtured the freak show, which quickly took root and thrived on its troubled soil” (Cassuto 244).

Therefore, the exhibition of wild men and missing links was nothing more than a strengthening of already existing ideas related about the backwardness and inferiority of black people and non-Westerners in general. They were, on the one hand, seen as examples of the savageness of non-whites, and used as justifications by those who wanted to deny freedom and rights to black people. On the other hand, those very freaks confirmed,

reinforced, and reassured the Western audience of its undeniable superiority and high level of civilization (Adams, *Sideshow* 103; Bogdan 197; Lindfors 217).

After the Civil War, the United States was a country still trying to come to terms with its own identity, and even this aspect was underlined with freaks. Siamese twins were the perfect emblem of this ambiguity, always seen as a “challenge to the borders of personal identity by placing a multiplied self where there is usually only one” (Pingree 174). Chang and Eng (Fig. 10), the original Siamese twins, marked the beginning of the obsession of the United States with that typology of freaks. As ambiguous beings, conjoined twins materialized a double



cultural element in the country: “they embody both a national fantasy and a national nightmare. That is, the prospect of merged selves corporealized in conjoined twins both reflects a democratic imperative – where all selves are in a sense the same, interchangeable self – and imperils the stability of unique selfhood so stressed by American individualism” (Pingree 174).

Figure 10: Chang and Eng Bunker (1811-1874), the original Siamese Twins.

As I will try to clarify later, individualism will be also linked to American exceptionalism, as witness Mark Twain’s interest in conjoined twins as an ambiguous symbol for the entire nation. However, the democratic imperative suggested by conjoined twins was not a reality for a lot of performers.

Some of them did achieve the status of celebrities and important figures in the American entertainment business. A lot of them, on the contrary, were constantly exploited and mistreated. Nevertheless, this was their only way to make a living. Given their disabilities and physical aspects, it was extremely difficult, if not completely impossible, for them to find different jobs. Therefore, the freak show was the only solution. Moreover, in the

majority of cases, it was the freaks' decision to display their own bodies for the amusement of others. To put it in different words, despite the cases of abuse and mistreatment, it was their right to display their deformities, if they really wanted to.

But this right, ironically, came from the fact that the nation kept discriminating against them, especially when the scientific community changed attitude. From that moment on, freaks were supposed to be isolated from the rest of the world because considered as deviant people, and the decline of the freak show meant the end of a living for a lot of them. In some states, the display of human oddities for profit was prohibited by law, as a form of exploitation. Florida passed a law banning freak shows in 1921, which was then canceled in 1972, since it prevented disabled people from earning an honest living (Bogdan 268-269; Dennett 319; Drimmer 15).

Therefore, freak shows represented several important aspects of the American culture, through the presence of what were considered as unnatural and disturbing bodies. At the same time they also responded to Johnson's claim about culture: "Culture is neither an autonomous nor an externally determined field but a site of social differences and struggles" (39).

1.1.3 – The Exotic Mode and the Aggrandized Mode

Certainly, all this was possible thanks to the bodies displayed in front of the audience. Freaks were like real stars that stirred both awe and terror. Not only were there different kinds of freaks, but also different presentations that derived from specific ideas.

For years scholars tried to classify human monstrosities but, for the freak show purposes, there were mainly just four categories: born freaks, made freaks, novelty acts, and gaffers. Born freaks were people with actual disabilities from birth. Made freaks were people who did something to their own bodies to turn them into something unusual enough to be

displayed. This category usually included tattooed people, men or women with incredibly long hair, beards, or nails, and so on. Novelty acts usually included physically normal performers with distinctive abilities, such as sword swallows, fire-eaters, or snake charmers. Ultimately, gaffers were phonies, people pretending of being affected by certain types of deformities, and considered with a certain aversion, since they were just faking (Bogdan 8).

Phonies were actually representatives of a very important trait of the freak show: the humbug. Already with P.T. Barnum, the concept of humbug was quite important for the entertainment business. In a place like the freak show, in which making money in the most original ways was a constant preoccupation, hoaxes and humbugs were at the core of many activities. One of Barnum's most famous exhibitions was nothing more than a perfect fraud: the Feejee Mermaid, advertised as a real mermaid, turned out to be a mummified creature whose body was part of a monkey stitched to the tail of a fish (Fiedler, *Freaks* 169).

The presentation of the freak was an extremely important part of the performance since it was created to attract the attention of as many people as possible. Therefore, showmen started to make up stories to create the most interesting and suitable backgrounds for the exhibitions (Bogdan 95).

This was just a little part of the presentation of the human oddity. A lot of other elements were involved in creating a certain expectation. In many cases there was the use of bannerlines, huge canvas paintings that portrayed distorted representations of the exhibitions (Bogdan 100-101). But most of the time there were always pamphlets, usually paired with freak portraits as souvenirs. Pamphlets in particular, included a short biography of the attraction with a description of his or her physical condition, as well as doctors' or scholars' opinions or impressions. Moreover, if the attraction was said to come from a distant land, the

pamphlet contained information about it, including descriptions of its geography, native people, and natural environment (Bogdan 19).

Therefore, the presentation of the freak performer included several aspects that required a lot of attention, so that they could be powerful elements to be used to enhance the oddity of the attraction and, at the same time, draw the attention of the audience. Despite all the work around the creation of the performer's identity, there were mainly two modes of presentation: the exotic and the aggrandized.

As Bogdan explains, "in the exotic mode, showmen presented the exhibit so as to appeal to people's interests in the culturally strange, the primitive, the bestial, the exotic" (105). Basically, the exotic mode was an extension and development of the interest about the "races", which were opposed to the "lusus naturae".



Figure 11: The Fiji Cannibals, example of exotic mode.

The exotic mode, based on racial and cultural differences (Fig. 11), included the exhibition of people mainly from outside the United States. In some very extreme cases there was also the exhibition of alleged extraterrestrials, like Willie and George Muse. The Muse brothers were widely known as Eko and Iko, Ambassadors from Mars, while they were two black albino brothers wearing dreadlocks (Bogdan 105). Usually, the performer wore tribal clothes that included a loincloth, strings of bones and even chains. The exhibition reflected the ideas of the

time about savages and wild men, meaning that they also had to growl, jump around and behave like animals. Exotic freaks were usually photographed in front of painted backdrops

reproducing their place of origin, surrounded with props created for the occasion. The stories of their lives were invented following the stories told in travelogues or scientific reports of natural scientists, since they also provided the possibility to use scientific reasons to explain the freak's appearance. In particular, the hybridity and the atavistic theory were the most used ones. The first one implied crossbreeding between man and beast. The second one claimed that some human beings could give birth to babies who were a step back in the chain of evolution, meaning that they were actual underdeveloped human species. Following these theories, and the fact that most of the exotic freaks were black people not from the United States, it is clear how racism started to be an issue. Moreover, in this kind of presentation, there were frequent references to cannibalism, human sacrifices, polygamy, and foods that resulted too disgusting to American citizens. Therefore, the exotic mode drew the audience's attention not much on the physical appearance per se, but rather on the cultural difference (Bogdan 105-107).

On the other hand, the aggrandized mode "emphasized how, with the exception of the particular physical, mental, or behavioral condition, the freak was an upstanding, high-status person with talents of a conventional and socially prestigious nature" (Bogdan 108).

In this kind of presentation, the freak was given high-status titles such as General, Prince, or Queen. The public was usually told that the performer could speak many languages, was highly educated, and had highly cultural and intellectual hobbies. Basically, with the aggrandized mode, the exhibitions were presented as intellectually superior people, except for their single physical oddity that caused their being so famous. They were introduced as opposed to the exotic mode, and reasons behind their appearance were not sought in anthropological or zoological studies, as it happened with the exotic performers, but in actual teratology, even though only after 1900 this science started to give scientific reasons

explanations for human oddities. Up to that point, in fact, maternal impression was the most common theory, refocusing attention on the mother and the family (Bogdan 108-111).

Generally speaking, aggrandized performers were dwarves, giants, conjoined twins, skeleton men, and many others. This was the mode of presentation that mainly exploited marriages and families, which were heavily used to advertise the performer and make a lot of money. One of the most famous attractions working at Barnum's American Museum was Charles Stratton, better known as General Tom Thumb, the epitome of this exploitation.

Stratton was a dwarf whose career started when he was just five years old and it was marked by an incredible success. Thanks to Barnum he met and fell in love with Lavinia Warren, another dwarf. Their story turned into a sort of fairy tale when news about their engagement and imminent wedding were spread all over the United States.

The ceremony, held on February 10, 1863, was called the Fairy Wedding (Fig. 12)

and was saluted as the “grand national event of the season”, involving “governors, members of Congress, Civil War generals, and the cream of New York society” (Saxon 209). Everyone who



Figure 12: Souvenir of the Fairy Wedding. From left to right: best man Commodore Nutt, General Tom Thumb, Lavinia Warren, and bridesmaid Minnie Warren.

counted was invited to the event, which preserved some traits of a performance.



Figure 13: General Tom Thumb, Lavinia Warren, and their baby.

In an article describing the ceremony, in fact, it is written: “As the little party toddled up the aisle a sense of the ludicrous seemed to hit many a bump of fun and irrepressible and unpleasantly audible giggle ran through the church” (“The Lovely Lilliputians”). The wedding “delighted its viewers because it looked like children imitating adults” (Merish 194).

Despite the fact that the ceremony was surrounded by an atmosphere of spectacular nature, it was with the creation of their family that General

Thumb and his wife tricked everyone. On December 5, 1863 news started to spread about the birth of their

daughter. Soon after, the two started to appear in many pictures portraying their Lilliputian family (Fig. 13), and even toured with the baby, an immense success of audience, until her unexpected death, which gave a “humanizing touch of tragedy” to their story (Bogdan 157).

It was only in 1901 that Lavinia Warren herself revealed:

“I never had a baby. [...] The Exhibition Baby came from a foundling hospital in the first place, and was renewed as often as we found it necessary. A real baby would have grown. Our first baby – a boy – grew very rapidly. At the age of four years he was taller than his father. [...] We appealed to Mr. Barnum. [...] He thought our baby should not grow. Thus we exhibited English babies in England, French babies in France, and German babies in Germany. It was – they were – a great success” (“Tom Thumb’s Widow”).

The creation of a family of dwarves was an excuse to make money: marriages and families turned into farces. Tom Thumb and Lavinia Warren were not the only ones to exploit the

idea of family to earn money and attention. Many other performers did the same, turning weddings and families into “a stock promotional strategy” (Bogdan 210).

In other cases, instead, the aggrandized mode exploited families in a more subtle way, without creating public events such as the Fairy Wedding. There was a case in particular, in which the presence of a family in the life of a freak was continuously placed under the spotlight only through photography.

Eli Bowen had no legs, just two differently sized feet. To compensate, he learned how to move around only with the use of his arms. The interest in Bowen mainly originated in his family, which was the main subject of four photos (Fig. 14, 15, 16, 17) taken in different years, from 1876 to 1890, showing its growth and development. In the first picture, we see a



Figure 14, 15, 16, 17: Eli Bowen (1844-1924) and his family.

young Bowen posing alone. In the second, he poses with his wife and first child. In the following two photos we see an older Bowen with a growing number of children. The interest in his personal life was quite palpable, since the photos portrayed the performer who was able to reach an important achievement, represented by the creation of his own family (Bogdan 212-213). These photos represented the “pinnacle of Victorian respectability” (Bogdan 217), since they showed great independence and dignity. Moreover, they greatly satisfied the audience’s curiosity about the personal life of the performer.

In other cases, the freakish nature of the aggrandized performer was the main obstacle to the possibility to get married and have a family, whether the artist wanted it for advertising reasons or for real. The case of Daisy and Violet Hilton, conjoined twins, raised a series of protests. Even if they actually managed to get married at least once, in 1934 their request turned into a real scandal. Violet, in fact, tried to marry Maurice Lambert but twenty-one different states refused to issue the license for the marriage (Pingree 181). In an article published in the same year, there are some of the reasons for the denials: “The very idea of such a marriage is quite immoral and indecent”, or “Nothing doing! Moral reasons” (“One of the Siamese Twins”). Despite the exploitations, there were still some cases in which the very nature of the freak caused the impossibility to reach the status granted by the creation of a family, even in the aggrandized mode.

Unexpectedly, the role of families was overturned again: from institutions showing the freaks, to part of the audience, families ultimately turned into marketable ideas deprived of their original significance in society.

Despite the great success achieved by some performers, either in the exotic or aggrandized mode, the general ideas about them were not so positive as they seemed. As I already said, the exotic mode explicitly presented the freak as an inferior human being. This negativity was also present in the aggrandized mode; it was just more elusive. Aggrandized performers were admired for their intellectual and cultural superiority, but also for their ability to live normal lives. Nevertheless, to make a living, they were still forced to show themselves to a paying audience. As Bogdan argues: “they belonged with their own kind and were not competent to prosper in the larger world. In addition, by flaunting normal accomplishments as extraordinary, and by hailing people with disabilities as human wonders, aggrandized presentations probably taught the lesson that achievement for people with differences was unusual rather than common” (279).

Freaks brought with them complex ideas about their very nature, as well as reactions to their surrounding cultural environment. Their ability to convey different meanings through their bodies was used more than once to address specific issues and notions. In the following paragraph I intend to focus on their role in American literature and cinema.

1.2 – The Representation of Freaks in American Culture

Freaks and freak shows never really disappeared. Their mythical presence has left, in fact, a mark in the American culture. Not only in the last few years there has been a revival in this kind of performance but literature and films both have tried to portray several representations of freaks, giving them specific meanings and importance. In this paragraph, my intention is to focus on an array of works, including novels, comic books, graphic novels, and films in which it is possible to find examples of freaks.

1.2.1 – Freaks in American Literature

American literature has always been full of representations of freaks made in the most disparate ways and for different reasons. Depending on the time period, literary freaks have always embodied specific aspects and meanings, conveyed through their physical appearance or simply through their being different from the norm, marginalized, or misfits.

In 1849 Edgar Allan Poe published “Hop-Frog; or the Eight Chained Ourangoutangs”, featuring a dwarf as main character, whose nickname gives the title to the story. Poe’s work is included in the list of writings concerning freaks, inscribed also in a specific tradition, with the use of the figure of the orangutan.

At first, the short story might be simply read as “a straightforward ritual of satire” (Bryant 47). In fact, it links the artists to their own readers: “If Hop Frog and Trippetta represent a symbolic marriage of humor and beauty, then the king and his ministers are the

gourmandizing public who, demanding entertainment rather than art, enslave those muses” (Bryant 45). Underlining the sometimes complicated relationship existing between the artist who is symbolically enslaved to satisfy the desire of his audience, and the latter, Poe, through the use of humor, presents “Hop-Frog” as an example of satirical writing about art itself, even if there is more to it.

Dwarves, in fact, were usually depicted with monkeys, because of common legends, beliefs, and rooted traditions according to which they were “beast/human hybrids, produced when men coupled with the “lower animals” in defiance of God’s law” (Fiedler, *Freaks* 72). The same happens in Edgar Allan Poe’s short story, where the presence of the orangutan is not just a reference in which it is possible to see the mythological discourse about freaks, because it is an element that introduces also a racial component linked to slavery.

Hop-Frog’s story, in fact, resembles the stories of many black slaves in the United States. Coming from “some barbarous region, however, that no person ever heard of” (Poe 850), Hop-Frog and his female friend Trippetta, another dwarf, were “forcibly carried off from their respective homes in adjoining provinces, and sent as presents to the king” (Poe 850). Moreover, as the narrator claims, “I believe the name “Hop-Frog” was *not* that given to the dwarf by his sponsors at baptism, but it was conferred upon him, by general consent of the seven ministers, on account of his inability to walk as other men do” (Poe 849). Hop-Frog has been stripped of everything, including his name. The reader is told that he resembled “a small monkey” (Poe 850), a detail that aligns him to a specific idea: “Poe connects the dwarf to images of animals, notably primates, consistent with antebellum uses of such images to dehumanize blacks” (Jones 245).

Hop-Frog is portrayed as a constant victim of the abuses of the king and his seven ministers, turning him into a figure belonging to the abolitionist literature (Jones 247). But the roles are surprisingly overturned since from victim, Hop-Frog turns into executioner.

He plots a plan consisting in making the king and his seven ministers disguise as orangutans and let them enter the main room of the residence during a ball, to scare the guests. But it is during the prank that Hop-Frog manages to chain and hang the eight from the ceiling in front of everyone. Right before running away with Trippetta he also lights them on fire, leaving them to die “in their chains, a fetid, blackened, hideous, and indistinguishable mass” (Poe 864).

Poe manages to overturn the image of the orangutan, moving it from the slave to the master. In this way what seemed to start as an abolitionist writing, turns into a horrific story in which Hop-Frog finally punishes his king and the seven ministers for their continuous abuses using the same violence he has learned from them (Person 143-144).

Moreover, Poe’s approach to the matter is also quite clever. In fact, he never actually uses the term slave and he does not set the story in the United States. In this way he seemingly voids his work of any kind of political discourse linked to slavery in his own country. As a consequence, at least on the surface, Hop-Frog is a victim only because of his weirdness, dictated by his being a dwarf (Jones 245; Person 149), even though Poe uses his body as a container symbolizing different elements.

Poe was not the only one interested in freaks. Mark Twain, too, was extremely fascinated by the subject, especially in regard to conjoined twins. His first interest in them can be traced in 1868, with the publication on Packard’s Monthly of a comic sketch, “Personal Habits of the Siamese Twins”, about Chang and Eng, the original Siamese Twins. The sketch presents two connected but completely incompatible selves, as well as a certain concern for the freaks’ personal lives.

As I said before, conjoined twins were linked to ideas of individualism and exceptionalism, typical American traits that Twain includes in his writings and merges with them. Because of their being disabled and nonnative, the Siamese twins are completely

excluded from a democratic setting that, unexpectedly, turns them into the ideal symbol for the nation. During a moment in which the country is still divided and concerned with racial problems, Twain manages to turn the Siamese twins into an image of national unity based on difference. Chang and Eng are in fact presented as aliens because of their being so different from everyone else. This is an element that aligns them to the concept of oddity and weirdness, which is also embodied by the freak. Therefore, the extreme figure of the alien/freak is excluded because of his difference, but, at the same time, that very difference makes him exceptional (Russell 26-27).

As Russell underlines, “the logic of Twain’s essay trades on the paradoxical tie between the twin’s exclusion from national belonging and their position as the exceptional model” (28). Since the concept of exceptionalism needs the presence of something exceptional, then the Siamese twins are the best models to be found. As such, their being united and simultaneously divided makes them the best representation of the United States: “In Twain’s imaginative revision, the freakish body is no longer the conjoined twins, but instead the U.S. body” (Russell 28). It is only through their difference that the twins can be turned into an image of the nation itself, a nation that is still excluding them from democracy.

Bryant claims:

“The nation might acknowledge certain shared unities, for instance the concept of equality; and yet individual realities are shaped by diverse ethnicities so that the valorization of one group over another necessarily creates inequality. The individual is caught between the culture’s unifying vision of Equal Selves (worldwide) and one’s particularizing experience of ethnic roots (ethos). Given this paradox, a unified national identity seems impossible to achieve” (24).

Nevertheless, the very bodies of the conjoined twins coming from Siam turned into the symbol of this paradox, clearly included also in another of Twain’s works.

In 1892, in fact, he wrote a short story, “Those Extraordinary Twins”, again about conjoined brothers. In this case the main characters are Luigi and Angelo Capello, inspired by the real Italian conjoined twins Giacomo and Giovanni Battista Tocci (Fig. 18). The freak is represented again in a satirical way, but the story is also interspersed with more serious references to ideas of identity and law.

These are especially traceable in the ending of it, when Luigi is taken to trial for his crimes, obviously dragging with him Angelo. In this case, in fact, the twins represent a crisis in the concept of identity and individualism in the American culture. When Luigi and Angelo are brought in front of the judge, this one has serious problems in trying to understand where one twin’s identity starts and the other one’s ends. As



Fredricks claims: “The connected twins embody problems of identity and difference because they are literally identical, in the sense that they are one, and different, that is, two, simultaneously” (498). In this kind of situation, individualism is compromised since one twin has no complete and independent agency whatsoever over the body. The paradoxical results are showed in the applications of the law in the end of the story. The judge decides to punish Luigi for his crimes by hanging him, while Angelo is free to leave. Paradoxically, that same law that is supposed to bring order and justice, on the other hand brings agitation and unfairness. Luigi is ultimately sentenced, but there is no way for Angelo to just leave. The application of law condemns the guilty one to death, but the innocent one will die too, since the twins cannot be physically separated.

Figure 18: Giacomo and Giovanni Battista Tocci.

Luigi and Angelo Capello will also serve as inspiration for Twain's novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, published in 1894. The Capello twins are still there, but as minor characters. In both cases, the figure of the twins signify elements that underline a certain crisis and difficulty to reconcile some important aspects of the American culture. But this difficulty is so great that Twain cannot "come to terms with the mystery of duality and identity to which the Siamese Twins had seemed to provide so tantalizing a clue" (Fiedler, *Freaks* 271).

In both cases, Poe and Twain used the disabled body as a means to trigger their satirical writing to underline specific interests and themes of their times. The freak was already being used as a means to represent anxieties and preoccupations in the country and, in fact, as Bryant underlines: "Early-nineteenth-century Americans saw humor as a rhetorical strategy for coexisting with the conflicts inherent in democracy" (17). This very element characterizes the use of satire and the presence of freaks in both Edgar Allan Poe and Mark Twain.

Quite differently, during the 1940s, the presence of freaks in literature is addressed by Carson McCullers and her novels, in which "social misfits, psychological freaks" (Kohler 3) are used "to represent alienation, loneliness, a lack of human communication, and the failure of love" (Gleeson-White 109).

As I said before, talking about the notion of freak, this term started to be used alternatively with queer to talk about homosexuality. As Adams explains:

"Put very simply, *queer* refers loosely to acts and desires that cannot be described as heterosexual, whereas freaks, who appear first at the sideshow and then wander at large through her fiction, are beings who make all kinds of queer tendencies visible on the body's surfaces. Freaks and queers suffer because they cannot be recognized by the dominant social order, yet their presence highlights contradictions at the very heart of that order" (*Sideshow* 90).

Lily Mae Jenkins, even if only mentioned in *The Member of the Wedding*, is a perfect character to explain this aspect. Lily Mae is a young man who “fell in love with a man named Juney Jones. A man, mind you. And Lily Mae turned into a girl. He changed his nature and his sex and turned into a girl” (McCullers 81). His queer tendencies make him a freakish character that does not fit in the social order of that time. Berenice’s words about him – “Well, you don’t need to know Lily Mae Jenkins. You can live without knowing him” (McCullers 81) – signify the fact that “heterosexuality remains the norm, and resistance to perceived normalcy is futile” (McKinnie and Dews 91). His being so odd makes him the perfect example of what “society tolerates but does not fully accept” (McKinnie and Dews 91).

McCullers’ fiction is full of characters that can be described as freaks and queers, whose suffering lives are characterized by their “inability to fit into recognizable social categories” (Adams, *Sideshow* 91-92). But these characters are not always the classical freaks with deformed bodies. Some of them belong to this type, like Cousin Lymon with his notable hump in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951), but more frequently their outer appearance is quite ordinary, while the turmoil and deformity is inside.

These inner chaotic elements are mainly caused by the fact that McCullers’ characters are dreamers who project themselves in imagined contexts that, in the end, leave them isolated from everyone else. It is their inability to leave the traps of their own lives that causes their isolation and, at the same time, a freakishness and abnormality that are ultimately imagined and recognized by those very characters themselves (Millar 88; Vickery 13-14).

Alienation and isolation bring them to finally recognize themselves in the performing freaks:

“[McCullers’] characters identify with the figures onstage, which remind them of their own lonely and uncomfortable experiences of embodiment. Rather than

depicting the sideshow as the exclusive domain of freaks, McCullers suggests that each of her characters is, in some sense, a freak who cannot conform to normative standards of comportment and physical appearance” (Adams, *Sideshow* 92).

McCullers’ fiction also presents a certain interest towards negative family representations. In *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), for example, families are extremely grotesque. Captain Penderton, married to the beautiful Leonora, is actually a closeted homosexual attracted to Private Williams. On the other hand, Major Langdon, who is married to Alison, is having an affair with Leonora. Moreover, after her baby’s death, Alison mutilates herself with garden shears, and thinks of running away with her homeboy, Anacleto. The novel epitomizes the dysfunctionality and grotesqueness of the family structure, associated with the presence of freaks, mostly represented as misfits and deviant figures, immersed in the typical atmosphere of the Southern Grotesque.

In *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), there are negative familial aspects, too. Frankie’s mother is dead, her brother is far away, and her father is so absorbed by his job that he rarely knows where his daughter is, what she does, or what she thinks. Frankie Addams is just twelve years old; division, absence, and inability to be close to each other are elements that already characterize her family. The only guidance Frankie can receive is from Berenice, who represents other negative aspects. After her first marriage with the love of her life, she marries three more times: “I loved Ludie and he was the first man I loved. Therefore, I had to go and copy myself forever afterward. What I did was to marry off little pieces of Ludie whenever I came across them. It was just my misfortune they all turned out to be the wrong pieces” (McCullers 107). Berenice’s attempts to recreate her family are a disaster and she ends up blinded in one eye because of her violent last husband. The novel thus fails to provide a positive idea of the family system.

Moreover, Frankie’s perception of herself does not really help. Her loneliness is constantly combined with her preoccupations about her own body, which is changing since

she is turning into a woman. These two elements are then mixed with the freaks she sees at the Chattahoochee Exposition. She convinces herself that she is becoming one of them. In doing so, she does not realize that she is already putting together the presence of freaks with the concept of family (“‘I doubt if they ever get married or go to a wedding,’ she said. ‘Those Freaks’” McCullers 20). With her doubt about it, Frankie is denying the freak performers any possibility to create a family, without understanding that she considers herself a freak too, and that she will be ultimately excluded from those same elements.

After waiting for her brother’s wedding and her constant belief that she will run away with him and his wife, “the we of me” (McCullers 42), to “always be together” (McCullers 46) and create a sort of social circle with a familial structure, she finds out that she will be ultimately denied all that, just like she was denying it to the freak performers.

Another example of freaks in literature is given by Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), in which the representation of the freak is strictly connected to history and slavery: “the grotesque aids Morrison in representing the complex social world of slavery and exposing the moral failure of the society which sustained and defended that institution” (Corey 107).

In particular, early in the novel, the main characters go to a carnival show where they can see freak performers. In this case, the “black spectators are thrilled by the unprecedented sight of white performers on display for their entertainment. For once, instead of being the object of surveillance, the black fairgoer is a member of the audience” (Adams, *Sideshow* 161). The novelty of course is quite clear. Usually, black people were presented in carnivals and freak shows, inflaming the racial discourse, while in this case the situation is turned upside down, with black paying people in the role of audience.

The racial discourse is prominent, both in the novel as a whole, and in the freaks presence. In particular, Sethe “started wondering if the carnival would accept another freak” (Morrison 51), self-identifying with the performers. Morrison’s characters are constantly

defined in “corporeal terms” so that their bodies are “often scarred, wounded, or disabled” (Adams, *Sideshow* 163). Sethe herself has a grotesque scar on her back, giving her a freakish dimension underlining an affinity with the freak performers. Moreover, in both slavery and freak shows, the person is deprived of his or her “autonomy and self-determination as their bodies become the property of others” (Adams, *Sideshow* 178).

Both discourses are intertwined with the familial one. On the one hand, during slavery it was almost impossible to keep the family united or even to create one and, as Almond claims: “the mother-child bond among slaves was regularly and ruthlessly murdered” (194). On the other, Sethe herself tries to kill her children, managing to succeed only with the eldest daughter, Beloved, in a desperate attempt of saving them from the horrors of slavery. But despite her actions, her family will slowly disintegrate anyways, with her two sons running away scared by Beloved’s ghostly presence haunting their home, reminding them of the tragedy of the past. The strange happenings have a serious consequence on Sethe’s normalcy and family life, underlining also her relationship with the concept of motherhood.

This one in particular, is presented as something constantly in distress because of slavery itself and Beloved’s freakish and grotesque presence. On the one hand, black women under slavery were not even considered as mothers: they “were classified as “breeders” as opposed to “mothers”, their infant children could be sold away from them like calves from cows” (Davis 7). It is this horrible situation that brings Sethe to make atrocious decisions, such as trying to kill her own children to save them. Her peculiar idea of motherhood, based on a destructive possessiveness of her children, can be explained as a consequence of the fact that she never had a motherly model, since Sethe’s own mother was almost a stranger to her (Bloom 23; Harris 339). On the other, Beloved’s presence turns into a monstrous one too, since she actually tries to kill her mother, pursuing her desire of revenge. The freakish and

monstrous concept of motherhood during slavery is therefore portrayed in Sethe's abominable actions and in Beloved's grotesque and threatening appearance.

American literature presents several other examples of freakish characters, which can be easily found in comics and graphic novels too. Generally speaking, superheroes, for example, are freakish not only in their being possessors of superpowers and special abilities, but especially in their being almost constantly misfits, living on the margins of society, or out of the ordinary.

Comics have always been linked to political discourses, since "like other forms of mass culture, comic books both reflect and participate in the public sphere, registering and helping to shape popular opinion about political questions such as civil rights, international relations, and the role of government in private life" (Costello 470). This element can be traced in some famous comic books, in particular through the presence of freaks.

Marvel's *The X-Men* comic book series is a very good example. The X-Men, a group of mutants representing a subspecies of human beings, are born with a wide variety of superpowers. In addition to that, some of them have strikingly different and mutated bodies, which automatically stand out against the norm. The purpose of most of the X-Men is to use their powers to maintain peace and equality among human beings. Their main problem is that they live in an anti-mutant society, where oppressive politics are implemented in order to limit their lives. Their being freakish and so different from ordinary people is constantly perceived as dangerous and threatening for society.

The X-Men comic books use fantasy and science fiction to touch "some of the most intense social and political questions of our time" introducing important themes directly linked to representations and perceptions of freaks, such as "the exploration of attitudes towards homophobia and racism" (Shipley 711-712).

Fiedler argues that superheroes are marginal freaks that differ from the norm in their “greater strength, beauty, intelligence and invulnerability” (*Freaks* 308). Where some of the X-Men are remarkably different in their physical aspects, other superheroes are notably normal. Peter Parker, Susan Storm, Steven Rogers, and many others are very normal people on the outside. This means that, usually, the freakish part of the superhero is on the inside, as part of his or her character. At the same time, where the superheroes are usually freaks on the inside, the villains representing the real enemies they have to confront are the physically deformed ones (Fiedler, *Freaks* 309). Examples of this can be DC Comics’ The Joker, Two-Face, or Penguin, from the Batman universe, which respond to other political issues. In fact, where the X-Men can be seen as representatives of social issues mainly picturing left-wing ideas, Batman is quite the opposite.

Darowski claims that: “the need for a superhero implies that something is broken in the system. [...] With Batman it’s that there is too much crime for the system to handle” (xiii). Criminality in the Batman comic books is usually represented through freakish villains, actual embodiments of the monstrosity of the system itself, which is unable to accomplish its tasks. Consequently, Batman turns into a historically typical right-wing figure, the vigilante (Brown 140), whose main task is to re-establish order where the law and the system are ineffective and inadequate (Brown 96).

Therefore, the figure of the freak remains quite ambiguous even in the context of comic books, where it can move back and forth from left- to right-wing ideals, turning from superhero into super-villain.

This same interest for freakish superheroes can still be found in graphic novels. The difference between the two is quite simple to understand. A comic book is a periodical, usually published monthly, with serialized stories that unfold in a longer period of time. This means that a comic book is published in several issues and that the story does not follow any

specific line. Moreover, the illustrators involved usually work on characters that have already been created by some studios or other artists in the past. On the other hand, a graphic novel is much more like a novel. It still has a panel structure, like comic books, but the narration has a specific organization developing in beginning, middle, and ending parts. A graphic novel can be published periodically too, but in general the time elapsed between one issue and the other is longer than the one elapsed among comic issues. Moreover, a graphic novel generally focuses on one single story (Goldsmith 3-4).

Watchmen (1986), written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons and John Higgins transports the political discourse into the graphic novel, by placing superheroes into the real world making them face political and social issues again (Hughes 547-548). The freakishness, in this case, can be embodied especially by Jon Osterman, who turns also in the representation of the anxieties and fears about a possible nuclear war. Not only Jon, after a nuclear accident, completely changes his physical aspect, since his skin turns blue and his eyes completely white, but he even leaves the planet. His freakishness turns into complete isolation and total alienation, since “Jon is no longer a part of normal society or even of man” (Blake). As a sort of nuclear creature himself – he is even renamed Dr. Manhattan – people are scared of Jon, who “parallels the country’s fear of the growing atomic threat” (Blake).

Therefore, the political discourse linked to freaks seems, at least in part, to be still concerned with specific anxieties within the country. But they are also represented in other works, not necessarily with the presence of freakish superheroes.

In Tom DeHaven’s *Freaks’ Amour* (1979), freaks are in fact the result of a nuclear explosion in New Jersey that has caused significant mutations in humans and animals. The survivors try to make as much money as possible to undergo reconstructive surgery and turn back to be normal. Grinner and Flourface are twins who are trying to do just that. Grinner has his traveling sex show with his wife Reeni, in which mutants can rape their wives and

girlfriends, while Flourface sells drugs. DeHaven is quite concerned with themes such as conformity, alienation, love, and family in their weird, grotesque, and mutant representations. But his work does present the results of a possible nuclear aftermath, underlined also by the fact that the nuclear meltdown of Three Mile Island, in Pennsylvania, happened just a few months after his work was published, enhancing nuclear fear.

Moving away from the nuclear anxiety, there are graphic novels that, like Batman, are more concerned with the inability of the system to function properly. Frank Miller's *Sin City* (1991-2000) is famous for its representation of an unruly and corrupted city where criminals seem to be in command, instead of lawful and respectable figures. Freakishness can be found everywhere in Sin City. Marv and Yellow Bastard, both freakish in their physical aspect, can be examples of that. Marv looks like a giant, with his imposing figure, strength, and scarred face. In particular, he is a danger for the powerful and corrupted Roark family, because of the fact that he knows some of the dirty jobs the family is involved in. On the other hand, there's Yellow Bastard, whose real name is Ethan Roark. Ethan is a handsome young man with a specific proclivity for pedophilia and murdering. His family covers up his horrible actions but when he is caught, he is first tortured and then brought to prison. His body is ultimately horribly disfigured and his skin and blood turn yellow, hence the nickname Yellow Bastard.

Both characters move in a fictional city, where the authority of powerful and corrupted families, as well as the presence of seemingly endless armies of robbers, killers, and outlaws, represent the total absence and uselessness of a legit political and lawful system.

American literature, therefore, is full of freakish characters still underlining and showing the constant anxieties of a country, whether they are linked to political, social, or historical issues.

1.2.2 – Freaks on Screen

American literature presented freaks as steady figures on page, while cinema and television, thanks to their very nature, turned them into actual moving creatures, visually existing in the most diverse genres, from horror to fantasy to dramas. In 1932, Tod Browning directed one of the most known films about freaks and freak shows.

Freaks is based on “Spurs”, a short story written by Todd Robbins in 1923. Browning’s work was a shocking movie for the time. It was even considered to be so extreme that it was banned right after its first screenings in cinemas. It was only in 1962, during the 23rd Venice International Film Festival, that *Freaks* (Fig. 19) was finally rediscovered. Browning’s work was quite interesting since it involved famous freak show performers of the time, such as Daisy and Violet Hill, Johnny Eck, Jane Barnell, Schlitzie, and many more. Nevertheless, critics have always had very ambivalent ideas about it, since the film seems to be divided in two different and quite contrasting parts.

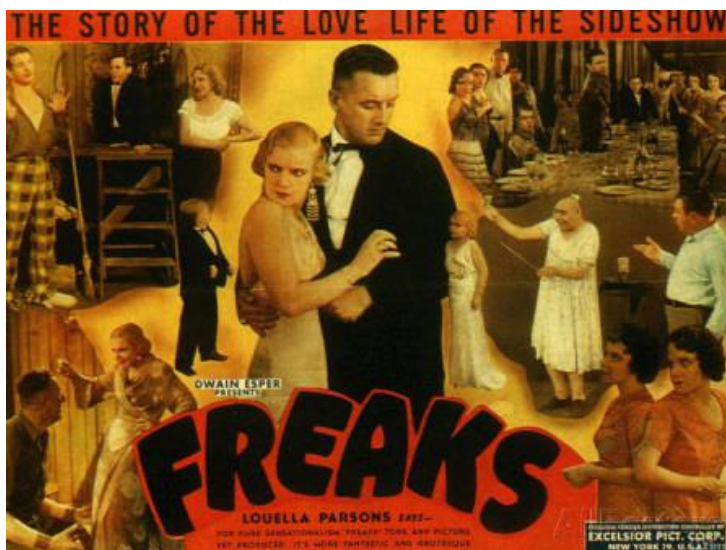


Figure 19: Poster for the film *Freaks*.

The first half of it, in fact, presents the physically normal Cleopatra, a trapeze artist, joining the show and starting to seduce the dwarf Hans, in order to marry him and steal his money, since he happens to be quite rich. She is helped by her lover Hercules, the Strong Man. The freak performers,

especially Hans, are represented as victims of the mistreatments and oppressions of the physically normal people: the film’s “critique is directed at the social context that

discriminates against the disabled, turning them into targets of laughter or abuses” (Adams, *Sideshow* 71).

Suddenly, with the wedding between Cleopatra and Hans, *Freaks* turns into an actual horror film since the truth behind her actions is finally discovered and the performers’ revenge turns into a massacre, with the death of Hercules and Cleopatra reduced to a creature half-chicken, half-woman (Fig. 20).

Browning’s film turns therefore into an ambiguous work in which from victims, freaks turn into murderers, while Cleopatra turns from the villain into the suffering woman attracting the sympathy of the audience. Interestingly, this change happens during the wedding scene, a



Figure 20: Cleopatra, played by actress Olga Baclanova, reduced to a freakish creature. *Freaks*, 1932.

moment that turns into a ritual, during which Cleopatra reacts with terror and disgust at the performers chanting “one of us! One of us!”. The festive atmosphere changes and the guests acquire a threatening aura that causes the bride’s horror.

This scene not only introduces transformative elements that reduce the freaks to actual monsters and murderers, but it also hints at elements that are directed to one of the preoccupations of the film: the sexual discourse.

Hans, in fact, is constantly reduced to the status of a child, eliminating his masculine nature too. Cleo calls him “my little”, accuses him of acting like a baby, and even tells him to go to bed so she can tuck him in. She constantly refuses to recognize the fact that Hans is not a child, but a man with the same feelings of taller and normal adult people (Hawkins 269). His greatest humiliation comes during his own wedding, when Cleopatra takes him on a piggyride. Through her actions, she keeps overturning the roles suggested by marriage: right

after the ceremony, she carries Hans's body across the threshold, introducing another example of his emasculation by playing the role of the husband (Adams, *Sideshow* 80).

In the end she must be punished since, as it is declared in the film, "offend one, and you offend them all". The act is not executed by the man who has received the insult. It is the rest of the performers, not Hans that reduce Cleopatra to a monstrous creature. His insult turns into an offense to everyone else in the show, allowing them to reduce yet one more time the man's possibility to defend his own pride by himself (Adams, *Sideshow* 81). Even in the last scene, when Hans is joined by his friends in his mansion, he is left in the arms of his previous fiancée, Frieda, reduced again to a childish figure, "destined for maternal rather than sexual love" (Hawkins 271).

The sexual discourse is also ambiguously represented with a minor character, the hermaphrodite Josephine-Joseph, who constantly appears on the background but never talks. The hermaphrodite's body is referred to through jokes that constantly blur its sexuality between the female and male identity. In one occasion, Joseph is jokingly offered a cigar, while at the same time Josephine is informed to have dropped her lipstick. The two objects are used as traditional signifiers of masculine and feminine sexual identities at the same time and for the same body. In another case, Roscoe tells Hercules that Josephine is attracted to him, adding also that Joseph is not. Josephine-Joseph turns into a figure embodying a complete sexual indeterminacy underlined also with his/her voyeuristic function when she/he is caught spying Hercules and Cleopatra's effusions of love: "Josephine-Joseph is the character most closely aligned with the film's viewer's own perspective. If a certain kind of feminist film theory argues that Hollywood cinema is dominated by a male gaze, *Freaks* subverts that convention granting the hermaphrodite the position of voyeuristic spectator" (Adams, *Sideshow* 75). Being both male and female, Josephine-Joseph embodies the voyeuristic gaze of both men and women.

But Browning's film is also interested in physical perspectives, represented by the camera movements and techniques. Perspective is, in fact, continuously manipulated but "rather than using the camera to further degrade the disabled actors [...] *Freaks* proves that film may be instrumental in creating tolerance to various kinds of difference" (Adams, *Sideshow* 68).



Figure 21: Cleopatra and Hans, played by actor Harry Earles. *Freaks*, 1932.

The film demonstrates the relativity of size on screen. In one scene in particular, we are in Hans's wagon where everything is to scale, respecting his proportions. Suddenly the audience stops thinking of him as a dwarf, since

everything appears to be well proportioned and respecting an idea of regularity. This one is then disrupted with Cleopatra's appearance. Suddenly she is the abnormal one, looking like a gigantic and out of scale figure inside the wagon (Fig. 21) (Adams, *Sideshow* 68-69).

At the same time, following the intrinsic ambiguity of the film, those same proportions turn into the element that starts the horror. During the wedding scene, in fact, Cleopatra is sitting among the other freaks. Despite their differences, they all are at the same level. It is when she stands up, horrified by their chanting, that proportions are disrupted again. More even so, during the scene in which they pursue Cleo in the night, the same proportions used to show the normality of the performers are unexpectedly used to turn them into real monstrosities (Hawkins 269). As Adams claims: "*Freaks* calls attention to the power of the camera to alter the viewer's visual orientation by making size and proportions unfamiliar" (*Sideshow* 68).

In time, freaks on screen have started to address also to other issues, more psychological than exclusively related to the body. In David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* (1988), Siamese twins turn into a metaphor to introduce the neurosis of the main characters, the physically separated identical twins, Elliot and Beverly Mantle. The two characters, in fact, emerge as real monsters because of their psychological problems. Because of the fact that, despite their being twins in two separated bodies, they are so united and connected to each other, they are constantly compared to Chang and Eng, the original Siamese twins. Moreover, the film also keeps overturning roles in regard to sexuality and identity.

Right from the beginning of the film, their names seem to cast the twins in their roles as masculine and feminine part of the same self. Elliot is presented as the apparently dominant and more masculine of the two, while Beverly, also because of his ambiguous name, seems to be the emotional and sensitive one, the feminine part of the couple. Nevertheless, these roles are constantly blurred and mixed together by the fact that they are "fascinated, attracted to and repelled by each other" (Beard 235).

Elliot and Beverly work as gynecologists and, as Beard notices, when they perform an operation on their female patients, it is "a form of having sex with them". Therefore, when Beverly "medically eviscerates" his brother at the end of the film, it turns into "a profound act of desire" (240). This idea seems to actually cast Elliot in the role of the woman, and many critics have argued the possibility for him to actually be homosexual, but what he really looks for is a real fusion with his brother. This is clear when, in a hotel room, Elliot calls two twin girls telling them: "Listen, so that I know which one of you is which, I'd like you, ...Coral, to call me Elly, and you, Mimsey, to call me Bev". By being called with his name and his brother's, Elliot can have the feeling to actually be one with him.

Slowly, the twins start mixing their two separate identities together, underlining their complete incapability to live separately from each other, as if they were actual conjoined



Figure 22: Beverly and Elliot, played by actor Jeremy Irons, in the nightmare scene with Claire, played by actress Geneviève Bujold. *Dead Ringers*, 1988.

twins, and their co-dependence. This mixing gets so intense that during the film their personalities and psychological traits are actually exchanged: Elliot

turns into the subordinate one, following his brother's drugs addiction; Beverly turns into the dominant one, organizing everything concerning the abuse of drugs and orchestrating their definitive separation.

The presence of Chang and Eng is used to maximize this difficulty in separating identities. The Siamese twins are at first recalled through Beverly's nightmare (Fig. 22), in which he and Elliot turn into actual conjoined twins. While they are in bed with Claire, a patient Beverly is having a relationship with, she starts separating them with her teeth, biting their flesh. The dream is a clear reference to Beverly's fears of being separated from Elliot (Shaw 115).

Nevertheless, it is Elliot the first one to explicitly refer to Chang and Eng while Beverly starts his descent into drug abuse:

ELLIOT: Don't do this to me, Bev!

BEVERLY: But I'm only doing it to me, Elly. Don't you have a will of your own? Why don't you just go on with your very own life?

ELLIOT: Do you remember the original Siamese twins? Remember how they died?

BEVERLY: Chang died of a stroke in the middle of the night. He was always the sickly one, he was always the one who drank too much. When Eng woke up beside him and found that his brother was dead, he died of fright, right there in the bed.

ELLIOTT: Does that answer the question? (*Dead Ringers*).

This is the moment in which Elliot also openly confesses his inability to live without his brother, casting him as Chang, the “sickly one”, an appropriate comparison with Beverly’s condition as a drug addict. Nevertheless, in the last scene, the roles are overturned again. When Beverly kills Elliot, the latter is said to play the role of Chang, while the former the role of Eng (Beard 242).

Dead Ringers shows the psychological problems of the twins also through their relationship with the concept of femininity, which underlines the presence of their complete neurosis, since “the twins are a single personality with schizoid features” (Beard 237). Their job, in fact, is supposed to help what Beverly calls “mutant women”, by returning them to a state of naturalness that will allow them to give birth again. But to the twins, all women are monstrous since their bodies are so different from males. Nevertheless, they feel great excitement in finding something unnatural in those very bodies, and this is quite clear in Beverly’s reaction in discovering that Claire’s uterus is trifurcated, something that will mainly fuel his intentions to have a relationship with her (Beard 254). Therefore, the twins’ psychological state does not even allow them to understand that women are not the mutants. It is Elliot and Beverly themselves who are the ones with a very bizarre and freakish nature. The presence of freaks and links connecting them with apparently normal human beings starts to include a new dimension, seeing them as signifiers and metaphors of psychoanalytical elements.

Showing unfamiliar bodies on screen is of course cinema’s strongest point when talking about freakish characters. This unfamiliarity is even stronger in specific genres, such as science fiction, which brings to the extremes one aspect of the freak show. As I already stated, one of the greatest exaggerations of the show was claiming that the performers were not human at all, meaning that they were actual extraterrestrials. There is an endless list of

science fiction films introducing aliens, but the *Star Wars* original trilogy (1977-1983) does it with clear references to the freak show.

The extremely famous cantina sequence in *A New Hope* is nothing more than an extraterrestrial freak show, in which the camera continuously focuses on different aliens, showing the audience their differences and peculiarities. Moreover, this aspect is directly linked to the idea of Extraterrestrialism, “the exhibition and exoticization of freakish aliens implicitly presented as inferior” (Weinstock 331), underlining a classical aspect implying that to external ugliness corresponds internal corruption. This element is presented as opposed to Luke Skywalker and Ben Kenobi: where the cantina is a place of deviation and degeneration, underlined by the presence of aliens, the two main characters represent the “white human norm” (Weinstock 331).

Probably, the most freakish character in the series is Jabba the Hutt, who epitomizes the aliens’ degeneracy in his own body. Jabba’s harem is quite repulsive and debauched: slave-dancers fed to his monstrous pet, disgusting aliens everywhere, corruption, and violence, are its main traits. Nevertheless, Jabba himself is a living freak show, “suggesting simultaneously the fat man, the legless wonder, a misshapen fetus, and the enlarged head of an achondroplastic dwarf” (Weinstock 332).

Weinstock claims that in science fiction, Extraterrestrialism is an extension of Orientalism, and this is clear especially with Jabba the Hutt. His debauchery is the unlimited greediness and desire of the powerful Non-Westerner, as opposed to the virtues of self-control and decorum embodied by the white American character (333).

Not all extraterrestrials are depicted like that. *Star Wars*, in fact, includes several positive representations of non-humans, but they are still imbued with stereotypes. If the gigantic Chewbacca (Fig. 23) can be seen as the non-white companion of the main character on the one hand, on the other he is the clear missing link of the freak show – including also a

certain resemblance to Lionel the Lion-faced Man. The Ewoks are the classical simple people living far away in the jungle, reacting with curiosity and astonishment in front of the white man's technological advancement. At the same time, they seem to be an alien representation of the Pygmies, hinting to the dwarves in the freak show (Weinstock 333). The aliens in science fiction, for the most part, have the same role of the exotic freak performers: reinforcing our ideas of superiority and greatness about our civilization and ourselves.



Figure 23: Chewbacca, played by actor Peter Mayhew. *Star Wars - Episode IV: A New Hope*, 1977.

Through these examples it is clear that the figure of the freak is an extremely flexible one, whose malleability allows it to be used in the most disparate works. From satire to political and social issues, from difficult identities to superheroes, horror and science fiction, freaks have always been used to identify anxieties and crisis in several different aspects of the American culture.

In the following chapters, my intention is to analyze some contemporary American works that happen to have a common preoccupation this time toward the concept of family.

CHAPTER 2

FREAKS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

2.1 – The Binewskis: Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love*

In this chapter, through the analysis of two recent literary works, I argue that the presence of freaks and family discourse are intertwined, showing negative representations of families. In particular, Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love* and Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex* seem to show a disruption of the traditional ideas of family, especially nuclear and patriarchal ones, as well as a general apprehension and anxiety toward possible other new familial structures.

Geek Love, published in 1989, struck readers with its daring story of the Binewskis, a family of freaks, and their traveling carnival. Katherine Dunn’s novel presents a “traditional preoccupation with genealogy” which is “introduced into a contemporary context where reproductive technologies have altered the relationship between sex and procreation, the fetus and the maternal body” (Adams, *Sideshow* 187). *Geek Love* presents those anxieties through the freakish bodies and stories of its main characters. It is also a “saga of three generations of carnival freaks” (Adams, *Sideshow* 187), in which the author creates and interlaces two binaries, freak and norm, to show how they can be interchangeable (Hardin 338).

The novel follows two narratives: the first one, which focuses on several dynamics developing among the members of the family in the show, is intertwined with the second, which is about Olympia Binewski and her relationship with her daughter Miranda. The latter knows nothing about her own past, not even who her real mother is. In both narratives, the presence of the family, in all of its different and possible manifestations, is notably imbued with negativity. My analysis focuses on these negative manifestations, taking into account the idea of nuclear family as well as other representations of the family system.

The Binewski family is extremely unconventional, as made clear from the first pages of the novel. “The Nuclear Family: His Talk, Her Teeth” is the first chapter of the novel, which explains right away their peculiarity and, at the same time, seems already to mock, through its title, the traditional concept of nuclear family.

Jon Bernardes explains that a nuclear family is composed of a “young, similarly aged, white, married heterosexual couple with a small number of healthy children living in an adequate home” (3). In this kind of family “there is a clear division of responsibilities in which the male is primarily the full-time breadwinner and the female primarily the caregiver and perhaps a part-time or occasional income earner” (3). Bernardes goes on, claiming also that “this image of ‘the family’ omits the rich detail of everyday living and certainly ignores any possible ‘negative’ side of family living” (3). Ironically, the Binewskis seem to embody all those negative sides supposedly denied by the concept of nuclear family.

Aloysius “Al” Binewski has inherited the Binewski’s Fabulon from his deceased father and, while working, meets Lillian “Crystal Lil” Hinchcliff, who becomes the new geek performer, whose role in the show is to bite off and eat the heads of live chickens. They fall in love and get married. There seems to be nothing particular in this story so far. The real peculiarity starts with their actions after that, when Al decides “to breed his own freak show” (Dunn 7) and create his nuclear family.

The Binewskis’ breeding method reflects the grotesqueness of the family itself: “the resourceful pair began experimenting with illicit and prescription drugs, insecticide, and eventually radioisotopes” (7). Moreover, Olympia, the narrator, tells us that Lil was “liberally dosed with cocaine, amphetamines, and arsenic during her ovulation and throughout her pregnancy with me” (8). The result of Al and Lil’s actions is an offspring that creates a family composed of what he calls “my dreamlets” (3): Arturo, whose “hands and feet were in the form of flippers that sprouted directly from his torso without intervening arms or legs” (7-

8), the twins Electra and Iphigenia, “Siamese twins with perfect upper bodies joined at the waist and sharing one set of hips and legs” (8), Olympia, a hunchback, albino dwarf, and Fortunato, called Chick, with an ordinary physical aspect, but endowed with the power of telekinesis, making him “my parents’ masterwork” (9). In addition to them, there are several characters known, in carné terms, as the “pickled punks”: fetuses and dead babies preserved in jars with formaldehyde, and kept for display in the “Museum of Nature’s Innovative Art” (52), one of the attractions of the carnival. The fetuses and babies are freakish and deformed too. They are “Al’s failures” (53), during what seems a trial and error process of creating his perfect family of freaks, and labeled as humans “BORN OF NORMAL PARENTS” (54).

Right at this point it is clear that there is nothing normal in the Binewskis or in anything linked to them in what concerns the idea of nuclear family, or family in general. The physical aspect of the Binewski youngsters is grotesque, but the monstrosity of the actions that take place in the Fabulon surpasses it.

In her narrative, Olympia makes clear that “I win out by nature. A true freak cannot be made. A true freak must be born” (20). This is a very important concept that will return throughout the novel, but right from the beginning it underlines a very ambiguous aspect. Olympia and her siblings were born freaks, but not naturally. They are the result of their “parents’ careful and intentional experimentation” (Adams, “American Tail” 277) with all sorts of drugs and techniques to obtain a freakish offspring. As a consequence, she can inscribe herself into a family history that is unique, extraordinary, and certainly not a representation of the nuclear family. At the same time she cannot do the same in what concerns the history of a true freak that is really born naturally and accidentally within a family.

The retelling of the way in which the Binewski children were born is extremely important in creating their identity and sense of belonging to the family, as well as to

reinforce the family bonds. But this last aspect is constantly put in danger by the relationships existing among the members of the family itself. It all seems to fall under the terms of a constant jealousy among Al and Lil's children.

Arty is the epitome of this and he shows all his destructive potential when he takes over the Binewski's Fabulon, in place of Al. Up to that moment, Al represents a typical patriarchal family, in which he is the one making decisions and in charge of everything, also thanks to his role as the legitimate owner of the Fabulon. Moreover, his greatest accomplishment is the creation of his "dreamlets", an action which turns him from father to author. His triumphant experiments "mark his appropriation of the traditionally feminine power of reproduction (...) while the role of mother is reduced merely to that of malleable material" (Worthington 112). Al Binewski is father, mother, creator, and author of his children and their narratives and identities.

When Arty's control over the Fabulon gets stronger, his jealousy toward his siblings and his thirst for familial power is too indomitable to be contained: "I was the first keeper. I'm the oldest, the son, the *Binewski!* This whole show is mine, the whole family" (103).

Dalley argues about the existence of a possessive individualism, dangerous for the family system because it allows, especially the men, to put their own interests before those of the rest of the family (34). Arty's possessive individualism brings him to make decisions that will contribute to the destruction of the entire family, making him the most monstrous of the Binewskis.

Arturo's jealousy toward anyone who might be better than him goes a long way back in the history of the family, when he secretly smothered his sister Leona the Lizard Girl, now one of the pickle punks kept in the Museum. Successful once, he tries to smother Chick but he fails, because of his little brother's telekinetic powers. Thus, after other attempts at hurting

him, he finally decides to make Chick his unaware ally and, taking advantage of his good nature to control and use him to do whatever he pleases.

The patriarchal and oppressive power represented by Arty is therefore limited in his relationship with his brother, mainly because of Chick's submission and lack of real threat. At the same time, it is completely unleashed in the way he tries to control his sisters' lives.

The twins' talent, in particular, is enough to set Arty's hatred free. What will happen to them is foreseen during their birthday. Arty gives them a horse as a present. But the poor animal is kept together by Chick's powers, since "the horse had been cut off just below the knees and was dancing his sprightly senile horse dance on stocking-covered, rubber-padded half-leg stumps" (142). The horse has always been a symbol of freedom and strength, and those are exactly the things Arty still denies to the twins, by keeping them in his patriarchal family system. Yet again, Elly is the one who actually understands the situation and somehow foresees how things might end for them: "So this is what it's going to be like" (143). The horse stands as the symbol for the present life of the twins as part of the family. They are supposed to follow Arty's orders, thus seeing their freedom constantly denied and severed, just like the body of the horse, and acting as puppets for him, the new patriarch of the family.

But the twins still try to fight the family system set by Arty, understanding why the audience is so interested in them:

"You know what the norms really want to ask?" said Elly. "What they want to know, all of them, but never do unless they're drunk or simple, is How do we fuck? That and who, or maybe what. Most of the guys wonder what it would be like to fuck us. So, I figure, why not capitalize on that curiosity? They don't care that I play bass and Iphy plays treble, or whether we both like the same flavor ice cream or any of the other stupid questions they ask. The thing that boggles them and keeps them staring all the way through a sonata in G is musing about our posture in bed." (207)

Once they understand the audience's morbid interest in them, and in the most private part of their lives, they decide to prostitute themselves to get enough money to finally run away from the Binewski's Fabulon and Arty. On one hand, through their actions, they objectify themselves, remaining stuck in an immovable role, reminiscent of the one fulfilled by Lil in the family system: not a real mother, wife, or daughter, but a thing used for a purpose. On the other, their decision is presented as a form of rebellion, the only one the twins can manage to get away from the patriarchal and oppressive family system imposed by their brother. Yet, there will be no escape at all because, when Arty finds out, he starts arranging the twins' marriage with the Bag Man, a new addition to the show. The twins' protests are unsuccessful and meet with the void in the family system represented by their parents. Al and Lil are now too old and mentally unstable to play their role as parents, leaving their position in the family vacant and completely worthless. Moreover, the Bag Man's past is inextricably linked to the Binewski's, and it brings with it another negative take on the representation of family.

The Bag Man rapes the twins and leaves them pregnant seconds before Lil enters the room and shoots him dead. But Arty's plan is not over because, after locking the twins in their trailer for months and preventing a possible abortion, he has Electra lobotomized, bringing to an end his terrible punishment and leaving Iphy "with her swollen belly pulling her forward while she struggles to balance the flabby monster that sprouts from her waist" (272-273).

When the twins finally give birth to their son, Mumpo, they will finally succeed in altering the concept of family. Not only they give their relatives the new roles of grandparents, uncles and aunt, but they also present a real new reconfiguration of the family system as presented so far. They represent a new family composed of two mothers and one child, in which the patriarchal power is supposed to be null and, therefore, a possible threat for Arty. Mumpo, moreover, will be the constant reminder of Arty's power, abuse, and

domination as well as the face of the Bag Man, transferred in his shapeless and continuously expanding body, as a sort of echo of the maternal impressions that were constantly used to explain the birth of freaks.

Those maternal impressions, branded on Elly, will ultimately represent the twins' death: Elly, returning momentarily to reality from the void of her lobotomy, kills Mumpo, and then gets killed by Iphy, who then dies. The new family reconfiguration implodes and is ultimately crushed under the metaphorical and actual weight of what Mumpo, "the World's Fattest Baby" (307), represents.

Soon after the discovery of what happened, Chick loses control over his powers and literally explodes in the middle of the Fabulon, causing an aftermath that destroys the carnival and kills the rest of the family present there, except for Lil and Oly. This is how the first narrative about the Binewskis ends. The patriarchal system is completely destroyed, as well as the nuclear family. As a consequence of Arty's actions, the male leaders of the family, Grandpa Binewski, Al, and Arty himself, are all dead leaving Lil, Oly, and then Miranda as the sole survivors, virtually able to create a better family system.

However, Olympia, who is yet another victim of Arty's verbal and psychological abuses fails in doing so. The difference between the twins and Olympia is in the latter's words: "I was the one who did the most for Arty. I spent a lot of time with him and a lot of time thinking about him. I loved him" (78).

Olympia's love for her brother will bring her to trespass one of the traditional family boundaries, thus turning into an incestuous practice: she convinces Chick to use his powers to move Arty's semen directly to her ovum.

When Oly gives birth to Miranda, she realizes that the baby who was supposed to be Arty's "monument and his fortress against mortality" (309) has only one little abnormality: a pigtail, which is not enough to make her an attraction at the Fabulon. Therefore, Arty, who

will remain unaware of his fatherhood, forces Oly to abandon Miranda, and she complies heartbroken.

With Oly and Miranda there's the second family narrative of the novel. Oly, remained in the shadows for years, finally approaches and befriends her daughter, who tells her about a plan, suggested by Miss Lick, of having her tail removed forever. The tail plays an important role. It is the only thing that makes Miranda a freak and it is the only link to her freakish family. Getting rid of it would mean to get rid of her real nature, identity, and the past and memory of the Binewski family, rejecting the possibility to be part of an actual family narrative, something that she has been denied for a long time.

What Olympia does not understand is that in plotting behind Miranda's back, to let her keep the tail, she turns into another Arty. Oly is the new leader figure of the Binewskis, now a matriarchal family. As the one supposed to be in power, she plots and moves around trying to befriend Miss Lick, to eventually kill her and then commit suicide. In her behavior, Olympia acts just like Arty acted toward the twins: she tries to deny her daughter the power of making a choice over her own body. Even though Olympia leaves Miranda a letter explaining everything, the damage is already done. Miranda can still decide between keeping and removing the pigtail, but Miss Lick won't come back to life to take care of all the details of the operation, especially the economic part of it.

"You are one of us" (348), claims Oly in her letter to Miranda to explain her actions, but in the end her daughter is left only with an old, dying Lil. Miranda is ultimately inscribed in the family narrative, but the family is by now completely destroyed. The open ending will not solve this problem and the reader will never know what Miranda will do with her pigtail, leaving the family narrative pending, without any resolution.

The Binewskis are a representation of everything that is wrong within a family in which everything seems to deny freedom to all its components. Both Arty and Oly are

affected by this problem. They both constantly try to limit, control, and influence the actions of everyone around them, even though for very different reasons. But the Binewskis are not alone in this negative representation of the family in the novel

As I said, the Bag Man is linked to the Binewskis' past: he is the same man who tried to kill them in a parking lot, simply because Lil "was pregnant *again*" (61). At first, he is presented as a danger for a family that is different from the norm, but he will then turn into a danger for his own family, which is completely normal. The Bag Man kidnaps his own kids, kills his wife, and shoots himself in the face. He survives, but his face will never be the same again and his only way to have a life is to join the Fabulon and the Binewskis, the original reason for the destruction of his own family, as a new attraction in the freak show. But the Bag Man was not born a freak, he was made one. His freakishness and monstrosity derive both from a failed suicide and his horrible actions towards his family, after his violent reaction towards the Binewskis.

The Bag Man tries to destroy a family that is different from the others, just to come back in the story and be part of that same kind of family. He does not complain once about the idea of marrying the twins, underlying an attraction-repulsion, and then obsession, for the idea of being part of a family of freaks. His behavior seems to mirror the obsession typical of whoever was interested in the private lives of freak show performers and their families in American history.

On the other hand, there's Miss Mary Lick. She is the one who describes the concept of family from a very different point of view:

Miss Lick's purpose is to liberate women who are liable to be exploited by male hungers. These exploitable women are, in Miss Lick's view, the pretty ones. She feels great pity for them. (...) If all these pretty women could shed the trait that made men want them (their prettiness) then they would no longer depend on their own exploitability but would use their talents and intelligence to become powerful. (162)

Her point of view is a feminist one, which empowers women. But it is also extremist: she convinces young beautiful women to literally disfigure their bodies so that they can only concentrate on their careers, avoiding men's attentions and, consequently, marriage and the possibility to create a family. Miss Lick is yet another agent of creation-destruction in the novel: she creates freaks and denies the construction and existence of a family.

Her ideas are framed into a feminist context, ostensibly opposed to that represented by the patriarchal Binewskis, in which it is quite clear that the role played by women must be kept in the background. In particular, Miss Lick and Arty share a common element that they cannot achieve: reproduction.

Miss Lick claims that the girls she helps are "like my kids, all of them" (333). Through her actions, she creates her own family of freaks, keeps controlling them, and exercises her power through money. However, they are not really her kids: she has not adopted or given birth to them. Arty is unable to fulfill the same natural purpose, but he is successful when he creates his cult, Arturism.

Like every form of cult, the people participating create a sort of one big family, which literally tries to replicate Arty's appearance. The members of the cult have their arms and legs amputated to resemble Arturo, turning themselves into his devoted followers and literal duplicates. In this way, on the one hand Arty resumes his father's place as author and creator of freaks. On the other, he makes clear that his anxiety about his sisters' personal lives is actually dictated by his inability to "reproduce rather than replicate" (Worthington 115) natural, striking freaks. Even if unaware, he does have a daughter. Olympia remembers that "he called her a norm! (...) He wouldn't even look at her tail!" (314). His only offspring is more normal than freakish, representing his failure at reproducing successful freaks. By restricting and forcing his sisters to do everything he wants, Arturo can control the development of the Binewskis and the danger represented by the women of the family. The

latter are the only ones that actually have the power of reproduction and, as a consequence, the possibility to change the traditional family configuration, which is exactly what the twins finally did, even if they ultimately destroyed each other.

In both cases, Olympia's words - "a true freak cannot be made. A true freak must be born" (20) - seem to resonate in the actions of Arty and Miss Lick. They all contribute in the creation and replication of freaks that are not natural. They all inscribe themselves in the process started by Al, and try to be authors and creators of a family that is inevitably dysfunctional in all of its aspects.

In the end, the Binewskis and everyone around them constantly remind how negative the idea of family is, in all its different forms. This aspect is also underlined by the irony of some of Oly's statements about her family: "We were a close family" (203) or "Family. The Binewskis are big on family" (261).

Olympia's words are true: "A Binewski never disintegrates in front of the ticket holders" (25). It is also true, however, that what a Binewski brings in front of another Binewski is exactly that: disintegration. The Binewskis, and the main characters surrounding them, stand as the symbol of the complete annihilation of every positive representation of family.

2.2 – The Stephanideses: Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*

Also the novel *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides, published in 2002, is a novel concerned with freaks and family representations. In this case the family portrayed is the Stephanideses, a Greek-American family whose story is narrated by the main character, Callie/Cal who "was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974" (Eugenides 3). These words are better explained by the fact

that Callie is a hermaphrodite, raised as a girl, who then decides to live as a man, therefore changing her name to Cal.

Middlesex “introduces concerns about biological essentialism, historical causality, and social transgressiveness under the complementary trope of genetics” (Shostak 384). Moreover, the novel provides, with “its literal representations of incest, immigration, and intersexuality, a range of social practices and positions that disrupt identity” (Shostak 386). To this last aspect, I would add that the novel presents also negative takes and anxieties on the idea of family through some of those practices, conveyed especially by the presence of a freak character. Eugenides himself describes the novel as a “family epic, with a very unusual narrator” (Foer 77). My purpose is to focus on the familial elements in the novel, and the ways in which Cal, but also other characters, contributes to a negative representation of traditional aspects linked to the family system.

Differently from the Binewskis, the Stephanideses are not that freakish, but unfavorable aspects are still present. When Cal tells the story of his family, he has to start from Greece, with his grandparents Eleutherios “Lefty” and Desdemona, who are actually brother and sister. Therefore, the Stephanides family starts with an incest, which will then directly determine Cal’s hermaphroditism.

The idea of family is introduced through a forbidden practice, which crosses boundaries and is far from the definition of the traditional nuclear family provided by Bernardes. Moreover, the secrecy of the incest will influence the actions of Desdemona and Lefty, pretending to be strangers falling in love during the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. They get married during their journey to the United States, altering their original family structure and turning it into a different one, through their incestuous practice: “as they paced around the deck the first time, Lefty and Desdemona were still brother and sister. The second

time, they were bride and bridegroom. And the third, they were husband and wife” (Eugenides 69).

When they arrive in the United States, they have to face the first possible threat to the secrecy of their actions, represented by their cousin Sourmelina, who has a big secret herself. Sourmelina is married to Jimmy Zizmo, an alcohol smuggler during Prohibition, but she “was one of those women they named the island after” (86). Lina, being actually a lesbian who lives in a marriage of convenience with Jimmy, is not an obstacle at all. She’s actually the only one who can understand and keep Desdemona and Lefty’s secret about their new family, a secret that will be revealed only years later to Cal.

Lina, as a partly closeted lesbian, is not different from the freaks and queers that inhabit Carson McCullers’s fiction, and can be regarded as a representative of sexual non-conformity, living in a still heteronormative society. Being perceived as an anomaly herself, Lina’s family too is presented through negative elements. Her husband is a typical representative of a patriarchal system, in which he “treated his young bride more like a daughter than a wife. He was always telling her what she could and couldn’t do” (91). But Jimmy, who is completely unaware of his wife’s homosexuality, will convince himself that she had an affair with someone else and that the baby they are going to have is not his. As a direct consequence, he tries – but fails – to kill himself and then abandons his family, leaving Lina as a lesbian mother moving from a patriarchal system to a single-parent one, showing another family failure.

The Greek origins of the family are constantly on the background, thanks also to the continuous mythological references to Ancient Greece. In one of them the birth of the freak in the family is predicted, when the Stephanideses go to see *The Minotaur* at the Family Theater in Detroit, with the Zizmos.

The play narrates the myth of the Minotaur, a freakish monster born from the unnatural intercourse between Pasiphae and a bull. During that same night, at home, both the Stephanideses and the Zizmos conceive their children. Just like the unnatural relationship in The Minotaur, the unnatural Stephanides family will have its monster in due time. Moreover, the fact that The Minotaur is showed in a theater called Family does not appear as a mere coincidence, but it seems to be a sort of omen of what will happen to the Stephanideses – but also to the Zizmos – in the future.

Desdemona worries about her family, fearing consequences for her outrageous acts with her brother, especially when she finds out that she is pregnant. Dr. Philobosian, moreover, during his visit, starts talking about deformities and freaks. In particular, he lingers on the concept of maternal impressions, to rapidly move to a more modern and scientific explanation of the birth of freaks: “All this nonsense comes from the Dark Ages. We know now that most birth deformities result from the consanguinity of parents. (...) From families intermarrying. (...) Causes all kinds of problems. Imbecility. Hemophilia. Look at the Romanovs. Look at any royal family. Mutants, all of them” (116).

From this moment, until the birth of her son Milton, Desdemona will be haunted by the fear of giving birth to one of those mutants Dr. Philobosian talks about, especially after having remembered old stories from her hometown:

She thought back to Bithynios, trying to remember how many children had been born with something wrong with them. Melia Salakas had a daughter with a piece missing from the middle of her face. Her brother, Yiorgos, had been eight years old his whole life. Were there any hair shirts? Any frog babies? Desdemona recalled her mother telling stories about strange infants born in the village. They came every few generations, babies who were sick in some way, Desdemona couldn't remember how exactly – her mother had been vague. Every so often these babies appeared, and they always met tragic ends: they killed themselves, they ran off and became circus

performers, they were seen years later in Bursa, begging or prostituting themselves.

(117)

From what Desdemona remembers it is clear that incestuous practices were common in the small village of Bithynios, and she and Lefty inscribe themselves into that same forbidden kind of families, far away from a normally acceptable practice of creating a family. Moreover, their actions seem to repeat themselves somehow, for instance when their son Milton falls in love with a member of his own family, his cousin Tessie, Lina's daughter.

After their marriage, Desdemona's fears about the birth of mutants in the family come back. Milton's first son appears to be completely normal, but Cal's parents still believe that a freak is born into a family as a punishment. Milton tries to do everything he can to convince Tessie to act in specific ways so that they can conceive a baby girl, but "to tamper with something as mysterious and miraculous as the birth of a child was an act of hubris. In the first place, Tessie didn't believe you could do it. Even if you could, she didn't believe you should try" (9).

Apparently, an act of hubris is exactly what the Stephanides family keeps doing, and the punishment is the birth of a freak, Calliope, who will be treated as a girl for fourteen years. But moving away from mythology and the legends around freaks, Cal knows that his condition was not determined by his parents' hubris, but rather by his grandparents' transgressions, and the genetic discourse linked to their incest. "Parents are supposed to pass down physical traits to their children, but it's my belief that all sorts of other things get passed down, too: motifs, scenarios, even facts" (109). Cal's thought seems to trace all that has happened in his family and that has affected himself: from his grandparents' escape from Greece, to his own same action; from his grandparents' falling in love with each other, to his parents'. Just like his gene mutation was passed down one generation to the other, some negative behavioral aspects are shared among the members of his family.

“Sing now, O Muse, of the recessive mutation on my fifth chromosome!” (4), is how Cal starts his account of the Stephanides family, highlighting the genetic discourse that envelops the novel. His hermaphroditism is given by 5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome, which means that “Callie is a girl who has a little too much male hormone. We want to correct that.” (427). Dr. Luce’s final words are the alarm bell: he wants to go on with a reassignment procedure to keep Callie a girl. The problem is that Callie, despite her outside female genitalia, feels to be a man.

The intersexed body, the freak, is therefore an element of total crisis, not only in what concerns identity, but also in what concerns the idea of family. In his analysis of the Stephanideses, Dr. Luce claims that Tessie “accedes to the subservient wifely role typical of women of her generation. The father only came to the Clinic twice, citing business obligations, but from those two meetings it is apparent that he is a dominating presence” (436). From his words, it seems that the Stephanideses are quite normal and they can be seen as an example of traditional nuclear family, when they are actually not. That kind of representation stops existing when their scandalous familial bonds are taken into account. Moreover, their family system is distressed by Dr. Luce’s statement, which involves Callie in the general picture: “the subject has been raised in the Greek Orthodox tradition, with its strongly sex-defined roles” (436). The role of daughter, occupied by Callie, is put in danger by her condition, which causes a reconfiguration of what the family has been so far, not only by the fact that a daughter will be replaced by a son, Cal, but also by the fact that Callie runs away, leaving a real void in the family, in order to avoid Dr. Luce’s intention to operate and keep her a girl. Cal starts his journey to create and accept his male identity, only to underline the family’s inability to understand what has been happening so far.

Middlesex Boulevard, in Grosse Pointe, Detroit, is where the Stephanideses live. Middlesex, the name of the house, is described as a “testament to theory uncompromised by

practicality” (258), a place with huge windows, in which everyone can spy on everyone and see what everyone else is doing. Even though the house offers this possibility, the idea of seeing and possibly understanding what goes on constantly fails.

Nobody knows about the real origins of the Stephanideses and the incest between Desdemona and Lefty, just like nobody seems to see what is wrong with Callie, including her family doctor. It will take Tessie a while to start worrying about her daughter’s condition, especially when her puberty seems not to start. Middlesex is the house in which the family should stay supportive and united; instead it is the very place in which the family cannot follow its main purpose. The theory Middlesex should represent is threatened by the impracticality of the familial bonds among the Stephanideses. Moreover, its name contributes to and highlights the connection existing between Cal’s condition and his family’s history.

Just like her grandparents Callie runs away, but her decision comes also from the perception of herself as a monster, through a brief, significant, and powerful journey into words. While in the New York Public Library, she starts looking for the meaning of the word “hypospadias”, after having read it in Dr. Luce’s notes. The Webster’s definition of the word suggests her to “*See synonyms at EUNUCH*” (430). The same happens with this word, which suggests to “*See synonyms at HERMAPHRODITE*” (430). This is actually the way in which Callie understands what’s wrong with her and what is happening in her life, even if she ends up with erroneous conclusions. Up to this point, nobody in her family has actually stopped to clearly explain at length what is wrong or to reassure her about the situation. Ultimately, she reads the definition of the word “hermaphrodite”, just to obtain the final suggestion: “*See synonym at MONSTER*” (430).

By following those words, Callie ends up with what she calls “the definition of myself” (430) which directly affects her decision to run away. To this aspect I would also add the weight of the total failure of her family in trying to let her understand what is going on.

As a consequence, instead of endorsing the genetic discourse and finally tell her parents that she doesn't want to stay female because she feels male and deal with the situation all together, as a family should do, Callie embraces the idea of monstrosity and freakishness and runs away. In this way, she completely accepts the freak discourse, following the footsteps of all those kids in Bithynios who "ran off and became circus performers" (117).

From New York, Callie crosses the United States to end up in San Francisco where she survives as a homeless guy among other homeless young people. During the journey she struggles in behaving as a regular boy and she succeeds, until two homeless guys join her one night. They want to rob the homeless camp, but they meet Callie and they see right through her. Thanks to her school ID they realize that the alleged guy in front of them is actually a girl and their reaction is despicable. After having pulled her pants down to see if they are actually right, they discover the truth of Callie's hermaphroditism. But before leaving, they beat Callie up and urinate on her, telling her to "crawl back into the hole you came out of, freak" (477). Surprisingly, the two homeless guys have no difficulty in realizing that there's something unordinary in the person they have in front of them, something that took the Stephanideses and their doctors fourteen years to understand.

The idea of seeing is of course linked to the spectacle of the freak show. In fact, it is right after this episode that Cal ends up in a peep show, the Sixty-Niners, where he exhibits himself in a tank full of water in which the audience can see what's inside. In there he plunges to let the audience see the peculiarity of his body, pretending to be "the God Hermaphroditus! Half woman, half man!" (482).

It is interesting to notice that, while the Stephanideses have the possibility to see but not to understand, the audience of the peep show does not need to understand, but it is ready to pay to see. When Cal plunges himself in the tank and opens his eyes to stare at the audience, he realizes that "they were not appalled. (...) It was all beneficial in a way. It was

therapeutic” (494). Surprisingly the audience’s gaze results to be way more effective than the one of his family.

But other elements of the history of the freak show are presented through Dr. Luce, whose interest for Cal’s condition reminds that of the doctors studying, analyzing, and photographing freaks during the past. Through Luce’s actions, Callie’s position as an anomaly in the discourse of identity disruption gets even stronger when she recalls the photographs taken and then used in textbooks: “the textbook publishers would make sure to cover my face. The black box: a fig leaf in reverse, concealing identity while leaving shame exposed” (421-422). Those same photos increase her sense of monstrosity: “what did people do when they came upon Bigfoot or the Lock Ness Monster? They tried to get a picture” (431). Ultimately, Cal’s sense of monstrosity, linked to his disruption of identity, makes him an even bigger anomaly in the family discourse, with very negative consequences.

Because of Cal’s disappearance, in fact, Milton will find his death. Some time after Callie’s escape, Milton starts receiving strange calls from an alleged kidnapper who asks for a ransom. Milton decides to act secretly and give him the money he wants, so that he can get his daughter back, only to find out that the kidnapper is his brother-in-law.

Father Michael, the priest at the church the Stephanideses attend, is married with Milton’s sister, but was Tessie’s fiancé before she fell in love with Milton. His actions are dictated by his sense of revenge and need to start a new life because “Father Mike was abandoning his own family” (507). Father Michael’s family is yet another dysfunctional system in the novel, which has as a direct consequence Milton’s premature death during the car chase trying to stop his brother-in-law. Father Mike uses Cal’s dramatic situation to his own advantage just to end up in destroying two families: the Stephanideses, with Milton’s death, and his own family, since he will get caught and end up in jail.

At this point, after Milton's death, Cal finally goes back to Detroit to reclaim his place as Milton and Tessie's second son, something underlined by his staying at home during his father's funeral, so as to honor an old Greek tradition. Cal stands in front of the door of Middlesex, in order to prevent his father's spirit from entering and haunting the house, because "it was always a man who did this, and now I qualified" (529).

Finally, Cal enters what he feels his natural role in the family and finally finds out the truth about Desdemona and Lefty. But, if on the one hand his quest for identity seems to be over, on the other, his role as an anomaly in the family discourse is not over yet.

Cal's narrative in the present is still extremely significant in familial terms. He now lives in Berlin, but his role as a freak endangering the family structure is still there. After having met Julie, gone on a few dates with her, and disappeared for a while, he finally decides to tell her the truth about his condition. Following the functionalist approach to the idea of family, Callie was already a danger, not only because of her being intersexed, but also because of the fact that she couldn't have children. According to the functionalist theory, a family should engage in activities that are essential to keep society and social groups together. Among those functions there is reproduction (Bernardes 37), something that is denied to Callie/Cal as a consequence of his hermaphroditism.

When Cal tells Julie the truth, she accepts it and they still try to be a couple and build something together. The ending is open, so the reader has no clues on the future of Cal and Julie, their relationship or creation of a possible family. Whatever might happen, in terms of family and functionalism, even if Julie accepts Cal for what he really is, "stability and order are considered natural and desirable, whereas conflict and disorder are evidence of deviance and dysfunction in the system" (Smith 9). Following this idea, a family including Cal, an element of deviance because of his being intersexed, is therefore "bad for society" (Bernardes 38), underlying in this case another element of dysfunctionality and extreme conservativeness

about the concept of family and its possible developments. Not to mention the fact that the idea of nuclear family is not applicable to Desdemona and Lefty, Milton and Tessie, and it will not be applicable in Cal's future, either. The Stephanideses, with their secrets and inabilities in familial terms, are another example of the dysfunctionality of the family system and the concept of nuclear family.

Both *Middlesex* and *Geek Love* present very negative aspects linked to family representations, in very different ways. Incest, violence, control, abuse, absence, secrecy, however, seem to be some of the characteristics through which the family is ultimately portrayed.

Moreover, in both novels the open ending does not give any sense of closure on the familial aspect. The reader has no idea of what will happen in Miranda's life, being no clue about Cal and Julie's future together, or about their possibility to create a family on their own. The freaks portrayed in the novels, having contributed to the crisis of their families, have shown the weakness of the family systems they belonged to.

The open endings and the fact that freaks are still there, leave great space for the implementation of new family structures and systems, in place of those predominant and authoritarian ones showed in the novels. Cal and Miranda, two freaks and anomalies, are the ones who are ultimately given the possibility to look at the previous family systems and change them, by introducing new and more accepting families, new positive anomalies in place of those negative aspects presented so far.

CHAPTER III

FREAKS IN GRAPHIC NOVELS

3.1 – “Weren’t we all one big happy family?”: Charles Burns’ *Black Hole*

In this chapter I intend to focus on two examples of contemporary American graphic novels: Charles Burns’ *Black Hole* (1995-2005) and Steve Niles and Greg Ruth’s *Freaks of the Heartland* (2005). The main characteristic of the families portrayed in *Black Hole* is their absence from most of the story and inability to act in their supposed roles as caregivers. In addition to this, in the few panels in which they are actually present, they are either completely dysfunctional or they turn into dangerous traps that can only be avoided by turning to freakish presences.

Black Hole was first published in twelve separate issues, between 1995 and 2004, and then in volume in 2005. The story is set in Seattle during the 1970s and focuses on the tragic stories of a group of teenagers affected by a new disease known as Teen Plague, or the Bug. The disease spreads “by having sex with a sick kid” (Burns, *Black Hole* 79) and the consequences are terrible: “there were all kinds of unpredictable symptoms... For some it wasn’t too bad... A few bumps, maybe an ugly rash... Others turned into monsters or grew new body parts...” (Burns, *BH#1*).

The kids’ enfreakment is sudden and terrifying. In the inside covers of each of *Black Holes*’ issues there is the portrait of a student, which seems to be taken from the school yearbook. The same kids in the portraits reappear at the end of every issue, again in the inside cover, showing their horrible mutations, providing statements explaining more about the disease and its consequences (Fig. 24, 25).

It is from their statements that the reader can have more details about the disease and the terrible conditions of the kids affected: every mutation is different from the other, the

infected are treated as monsters, forced to eat garbage to survive, and, in the case of clearly visible mutations, they are even forced to leave their families. Ultimately, just like it started, with no reason, the disease disappears.



Figure 24: *Black Hole #4*, 1997. Charles Burns, inside cover.



Figure 25: *Black Hole #4*, 1997. Charles Burns, inside cover.

The graphic novel follows a bunch of teenagers, including Keith Pearson and Chris Rhodes, the two main characters, who both get the Bug by having sex, respectively with Eliza and Rob. After having been infected, Keith and Chris have to face the great changes in their lives caused by the disease, while having the chance to better understand the general condition of the other kids.

While Rob, who has a second mouth on his neck, can hide it, and pretend to be normal, Chris is forced to leave her family because she literally sheds her entire skin like a snake (Fig. 26); Eliza grows a little tail, while Keith starts growing tadpole-like appendages from one side of his torso. If on the one hand, the two couples have very different experiences in the story, on the other, they have in common the fact that their families are barely seen or not seen at all.



Figure 26: Chris's mutation. *Black Hole*, 2005. Charles Burns, p. 32.

Idealized domesticity and middle-class life are both attacked in *Black Hole* (Iuliano), but the striking aspect is that “when reality intrudes, such as when Chris’s mom realizes that her daughter needs help, the reader gets shaken out of the torpor long enough to ask questions: Why aren’t more parents doing something about this? Where’s the panic in discovering your boy has two mouths?” (Schwartz).

Schwartz claims that this absence is explained by the fact that, in that way, the kids are left in their angst-ridden world in which adults will never understand anything. This seems to be quite clear in Chris’s words against her mother during an argument, but I believe that the reasons might be different, because of the presence of a subtle dysfunctionality in the environment surrounding the family and in the family system itself. The absence of family in the lives of the different characters, who are forced to live with the consequences of the Bug, bespeaks of the failure of the family itself, as it will be clear especially with Chris.

Chris’s family is the only one that actually appears more in the graphic novel, just to underline, paradoxically, its total absence. Even though her parents are seen, they are miles away from completely playing their role in the familial structure. A parent-absent family might be defined as “one whose nuclear structure is maintained by one parent who remains in the home while the other is absent, either permanently or temporarily. In this manner we exclude the completely disrupted family where the remaining parent cannot maintain the

home and the children must be kept somewhere else” (Rosenfeld and Rosenstein 132). Since the presence of at least one parent does not imply the disruption of the family, we can assume that this actually happens when both parents are excluded from the picture.

In Chris’s case, in fact, the definition of parent-absent family is doubled since it refers to both her parents. They do seem to be able to maintain the home, but their absence is in the fact that they completely fail in their moral role as guides and examples for her, causing Chris to be factually “kept somewhere else”, in the woods with the other freaks.

When Chris’s parents realize that there is something wrong with their daughter, their first reaction is to ground her and act “upon their own assumptions” (Iuliano) instead of talking things through and find a possible solution and possible acceptance of what has happened to her. When she argues with her mother, Chris simply states that her parent will never be able to understand (Fig. 27). Chris already knows that asking for help is useless, as well as trying to explain the situation. Her disinterest in providing excuses or actual justifications for her behavior suggests the presence of an already existing dysfunctionality in the family, which impedes her to seek for actual help in her parents.

Moreover, her mother does not even seem interested in an actual dialogue with her daughter to clarify the happenings. She does express her worries about Chris, but instead of trying to talk to her and turn into a supportive and comforting motherly figure, she just leaves the house, turning literally into the opposite of the “one parent who remains in the home”.



Figure 27: Chris’s argument with her mother. *Black Hole*, 2005. Charles Burns, p. 189.

Therefore, as Rosenfeld and Rosenstein claim,

in these cases, parents “are unable to function in their normal family roles” (132).

Chris's solution is, with Rob's help, to run away and find a place to hide in the woods. But after Rob's sudden disappearance, she seems to fall into a complete desperation, as witness her addiction to alcohol. Moreover, she actually contemplates the idea of returning to her previous life, "living with my parents, being the straight-A student, the perfect, sweet little daughter" (Burns, *Black Hole* 340). With her description she presents a portrait of the flawless daughter, not of the perfect family. In this way, she also underlines her own crisis in the loss of her role in the family institution, since she was forced to abandon it, reinforcing its dysfunctionality.

A family should "provide an environment for the development of identities and affectional response", including "a mentally healthy environment intrinsic to the well-being of a family" (Sussman 46). Since Chris's parents seem unable to provide that, she tries to fill the void they represent in a symbolic way in the ending of her story.

After Rob's death and Dave's killing spree, Chris hides at the beach where she used to go with her family when she was a kid, the same place where she had "the best day of my life" (Burns, *Black Hole* 174) with Rob. While there, she reflects again about the idea of going back home, something that she could actually do, since she claims that her parents would "be so happy to see me... I know they would" (Burns, *Black Hole* 348). Therefore, one would imagine that the place where she used to spend so many moments with her family, and "every time has been good" (Burns, *Black Hole* 347), would help her in making the decision to finally go back. Instead, she decides to replace the family with Rob: Chris buries his photo in the sand filling the place with his presence/absence and memory.

A family, as a unit, "must provide sufficient support and success in transactions so that its members believe it is worthwhile to maintain over time" (Sussman 47). Chris's act suggests that the transactions in her family are not significant enough to be kept, not even during a considerably difficult and emotional moment like this. Therefore, by replacing the

family with Rob, whose actions and support were much more meaningful and helpful to her, Chris reinforces his value over her family, which she definitely burns bridges with.

Left alone and completely unable to change her situation or ask for help, she finally plunges in the ocean. In the last scenes featuring her, Chris's words and actions seem to predict her imminent suicide, graphically suggested also with the prevailing of the color black over the white, indicating her complete absorption in the black hole of the title.

Keith's case is extremely different from Chris's, but his parents are still absent. They are only seen in two pages during the whole story, and when they are showed they do not fulfill any kind of familial role in their son's life. Moreover, they only seem to signify their role as a trap.

The first time we see them, they are way too absorbed by the television to notice that there is something wrong with their son. The only thing they do is to ask him to join them. Some pages later, Keith is with his friends and notices that they are watching "the same shitty movie my parents have been watching" (Burns, *Black Hole* 153). It won't take Keith much time to show, just like in other moments of the story, that he is bored and tired of his normal middle-class life. As his friend Todd remarks, in fact: "You always do this! You always want to be somewhere else!" (Burns, *Black Hole* 155).

Soon after, when the LSD Keith has taken kicks in, he has a grotesque vision of his friend Todd watching the TV movie: "His face had changed. The skin was all pulled back in a horrible grin and his teeth were showing. Suddenly his body started shaking and he let out an awful barking sound. It took me a while to realize he was laughing" (Burns, *Black Hole* 158).

The fact that Keith is starting to be under LSD effects might explain this vision, but it is interesting to notice how the laughter is reproduced on page. The font used to represent Todd's "awful barking sound" is exactly the same used to represent Keith's parents' laughter, and it does not appear anywhere else in the whole graphic novel (Fig. 28, 29).



Figure 28: Keith's parents laughing. *Black Hole*, 2005. Charles Burns, p. 146.



Figure 29: Todd's grotesque laughter. *Black Hole*, 2005. Charles Burns, p. 158.

If on the one hand, the grotesque in Todd's laughter in front of the television can be explained as a consequence of Keith's use of drugs; on the other, it has no apparent explanation when it comes to his parents, since, while Keith is at home, he is not under the effects of any drugs. The grotesqueness in Todd is transmitted to Keith's family: the grotesque "awful barking sound" coming out of Todd's mouth is exactly the same one coming out of Keith's parents.

This family grotesqueness, mixed also with the parents' inability to notice Keith's restlessness, and the absence of functional families in the rest of the story, seem to mirror what Coontz claims: "dysfunctional families are trapped in a feedback situation, where parental inadequacies are not countered or softened by other influences but rather exacerbated by the social environment" (229). Since stigmatization, parents' absence, and sons and daughters running away from home are the main traits of the social environment presented in

Black Hole, families cannot be but extremely negative and grotesque institutions trapped in it. Moreover, Keith's parents' invitation to join them and laugh together seems more like an invitation to finally embrace that same environment. It is in this case that the family turns into a trap.

Margaret Atwood claims: "In American literature the family is something the hero must repudiate and leave; it is the structure he rebels against, thereby defining his own freedom, his own Frontier. [...] The family, then, is something, you come from and get rid of" (143-144). First of all, by refusing to join his grotesquely laughing parents, Keith rebels against their environment, preferring the freakish kids' company. Even if still not infected, he surprisingly finds a more positive and welcoming atmosphere among them. Moreover, his continuous attraction towards freakishness, at first with Chris and then with Eliza, seems to highlight this preference. Secondly, his pursuit for freedom cannot happen in the apparently normal social environment where the families of *Black Hole* move, but rather in freakishness.

When Keith leaves Seattle with Eliza, his parents are showed again but they are just part of his fantasy about them believing he is dead; they are not really present. Only by finally repudiating his family can Keith reach his Frontier, signified also by its actual presence embodied by the Monument Valley he sees at first in his dream involving Chris, and then again in his fantasy about the future with Eliza. Moreover, his last scenes are imbued with a great sense of liberation, connoted by Eliza's drawing of him



Figure 30: Eliza's drawing. *Black Hole*, 2005. Charles Burns, p. 307.

"escaping, right? Flying away from all the messed up stuff" (Burns, *Black Hole* 308) (Fig. 30).

Keith, given his possibility to leave his family and its traps, to replace them with Eliza's freakishness, can create a new life for himself. On the other hand, Chris's impossibility to replace her family and find a refuge in freakishness with Rob, suggests her tragic last decision to commit suicide.

In the end, Atwood's metaphor – ironically mirroring Chris's mutation – that family in America is “a skin you shed” (144), is true only for Keith and Eliza, who replace the family with each other's freakish presence.

If Keith is successful in avoiding the familial traps, Dave's destiny is to fall entirely in them, turning into another enemy for the freakish teenagers. Dave lives with the group of kids in the woods, being them all victims of a familial abandonment. Moreover, they also mysteriously start disappearing one by one. Nevertheless, they keep staying united and, despite their being frightened, they keep helping each other.

It is Chris herself that claims, during the time spent with them, even if somehow sarcastically, “weren't we all one big happy family? ...Or something like that” (Burns, *Black Hole* 339). Actually, that is exactly what the group of misfits ultimately creates. They



Figure 31: The kids in the woods. *Black Hole*, 2005. Charles Burns, p. 171.

do act like one big family, trying to protect each other, providing food, and staying together. Interestingly, they also fill typical familial spaces with their presence, as clearly represented in some of Burns' panels.

In Figure 31, the freaks are in the “pit”, where they meet during the night. They have just met Keith, after his LSD-induced trip, and they quickly try to help and calm him down. The image might look grotesque, given their appearance, but it is interesting to notice that

they are the ones sitting all around a campfire that seems to symbolize the domestic and familial hearth that is completely absent in the rest of the graphic novel.

In Figure 32 and 33, instead, the freakish kids are the ones sitting at the table having breakfast, evoking another typical and traditional familial scene. Again, the freaks replace the spot that is supposed to be occupied by a real family.



Figure 32, 33: The freakish kids at the McCroskys'. *Black Hole*, 2005. Charles Burns, p. 279 and p. 339.

More specifically, the second and third panels are part of another discourse linked to family and domestic representation. Keith offers a shelter to the freakish kids when he has to take care of the McCroskys' house while they are gone, signifying yet another absent family. But the empty house, which is supposed to be a safe place for them, turns into a place of violence and death when Dave starts shooting and killing

almost all the freaks there. In the end, it will be clear that Dave, with his friend Rick, who has been hiding in the forest all this time, are behind all the disappearances and deaths of all the other kids in the woods, including Rob.

Dave's part in the story represents another take on the family role and its environment. While Chris starts remembering who Dave actually was before the Bug, she describes him and his friends as geeks, nerds, and losers, "the shy, ugly kids who laughed too loud, wore the wrong clothes" (Burns, *Black Hole* 341). Through her words it gets clear that Dave and his friends were considered freaks way before becoming ones because of the Bug. Chris continues: "I may have been nice to him but I was as guilty as everyone else... I

thought he was creepy. I didn't want to have anything to do with him" (Burns, *Black Hole* 341).

Being Dave a freak even before the Bug, his enfreakment is doubled and made worse by the lack of an actual moral and positive authority, supposedly embodied by the family. The results of parents' absence are "cumulative and produce permanent effects" that cause "irreversible changes in the personalities of the family members" (Rosenfeld and Rosenstein 133). As a consequence, Dave starts repudiating his life before the Bug: "I'd never go back, not in a million years. Anything is better than all the crap I had to go through... ..Going to school and getting beat up almost every day... All those stuck up girls laughing at me..." (Burns, *Black Hole* 340). He actually prefers his new life because it gives him power on the other normal kids who have previously bullied him. As Zeigler notes, in fact, the Bug turns Dave into "a potent social threat yet renders him a permanent exception to normalcy".

It is when he starts killing the diseased kids that Dave embraces "the moral prohibitions of the adult world" (Dadey). Since "social and parental authorities are only on the periphery of the experiences of the teenage characters, those absent presences rule their actions and ideas of self-definition and may contribute to their self-destruction" (Man). As a consequence, with his actions, Dave eliminates the only familial structure actually present in the graphic novel, the one formed by all the freakish kids, turning into an accomplice of "the very laws that proscribe him" (Man). By turning into the one who eliminates the other freakish kids, he brings the ideas represented by the family system, that does not recognize their existences anymore, to a completely different level. Moreover, he creates a short circuit that can only be resolved with the disappearance of as many freaks as possible, including himself, explaining also his suicide.

Whereas Chris considers her family as an irreplaceable dysfunctionality that tragically seems to contribute to her suicide, Keith considers his as the trap that must be avoided in

order to have a better life. Very differently, when Dave embraces the same social environment the family belongs to he turns into a murderer who kills the very freaks the families were already abandoning. Therefore, Keith is the only one who will have a happy ending, being the only one to actually find refuge in freakishness, through his relationship with Eliza.

Generally speaking, *Black Hole* and the mutations portrayed have been read as representations of the AIDS epidemic, school shootings in the United States, and generational conflict (Iuliano). It is the discourse linked to the AIDS epidemic, in particular, which recalls the stigmatization attached also to freak performers and represents another failure of the family system.

The Bug, even if a clear reference, works slightly differently from AIDS. The outbreak of both diseases is comparable: both illnesses have no known cause (Raney), inspire disgust because of the consequences on the human body, and indicate the moral flaws in the sick person. But there are also significant differences. First of all, the Bug is not lethal. No one of the deaths portrayed in the graphic novel is a direct consequence of the disease. Secondly, the AIDS epidemic was at first labeled as a homosexual disease, and it is interesting to notice that same-sex relationships are completely absent in *Black Hole*. As a consequence, the Bug turns into an illness affecting only the heteronormative society portrayed by Burns, and therefore, only its supposed moral flaws. (Raney; Zeigler).

Since AIDS turned into a symbol for deviance and otherness (Raney), under the same light, the kids affected by the Bug “live with their disease but suffer a kind of social death” (Zeigler): “once you were tagged, you were ‘it’ forever” (Burns, *BH#1*). This means that the stigma of being different, deviant, and freakish, is here a consequence of a disease that also forces the kids affected to live in desperate conditions.

Nevertheless, their families are still nowhere to be seen. Schölvinnck claims: “The family is also often the only safety net, playing a critical role in determining how well individuals and communities cope with AIDS and its consequences” (iii). If the Bug is a metaphor for AIDS, then the two diseases are interchangeable in their common aspects. Therefore, families should play a critical role in coping with the Bug too, but this does not happen at all.

The family response to such cases is supposed to be “shaped by which family member is infected, the potential impact of stigmatization in the culture and community, and feelings of shame” (Belsey 36). Since all the infected are teenagers, the family’s response to the contagion of their own children casts an even dimmer light on the parents. As a consequence, the absent parents are much more concerned with the influences of their social environment, rather than the well being of their own children.

Moreover, “the extent and duration of family disruption are influenced by history and strength of family bonds” (Loyd qtd. in Belsey 36). Families, as the first institutions to abandon the freakish kids, avoid their supposed roles as caregivers and confirm again the worthlessness of family bonds, as suggested by Chris’s actions at the beach.

Belsey claims that “In general, unless the forces of change are too destructive to be resisted, families respond to crises with surprising resilience, and the essential functions of the family often survive the most intense assaults” (21). Clearly, the families in the Seattle portrayed by Burns are not resilient at all, and their only response to the assault of the Bug over their children is to abandon their “essential functions”. The world represented in *Black Hole* does not seem to be a world really dominated by teens’ anger towards their families, simply because the families are not really there. They do not fulfill any of their supposed tasks.

3.2 – The Owens: Steve Niles and Greg Ruth’s *Freaks of the Heartland*

Now I will focus on the symbolic and monstrous representation of homosexuality in a group of freakish kids belonging to apparently normal families, to show how the real monstrosity is hiding in the latters.

Written by Steve Niles and drawn by Greg Ruth, *Freaks of the Heartland* was at first published in six different issues in 2004, and then in a single volume in 2005. Differently from *Black Hole* and its more traditional blacks and whites, *Freaks of the Heartland* contains much many colors, wisely used in the different panels, as well as a sharper line in the representation of the different characters.

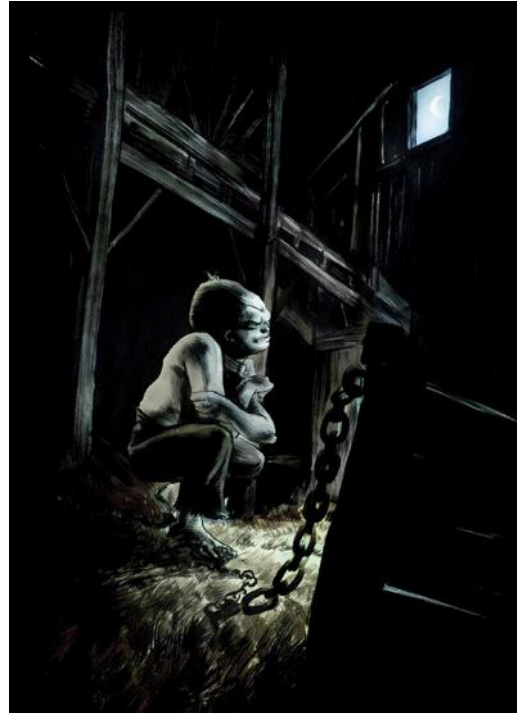


Figure 34: Will Owen. *Freaks of the Heartland*, 2005. Steve Niles and Greg Ruth, p. 44.

The story is set in Gristlewood Valley, during what seem to be the 1930s, and it revolves around the Owens, a small family with a big secret. The rest of the community is involved in this mystery too, since all the families in Gristlewood Valley seem to share the same shame: a freak in the family.

In particular, the freak in the Owens family is the youngest son, Will (Fig. 34). He is just six years old but his appearance is not that of a child. Will Owen looks like a giant, with a huge head, and way too tall for his age. The family keeps him chained in the barn, and Trevor, his older brother, is the only one to actually care about him. In fact, he treats Will just like a normal kid and he even sneaks him out of the barn at night to spend some time together.

With its freaks, *Freaks of the Heartland* seems to introduce a certain concern about recent issues surrounding homosexuality and families. Later on in the story, the graphic novel shows how also all the other freaks in town are imprisoned and kept locked in barns or basements. Those same terrible places seem to introduce a metaphor for the proverbial and oppressive closet, worsened also by the kids' monstrous appearances. Therefore, when they “emerge from these proscribed places into the sunlit world, they cause panic and fear” because “monster is to ‘normality’, as homosexual is to heterosexual” (Benshoff 2).

If Will and the other freaks are seen as symbolical embodiments of homosexuality, then, following a discriminatory take belonging to the idea of traditional family, they apparently play a specific and negative role. Benshoff claims that “homosexuals supposedly represent the destruction of procreative nuclear family” (1), therefore, “in contemporary discourse, the term *family* has become a codeword for the exclusion of homosexuality” (Morrish 339).

Hence, the freakish kids in Gristlewood Valley must be excluded from the family system. Nevertheless, they are the real victims, while the families are slowly showed for what they really are: monstrous executioners of their own extremely wrong assumptions.



Figure 35: The Owens' house. *Freaks of the Heartland*, 2005. Steve Niles and Greg Ruth, p. 8-9.

Freaks of the Heartland opens with Trevor Owen remembering “the terrible things” (3) that happened in Gristlewood Valley when he was just a kid. The negativity of the traditional family system is presented at first with the Owens. The reader is introduced for the first time to their house in a very dark setting, in which the house

looms threateningly over Trevor (Fig. 35). This first introduction is followed by the

desaturated interior of the house in which all the colors seem to fade away, leaving an impersonal and unsettling atmosphere. The scene is then lit up only in one panel, representing Will's father, Henry Owen, in a very meaningful moment.

The Owens are a patriarchal family in which Henry is in command. The book features the typical negative representation of a family in which the father, consumed also by the abuse of alcohol, dictates all the rules. But things are not so simple, since they are constantly exacerbated by the secret they have been keeping for so many years.

The desaturation of the colors in the panels, representing the family during dinner, significantly underlines the lack of spontaneous affection and warmth existing among the Owens. The family works exclusively with two purposes: following Henry's orders and keeping the secret. As I said, the scene lights up in colors only when Henry gets mad and starts scolding Trevor because he is late for dinner (Fig. 36).



Figure 36: Henry Owen threatening his son and wife. *Freaks of the Heartland*, 2005. Steve Niles and Greg Ruth, p. 11.



Figure 37: Henry Owen threatening his son and wife. *Freaks of the Heartland*, 2005. Steve Niles and Greg Ruth, p. 12.

But Marion, Trevor's mother, is a target too: when she tries to defend her child, she is threatened with a fork and her status of woman, wife, and mother, is reduced to that of a "little girl" (12). Henry's words, "That's right" (12), decree the restored order in the family, in which nobody can cross his authority (Fig. 37).

The Owens mirror what Coontz claims about the meaning of the word family, which "originally meant a band of slaves. Even after the word came to apply to people affiliated by blood and marriage, for many centuries the notion of family referred to authority relations rather than love ones" (43).

Moreover, Bernardes claims that "within the term 'family abuse' are included family practices involving emotional, psychological, sexual and physical abuse of family member(s) by other family member(s)" (73) and that "fear and abuse may be routine and common in ordinary family lives" (76). This is exactly what happens with the Owens: they actually are an abusive and patriarchal family in which interrelations among the members are constantly influenced by Henry's authoritative role.

Henry's abuses of course get worse with Will, since he treats him like an animal and keeps refusing to recognize his humanity. It is after Lee Carver's confession of having killed his freakish daughter that Henry decides it is finally time to get rid of his son. This is the moment when he fully embraces his role as villain, emerging directly from within the family. He continues with his abuses, by denying again Will's nature – "Them things just mistakes! Mistakes of God, or worse! I said it then and I'll say it now! And I'll tell you this -- Mistakes need correcting, and I am to do it! (48) – and hitting a powerless Marion.

When he enters the barn, he finally faces and repudiates his son, as well as his own role as a father: "They ain't no way you came from me" (51). His words are full of hatred towards Will, who won't react, not even when his father utters his death sentence, "It's over, freak" (52). Trevor, who surprisingly tries to stop his father, is the one who directly faces

Henry's violence, when the latter tries to strangle him. And this is what finally triggers Will's terrifying and tragic reaction, which directly leads to Henry's horrible death (Fig. 38).



Figure 38: Henry's death scene. *Freaks of the Heartland*, 2005. Steve Niles and Greg Ruth, p. 54-55-56-57.

Calhoun claims: "The family has historically been and continues to be constructed and institutionalized as the natural domain of heterosexuals only. It is a domain from which lesbians and gays are outlawed" (140). Under this perspective, Will was already a figurative outlaw but after his father's murder he turns into a real one.

After the terrible happenings in the barn, Trevor manages to introduce Will to Marion, before they take off to rescue all the other freaks in town. It is during their mission that they find out the final proof of the families' monstrosity.

During their journey in fact, the two brothers find a little graveyard with little headstones, among which there is Will's. When he starts digging he finds "five rag dolls. Two skeletons" (83), which allow them to understand the truth behind the families' actions: "They must not bin able to kill y'all when it came down to it. Pa said they shoulda, but he sure never said they did. I guess they did this to fool people in case they asked. Pretend to kill y'all. Killed some... an' faked the rest" (87). What they find is the tangible proof that those terrible actions are not only linked to the Owens, but they spread in all Gristlewood Valley, involving all the families. What Trevor and Will find, casts a bleak light on the whole community and the concept of family itself (Fig. 39).

As a consequence, they finally realize that until they were in their house, the enemy was their father. Now that he is out of the picture, the enemy is represented by all the other families left in the community and, in particular, by sheriff Tucker.

Singer claims: “The killing of a defective infant is not morally equivalent to the killing of a person; very often it is not morally wrong at all” (191). By killing their babies, the families in town have aligned themselves to this very questionable affirmation, which is also supported by Tucker himself, who is supposed to represent the law: “killing one of those things hardly calls for a word like murder” (95).



Figure 39: Will and Trevor find the graveyard. *Freaks of the Heartland*, 2005. Steve Niles and Greg Ruth, p. 82.

The birth of a child who, for whatever reason, is different from the other members of his or her family, can turn into a crisis and indicate the emergence of a difficulty in the traditional concept of family (Ginsburg and Rapp 187). The family members, in such cases, are supposed to face the crisis together. This does not happen in *Freaks of the Heartland*, since “the institution of family give[s] sway to the institution of segregation” (Hevey 439).

Adams claims: “Like a sideshow curiosity, the homosexual’s deviance is prominently displayed on the surface of the body” (*Sideshow* 93). In Niles and Ruth’s work, this statement is clearly embodied in the freakishness of the kids in Gristlewood Valley, whose difference is engraved in their very bodies. Since “the issue of visibility, and who can be visible, is intimately linked to whether family politics are tied to acceptance or transformation”

(Bernstein and Reimann 13), it is very easy to claim that the families represented in the graphic novel are extremely narrow-minded and intolerant institutions where the fathers are irrational bigots.

Both sheriff Tucker and the other fathers amplify Henry's behavior in their denying the nature of their children and their will to kill them all. They underline a movement that goes from the privacy of the Owens' household, to the public of the entire town, turning the issue into a collective one, involving all the families.

Once Will and Trevor start freeing the other freakish kids in town, thanks also to the physically normal Maggie, the real panic starts spreading among the fathers especially after having discovered what happened at the Owens'.

Sheriff Tucker finds out that Henry has been killed and that Marion has committed suicide, and this is probably one of the most tragic scenes in the graphic novel (Fig. 40).

Even if she is constantly kept on the background, Marion is a quite significant character. In fact, she is the only mother to be seen in the entire graphic novel and, probably, her condition reflects the one of all the other mothers in Gristlewood Valley. It is clear that only the fathers are in charge of things, while the women are never considered, except in some emergency situations. When Trevor and Will start a fire to distract the fathers, for example, Tucker gives specific orders to both men and women, but these are never actually seen around.

Therefore, Marion's suffering and sacrifice turn symbolically into the suffering and sacrifice of all the mothers in the community, who, on the one hand have given birth to freakish children, on the other, have been deprived of the possibility of being real mothers.

Marion hangs herself in the kitchen, with a note pinned to her dress saying "Let the children be" (109), in her last desperate attempt at helping her innocent sons. Her words echo in the entire graphic novel, as a reaction to the horrible intents of the men, highlighting the

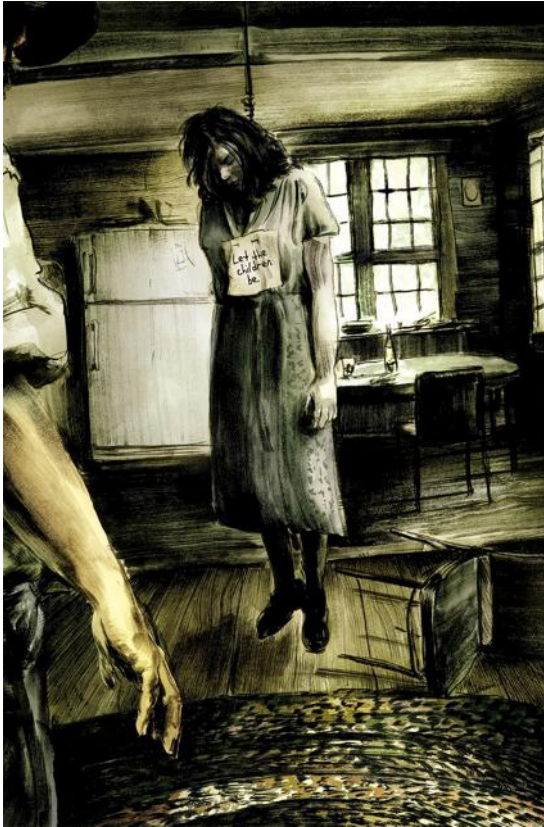


Figure 40: Marion's suicide. *Freaks of the Heartland*, 2005. Steve Niles and Greg Ruth, p. 109.

fact that in all this, mothers are victims just as their children. In this aspect in particular, there is an echo of the maternal impressions that marked the mother as well as the freakish child.

Marion's last desperate message is quickly dismissed by Tucker's reactions and conclusions, which increase his hatred towards the freakish kids, convincing him more and more that it is time to "put 'em down once and for all" (111).

The fathers finally find the kids, who are well aware of the fact that they will be killed one by one, and violence explodes again. This is the scene that, surprisingly, overturns crimes. As I said before, the kids are perceived as outlaws who are forced to live in segregation because their only guilt is to be different and unfit for the familial system. Will is the only one to have committed a real crime by killing Henry. Nevertheless, his actions are nothing when compared to those of the families.

It is Tucker and his men who are the real outlaws since "a social group can be dehumanized with much care and detail in order to define the moral character of those engaged in a struggle for dominance" (Metcalfé qtd. in Reinhold 67). Through their actions, the fathers in the story only contribute to the creation of a dominant but completely negative and inhumane idea of family.

This aspect is also worsened being Tucker a representative of the law. During the debates in favor of DOMA (The Defense of Marriage Act) – a 1996 law that prohibited the recognition of homosexual marriages in the United States –, Senator Gramm claimed:

“governments have recognized the traditional family as the foundation of prosperity and happiness, and in democratic societies, as the foundation of freedom” (Congressional Record S10106).

Both democracy and freedom are what the families in Gristlewood Valley keep denying to their deviant children, underlining their own monstrosity as well as that of the legislative power, embodied by Tucker.

It is Trevor who ultimately faces the sheriff and the fathers, trying to get to the root of their hatred – “We ain’t asked for this. None of us did, but we made do, didn’t we? What’s wrong with all y’all that you can’t stop hatin’ and blamin’ everybody but yourself for things going wrong? What’s wrong with you?” (131) – but his attempts fail when the sheriff points his rifle, ready to kill them.

Surprisingly, the remaining fathers seem to suddenly come to their senses, and one of them kills Tucker, but reconciliation is now completely impossible since “the bigot who can’t accept a family member becomes the pariah, and the accepting family member becomes the hero” (Gamson 78).

Sadly, this is where Trevor’s memory of the past ends, without other details about the happenings in Gristlewood Valley. In the end, the reader meets an old Trevor living with Maggie, and still meeting at night with his brother Will, showing how a pacific and accepting coexistence, despite the difference, is more than possible.

Nevertheless, this structure is also the great weakness of *Freaks of the Heartland*, given the fact that the story is abruptly interrupted, leaving the reader without real explanations. But this narrative structure seems to reflect Trevor’s mind and the way in which he remembers the past. After all, most of the graphic novel is occupied by a tragic and sharp memory.

On June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States legalized same-sex marriages in the entire country, leading to several cases in which people acted just like some of the characters in the graphic novel, with lack of acceptance and hurtful ignorance, mirroring an anxiety towards an extremely significant change in the traditional family structure. This change was seen by some people as something unnatural, far from God's will, and an extraordinary mistake, just like Henry sees Will.

Giddens argues that “the home is, in fact, the most dangerous place in modern society” (408), and this is something very well represented in *Freaks of the Heartland*, with its domestic violence and inability to see families as the secure institutions they are supposed to be, especially when they involve members who differ from the predominant norm.

The home is the place where the family lives and brings all of its members together, but it is also the most dangerous place for the freak, not necessarily a negative figure per se. The most gruesome and striking violent acts take place inside homes, and they are highlighted by the superb art of both graphic novels.

The sick kids in *Black Hole* and the freakish little children in *Freaks of the Heartland* are not the real monsters. The real monstrosity can be found in the families, with their indifference, violence, and inability to accept radical changes in their own traditional structures. The freakish children represent a stain on the supposedly perfect façade of the familial institution.

CHAPTER IV

FREAKS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN TV SERIES

4.1 – The Lannisters: HBO’s *Game of Thrones*

This chapter focuses on freaks in contemporary American TV series, specifically on two examples: HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (2011-2015) and FX’s *American Horror Story: Freak Show* (2014-2015). In both cases it is possible to find many examples of freaks linked to a negative take on the concept of family.



Figure 41: Tyrion Lannister, played by actor Peter Dinklage. *Game of Thrones*, “Two Swords”, 2014.

In this paragraph, my intention is to focus on a character in *Game of Thrones*, Tyrion Lannister (Fig. 41). I intend to pinpoint the negative aspects in the relationship between Tyrion and his father Tywin, and to highlight the role played by

his sister Cersei and her son Joffrey.

Despite Tyrion being a freak, indeed, the real monstrosity in House Lannister can be found in the dynamics that link his components to the idea of power: on the one hand there is Tywin’s patriarchy, dominated by his obsessive narcissism, retribution, and possessive individualism; on the other, there is Cersei’s unnatural matriarchy, based on lies and incest.

Game of Thrones is an American TV show based on the series of epic fantasy novels, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, written by George R. R. Martin. The TV show, produced by HBO, premiered in 2011 and, in 2015, reached its fifth season. It features several characters scattered across the fictional continents of Westeros and Essos. They live in a typical

medieval and fantastic world, dominated by violence and plots to gain control over the Iron Throne and, consequently, over the Seven Kingdoms. Treason, violence, battles and conspiracies are at the basis of the dynamics that influence the relationships among the Houses at war with each other to gain power. Each House represents a specific family, and power is exactly what most of the families involved look for. The TV show is, indeed, quite concerned with “the various forms by which humans govern themselves, gain and use power, and the way systems of power use them in return”, since “each household has a sigil and words which reflect that family’s practical philosophy of power, how to attain it, keep it, and use it” (Leederman 194). Therefore, *Game of Thrones* introduces the audience to a fantastic world in which the family system, directly linked to the idea of power, plays a central role in the story: almost all characters belong to a specific family/House, while secondary characters usually pledge allegiance to a particular one.

This fantastic setting redefines an entire genre, a distinctive trait that is applicable to both the novels and the TV show: “the series has garnered much praise for going against the conventions of the fantasy genre, although many of these conventions – the happy ending, the safety of primary characters, the sanctity of oaths – are not only the province of fantasy literature. In fact, *A Song of Ice and Fire* quite skillfully mines the fantasy tradition” (Johnston and Battis 3).

By going against the traditional tropes cited above, the novels and the TV show had the ability to reach out to a very large audience. Thus, in a fantastic world in which it is possible to find dragons, blood-magic, and an entire army of walking dead, the concept of fantasy itself is unexpectedly overturned and reframed against its more traditional aspects, including the safety of main characters or the happy ending. This same crisis hits the concept of family system as well: families are constantly plotting against each other, entire households are killed or continuously put in danger, and some are perceived as unnatural and

unlawful because of specific practices, such as incest. Even marriages are seen as dangerous, humiliating, and negative occurrences: instead of sanctifying the union of two families, they usually turn into massacres or perfect events to shame specific characters (“The Rains of Castamere”; “Second Sons”; “The Lion and the Rose”).

The TV show presents also a long list of freakish characters and, among them, Tyrion, a dwarf born within an apparently normal family, is a case in point with regard to freaks and negative representations of families, even in a fantastic world like the one displayed in *Game of Thrones*.

Right from the very first episode, “Winter Is Coming”, it is clear that there is an atmosphere of growing expectation in introducing Tyrion on screen. Young Arya Stark keeps asking impatiently “Where’s the Imp?”, using the nickname Tyrion is well known by in the Seven Kingdoms. His sister Cersei asks for him, calling him a “little beast”. Even Catelyn Stark and Maester Luwin talk about the preparations made to receive this still mysterious character by referring to his “stature”. Up to this moment, the expectation about Tyrion is defined by several characters talking about or looking for him, while he is constantly not seen around. In doing so, the curiosity about the character grows, creating a certain expectancy that somehow suggests the same atmosphere during the freak show, before seeing the actual exhibition. The only clue the audience is given is his nickname. Lambert claims that:

“his size marks him out instantly, as does his nickname, the Imp, used by family, friends and foes alike. Unlike the dwarf, stolid and happier in the dark, the Imp is a devious and chimerical figure, not entirely reliable, mischievous, capable of courage but preferring to use his intelligence when given the choice. There is some justification for this. Tyrion’s behaviour is often impish, cheeky” (29).

Following this description, there is no wonder that, when we finally see him, he is in a brothel with Ros, a prostitute who seems to be the only one able to utter what everyone is

thinking in Winterfell – “We’ve been expecting you, Lord Tyrion” – because everyone just wants to see the freak.

Tyrion is well aware of the ways in which he is perceived and known across the continent of Westeros, mainly because of extremely wrong accounts about his physical appearance and stories of his proclivity for wine and prostitutes. Some characters actually tend to remind him of these aspects, underlining also a certain disappointment when they find out that the mythical aura pervading his figure is not really true.

Probably, the best description is the one given by Obery of House Martell, when he tells Tyrion about his expectancies in seeing him for the first time:

“The whole way from Dorne all anyone talked about was the monster that had been born to Tywin Lannister. A head twice the size of his body. A tail between his legs. Claws. A red eye. The privates of both a girl and a boy. [...] When we met your sister, she promised she would show you to us. Every day we would ask. Every day she would say ‘soon’. Then she and your brother took us to the nursery and she unveiled the freak. Your head was a bit too large. Your arms and legs were a bit too small, but no claw. No red eye. No tail between your legs. [...] We didn’t try to hide our disappointment. ‘That’s not a monster’, I told Cersei. ‘That’s just a baby’” (“Mockingbird”).

Despite the accounts, Tyrion is not “the monster you think I am” (“The Laws of Gods and Men”). On the contrary, his mind is “sharp, calculating, and exceedingly clever” and “he reveals exceptional leadership qualities in running the Seven Kingdoms from behind the scenes” (Robichaud 184). Regardless of his freakish appearance and questionable habits, Tyrion slowly reveals himself as one of the most positive characters and members of House Lannister: he saves the capital King’s Landing from Stannis’s siege; unlike the rest of his family, he is the only one who treats Sansa Stark with humanity; he is the one who makes possible for Bran Stark to ride his horse again after having lost the use of both legs. Even the

eunuch Varys recognizes Tyrion's hidden and positive qualities: "Tyrion Lannister is one of the few people alive who could make this country a better place. He has the mind for it, he has the will, he has the right last name" ("Mhysa"). But it is exactly his last name his main problem.

Robichaud claims that Tyrion Lannister is "one of the most complicated and compelling characters ever to appear in a fantasy series" (184). Though born a freak, something quite negative in the unforgiving and violent world portrayed in the show, he was lucky enough to be part of House Lannister, "the richest family in the Seven Kingdoms" (Duval 258), and he is well aware of that: "If I had been born a peasant they might have left me out the woods to die. Alas, I was born a Lannister of Casterly Rock. Things are expected of me" ("The Kingsroad"). As a consequence of his physical condition and his being part of a prestigious and extremely powerful family, Tyrion constantly tries to prove himself and "to win his father's approval because he has so little else" (Garcia and Antonsson xi).

Nevertheless, he seems to constantly fail in doing so, and the reasons are several. Not only "his birth killed his mother, a fact for which his father despises him" (Robichaud 184), but his physical aspect plays a very important role in all this too. This last element is quite clear during his conversation with Jon Snow in Winterfell. When Jon, the bastard son of Ned Stark, asks him what he knows about bastards, Tyrion's answer is quite telling: "All dwarfs are bastards in their fathers' eyes" ("Winter Is Coming"). We are suggested that Tyrion's physical aspect has the power to reduce him to a bastard son, even if he is not, underlining the perceived stigmatization of having an illegitimate son, something that, under the order of patriarchy, cannot be tolerated because it undermines "male investment in the next generation" (Longman 62).

Tyrion's complicated relationship with his father is just one of many elements that build the negativity of House Lannister. As I already stated, the role played by the family

institution in *Game of Thrones* is extremely important, as witness several other characters, such as Varys, who clearly states that “here, only the family name matters” (“Mhysa”), and Lord Tywin Lannister (Fig. 42) seems to believe only in that principle.

His patriarchy is extremely strong and reflects the power of his House. As the one in charge of the family, a “military mastermind” (Robichaud 184), and twice Hand of the King, Lord Tywin knows exactly how to move in the Seven Kingdoms and how to obtain what he wants. He is



Figure 42: Tywin Lannister, played by actor Charles Dance. *Game of Thrones*, “The Pointy End”, 2012.

also aware of the important role of his family in Westeros, given its strength and seemingly endless economic resources. To him, the only public stain on this apparently successful and powerful family is Tyrion, who openly acknowledges his role as “constant disappointment to my own father” (“Cripples, Bastards and Broken Things”).

At first, the reasons for that might be traced exclusively in his freakish appearance and behavior, since “he’s prone to condescension, arrogance, and licentiousness [...] being a bit of a glutton and drunk” (Robichaud 186), or in the fact that everyone in his family, except for his brother Jaime, blames him for having killed his own mother at birth. Actually, there are deeper reasons that reveal the hidden monstrosity of the other family members, which are worse than Tyrion’s freakish appearance, starting with Tywin himself.

Talking about family abuse, Bernardes claims that “most sociological portrayals of social structure suggest clear ‘rules’, functioning systems, or, at worse, the use of largely

economic power by some parties to control other parties” leading to “intimidation, fear and abuse” (76). This is exactly at the basis of one of many episodes between Tywin and Tyrion, which shows the cruelty of the patriarch of the family towards his own son, based on his economic power.

In the ninth episode of Season One, “Baelor”, Tyrion tells the story of his first marriage, revealing how he ran into a girl, Tysha, saving her from two men trying to rape her. It is only after their marriage that Tywin forces Jaime to tell the truth about the girl, who is just playing a part in a huge and cruel prank he has arranged on his brother. But it is Tywin who will play the role of the real monster: he gives the girl to his guards, paying her handsomely, and forcing Tyrion to watch her being raped over and over, so that “by the end she had so much silver that the coins were slipping through her fingers”.

The terrible punishment clearly reveals Tywin’s economic power in controlling his son’s life, by literally convincing anyone around him to do anything in exchange of money, because “a Lannister always pays his debts” (“The Wolf and the Lion”). Tywin uses his corruptive economic power, turning himself into an abusive father following his personal ideas about the concept of family, something influenced also by his being stuck in a powerful narcissism and possessive individualism in regard to the importance of his family name.

About the first one, Tywin’s narcissism brings about “terrible designs” which include “lies, humiliation, rape, and the destruction of homes that might be built on other lines” (DeCoste 234). Tywin’s actions are all directed to his “narcissistic reduction of kin to the power of the self” (DeCoste 235) and, as for Tyrion’s marriage, things are taken to a horrible resolution. Even though the marriage is the unhappy outcome of a cruel prank, Tysha is still “no acceptable wife for any man, even a loathsome half-man, who bears the name of Tywin Lannister” (DeCoste 235).

Longman claims that: “Patriarchy does not simply mean that men rule. Indeed, it is a particular value system that not only requires men to marry but to marry a woman of a proper station” (58). Therefore, being Tysha just a prostitute, unworthy of a Lannister, the union needs to be destroyed. As Farrell explains, the creation of a new family is “a prime means of consolidation and maintaining power among those with access to important resources” (95), just like the Lannisters and their money, bringing about “strategic attempts to control the family patterns of descent, succession, and inheritance” (95). But instead of punishing Jaime, the mind behind the prank, it is Tyrion who will be included in the final punishment, since in Tywin’s eyes he is the one who has stained the family name by marrying a prostitute. With his actions, dictated only by his love for Tysha, Tyrion inadvertently turns himself into one of those people seeking for a change that causes a shift in the family, a shift that is unpredictable and “treacherous to those who hold the reins of power” (Farrell 11), like Tywin.

But it’s not only about family succession. DeCoste claims that “Tywin’s honour must not be sullied, the wholesale equation of one’s flesh and blood with one’s own person must not be disturbed” and “to defend that equation, all manner of brutalization of others, of one’s own children, is permissible and right” (235). Tywin Lannister endows himself with the power to decide what kind of family institution is acceptable and what is not, so that he can defend his honor and the one of his family name. In doing so, he does not realize that his own retributive actions toward his own son are unacceptable and turn him into an abusive father, and that the rest of his family has negative and unnatural elements involving Cersei and Jaime. He is too obsessed with his preoccupations about Tyrion to see them.

As a consequence of Tywin’s negative and abusive role, Tyrion is forced to follow his plans about his personal life even though this means being constantly casted as the “family insult” (“Two Swords”). This aspect is clearly present in one of the most dramatic dialogues between the two Lannisters:

TYRION: “I want what is mine by right. Jaime is your eldest son, heir to your lands and titles. But he is a Kingsguard, forbidden from marriage or inheritance. The day Jaime put on the white cloak he gave up his claim to Casterly Rock. I am your son and lawful heir.”

TYWIN: “You want Casterly Rock.”

TYRION: “It is mine. By right.”

TYWIN: “We’ll find you accommodations more suited to your name, and as a reward for your accomplishments during the Battle of the Blackwater Bay. And when the time is right you will be given a position fit for your talents, so that you can serve your family and protect our legacy. And if you serve faithfully you will be rewarded with a suitable wife. But I will let myself be consumed by maggots before mocking the family name and making you heir to Casterly Rock.”

TYRION: “Why?”

TYWIN: “Why? You asked that! You, who killed your mother to come in to the world. You are an ill-made spiteful little creature, full of envy, lust and low cunning. Men’s laws give you the right to bear my name and display my colors, since I cannot prove that you are not mine. And to teach me humility the Gods have condemned me to watch you waddle about wearing that proud lion that was my father’s sigil and his father’s before him” (“Valar Dohaeris”).

From the dialogue it is crystal clear that Tywin hates his own son, ignoring even his lawful rights about the family inheritance. As Tyrion clearly states, he is the only heir to the family, but his father’s honor cannot be stained by a freakish dwarf as Lord of Casterly Rock, the Lannisters’ residence.

Tywin’s narcissism is mixed with the same possessive individualism that characterized Arty Binewski in *Geek Love*. In the latter’s case, this aspect was mainly linked to his obsession with being the most successful and powerful member of the family freak show. In Tywin’s case, the possession is mainly about the concept of family itself. Tywin is

ready to make cruel, horrible and monstrous choices to defend the family name and reputation, even if this means to sacrifice his own children and what is meaningful to them: “The House that puts family first will always defeat the House that puts the whims and wishes of its sons and daughters first. A good man does everything in his power to better his family position” (“Mhysa”). Ironically, even though Tywin tries to do what he considers the best for his own family, he will never be a good man or a good father, simply because what he really cares about is the reputation and the power of the family name and nothing more. As a consequence of this, his actions will never be directed towards the good of the single members of the family, but only towards the ways in which others perceive his last name, so that he can satisfy his narcissistic needs.

DeCoste, following Freud’s explanations, claims that family “is by nature a jealous lord” (230). As such:

“the narcissistic bent of the family may, Freud notes, fuel social strife, by keeping hostage prized images of itself and by seeking to impose its image and its goods upon the world at large. Narcissism, indeed, is linked, for Freud, to our primordial inclination to violence, as the assertion of self through force, the reduction of the other to self by their subordination to our will. [...] The upshot [...] of narcissistic lordship is that the institution of the family, the House, becomes coincident with the ego of its governing figure” (DeCoste 230-231).

Tywin Lannister, as the obsessive “governing figure” of the case, follows exactly this pattern, turning into a monstrous and powerful patriarch who exerts control over his family members, and plots against his own freakish son, so that the family reputation could remain intact and true to the “prized images of itself”, to be later imposed on the “world at large”.

Therefore, his relationship with Tyrion will never get better – he will ultimately kill Tywin – since, despite being a brilliant man, Tyrion, the freakish dwarf, unlike Jaime or

Cersei, will never match his father's narcissistic idea of power and success, being a deviant that threatens his father's strict ideas of family.

The twins, on the other hand, are, at least from the outside, the perfect representation of House Lannister, being Jaime an "extremely skilled and deadly knight" and Cersei (Fig. 43) the Queen and later on the "de facto ruler of the Seven Kingdoms" (Robichaud 184). Nevertheless, they hide a monstrous secret, which, if revealed, might lead directly to the destruction of the entire family: they have an incestuous relationship that not only stains House Lannister more than Tyrion's habits or appearance, but also mocks the supposed sanctity of marriage and family itself, by creating Cersei's abominable matriarchy.



Figure 43: Cersei Lannister, played by actress Lena Headey. *Game of Thrones*, "The Lion and the Rose", 2015.

Cersei's thirst for power creates a matriarchal system in which she turns into "the epitome of what Plato warns us against: a vicious, inharmonious, unstable soul", being her "driven by her monstrous and unstable internal desires" (Silverman 69).

The marriage with King Robert Baratheon gives her the opportunity to increase her own power and the family prestige, reinforced by any children they might have, guaranteeing the succession and the success of her House (Duval 260). Therefore, she seems to follow the ideas about family success and descent Tywin is obsessed with. Yet, the marriage is built on huge lies: Joffrey, Myrcella, and Tommen, her three children, are in fact the result of her

incestuous relationship with her brother Jaime, and rumors about it spread all over Westeros, turning into a threat for the entire family system.

Cersei, despite her normal physical aspect, matches Michel Foucault's description of the abnorms as "individual[s] to be corrected", being a monstrous figure strictly linked to the family institution (57): "the incorrigible will be defined, take shape, and be transformed and develop along with the reorganization of the functions of the family" (61).

In fact, her machinations provide the annihilation of the role of the patriarch in her family, allowing the reorganization of the system, so that another powerful figure can rise, the monstrous matriarch.

First of all, the role of rightful father of the children turns into a sort of farce. King Robert Baratheon, in fact, has no idea about the real nature of the kids, and therefore, is himself but the caricature of a father. Moreover, she will plot with her cousin Lancel, with whom she starts another incestuous affair, to kill Robert and definitely delete him from the picture.

Secondly, Jaime himself is unable to play his role as a father, even if an unnatural one, since "if I was a father to any of my children, they'd be stoned in the streets" ("The House of Black and White"). This is explained by the fact that the three kids are perceived as real monsters, just like Tyrion, being born out of incest, a prohibited practice, that turns out to be even more monstrous because destroys the lawful union between the Baratheons and the Lannisters.

Foucault claims that incest represented "the figure" (101) and "the crimes of the king" (104), but in this case it is something that involves the Queen. In a world in which only men have power, Cersei appears as a feminist figure that goes against gender hierarchy and against patriarchy (Bernardes 43) and overturns them both. In particular, as Rosaldo claims, the patriarchy line of succession has the power to suppress the presence and importance given

to women (82). Nevertheless, despite her ability to go against the patriarchal power, Cersei is still inscribed into a monstrous dimension, given her incestuous crimes, and her continuous mocking the concepts of marriage and the basis of the creation of a family system.

The marriage between Cersei and Robert is not based on love and affection, but only on the reinforcement of the alliance between the two Houses, giving the Lannisters the possibility to gain access to the Iron Throne (Duval 260). As a consequence, Cersei's children, being the result of incest and not Robert's lawful heirs, turn into unnatural usurpers. Their secret, if disclosed, can destroy the Lannisters' image and reputation, so dear to Tywin. Cersei herself tells her father the truth about his precious legacy:

CERSEI: "How can someone so consumed by the idea of his family have any conception what his actual family was doing? We were right in front of you and you didn't see us. One look in the past twenty years. One real look at your own children and you would have known."

TYWIN: "Known what?"

CERSEI: "Everything they say is true. About Jaime and me."

TYWIN: "No."

CERSEI: "Your legacy is a lie" ("The Children").

In just one simple statement, Cersei destroys all that Tywin has worked for in his entire life and shows her father's failure at succeeding in the control of the family, revealing herself, and not Tyrion, as the real monster. Therefore, narcissism, incest and the abuse of power are the real deadly elements that threaten the family system (DeCoste 226), not the freakish dwarf and his appearance.

Moreover, being her matriarchy perceived as a monstrous one, it has to be eliminated. Joffrey is killed during his own wedding ("The Lion and the Rose"), leaving Tommen as the new King; while in the last episode of Season Five, Myrcella is poisoned during her voyage to return back home, and presumably dies. At the same time, Cersei herself is imprisoned for

her actions, on the charges of “fornication, treason, incest, the murder of King Robert” (“Hardhome”).

Cersei’s matriarchy reveals its entire grotesque potential especially with her first son. As Haas explains, Joffrey (Fig. 44) has no reason to behave morally, given his being the new King of the Seven Kingdoms, after Robert’s death, and the fact that he understands that his power allows him to get away with anything he wants (170), resulting in him carrying out horrible actions, including torture and murder. Joffrey’s monstrosity, acknowledged by

several characters in the show, therefore, is not only related to the way he was conceived, but is also revealed in his actions and abuse of power, which are especially



directed toward Tyrion, **Figure 44:** Joffrey Baratheon, played by actor Jack Gleeson. *Game of Thrones*, “Fire and Blood”, 2012.

who is constantly humiliated.

During Tyrion’s wedding (Fig. 45) to Sansa Stark, in fact, he is supposed to stand on a stool to be able to place the Lannister cloak on her shoulders, but Joffrey takes the stool away, causing the guests to publicly laugh at Tyrion’s inability to accomplish the task (“Second Sons”).

Likewise, during his own wedding, Joffrey takes advantage of the presence of some performing dwarves, whose appearance reminds a bit of the freak show, to mortify Tyrion, humiliate him and force him to be his personal cupbearer too (Fig. 46, 47) (“The Lion and the Rose”). In both cases, Joffrey reduces his uncle to a joke, taking advantage of his freakish



Figure 45: Tyrion’s wedding to Sansa Stark, played by actress Sophie Turner. *Game of Thrones*, “Second Sons”, 2014.

physical aspect to satisfy his personal sadistic desires. Through his actions, it seems that Joffrey follows his mother’s ability to mock and ridicule the sanctity of marriage and creation of new families, contributing to the negative representation of his

own House.

As noted by Lambert, another important aspect of the series is represented by the fact that “in traditional fantasy, beauty tends to be an indication of worth and disability the sign of innate moral corruption” (28), but “the genuine monsters in the cycle – Cersei, Joffrey – are often strikingly attractive, admired for their looks” (32). Consequently, they are the real abominations, not Tyrion, even though he kills his own monstrously retributive father after the umpteenth abuse. As a consequence of the hatred towards



Figure 46: Dwarves entertaining guests at Joffrey’s wedding. *Game of Thrones*, “The Lion and the Rose”, 2015.

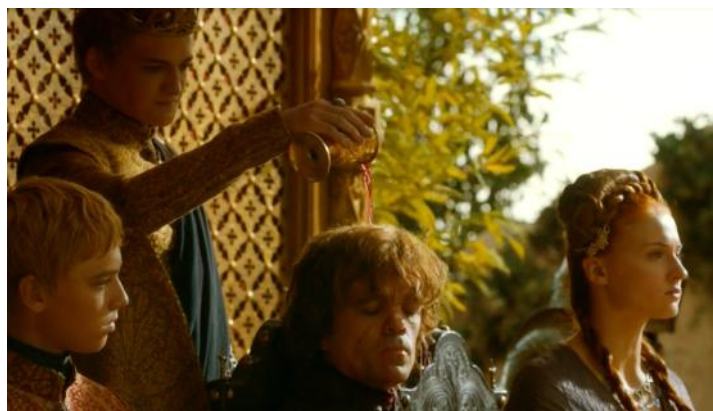


Figure 47: King Joffrey humiliating his uncle, Tyrion Lannister at his wedding. *Game of Thrones*, “The Lion and the Rose”, 2015.

him, Tyrion will ultimately be expelled from the family system, being unjustly accused of Joffrey's death and therefore forced to leave Westeros.

Nevertheless, Tyrion's apparent monstrosity is nothing if compared to the other members of his own family, since "indeed, it is those who have been un-Housed, ejected from their familial economy, who offer hope" (DeCoste 226).

Therefore, the physical monster turns unexpectedly into the "indication of worth", while the moral monsters – Tywin, Cersei, Joffrey – turn into that "sign of innate moral corruption" Lambert talks about. Though part of a fantastic world, the Lannisters, with their abuse of power and narcissistic tendencies, show how real monstrosity is not in the physical appearance of the freak but in the familial system, possessed by and obsessed with the idea of power and narcissism about its own name.

4.2 – Pepper and the Gayhearts: FX's *American Horror Story: Freak Show*

After having analyzed an example of the representation of freaks and negative families with the Lannisters in HBO's *Game of Thrones*, in this paragraph I want to analyze the same topic in a different genre, the horror one, with FX's *American Horror Story*, in particular the fourth season, *Freak Show*.

After a short introduction to the anthological horror show, my intention is to focus on a few negative representations of family. Among these, there is one that appears quite meaningful, which revolves around Pepper and her dramatic experience with what is her lawful family, the Gayhearts, showing the negativity role of mother in the traditional family system of the 1950s.

Erens claims that the horror genre "addresses the dark side of family life and small-town America" by "foregrounding patriarchal power but positing the maternal order in opposition to the destructive element of patriarchy" (354). In Pepper's case, in particular, the

negativity in the family representation is not much in the role of patriarchy, as it is in the one played by the supposed maternal figure, her sister Rita. In the other examples, instead, it is still possible to find a negative image of patriarchy, as well as the idea that conforming to a normal idea of family produces disruptive consequences.

American Horror Story is a TV show that premiered in 2011, created by Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk, broadcast by FX Network. The show is an anthological series in which each season is conceptualized as an independent miniseries for the most part, meaning that there are some elements in common that connect the seasons to each other.

Every season features different characters, mostly played by the same set of actors, involved in stories that focus on the main tropes of the horror genre (Radish). The first season, *Murder House* (2011), focuses on a family moving into a haunted house in Los Angeles. The second season, *Asylum* (2012-2013), follows several characters in an institution for mentally insane criminals in Massachusetts. *Coven* (2013-2014), the third one, tells the story of a group of witches in modern New Orleans. The fourth one, called *Freak Show* (2014-2015) focuses on a group of freak performers, while the fifth, *Hotel* (2014-2015), is set in a creepy hotel in Los Angeles.

Among these, the one I am interested into is the fourth, *Freak Show*, set in the small town of Jupiter, Florida, in 1952, and telling the struggles for survival of several performers working in one of the last freak shows in the United States.

The role of the freak show is of primary importance in creating the atmosphere and setting of the story, and real freak performers from the past seem to have influenced the series. Some of them, such as Grady Stiles, Fannie Mills, or Blanche Dumas, can be easily recognized in some of the figurines moving around during the opening titles. Other famous freaks, instead, seem to have been used as inspiration for some of the main characters: Jimmy Darling gives the impression to be based on Fred Wilson, while Meep is an obvious reference

to Minnie Woolsey. Moreover, among the secondary characters there are actors with actual disabilities: Mat Fraser, who has thalidomide-induced phocomelia (Oswell), Rose Siggins, who was affected by sacral agenesis, which causes abnormalities in the spine (Dicker), and Jyoti Amge, the world's smallest living woman (*Guinness World Records*). The rest of the cast, instead, recreated their freakish characters with the use of prosthetics and CGI (Fig. 48) (Stack).

The freaks work at Fräulein Elsa's Cabinet of Curiosities, a freak show that is experiencing a very difficult time, being a form of entertainment in decline during the 1950s. Elsa Mars's "monsters" ("Monsters Among Us"), as she calls them, are constantly put in danger. On one hand there is the police and the citizens of Jupiter, who would like to



see the freaks miles away from their town – "There's no place in Jupiter for freaks!" ("Monsters Among Us") – especially because of a serial killer on the loose, Twisty the Clown, whose actions cast suspicion on the performers. On the other hand, there is Stanley, whose only interest is to kill as many freaks as possible, so that he can sell their body parts to the American Morbidity Museum.

The way in which the freaks are constantly mistreated and cast out highlights the fact that the normal ones appear as perpetrators who "are victimizing not some alien religions or ethnic group, but rather their fellow citizens, their own friends and family" (Gallagher 3).

The freaks portrayed in *American Horror Story: Freak Show* look like constant victims, and in part they are, but they can also recur to terrible actions if needed. For example, Jimmy Darling kills a detective threatening and accusing the Siamese twins, Bette

Figure 48: The Siamese twins Bette and Dot Tattler, played by actress Sarah Paulson, and created through the use of CGI. *American Horror Story – Freak Show*, "Curtain Call", 2015.

and Dot, of being responsible for the killings in town (“Monsters Among Us”). In the same way, the entire group of freaks cooperates in maiming Stanley, leaving him into a cage, after finding out the truth behind his despicable actions (“Show Stoppers”). This last episode is a clear reference to Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1932). Not only is *Freaks* explicitly mentioned, but there are some scenes which clearly remind of it. There are, in fact, a lot of similarities between the moments in which the freaks bring about their revenge against Stanley, and those in which Browning’s freaks reduce Cleopatra to “the most astounding living monstrosity” (*Freaks*). Therefore, just like *Freaks* presented its characters as both suffering and capable of violent acts (Adams, *Sideshow 77*), *American Horror Story: Freak Show* has a list of freakish liminal characters, in part victims and in part executioners, constantly blurring the borders between what is good and what is right to defend their own kind from their enemies.

Their actions are continuously directed to the protection of the group, which is perceived as a real family, since most of the freaks in the show never had a real one. As Elsa herself claims: “A family must come together when tragedy strikes. And we are the only family most of us have ever known. [...] I had to create a family. Everyone here... they are all my babies. My special ones. I love them all” (“Bullseye”). In this peculiar family there are



several characters who had a very harsh life, but among them Pepper is the one with the most tragic and striking story linked to the idea of a normal family.

Figure 49: Pepper, played by actress Naomi Grossman. *American Horror Story – Freak Show*, “Orphans”, 2015.

Pepper (Fig. 49) is what the carnies called a “pinhead” (Bogdan 120), a girl affected by microcephaly, “a syndrome characterized by a small head with a sloping forehead; large,

protruding ears and nose; unusually small stature, in general; and moderate to severe subnormal intellectual functioning. [...] Individuals with the syndrome often have a strikingly unusual appearance” (Bogdan 126). She is firstly introduced in the second season, *Asylum*, and then returns in *Freak Show*, where she is constantly seen moving around on the background. Her story becomes the main focus of one episode in particular, “Orphans”.

Pepper, as a character, can be easily related to the idea of family and especially to the concept of motherhood, since she made a mother out of Elsa. Miss Mars claims more than once to be like a mother for the rest of the freaks, but it was Pepper who turned her into one for the first time. During the episode, Elsa tells the story of how she started her freak show, by looking for “pets” in “the place where people throw other people away. An orphanage”. That is the place where she finds Pepper, who never knew her father, whose mother died, and sister couldn’t “handle the burden”. Elsa claims: “Most people don’t see beauty in someone like Pepper. They see shame. They see human garbage”, nevertheless “I loved her. My first monster. [...] But when this strange-looking little one looked at me, it was the first time I had ever felt unconditional love”. Therefore Pepper, as Elsa’s “firstborn”, can stop being an orphan and finally taste a bit of family life, even if an apparently freakish one, by being her daughter.

While in the freak show, Pepper actually builds her own little family. Thanks to Elsa, who understands that “she was a woman now and she had maternal needs”, Pepper can turn herself into a mother and then into a wife when Miss Mars has Ma Petite and Salty join the show. Thus, “her maternal needs were fulfilled”, and after her marriage with Salty, another pinhead, “they raised Ma Petite as their own child” (Fig. 50). As a consequence, inside the freak show there is the constitution of a small family only made of freaks.

Pepper’s possibility to have her own family is quite interesting since, as Elsa herself claims: “she couldn’t possibly be allowed to breed”. Landis argued that: “Except for the sick,



Figure 50: Pepper with Ma Petite, played by actress Jyoti Amge. *American Horror Story – Freak Show*, “Monsters Among Us”, 2015.

the badly crippled, the emotionally warped and the mentally defective, almost everyone has an opportunity [and by clear implication, a duty] to marry” (qtd. in Coontz 33). Therefore, given her condition, Pepper should not be allowed to have a family. Nevertheless, she does make Elsa a mother, though not a biological one, becomes a member of the performers’ family, and has a family of her own thanks to her marriage to Salty, even if it is a very

unorthodox one. These unconventional forms of familial systems provide Pepper with the family she never had in her entire life, since, as Popenoe claims, a family is “a relatively small domestic group of kin (or people in a kin-like relationship) consisting of at least one adult and one dependent person” (529).

When Salty dies unexpectedly, Elsa decides that it is time to track Pepper’s sister, who lives in Massachusetts, so that she can be reunited with her lawful family. This is the sad moment in which Pepper’s life changes forever. Her little family, formed with Ma Petite and Salty, is destroyed, since her husband dies of natural causes while Dell kills Ma Petite. Moreover, she is distanced by the rest of the freaks’ family, to be returned to a normal and lawful familial system that will in fact prove as the real source of monstrosity in her life.

Pepper’s return in Rita’s life is completely unexpected, but ultimately accepted. Nevertheless, following the typical ideas about family during the 1950s, Rita already shows some elements that foresee her being a monstrous mother.

Rita claims: “I told myself, Rita, you will never meet a man and have children if I have to look after a dim-witted sister. I... I always wanted the babies”. Her words confirm

the typical ideas of the 1950s, “the heyday of the so-called ‘traditional nuclear family’, the family consisting of a heterosexual, monogamous, life-long marriage”, with children who “were high valued by their parents” (Popenoe 528). On one hand Rita reinforces her desire, typical of those years, to have a functional family; on the other, she demonstrates to have refused the only existing link with what was left of her original familial nucleus, to fulfill her personal desires.

Moreover, she sees herself as an unnatural mother, since she claims that, in the end, she never had babies because of “clogged pipes. Something. I don’t know”. Rita’s body is apparently not made to have children, though she is not even sure about the real reasons why. Her attitude seems to suggest that she does not really care that much and that her desire to have babies might just be a lie she keeps telling people, so that she can conform to the ideas of the time about motherhood. Only later on in the episode this aspect will be confirmed.

Despite that, she falls into a precise category of the time. In fact, the woman’s failure to have children turned from a social disadvantage or tragedy, to a perversion during the 1950s (Coontz 32). During those years, in fact, motherhood was considered “the pinnacle of feminine fulfillment” (Plant 87), and all those women who could not have any form of satisfaction from motherhood, were labeled as unnatural (Coontz 32). Following the beliefs of those years, Rita matches the idea of the grievous and inhuman woman, given her impossibility to be a mother, something that, instead, was surprisingly possible for Pepper with Ma Petite.

As a consequence, the two sisters are contrasted in their role of mothers. Rita, the physically normal woman, is perceived as a monstrous mother, unable to fulfill her role as such, and later on refusing her own child. Pepper instead, the physically monstrous woman who is not even allowed to breed, is constantly portrayed and perceived as the one with a natural motherly instinct, able to cover the role better than her sister (Fig. 51).

Later on in the episode, the audience finds out that Rita surprisingly becomes a mother, but her son Lucas is “different than your normal baby. He was deformed, but to us he was our perfect miracle”. She tells these lies to Sister Mary



Eunice while in Briarcliff, to have Pepper committed for Lucas’s death.

Figure 51: Pepper taking care of Lucas. *American Horror Story – Freak Show*, “Orphans”, 2015.

Slowly, through a series of flashbacks, the truth behind Rita’s words is revealed. Up to this point, in fact, she is simply suggested to be a monstrous character, but the flashbacks show that she really is one.

Farrell claims:

“The power of social forces is such that parents normally can be counted on to provide long term care for their dependent children because the emotional closeness of family bonds makes them *want* to do so. Families are therefore particularly effective institutions because they press people into service for their kin by the dual imperatives of love and obligation” (6).

This aspect is completely absent in the Gayhearts, especially in Rita, who had already denied the “imperatives of love and obligation” to her own freakish sister to follow her desire to have a normal and functional family, and then again, as will be clear through the flashbacks, to Lucas.

Families with a physically handicapped child experience a fairly great amount of stress, which can be doubled when related to the public image of the family itself with the presence of a disabled component (Bernardes 99-100). As a consequence, “parents continually need to readjust to the disability of the child overtime” (Bernardes 100). The

Gayhearts, therefore, have to readjust at first to Pepper's presence, and then to Lucas's birth. Their readjustment is a very negative one that, instead of making the family more cohesive, so as to face the difficulty and the complexity of taking care of the two new members, turns the event into a "potentially divisive, destructive force in the family unit" (Asch 306).

Thanks to the flashbacks, we can see Rita spending most of the days in bed getting drunk, even if she claims that she is recovering from giving birth to Lucas. She leaves Pepper to take care of the baby, confident that her sister "might have the mothering instinct". Again, Pepper shows to be more than able to play the role of mother, something that Rita constantly avoids, preferring to stay in bed enjoying her drinks to even holding her own child.

People with disabilities have functional limitations or restrictions that impair their ability to accomplish specific tasks or successfully hold specific positions suggested by his or her role in the family. These functional limitations may, of course, include the possibility of taking care of a child (Altman 106). Surprisingly, despite of her condition, Pepper is able to overcome almost all of these supposed functional limitations, turning into a more efficient mother for Lucas than Rita will ever be. Pepper's success in being a caring mother, following her maternal instincts, highlights even more the contrast with her sister, who will never be a real mother, since, as her husband tells her, "Some women just shouldn't have kids".

It is Rita's husband, Larry, who comes up with the idea to get rid of the "permanent freak show" in their house, killing Lucas and blaming Pepper for it. When he talks about his plan to his wife, he finally makes Rita's monstrosity emerge. By manifesting her unhappiness about her being a mother of a child, even if a deformed one – "He makes me want to squeeze the life out of his little baby body half the time" – she finally starts to show her abominable nature, signified at first by her being an unnatural mother during the 1950s, unable to experience any kind of joy or familiarity with the concept of motherhood, and later on by her

actions. Rita gives birth to her real monstrosity when she is finally able to utter out loud the words: “I never bonded with that baby”.

Right after this realization, there is the scene in which Larry kills Lucas. The camera, focusing on Pepper’s desperate and powerless reactions while locked outside the room where Lucas is being killed, underlines the tragic nature of the moment, amplified by the fact that, despite her intellectual disability, she perfectly understands what is going on.

What happens in the long scene in which the killing takes place and Pepper is dragged away from the Gayhearts’ house can be compared to the scene in which she leaves the orphanage forever. When Elsa takes her away, it is possible to hear a happy and cheerful song in the background, which seems to highlight Pepper’s future happiness. She enters Elsa’s car and leaves the orphanage to join the freak show, the place in which she will be able to have a family.



Figure 52: Pepper dragged away after Lucas’s murder. *American Horror Story – Freak Show*, “Orphans”, 2015.

The same song can be heard again, in a distorted version, during the whole tragic scene of Lucas’s death and Pepper’s commitment to Briarcliff. The happiness and cheerfulness of the song is mutilated by the dramatic events and by Pepper’s unjust destiny. She is seen dragged away in a straightjacket (Fig. 52) and pushed into a car, directed this time to the asylum where she will be locked up. The happiness and optimism of the initial scene is suddenly turned into a monstrous and oppressive sense of pity and sadness for Pepper, after the actions of her family.

Benita Eisler wrote: “I heard sagas of life at home that were Gothic horror stories” (341). This is exactly what the Gayhearts create when their family is turned upside-down by

the presence of freakish characters. Their familial system positively responds to the “dark side of family life” (354) Erens refers to talking about the horror genre.

Moreover, both Rita and Larry destroy what Coontz claims about families: “Mothers were considered the moral guardians of civilization itself. Men had no doubt that they themselves were both the protectors and the representatives of their families” (43). As a consequence of their despicable actions, Rita turns out to be the monstrous mother who has nothing to do with morality or civilization, while Larry is indeed a protector, but of his own interests, turning into the murderer of his own child and the representative of an abhorrent family.

As a family, the Gayhearts are everything Pepper has to be afraid of, since their normality cannot accept the presence of the freak. By distancing her from the freak show, Elsa inadvertently condemns Pepper. “I know all you ever wanted was a family. So, you just remember... no matter how far I am. I will always be your family”: these are the words Elsa tells Pepper before leaving her with Rita. Elsa’s actions are supposed to protect Pepper, who instead turns into the innocent victim of her lawful relatives, though already having her own family, represented by the other freaks.

Pepper falls victim of the “tyranny of the normal” (“Tyranny” 42) Fiedler talks about, being an unacceptable and unwelcome freak for the perceived normal norms of the times. Moreover, in the tenth episode of the second season, *Asylum*, she seems to be aware of that:

“Dr. Arden, you still see me as microcephalic. No one takes a pinhead seriously. When my sister’s husband drowned her baby and sliced his ears off, he told everyone I did it. They tied me up and paraded me in front of the judge. He took one look at the shape of my head, and I was locked up for good. That’s how it works with us freaks. We get blamed for everything” (“The Name Game”).

Despite her experiences with freakish families, which actually fulfilled her needs, in the moment in which Pepper goes back to her lawful family, she turns again into the orphan she

was at the beginning of the episode. The family that is supposed to take care of her is the real monstrosity in the story, unable to repay Pepper's efforts and the request Elsa made on her behalf: "Pepper has suffered great losses. And I fear that she will perish from loneliness and a broken heart if she does not have someone who loves her" ("Orphans").

Ultimately, the apparent normal family, marked by the presence of an unnatural mother, turns into the real danger for the freak, perceived as an element of disturb for a normality that surprisingly turns into the real monstrosity.

Pepper's dramatic experience with an apparently normal family is not the only one in

the show: Penny's story is just as sad. At the beginning of the series, Penny, who has a very normal appearance, lives with her obsessive father Vince, who controls her every movement because "I'm just doing my job" ("Bullseye"). But when Penny falls in love with Paul, who is one of the freaks, Vince decides to act, driven by his pride and narcissism: "If you do something to shame this family, I will do



Figure 53: Penny, played by actress Grace Gummer. *American Horror Story – Freak Show*, "Blood Bath", 2015.

whatever it takes to make sure no one ever knows you belonged to me" ("Test of Strength"). As a consequence, the night Penny decides to leave "the evil that lives in this house" ("Test of Strength") and join Paul, Vince has her face completely tattooed, her head half shaven, and tongue forked (Fig. 53).

Penny's father follows the same path walked by Tywin Lannister in *Game of Thrones*, revolting against his only daughter. Narcissism and wrong ideas of honor bring Vince to

prefer seeing his own daughter leaving forever, turned into a freak, rather than seeing his family shamed by her relationship with Paul.

Monstrosity in the familial system can be also found in Elsa's Cabinet of Curiosities, disguised under the physical normality of a freak: Dell Toledo (Fig. 54).



Figure 54: Dell Toledo, played by actor Michael Chiklis. *American Horror Story – Freak Show*, “Massacres and Matinees”, 2015.

Dell, the Strongman, who has a completely normal appearance, joins the show with his wife Desiree, a three-breasted woman. Once arrived in Jupiter, he finds out that his previous love, Ethel Darling, the Bearded Lady, works there too with their son, Jimmy.

Dell is presented at first as a very negative fatherly figure: after having forced Ethel to give birth to their son in front of a small audience, to earn some money – “It’s a monster! It’s two bits to

hold the monster baby!” (“Edward Mordrake – Part 1”) – he tries to kill Jimmy and then abandons the family.

Being the 1950s a “profamily period” (Coontz 24), the familial institution is of course present also in the freak show, but still preserves a certain amount of negativity. If on the one hand Dell slowly resumes his old fatherly role, on the other he has a great secret that contributes to turning him into a threat for the bigger family of freaks.

Dell Toledo is, in fact, a closeted homosexual that has a secret relationship with a young man. Being the story set in the ‘50s, a time in which homosexuality still met with repression and was seen as something detrimental (Bedell) – “The only thing people in Jupiter hate more than freaks are poofs” (“Pink Cupcakes”) – “the turn toward families was in many cases a more defensive move than a purely affirmative act. Some men and women

entered loveless marriages in order to forestall attacks about real or suspected homosexuality or lesbianism” (Coontz 33).

Therefore, Dell is forced to create disrupted and puppet families to hide his real nature so that he can protect himself from the outside, not just because he works in a freak show, but especially because of his being a homosexual. In so doing he can conform to the heteronormativity of the time.

Nevertheless, his actions create even more disruption in the surrounding families. Firstly, his stagnant relationship with Desiree endangers her desire to become a mother and possibly expand their family. Secondly, once Stanley finds out about Dell’s secret he starts blackmailing him, forcing him to kill one of the freaks of the show. Dell’s choice falls back on Ma Petite, whose death is a misfortune for Pepper’s family, but also for the entire family of performers.

As a consequence of his actions, when the truth is finally discovered, Dell has to be killed, because “he broke our code. [...] He killed a freak!” (“Show Stoppers”). By going against his own kind to answer the demands of the external world, Dell turns into another physically normal monster, endangering every family system too close to him. Ethel tells him: “We wear our shame on the outside. There’s no hiding it. It’s just who we are. Now you, you carry your shame on the inside. You keep it trapped in there. It eats away at you, feeding on you like a living thing till there’s nothing left but the rot” (“Tupperware Party Massacre”).

By trying to conform to the idea of normality and repudiate his real freakishness, Dell conforms to the monstrosity and tyranny of the normal, turning into a threat for the freaks’ family systems.

These examples show that the idea of family is still negatively represented when related to the presence of freaks. Lies, narcissism, violence, repression, and abuse are still

behind the perfect façade of families, of them being apparently unable to cope with freakish presences. The freaks must be expelled in order for the normal order of things to be restored once more inside the family. The real monstrosity, thus, does not belong to the physical monster, but to the moral one hiding in the family institution.

CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to explore the representation of freaks in American culture, with a special focus on the relation between the latter and the (almost exclusively negative) representation of the traditional family household, through the analysis of significant cultural products, including novels, graphic novels and TV series.

Having examined several fictional families featuring freaks, I can claim that they provide evidence of the dysfunctionality and monstrosity hidden behind the traditional concept of family. Freaks, those very monstrous bodies born within the family institution, seem to place the traditional American family under those same spotlight once used by people to gawk at them.

Freaks have contributed to shaping the American culture: they have not been simple entertainment performers but also “bodies”/“corporealities” to be deciphered in order to understand societal fears and anxieties in a determined time and context.

I have tried to read and place those freakish bodies under a new light. By applying recent theories from specific research fields to contemporary works featuring freaks, I have come to the conclusion that their otherness offers itself to cultural analysis. More specifically, freaks seem to have kept their place as powerful cultural signifiers in the United States. At the same time, they have been used to explore issues linked also with more recent research areas, such as family studies, disability studies, or queer studies, all included in this work.

Their ability to show the obsolescence and inadequacies of traditional families turns them into transitional figures. If on the one hand, freaks show the monstrosities behind traditional familial structures, on the other, they pave the way to the possibility to actually create and represent new and more positive ones.

This movement can be traced also through the freakish characters I have taken into account in my work. If, unfortunately, some of them fall victims of traditional familial

structures (Chris and Pepper for example), all the others manage to escape those traps. Miranda, Cal, Keith, and Tyrion all have a real chance to contribute to the creation of new and better families.

After having placed traditional families under the spotlight to ultimately show their negativity, now it is the turn for new familial institutions to be gawked at. Freaks are finally given the possibility to prove their ability to really be “big on family”.

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