



It's all relative: breaking barriers and binaries in Preacher

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Abstract:	<p>For special issue 'Popular Narrative: Beyond the Novel,' Issue 4, Spring 2010.</p> <p>This article demonstrates how the comic book Preacher (Garth Ennis/Steve Dillon) breaks genre barriers and narrative binaries to produce a multi-generic work of serial fiction where norms are unfixed and nothing is absolute. It begins by considering Preacher's use of various genre models (taken from both literary and cinematic sources and including the quest, the road movie, the western, and the romance) and exploring the ways in which this series represents and subverts these in both thematic and aesthetic terms.</p> <p>It proceeds to identify further subversions and discusses Preacher's use of textual oxymorons and visual paradoxes to invert binary categories such as male/female and human/monster. It extends this argument to the macrocosm of the series, making reference to the flexible narrative position of characters and the comic's thematic background.</p> <p>The article concludes by summarising the ways in which Preacher unfixes expected narrative binaries by denying a Manichaeian notion of morality and instead demonstrating this is a subjective concept. It argues that the tension between the visual/textual and the interpretative power allowed to the reader are essential elements in achieving this and concludes that Preacher's subversions of formulaic narrative patterns and reader expectations are reliant upon the comics medium.</p>



It's all relative: breaking barriers and binaries in *Preacher*

This article will demonstrate how the comic book *Preacher* (Garth Ennis/Steve Dillon) breaks genre barriers and narrative binaries to produce a multi-generic work of serial fiction where norms are unfixed and nothing is absolute. It will begin by considering *Preacher*'s use of various genre models (taken from both literary and cinematic sources and including the quest, the road movie, the western, and the romance) and exploring the ways in which this series represents and subverts these. It then discusses *Preacher*'s use of textual oxymorons and visual paradoxes to invert binary categories such as male/female and human/monster. It concludes by summarising the ways in which *Preacher* unfixes expected narrative binaries and instead presents these as relative concepts, and comments on the role of the comics medium in achieving this.

Preacher (1996-2001) is a 66 episode maxi-series that has since been collected into 9 trade paperbacks. Published by DC Vertigo, it is one of the most controversial series to emerge from the 1990s American mainstream comics industry. It tells the story of Jesse Custer, a small-town Texan minister who is slowly losing his faith until he merges with Genesis, a disembodied force (the illicit child of a demon and an angel) that has been kept captive in Heaven for years. Genesis escapes and sets up home in Jesse's consciousness, giving him the "word of God" (Ennis and Dillon, 1996:46) – a voice nobody can disobey – and also the knowledge that God has quit and nobody in Heaven knows where he is. Together with his ex-girlfriend Tulip and his new best friend the vampire Cassidy, Jesse sets out on a bizarre road trip to track down God and make Him take responsibility for His creation. They soon discover the Grail: a military organisation that has protected the lineage of Christ for centuries and intends to manufacture Armageddon on earth and produce the new saviour. Jesse's new power makes him first choice for this role and the trio soon run into conflict, both with Grail leader Herr Starr, and with Jesse's all-too-dysfunctional family.

Incorporating both natural and supernatural figures and events, *Preacher* transgresses its own genre expectations – at once a quest or buddy movie, a western, a love story, a religious satire, and a horror. The result is a multi-generic, X-rated work of black humour and horror that tests the limitations of concepts of genre, gender and the human in various ways. The comic's shock elements and 'lad's mag' humour hides its real agenda of social commentary as it combines and subverts multiple genres; undermining notions of Manichaeian morality and fixed binaries.

As both a genre and structure, the quest can be seen as implicit to our understanding of comics, if we consider the superhero as a twentieth-century myth or "the postindustrial equivalent of folk figures" as identified by DC creator and editor Denny O'Neil (Pearson and Uricchio, 1991:23). It is apparent in comics structure, which is often ongoing and contributory, as long-running series are contributed to by a variety of different creators, recalling the heroic tradition in oral storytelling and its embellishment by different tellers. The quest is also reflected in the content of superhero comics, which is heroic and often symbolic.

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) Joseph Campbell famously identifies the classic structure of the quest as *separation-initiation-return* (1988:30), and this pattern is followed by *Preacher*. Within an initial framing story of the three protagonists

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3 sharing their stories (“Figure I better start at the beginning” (Ennis and Dillon,
4 1996:12)), we join Jesse at the moment of his separation from society in Annville as
5 he drunkenly criticises the town’s inhabitants one night in a local bar. This scene is
6 paralleled with Genesis’s own separation from its ‘home’ as it escapes from captivity
7 in Heaven (“Would have been round about then that Genesis was busting loose” (17)).
8 The next day, Genesis merges with Jesse during his sermon, killing his congregation
9 (the entire town, thanks to his outburst the night before) which literally separates Jesse
10 from society as he is suspected of mass murder and must go on the run. As it
11 continues, Jesse’s quest to find God contains a number of initiations – he loses the
12 love of his life and an eye in the process and rejects the chance to simply quit many
13 times (see for example 1997a:91; 1997b:158-9; 1999b:204). Although he does not
14 physically return triumphant to Annville, as a result of his quest Jesse is released from
15 his family and in this sense his existence becomes equivocated as he gains happiness,
16 emotional growth and Tulip, the love of his life. Of further interest is Campbell’s
17 statement that the components of ‘seeker’ and ‘found’ which make up the quest myth
18 represent “the outside and inside of a single, self-mirrored mystery, which is identical
19 with the mystery of the manifest world” (1988:40). This statement clearly applies in a
20 literal sense to Jesse’s search for God.
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26 Later studies, such as Lawrence and Jewett’s *The Myth of the American Superhero*
27 (2002)¹ offer an alternative construction of the quest as a ‘redemptive’ monomyth (6).
28 In contrast to Campbell’s ‘initiation’ myth, Lawrence and Jewett identify a different
29 process in contemporary versions, saying: ‘The monomythic superhero is
30 distinguished by disguised origins, pure motivations, a redemptive task, and
31 extraordinary powers. He originates outside the community he is called to save, and in
32 those exceptional instances when he resides therein, the superhero plays the role of the
33 idealistic loner’ (47). Again, we can see elements of this structure in *Preacher*’s
34 presentation of Jesse’s story. His origins are not revealed to us until the second trade
35 paperback, he remains positioned outside society throughout the comic, and his quest
36 to find God, along with his extraordinary powers, stems from a moral outrage that can
37 be considered both pure and redemptive. As such, *Preacher* combines two different
38 forms of the quest myth to create a narrative that is simultaneously both literal and
39 metaphorical, and in which redemption is achieved via initiation.
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43 The cinematic genre of the road movie is the obvious modern incarnation of the quest.
44 It can be defined as: An individual, two people or a small group attempt to escape the
45 world they live in, to find freedom and sometimes redemption; in “a physical journey
46 that parallels a spiritual quest.” (Roberts, 1997:53) Julian Stringer identifies two main
47 narrative situations that underlie the road movie: the protagonists take off as a means
48 to escape from pursuers or lifestyle, or to find themselves existentially (through sex,
49 violence, nature, and so forth) (Stringer, 1997:165). It seems obvious that both are
50 present in the concept of Jesse’s quest, as not only he is a wanted man due to the
51 deaths of his congregation, but his mission to find God can also be viewed as an
52 existential one, considering his position as a preacher with a “crisis of faith” (Ennis
53 and Dillon, 1996:14).
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57 The road movie has been defined as having multiple sub-genres so this article will
58 limit its discussion to three of the most prominent character combinations: the ‘buddy’
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¹ A study focusing on the all-American hero (for example as found in westerns) rather than the comic-book superhero.

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3 movie, the threesome, and the 'Bonnie and Clyde'. The buddy movie is probably the
4 most common one we think of today, and has been hailed as an archetype by critics
5 such as Timothy Corrigan (*A Cinema without Walls*, 1991); but in fact the earliest road
6 movies focused on a couple or a community (Cohan and Hark, 1997:9). Jack Kerouac
7 was first to introduce the male pair in his book *On The Road* (1957) and the format
8 had a brief period of movie dominance during the 1970s after films such as *Easy Rider*
9 (1969) kick-started the trend; but by the early 1980s had "virtually disappeared"
10 (Wood, 1986:229). The 'buddy movie' is obviously represented in *Preacher* by the
11 close friendship between Jesse and Cassidy.
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15 However, *Preacher's* overall quest revolves around the trio of Jesse, Cassidy and
16 Tulip, and as such represents the 'threesome' format of the genre. Julian Stringer
17 comments that such stories often focus on how a single female gets passed between
18 two men (1997:172) citing further examples including *Scarecrow* (1973) and *Rain*
19 *Man* (1988). This thematic focus is also represented in *Preacher* as, unlikely though it
20 appears from the outset, Cassidy does develop feelings for Tulip and the pair become a
21 couple for six months (episodes #38 to #51) during which time she believes Jesse to be
22 dead.
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26 The 'Bonnie and Clyde' subgenre (named after the 1967 movie) is a further form of
27 the road movie and also appears in films such as *Gun Crazy* (1950, also released as
28 *Deadly Is the Female*), *Badlands* (1973), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), and *Mad Love*
29 (1995). The format typically relies upon love, money and violence and underpins the
30 *Preacher Special: Tall in the Saddle*. This issue tells the backstory of Jesse and Tulip
31 who, along with Tulip's friend Amy, are notorious car thieves: "She's addicted to
32 goddamn G.T.A. and he'll do *anything* for kicks!" (Ennis and Dillon, 2000:208). It
33 even contains a high-speed car chase in which Jesse drives while a topless Tulip
34 jokingly taunts the law "Wheee-hee-hee-hee! Look at my tits!! You'll never take me,
35 lawmen! No prison walls can keep me! No chains can hold me down!" (205). The
36 genre has been defined as typically featuring "two young people who fall in love,
37 speed away from home in a stolen car, shoot guns, make love, and get caught."
38 (Leong, Sell and Thomas, 1997:72); a definition that (except for the last point)
39 certainly applies to this issue as Jesse and Tulip (described as "young and carefree and
40 stupid and utterly in love" (Ennis and Dillon, 2000: 203)) lose \$1 million in a botched
41 car job. Their Bonnie-and-Clyde past is summarised by Jesse, saying "All the time we
42 were together, an' my abiding memories are Grand Theft Auto an' screwin' like
43 bunnies" (1997a:69-70). However, it also continues in their present, for example as
44 when Tulip comments "Now, I have a fucking *arsenal* out in the truck and I will use it
45 [...] to protect us both. And the good life we have coming." (2001:68)
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51 It is worth noting that all the above subgenres are so well-established that multiple
52 inversions and subversions already exist, for example those which use notions of
53 gender to rewrite established forms. *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965) puts a
54 different spin on the road movie as pillaging rampage; *Thelma and Louise* (1991) can
55 be viewed as a rewriting of either the male buddy movie or the 'Bonnie and Clyde'
56 format; while *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) can be seen as a
57 self-conscious commentary on the sexualised threesome movie. However, *Preacher's*
58 combination of contradictory formats seems to go beyond the traditional
59 experimentation found within the boundaries of the genre. Further, it should be
60 remembered that the form of the road movie is, above all, culturally specific: for

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example, early films depicted whole displaced communities running away from a depression, or towards freedom (Cohan and Hark, 1997:8) and as such link clearly to the concerns of their era. Similarly, the rise of homosexual awareness and tensions in the 1980s might be one reason behind the demise of the buddy movie, as the notion of intimacy-without-sex became increasingly problematic in male pairings. In a similar sense, then, *Preacher*'s literal quest for God can also be interpreted as representing the current cultural climate – a time of widespread agnosticism and religious anxiety.

In its search for personal or existential fulfilment, the road movie also contains clear reference to the American Dream (the belief that success is freely available to all hard-working individuals) and in this sense leads into discussion of the western genre. This article will rely upon three main critics to define this genre: Frederick Jackson Turner, John Cawelti and Frank Gruber, veteran writer and critic of pulp westerns. Although *Preacher*'s western credentials are not really in doubt (set initially in Texas and incorporating cowboys, horse rustling and similar), the difficulties of defining the western allow the comic to also reflect the genre in other, more subtle, ways.

Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 lecture on 'The significance of the frontier in American history' linked the striking characteristics of the American intellect and character – restless energy, practical expediency, exuberance and individualism among them – to the encounter between civilisation/wilderness and east/west that the western represents (Turner, 1893). This thesis is traditionally regarded to have formed the basis of our understanding of the genre and John Cawelti comments that it can frequently be seen in various motifs, such as the combination of characters. For example, the hero's comrades are often directly opposed to his own characteristics and represent the marginalised/other: the WASP cavalry officer has his Irish sergeant, the cowboy has his Indian, Mexican or African American companion (Cawelti, 1999:42). In this sense, Jesse has Cassidy, his Irish vampire best friend – who, as both non-American and non-human, seems doubly 'othered'. This type of tension is also represented by the clash of cultures embodied in Jesse's parentage. Jesse's mother, Christina L'Angelle, is descended from a French puritan family, while his father, John Custer, is an all-American Texan Vietnam soldier. Both their names and heritages are represented as polar opposites throughout the text: Jesse's paternal lineage is described as "Texas white trash" (1997a:27) while the L'Angelles are (male) preachers and (female) breeders: "Family goes *way back*. Blood is *everything*." (41). These two worlds first collide when Christina (on the run with a group of anti-war hippies) meets John (on his way home from Vietnam) and spits in his face, calling him "Babykiller!!" (31) As a clash of cultures rather than a simple meeting, this clearly recalls Turner's definition – and Jesse, as the product of this encounter, displays all of the associated characteristics ("restless energy, practical expediency, exuberance and individualism"), upholding this interpretation of the western.

John Cawelti, in *The Six Gun Mystique Sequel*, also notes the significance of the frontier as a meeting point between civility and savagery (1999:20). However, he takes a different approach to defining the western, noting the ongoing problems of definition within the genre. He comments that the variety and breadth of plot choices possible and lack of structural characteristics result in this genre becoming primarily defined through its symbolic landscape, stating: "the western is a popular genre about the West" (14). Cawelti therefore concludes that certain signals or motifs, such as ten gallon hats or dusters, become genre markers. This definition of the western is the one

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Preacher most obviously adheres to: as Jesse's Texas drawl and Southern code of conduct make him "one hundred percent *cowboy*" (2000:225). He even rides off into the sunset at the end of the series as a whole (2001:214-7) and other traditional motifs are also exploited. Throughout the series Jesse experiences visions of John Wayne (who offers advice and support) and is a clear cultural contemporary marker of the western (see for example 1996:66-7; 1997a:83-6; 1999a:86). A more traditional symbol can be found in the character of the 'Saint of Killers', whose visual depiction includes tropes such as the ten gallon hat and duster. Interestingly, within western symbolism, the duster is traditionally a sign of the 'bad guy', signifying mystery and evil (Gaines and Herzog note that in the contemporary western a hero will not wear one (1998:176)) – and this character is indeed used to explore this notion in *Preacher*.

Garth Ennis has described his creation of the Saint as owing much to Clint Eastwood "specifically in his later movies, the long coat, the wide brimmed hat, the old Colt revolvers, but Steve preferred Lee Marvin and that's why you've got this character who I always think moves, speaks and has all the mannerisms of Eastwood but has that kind of handsome ugliness that Lee Marvin had." (Salisbury, 1999:91) As such, both these symbols also operate as reflective commentary on the western, by being conscious appropriations of its underlying mechanisms (as they are based not on character roles but on the actors who have played them). This tendency to acknowledge sources and provide implicit commentary on them runs throughout *Preacher* and is used to reflect on audience expectations and genre anxiety. For example, in *Tall in the Saddle*, Tulip and Amy mock Jesse's claim that stealing horses "just ain't right" with affected Southern accents: "Why Miss Toolip, ah *do* declare! Do y'all think this might be some *Suthan thang*...?" (Ennis and Dillon, 2000: 226) Jesse also acknowledges the connotations of his background with reference to the movie *Deliverance*, joking: "You don't start raping canoeists 'cause you had grits for breakfast." (1999a:77)

Preacher thereby makes conscious use of many of the symbols and signals of the western. However, due its serialised nature and the multiple story arcs allowed by trade paperback publication, it also invokes multiple plots. As mentioned, John Cawelti believes that the genre's geographical definition is due to the vast range of plots possible, stating that the only requirement is some basic challenge to the hero leading to a confrontation with his antagonist (1976:193). However, Frank Gruber, veteran writer of over sixty pulp novels (including westerns and crime thrillers – many of which were adapted into movies) offers the notion of seven basic plots that make up the western genre, as follows:

1. The Union Pacific/Pony Express story
 2. The homesteaders or ranchers theme
 3. The cattle empire story (epic version of 2)
 4. The revenge story
 5. Cavalry and Indians or Custer's last stand
 6. The outlaw story
 7. The Marshall story
- (Cawelti, 1999:19)

It is no surprise to note that all seven are clearly present in *Preacher*. The first (Union Pacific/Pony Express) is perhaps not the most convincing starting example, as this

generally refers to a specific historical event (such as the construction of a railroad or telegraph line, or the adventures of a wagon train) and is so hard to place in Preacher. That said, this is essentially a western structured by a road narrative (like *Stagecoach* or *The Searchers*) and in this sense contains features similar to those discussed earlier in the context of the road movie. Therefore perhaps it could be said that the narrative of *Preacher* as a whole falls into this category.

Gruber's second and third categories are represented clearly by the *Preacher Special: Tall in the Saddle*; the flashback episode mentioned previously in which young car thieves Jesse and Tulip become involved in preventing a cattle-rustling operation. His fourth category of revenge story finds a home in the *Preacher Special: The Saint of Killers* #1-4, which tells of the origin of this character using a plot that in many respects echoes the 1992 movie *Unforgiven*. It also appears in the story arcs that make up the trade paperbacks *Preacher: Until the End of the World* and *Preacher: Dixie Fried* (the first detailing Jesse's revenge on his family, and the second a story of Cassidy's past catching up with him in New Orleans).

Custer's last stand could be an alternative title for the concluding trade paperback of the series, *Preacher: Alamo*, which not only takes place at this location but is clearly conveyed as a final fight between good and evil. Gruber's outlaw story is a little harder to place but, again, might be said to conceptually fit the content of the series as a whole, since Jesse and his companions are not only on the run from the Grail and various military organisations, but also the police forces. Finally, the Marshall story is represented by the story arc of the trade paperback *Preacher: Salvation*, in which Jesse becomes the Sheriff of the eponymous town and cleans up the trouble caused by the nearby factory workers and owners – and also roots out an ex-Nazi war criminal for good measure.

The similarities between the western and the road movie are discussed by Shari Roberts who draws comparisons between the settings of the frontier and the road and discusses both genres' reliance on Americanism, masculinity and heroism (1997). In a similar vein, Cawelti and other critics draw attention to the similarities between the western and the quest, noting "the analogy between the heroic cowboy and the chivalrous knight" (1976:37). Cawelti writes elsewhere that the western is an example of Northrop Frye's mythos of romance (one of Frye's four central literary story forms alongside comedy, tragedy and irony). He defines adventure as the essential element of plot in romance, and Cawelti notes that the major adventure that gives form to the romance is the quest (1999:47).

As such, we seem to have come full circle in linking the quest, road movie and western under Frye's archetype of romance. Subsequent critics have approached the romance as a literary quality (Beer, 1970:66) or structural feature of narrative, and Beer also notes its tendency to appear in "sub-literature"² and to re-present well-known stories (1-2). She characterises the romance as a world of exaggeration and intensification, listing:

a cluster of properties: the themes of love and adventure, a certain withdrawal from their own societies on the part of both reader and

² A loaded term, but one I shall take in this instance to refer to popular texts.

romance hero, profuse sensuous detail, simplified characters (often with a suggestion of allegorical significance), a serene intermingling of the unexpected and the everyday, a complex and prolonged succession of incidents usually without a single climax, a happy ending, amplitude of proportions, a strongly enforced code of conduct to which all the characters must comply. (10)

DC editor Karen Berger also characterises *Preacher* as a romance, commenting on how readers responded to the “relationship stuff” (Round 2008) and throughout *Preacher* the relationship between Jesse and Tulip dominates the story. At the very end of the series, despite winning the climactic battle, Jesse muses “If I don’t go after her... Then all this has been for nothin’. An nothin’ good comes out of it, just blood an’ loss an’ horror.” (2001:204) Jesse’s often-repeated vow to love her “until the end of the world” is reinforced by visual extremes: as artist Steve Dillon draws them in passionate embraces in front of burning buildings (1997a:125) and in a “fairytale” New York snowstorm (2000:103). Their love story is presented as miraculous: both characters die and are returned to life during the course of the series. As Tulip’s friend Amy summarises:

Tulip and Jesse were born to love.
 You see those two together and you know why the stars are shining. You know what time it is.
 When they first met it was all full throttle; it was hearts and guns and car chases and sweaty sex whenever they felt like it, and lots of staring into each other’s eyes at sundown and *I’ll do anything for you...*
 And then they got split up, and that was a long, dark, cold, bad time.
 And then... presumably because the world *is* a good place and it *is* worth fighting for after all...
 They found each other again.
 (2000:89)

The excess apparent here is another characteristic of romance that is also discussed by Diane Elam in *Romancing the Postmodern* (1992). Elam links romance with postmodernism: considering romance both as a postmodern genre and as postmodernism itself (12). The key factors are “a common excess – the inability to stay within historical and aesthetic boundaries” (12). Nothing is subordinated within their parameters and “Boundaries, whether temporal or generic, fail to maintain control” (12). As such, *Preacher*’s sprawling and inclusive narrative uses the excess characteristic of romance to take in multiple genres: destabilising the boundaries that exist between them.

This type of subversion continues in the comic’s characterisation, which attacks the boundaries between binary oppositions such as male/female and human/monster.³ Definitions of morality shift and change throughout: heroes become villains and vice versa. For example, the character of Tulip O’Hare is used to contradict our expectations and instead provide a social commentary on the constructed nature of gender boundaries. Although she appears the standard blonde, big-breasted comics

³ For further discussion of *Preacher* in the context of gender identity and queer theory, please see the author’s article ‘Mutilation and Monsters: transcending the human in *Preacher*’ (Round, 2009) from which the following discussion is summarised.

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3 heroine (1997a:186), Tulip's expressed behaviour is distinctly masculine – she is
4 introduced as an amateur assassin (1996:23) and it transpires she was raised as a son
5 by her father, Jake O'Hare. Jake's application of his chauvinistic ideals to his
6 (initially unwanted) daughter mocks the arbitrary nature of gender rules ("Us fellas
7 have to be nice to you ladies [...] It might be to make up for ladies generally havin'
8 less fun." (2000:30) In this way *Preacher* draws attention to and critiques gender
9 boundaries, in ways that make ideal use of comics medium. Tulip's attempts to make
10 friends, for example, are rejected in identical terms by groups of male and female
11 classmates in panels whose composition and reasoning is the same (28).
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15 A similar process is apparent in *Preacher*'s treatment of the barriers between the
16 human and the monstrous, for example in the characters of Jesse's Gran'ma and the
17 vampire Cassidy. Responsible for the murder of Jesse's parents and for recurrent
18 sadistic punishments throughout his childhood, Gran'ma is inhumane rather than
19 human. However, artist Steve Dillon emphasises her humanity and mortality by
20 foregrounding her gender, age and frailty. Gran'ma is almost completely bald and
21 wheelchair-bound and her strappy nightgown, polished nails and red rose corsage
22 only accentuate the ugliness of her condition (1997a:25). This contrasts with
23 traditional witches whose gender is often destabilised in order to undermine their
24 humanity: for example by the addition of warts or the unnatural exaggeration of some
25 features. Despite the undermining of her femininity through baldness, Gran'ma's
26 overall depiction uses her gender to emphasise her mortality. However, she remains a
27 woman far removed from society's notions of femininity and in this sense *Preacher*
28 again tests the limitations of gender identity.
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33 Joseph Campbell comments that motifs such as the "long fingers and nose of the
34 witch" create the "phallic mother" (1976:73) and Gran'ma is all the more terrifying
35 for being a subversion of the feminine and maternal, rather than sexless or masculine.
36 Through systematic child abuse, she becomes a perversion of the maternal and
37 familial similar to that discussed by Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous Feminine*
38 (1993). Her named identity (Gran'ma) calls attention to these aspects of her character,
39 but our expectations are then desecrated as her maternal status is warped both
40 physically ("[...] you ain't gonna believe this, but the old bitch had my mum when she
41 was *sixty*." (1997a:40)), and behaviourally ("Whatever it takes to kill your own kid --
42 to cold-bloodedly *decide*, the girl's no use any more [...] Gran'ma has it" (1997a:51-
43 2)). In Gran'ma the frail and feminine is simultaneously shown to be powerful and
44 monstrous: subverting these oppositions.
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48 The borders between human and inhuman are also transgressed and inverted in the
49 character of the vampire Cassidy. Whereas early vampires were bestial figures (Senf,
50 1988) the twentieth-century vampire is sexual, decadent and humanised.
51 Contemporary films such as *The Lost Boys* (1987) or *Near Dark* (1987) and books
52 such as Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* (1976-2003) depict their vampires as
53 transgressive, decadent, glamorous creatures. *Preacher* invites comparison with these,
54 for example by use of the caption "Next: Interview with the *Bastard*" (1996:74) when
55 we first discover that Cassidy is one of the undead. However, in contrast to his
56 contemporaries, Cassidy is perhaps best seen as a figure of human excess, in contrast
57 to the supernatural otherness more usual to vampires. His sexual encounters are
58 described as drunken one-night stands rather than lust-crazed feedings and he
59 generally only feeds during bar fights.
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5 As in the case of Gran'ma, appearance and behaviour contradict each other and
6 Cassidy is one of the most human characters in *Preacher*: weak, fallible and prone to
7 mistakes. His actions are discussed and defined in human terms, for example as
8 regards violent relationships in his past (2001:137) and in this way it becomes
9 impossible for us to view him outside human moral parameters. This is despite
10 irrefutable evidence to the contrary (i.e. his vampirism) and statements that explicitly
11 align him with the inhuman (“[...] yeh’re one of the monsters, yeh’re doomed, and
12 yeh’re fucked” (138)). On the one occasion Cassidy is drawn as truly monstrous (with
13 wasted grey skin and chewing on a dead rat) (2000:164), it transpires that this has in
14 fact arisen from heroin addiction: a particularly human cause. It should also be noted
15 that he speaks as usual in this scene: and his dialect emphasises his human nature over
16 his animal appearance. Conversely, *Preacher's* only true monster proves its most
17 human character, and this is reinforced on the literal level as Cassidy is restored to
18 humanity at the end of the series.
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22 These tensions between appearance and personality are used to break down and
23 critique assumed oppositions. Such a process is also apparent in the character of Grail
24 Leader Herr Starr, an archetypal soldier whose only concern is personal advancement
25 and the implementation of order. However, by the end of the series Starr has been
26 anally raped, loses an ear in a gunfight, has his head cut to resemble a penis, has a leg
27 removed and eaten by cannibals, and has his genitals eaten by a Rottweiler (see
28 2007a:173, 212; 1997b:165; 1999a:187; 2000:193). As one of the Grail says to him
29 “So you have become a monster in order to save the world” (1999a:54), but it seems
30 that as his appearance becomes less human, Starr's character becomes more so.
31 Although Starr conforms to the *visual* stereotype of the monstrous – as he
32 acknowledges – his resigned tone and new self-knowledge go against this as he
33 reveals that he became a monster long before his mutilation: “So I’m the villain. I’m
34 the monster. And all I want is my revenge on Jesse Custer.” (2001:162) His
35 disfigurement leads to the complete abandonment of his mission of global religious
36 genocide in favour of a personal revenge that seems at least partially deserved. Again,
37 the definitions of human and monstrous are questioned as Starr's monstrous
38 appearance is coupled with a newfound humanity.
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43 Just as characters are unfixed and can be contradictory or even change entirely,
44 perspective is similarly altered, for example as regards notions of Manichaeic
45 morality or good versus evil. Jody and TC, retainers to Jesse’s Gran'ma, star in the
46 *Preacher Special: The Good Old Boys*, in which they are the heroes of the piece in a
47 battle against foreign terrorists. This inverts underlying narrative binaries as these
48 characters are proven villains in the context of the series-as-a-whole, and directly
49 responsible for multiple deaths including Jesse’s parents, childhood best friend and
50 pet, as well as Tulip. Their repositioning as “[...] just a couple good ol’ boys”
51 (1998a:196) changes our perspective and a similar process is apparent in other
52 characters. For example, the murderous Saint of Killers is revealed to have been
53 manipulated into his calling (1998b:189-191) and it may not be too much to say that
54 the linguistic oxymoron of his name further unfixes what we would perceive as binary
55 opposites (by combining ‘saint’ and ‘killer’). Even Ennis’s angels engage in drinking,
56 swearing, drug abuse and sex (2001:13). In this way the series unfixes narrative
57 binaries such as good versus evil by denying notions of Manichaeic morality and
58 instead demonstrating that these are relative concepts.
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5 The obliteration of genre boundaries and the inversion of thematic and cultural
6 binaries seems particularly appropriate for a series based around a notion of illicit love
7 (the affair between a demon and angel that created Genesis). However, *Preacher's*
8 subversions of formulaic narrative patterns and reader expectations are only made
9 possible by the comics medium. The combination of genres that inform *Preacher's*
10 narrative are reliant on both visual markers and textual clues, and the serial structure of
11 the comic allows for its inclusive treatment of these. The creators' critique of gender
12 and monstrosity exploits the tension between the visual and the verbal that is inherent
13 to comics narratology. Finally, the treatment of characters such as Jody, TC and
14 Cassidy, whose likeable traits and heroic or amusing actions are presented alongside
15 dishonest and violent behaviour: drawing attention to the subjectivity of narrative
16 perspective. Again, this experience seems to be enhanced by the comics medium,
17 where the reader must be not only interpret panel contents, but also fill in the events
18 between panels, in the gutter. Our culpability in the narrative's events is therefore
19 inherent to the reading experience, and perhaps this is what ultimately enables
20 *Preacher's* narrative to so consistently and effectively transgress boundaries, invert
21 binaries and subvert our expectations.
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