Arin Vecchio

Castagnozzi

Writing & Rhetoric

19 October 2023

Infection in Fiction: The Creation of an Environment for Suffering

Fiction is a prime gateway to explore some of our primordial feelings, with fear being an emotion to tap into to feel alive. Disease, as portrayed in alien-invasion media, creates the perfect environment where typical order gets usurped, which causes a dominant group to spiral out of control and become thoughtlessly violent. The common understanding of mass infections is often inaccurate, and by analyzing infection in media as a non-malevolent force. Combatting these assumptions by audiences requires giving proper attention to these stories--such as the Radiance in *Hollow Knight* through analysis in "The Ones Who Walk Away from Hallownest: *Hollow Knight*'s Radical Response to the Omelas Dilemma" and the Shimmer in "Revising Nonhuman Ethics in Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation.*" These plagues do more to reflect the faults of society and better illustrate a dominant group's fight to last eternal--a far more accurate reading than the simple us-versus-them alien-invasion narratives these complex stories receive.

Annihilation by Jeff Vandermeer follows the twelfth expedition into the mysterious Area-X, an area consumed by an alien, tumor-like growth called the Shimmer. These teams of scientists are on a mission to understand its origins, and as the group learns more, they begin to unravel completely. We follow the Biologist as she documents her time there, observing the alien flora and fauna and trying to understand the logic behind the Shimmer. The movie adaptation's

design team makes sure its monsters are designed not as an antagonist, as the ecological nature of the Shimmer cannot be good nor evil. Viewers assign “evil” to an animal merely trying to survive, and this emaciated creature is only behaving in a way that any predator would when face-to-face with its next meal. The bear, which is an amalgamation of the animals it has killed, including the skull of one of the expedition members, is designed and puppeteered in a way that contrasts the typical norms of this media; the bear is frightening by appearance but carries itself with a contrasting lethargy: “The behavior of the monster has something odd about it because it's primarily in a state of sort of despair and pain rather than anger.” (“The Scariest Movie Monster”). Most instinctually put the “angry” label on the bear for an emotional degree of separation, keeping the aliens and terrestrial animals as separate as possible, not allowing non-terrestrial, non-human lives to bestow empathy we freely give to our species. The lack of empathy and compassion we give to things we may not understand is where suffering begins--where every expedition member dies without attempting to understand the non-human. The Biologist thrives under the Shimmer’s conditions when she changes her perspective. The Shimmer behaves against natural law, both beautiful and horrific in its defiance. The Shimmer does an excellent job at defying all facts defined by humanity's scientific efforts; expeditions involve psychologists, anthropologists, linguists, biologists, and other people of science to try and quantify the unquantifiable. When this plan fails, and they can not rationalize the Shimmer’s behavior, violence breaks amongst the expedition. The Shimmer’s alien nature creates the perfect conditions for the expedition's members to lash out and kill each other despite training for months to accustom themselves to the Shimmer’s Lovecraftian nature. Throughout many iterations of the story, *Annihilation* presents the viewer with evidence that the Shimmer is an ecosystem first and an infection second. Our biases guide us to misjudge situations; anyone who

enters Area X learns this lesson, and we are not as invincible as we lead ourselves to believe. The Shimmer is cosmically horrific because it challenges the idea that our existence as the dominant species on Earth is infinite: "*Annihilation's* use of horror tropes implicitly acknowledges human anxiety about value systems that accord human and nonhuman lives the same value." (Prendergast 337). Understanding and empathizing with non-humans' experiences forces an acknowledgment of the exploitative relationship we uphold to maintain our sense of exceptionalism. This anxiety about our fragility--that we are just as vulnerable as everything we exploit for our gain, one mismanaged pandemic could spell downfall for humanity--is where the alien-invasion genre finds its footing. Most of the twelfth expedition responds to the cosmic horrors of the Shimmer by lashing out, whether against the amalgamated creatures within Area X or each other. The Shimmer creates conditions where violence becomes second nature. When people lose their sense of superiority and can only cope with their obsolescence by responding through violence, it's clear how our human-centric perspectives lead us to biases that lead us astray from societal issues exacerbated by a pandemic.

Hollow Knight is a platformer-Metroidvania that follows an unnamed protagonist unraveling the mysteries of Hallownest, a dying kingdom inhabited by anthropomorphic bugs devastated by the Radiance. One of the protagonist's siblings, the titular Hollow Knight, is forced to contain the infection inside their body. The Temple of the Black Egg holds the Hollow Knight, with additional seals put in place by the Dreamers. The protagonist learns that the Hollow Knight is impure and unfit for its purpose, and it's their job to kill the Dreamers, break the seals, and defeat the infection. A corpse we find, the late Pale King, was an ancient god responsible for creating the Vessels, his children born with no free will, unthinking husks meant to be containers for the Radiance in a horrific display of cruelty. The drastic measures the Pale

King took to secure his reign illustrate that a dominant group's desire for control can turn to violence with the flip of a switch by something as unbiased as an infection. The infection is an ancient god of dreams forsaken by the Pale King. Her plage was an act of revenge on her followers after they abandoned her. Many bugs responded to the infection by taking an "every-bug-for-themselves" approach, especially the Pale King, who deserted after realizing he could not sweep the Radiance under the rug. One of the Pale King's many children was selected and sealed away in hopes of permanently containing the Radiance inside itself. The conditions in the egg are isolating and border on torture, especially considering the Hollow Knight is not as hollow as initially suggested; they are capable of free thought and are thus capable of suffering from the isolation brought about by the Pale King's plan. They have been chained up and left alone with the Radiance inside them under the assumption that they were no more alive than a clay pot, but this is not the case. The Pale King, trying to immortalize his status as a higher being, forced one of his many children to contain the ancient god so he could remain uncontested: "...a child of the Pale King has been locked within the Temple of the Egg, trapped in an endless torment as it contains an infection called the Radiance. Hallownest needs its sacrifice to survive." (Grunberg). The Hollow Knight's condition is referred to with adjectives like "trapped" and describing their sacrifice as "endless torment" which supports their lack of autonomy in being chosen because of their perceived lack of sentience. His choice to use a vessel he knew was not fit to hold the Radiance shows his willingness to sacrifice anyone to remain king. When discussing the Pale King, it's integral to discuss the Vessels and their birthplace, being far below Hallownest behind a seal only the recognized King can break. Having the Birthplace and the Abyss far away from most bugs allowed the Pale King to cover up his crimes. A statue in the city center depicts the Hollow Knight surrounded by the three Dreamers.

Everyone recalls the Hollow Knight's existence, but its purpose remains shrouded. A description that further elaborates on the statue reads: "...few seem to remember this mysterious knight, and none can recall what sort of "sacrifice" it may have made" (Novak, Fry 68). It is an important distinction to make, knowing now that common bugs are not aware of the Hollow Knight and the Dreamers' ultimate sacrifice makes the Pale King's secrecy about the entire project all the more insidious.

There are four endings to *Hollow Knight*: The Hollow Knight, where the player vessel kills the original Hollow Knight and takes their place; Sealed Siblings, kill the Hollow Knight with Hornet by your side, who becomes a dreamer and seals the egg from the inside; Dream No More, enter the Hollow Knight's mind and kill the Radiance; and Embrace the Void, kill the Radiance, destroy the home of all gods. Each ending varies slightly, but they all share one thing in common: somebody has to die for the Pale King's world to remain dominant. There are five endings to *Hollow Knight*: All endings of *Hollow Knight* involve another character's sacrifice; someone has to die for Hallownest to continue as is (Hollow Knight). The infection wreaks havoc on the few survivors left, all doomed to become infected and assimilate into the Radiance, and her destruction leaves the entire kingdom in shambles and barely able to stand on its own. While it's important to acknowledge the havoc caused by the Radiance, it's more important to understand that the infection only progressed this far because of the Pale King's choices; his selfish desire to be the main god of Hallownest led to the Radiance's infection. His rigid caste allowed for the Hollow Knight, their siblings, and thousands of other bugs to die in hopes of keeping that dream alive. The Pale King chose to sacrifice everything to remain on top until his final bitter breath at the bottom of the world, and our vessel returns to make the best of the destruction left behind in the Pale King's wake. Many bugs suffered under the rigid caste system

the Pale King put in place, and his crumbling society brought liberation to many species. Her plague targeted the weak-of-mind aristocrats who thrived under the Pale King's rule. Others--such as the mantis tribe and the Nailmasters, who valued selflessness and fairness--flourished after the Pale King's passing. In a way, our killing of the Radiance allows for a total reset of society, allowing bugs to right the wrongs of the past.

Humans separate themselves from the rest of life on Earth--seen as an exception to the rule and rightfully separated from other animals as much as possible. We exist within the same set of laws as animals, but our ability to define reality in our terms clouds our judgment. The horror media we create reflects some of our oldest and most carnal fears, the inevitable obsoleteness of humanity being a well-explored avenue in the genre. Infections do more to emphasize society's faults, which get overlooked in analysis; the suffering is because we hold on to our sense of exceptionalism and struggle to let that go. Exploring these stories, through "Revising Nonhuman Ethics in Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*." and "The Ones Who Walk Away from Hallownest: *Hollow Knight*'s Radical Response to the Omelas Dilemma." brings forth a more complex reading of the infection-horror genre, which many simply reduce down and overlook. Diseases are unique and provide the perfect avenue for exploring the inevitability of human destruction. They force us to acknowledge our relationship with other organisms, and many draw the false conclusion that the solution is to continue viewing humans as the exception. These one-dimensional analyses draw inaccurate conclusions, and while the infection becomes the sole antagonist, viewers neglect the systemic issues these stories discuss. *Annihilation* aims to discuss our abusive relationship with nature. Media analysis only discusses the fear the Shimmer creates rather than the growth we can experience if we empathize with the world. *Hollow Knight*'s player base often ignores the segregated castes and horrific cruelty pushed upon

the Vessels, among other low-class bugs. Human-centric perspectives lead viewers to bias, ending with these stories falling flat into the alien-invasion genre where complex interpretations go to die.

Works Cited:

Grunberg, Alex. “The Ones Who Walk Away from Hallownest: *Hollow Knight*'s Radical Response to the Omelas Dilemma”, March 28, 2023. Sage Journals, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/15554120231166769.

Hollow Knight. Version 1.5.78.11833 for Windows PC, Team Cherry, 2017.

Novak, Ryan, and Kari Fry. *Hollow Knight: Wanderer's Journal - A Journey Through the Heart of Hallownest.* Fangamer, 2019

Prendergast, Finola Anne. "Revising Nonhuman Ethics in Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*.", Contemporary Literature, vol. 58, no. 3, 2017, pp. 333–360. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26529563.

Throughline. "The Scariest Movie Monster." Youtube, March 11, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVkMVGL4WJg&t=143s&ab_channel=throughline.