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# Traveling through Midian: Clive Barker and the renewal of horror literature

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**Abstract**

This essay discusses the construction of the representation of the monster in Clive Barker's work *Cabal*. This analysis is based on a comparison of aspects present in the work with common elements of classic horror narratives. To this end, texts by specialized authors dealing with horror narratives are presented and discussed in the bibliography. The aim is to demonstrate the originality of some subversive elements present in Barker's narrative and how this impacts the representation of the monster.

*Keywords:* Clive Barker; Horror; Monster.

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## 1. Introduction

In 1988, British writer Clive Barker brought to life a mythology of creatures he called the Nightbreed. It was a group of monstrous figures of various kinds who had taken refuge in a place far from human society for centuries, called Midian. This distance was due to the need to protect themselves from the persecution they suffered at the hands of humans. In the story narrated by Barker, these creatures are discovered, persecuted, and have their peace disturbed precisely by the actions of humans.

In the book *Nightbreed*, as in other narratives, Barker shuffles the simplistic duality between Good and Evil, questioning who the fearsome monsters really are: the fantastic creatures that live underground so as not to be discovered and slaughtered, or humanity that fears them and therefore wants to destroy them. Although it is a horror story, a classic among recent productions, which even has a film adaptation by Barker himself, the story of Nightbreed has an evident political background and shows important elements of renewal in the horror genre. The novel shows how prejudice against differences works and how fear of the unknown can mobilize a feeling of unbridled collective violence.

In the plot narrated by Barker, Aaron Boone suffers from nightmares involving a place called Midian, a community inhabited by monsters. With the support of his girlfriend, Lori Winston, Boone seeks the help of psychotherapist Dr. Phillip Decker. The doctor is, in reality, a *serial killer* responsible for the murder of families and tries to blame Boone for his crimes. After an accident caused by the use of drugs prescribed by Decker, Boone meets another patient, Narcise, who talks about Midian and, after pointing out its location, rips the skin off his own face. The confusion created by Narcise allows Boone to escape. However, upon arriving in Midian, Boone discovers that he did not commit the crimes attributed to him by Decker, but that if he was not a monster, he could be killed and devoured by the Nightbreed. Boone manages to escape, but is surprised by police officers, led by Decker, and is shot dead. However, he comes back to life shortly after, in the morgue, due to the wound caused by one of the members of the Nightbreed. After Boone joins the Nightbreed, Decker leads a violent attack to pursue him and destroy Midian.

Although Clive Barker is a creator with many different facets, having worked in theater and comic books, it is through cinema and literature that his name resonates most often. His worldwide fame is mainly due to the success of the classic horror film *Hellraiser* (1987), which he directed and adapted from a short story of his own. This experience of directing his own work for the cinema was repeated a few years later in the film *Nightbreed* (1990), adapted by Barker from *Nightbreed*. In this work, Barker also focuses on a set of fantastic creatures, as in some of the short stories in *the Books of Blood* volumes or even in *Hellraiser*. Barker said, in relation to the film adaptation of his book: “I want to explore the theme of monstrosity, to create a mythology that goes beyond anything we have seen in this type of film” (Timpone, 1998, p. 157).

Barker's works stand out for their great creativity in the construction of monstrous figures. Vugman (2018, p. 22) points out that "the monster has the function of delimiting the boundaries that separate the natural from the unnatural, the human from the non-human, the civilized from the uncivilized, good from evil, right from wrong. Because it is always the Other, the monster refers to our identity and otherness and guides our desire to belong." It is worth remembering that, "in the process of consolidating a collective identity, each community creates its monster and its story," trying to "define values, behaviors, and even an aesthetic for each person to recognize themselves and be recognized as a member of that group" ( Vugman, 2018, p. 22-3). In this sense,

> [...] when a community creates a monster story, it is trying to define "human" according to its worldview, beliefs, and values, offering a reference so that each individual can see their neighbor as a fellow human being. As long as this monster is capable of expressing the anxieties generated by the contradictions and inaccuracies inherent in the definition of human, it will continue to function as a powerful metaphor. When it ceases to fulfill this function, the stories of this monster will be forgotten, or will need to be adapted ( Vugman, 2018, p. 24).

Barker subverts this dichotomy between monster and humanity, attributing the monstrous aspect to something much more complex than physical nature. Human beings, when they express their fear of the Other, can be considered monstrous. In this essay, we will seek to show these elements, first by providing a brief overview of horror narratives in literature. Second, we will analyze some elements of Barker's work, especially his representation of the monster. Finally, we will discuss the originality of some elements of Barker's narrative.

## 2. Elements for a history of horror literature

Fear has been a recurring theme throughout the history of literature, being used in the construction of a wide variety of narratives. Horror literature is fundamentally based on the construction of fear, or rather, on the narrative of events that provoke fear in the reader. Fear, "inherent in our nature, is an essential defense, a guarantee against danger, an indispensable reflex that allows the organism to temporarily escape death" (Delumeau, 1993, p. 19). In the construction of narratives, fear is "a shock emotion, often preceded by surprise, caused by the awareness of a present and urgent danger that we believe threatens our survival" (Delumeau, 1993, p. 23). In this sense, it can be said that “fear is our deepest and most intense emotion, and also the one most conducive to the creation of illusions that defy Nature” (Lovecraft, 2009, p. 151). In these works,

> [...] horror and the unknown, or the strange, always maintain a very close relationship, so that it is difficult to paint a convincing picture of the breakdown of natural laws or cosmic strangeness or singularity without highlighting the emotion of fear (Lovecraft, 2009, p. 151).

Understanding horror in a broad sense, its precursors can be identified at different moments in history, such as in Greek epics and tragedies, as well as in Dante's medieval work *The Divine Comedy*, considered "a pioneer in the classical capture of the macabre atmosphere" (Lovecraft, 2008, p. 23). In William Shakespeare's work, fear and the supernatural are elements that appear in different narratives, with the witches in *Macbeth* and the appearance of Hamlet's father's ghost possibly being the most emblematic. In this sense, fairy tales, which proliferated in the 17th and 18th centuries, are also related to the production of horror, in that they "featured bizarre beings representing evil that were confronted by the hero before he ultimately prevailed" in plots involving "magic, metamorphoses, enchantments, or talking animals" (Melo, 2011, p. 22).

Fear and the supernatural ceased to be merely occasional narrative elements and became the focus of works only at the end of the 18th century, through works associated with *the Gothic*. These works "represented a return to the feudal past, caused by disillusionment with rationalist ideals and individual awareness of the cultural dilemmas that arose in England from the latter half of the 18th century" (Sá, 2010, p. 35). From this perspective, the Gothic work usually cited as the precursor of modern horror is Horace Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). This work presents aesthetic elements that would be used in later works:

> This new dramatic paraphernalia consisted, first and foremost, of the Gothic castle with its astonishing antiquity, vast distances and ramifications, deserted and ruined wings, damp corridors, hidden unhealthy catacombs, and a galaxy of ghosts and terrifying legends as the nucleus of suspense and demonic dread (Lovecraft, 2008, p. 28).

These works also outline the characteristics of some of the main characters, among which we can highlight, among others,

> [...] the tyrannical and perverse nobleman as the villain; the saintly, much-persecuted, and generally insipid heroine who suffers the greatest terrors and serves as the reader's point of view and focus of sympathy; the valiant and unblemished hero, always well-born but often in humble attire (Lovecraft, 2008, p. 28).

The Gothic novel spread rapidly, highlighting names such as Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Gregory Lewis. Amidst great public success, "the furor unleashed by Gothic fiction led to enormous production, mostly aimed at sales and with little concern for literary innovation" (Sá, 2010, p. 43-4). Later, these productions, incorporating more complex elements, such as the influence of scientific development or the presence of supernatural monsters, soon gave rise to some of their best-known classics.

In 1818, Mary Shelley published the novel *Frankenstein*, a work that would exert enormous influence not only on horror literature but also on science fiction. The following year, John Polidori published the novel *The Vampire*, considered a "watershed in vampire literature" in that it "established important elements that were used or modified in subsequent artistic creations," such as the fact that the vampire does not attack "simply for blood, because there is an erotic element between him and his victim, and the erotic or libertine elements are more prominent in the narrative than the need for blood" (Silva, 2012, p. 26).

In the United States, it did not take long for names influenced by European Gothic to emerge, among which Edgar Allan Poe stands out. The American poet and short story writer worked on a set of themes that would become common in later horror literature, such as madness, and defined many of the aesthetic characteristics of horror literature, such as suspense. In his work, the poet “appropriated contributions from the Western literary tradition and the best of his own era, making his work an epic about the degradation of man, despair, alienation, and a complete lack of prospects” (Silva, 2011, p. 151).

Romanticism in European literature gradually gave way to realism and, later, to naturalism. As a result, even though some of the major works of the period did not make use of the supernatural to a certain extent, fear was not left out of literature. Associated especially with naturalism, some works were produced that brought to the fore the cruelty manifested by human beings, with man himself as a manifestation of the monster. One of the most memorable works of this period is *The Human Beast* (1890) by Émile Zola.

At the end of the 19th century, some of the greatest European classics of horror literature were published. In 1872, Irish writer Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu brought to life Carmilla, a lesbian vampire, who, , personified some of the greatest fears of the bourgeois and aristocratic families of the period. In this work,

> [...] Carmilla's attack on girls and young women can be interpreted as a direct attack on the future of the community in the sense that by killing females, the vampire deprives this social group of those responsible for generating new members (Silva, 2010, p. 26).

The vampire gained its definitive personification in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), with which "all

vampire productions of the last century and the beginning of this century still dialogue" (Silva, 2012, p. 31). *Dracula* brought to the stage a supernatural creature that attacked the structures and future of traditional families, that is,

> [...] with the passage of time and the gradual predominance of patriarchal ideology to the detriment of cultures where women played a central role, the myth of the vampire became more associated with the transgression of social norms (based on Christian and, therefore, masculine thinking). Suicides, victims of brutal deaths, bastard children, or excommunicated people were candidates to become vampires (Silva, 2010, p. 25).

However, at the same time, Stoker's novel placed Dracula in the midst of the capitalist modernity that marked London. Contemporary to the two great vampire classics are the works *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), by Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), by Irish writer Oscar Wilde. In the former, a scientific experiment causes the doctor to transform into a dangerous monster. In the latter, a beautiful young man trades his soul for the possibility of never aging.

Throughout the 20th century, horror and the supernatural appear in numerous literary works. Possibly one of its biggest names is H. P. Lovecraft, who built his own mythology of monsters, having written his main works in the 1920s and 1930s. These works inspired much of the literature and cinema produced in the following decades.

On the other hand, in the 20th century, these various cultural productions expanded the use of monsters as the main threats to humanity. It is observed that, "with the end of World War II, a new scenario appears in apocalyptic stories, where monsters populate a world haunted by the possibility of a nuclear holocaust" (Vugman, 2018, p. 45). The establishment of this milestone in World War II did not occur by chance, after all

> [...] the nuclear attack on Hiroshima and Nagasaki created the need for a metaphor from the Monster Myth for new existential anxieties, those that afflict a human being endowed with the power of total destruction. In books and films, narratives emerge in which monsters no longer show any interest in belonging to the human community, driven only by the desire for its total destruction (Vugman, 2018, p. 51).

In this context, the figure of the zombie emerges, a metaphor for the dangerous masses that surround the bourgeoisie and threaten private property in large urban centers. The zombie is a collective monster. Although they can attack alone, they become more dangerous when they act in hordes, surrounding groups

of living people with the aim of eating parts of their bodies. They are beings whose actions lack intentionality. The zombie, devoid of any personal identity, “continues to move and consume, without purpose or plans, without past or future. The zombie is a metaphor for a world that has already died but continues to move" (Vugman, 2018, p. 55). Zombies are the typical monster of a mass society, with large concentrations in urban areas, where they can move around and corner their victims.

In the last three decades of the 20th century, some writers of the genre became *best sellers*, notably the American Stephen King. Another name that became quite notable was the British Clive Barker. Other names have also stood out in recent decades, such as Peter Straub and William Peter Blatty. According to Causo (2003, p. 101), in recent decades, "horror has turned to everyday life, willing to take on the role of a metaphorical space for the most real horrors that walked our streets." As a result,

> [...] one of the most modern forms of horror is *dark fantasy*. These are narratives that start from contemporary everyday life, where at first glance nothing out of the ordinary occurs. Gradually, a fantastic element—magical, supernatural, or even belonging to the themes of science fiction—intrudes and builds an atmosphere of horror (Causo, 2003, p. 101).

Horror, therefore, is part of contemporary popular culture. Given the above, it can be said that horror has become “a staple of contemporary art forms, popular or otherwise, generating a plethora of vampires, goblins, imps, zombies, werewolves, demon-possessed children, special monsters of all sizes, ghosts, and others” (Carroll, 1999, p. 13). However, there is still a certain understanding that it is a minor genre, like detective or erotic literature, even though some writers considered canonical have written works in the genre and horror works are even frequently cited in lists of classic literary works. Barker's books are part of this constitution of new horror classics, problematizing social elements and contributing to the development of literature in general.

## 3. Midian and the monsters

The novel *Cabal* tells the story of a group of creatures who hide from human persecution, caused largely by humanity's religious wrath. Midian was the place they had found centuries earlier to hide and build their society without human intervention. Beneath the earth was a complex system of tunnels, stairways, courtyards, and dormitories where the creatures tried to build their lives peacefully. These creatures are enveloped in darkness. For many of them, the sun is as dangerous an enemy as humans. They are not immortal creatures, at risk of being harmed in different ways, including exposure to the sun, even

though they can live for many years or even centuries. In Barker's representation of the dead, fragile figures also appear who need to protect themselves from humans.

This construction of the representation of the monster is related not only to literature or other artistic expressions, but also as part of society itself. It can be observed that "the monster has taken on different meanings and forms over the centuries" (Messias, 2016, p. 55). Therefore, it is known that monsters "are constructions that relate to the era and culture that produced them" (Ribeiro, 2021, p. 36). The monster, thus, is associated with fear or a form of threat, which may or may not have some supernatural element. The monster is defined "in opposition to humanity. It is its mortal enemy, the one against which it can only react by extermination" (Nazário, 1998, p. 11). In this sense, "most of the attributes of monstrosity are in clear opposition to the attributes that define the human condition. Others are aspects of this condition taken in isolation and subjected to a plastic treatment of exaggeration" (Nazário, 1998, p. 11).

Returning to Midian, it is known that it was a place that welcomed “monsters,” largely criminals in search of some kind of redemption. In the book, it is stated: “Midian was like a place of refuge; a place to be taken. And more: a place where any sins they had committed – real or imagined – would be forgiven” (Barker, 1994, pp. 29-30). Boone, the protagonist of the book, wants to escape from suffering and newly discovered crimes he allegedly committed. With that, he sees Midian as "a place to go, where he could finally find someone who understood the horrors he was enduring" (Barker, 1994, p. 34).

This representation brings into conflict a duality in Boone's nature. In this process, it is stated that when the protagonist heads for Midian, "the man Boone and the monster Boone could not be divided . They were one; they traveled the same road in the same mind and the same body. And whatever lay at the end of that road, death or glory, would be the fate of both” (Barker, 1994, p. 40). However, upon arriving in Midian, he discovers that he did not commit the crimes he was accused of; he was not a “beast” or a “monster.” Therefore, in this case, Boone could not be part of that place nor could he enter Midian. Boone insists that he is a monster, but ultimately, if he does not belong there, he should be devoured. In his confusion and agony, he discovers that “even there, among the monsters of Midian, *it was not his place*. And if it wasn’t there, where was it?” (Barker, 1994, p. 51).

In this regard, we see a subversion that Barker makes in relation to classic narratives, after all, “in the Western canon, every monster wants to integrate into the society in which it is created, since its identity, or at least its existence, depends on it” (Vugman, 2018, p. 33). Boone, on the contrary, considering himself a monster, wants to integrate into that hidden community which, in the face of persecution suffered in previous centuries, hid from society. At one point, Barker (1994, p. 115) states: “There were few hiding places where the monstrous could find peace.” And that was not the place for Boone.

Boone, after being attacked and bitten, manages to escape to meet another monster: the one who had actually committed the murders he was accused of, his psychiatrist, who was a cold-blooded *serial killer* and had forged a series of pieces of evidence, including Boone's confession that he was the murderer of some of the crimes committed by the doctor. Although he escaped the attack by one of Midian's residents, Boone did not escape the shots fired by the living. After being killed by the police, victim of Decker's setup, Boone resurrects and flees to Midian. With the bite Boone had received, he was able to revive, now in Midian, joining the Nightbreed.

However, Midian ends up being a victim of Decker's persecution of Boone, and ends up being destroyed by fear and human irrationality in the face of difference. Barker uses this element to engage in philosophical and political discussions that go beyond the scenes of suspense and action or the narrative that shows the massacre of the residents of Midian. Therefore, Barker's lack of hope in human behavior and his criticism of the irrationality manifested by religious knowledge are evident. It is no coincidence that Barker makes use of religious references at various points. At one point, Decker, referring to Midian, states: "What's underneath is not holy" (Barker, 1994, p. 161). In another passage, the police officer who commands the Midian massacre thinks: "And the next day, God willing, it would be as it was before: the dead staying dead, and sodomy on the walls, which was where it belonged" (Barker, 1994, p. 181). The same policeman, Eigerman, at one point says to the priest he is taking to the Midian massacre: "Just use your little book of exorcisms. I want those monsters back in the fucking place they came from" (Barker, 1994, p. 198).

Elements of subversion of the narrative in relation to the monster can be observed in Barker's narrative. It is known that "the character's emotional reaction to the monstrous in horror stories is not simply a matter of fear, that is, of being terrified by something that threatens to be dangerous. On the contrary, the threat is mixed with revulsion, nausea, and disgust" (Carroll, 1999, p. 39). However, in *The Night Raid*, even though humans may fear the monsters of Midian, it is not they who attack and terrorize them. On the contrary, there is a reversal of who the monster really is, which "in horror fiction is not only lethal but also – and this is of the utmost importance – repulsive" (Carroll, 1999, p. 39). The lethal and repulsive are not found in the creatures hiding in Midian, but in the humans who attacked it. Barker says, at a certain point in the narrative, that Boone, in the presence of Decker, "had been proud to call himself a monster, to display his part of the Nightbreed" (Barker, 1994, p. 125-6).

Another key character in the narrative is Lori. Barker states that Lori, after living with the inhabitants of Midian and witnessing the massacre carried out by humans, changed her worldview. This change is described as follows:

> Only now *did* she *know* the dead. She had walked with them, talked with them. She had seen them get emotional and cry. Who, then, were the *truly* dead? Those whose hearts no longer beat, who still knew pain, or their wide-eyed torturers? (Barker, 1994, p. 231).

Lori is the external perspective on the Nightjars that allows Barker to describe the cruelty to which Midian is subjected. In this sense, it can be said that, "by sharing her uncertain future with the Night Race," Lori "accepts otherness and rejects Eigerman's violence" (Stokes & Stokes, 2023, p. 105). Lori's perspective expresses Barker's point of view regarding the events against Midian and the writer's political stance on prejudice and violence against differences. Therefore, *Nightbreed* can be seen as a work that criticizes the barbarism that humanity promotes on a daily basis, destroying its most fragile members or excluding undesirable beings through death or exile.

The hatred for what is different, which led to the destruction of witches in past centuries, resembles the destruction promoted against Midian. This is the cruelty that Barker wants to combat in his work. In a discourse that emphasizes differences as a negative element, there is no room for dialogue. Eigerman, the police officer who commands the massacre, sees the residents of Midian as "freaks, even stranger than normal. Things that defied nature, that should be taken from under their tombstones and doused with gasoline" (Barker, 1994, p. 164).

This behavior was not limited to the police officer, but to the group of people who gathered to attack Midian. The hatred of monsters is made explicit in the work, showing an uncontrolled mob. Barker (1994, p. 218) narrates: "The crowd was crazy for fun. Those who had guns and rifles had taken them out of their cars; those lucky enough to be traveling with ropes in their trunks began to tie knots; and those who had neither rope nor guns had picked up stones."

Faced with difference, there was no room for dialogue or reflection, only irrationality and violence. Manipulated by a serial killer, who instigated the deepest and most irrational hatreds of those people, the mob, even though it lost the battle against the monsters, managed to destroy the home of the Night Race and forced them to seek refuge where they could rebuild their lives.

## 4. Final considerations

This analysis of Barker's work sought to show some of the British writer's contributions to the renewal of the horror genre. By comparing elements of classic narratives, it was possible to identify some of these contributions present in the book *The Night Race*, showing important thematic and technical innovations for

the genre. In this way, creative elements and fundamental contributions on the part of Barker's work could be identified.

To a large extent, this contribution is due to the subversion of elements of classic writing in the genre around the representation of monsters. Barker, in particular, shows how eventual monstrosity may be associated not with nature or physical constitution, but with the actions and behavior of the characters. His work, thus, expresses a political concern and points to necessary reflections on society and its contradictions.

This demonstrates that Barker's work can be considered of great importance to horror literature in recent decades. On the one hand, his work shows the permanence of elements of the genre, such as the use of literary techniques to construct a sense of fear and horror. On the other hand, it shows the potential for renewal of the genre, as an expression of the dynamics of society and the political, cultural, and social changes that have been taking place in recent centuries.

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