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Bits and Pieces of *Hannibal*—A Case Study for Masculine Nurturing

There is a famous and important dictum reminiscent of the medieval age posited by Carl Jung in *Alchemical Studies*, the thirteenth volume of his collected works: *in sterquiliniis invenitur*—in filth it shall be found (35). Translated for modern society this might be better understood as “that which is most valuable will be found in the place you least want to look.” If there is one source in the corpus of popular culture that best typifies “the last place we would want to look” for masculine values, it would be Mads Mikkelsen’s portrayal of Hannibal Lector, particularly Lector’s relationship with FBI profiler Will Graham during the first two seasons of the HBO series *Hannibal.* By stripping away the perverse horror of Lector’s actions toward Graham, and treating their relationship as an absolute value, I systematically explore the series’ portrayal of masculine nurturing in a way that reveals potentially praiseworthy facets relevant to modern masculinity.

Since it is far from self-evident based on the grisly premise of the series, the first task must be to determine what one means when one speaks of “nurturing.” Typically, to "nurture” means to encourage someone or something develop a conceptualization with a positive ring *prima facie*, but one whose positivity is muddied upon deeper investigation into its etymological roots. “Develop,” as described by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, comes from the French word “desveloper,” which means to “unwrap,” or “expound [upon] in great detail,” whereas “encourage,” evolved from “encoragier,” meaning to "animate," "instigate," or “embolden.” Taken together we can then say that a nurturing relationship is one of inspiration, where a party is provoked by another into unveiling an erstwhile unknown part of the "true" or more primordial Self; allowing the Self "to be seen" as it were. This motif of "being-seen" is a common one in *Hannibal*, its external occurrence a necessary and eventually willful bedfellow of the cathecting events orchestrated by Lector to facilitate Graham's "becoming," to see himself as he really is with his own eyes: Nietzsche's Dionysian task. It speaks to necessary rites of passage associated with historical philosophies of apprenticeship, the punctuating e-vent of the transitionary place between the adolescent and adult worlds of any particular culture—the act of "calling to oneself" (Heidegger 27).

However, the passage from childhood dependency to meaningful adulthood is explicitly different for masculine and feminine individuals; it has to be. Even if the ontological structure of existence remains the same, each requires a distinctly different developmental strategy to reach maturity. This raises a necessary question: why does masculinity require a different form of nurturing than femininity? The answer to that question is simultaneously biological and sociological in nature. Since females are typically more successful reproductively then males and therefore disproportionally burdened with a level of natural responsibility (Favre and Sornette), one might presume, for the sake of argumentation, that the claim of biological essentialism is true: women are effectively initiated into femininity by nature at the onset of puberty. Conversely, the implications of male biological transformation are nowhere near as immediate, nor as profound in consequence. Therefore, in order to properly assume their role in society, masculine individuals require an artificed initiatory process—an “event [that] destroys the ‘unconscious’ union between the child and biological mother” and “renovelizes” the environment by disintegrating the previously held personality and its associated modes of adaptation (Peterson 223). Nurturing in this sense forces masculine individuals to adopt the hereditary personality of their culture, thus facilitating the restoration of existential order and integration into the masculine dominance hierarchy, sufficiently detached from their parental unit. Stated simply, masculine children "require" a push into adulthood generally where feminine children do not.

Now that those underlying axioms have been laid out, we can begin to look at how *Hannibal* fulfills this schema, but in talking about Hannibal Lector, I also need to discuss Will Graham, since everything about the latter provides crucial windows into the philosophy and psychology of the culturally infamous former. Archetypally speaking, Graham is the revolutionary hero; the product of feminine nature and masculine culture, personalities represented imagistically by Caroline Dhavernas’ “Alana Bloom” and Lawrence Fishburne’s “Jack Crawford” respectively. As set pieces for Lector and Graham’s relationship, Bloom and Crawford inhabit a mythological, near godlike position in Graham’s psychological hierarchy prior to his initiation, something apparent in the way he differentiates them from agents he regards as peers. For viewers, this distinction is easily obscured by the interplay of the two characters when Graham is not in the room: he does not see the concern Bloom has for his apparent psychological fragility, nor does he see the faith Crawford has in him as a sufficiently matured man.

Graham himself is unique kind of hero, more in line with the Harry Potters of the literary world, albeit much darker in his conceptualization. When Hannibal notes, early in the first episode, that Graham “has a knack for the monsters” what he is addressing is Graham’s natural proclivity for human malevolence (“Aperitif” 21:45). He is a pure empath who can literally take on the perspective of serial killers, and recreate “their design” in order to provide insights that might lead to their capture. It is Graham's “empathy disorder” that differentiates him from other profilers in the eyes of Lector, and it is the part of his psyche that not only allows him to be successful across a broad range of hierarchies, but enables him to effectively create his own “game,” one Lector interprets as kindred to his own. Lector, on the other hand, represents the psychopomp or shaman who, according to Mircea Eliade, serves as an intermediary between man and the gods by guiding initiates through a ritualized ordeal—“[compromise], suffering, death, and [rebirth]”—that represents a paradigmatic return to primordial chaos as well as resurrection into “a new spiritual life” within the tribe (*The Sacred and the Profane* 196). Lector is keenly aware of his role, and makes as much known during later conversations with Graham *after* his symbolic rebirth toward the end of the second season, noting that “[e]very creative act has is destructive consequence . . . Who you were yesterday is laid waste to give rise to who you are today” (“Ku No Mono” 26:55).

The first season of Hannibal is dedicated to the first two stages of initiation, and chronicles Graham’s forced confrontation with a transcendental "Other," in this case the chthonic stag that represents Lector’s integrated shadow; that thing that systematically unmoors him from the relatively idyllic conditions of his pre-initiatory state. Psychological compromise occurs almost immediately: the first episode sees Graham gangpressed into service by Agent Crawford, and Lector utilizes the opportunity to manipulate Graham into becoming aware of another, separate and seemingly inaccessible killer than the one under current investigation—Lector himself (“Aperitif” 4:00). And as if the ineffability of this new killer is not enough of a strain, Lector then learns that Graham is suffering from a rare form of encephalitis hallmarked by “disturbances of consciousness, cognitive decline, and [epilepsy],” (Li, Guo, and Peng) symptoms that become increasingly present in the Graham’s day-to-day life (“Buffet Froid” 14:25). However, Lector hides this diagnosis from Graham, and is quick to convince his healthcare provider—who he promptly murders in the grisliest of fashions—to do the same under the pretense that it would lead to important, publishable research. In fact, Lector actually goes out of his way to downplay the severity of the situation by associating Graham’s symptoms with latent mental illness instead of a potentially fatal condition. The question is: Why? Why allow Graham to suffer in such a needless fashion?

The fact of the matter is that suffering, in certain circumstances, is the catalyst for experiential and psychocognitive growth, and failure to allow for it creates situations conducive to what William James Maloney describes as “Peter Pan Syndrome,” a condition of psychological immaturity prevalent in men raised under the overprotective gaze of an archetypally “devouring” mother figure. While it cannot be known for certain if Graham absolutely fits this paradigm—to my knowledge he never speaks about his parents at length—we can infer, based on assessments by Alana Bloom, that something is not quite on the level with Graham. Given Lector’s closeness to Bloom, it stands to reason that he should have an awareness of Graham’s insufficiencies, making him an ideal coordinator for Graham's psychological push toward transcendence.

The first two stages of initiation culminate with Graham’s complete ostracization from his previous life and childhood “personality” as well as his symbolic death, represented cinematographically in the final scene of the second season's thirteenth episode, where Lector visits Graham in his cell at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane (“Savoureaux” 41:00). The hospital, Eliade might suggest, symbolizes “the telluric womb” or “belly of a monster,” and “expresses regression to a preformal [or] latent mode of being” (qtd in Peterson 225). Death, in this sense, is tantamount to the dungeon that Prince Charming finds himself in during *Snow White*; it is that place that you never want to go to, but the place you inevitably end up before you get to where you need to be. As such, the asylum is where Graham’s most dramatic metamorphosis takes shape, not because he realizes the truth about Lector—that is something he begins to understand fully over the course of the second season—but because the ordeal strips Graham of his preconceptions about the world, and how to deal with it, thus forcing him to learn new adaptive techniques more suitable to the world as it actually is. Facets of Graham’s "new" personality begin to shine through the ashes of his old life as early as the second episode of season two. He becomes subtly manipulative, acting as if he has finally bought into the possibility of guilt and bating Lector into “resuming treatment” before being returned to his cell, and reassuming the countenance of a man with a plan of action (“Sakizuke” 5:45). Graham also becomes more assertive toward his own well-being, making quid pro quo arrangements with investigator Beverly Katz to provide crime scene insight in exchange for her continued investigation into his case, something, he argues, that is just as likely to further incriminate him as exonerate him.

However, Graham is not the only person who changes: Lector too begins exhibiting behaviors that, until now, would be considered atypical of him, specifically the occasional flashes of vulnerability in discussions with Graham as well as those implicit in the savage murder of the judge who dismisses Lector’s testimony during Graham’s court case (“Hassun” 36:00). Despite his previous actions and outwardly measured demeanor, it becomes apparent that Lector legitimately cares about Graham and their friendship. Lector’s desire that Graham not be in jail for the murders he used to frame him with is, if nothing else, genuinely felt and besides, he has already invested quite a bit of time in Graham’s development; allowing him to be taken to task and executed by the state would be an unacceptable course of events. Therefore, Lector's new string of murders are his attempt at catalyzing the final stage of Graham’s initiation and reintegration into the world: resurrection.

*Hannibal* is more than a simple crime thriller. As a series it concerns itself with transcendental entities and worldly monsters, and as such the resurrection of Graham "the individual" takes on new significance. His symbolic rebirth is more than a simple matter of reintegration into society—he is a transformed man, not dissimilar from Francis Dolarhyde in the 2002 film *Red Dragon*. But what is the nature of this transformation? Mythopoetically, resurrection represents the hero’s return from his voyage into the underworld carrying the spirit of the father—it is an integrative process of spiritual transfiguration where complementary aspects of the individual, and useful aspects of ancient wisdom are fused. In speaking of Horus and Seth, Eliade states that this transfiguration has an ennobling effect (*A History* 113), however, Peterson elucidation of Eliade is not so romantic. He notes that “those who maintain their heads [during their journey] return contaminated . . . from the perspective of their compatriots, but rife with possibility for reordering the world” (278). Indeed, in this instance I believe that Peterson to be correct. Graham returns to the world of the living tainted by the spirit of Lector, a tarnish made apparent in the reactions Graham receives from former friends, particularly Alana Bloom; an existential blemish concretized imagistically by the Lectorian antlers shown to be growing from within him. However, what is important, in spite of this corruption, is that Graham has at the same time developed his capacity to engender order out of the chaos of his ordeal. There is value in this form of maturation that transcends the ideality of innocence.

*In sterquiliniis invenitur*—in filth it shall be found. If we are being honest, the world is a filthy place, one filled with monsters. As painful as it might be to admit this, some monsters—prolific monsters like Hannibal Lector—serve an undeniable purpose in a greater scheme of things. Here we might construe Lector’s purpose as the capacity to create monsters powerful and self-sufficient enough to deal with the other, more ignoble monsters in the world. This process of becoming undergirds the relationship of Lector and Graham, and it is precisely the same process that needs to be rediscovered, and embraced by contemporary society if we are to cultivate future generations of competent men. Young men need experience trauma, as early as feasibly possible depending on their temperament—the existential wounding it causes is of supreme moment to growth; it allows for the possibility of seeing who and what they could be if only they would voluntarily undertake the challenge ahead of them. Furthermore, they need to be allowed to suffer the consequences of their actions, the good and the bad, and not be mollycoddled by overprotective social structures. The death of who they were as children is a necessary casualty of this process, and this is likely the hardest part of the process, not for the individual in question, but for his immediate family because part of what is lost is the thing that is typically cherished the most: their vulnerability.

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