

Loving the corpse, becoming the wolf: identity, assimilation, and agency in Daniel Waters's *Generation Dead* and Maggie Stiefvater's *Shiver*

I'm going to begin with a disclaimer. This is a conference on YA literature, and I'm looking at YA texts; this raises all sorts of questions about the validity of this recently introduced marketing term as a generic label. But, without being a nominalist and spurning classification, I'm going to pretend that in a way they're not YA texts—I'm not initially approaching them with regard to their specific qualities as YA texts or in consideration of their intended readership but, in a kind of thought experiment where I temporarily bracket off those qualities. Thus you could accuse me of dissolving YA identity itself. But what I'm suggesting is that the crisis of burgeoning adulthood that many YA novels attend to can be read in ways that transcend that specificity and allow the exploration of some crucial, universal issues.

So, for example, there is in many YA novels that feeling of being on a precipice, of leaping into new possibilities. And this is not confined to becoming adult—it stands in for all those moments of existential choice that all human beings experience. Even that first kiss—so central to these narratives—can represent moments of the recreation of identity. So in these moments of *discovery* (often sexual), characters discover themselves, or see themselves anew. They're exploring their identity but also demonstrating the *invention* of identity, revealing its fluidity and saying something about human agency.

One excuse for my ignoring the YA aspect of these texts is that I've come to them in a roundabout way. This research project began by looking at the newly emerged genre of Paranormal Romance. I soon found out that YA paranormal romance is often more daring, ideologically and stylistically, than its adult counterpart. Different, less constraining commercial imperatives may be at work here, or readers' expectations less fixed. Pedagogical and socialising functions are also present and may work in tandem with or against these other forces.

But first I need to describe quickly what this genre is and why I find it interesting. This new genre has emerged recently; a collision or mating of genres has taken place, and this itself is of interest for those interested in literary form and how kinds of writing emerge and mutate. The typical Gothic text of darkness and evil now flirts with the much-maligned genre of romance fiction. The monster has become tamed, domesticated—feminised, if you like—and transformed into the lover. It's an

encounter that may be seen as masculine with feminine; I would argue that it's also a restoration of humanism to the Gothic, often through concerns with identity and agency.

This new literary form has many of the trappings of Gothic, but the plot is subordinated to the movement towards amatory consummation of romantic fiction; the setting tends to be contemporary; it seems to assume a female readership; and, crucially, it centres on love affairs between humans and supernatural creatures.

[2] You all know Edward, the glittery love object in *Twilight*, I'm sure. But the genre of paranormal romance—where mortals have love affairs with supernatural creatures—is vastly prolific. The demon lover can be vampire, but also werewolf or other shapeshifter; there are affairs with demons and angels and fairies. There are more unlikely, less romantic monsters, too: ghosts and [3] gargoyles, [4] even zombies. [5] I have to include the merman—he's very popular. There are questions about how these affairs are consummated here, though I'd rather not know the answers.

Genres bring with them certain perspectives, so when genres collide, as in the mating of horror with romance in this new, hybrid genre, interesting things happen. I'm going to try, in the time we have, to look closely at two YA Paranormal Romances where the romance perspective modulates the horror theme in ways that cast light on otherness and identity. Both these texts show how identities are consolidated and confirmed, and suggest an idea of identity that is endowed with agency, rather than merely passively inherited and acquiesced to.

[6] *Generation Dead* (2008)

Daniel Waters's *Generation Dead* employs the unlikely love object of a zombie to raise, through mimicry and parody, questions and arguments around identity politics as they have become appropriated or assimilated by contemporary Western culture. This leads to a repudiation of deterministic views of human behaviour and a questioning of identities as essences.

We can assume that Paranormal Romance begins with the vampire lover. In the past, vampires have conveniently represented alterity, whether foreignness or deviant sexuality, or both. Vampire fiction is currently enormously popular; in part, I will argue, because of how easily it dramatises contemporary concerns with the

politics of difference. And transforming the monstrous outsider into the sympathetic demon lover is not unconnected with the ambivalent assimilation of otherness into society.

In the 1990s, identity politics became somewhat mainstream in the US and Western world generally, and the genre becomes consolidated around that time. Terry Eagleton recounts how this politics of culture became normalised during this period [7]:

‘Culture’ meant that social life was ‘constructed’, and so mutable, multiple and transient in a way of which both radical activists and consumer experts could approve. [. . .] What had survived of the politically turbulent 1960s was life-style and identity politics, which as the class struggle froze over in the mid-1970s surged increasingly to the fore. [. . .] Culture [. . .] had severely challenged a philistine, patriarchal, ethnically blinded left. But as [. . .] the politicized culture of the 1960s and early 1970s gave way to the postmodern 1980s, culture was the supplement which came gradually to oust what it had amplified.¹

Generation Dead and its sequels tackle identity politics subtly and acutely, highlighting through satire and the paranoid thriller subplot the limitations and indeed ideological force of that politics—yet recognising the need to affirm particular identity within some sort of more collective affiliation.² But Daniel Waters’s significant gesture in *Generation Dead* is to choose zombies as the subject of a teen romance and thriller rather than the over-fashionable vampires. Loving the corpse is a trickier plot device than embracing the supremely glamorous vampire. In this novel, all over the US, teenagers, and only teenagers, are mysteriously coming back from the dead, but with their movements and, perhaps, thought processes impaired, and sometimes bearing the wounds of their death. The choice of zombie over the more exotic vampire is crucial, I think, for Waters’s eliciting sympathy and exploration of agency.

What *Generation Dead* does is to portray minorities sympathetically in terms of both discrimination and powerlessness (a powerlessness which may, indeed, be a biological disability). It also explores with great sensitivity questions of identity, particularly as experienced by young adults; yet it also satirises the language and

uncritical assumptions of varieties of identity politics. With its sequels, a sinister narrative accumulates which exposes the latent threat of the state and private enterprise. Waters delineates how easily identity politics can be appropriated by these forces as ideological cover for oppression. Thus, the satire (which I'll come to) is not a cheap, or indeed illiberal, gibe, but works as part of this unmasking.

There are various levels and strategies of reading that can be applied to this text, which mediate the problems of identity politics in different ways. On one level, difference here is rooted in biology; here, scientists investigate the cause of this phenomenon that has hit America's young; the kinds of causes speculatively invoked are themselves revealing about contemporary cultural anxieties. The empathy that the text creates is one with people who are struggling with very real barriers to their mobility and self-expression; the cultural politics is that of disabled people.

But there is more to this; a very important strand emerges out of this concern with causality. In Waters there is an almost existentialist concern with becoming and with self-fashioning, which is thus very much to do with the origins of identity itself. On another level of reading, difference is akin to 'race' or, more nebulously, 'ethnicity'; on yet another, it represents lifestyle. At this level, the zombies mirror Waters's heroine, Phoebe, who is herself culturally apart: she is a Goth, interested in literature and non-mainstream music, estranged from the more conventional teenagers around her. It's the fluidity of the metaphor in *Generation Dead*, its shifting across signifieds, that actually dissolves the parochialism of much identity politics and points towards universalism.

[8] Waters is very good at dissecting the vicissitudes of the language of prejudice: we encounter first the raw and unthinking language of the school canteen: 'zombies, dead heads, corpsicles' (2). Then, refracted through the bigoted coach's voice, we hear the first phase of condescendingly PC language imposed from above: 'We are required to refer to them as the *living impaired*, okay? Not dead kid. Not *zombie*, or *worm buffet*, or *accursed hellspawn*, either' (23). Then, the neutral term, 'differently biotic' is introduced, with its hint of celebration of the fact of difference; previously, says the high school principal, 'the term diversity had been most typically used to describe a diversity of culture, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation'. Now, 'the term may also be applied to diverse states of being' (100). Finally, from the most angered and alienated dead teens themselves, the 'Z' word is actively reclaimed as a symbol of positivity and revolt, and of difference as separatism. I do apologise for

using the word ‘zombie’ myself in this essay, asking forgiveness for any offence this may cause.

In Waters’s novel, ‘The Undead Citizens Act’ explicitly compares ‘differently biotic people to illegal immigrants’ (276). Immigration presents significant concerns to Western establishments, and now the undead represent those without citizenship—Hispanic migrant workers, or black people in earlier struggles.

Phoebe and her best friends—Margi, and Colette, now dead and risen—are Goths, mocked by jocks and cheerleaders but defiant and able to articulate what defines their specificity. Phoebe’s Goth identity is both defensive and assertive: But Phoebe is fascinated by and attracted to ‘the living impaired’ because of their otherness, ‘their bravery’ (32)—and the specific otherness of the mystery of death, thus invoking the perennial angst of young adults making sense of the big questions and here using the type of undeadness as something distinctly particularised.

Waters vividly articulates, through mimicry and parody, questions and arguments around identity politics as they have become appropriated or assimilated by contemporary Western culture. The indeterminacy of the tenor in the zombie metaphor facilitates Waters’s technique of shifting perspectives to build up this ensemble of arguments and ideologies of difference. And this parallels his refusal to countenance essences or mechanical determinism of human behaviour. This also refuses to embrace an essentialist identity as the foundation of claims to autonomy, as in the varieties of identity politics that Eagleton identifies as ‘[t]he most uninspiring kind’ [9]:

those which claim that an already fully fledged identity is being repressed by others. The more inspiring forms are those in which you lay claim to an equality with others in being free to determine what you might wish to be. Any authentic affirmation of difference thus has a universal dimension.³

The existentialist strand in *Generation Dead* affirms precisely that freedom ‘to determine what you might wish to be’.

Raised mysteriously out of death, Waters’s *Generation Dead* articulate their claims to autonomy and responsibility, remaking and questioning the language that reifies them. In his humane, literate and witty novels, Waters shows these rights in formation and adumbrates a politics of active subjects claiming their common humanity against the forces that would objectify them and reduce them to dead things.

[10] *Shiver* (2009)

I turn now to another type of monstrous lover. Maggie Stiefvater's *Shiver* uses the werewolf to perform a sophisticated interrogation of the boundaries of animality and humanity, highlighting the centrality of language and its relationship to agency, which is intimately bound up with the formation of identity in young people. Here, I'm talking about identity in general, rather than specific identities within society; *Shiver* is almost an allegory of the formation of identity, of human subjectivity itself.

Shape-shifters may seem peculiarly suited to dramatise the transition to adulthood because of their own indeterminate status. But they can do more than this, exploring other antinomies creatively and in ways that embrace more universal concerns than adolescence alone.

[11] There's a marvellous quote from the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty which reveals that an examination of transition to adulthood itself may lead to insights into the uniquely human embodied consciousness:

When the adolescent suffers through the trauma of coming-of-age, he has at his disposal the grammar of 'I-you-they' already implanted in his speech and ready to take on deeper symbolic meaning. 'I' now becomes the emblem of a multileveled and ambiguous mode of being in the world. I am the body at one with itself, others, and world when I am engaged in team sports. I am also the other whose face in the mirror is sprouting whiskers and pimples. And I am the self whose significance is simultaneously built up and torn down in the look of peers and parents, guys and girls. I – the grammatical sign, the overdetermined symbol – is now a question.⁴

Stiefvater's *Shiver* books explore this ambiguous adolescent body and the 'I' that is under question. *Shiver* is tantalisingly ambivalent about the appeal of the instinctual and the borderline between an embodied humanity and the animal. The books tell of the love affair of two teenagers, Sam and Grace. Grace has long had a mysterious attraction to the wolves that almost killed her as a child. She meets Sam, who turns out to be cursed with the biological necessity of becoming wolf when the temperature falls. He's the one who had saved Grace from the rest of the pack.

There is in *Shiver*, in the temptation to become wolf, the appeal of an aesthetic

owing much to Romanticism: a self-effacing wonder at the sublimity of nature.⁵ The enhanced senses that a return to animality brings are related to this concept but also involve the erotic. As they watch the Northern Lights, Grace recounts the aesthetic pleasure of being immersed in nature [12]; this is also a prelude to a kiss:

Together we gazed up. The flat black field around us made the sky as big as an ocean. With the wolf inside me and Sam beside me, both of us strange creatures, I felt we were somehow an intrinsic part of this world, this night, this boundless mystery. (F192)

Their strangeness is not just wolfish; it is the strangeness between the sexes, or of the erotic other, which propels most YA fictions of this kind, too. The aesthetic ecstasy inspires the erotic, and Sam kisses her [13]:

Everything inside me felt raw-edged and hungry. [. . .]
When we kissed, it didn't matter that I had been a wolf hours ago, that I had been a wolf again. [. . .] All that mattered was this: our noses touching, the softness of his mouth, the ache inside me. (F193)

The clichés of romance here take on a freshness when coupled with the Gothic undertones, reinvigorating the genre of romantic fiction; 'raw-edged and hungry' renders the danger and the physicality of the romantic 'softness' and 'ache' both more powerful and more under question by the wolfishness of the desire. Here, for Sam, nature's wonders affirm human love: 'I loved her, and she loved me, and the world was beautiful and awash with pink light around us' (F196). Crucially, the sublimity of the aurora borealis becomes a background to the human couple rather than the solvent of identity wherein the subject is lost.

As Sam emerges from wolfhood, he is 'not a wolf', but not 'Sam yet, either'; in this state of becoming he is 'a leaking womb bulging with the promise of conscious thoughts', where 'The future and the past' are 'both the same', and Grace is 'past present future' (70). [14] This moment of entry into temporality and structured human language recalls Julia Kristeva's womb-like *chora*, an indeterminate position which 'as rupture and articulations (rhythms), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality'.⁶

In his wolf state, Sam inhabits a wolf language that is akin to Kristeva's semiotic realm. This bodily aspect of language is rooted in our animal biology and is the supplement (particularly in poetry) to the meaning-bearing function of language,

which for Kristeva belongs to the realm of ‘the symbolic’.⁷

Stiefvater evokes this precarious emergence as her young wolf-people fall back into the semiotic in order, however, to reconstruct and reintegrate their sense of identity. Like Kristeva, Stiefvater does not overvalue the semiotic, recognising that without autonomy we can have no meaningful projects. The temporary surrender to the wild semiotic and the dissolution of the ego may facilitate that remaking, overcoming of the past, and plunge into new projects that constitutes human freedom, but it has its dangers. In Kristevan terms, ‘identity is necessary but only ever partial’ and risks ‘the wreck of all identity’ or, conversely, ‘a self-blinding allegiance to psychic norms’.⁸ For the protagonists to instantiate an individual agency, untied to rigid norms, the loss of identity and then re-emergence into humanity is crucial. And the dissolution and revitalisation of language in the presentation of the transition between wolf and human mirrors and realises this process.

The novels repeatedly and knowingly refer to language and communication; attention is drawn to the personal name in particular. This recalls the ‘I’ put into question in the quote from Merleau-Ponty earlier. Opposed to the lure of nature are the deeper rewards of being human – love, art, cooperative purpose – all founded on language.⁹ Language brings with it the subjunctive, futurity, and the possibility of projects and vocations (I mean here ‘Projects’ in Sartre’s sense of consciously shaping one’s life towards a future).

Sam’s humanity is centred upon his love of language and text; he reads poetry avidly; he writes songs. As Sam transforms, he recalls his pain at losing humanity as manifested in love and language and self-identity [15]: ‘I felt the agony of the single moment that I lost myself. Lost what made me Sam. The part of me that could remember Grace’s name’ (212). In language, subjectivity and identity coalesce around the proper name. It is language that enables the human calling, a vocation that necessarily involves projects aimed at the future, and free will, with all the anguish of choice which that entails.

So, in different ways, both these authors use the conjunction of the Gothic and romance modes to explore various ideas of identity and the closely related concept of agency. They assert a humanist celebration of autonomous speaking subjects whose identities are formed within a universalist schema that transcends their situation in the transition to adulthood yet is rooted in that sense of being precariously perched on the edge of freedom.

¹ Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, Blackwell Manifestoes (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 126-27.

² Linda Nicholson suggests a like accommodation of identity politics to universalism, where there are ‘degrees of commonality interspersed with difference’ and where ‘particular identities will both vary among members of any particular identity grouping while also expressing elements of similarity’ (Linda Nicholson, *Identity Before Identity Politics*, Cambridge Cultural Social Studies (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), p. 185.

³ Eagleton, p. 66.

⁴ M. C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 2nd edn, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), p. 111. This passage obviously favours male experience; fictional counterparts might be found in the dramatisation of female adolescence in Angela Carter’s wolf stories and John Fawcett’s werewolf film, *Ginger Snaps* (2001).

⁵ There are suggestions of pantheism in the work of such writers as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, and hints in Rousseau that have led to characterisations of Romanticism as having inaugurated the desire for a new relationship of exalted oneness with the natural world. See Jonathan Wordsworth, ‘The Romantic Imagination’, in *A Companion to Romanticism*, ed. by Duncan Wu, Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 486–94 (pp. 489–90); and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 296–302. Du Coudray says of a passage in S. P. Somtow’s *Moon Dance* (1991): ‘[it] owes much to the romantic conception of the sublime, in which spiritual enrichment is attained through an immersion in or connection with nature’ (Coudray, p. 143); this could be applied to many other passages in these fictions.

⁶ Julia Kristeva, ‘Revolution in Poetic Language’, in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 89–136 (p. 94).

⁷ Kristeva, pp. 92–93.

⁸ Jacqueline Rose, ‘Julia Kristeva – Take Two’, in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London and New York: Verso, 1986), pp. 141–64, p. 150.

⁹ For the uniquely cooperative nature of human communication, see Michael Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).