Is It Me?: An Analysis of Age as Other within *The Strain*

"The crowd was famished by degrees; but two
Of an enormous city did survive,
And they were enemies: they met beside
The dying embers of an altar-place [...] 
Their eyes as it grew lighter, and beheld
Each other's aspects — saw, and shrieked, and died —
Even of their mutual hideousness they died,
Unknowing who he was upon whose brow
Famine had written Fiend..." (Byron 55-69).

Within Byron's "Darkness" the world has fallen into chaos, swathed in eternal night, leaving inhabitants to battle one another for what little remains. In the final moments, meeting with no description of age nor race, the last two denizens confront the horror of one another and die. Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan's *The Strain* portrays two representations of the ‘mutually hideous’: invading vampires and the intrinsic elderly. The depiction of ‘monsters’ within *The Strain* reveals a covert societal perspective of the elderly, they are to be feared, isolated, forgotten. I will argue that within Del Toro and Hogan’s *The Strain*, a comparison is drawn between the vampires and the elderly — painting both as “monstrous” and highlighting the anxiety surrounding the process of aging, the fear of it, and the consequent Othering of the elderly. Despite the similarities drawn between the elderly and vampires within the novel, the

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1 Abraham’s early warnings concerning the vampires are consistently dismissed (Del Toro and Hogan 131-133)
Master largely ignores the elderly, focussing instead on turning society’s younger members, suggesting that it is their striving for perpetual youth that is truly monstrous.

Aging is natural, yet monstrous; it is a form of temporal consumption in which the body and mind are stealthily destroyed, catching even the inhabitants of their desiccating shells somewhat unaware. Consumption as consumerism is well known, but it has another meaning; the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines it as, "The action or fact of destroying or being destroyed; destruction...." drawing a linkage to the definition of age, "The symptoms or qualities associated with old age; mental or physical changes, esp. deterioration, brought about by old age" (OED). Age is a form of consumption, of destruction in which the victim is one’s sense of Self. Age brings mental and physical changes, albeit not always detrimental, but as does consumption, age alters the self both in mind and body. These alterations may imply disease, "[a] condition of the body, or of some part or organ of the body, in which its functions are disturbed or deranged; a morbid physical condition..." (OED). With aging comes a naturally slower pace, but when mental or physical functions are sufficiently disturbed they are labelled as disease. Kathleen F. Slevin within her article: "'If I had lots of money... I'd have a body makeover:' Managing the Aging Body” states that, "[b]ecause youthful appearance has become the coin of the realm in Western societies it is not surprising that growing old in our society is increasingly viewed negatively and that some old people may come to view old age as a 'social contagion'..." (Slevin 1005). The elderly, no longer fitting the idealized model of society, of "desirable bodies as young, toned, and thin [...] [thus possessing] the most desirable form of...

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2Also see "An individual case or instance of such a condition; an illness, ailment, malady, disorder" (OED)
cultural capital" (1004), often internally Other their selves — adding their own pejorative labels before others may do so and establishing the element of contagion. Slevin finds that aging is somehow monstrous, unnatural (1004), something to be feared, subhuman. Jamil Khader, within "Un/Speakability and Radical Otherness: The Ethics of Trauma in Bram Stoker's Dracula" extends that notion, "the real horror lies in the failure to represent those who are Othered as radically inhuman at the same level of representation, as if they are believed to lack a specular image in the mirror" (Khader 92). Within The Strain, I believe that it is not the lack of representation of the elderly, but the conflation between the vampires and the elderly, creating reflections that are equally monstrous — radically inhuman, different from idyllic youth, and therefore to be shunned.

Isolation, contagium, and monstrousness are underlying themes within The Strain. At the start of the novel the reader is introduced to Abraham Setrakian's grandmother, who ultimately elects to remove her burdensome self from her fleeing family by ending her life, "In the morning [Abraham] found her on the floor of the room [...] having fallen off in the night, her lips charcoal black and peeling and her throat black through her neck, dead from the animal poison she had ingested" (Del Toro and Hogan 5). The grandmother's recognition that her age was a contagion to the rest of her family, that her infirmity was the cause of their capture, prompted her to take her own life — a solitary and isolative act. This segregation is reflected too in the lack of narrative surrounding the grandmother. The reader is given only a small storytelling scene concentrating mostly on the development of the antagonist, followed by the aftermath, the resulting desecrated body — the blackened remains. Similarly, Abraham, in his old age lives a solitary existence both physically, "The old man stood alone on the cramped sales floor of his
pawnshop" (51), and in his existential contemplation, "he watched his breath given shape by the steam, and wondered just how many of these respirations he had left" (53). These quotations illustrate his aloneness and elegiac mood (51), resulting in his disassociation from society by age and by choice.

Eldritch Palmer, offers another example of the isolation of the elderly, "A faint plume of breath emerged from [Palmer's] mouth. An onlooker might have believed the man near death. Might have thought they were witnessing the last days or weeks of what, judging by the sprawling seventeen-acre estate…” (22). Death is a lonely experience, one that must ultimately be a solo journey, but the three are all also separated from society, whether in small rooms or in a massive palatial complex. Despite Palmer's decrepit condition he remains one of the pivotal antagonists within The Strain, moving the Master into the city and orchestrating obstructions to the protagonist, Ephraim Goodweather.

Palmer mirrors the role of Jonathan Harker within Dracula, an agent in bringing Dracula to London (Willis 317). His mental faculties are neither dysfunctional nor disturbed, only his body is weak, diseased. Vampires and disease are inextricably linked within vampire narrative, particularly in their archetypical representation, Bram Stoker's Dracula. Martin Willis within "'The Invisible Giant,' Dracula, and Disease,” draws attention to the infectious nature of the vampire (311) — a contagion that replicates, spreading an infection like the vampiric parasites within The Strain, "these vampires were virus incarnate" (Del Toro and Hogan 277).

Vampires within The Strain act as an infection, however, their appearance and behaviour is counter to other well recognized examples such as Dracula, Carmilla, Lestat, Angel, and Damon Salvatore. Modern vampires, although retaining the undercurrent of disease, have
become "models of popular physical ideals" (Tenga and Zimmerman 79) that, returning to Slevin, are the primary currency of Western societies. Although they exhibit elements of fear and danger, neither Dracula nor Damon Salvatore are completely monstrous, evincing nearly entirely human forms. *The Strain* vampires too have humanoid components, although their corpse-like appearance and lack of full sentience in the initial stages of turning is more zombielike than vampiric: “[The vampires] leaned into its repulsing rays like zombies staring at the sun” (376). *The Strain* creates a liminality between vampire and zombie — the Master is far more sentient than his progeny who act purely on instinct. Although Tenga and Zimmerman refer to zombies as, "com[ming] in in hordes [and] generally still lack will, consciousness, and individuality" (80) this description is also true of base level vampires. Fear of *The Strain* vampires derives from "[t]he dissolution of the human spirit [that has been] a key source of horror in zombie fiction [...] [i]n contrast [with] vampires [that] uphold human notions of Self" (80). Unlike zombies, *The Strain* vampires do not decompose (Del Toro and Hogan 70), "zombie[s] [remind] us that we will soon be rotting flesh" (Tenga and Zimmerman 78) yet victims of the Master also refute the vampiric notion of Self, adhering more to the mindlessness ascribed to zombies.

Abraham, his grandmother, and Palmer, the elderly characters of *The Strain*, manifest unnatural monstrous characteristics. The grandmother in her death, "her lips charcoal black and peeling and her throat black through her neck" (Del Toro and Hogan 5), appears particularly unnatural to youth, who hold death as taboo, away from the forefront of their psyche. Her body is monstrous, discoloured and crumbling — more reminiscent of zombiesque rotting flesh than of vampires. Another description conflates the grandmother with the vampiric Jim Kent, "[h]is
muscular and circulatory features showed through his disintegrated flesh except at his swollen, blackened throat. His eyes were open and staring out of the hollows of his drawn face" (334). As in Byron's poem, the elderly grandmother seems a reflection of the vampiric Kent, similar yet each monstrous to the other.

Abraham, alive and un-necrotic, also reveals a monstrous aspect — his hands throughout the novel are described as "gnarled" (90, 240), "mangled" (288), "crooked" (227) or "claw-like" (133) drawing a comparison to the Master's "long, taloned hands" (353) and "talonlike toenails" (116). There is a dialectical dyad between the Master and his adversary which draws on the ancient parallel of good versus evil — a Dracula figure versus a "Crew of Light" (Khader 86). The comparative diction between the Master and Abraham references Khader's statement that it is the lack of representation or reflection of the radically Othered that is the true horror (92). The elderly, the medium for Otherness, are seldom overtly represented in the novel but they are nonetheless reflected in the vampires — figures radically dehumanized and Othered. While their outward appearances merge, the two remain distinguished by internal anatomy and by their individual moral compasses.

Abraham’s initial encounter with the Master in Treblinka resembles that of Beowulf's Grendel stealthily entering the hall and the threat that he represented to Hrothgar's warriors⁴. Comparative descriptions of Abraham and the vampires; their hands and Abraham’s weapon of choice — a silver blade concealed in Sardu's (the Master's current host) cane (Del Toro and Hogan 242) — establishes Abraham as not simply Othered, but an Other aligned against the evil

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³ See also "two rows of small, yellowed teeth, impossibly sharp" (Del Toro and Hogan 117). Although Abraham’s teeth are never mentioned, the alignment of sharp fangs and taloned fingers evoked similar images of the monstrous.

⁴ See Beowulf 64-140 in which Grendel steals into the drinking hall reflecting both Treblinka, and to a lesser extent, the airplane.
and disrupting vampiric Other. Megan Cavell's "Constructing the monstrous body in Beowulf" examines not only the physical, but the comparative diction between hero and monster. Cavell states, "The written record depicts culture, represented by manmade buildings and artefacts, as under constant attack by nature, the chaotic world existing outside of civilization — a world that could not be kept under human control" (Cavell 157). Within The Strain, vampires are ascribed a perfect balance between the invading natural and the artificial. "Nothing in nature [could have made the throat wound], not that I know of, [...] the edges are rounded, which is to say, almost organic in appearance" (Del Toro and Hogan 126). The parasitic component of vampires constructs a natural element yet they possess supernatural strength and speed, which, framed within limited human understanding, seems unnatural. Old age can be viewed through a similar lens. It is a natural progression, but the struggles which accompany this progression not only can necessitate reliance on unnatural medicinal and physical supports, but can lead to isolation and a sense of monstrousness. The elderly can, like the vampires, be seen as something other than human. This parallel duality is alluded to within Cavell's article, "While the hero chooses whether or not to put on his armour, these monsters come equipped with an inherent defence that aligns their bodies with the manmade world of constructed objects. What makes these bodies monstrous is precisely their uncanny resemblance to and simultaneous difference from the human body" (Cavell 163). Vampires cannot remove their monstrous aspects nor can humans forever evade the aging that transforms them into monsters.

Cavell asserts that it is a literary convention for the natural to oppose civilization, acting against both physical structures and the inhabitants. The villainy of these vampires lies in their

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5 Grendel and his mother's skin-like armour and his claw-like hands (Cavell 169-171)
disturbance of society and city functions under human control. These vampires are unnatural —
inhuman, powerful, monstrous — and they prey on the human fear of being out of control, the
loss of Self which is arguably also one of the most feared aspects of aging.

Both vampires and the elderly possess an uncanny similarity to ‘humans’ (the young),
being just different enough to be terrifyingly inhuman or “once-human” (Del Toro and Hogan
241). Tenga and Zimmerman's zombie construction also explicates the fear of the loss of Self.
Despite the uncanny similarities, Abraham's Crew of Light eventually views vampires as a
separate species (Khader 87), therefore able to be inconsequently eradicated. The elderly face a
more subtle extirpation as they are isolated until forgotten.

Palmer and his failing body forms a final example of the elderly as monstrous Others.
His frailty draws a conscious contrast between strong desirable bodies (Slevin 1004) and those
not functioning or out of control, reflective of zombies and soon to be rotting flesh (Tenga and
Zimmerman 78). Palmer's narration, "Most people didn't know what it was to mark existence
one sunrise at a time. What it is was like to depend on machines for one's survival. Good health
was the birthright of most..." (Del Toro and Hogan 306) illustrates his isolation and the
monstrousness of surviving by machine, a manmade existence, constantly in the shadow of
death. Palmer isolated by his expensively purchased walls, marked as contagion, as Other, is
compelled to seek out means to prolong his life, not by "avoid[ing] other old people and
seek[ing] the company of those younger" (Slevin 1005), but by seeking eternal life⁶;
succumbing to the unnatural desire to retain youth, embracing vampirism as a natural yet
unnatural solution to aging and death. Palmer is the antithesis of Abraham, who is all too

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⁶ Abraham confirms this by stating, "I believe Eldritch Palmer intends to live forever" (Del Toro and Hogan 339)
conscious yet accepting of his impending death, "[Abraham's heart] beat steadily if not robustly. How many more beats did he have in him?" (Del Toro and Hogan 301) yet does not attempt to avoid it. The triad of death, decay, and disease are taboo amongst Western cultures, but these inevitabilities are natural. It is the desirable body complex of the thin, healthy and youthful which submerges senescence while buoying unnatural, immortality-seeking procedures.

Although the elderly appear monstrous and Othered, they are not the most frightening or unnatural of the humans within the novel. Palmer's quest for eternal life parallels that for the fountain of youth as the deluded attempt to preserve their youthful bodies, elevating beauty to the marked currency of the realm with its own separate market (Slevin 1005). The body, according to Slevin, has become the central grounds for age-resisting practices and the amplification of the contagion-status of the elderly (1005). This market growth for anti-aging is addressed within the novel, "The program then went to a commercial for an “age-defying cream designed to "help you live longer and better.""

The ubiquity of such products reasserts the social construct of elderly as contagion, an avoidable disease, in contrast to the functional and desirable body of youth, spawning a sub-species dubbed by Slevin as “appearance junkies" (Slevin 1005). Gabriel Bolivar within The Strain, falls within this category, "He stared at the sickly pallor it gave him, the gaunt shadowing of his cheeks, the dead black pupils of his contact lenses. He was in fact a beautiful man, and no amount of makeup could hide it, and this, he knew was part of the secret of his success" (Del Toro and Hogan 147). Despite his profession aimed at corrupting beauty via his gothic, pretend-vampire stage makeup, his allure remains largely unobstructed and his popularity unaffected. Gabriel, a prominent figure in society stands

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7 "His entire career consisted of taking beauty and corrupting it" (Del Toro and Hogan 147).
in contrast to the contagium of the elderly. His transformation into an actual-vampire is marked by the rapid loss of stereotypically desirable features, including his hair and genitals, until what remains is an ambulatory corpse without total control, without Self. He is later described as, “Looking very dead, dangerous, and very hungry” (350). Gabriel, toward the end of the novel, is reduced to a mindless, ravenous zombie — a pallid drowned reflection of the desirable body valued by Western society — engorged by fears of aging and compelled by a monstrous hunger. This conflating of both anxiety and consumption is evocative of the duality of the monstrousness referenced by Cavell. Gabriel retains the drive for consumption that is associated with the youth of Western culture as he assumes a dangerous, corpse-like, monstrous visage.

Ansel Barbour possesses a similar obsession with Self, "[Ansel] pulled the string light on over the mirror, wanting to stare into his own eyes. Glowing, red-veined eggs of sallow ivory" (166). Ansel maintains a narcissistic desire to look at his reflection in the mirror, to measure himself against ideals, to see himself looking at himself — what he sees, however, is something to which he is not accustomed; it is alien, Other, contagium. The diction within Ansel and Gabriel's transformation scenes suggests illness — pallor and inflammation. Ansel's reassessing of Self is followed by his swift degeneration into the primal, the inhuman (255). He 'spared' his family from becoming part of the “Dear Ones” (400) and yet the experience of loss of control Others himself internally even as he outwardly transforms into the monstrous vampiric Other.

The Master's first collection of humans, those onboard flight 753, were young, able to infect their Dear Ones sooner, to replicate faster, as they move more freely through society. This
choice, although seemingly arbitrary, returns to the concept of what is desirable — able-bodied, youthful, surrounded by significant others and family. The dialogue between Ephraim and Nora,

"'This thing is spread by people. By unpeople.' [...]"

'Don't demonize the sick,' said Nora.

'But now... now the sick are demons. Now the infected are active vectors of the disease, and have to be stopped. Killed. Destroyed'" (244).

Their dialogue not only suggests the hierarchical position of the infected, of these monstrous Others as unpeople, but also elucidates the societal perspective on the sick. The diseased or disabled, much like the elderly, do not meet the requirements of a desirable body and occupy overlapping spaces, both physically (e.g. hospitals) and socially (Othered). This station is represented throughout the novel by the omnipresence of medicinals, a never ending pharmacopeia designed to repel symptoms of aging, pain (144, 147), muscle tension (147), or aesthetic perturbances via ubiquitous anti-aging remedies (247). The Master's prey ultimately are those classified as "young [...] daredevils" (281), those deluded into believing that youth is eternal for those possessed of desirable bodies. This delusion enables the initial spread of the vampiric disease as the young remain convinced that they can fend off whatever viral contagion affronts them — certain that succumbing to disease is exclusively the province of infants, the elderly, the weak, or imperfect. This misconception of immortality amongst youth is far more terrifying than the spectre of those afflicted by natural aging. Palmer's belief that many do not comprehend the proximity of death (306) is what leads him to initiate the chaotic events of the

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8 See also drug addiction (Del Toro and Hogan 326, 332) with regards to avoidance of life, aging, and/or pain. The abuse of these drugs explicates a loss of control.
novel so that he could again, "know their bliss. Soon he would know what it was not to worry about tomorrow" (306).

Throughout the novel, there is a shared unpleasant diction applied to both the elderly and the vampires. The young, healthy, and beautiful, and those that attempt to retain that visage beyond its natural shelf life are accorded more positive natural epithets. The unnatural retention of youth parallels the immortality of the vampire, the desire to stop time motivated by a determination to remain vigorous, alluring, and in control. The more complex hierarchical system of the vampires within *The Strain* in which powerful vampires hold dominion over those that lack a unified Self belies the efficacy of this trade. *The Strain*’s vampires act as counter-societal monsters, destroying the functioning organs of civilization (e.g. CDC) and using their most vulnerable members, the daredevil-youth\(^9\) that believe that all can be relieved with creams, medication, and their seemingly supernatural immune systems, as fodder for the viral component of this vampiric contagion.

Just as the vampires, the youthful mass that propagates a desirable body complex, devalues the old, seeing them as, “[slow], [dull], unattractive, inactive” (Slevin 1005) and disregards their under represented experience. The lives of the young are centred around their own, often frivolous, wants, consuming without conscience, as parasitic as the vampires. While the elderly can also be frivolous, those that have achieved age generally have also achieved the wisdom to avoid excess. Abraham’s pillbox (Del Toro and Hogan 387) may have been silver, but it contained medicine necessary for his survival.

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\(^9\) Abraham mentions, “He only hoped that fear would not turn him back into the powerless young man he had once been” (Del Toro and Hogan 358). Although this is in reference to his incarceration in Treblinka (289) and his early attempts to slaughter the Master, this warning also makes reference to the foolhardy beliefs in the immortality and limitless energy of youth, even against a superhuman foe. This notion of the daredevil youth as the primary target of the vampires is not dismiss the initial victims, the child and the middle aged man in Time Square. The subsequent
Is aging monstrous? It certainly can be frightening to the eternally youthful who encounter those encapsulated in enfeebled alien bodies, even as they deny the possibility of their ever becoming old. Do those already imprisoned, the monsters, see horror in their reflections or do their eyes behold their intrinsic Self? Abraham, continuously reminded of his body’s failings, likely sees the faded wrinkled external remains, but nonetheless holds on to his youthful Self through his purpose in combatting the invading monsters. Externalities can be painful — physically and psychologically — but as long as the mind remains, there is Self to oppose Othering. The aged that maintain Self are not monstrous regardless of physical deformities. Parasitic vampires and frivolous youth that consume without care cannot be other than monstrous regardless of their apparent vigour.
Works Cited


