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In Defense of Violent Fiction

The why's and values of violent and 'immoral' fiction.

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Abstract: This essay aims to answer two related questions; why are people able to accept actions of fictional characters that deviate from normal morality, and why works of fiction which invite such a response can be valuable.

The first parts of the essay is a general discussion of the criticism and defense of violent fiction; here we establish why it is problematic and why it is valuable, discussing the possible cathartic and educational aspects of fiction.

I then move on to a case study of the web serial *Worm*. This works as the primary explanation of *why* a reader is able to accept such actions, as the series' protagonist is both cruel and ruthless, while still being portrayed heroically. But it also serves to illustrate how the different parts of the story, which appear to glorify both violence and an ideology which condones it, can actually benefit the reader.

In this analysis, I look at both elements of the story and narrative, especially relevant is Wayne Booth's concept of an 'implied reader', as we discuss the *reader's* reaction to the text.

Keywords: Superheroes, Catharsis, Morality, Violence, Narrative Theory, Desensitization.

Table of Contents

1.1 Introduction

The Arts in general often depict violence, but this is especially true for narrative arts; many stories have violent conflicts as a central theme; anything between epic wars between men and gods to schoolyard bullying. Stories of this nature are enjoyed by countless people of many ages, and their purpose can vary widely; many exist simply to titillate and entertain, others attempt to describe the most horrific parts of humanity's history and psyche.

What is interesting, however, is that this tradition of storytelling has been criticized since antiquity; Plato argued for the censorship of Drama due to its allegedly corrupting influence, and ever since this criticism has prevailed, although aimed at different forms of media. Today, video-games are the most frequent target of this type of criticism, but movies, music and books have all suffered from similar treatment. While many defend artists' right to create whatever they wish.

Recent research, such as Comstock and Paik's meta-study of exposure to media violence, show that such exposure is related to heightened aggression, desensitization and reduced feelings of empathy. On a related but distinct note, many works of fiction are also criticized for propagating immoral or amoral behavior; instead of heightened aggression, the critique in this case is focused on how books or films spread ideologies which are faulty or undesirable; *Mein Kampf* is famously banned in Austria for its ideological statements. This differs from the problem of simply violent fiction, as the former is criticized for desensitizing people, and possibly causing heightened aggression or loss of empathy; the latter is criticized for *justifying* problematic behavior.

I find it necessary to explain why both violent and 'immoral' fiction can be valuable even *if* we accept its criticism as valid, as opposed to simply appealing to artistic freedom. That is not to say the science used to argue for the connection between violence and violent media is entirely reliable, as not all studies find any correlation between the two.

My thesis is that the criticism against violent media, if we assume it is valid, does not exclude the possibility of valuable beneficial effects. By exploring therapeutic and educational possibilities in fiction, I outline several possible ways the gruesome or immoral aspects of a narrative can have positive effects on the reader; its primary benefits appears to be its ability to help its audience better understand subjects which are difficult to approach in real life, such as aggression, fear or

cruelty. In addition to this, violent material appears to have at least some value for purposes of stress relief; what is noteworthy is that these benefits are not necessarily universal, and may require additional input to occur.

Added to this is a sub-thesis, proved via case study, that people can and do enjoy violent fiction without this affecting their normal values; by looking at aspects of a work of violent fiction I show *how* a reader comes to accept the cruelty inherent to the story, while not necessarily accepting parallel behavior in reality.

1.2 Method

To illustrate these points, I will begin by outlining the criticism, in the form it takes today and how this mirrors the millennia old argument for censorship proposed by Plato. While some relevant flaws need discussing, the primary goal of my defense is to show the value of the violent and immoral aspects of fiction *despite* the valid criticism aimed at it.

Thus, I will outline the theory of catharsis proposed by Aristotle and how this theory has been adapted by some in the modern world. The purpose of this section is to set limits to the term so it can be applied specifically to violence, as opposed to how it is applied towards other emotions, for example grief.

After discussing the possibilities and limitations of catharsis, I move to the question of literature that propagates ideologies or moral systems one may find disagreeable. The discussion of this question will be somewhat shorter, as it is not founded on empirical data to the same degree. Instead, this section contains a discussion on the problems of censorship on these grounds, coupled with the possible benefits of violent media.

To illustrate these points, we then move on to a case study of a work of fiction which I believe embodies the type of story most often criticized for these types of content- *Worm*. This story contains many instances of extreme violence, perpetrated by both antagonists and protagonists of the story. In addition to this, the story and narrative invites the reader not only to sympathize with the protagonist despite her use of extreme violence, but to accept that these actions are necessary or even heroic. The case study will thus answer why the reader is able to sympathize with a character whose actions, in normal circumstances, would be considered reprehensible- and why a text which is both violent and contrary to common morality can be valuable beyond simple enjoyment.

Finally, I will point to some of the limits of this essay both in relation to violent fiction in general and the primary source specifically, as possible areas for future research.

1.3 Theoretical Background

To discuss the value of fiction I look both at the ideas of the philosophers Aristotle and Plato, the latter being the originator of most arguments against fiction and the former an early defender. Plato's argument for censorship is today propagated by psychiatrists such as Joanne Cantor, who describes the potential media has in teaching people to hurt each other. Aristotle, on the other hand, mostly discuss the emotional impact of fiction and how it can aid the audience through catharsis, a concept which today is discussed by, for example, David Kearney. Although he does not use the word, I also include Bruno Bettelheim's writings on violent fairytales as support for the idea of cathartic value in violent fiction. Although he limits his claims to cathartic grief, I show how it can be applied to other emotions. Furthermore, Wilna A. Meijer's discussion about literature as beneficial to moral education is relevant to understanding the normative aspects of literature, as opposed to the emotional.

To give basis for my arguments, I have also included empirical research on the behavioral effects of media violence. This research shows several things; Comstock and Paik's meta-study show a correlation between the consumption of fictional violence and committing real world crimes, whereas Yancey and Savage's study fails to find such a correlation; neither study make any claims of a causative effect. "Desensitization to Media Violence: Links With Habitual Media Violence Exposure, Aggressive Cognitions, and Aggressive Behavior", by Anja Berger (et al), a study on desensitization to violence through media similarly show that such an effect occurs, yet appears inconclusive as to whether this lessened reaction is relevant to real world violence, or if the audience simply become desensitized to fictional violence.

To describe why the reader is able to accept the heroic protagonist of *Worm* a variety of literary and narrative theories are employed, one being Wayne Booth's 'implied reader', a concept which allows us to analyze the reader's reaction towards a text rather than the possible message of it. This 'implied reader,' sometimes called the 'textual reader' is a construct existing apart from the actual reader, and is based on what appears to be the 'ideal' reader of a text, as someone who reads it as it was

‘intended’ to be read. As such, the ‘implied reader’ stands opposed to the ‘implied author’, a similar construct which is commonly used to examine what appears to be the ‘purpose’ of the text- in this essay, we examine how different parts of the primary text affect the reader, this construction becomes necessary to discuss this.

One of the things that affect the reader is described by David Herman as ‘Script theory’, in his essay “Scripts, Sequences, and Stories: Elements of a Postclassical Narratology”. Its purpose is initially to explain why the human mind classifies certain sequences of words as *narratives* and others as something else. He also explains how we are able to infer information from a larger narrative structure which is only hinted at by the actual sequence of words given to us; an example used by him is the ability to infer a visit to a birthday party if the following phrase is uttered in a context of discussing birthday parties “John went to Bill's. John ate so much he got sick. Then John had to go home.”

Extrapolated to the reading of literature, many stories follow similar patterns, meaning that a reader of a book or watcher of a film will activate certain ‘scripts’ when familiar settings or characters are introduced. Whether these expectations are fulfilled or not differ from text to text, but it is an important piece in explaining why the audience is willing to accept the actions of certain literary characters.

Specific aspects of the narrative, such as the superhero motif or the concept of an immoral hero, are rather common and as such essays on other works contribute to the analysis on these parts of the story, primarily we look at John G. Cawelti’s discussion on violent fiction in “Myths of Violence,” where he describes the glorification of violence that persists in many genres of literature. Furthermore, Ashley M. Donnely’s discussion on heroic dehumanization, specifically with regards to ‘psychopath’ stories, contributes to the discussion on the protagonist of *Worm*.

To examine both the inter-textual aspects of our ability to accept violent protagonists, and the possible value violent fiction, research on the psychological effects of being subjected to it appears relevant. To verify these effects, I have looked at research regarding the desensitization to violence which those exposed to violence in the media may experience, the former of these two is supported by the research paper “Desensitization to Media Violence: Links With Habitual Media Violence Exposure, Aggressive Cognitions, and Aggressive Behavior.”

The primary source, *Worm*, also requires some introduction as it superficially is not an ordinary novel. It is a web-serial, a series of texts published two or three

times per week between the 11th of June 2011 and the 19th of November 2013 via the URL www.parahumans.wordpress.com , written under the pseudonym Wildbow[1].

2.1 Plato's Criticism and Beyond

Plato, who lived roughly 400 years BC, among other things argued that philosophy and poetry were at odds with each other (Griswold). Some definitions are required, as the terms may be unclear. First, however, I do not claim that my interpretation necessarily reflects Plato's intentions, as it is colored by my time and the fact that I have read only the second-hand explanations provided by the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Nonetheless, I believe these will suffice as a historical background for a current debate.

Philosophy will, for the purpose of this discussion, be seen as striving for concepts such as moral education and mental health, as these were ideals which appear to have been important to Plato's ideals of how a good human should be. While the concept likely incorporated many other parts, the ideals of good morality and mental health also mesh well with the contemporary debates we will discuss later.

During his time, Plato argued that Homer, the (probable) author of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* had become the teacher of the Greek, and failed in that role as he did not teach proper morals to the people. Griswold states that it is unclear whether Plato then objected to the stories themselves, or the form they were told in, or both; what appears clear is that he believed some aspect of poetry dangerous to the people's moral soundness. Furthermore, he argued that beyond the ideologies reflected in poetry the emotions they portrayed were harmful; depictions of grief, fear or even hilarity were abhorrent if ascribed to a heroic character as "strong souls are not overpowered by any emotion, let along any bodily desire"[2]. If the audience were overcome by emotion when watching a play, for example, this would cause lasting harm to mental health and moral soundness. Thus Plato argued for extreme

[1] The fact that it is published online poses a problem when referencing particular pieces of text, as a 'page' can be several thousand words long. To solve this issue I reference specific words on any given page by coupling that word with a number representing its iteration. This means a reference will look like "(5.3, "Both", 1)". To find the reference, you will have to go to the specific chapter, given by the first number and found via http://parahumans.wordpress.com/table-of-contents/ , then by typing the given word into your browser's search function (default set to CTRL+F for windows and COMMAND+F for MacOS) before scrolling to the given number.

censorship of all writing, forbidding displays of emotion and arguments for unsound ethics (Griswold).

As todays form of media entertainment differ from what was available at Plato's time, we cannot know what *he* would think about video-games, novels or movies. Yet, arguments of very similar nature are still being propagated.

Today the effects of media on behavior are perhaps being discussed more than ever, and studied in more detail. And much like Plato feared many studies appear to show that exposure to violent media causes some amount of aggressive tendencies or violent behavior. One example is Comstock and Paik's metastudy of behavioral studies, which points to a correlation between the two. Cantor's case study of Iranian schools, on the other hand, shows a direct causative effect between the airing of wrestling on national television and adolescent violence imitating it. Comparatively, literature is less heavily criticized today, although books such as George R.R Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* has received its fair share of criticism for numerous instances of sexual violence.

The question of immoral literature is often connected to violent content, as violence is often seen as immoral. Yet when looking at works such as the previously mentioned *Mein Kampf*, the problems present seem insufficiently explained by pointing to graphic content; rather, it is the ideology of the text which is problematic. Fictional works can certainly be similarly criticized; one could argue that epics such as *Lord of the Rings* propagate feudal ideologies, or those of racism due to the presence of the 'inferior' orc races. Our primary source, *Worm,* shows how the only path to survival is through extreme utilitarianism.

This side of literature is less studied, perhaps especially in popular culture, but the censorship of unorthodox political ideals shown through literature is perhaps more prevalent than the censorship of violence per se; consider Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, which is banned in several Muslim countries- or Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which was banned in the USSR as it criticized the reigning ideology.

2.2 Aristotle's Defense of Tragedy

The two issues in discussion- effects on emotions and effects on morality- are separate, and as such I believe they must be addressed separately. The first, its ability

[2] Spelling error in source

to arouse harmful emotions, was initially countered by Aristotle. He argued for a concept called "Catharsis", meaning purification or purging. He argued this was an effect of the tragic play; it caused "through pity and fear, the catharsis of these sorts of feelings". The exact meaning of these words is debated, for our purposes we will consider Richard Kearney's explanation of "pity and fear".

He explains that 'pity', in original Greek 'Pathos' refers to any emotion the audience can be expected to feel due to the narrative they are presented to. They are made to *empathize* with the characters in the play, or novel, or movie, and thus feel emotions such as anger, fear, joy or aggression. However, to counter this is 'fear', or 'Eleos', as is the original word. This, Kearney believes, is the distance between the audience and the world of the narrative. This distance allows the audience to experience the emotions I previously mentioned without being overcome by the realities which usually cause them. Kearney argues that this allows the audience to approach memories and repressed emotions too painful to otherwise experience, allowing those suffering from heavy psychological trauma to somewhat heal.

While Kearney while he does not make this connection, this could easily be applied to violent behavior and aggressive tendencies as well. The emotions are certainly different, so the precise nature of the effect may differ, something which will be explored in more detail.

The idea that watching violent movies or reading comics with violent content could have a cathartic effect is disputed by people such as Cantor, who sees case studies such as the Iranian schools and their wrestling-imitating children, or reports of some amounts of heightened aggression experienced directly after the viewing of a piece of violent film, as strong evidence against this notion. On the other hand, we have research such as Yancey and Savage's, which does not find any such relation. What appears safe to say is that this heightened aggression is not universal, but simply a risk factor. Instead, it seems worth to consider whether violent media *can* have a cathartic effect on its audience.

I believe this is the case, and this necessitates a more detailed explanation of what *catharsis* means in this particular scenario- I will in fact argue that it can mean *both* purification and purgation, and that these effects are separate. In the sense of purging, it would take the appearance of a more general relief of stress, a result which may only appear in some individuals. This could also explain why instances of stress relief do not appear on tests; these tend to search for heightened aggression,

but not instances of feelings of calm. This calming effect is not necessarily applicable in cases of people who are violent in general, but instead as a release for people who normally do not let their frustrations affect their surroundings. Note that this reaction may simply not occur, and is mentioned as a *possible* benefit of the violence in media, one that appears plausible, but lacks empirical backing; something Yancey and Savage attribute to no one looking for it.

The other sense, of *purification,* is more related to the healing process Kearney describes. In this sense of the word, the existence of violent and gruesome elements in fiction could be seen to help the readers understand their own morbid tendencies. Bettelheim, in *The Uses of Enchantment* discusses how the monsters of fairy tales help children give form to their inner demons; by including the cruel and the macabre in the story the child can "give these anxieties form and body and also show ways to overcome these monsters". For children, this can take the form of witches and trolls, yet I would argue adults have monsters too; our anxieties too can be given form and dealt with through literature.

This definition presupposes that the reader has a certain amount of aggression within them before ever being subjected to it from the outside. Especially in children these emotions can take different forms in different individuals. By thus exploring violence in literature, film or music it seems possible for the audience to better come to terms with aggression; while one could argue depicting violence encourages it, it could also be seen as a tool for teaching the normalcy of anger or even sadism. This too, of course, must be tempered; in the story of the outbreak of wrestling imitation Cantor says that these did not stop until airing time of the show decreased and media literacy programs counteracting its effects were started.

While Cantor believes this shows the harmful nature of violence glorifying media, I believe it also shows a great deal about its value in the sense of *purification*. By airing it, children were certainly injured in accidents; clearly a negative outcome. But it also led to a media-literacy program, allowing the children to understand the dangers associated with physical violence, especially as they did fight each other before, only with less harmful results. Cantor discusses primarily children's behavior, but it seems plausible to expect that adults can have similar experiences.

2.3 Morality

Plato's other cause of grief with literature was that it allegedly spread poor morality. I previously mentioned how this seems to motivate some books to be banned even today. The question is approached by Wilna A. Meijer, who describes literature as a "counterpoint" to the real world. A suitable word to preface what will be discussed below.

One can argue that all fiction is, in some way, based in an ideology; this can be an orthodox one, or it can be highly unorthodox. As opposed to the idea that violent media desensitizes the audience to violence, and through this contributes to a more violent society, the presence of ideology can be criticized if it subverts some notion of 'good morality'. This is especially relevant as literature can invite the reader to applaud actions or characters who fail to conform to said morality. Thus, one can fear that individuals who read such texts question the morals the text subverts. For example, *Worm* shows the protagonist sacrifice human lives, motivated by the belief this would *save* more lives. If applied to reality, such a mentality could be disastrous, and the general criticism appears to be that texts of such a nature, therefore, are dangerous.

While this is true, it also seems to presuppose is that readers who accept a fictional action would accept a parallel action in the real world. Wayne Booth draws attention to the difference between the *reader* of a text and the person who reads the text (Booth, 138); we do not apply the same values to fictional events as to real ones, even if we applaud *fictional* characters, similar characters in real life may be seen in a drastically different light. By creating a narrative in which characters follow a set of ideals the reader could conceivably be exposed to the implications of following those ideals, stripped of consideration for outside implications. This is common practice amongst philosophers, although often on much smaller scale than massive novels, as one often creates so-called thought experiments to problematize our intuitions of morality (Snyder).

A thought experiment is most often a question linked to a specific situation, often asking the audience to solve a problem which appears to lack palatable solutions: for example, killing an innocent person to save the lives of five others. While there are many differences, one could consider any narrative to be an incredibly complex thought experiment by putting oneself in the shoes of the

character that makes decisions. In much the same way as a thought experiment, a novel can challenge the reader to reconsider earlier notions.

The second is that simply because a text appears to propagate a reprehensible morality, that ideology may not be unfounded. This may be a historical tangent, but one need only to look at the many references to slavery and genocide in the Old Testament to understand that morality changes drastically with the times; condemning a work of literature simply because it propagates inconvenient morals seems ridiculous in this context.

The basic argument, that literature that spreads unwanted thoughts should be banned, appears patronizing. In many ways, it can be likened to the case of children imitating wrestling; the educational programs created to counteract the effects would not have happened if the wrestling had not been aired. In the same way, it appears healthy to allow any type of opinion to be voiced, through all kinds of media.

The danger only appears to be relevant if one assumes that people cannot critically assess what they read or hear. This is certainly a valid concern, but to use it to argue for censorship appears patronizing or lazy, when one instead can use it to argue for the need of more in-depth education.

3.1 Case Study

Having outlined the criticism towards violent and immoral fiction, and a generalized explanation of the positive effects it can have, I will examine a specific narrative to illustrate my points. This will also illuminate an important question in regards to the reading of these types of stories; while I have outlined some of the values, they seem to depend on the reader at least temporarily accepting actions which are normally reprehensible. If the only ones who liked violent fiction were actually violent people, the case for their defense would be far different. Instead, most people who enjoy violent fiction show no such tendencies, making it necessary to ask why they do find it possible to enjoy it.

Worm has been chosen because it contains both extreme scenes of violence, and invites us to sympathize with a character that is both incredibly cruel, and motivated by a utilitarian set of morals many find objectionable. In many ways, the story is an extended variant on a type of thought experiment, as its protagonist does what many that are posed that problem seem unable to; she kills the few to save the

many. This is interesting, as most people when posed such an experiment will do the opposite, refuse to kill one to save many.

I will outline the elements of story, narrative and inter-textual experience that allow the reader to sympathize with this character. In doing so, connections will be drawn to both the criticism aimed at these elements, and the positive effects they effect.

3.2 Synopsis

Worm is primarily the story of Taylor Hebert, a character who goes from victim of bullying to one of the nation's most prominent Supervillains, and from that to a Superhero, and finally savior of the human race. Taylor herself is introduced as a sixteen year old girl, the victim of a long campaign of bullying and in possession of the ability to control invertebrates. Her initial ambition is to become a Superhero[3]. Her story is structured around a series of enemies, as she and those around her are placed before increasingly dangerous situations. The first of these is a gang war against the Azn Bad Boys (ABB) (4-5), followed by the walking natural disaster Leviathan (8), a group of traveling, parahuman[4] serial killers called 'Slaughterhouse 9'(11-14), the power hungry crime-lord turned army officer Coil (16), a monstrous and vengeful girl called Noelle (18-19), a thermonuclear entity called Behemoth (24), the return of 'Slaughterhouse 9' and their army of clones (26), and finally the nigh omnipotent Scion (27-30).

Following is an analysis of what intra- and inter-textual factors play into the reader's ability to both accept these actions and sympathize with the protagonist.

3.3 Escalation

This seems to be the primary story element which needs to be addressed in this essay, as it plays a significant part in explaining an audience's willingness to accept the actions of a character.

On a purely textual level, escalation refers not only to the increasing brutality of Taylor herself, but also to the increasing brutality of the series in general. Taylor's

[3] A term which specifically denotes a parahuman who fights crime and whose actions are sanctioned by the government of their country of residence. As such, when Taylor instead becomes member of a group of Villains she remains the 'hero' of the story, but is not a Hero

[4] Parahuman refers to any human character who displays para-normal abilities, such as pyro kinesis or telepathy.

first battle (1.4, 1.5) between her and the Villain Lung is fairly clean; the only major injury suffered is by the Villain, whose genitalia Taylor injects with several doses of insect venom. When we learn that these had to be amputated this is treated primarily as comedy (2.6, let, 11), especially as the character possess incredibly heightened regeneration.

Later engagements become increasingly brutal; chapter 4.8 contains the first death of the series', Taylor herself condones the use of lethal force in 13.3 (Ignore, 2) and applies it herself in 14.5, when she tosses grenades at enemies, although she fails in killing them. Her first successful attempt at someone else's life happens in 16.3 (you're not, 2). In the following chapters, she orchestrates the death of- or directly kill four people (19.7, the sun, 1) (21.6, focus, 3) (22.4, as though, 2). Chapter 24.4 (without, 3) adds an interesting dimension to this, as she is seen more or less deliberately betraying an ally to further her current goals; the ultimate fate of the character is unknown, and the motivations behind the betrayal are ambiguous. Chapter 26 depicts a prolonged series of battles where Taylor leads a group of parahumans in battle. The group kills several people in battle, but perhaps more relevant is Taylor's murder of the three-year old Aster, who was taken hostage by the enemy parahumans. During a part of 29.5 (one pass, 1) she attacks a large group of hostile's using a highly destructive weapon, the actual death toll is unknown, we are only made aware that she uses a lethal weapon to indiscriminately attack a large group. Finally, chapter 30 shows how Taylor uses her powers to mind-control every parahuman in existence to use them to fight a desperate battle against an immensely powerful enemy, an action very similar to the thought experiment described earlier.

As mentioned, her adversaries too become more and more lethal; the engagement containing the series' first death, 4.8, depicts this as a somewhat important event. Later battles, such as the prolonged battle against Leviathan in chapter 8 reference the deaths of dozens. The 'Slaughterhouse 9'murder and maim people in the hundreds, and in the most gruesome ways imaginable; one could speculate this is what motivates Taylor to murder a small girl rather than let her remain their hostage. Similarly, using mind-control to force people to fight Scion must be taken in relation to his own actions, which had killed billions.

While the antagonists of the series tend to kill *more* people, these deaths seem to be qualitatively similar; no apparent pattern exists showing that the victims of the ABB suffer more than those killed by Scion. On the other hand, Taylor herself, much

like she is more willing to use lethal force, employs crueler tactics; when she kills Coil she shoots him in the head, whereas Noelle is incinerated alive. The people she kills in 22.4 are killed by swarms of insects; one is stung repeatedly and the other is suffocated by them directly entering her lungs. She defeats Scion by emotionally torturing him until he crawls into fetal position and allows himself to be killed.

3.4 Desensitization

The gradual escalation of violence could be expected to cause a level of desensitization in the reader. This term, in psychology, refers to the mind's ability to adapt to stimuli; what is scary, funny or disgusting the first time will not evoke as strong a reaction the second time, and a weaker one still for every subsequent encounter. That this effect is applicable to violence in all media seems very likely; the paper "Desensitization to Media Violence: Links With Habitual Media Violence Exposure, Aggressive Cognitions, and Aggressive Behavior" shows that, with time, an audience exposed to violent videos will experience a reduced level of "anxious arousal" when subjected to these, combined with increased sensations of "pleasant arousal"; the conclusion they draw is that prolonged exposure habituates the audience to violence, making it more appealing and less appalling.

In *Worm* desensitization is a relevant topic to discuss because of the aforementioned escalation of violence, but also because the text shares many themes with other works of fiction: as such the reader can be expected to experience desensitization both due to the structure of the text itself, but also due to previous experiences with the genre. That is not to say the reader wouldn't be shocked when Taylor murders a small child or tortures Scion to death, but the extreme disgust which would normally dominate these scenes may not appear.

Desensitization as a concept is usually discussed on a more general level; as readers becomes more experienced, by reading or watching several violent narratives, the shock value of violence decrease. This is likely another important aspect of the reader's ability to accept Taylor's extreme brutality; as the reader is familiar with the world of Superheroes and Villains from other works he will be far likelier to view the brutality of the series as normal. This is explained in part by the script theory of David Herman; previous experiences are almost automatically integrated into the reader's understanding of the text in front of him.

Superhero stories tend to follow a very common formula of "Hero beats Villain". The moral implications of these actions are not usually important, something one can also credit to a genre of fiction which often glorifies violence. This is what could be called a "script", as the narrative sets up certain expectations, in this case that the protagonist is a hero, the reader is more likely to ignore aspects of the story which could go counter to that expectation. Compare to a text which does not create such an expectation, where the protagonist would need to do more to appear heroic.

3.5 Dehumanization

In most stories with the primary focus of showing a hero defeating a villain, be it a western, a fantasy epic or a superhero comic, the antagonist is often dehumanized to some extent. This can be achieved through many different means, be it their excessive cruelty to small animals or their monstrous appearance. The gap this opens between the villain and the reader makes it easier for the latter to rationalize the violence committed against the former. The protagonist of a work of fiction is often more relatable or admirable; we get to see their faces.

This relates to David Herman's script theory; the initial confrontations of the story conform to a standardized formula where the protagonist is consistently just and the antagonists are one-dimensionally evil, a 'superhero script' activates within the reader and the questionable aspects of the protagonist's actions are glossed over. That such a script can be expected to exist is supported by, among others, Cawelti, whose essay details a long tradition of tales which depict justified bloodshed and the glorification of this harsh justice. It seems that the Superhero is simply next in the line of these archetypical heroes.

In *Worm* this script is very easily started, as the beginning chapters contain both of the elements I previously mentioned; the Hero is portrayed in a very sympathetic light, owing to her initial role as a victim of bullying and the determination to do 'good' despite her own troubles. Similarly, the first antagonists of the series, Lung and Bakuda, display very few human qualities; their faces are never described due to masks, their actions are brutish and cruel, their voices are described in primarily negative tones; Lung speaks in a "snarl" and Bakuda wears a gas-mask which makes her voice "eerily monotone". This conforms to the

expectations of the genre and serves to activate a script not concerned with questioning the protagonist.

However, as the story progresses Taylor's 'victims' gain more human qualities; the 'Slaughterhouse 9', comprised of seemingly irredeemable psychopaths, show some emotions beyond murderous glee; in their case it is juxtaposed with their horrible crimes to create an unsettling atmosphere, an example being the leader's observation that a younger member appears to desire familial bonds (11.h, wanted,4), while said member had just infected a group of people with highly lethal microbes (11.h, turned, 7). With later antagonists, these qualities are made more prominent; a smaller group of criminals which Taylor attacks is seen relaxing and preparing dinner before battle, one of Taylor's victims in 22.4 is known to be a father and a husband. Scion, perhaps most importantly, is defeated precisely because he had acquired some human qualities, allowing him to feel grief for the death of his partner; while this motivates him to act out destructively it is described as the rage of a small child.

3.6 The Value of Desensitization

Escalation and dehumanization appear to have the primary purpose of maintaining a certain emotional reaction towards the text; by escalating the violence, the reader is able to accept it to some degree due to precedence, while the material also retains a certain amount of shock-value; the increasing violence counteracts desensitization. While these techniques appear necessary from a story-telling perspective, the effect of dulling reactions to violence is one of the most well-documented and criticized effects of its prevalence in media. What seems unclear is if fictional violence acts to lessen reactions to real violence; research appears to show a correlation, but considerations may not always have been taken regarding differences in genre or setting; is a fantasy movie, depicting violence between orcs and elves, as effective at desensitization as a more realistic movie set in modern times? This question I cannot answer, but it seems worth considering.

If we assume desensitization does happen the negative aspects ought to be clear; if violence is not as shocking to us, it appears likely that we become less invested in preventing it, not only making the audience itself more aggressive, but also making them less likely to object when other people are.

On the other hand, these aspects also seem necessary for the cathartic effects I outlined earlier; if the violence of a narrative is too gruesome, it becomes unsuitable as a means of releasing stress. Similarly, a reader struggling with aggressions may benefit from 'guilt free' violent fiction. Bettelheim discusses the necessity of horrific monsters in fairy tales, but also the gruesome methods in which they are destroyed. The latter are not portrayed as evil, but neither are they expected to teach children to throw unwanted individuals into ovens. The dehumanization of the witch, in this example, is necessary for us to feel good about her death. For adult fiction, such as *Worm,* this justified violence could serve a similar purpose; not to teach cruelty, but to learn to accept that part of the mind.

3.7 Narration

The story is primarily told from the perspective of Taylor; most events are 'seen' through her eyes, although several interlude chapters are told from the perspective of other characters.

This style of narration is highly relevant to the reader's impression on the characters, as different aspects of the story are told in variable tones. In the case of Taylor's narration, this is most evident when comparing descriptions of antagonists and their victims, and how Taylor and *her* victims are portrayed. How villains are described in general is discussed in some detail in the previous section, but it is important to note that when they are given more human qualities this is often through interlude chapters. Their victims, however, are often described in greater detail by Taylor, especially evident around the 'Slaughterhouse 9', where the reader is given many explicit descriptions of mutilated bodies and survivors.

The portrayal of Taylor and those she victimizes is perhaps best exemplified by how Taylor's internal monologue shifts depending on situation; in combat the narration is to a large degree externally focalized, describing the battle in neutral terms; describing the fight against Behemoth she says:

> The Endbringer[Behemoth] staggered under the onslaught, but he was slowly adapting. They'd managed to pin him for a minute, even costing him some ground by driving him back once or twice, but each successive minute saw him rolling with the punches more, advancing further when he found a second or two of mild reprieve. (24.3)

When emotions are approached in battle, it is *usually* with regard to the stress and demoralization her allies suffer from. Furthermore, the suffering of antagonistic characters is almost never touched upon and their wounds are very rarely in full display. This is a part of the dehumanization of these individuals, but it is especially evident when we consider the characters only from Taylor's own point of view.

For example, at two separate times she disoculates antagonistic characters to disarm them; the former, Lung, would regenerate any minor injury too quickly and restraining him with other means was not feasible (5.9, jammed, 1). The second, a man named Valefor, could hypnotize people with a glance, so destroying his eyes is explained to be the only sure way to render him harmless (21.3, maggots, 1). In both of these scenarios, and almost any situation where Taylor hurts another character, their reactions are muted or non-existent; Lung is unconscious and unresponsive; Valefor is overcome by a look of "defeat" and nothing else is made explicit. The character she betrays in 24.3 is teleported away, never to be seen; the reader is rarely subjected to the gruesome results of her actions.

Added to this is that her actions in these scenarios seem to be motivated purely by necessity. That is another important aspect of how combat scenarios are narrated; because everything is told via her sensory inputs and thoughts, the battles are *hectic*. An example of this is the battle against Leviathan, where a communication device constantly repeats the names of those killed or rendered unconscious; the beginning paragraph of the battle ends with "*Carapacitator down, CD-5. Krieg down, CD-5. WCM deceased, CD-5. Iron Falcon down, CD-5. Saurian down, CD-5*" (8.1, fast, 8). All are names of different parahumans, and in the following chapters such messages are relayed every few paragraphs, heightening the pace of the action. The choices Taylor makes are portrayed as the choice of doing nothing or moving forward, where the former choice is likely to have catastrophic implications. When she, for example, orders the destruction of Noelle this is done with the knowledge that some people may be caught in the blast; but we are also aware that a better chance at killing her may not appear. When she betrays her ally in 24.3, this too is a spur of the moment decision. This hectic tone seems very significant as the reader does not doubt her motives.

These are consistently seen to be altruistic, something which is apparent outside of combat. During these lulls, the narration becomes more internally

focalized; Taylor's own doubts and emotional troubles become more important, a constant that began in chapter one, where her primary motivations were to escape bullying and until the very end; prior to engaging Scion a chapter is spent describing her attempting to cope with her failure to stop that event unfolding; thoughts such as "The mask I'd erected to see things through to this point was cracking and I couldn't bear to show anyone my face" (27.1) express both shame and grief. When she discusses her motivations for fighting this is "keeping the peace, keeping people safe … basic stuff." This combination of emotional displays and altruistic ideals make it easier for the reader to accept the extremes she goes to.

When she interacts with other groups, we are constantly made aware that these doubt her intentions, something the reader is never made to do. This initially reinforces the aforementioned image of her as the 'hero' of the story, and it supports the script. Coupled with the slow escalation of violence, this aids the reader in staying connected to the character through her own transformation from bully victim to a ruthless utilitarian superhero.

This connection is subverted throughout chapter 30; towards the end of chapter 29, she has another parahuman alter her brain in an attempt to unlock the inherent limits of her powers. It does allow her powers to no longer affect only insects, but all organisms. It also alters her mind, making her display increasing amnesia and paranoia; towards the end she no longer understands speech, and has forgotten the names of everyone around her, the reader can only discern who she talks about by visual traits. Sentence and paragraph length is also shorter, her diminishing ability for speak is demonstrated even through stuttering and the inability to recall specific words; speech such as "*Same strat- strat- same tactic as before"* are common.

Interestingly enough, the altered state of mind Taylor exhibits here serve to make her more sympathetic when she is later cured. In part it acts as an extreme variation on the hectic tone of previous engagements, as her most inhumane actions are made in a state where she is almost entirely disconnected from her normal frame of mind. More importantly than that, however, it acts to alienate the reader from the character. This is something Donnely describes in relation to *Dexter*, and other narratives with psychopathic protagonists, as something instrumental to their popularity. Because they are decidedly *other*, the audience do not need to overly empathize with them and can instead focus on their actions. In the case of Dexter, a 'psychopath' and serial killer who targets only other murderers, this means that one

can accept or even applaud his efficiency in bringing justice to criminals without the need to consider any kinship to him or his actions. In the case of Taylor, the same seems to apply; as the end results of her actions are favorable, we can accept them; because the distance between her internal narrative during chapter 30 and that we normally associate with is so great that distance is created between the reader and the character.

This chapter also include more hints at the actual suffering Taylor causes, as we see several people literarily torn apart due to her forcing them into battle, or when one of them has a heart attack due to the stress of being a passenger in his own body. The pain of Scion, even, is seen much more clearly than that of any previous antagonist; 30.6 describes his descent into hopelessness, culminating in the image of him "hunched over in the air, hands on his head, knees against his chest, rotating as though gravity didn't touch him, no conception of up, down, left or right." before being obliterated, the entire chapter detailing the methodical destruction of a frail psyche.

Added to this it seems another element needs to be discussed, and that is the awareness of how Taylor appears from the outside. While chapter 30 serves to distance the reader from Taylor, several interlude chapters serve similar purposes; perhaps most notably 26.x 1 and 2, where we see events from the perspective of Theo 'Golem' Anders, the brother of Aster. Here the reader, among other things, sees Taylor from an outside perspective. I mentioned before that the reader stays connected to the protagonist through internal focalization on her emotions, but stripped of that she is mostly described as unsettling or terrifying, Theo likens her to a "machine with a battery removed". This unsettling appearance is hinted at throughout the series, as characters make reference to her habit of keeping insects under her clothes (18.3, so many, 1) or problematize her actions in combat. For example the betrayal in 24.3, is brought up and almost gives her a jail sentence, but is ultimately defended by other combatants (25.1, anything, 3).

3.8 The Effects of Narration

The combination of narrative elements I have described here is what motivates me to define the 'implied reader' as someone who sympathizes with Taylor and reluctantly accepts the necessity of her actions; her motives and emotions are easy to identify with on the one hand, and the results she achieves are largely favorable on

the other. This is important as it is instrumental in allowing the reader to both sympathize with, and accept the actions of, the protagonist- in addition to the previously established elements which act to lessen the impact of the violence itself.

This is what makes this text an example of a piece of fiction that allows the audience to question the issues at hand. For the reasons previously discussed, the reader may be able to, at least temporarily, accept Taylor and her actions. But as her actions are also seen to cause much grief, it invites us to also question them, especially towards the end. One could argue that the positive impressions exist to trick the reader into acceptance, but I would argue this is necessary to make it possible to ever consider such a cruel savior commendable.

This exemplifies the concept of "literature as a counterpoint" well, as it leaves the reader with the conflict of accepting the necessity of actions which inflict immense suffering on innocents. While this could be seen as an argument for a reprehensible philosophy, it also appears possible to see it as a contribution to developing a more comprehensive one, as the *benefits* of Taylor's actions are as significant as the problems.

4.1 Conclusion

This essay is meant to answer two questions; why are people, who normally carry some amount of reverence for human lives, able to accept fictional heroes who violate these morals. And, if we do enjoy narratives containing such characters, can it be a good thing? What values exist in a narrative containing both large amounts of highly descriptive violence, and which seems to propagate a morality which is normally seen as reprehensible in action, if not in theory?

By analyzing *Worm*, a web-serial published under the pseudonym Wildbow, I have found several elements which seem to contribute to the reader ultimately accepting the protagonist to some degree. One of the most important of these appears to be the desensitization the reader likely experiences, both as a result of previous reading experience and due to the slow escalation of violence, something initially aided by the lack of human elements found within the antagonists.

The other significant factor appears to be the emotional accessibility of the protagonist, as many can identify with the personal troubles she experiences, such as bullying and parental alienation, combined with her consistently altruistic motives. This also stands in contrast to the high amounts of tension displayed during combat

scenarios, making many of the choices which one afterwards would consider problematic appear as more akin to 'fight or flight responses'.

This leads us to the other question; what values are to be found within such a story. The first, catharsis, suffers from a great deal of controversy, some of it dating over two millennia back. And while this controversy is somewhat well founded, it seems doubtful that it is as universally applicable as its proponents make it out to be. Instead, I would argue that while violent media can cause some amounts of aggressive behavior, it appears plausible that it could also act cathartically for other individuals; the research into this question is lacking. Whether the net amount of violence goes down or up due to the existence of violent media is, to date, undecided.

In addition to possibly being cathartic, I argue that violent media can allow the reader better to understand morality. While Plato argued that teaching morals through the arts ultimately corrupts the audience, this argument seems founded in two misconceptions, the first being that a reader or viewer takes what he sees at face value. The second misconception is that current morality is intrinsically better than other ideologies, meaning that a text we find morally reprehensible could in fact be representative of a superior ideology. That being said, the negative aspects of violent fiction should not be ignored; this is simply a voice for the other side of the argument.

4.2 Further Research

Taylor could be seen as a utilitarian superhero, or one could read the story as an advocacy of utilitarian ideals; the rights of the few are often sacrificed for the safety of the many, to great effect. It might be interesting to examine more closely what ideology(ies) is/are represented in the text and how they are portrayed. Rather than examine it as an example of a "dangerous" ideology, one could examine whether it actually is a compelling argument for utilitarian ideals.

A feminist reading of the text may be fruitful, as Taylor is an incredibly dominant and forceful character despite being a young female; she is highly successful both as a leader of a criminal organization, a field commander in combat and, later on, an important figure in military operations.

Her story could be interpreted in many ways from a feminist perspective, as she defies the stereotypical expectations of how a female super-hero should act and

appear. In one way she could be seen as a rejection of being female, especially on a symbolic level; she does not menstruate due to stress, and her murder of the toddler hostage Aster could be seen as a symbolic rejection of the "mother instinct". On the other hand she is consistently portrayed as a very caring character, for example turning her 'secret Supervillain lair' into a daycare for orphaned children, a stereotypically female action. One could even argue that her gender is largely cosmetic, serving to neither reject nor embrace any particular gender role.

With regard to violent fiction in general, more empiric research needs to be done regarding the possible cathartic effects of violent fiction. Most research is made to show if media violence does contribute to violent behavior, but very little actual research has been made which measures cathartic effects. While it is possible it only occurs in a minority of cases, it would be interesting to have data on this minority. This research would have to consider the variations of the term, as the results may differ if the release of stress is measured, or whether it can help people come to terms with their own aggressions.

I do not differentiate between popular and classical media; I only note that contemporary critics tend to focus on the latest forms, today games and movies. I choose to not greatly distinguish between these and literature because the latter, together with drama and other forms of classical media, was criticized when they were 'popular'. If a distinction is made, one needs to prove that qualitative differences between these types of media exist.

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