

Gender Boundary Transgression in the Works of King, Koontz, and Rice

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Abstract

It is well accepted that men and women are depicted in stereotypical and highly traditional ways in media. Men are encouraged to compete aggressively, take a leadership role, to be unemotional, and independent. Women, on the other hand are implicitly ordered to engage in expressions of self-denying generosity, present a pleasing appearance, express emotions freely, develop a “nice” personality, and be subordinate to male-initiated actions. These same kinds of gender stereotypes have been a staple of horror fiction, but do we find any changes in contemporary horror novels? Nine works of horror fiction by King, Koontz, and Rice were analyzed to provide an explanation for this puzzling reality.

Introduction

What does it mean to act as a man or a woman? Often these statuses are depicted in stereotypical and highly traditional ways. Men are identified as aggressive competitors, natural born leaders, emotionally distant, and independent; women, on the other hand, are seen as selflessly generous caretakers, pleasant to look at, in touch with their emotions, nice, and subordinate to men (Lindsey 1997; Wood 1997; Tannen 1990; Lottes 1988; Schmitt and Millard 1988; Mast and Herron 1986; Bem 1974; Busby 1975; Broverman et al. 1972). The media, in particular the movies, television, and music, has overwhelmingly presented the public with these same traditional images of men and women (Inness 1999; Colmenero 1999; Scodari 1998; Lindsay 1997; Wood 1997; Sommers-Flanagan et al. 1993; Cowan and O’Brien 1990; Tuchman,

Daniels and Benet, 1976). Popular fiction, the subject of this study, has also been found to present characters who conform to these same traditional gender role scripts (Modleski 1997; Dubino 1993; Radway 1991; Palmer 1991; Cranny-Francis 1988; Lowery 1983; Brownmiller 1975; Cawelti 1976).

Even though popular fiction often presents a very traditional picture of gender, it was hypothesized in this project that when one looked closely at a single genre of popular fiction -- horror -- there would be gender boundary transgressors -- characters who worked outside the normative scripts of gender. What was found, however, was something different.

A content analysis of nine books was completed: Stephen King's *Bag of Bones* (1998), *Dolores Claiborne* (1993) and *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* (1999), Dean Koontz's *Seize the Night* (1999), *The Voice of the Night* (1980) and *False Memory* (1999), and Anne Rice's *Vittorio the Vampire* (1999), *The Vampire Armand* (1998) and *Merrick* (2000). Words and phrases were identified as conforming to traditional or non-traditional gender role scripts as well as major plot elements.

Gender Typologies

Before we progress any further, however, let us look at the concept of gender. Gender is a social construct based on society's identification of categories that have been defined as male and female. In the dominant American culture, gender has been based traditionally on a binary reading of social roles (Bem 1993).

Socialization into these gender roles is a life-long practice with reinforcement and modification of the gender scripts occurring throughout the life-span (Lorber 1994; Blumer 1969). Gender is designated at the birth of a child. The critical indicator in our culture is visible

sex organs. Gender construction commences immediately – pink name tags for girls and blue for boys. As Simone de Beauvoir has said, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (1953, p. 267) and, by extension, a man. Children have internalized this sense of gender by age three (Garber 1992). For both adults and children, however, the lines of demarcation between the genders are made very clear if imperceptible to most. “Gendered social arrangements are justified by religion and cultural productions and backed by law, but the most powerful means of sustaining the moral hegemony of the dominant gender ideology is that the process is made invisible” (Lorber 1994).

From this perspective there are only three categories of gender – male, female, and the deviant other. The deviant category would incorporate a variety of groups including individuals who define themselves as lesbians, homosexuals, bisexuals, cross-dressers, transgendered individuals, or androgynous people – essentially anyone not socially defined as heterosexual. It would also include those people who fail to perform the role script that is prescribed for that particular gender – men not seen to behave in a “manly” fashion and women seen not to behave in a “womanly” fashion. This deviant category, however, would also include a third group -- those who suffer from gender misattribution, people who are not correctly identified by members of society. Their role scripts are misread or misinterpreted by individuals in their social groups.

Goffman (1963; 1959) has contended that gender is socially scripted and that individuals engage in “gender display” (1976) of these scripts. Gender, therefore, is a performance, or a “stylized repetition of acts” (p. 140), and gender is the “costume, a mask, a straitjacket in which men and women dance their unequal dance” (Lerner, 1987, p. 238). These gender displays cue our interactions with people, calling up the appropriate role scripts for a particular situation. Bordo (1993) has identified our bodies and their adornments as “texts” which are read in our

social groups, usually leading to a correct identification of gender. These scripts are made up of many elements including appearance, behavior, attitudes, etc.

While this has been the traditionally accepted view of gender, it certainly is not the only one. A polarized view of gender is not found in all cultures nor at all historical time periods. Many cultures have defined a social space for those individuals who failed, for one reason or another, to fit into the two dominant gender molds. In Native American culture, for example, the berdache and the manly-hearted woman are examples of these alternative gender categories. These cultures have normalized methods for gender difference. And, indeed in our own post-modern world, this binary view of gender has in some instances, particularly in the academic world, begun to change. For much of the dominant culture, however, there is still a strong commitment to these dichotomous images of gender.

Individuals who fall outside of the two dominant gender categories often suffer repercussions. West and Zimmerman (1987) have indicated that when labeled as a member of a specific sex category, a person takes on a “moral responsibility” for behaving within the role script of that classification. This moral component raises gender compliance to a whole new level. Failure to comply places oneself in the category of deviant, and deviance is answered with sanctions in all societies. Those who fail to live within the boundaries of normatively identified gender roles then are often seen as deviant by the dominant majority in the culture. These gender boundary transgressors are often treated as outsiders, and, as Butler (1990) has said, “We regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (p. 140).

Treatment of Gender Transgressors

How then are gender transgressors sanctioned? In their research on gender transgression and middle-childhood aged children, McGuffey and Rich (1999) have identified that those males

who transgress the traditional boundaries are considered deviant and labeled as outcasts by the other boys. Name-calling, teasing, physical aggression and exclusion are practiced against them. When boys interacted with a transgressing girl, they de-feminized the girl and treated her as if she was not a member of the female gender.

For girls, McGuffey and Rich found, the gender lines were equally clear, but the characteristics of the female script were different. While McGuffey and Rich felt that gender transgression was more widely accepted by the girls who continued to include both male and female transgressors, the critical element for acceptance of both groups were demonstrations of niceness, not gender transgression; people who were not considered to be nice as defined by the particular social group were excluded.

For both genders, it was the boys who actually set the gender boundaries. Behaviors that had traditionally been identified as feminine could be “masculinized” if accepted by and practiced by a high status boy, and niceness is a component of the traditional female role script.

Sanctioning of gender transgression, of course, does not occur only with children. Punishment can vary greatly from the lesser serious forms such as snubbing to the most horrible and violent acts such as rape and murder. Devor’s (1987) investigation of what she called “gender blenders” -- women who wore short hair, no makeup or jewelry and dressed in unisex clothing -- reported the feelings of humiliation they experienced when they were challenged for their presence in women’s restrooms or when they were physically ejected from them (Lucal 1999). While this treatment is certainly unpleasant and emotionally damaging, there are unfortunately other more severe sanctions against gender transgressors. Consider, for example, the brutal murder of Matthew Shephard.

Gender Transgression in the Media

If gender boundary transgressors are sanctioned in “real” society, what do we see in the media we commonly encounter? Characters in American movies and television programs who deliberately break with the traditional images of gender are often portrayed harshly or suffer terribly. The point is that in the media, particularly on television and in the movies, we find many examples of characters who are sanctioned, often severely, for breaking through the normative gender boundaries and attempting to live some form of distinctive and non-typically gendered life.

There is a category of gender transgressor in the media, however, that is dealt with more kindly; members of this group usually have adopted the gender script of the other because they are eluding danger or attempting to achieve a socially sanctioned goal (Lieberfeld and Sanders 1998). They are forgiven if and when they return to their appropriate gender roles. Characters in this category would include Shakespeare’s Viola in *Twelfth Night*, Dustin Hoffman’s *Tootsie* and Robin William’s title character in *Mrs. Doubtfire*.

Gender Boundary Transgression in Selected Novels of King, Koontz, and Rice

What about gender roles bending in the nine novels that were the subject of this research?

Gender boundary transgressions by characters occurred in four major categories:

1. Characters who deliberately chose non-typical gender role scripts for themselves,
2. Characters who because of circumstances – usually to evade danger or to realize a goal -- temporarily and voluntarily took on non-typical gender role behaviors,
3. Male characters who suffered normatively allowable emotional overload, and
4. Females who used aggression to protect or nurture.

The fifth category, gender misattribution, was not found in any of the analyzed novels.

When we look at the nine novels analyzed in this study, we find the following. In two of the Koontz novels (*The Voice of the Night* and *Seize the Night*), we find primarily male characters. In *The Voice of the Night*, the main male character of Colin transgresses the boundaries of the traditional image of masculinity. He is a misfit, a victim, and a loner. This transgression is not voluntary. In fact, he develops his friendship with the sociopath Roy because it is Roy who matches the generally accepted gender role script with his charm, intelligence, blond-haired, blue-eyed good looks, and athleticism. By the end of the book, however, Colin has begun to conform to the more conventional images as he takes on the male script's requirement that he act as protector and defender of friends and family. He defeats Roy and saves the girl. An additional point to consider, Colin is a young boy. As a society we are more forgiving of less than "manly" behavior if it is a characteristic of immaturity, although we do strongly sanction it. *The Voice of the Night* can be seen as a coming of age novel with Colin demonstrating the mature components of the male role script by the end of the novel.

In Koontz's *Seize the Night* we once again see a less than average male character. This time, however, it is due to illness. Chris suffers from xeroderma pigmentosum, a disease which requires he stay out of direct sunlight. Everything else about this character, however, fits the male role script – rugged good looks, bravery, intelligence, passion. His only indication of a possibly less than standard role image is the grief he expresses at the death of his best friend. This, however, does fall within the bounds of the gender typology. Men are allowed to express emotion, at least in the short-term, if it is grief, anger, or passion.

In the third Koontz novel, *False Memory*, there are two main characters – Martie, the wife (who has the atypical gender occupation of a video game designer) and her husband Dusty,

a painting contractor. Despite Martie's non-traditional occupation, both she and Dusty read like a checklist for male and female gender role scripts. Martie is victimized by an evil doctor who induces severe phobias in her, yet she is constantly concerned about her failure to appropriately nurture those around her. Dusty, the ever-protective and aggressive male spends the vast majority of the book trying to take care of his woman.

In the three Koontz novels, then, we find some minimal boundary transgression, but mostly compliance to the gender role requirements.

The King novels present much the same picture, with just a few disparities. In *Dolores Claiborne*, the title character is traditionally female. She is a wife and mother. Her job is as a housekeeper. She nurtures her children, suffers the alcoholism and abuse of her husband, and pretty much fits the female typology. She does, however, demonstrate non-typical characteristics when she decides to stop her husband's incestuous abuse of their daughter by very logically and rationally planning and committing his murder. Because of its violence and rational execution, it can be read as conforming to a male role script, but depending on how one interprets it, it can also be seen as the ultimate act of nurturance, saving her daughter.

The other two King novels provide much the same gender demonstrations. In *Bag of Bones*, Mike, the main character, is a recent widower. His emotional upheaval is totally within the boundaries of allowable behavior considering the circumstances. The ghost of his wife Jo, however, does present a somewhat non-traditional image. It is she that provides salvation in the novel, destroying the evil ghost Sara who is inflicting pain and death in retribution for the racially motivated killing of her son – another example of the nurturing quality of most female role scripts.

The last King novel, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, deals with a young girl (Trish) who has become lost in the woods and is tracked by an evil monster. She is accompanied by Tom Gordon, her favorite baseball player. We don't know if Tom Gordon is just in her imagination or if there is indeed an "angel" of sorts with her. Trish is a tomboy whose first love is baseball. This is definitely outside of the bounds of the traditional female gender typology, but this kind of behavior can be considered age-appropriate. In addition, it is actually Tom Gordon who keeps Trish going, encouraging her, reminding her of the survival knowledge she has learned. It is Tom Gordon who, in the end, saves her.

In the final analysis, the King novels also for the most part present traditional images of gender, except in a few, and mostly normatively acceptable ways.

The last author, Rice, provides us with both the most and the least of the gender boundary transgressors. In her most recent novel, *Merrick*, we see two characters who are very gender script compliant. The title character is a strong-willed woman, but she carries the traditional female occupation of witch, she gains her own ends through the use of sex and cunning, and she must be taken care of by the vampire David. At all times throughout the novel, David plays the traditional father-protector or lover, caring for the too-powerful and often emotionally weak Merrick.

The same kinds of gender images are found in Rice's novel *Vittorio the Vampire*. Vittorio is a teen who is made into a vampire by the older Ursula who at first acts as a mentor to the young man but soon takes on the role of subservient lover. Like many of the other novels discussed here, very soon the male character of Vittorio becomes the savior of the female character. Age is irrelevant. Gender will tell in the end.

The most unique of all of the nine novels, however, is Rice's *The Vampire Armand*. This novel presents the only example of truly voluntary participation in a gender transgressor's lifestyle. The title character of Armand is introduced to (not coerced or victimized into) a bisexual lifestyle by his lover and mentor Marius. The two men participate freely and willingly in the way of life. Their lifestyle is eventually destroyed, but its ruin is not due to the choice of deviant sexuality, but because they sought solace with and tricked mortals. The homoeroticism that is found in this novel and not in the other two selected here is not unique to Rice's books, but can be found in many of them. It is unusual, however, that two of the three most recent works fail to include this element.

When all nine of the novels are evaluated, what we find are characters that for the most part conform to those very same traditional role scripts found in other kinds of the mass media. Only minimal gender boundary transgression is found and, therefore, only minimal sanctioning occurs.

Significance of Findings

What then is the significance of these findings? To understand this, we need to place these kinds of images back within the larger framework discussed earlier in this paper. Lorber (1994) has analyzed gender as a "process of creating distinguishable social statuses for the assignment of rights and responsibilities." This serves to place women into and retain them in a subjugated and devalued position. As Johnson (1997) so clearly explains:

[F]emininity and masculinity are part of a way of thinking that makes gender oppression seem acceptable and unremarkable, as simply the way things are in everyday life. They are used to

portray women and men in ways that justify the oppression of one by the other, that make it seem normal that men should dominate women, and that give the various aspects of oppression a taken-for-granted, “of course” quality that hardly bears notice, much less analysis or challenge (p. 72).

And if gender role scripts are both reinforceable and open to change (Howard and Hollander 1997), then media images, even those found in popular fiction texts, can both reflect what is happening in the real society and strengthen these oppressive images and attitudes in the general social group.

While normative role scripts have limited options for both men and women, women in particular have been ghettoized into narrow roles in our society with limited power, an exclusion from valuable resources, assignment of low status, and restriction to the domestic arena. The mass media is one of the major agents of socialization in American culture. It is, of course, impossible to point to any single form of the mass media and identify a definitive causal relationship. But the question is, what is the consequence of the *combined* effects of all of the media when we further add them to the socializing efforts of family, peers, and the schools, all of which also have been demonstrated to limit men and women to narrow gender opportunities? Popular fiction and its traditional images of gender are just one piece of the total puzzle, but a significant one in the battle to equitably divide the resources of American society.

BOUNDARY TRANSGRESSION OF KEY CHARACTERS

NOVEL	CHARACTERS	KIND OF TRANSGRESSION	VOLUNTARY OR INVOLUNTARY	SANCTIONS
Voice of the Night	Colin (M)	weak, bookish	involuntary	excluded; lonesome – changes by end
	Roy (M)	none	NA	NA
False Memory	Martie(F)	occupation traditionally male	voluntary	she is the damaged character
	Dusty(M)	none	NA	NA
Seize the Night	Chris(M)	emotional (grief)	involuntary	none -- considered appropriate
	Sasha (F)	none	NA	NA
Merrick	Merrick (F)	strong-willed	voluntary	none
	David (M)	none	NA	NA
The Vampire Armand	Armand (M)	bisexual	voluntary after beginning	lifestyle ruined, NOT due to bisexuality
	Marius (M)	bisexual	voluntary	lifestyle ruined, NOT due to bisexuality
Vittorio the Vampire	Vittorio (M)	none	NA	NA
	Ursula (F)	none	NA	NA
Dolores Claiborne	Dolores (F)	kills husband	voluntary	none
	Joe (M)	commits incest with daughter	voluntary	killed by wife
Bag of Bones	Mike (M)	emotional (grief)	voluntary	none – considered appropriate
	Jo (F)	saves husband	voluntary	none – already dead
	Sara (F)	violent	voluntary	destroyed
Girl Who Loved Tom G	Trish (F)	tomboy	voluntary	none – age appropriate
	Tom Gordon (M)	none	NA	NA

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