

Grace Files

Queer Theory – Professor Graybill

Abstract:

This paper uses Lee Edelman's *No Future* to examine 20th-century author Mervyn Peake's series *Gormenghast*. In applying Edelman's theories regarding reproductive futurity, the Symbolic and the Real, and ethical queers, I trace which characters in the series can be read as queer and, from amongst those characters, who fulfills the role of Edelman's ethical queer.

Abandoning Gormenghast:

Titus Groan as a Queer Figure Against Reproductive Futurity

In his opus magnum, the *Gormenghast* trilogy, Mervyn Peake creates a world in which the characters' lives are controlled completely by the castle in which they live. Ritual and tradition dictate each person's job, quality of life, and future. Within this structure of oppressive custom, certain characters reveal themselves as queer. These queers refuse to succumb to the demands of Gormenghast, and in doing so endanger the future which the castle works so hard to preserve. Only one character, however, realizes the full potential of his queerness in the complete abandonment of Gormenghast: Titus Groan.

Peake's trilogy contains three books, but for the purposes of this paper I will examine only two: *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast*, the first two books in the series. These are the novels which take place within Gormenghast, the crumbling, labyrinthine castle ruled for over seventy generations by the Groan family. A queer reading of the series becomes possible by drawing on the theories which Lee Edelman outlines in his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Edelman elaborates on the structures of reproductive futurism and the Symbolic versus Real, structures which are mirrored in the castle Gormenghast and which, to Edelman's certain delight, are slowly eroded throughout the first two books.

In beginning a queer examination of Gormenghast, it is first necessary to understand the applicable theories of Edelman. The larger structure which Edelman centers his book around is the Symbolic versus the Real. The Symbolic in this structure is contrived meaning; it represents laws and social systems constructed in attempts to cover up, avoid, or ignore the Real. The

Symbolic is always opposed to the Real, and the two are entwined in such a way that no subject can ever completely be outside the Symbolic.¹ The illusion of reality is one created by the Symbolic; reality depends on social and structural fantasies to survive.²

The Real, on the other hand, is meaningless. It is inaccessible, unknowable, inexplicable chaos. It is the part of subjects that makes them strangers to themselves. The Real is what everything else is organized around. A crucial part of the Real which Edelman focuses on is the death drive, which emerges, according to Lacan, as a consequence of the Symbolic, because the Symbolic both insists on existence and does not exist.³ The death drive refuses identity or the absolute privilege of any goal.⁴ It provides “a persistent negation that offers assurance of nothing at all... Instead, it insists both on and as the impossibility of Symbolic closure, the absence of any Other to affirm the Symbolic order’s truth, and hence the illusory status of meaning as defense against the self-negating substance of jouissance.”⁵

Jouissance is a manifestation of the death drive; it is a movement beyond pleasure, pain, identity, meaning, and law; it is meaningless enjoyment. It challenges and breaks down the consistency of a social reality that relies on imaginary identification—thus challenging the Symbolic. Edelman elaborates on how jouissance forces the Symbolic to confront the Real by stating that, “Jouissance evokes the death drive that always insists as the void in and of the subject, beyond its fantasy of self-realization, beyond the pleasure principle.”⁶ Thus, Edelman outlines a system in which the Symbolic stands opposed to the Real, while jouissance and the

¹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 22.

² Ibid., 7.

³ Ibid., 9.

⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁵ Ibid., 48.

⁶ Ibid., 25.

death drive pester, batter, and implore the Symbolic to recognize its own contrived nature and face the Real.

Within this structure, subjects are constructed around a fundamental, unknowable lack. Unable to fill or eradicate this fundamental lack, subjects still are compelled to try. Thus, subjects desire meaning and continually aspire to find meaning where there is none.⁷ This desire is really only a desire for the prolongation of desire, not any concrete object.⁸ Desire becomes an endless unfolding of futurity that is always undoing the subject.⁹

Out of this futile search for meaning, reproductive futurism is born. Edelman describes a structure which is centered around a figure that represents the future—for Edelman, that figure is the Child. Through the Child, a future is imagined in which the past is repeated and reconstructed; without the Child, there is no conception of a future.¹⁰ The Child—and the future—signifies life after death, continuation, meaning. This fantasy of survival requires a survival of fantasy,¹¹ which requires constant repetition of past behaviors to reify Symbolic structure and avoid the realization of the death drive. Edelman describes, “Fantasy alone endows reality with fictional coherence and stability, which seem to guarantee that such reality, the social world in which we take our place, will still survive when we do not.”¹²

Subjects must therefore identify themselves with an imagined future to defend against the ego’s certain end.¹³ The issue with the future is, of course, that it is fantasy. There is no real

⁷ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 74.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹² *Ibid.*, 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*

future, only repetition that serves to emphasize that something is always missing. According to Edelman, “Futurism thus generates generational succession, temporality, and narrative sequence, not toward the end of enabling change, but, instead, of perpetuating sameness, of turning back time to assure repetition...”¹⁴ Anything that threatens reproductive futurism and the figure that sustains it—the Child—is a threat to the social order and the logic of futurism on which meaning depends.¹⁵

For Edelman, all queers have the potential to threaten this social order—or rather, it is this potential that makes queers queer. He writes, “Queerness...is never a matter of being or becoming but...of embodying the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic order.”¹⁶ This is because queerness figures the place of the social order’s death drive.¹⁷ Thus, all queers have the potential to become what Edelman dubs “sinthomosexuals.”

The sinthome is the “site of a jouissance around and against which the subject takes shape and in which it finds its consistency.”¹⁸ However, the cost of the creation of the subject by the sinthome is the subject’s blindness to its own means of creation: the subject cannot recognize the meaningless enjoyment around which it coheres. Thus, the sinthome ensures that no subject will ever get over its fixation of the drive that determines jouissance.¹⁹

The sinthomosexual accepts the sinthome as Real identity and the path to jouissance. It is “the site where the fantasy of futurism confronts the insistence of a jouissance that rends it

¹⁴ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 60.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

precisely by rendering it in relation to that drive.”²⁰ Sinthomosexuality denies and inverts the appeal of fantasy;²¹ it opposes the generation of endless narratives of reproduction;²² it calls out the Symbolic for its fruitless grasping for meaning and its cowardly avoidance of the death drive.

This, Edelman suggests, is the ethical obligation of queers: to embrace the position of the sinthomosexual. Queers must embrace the position of meaninglessness associated with the sinthome,²³ because “the efficacy of queerness...lies in its resistance to a Symbolic reality that only ever invests us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in it.”²⁴ If queers do not accept this figural status, they can only serve to reinforce the dominant system of reproductive futurity.²⁵ Queers who deny their negativity only shift the figural burden of queerness; the structural position of queerness will always exist,²⁶ because the Real and the death drive that calls to it will always exist.

With Edelman’s characterizations of Symbolic versus Real, death drive and jouissance, and reproductive futurism, I turn now to Gormenghast. Rather than the Child as the figure of futurity, Gormenghast itself serves to sustain reproductive futurism (while in turn being sustained by reproductive futurism) in Peake’s books. Endless, repetitive ritual persists day after day—ritual whose significance is forgotten but whose tradition is so deeply rooted in the castle that it has become Gormenghast itself.²⁷ These rituals serve only to repeat the past in which they

²⁰ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 38.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²² *Ibid.*, 82.

²³ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁷ Colin Greenland, “Mervyn Peake: Overview,” in *St. James Guide to Science Fiction Writers*, ed. Jay P. Pederson (New York, NY: St. James Press, 1996).

were created, and so the future they reproduce for Gormenghast is only a return to a long-forgotten history.

It is the duty of the Earl to perform the rituals and the duty of the Master of Ritual to instruct in their performance, but the traditions affect every other character as well. The inhabitants of Gormenghast must participate in obscure ceremonies and provide services of unintelligible significance for ancient rituals. This participation extends even beyond Gormenghast to the Outer Dwellings during ceremonies such as that of the Bright Carvers, who populate ramshackle mud villages that crowd around the castle. Once a year, the Bright Carvers must travel into Gormenghast to display their carvings. The Earl selects a single piece to be placed in a far-off tower room (whose use is designated only for these carvings), and the rest of the carvings are burned before the Bright Carvers return to their life outside the castle. Many carvers spend months preparing for the ceremony. The only person who ever interacts with the carvings again is a character named Rottcodd, whose job is to live in the tower room and dust the carvings every day.

Furthermore, the entire social structure inside Gormenghast is based in bloodlines; children will take on the jobs of their parents. Thus, classes are created through the repetition of history and tradition, regardless of the goals or happiness of individual characters. The repetition of history inside the castle is what reproduces its future. Pete Bunten summarizes, “The traditions and rituals, rooted in the fabric of the castle...sustain the estate of Gormenghast...Here the castle is both...past and...anticipated future.”²⁸ Because the castle is a structure which must be

²⁸ Pete Bunten, “Capturing the Castle: Castles in the Air, Castles Built on Sand: Pete Bunten Examines the Gothic Castle as Myth, Motif and Metaphor, and Looks at the Ways in Which This May Reflect the Instability of the Genre,” *The English Review* 20, no. 3 (February 2010).

maintained through strict attention the repetition of rituals, it becomes something fragile,²⁹ something which could be destroyed if it does not have ritual repetition to sustain it.

To be queer in Gormenghast, then, is to work against Gormenghast: to shun tradition, to eradicate ritual, to abandon history. Characters that stifle the preservation of Gormenghast's past in its future stand opposed to the Symbolic and leave themselves open to the Real and to the potential of sinthomosexuality. Using this definition, three key characters can be identified as queer: Steerpike, the Thing, and Titus Groan.

Steerpike is the villain of the novels. His hunched shoulders, sour disposition, and malicious scheming set into motion many of the events that occupy the pages of Peake's books. His story begins deep in the belly of Gormenghast, surrounded by smoke and steam and bullied by a vile boss. Steerpike's class has constrained him to work as a kitchen boy, but his ambitions are far greater. On the day that the 77th Earl of Gormenghast—Titus Groan—is born, Steerpike manages to escape. He begins an upward trek, climbing the staircases of Gormenghast into the towers. When he is caught and locked away by a servant of the 76th Earl, he climbs out of a window and physically scales the stone walls and tiled roofs of the castle.

Steerpike's physical upward journey in Gormenghast mirrors his pernicious and insidious social climbing. This climbing occurs through a series of absurd events: first, he convinces Lady Fuschia Groan to take him to see the castle doctor when he climbs into her attic through a window. At the doctor's house, he convinces Doctor Prunesquallor and his sister, Irma, to hire him on as an assistant and servant. While working for the doctor, Steerpike ingratiates himself

²⁹ Pete Bunten, "Capturing the Castle: Castles in the Air, Castles Built on Sand: Pete Bunten Examines the Gothic Castle as Myth, Motif and Metaphor, and Looks at the Ways in Which This May Reflect the Instability of the Genre," *The English Review* 20, no. 3 (February 2010).

with Ladies Cora and Clarice, two dull sisters of the 76th Earl's wife who feel as if they have been cheated out of power by their sister. Preying on their ignorance, foolishness, and ambition, he orchestrates a massive fire in the castle library—while the entire Groan family is inside.

Steerpike rescues the Groans from death, intending to increase his favor with the most powerful family of Gormenghast. However, the Master of Ritual, Sourdust—who was also in the library—dies of smoke inhalation. The title is passed to his son, Barquentine, who makes Steerpike his assistant.

Sourdust's is not the only life claimed by the library fire. The 76th Earl, whose only joy in life came from his books, slowly descends into madness. He begins to act like an owl, perching on his fireplace mantle, hooting, and demanding he be brought mice to eat. Eventually, the Earl goes secretly and silently into the Tower of Flints, where he is eaten by the Death Owls that live within.

Steerpike continues his murder spree in the second book of Peake's series, *Gormenghast*. He burns Barquentine to death when he locks the Master of Ritual in a room and sets it on fire. With his old master dead, Steerpike becomes the new Master of Ritual, firmly situating himself as an indispensable part of the castle and continuing his climb through the ranks. He later kills Cora and Clarice, who he worries will reveal his previous plot to burn the library, and Nannie Slagg, who angers him when she says that he will never be more than a kitchen boy.

With his insatiable thirst for power, Steerpike certainly poses a threat to Gormenghast's fantasized future. He kills two masters of ritual and the 76th Earl, all of whom are crucial in the repetition of Gormenghast's past to reproduce its future. His killing of Cora and Clarice further erodes the Groan line and leaves Gormenghast's futurity in peril, as does his murder of Nannie

Slagg, the nurse who cares for all the Groan children. Her role is quite literally one of historical repetition, as she takes one Groan child and raises her—seeing her into the future—and then takes the next and repeats the process.

Steerpike is not, however, Edelman's ethical queer. He never fully embraces the position of sinthomosexual—rather, he uses tradition when it suits him and abandons it when it hinders him. His position as Master of Ritual in *Gormenghast* serves to reify the Symbolic position which the castle inhabits, and he himself contributes to reproductive futurity when he instructs Titus Groan in the performance of tradition. Edelman acknowledges that nothing intrinsic predisposes queers from assimilating and supporting futurity;³⁰ this is exactly what Steerpike does. Although he tries to alter the structure to work in his own interest, his ambitions never go beyond Gormenghast; he remains rooted firmly within the structure and the Symbolic.

Another queer within the series, known only as the Thing, is quite the opposite. She remains outside Gormenghast for the entirety of her life, living as a feral child in the woods that surround the castle. The story of how she came to exist in such a state begins not with her own birth, but with the birth of Titus, the 77th Earl of Gormenghast.

After Titus is born, Nannie Slagg is sent to seek a wet nurse from the Outer Dwellings. She returns with a young woman named Keda, who recently gave birth but whose child has died. Keda's husband is also deceased; he died suddenly three months after they married, just before Keda realized she was pregnant. Already, Keda is an amalgam of death and life—her own child's future begun during her husband's death and then cut short with the child's entry into life, she contributes to the futurity of Gormenghast by feeding its heir.

³⁰ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 17.

After spending some months as his wet nurse, Keda leaves Gormenghast and returns to the Outer Dwellings. She explains to Nannie Slagg that she left behind two men who were in love with her, which created between them a hateful and violent rivalry. However, she cannot continue to avoid them; despite the protests that Nannie Slagg voices, Keda must leave. When she arrives back in her village, she finds one of the men waiting for her. She goes home with him and the two have sex. The next morning, Keda's other suitor is waiting outside. The two men decide to duel to the death that night, and Keda follows them to watch, resigned to the inevitability of the violence. During the duel, her suitors kill each other. Shortly after, Keda finds that she is pregnant. Once again, life has risen from death in Keda's story.

She is shunned by her village for bearing a child out of wedlock. Shortly after the child is born, Keda commits suicide by leaping off a cliff. The child is left to her own devices, and she grows up in the woods, alone and feral, known only as the Thing. Born quite literally from death, she embodies Edelman's sinthomosexual. She cares nothing for the future of Gormenghast, its traditions and rituals, or its social structures. The Thing embodies the death drive in Gormenghast: that march towards jouissance and delight in meaningless enjoyment.

The most important aspect of her sinthomosexuality, however, is that it provides the impetus for Titus to realize his full potential as a queer in Gormenghast. When Titus is a boy, he runs away into the forest. There, he first sees the Thing; he is immediately enchanted by her freedom, so counter to his own life full of duty and ritual. When he is older, Titus goes back to the forest again. He takes shelter in a cave during a storm and finally encounters the Thing when she seeks shelter in the same place.

When he first sees her inside the cave, "All that was Gormenghast within him shuddered: shuddered and bridled up in a kind of anger. All that was rebellious in him cried with joy: with

the joy of witnessing the heart of defiance.”³¹ She, however, does not immediately notice him. When Titus stands to move towards her, he frightens the Thing—she tries to flee and, while doing so, is fatally struck by lightning. Thus, Titus comes face to face with the death drive—and with jouissance. At the end of their meeting, the cave stands empty, waiting. For, as Edelman writes in *No Future*, the place of the sinthomosexual can be abandoned, but it will always still exist, ready to be filled by whatever continues to exist outside meaning.³²

And so the time comes to turn to Titus Groan. From birth, Titus rebels against the structure of Gormenghast. At his christening, twelve days after his birth, he tears a page in the Book of Baptism. When he is one year old, during the ceremony to declare him Earl of Gormenghast after the mysterious disappearance of his father, Titus drops the sacrosanct symbols which ritual dictates he hold into the lake on the grounds of the castle. Throughout his childhood, he is indifferent to the futurity of Gormenghast. He is bored with ritual, and, as previously mentioned, runs away into the forest multiple times as he grows up. For these excursions, Titus is punished—but these punishments serve only to reinforce his hatred of the duty that holds him captive.

Even before his encounter with the Thing, Titus begins to notice the meaninglessness and disorder which ritual tries so hard to mitigate within Gormenghast. While in school as a boy, he watches as the headmaster—a man confined to a wheelchair and oftentimes asleep—accidentally slips across the classroom and out the window to his death after Titus’ classmates polish the floor to play a game that involves sliding about the room. The Fly, a servant whose only purpose is to push the wheelchair of the headmaster, jumps to his death immediately after the headmaster

³¹ Mervyn Peake, *Gormenghast* (Great Britain: Methuen London Ltd, 1985), 416.

³² Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 105.

when he realizes that his life's purpose has suddenly and inexplicably ended. Thus, Titus is exposed from a young age to death's ability to strike suddenly and without meaning.

Death continues to show its face throughout Titus' life. He attends the funerals of Barquentine and Nannie Slagg after they are murdered by Steerpike and eventually helps uncover Steerpike's additional murders of Cora and Clarice. After this discovery, Steerpike becomes a fugitive, hiding in the labyrinth of tunnels and towers that comprise Gormenghast. At the end of Peake's second novel, heavy rains lead to flooding that drives the entire castle to the upper floors. Fuschia, Titus' older sister and one of the only people within the castle that he loves, slips while standing on a windowsill and hits her head. She drowns in the floodwaters. Titus, however, thinks that Steerpike has killed yet another member of the castle. In an intense and exhausting chase, Titus catches and kills Steerpike, becoming himself an agent of death.

Any contribution to the futurity of Gormenghast that might have been attained by killing Steerpike is immediately mitigated when Titus decides to leave Gormenghast once and for all. Before he leaves, he says goodbye to his mother, the Countess Groan. She warns him, "There is nowhere else... You will only tread a circle, Titus Groan. There's not a road, not a track, but it will lead you home. For everything comes to Gormenghast."³³ This final conversation emphasizes the insidious nature of reproductive futurity. For those living within the Symbolic, fantasy is reality; there is nothing outside of Gormenghast.

Titus proves this fantasy wrong. He abandons Gormenghast, he fills the cave the Thing left empty, and he embraces the role of sinthomosexual. Never, in the entire series, does Titus return. His abandonment is the proverbial nail in the coffin for Gormenghast, the final "fuck the

³³ Mervyn Peake, *Gormenghast* (Great Britain: Methuen London Ltd, 1985), 510.

future;” for without the Earl, there can be no ritual, no heir, and no repetition of the past. Thus, in turning away from reproductive futurism, Titus reveals the structure to be contrived, a sham, a fantasy, and he brings the reader with him to face the death drive and the meaningless enjoyment of jouissance. In abandoning Gormenghast, Titus proves himself as the embodiment of Edelman’s ethical queer.

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