

The Construction of Queer-Coded Villain, Dennis Creed, in J.K. Rowling's *Troubled Blood*

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Abstract

Troubled Blood is the fifth crime thriller by J.K. Rowling, written under the pseudonym Robert Galbraith. This thriller is in Strike series, and revolves around two detectives Cormoran Strike and Robin Ellacot investigating the cold case of a missing doctor Margot Bamborough who disappeared almost 40 years ago leaving behind a forever-changed husband and a daughter who wouldn't rest until she knows all the answers. The novel unfolds between 2013 and 2014, and the crime it investigates unfolds in 1974. The prime suspect in Bamborough's case is the infamous serial killer Dennis Creed who was in Broadmoor Psychiatric Hospital during this investigation after having served his prison sentence for some of his murders.

This article is an attempt to understand the characterization of Dennis Creed, a queer-coded serial killer in J K Rowling's crime thriller Troubled Blood written under the pseudonym Robert Galbraith, examine the inherent transphobia in the way he has been sketched, the role the text and the discourse around it plays in influencing the mainstream readership and the dangers of such stereotyping to queer and trans individuals in real life.

This article is a close examination of how Troubled Blood's author shapes Dennis Creed as a queer-coded villain through descriptions of his attire, demeanour, his kidnapping tactics and violent behaviour, and how his villainy is posed as a product of his queerness.

Keywords : Crime, Thriller, Transphobia, Cisgender, Crossdresser

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Horror and Crime are not afraid of diversity. These genres demand divergence from the 'traditional' to build a sense of the uncanny and unknown, establish suspense and spook their readers and audience. These genres, while typically lauded to be some of the most inclusive genres since they allow for fluidity in performance, this inclusivity still comes at the cost of misrepresenting the queer and transgender community by narrow, mostly negative, representations of some of the most popular and memorable cross-dressing characters like the cross-dressing serial killer Norman Bates and the transexual Buffalo Bill in *Psycho* (1959) and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) respectively.

In these genres, the overarching suggestion is that the criminal tendencies of these crossdressers are directly associated with their queerness and sexual deviance from the norm. These crime thrillers are visualised, executed, watched and read with the underlying assumption that a crossdressing serial killer is starkly different from the typical cis-heterosexual criminal because of the way they choose to present themselves. In crime thrillers, this deviance from the normative gender association of men only wear masculinity and women wear femininity has rather been used as an intelligent technique to shock the audience and take advantage of their social dread and lack of awareness of gender and sexual nonconformity. For instance, a film like the blockbuster adapted from Thomas Harris' novel *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) was one of the very first instances of the public getting a glimpse into gender nonconformity. For an audience that has predominantly never been acclimated to a person who does not conform to traditional gender identities of male and female, their first experience watching a crossdressing character has the capacity to cement their idea of what crossdressers, and in extension, trans people in real life are like. J K Rowling's fifth book of the Strike Detective series *Troubled Blood* also falls under this category.

In *Troubled Blood*, Dennis Creed is one of the eight suspects in the disappearance and probable murder of Dr Margot Bamborough. During the time of *Troubled Blood*, he is a 77-year-old prisoner at a psychiatric facility. Although the serial killer's gender and sexual identity are never once revealed straightforwardly, the descriptions that characterise Creed's behaviour, attire, accessories and even approach to manipulate his victims paint him as queer, or at least align with the mainstream and myopic understanding of queer individuals.

Firstly, Creed is identified to be "dark and stocky, because he was wearing a wig" and "all padded out in a woman's coat" (Rowling 79). Creed is also hinted to exhibit sexual deviance even as an adolescent as he steals his grandmother Ena's underwear to masturbate in it. Here, Rowling deliberately chooses to express the morbidity of Creed masturbating in his own relative's underwear alongside his perverted and non-normative need to pleasure himself in a woman's underwear.

Creed's closeness to femininity is also communicated through the manner in which he abducts his victims. Creed usually picked these women when they were drunk. Rowling writes that he is seen "wearing a wig that, from a distance, to a

drunk victim, gave his hazy form a feminine appearance just long enough for his large hands to close over a gasping mouth” (Rowling 615-616). His feminine appearance is posed as what led them to trust him. This statement about Creed’s methods of wooing women strips him of his masculinity. It distances him from a ‘manly’ way of murder where violence is more directly inflicted upon the female victims by a typically masculine male killer through his physical strength. “And he was good at lulling women’s suspicions and getting their sympathy. A couple of them walked into his flat of their own accord,” (Rowling 79) which indirectly implies that a person who appears feminine to a certain degree can deceive women and kidnap them. Creed’s abduction method is similar to Buffalo Bill’s from *Silence Of The Lambs* (1991), where the trans-coded serial killer appeals to the empathy of his victims by pretending to be a vulnerable man with a broken arm.

In the essay “Fantastic Bodies and Where to Find Them: Representational Politics of Queer Bodies in Popular Media,” Adharshila Chatterjee who humorously suggests through the essay’s title the queerphobia hidden in J K Rowling’s works writes that early homosexual representations were under “the constant scrutiny of a panoptic, normative gaze which tried to confine the queer body within explicable binaries of active-passive, effete-but, master-slave, dominant-submissive, normal-queer etc.” (215). In this sense, Dennis is constantly compartmentalised as one of the two binaries Chatterjee mentions. Creed is passive, effete and queer. But he doesn’t conform to the other categories most suitable for a queer-coded character like him. He falls under the master and dominant categories in private when the world isn’t watching. It is in these deviating spaces that social dread and horror are generated in the majoritarian audience. Not only is Creed deviant from the accepted norms, he seems to transcend the characteristics generally accepted to be that of the “queer” too. A queer man is not the threat, but the potential of him to behave like a cis-gender man to subjugate a woman is.

In Rowling’s own words, “Creed had perfected a façade of vulnerability” and a “convivial, sexually ambiguous persona that worked well with the drunk and lonely” (Rowling 364). Again, Creed’s predatory nature is not acknowledged to be starkly diverging from what a masculine, acceptable murderer is. He is manipulative and calculating. He is not an uncontrollable, erratic criminal whose violent nature can be traced back to his testosterone. “Social and contextual factors encouraging male entitlement, hyper-masculinity, toxic masculinity and unequal gender norms are other key factors that drive rape perpetration” (Selepe et al 521-532).

Rape perpetrators often describe rape as a way to exert power, dominance and control over women and use it indirectly as a tool to conceal insecurities (Selepe et al 521-532). Although researchers find that rape is instigated by several other social factors beyond simply desire (NIH), the uncontrollable hormonal influence of the male hormone is typically the reason that people fall back on to justify men’s violent behaviour and sexual assault. Not only does this train of discourse around rape try to naturalize men assaulting women, it simultaneously falsely implies that anyone that is unmasculine or shows traits of femininity is incapable of aggression

due to their very biological design. Creed is also an extremely violent killer. Not only does he like killing people, he sadistically derived pleasure from torturing his victims for days before he killed them. "Dennis Creed imprisoned, tortured and killed seven other women. Creed's trademark of beheading the corpses of his victims..." (Rowling 28). When an ambiguously gendered character like Creed is introduced as a violent rapist, the author is deliberately trying to evoke a sense of panic in a quintessential reader who is unable to locate where the unmasculine character's aggression is originating from.

The reader is further expected to empathise with the innocent victim and feel a sense of terror on their behalf for what the tragic fate is about to envelop them that they are innocuously unaware of. The reader is expected to assume that the fictional victim too is underestimating the potential for violence from a short, stocky man dressed in a woman's coat like Dennis Creed is. "I couldn't believe there was wickedness like that in the world, and that my sister could have met it," (Rowling 366) says one of the victims' sister. The statement comes from a place of the boundless grief that a family member experiences for the dead. Yet, it is undeniable that the world has seen more insidious serial killers than Creed. What the world hasn't seen much of is a queer-presenting female wig-wearing serial killer like the one in *Troubled Blood*.

Dennis Creed is also often contrasted with his step-grandfather William Awdry who was the only adult figure in his life during his childhood after his mother abandoned him. Awdry is a large, masculine man who got what he wanted by using physical violence against Dennis and his mother who did not have the power to defend themselves. In the memoir Dennis Creed wrote during his prison sentence, he recollects that Awdry's "great dislike of me came from the fact that he hated to see his own features in a weak and girlish form. He despised vulnerability..." (Rowling 224). A similar association to past trauma is seen in Robert Bloch's 1959 horror novel *Psycho*, where the titular character Norman Bates is a serial killer who takes up the persona of his late mother every time he kills someone. The female victim in the book, Marion Crane, who stays in the Bates Motel is cornered at a vulnerable moment when she is in the shower - naked and armless - and is brutally stabbed and murdered by Norman in his mother's crossdress, all due to his trauma of her mother's controlling and toxic parenting. The ongoing TV show "Bates Motel" that first aired in 2013 discusses Norman's spiral into his mental illnesses in great detail, reiterating the popular contemporary argument that people transition due to mental illness and psychological damage. To put it simply, transphobes argue that gender nonconformity is unnatural and the reason why people feel gender dysphoria can be traced back to psychological damage.

Dennis' childhood trauma, which is drawn to be the reason for his becoming a serial killer later in life, is also largely linked to his step-grandfather's constant belittling scarred him for life. It doesn't end here. Creed's deviant sexual behaviour is also directly linked to trauma. To escape the humiliation Awdry imposed on him, Creed sought fantasy. Dennis describes himself as having a secret life where he took

refuge in the power of gazing. "By the age of twelve, Dennis had discovered the pleasures of voyeurism." (Rowling, 84). In an interview, Creed recalls that it excited him to gaze at women who didn't know that they were being watched. He peeked at them through windows and found it to be a lucky day if he witnessed someone undressing. "I was aroused not only by the obviously sensual aspects, but by the sense of power. I felt I stole something of their essence from them, taking that which they thought private and hidden." (Rowling 85).

Creed's innocuous search for fantasy to even momentarily forget the abuse is shown to later morph into something insidious; into a thirst to dominate, torture and gain pleasure out of hurting people who are more vulnerable than him: poor, young women from the streets. By alternating perspectives between the perpetrator and the victim, viewers are compelled to envision themselves capable of both committing the perpetrator's violent crime and on the other hand, experiencing the victim's position. "Horror puts a focus on the body of the audience members because the audience, while watching, is forced to feel and imagine that they are both the victim and the killer" (Cooper 5). The majoritarian cis-het audience is made uncomfortable by being placed in the perspective of the killer, especially when narrated from the very perspective of the killer who expresses no remorse for his actions in his own memoir.

In an instance when the usually quiet Creed donned a female coworker's coat to imitate the singer Kay Starr, "It made some of the older men uncomfortable. A couple of them thought he was, you know, queer, after. But the younger ones, we all cheered him like anything" (Rowling 105). Rowling has always been fear-mongering with the fact that the present generation has been indoctrinated into a way of life that is so detached from and fearless of traditional values like conforming to binary gender identities. By strategically placing the memory of this scene right after discussing his perverted behaviour of stealing women's underwear, the author attempts to foreshadow that his coming into violence could have been curbed right then and there. Still, he was encouraged to grow comfortable with transgressing gender boundaries.

In an interview during the investigation, Dennis' landlady Violet Cooper says that she always thought Dennis was a 'pansy', which is a derogatory term used to refer to homosexual men. She informs the detectives that she'd seen people like him when she did theatre and therefore pitied him. Her assumption that he was a "pansy" also allowed her to become friends with him easily, sing and drink with him in his private den without the kind of second thoughts and reservations she would have had against being alone with a cisgender heterosexual man. In a cyclical fashion, Rowling highlights over and over again that Dennis Creed deceptively "appeared" to be a lesser threat than he really is because of his attire, demeanour, and his preference for femininity.

Cross-dressing is striking. It shocks its readers and audience, at least momentarily. Horror and dread are generated in these mere moments where the consumers readjust themselves to chancing upon a non-normative character. This dread prolongs through the end of the consumption of the text or media, and unless there is a conscious effort by an author to liberate a character from the stereotypes associated with them, a reader is bound to build the image of this character not only by what is said about them in the text but also with all the unsaid details about the stereotype that a society biased against a group informs them. Cultivation analysis theory points out that frequent and continuous exposure to a stereotyped character to an audience who aren't familiar with these character identities in real life have a false, and typically negative perception of people who carry these identities in reality (Shrum 2-4). They are perceived as a homogenous mass with no unique lived experience and individual differences from each other.

While *Troubled Blood* personifies its queer or trans-coded character with unfair eyes, it is undoubtedly a pro-feminist text. Written by a woman who has consistently shown up for women's rights, even though this 21st-century book itself is written under a male pseudonym for debated reasons, and there is more recorded evidence of Rowling's financial contribution to anti-trans organisations than to women's rights groups, Rowling tastefully critiques the patriarchy in society at critical points in the narrative, recognizes the intersection of class and gender, and fleshes out the titular female characters as complex and three-dimensional figures in this novel.

Firstly, the victim whose disappearance is investigated, Dr Margot Bamborough who led her life in the 60s and 70s as a wild and fearless feminist despite being fully aware of the repercussions. Margot didn't come into the medical field due to her family's wealth and connections, but through a rags-to-riches story where she had to bring her family out of poverty by working hard to become a doctor. With no funds to support her education, Margot saved up by working as a Bunny Girl, i.e., a hostess at clubs who wore skimpy attire, during the day and studied into the night. Margot's dedication to women's rights, especially of underprivileged women, is undeniable in *Troubled Blood*. During a time when the conversation around women's rights, much less their sexual and reproductive rights, was only starting to prop up within women's spaces in 1974, the year she disappeared,

Bamborough was vehemently pro-abortion and even helped her receptionist Gloria Conti get an abortion done on her name, risking her reputation and even her job. Abortion had just been legalised in 1967 in the UK with the Abortion Act 1967 that permits abortions only on the grounds of serious threat to the pregnant woman, abnormality or potential disability in the foetus, or significant physical or mental health risks to the pregnant woman or family when two medical practitioners support the claim for seeking an abortion. This still holds for procuring an abortion in the UK today. For a working-class receptionist like Gloria Conti who couldn't afford to legally get an abortion since her reasons to get an abortion could be shot down easily, Bamborough swooped in with her newfound social capital as a doctor to

support her during a critical point in her life. A fictional book in *Troubled Blood* titled *Whatever Happened to Margot Bamborough* writes “Margot was forever frozen at twenty-nine, fighting not to be defeated by a life more complicated than she had ever imagined it would be, when she conceived the ambition of raising herself out of poverty by brains and hard work” (Rowling 396). Margot is idealised for hubristically mounting herself out of the class she was born in, for fitting into tight corsets to earn a livelihood as well as for the tragedy that befell her.

Dennis Creed targeted only a particular type of women. Although not all his victims fit the same social standing, Creed chose to abduct lower-class women - often prostitutes, whose disappearance possibly wouldn't shake people the way an upper-class white woman's disappearance would. *Troubled Blood* also wittily critiques the class disparity in the second-wave feminist movement through the voice of Oonagh, Bamborough's best friend and fellow bunny girl, who says “Middle-class gurls, with their mummies and daddies paying their way, they could afford to burn their bras and have hairy armpits. Margot and I, we did what we had to.” (Rowling 258).

Troubled Blood charmingly rejects the shackles that the 20th century quintessentially patriarchal society demanded of its women through its female characters like Margot Bamborough and Robin Ellacott who defy conventions, strategize to get the best output, and choose to hide and reveal parts of their lives from people to get what they wanted. But as for Dennis Creed, the novel instead chooses to stick to a normative transphobic lens of lazily villainising him through his queer identity and falling prey to the same kind of gendered stereotyping that its female characters have managed to flee from.

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