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ENG465 Final

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12.6.22

Heroes and Villains, Not As They Seem: Trevor and Little Dog's Identity Trade-Off

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous by Ocean Vuong explores the common result of constant ostracization: identifying with the monstrousness one is told they embody. Little Dog, the narrator, spends much of the narrative in a state of emotional turmoil due to the tangled and conflicting messaging he receives about his identity. As an impoverished Vietnamese immigrant to the United States for whom English is his second language, Little Dog finds social integration to be difficult, but his struggles with mental illness and his identity as a queer young man are what solidify his fate as an outsider. Even at a young age before he has an understanding of his sexual identity, those around him sense his "otherness" and shun him accordingly. The aspects of his identity that are unacceptable to the hegemonic culture — his immigrant status, poverty, non-whiteness, queerness, small stature, mental illness, and non-English mother tongue — all contribute to the violence and ostracization that plagues him through his young life. Early on, he is "diagnosed," so to speak, as wrong, and thus begins to internalize that wrongness. He identifies with the label of "monster" to match the way people perceive his nonconformity as alien and threatening: he *feels* monstrous because he is *seen* as monstrous. Meanwhile, Little Dog's love interest Trevor, is an outwardly heroic figure, who Little Dog sees as an ideal of masculinity, positioned within American society as a golden child. Trevor represents everything that Little Dog is told he should be and, therefore, everything that is good.

The ways in which "monster" and "hero" figures are positioned in Vuong's narrative mirror, to a certain extent, classic tropes in gothic literature. The monster and hero figures are opposed to each other, both literally and figuratively. The traditional gothic tale ends in the destruction of the "monster" or otherwise evil force, usually by the action of the hero, who is often aligned with the dominant culture in some way. But, of course, at the center of this dynamic is the understanding that a hero cannot exist without a monster and a monster without a hero. They are at once invested in the destruction and continued existence of the "other." Little Dog and Trevor are supposed to be in opposition with each other according to the social and textual norms. The monster and hero must destroy each other in order to fulfill their textual goals, but neither boy is particularly invested in the failure of the other. Indeed, they are invested in *success* for each other; Little Dog cares for Trevor through his active addiction, and Trevor encourages Little Dog's writing and academic endeavors. Not only do the monster and hero care for each other, they also change and morph positions throughout the narrative. Little Dog begins the narrative identifying as monstrous and being outwardly identified that way, but as time goes on and his personal perception changes, he shifts into a more heroic, admirable character. Trevor is introduced as a handsome, all-American boy and slowly deteriorates into a man made monstrous by active addiction. As the narrative progresses, the descriptions of both boys shift. Little Dog goes from the "yellow boy" to beautiful; Trevor goes from "finely-boned" to "eyes grey as sink water" (Vuong 27, 94, 168). The shifting identities take the generally clear-cut boundaries of the gothic and "queer," or disrupt, them. The tragedy, death, and decay at the center of this book, coupled with the diametrically opposed "hero" and "monster" characters these elements surround, evokes the gothic genre, which Vuong queers to critique and shatter the flattening of multifaceted characters (and people) into restricted archetypes.

Little Dog is given signals his whole life that tell him in no uncertain terms that he is monstrous. In a country that values whiteness over all else, Little Dog's visible non-whiteness automatically classifies him as not traditionally handsome. Americanness and whiteness are conflated in the mind of Little Dog and his mother, and when Little Dog comes home crying after being bullied and hurt by white boys on the school bus, his mother tells him to "'Drink,' … 'American milk so you're gonna grow a lot. No doubt about it'" (Vuong 27). Little Dog, in an effort to please his mother and to avoid being abused again by the boys on his bus, "drink[s] it down, gulping, making sure [she] could see, both of us hoping the whiteness vanishing into me would make me more of a yellow boy … the milk would erase all the dark inside me with a flood of brightness" (Vuong 27). Little Dog's childhood as a nonwhite immigrant to the United States enforces whiteness as American, and his inability to conform to this labels him as "other," the first step in a long sequence of monstrosity.

Little Dog's Vietnamese identity goes hand-in-hand with his delayed acquisition of English to separate him from the "true" Americans while he grows up. When he is only nine, the boys riding his bus start to target him for his non-white appearance, but they continue to harass him when he does not speak, taunting him by asking "'Don't you ever say nothin'? Don't you speak English?'" (Vuong 24). Violence ensues when Little Dog initially refuses to comply with the request, and violence continues when his mother discovers that he stayed silent rather than give in. She slaps him and hugs him immediately after, saying that she does not "'have the English to help [him]....[he] ha[s] to step up or they'll keep going'" (Vuong 25). Little Dog's mother continues, pleading with him, saying "'You have a bellyful of English.' … 'You have to use it, okay?'" (Vuong 25). When he is even younger and has less than a bellyful of English, Little Dog experiences a similar form of ostracization from an initially kind American boy. At

six, a boy at lunch gives Little Dog one of his pizza bagels without being asked, and Little Dog "become[s] his shadow" as a form of gratitude (Vuong 132). Far from understanding Little Dog's need for proximity as repayment for his kindness, the little boy eventually yells at him "'Stop following me, you freak! What the heck is wrong with you?'" (Vuong 132). Little Dog, "a shadow cut from its source," comes to understand this interaction as confirmation that he is different (Vuong 132). In these two early childhood interactions, Little Dog's quietness due to language differences is interpreted maliciously, one child going so far as to call him a "freak." Words like this and violence based on a circumstance outside of his control cause Little Dog to begin to enforce the belief that his separation from societal norms makes him monstrous.

Vietnamese identity and language barriers do a lot to keep Little Dog separate from other people, but the internalization of monstrousness does not come from either. His identity as a queer young man is what causes Little Dog to self-identify with monstrosity. Before he could even read, Little Dog would put on a dress of his mother's "thinking [he] would look more like [her]," and "at recess the next day, the kids would call me *freak, fairy, fag*. I would learn, much later, that those words were also iterations of *monster*" (Vuong 14). Something as innocent and impulsive as wearing his mother's dress had Little Dog laughed at and mocked by his classmates, telling him early on that noncompliance with gender norms is inherently wrong, inherently monstrous. Little Dog writes of another time, also at six, where he colored in a picture of a cow with "purple, orange, red, auburn, magenta, pewter, fuchsia, glittered grey, lime green" and his teacher yelled at him, "a hairy hand grabb[ing] [his] rainbow cow and crush[ing] it in its fingers. 'I said color in what you *saw*.' … "[Little Dog] sat there, among [his] peers—unreal" (Vuong 227-228). Color is transgressive, and as a man in the United States, it is especially so.

Men are not supposed to be invested in beauty, and thus Little Dog's interest in both dresses and bright colors is identified as "queer" and enforced as monstrous from a very young age.

Overt queerness is considered monstrous by the people around Little Dog, too. The most important person in Little Dog's life besides Trevor is, of course, his mother Rose, who he has a complex relationship with due to her simultaneous abuse of and dependence on him. Rose is invested in Little Dog's success in the United States where she cannot succeed; she encourages him to use his bellyful of English since she does not have one, and she works constantly at the nail salon to provide for him and his grandmother. Little Dog's timidity in the face of bullying is met with derision from his mother, who asks him "'What kind of boy would let [the bullies]'" slap him without talking back (Vuong 26). "Boy" is associated with strength and violence, and Little Dog's impulse to lay low is seen as weak by his mother. When Little Dog comes out to his mother as gay, her immediate response is to deny the possibility of it. She tells him he does not know anything, and when he insists he knows he is gay, she tells him point-blank "'They kill people for wearing dresses. It's on the news. You don't know people. You don't know them'" (Vuong 130). Later on in the conversation, after Little Dog says he does not plan to wear dresses, his mother asks him one question: "'when did this all start? I gave birth to a healthy, normal boy'" (Vuong 131). Like many people living in the modern Western world, Little Dog's mother associates queerness with sickness and abnormality. His mother's insistence that being gay is not normal only serves to further enforce Little Dog's internalized monstrosity.

While Little Dog is told at every turn that all that he is is monstrous, Trevor, his antithesis and love interest, is told the opposite. Trevor is a white American, "a legend, a warrior," according to his father, "like [Neil Young], Trev" (Vuong 144). Little Dog's first encounter with Trevor evokes an almost mythic atmosphere; while picking tobacco for his first job, Trevor joins

Little Dog in the fields, and Little Dog sees him "a head taller, his finely boned face dirt-streaked under a metal army helmet, tipped slightly backward, as if he had just walked out from one of Lan's [Little Dog's grandmother] stories and into my hour, somehow smiling" (Vuong 94). His entrance into the narrative is studded with stereotypically American imagery, "dirt streaked" evoking the working class and anything from the US Army practically synonymous with the United States itself. Trevor's connections are also quintessentially American, with a grandfather who owns tobacco fields and employs fieldhands, a veteran uncle, and a father who works odd contracting jobs. All Trevor's family members work with their hands, in careers that are generally "self-made." All these careers are associated with American masculinity. Many descriptions of Trevor up contain words with similar connotations, indicating that Little Dog sees Trevor as the American masculine ideal. He describes Trevor's arm with "thin, flowing muscles, field-toned and burger-fed, shifting as he talked" (Vuong 99). The army helmet is a recurring image often paired with Trevor, again highlighting his American-ness but also solidifying his "heroic" nature in the eyes of American culture; after all, in the United States there is no hero more revered than a soldier.

Shortly after Trevor's introduction into the narrative, there is a profound shift in the way his character is portrayed. Trevor's father is abusive and an alcoholic, and Trevor ends up repeating these patterns of behavior himself, both in response to and defiance of his father. Not long after their first meeting, Trevor and Little Dog get high in Trevor's truck, where Trevor "tip[s] white grains [of cocaine] over the row of weed" before rolling it into a joint (Vuong 102). Trevor's drug habits are established before Little Dog even meets him; he "was put on OxyContin after breaking his ankle doing dirt bike jumps in the woods … [when] he was fifteen … After a month on the Oxy, Trevor's ankle healed, but he was a full-blown addict" (Vuong

174-175). Trevor declines while Little Dog knows him, their last encounter at a diner before Little Dog goes away to college where Trevor's "voice sounds unfinished … the veins bulged and blackened where the needles foraged … slurring, eyes grey as sink water" (Vuong 168). Trevor rapidly goes from a strong-jawed, all-American boy with a bright future to a boy physically in decline, descriptions of his body from the person who loves him bordering on the grotesque. In this way, Trevor shifts from hero to monster over the course of the narrative.

Little Dog experiences similar shifts in the narrative, coming to view himself as beautiful through his relationship with Trevor, seeing himself as "something that was wanted, that was sought and found among a landscape as enormous as the one I had been lost in all this time" (Vuong 107). He never entirely shifts, still thinking of himself as an outsider and his queerness as "filthy," but he is also no longer unequivocally monstrous. This departure from the two-dimensional representation of queer bodies as monstrous in literature is a "queering" of the traditional gothic view. In traditional gothic literature, the "monstrous" is in direct opposition to the "heroic" (or perhaps more accurately, the normal). These stories are full of high emotions, physical decay, the grotesque, and suffering, much like *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*.

Pitting the "heroic" — in most cases, the heterosexual — against the "monstrous" — oftentimes the unknown and homosexual — is vital to the structure of the original gothic story. The monstrous generally has a corrupting influence on the heroic, and the heroic figure is often tempted, but as Laura Westengard writes in "Queer Gothic Literature and Culture," "readers enjoy the titillating details of the 'subversion of order,' or the queering of the status quo, but ultimately the narrative reinforces adherence to norms by the destruction of those situations and creatures that represented divergence" (Westengard 260). Vuong certainly has his characters "queer" the status quo (figuratively and literally), but he also queers the gothic by blurring the

lines between monster and heroic. Trevor and Little Dog start out in rigidly defined positions, with little textual uncertainty around why they are placed within these positions, but as the narrative continues they begin to change. The once golden "warrior" Trevor crashes into addiction headfirst, losing his beauty and his health all at once. Little Dog, conversely, gains confidence and language as the book unfolds. He goes from a timid boy, too afraid (or unable) to speak up and defend himself from abuse, to a man, moved from the small town he spent much of his developing years in and studying literature of the language he did not know when he first moved. The shifting boundaries of monster and human create a queering of the gothic story and of the roles inherent within it.

Vitally, in gothic literature, the destruction of the abject or the "monstrous" is one of the conditions of the end of the work. The most famous example of gothic literature, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, is indicative of the reasons for destruction of the monstrous. Stacy Holman Jones and Anne Harris argue in their article "Monsters, desire and the creative queer body" that "Frankenstein's monster is rejected and damaged not by any innate difference or inhumanity, but by his inability to belong in a society that reinforces his outsider status, despite his emotional similarity to the humans around him" (Jones & Harris 524). The monstrous must be destroyed because it does not belong, not because of anything inherently different or damaged about it. The monstrous must be destroyed in order to restore order and complete the journey of the heroic. Here, Vuong returns to the gothic; through shifting roles, Trevor and Little Dog are both hero and monster at different points, but with the penultimate death of the character positioned as the monster, the original gothic format returns.

Ocean Vuong shifts and explores the boundaries of gothic literature in his semi-autobiographical work *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Through the label of the

monstrous, expectations about the characters of Little Dog and Trevor are formed and Vuong deliberately subverts them, "queering" the gothic as his characters "queer" the world around them. However, the narrative's ultimate end is the same as many gothic narratives: the monstrous is destroyed in order to fulfill the journey of the heroic. Trevor, monstrous at the point of his death, does die, and his death shapes the remainder of Little Dog's narrative; Little Dog is moving away from addiction and moving into a new life as an academic. Ultimately, it seems, Ocean Vuong's queering of the gothic ends in the same place it began. While his subversion complicates the flattened perception of "monster" and "hero," calling into question single-aspect labels for any multi-faceted being, the pull of the tragic end of the gothic does win out. Perhaps escaping the demonization of queerness at the heart of gothic literature is impossible; Vuong's narrative attempt to do so proves that subverting a structure with deep roots in bigotry is almost futile.

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