
**Monstrous Appetites: Exploring Cannibalism as a Site of Identity Formation
in *Bones and All* by Camille DeAngelis**

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Abstract:

Cannibalism has been considered as the ultimate taboo and breach of social and ethical principles. The novel *Bones and All* by Camille DeAngelis adheres to this perspective, while simultaneously providing a unique representation of the act of cannibalism. The novel depicts cannibalism as a metaphor for the externalisation of repressed urges and impulses. The novel also frees itself from the hackneyed depiction of cannibalism which includes visceral and graphic descriptions of the act, while still upholding its impact and significance. Framed as a bildungsroman, the novel traces Maren's journey for search of identity as she faces alienation and isolation as a cannibal. The portrayal of the act of cannibalism as an irrepressible urge shows the deep conflict between id's instinctual drives and superego's moral restraints, which results in fragmentation of identities, including the protagonist's. However, the very same act simultaneously affirms as well as annihilates subjectivity. Drawing upon Freudian theories of oral fixation and repression and Jung's concept of the shadow, this paper argues that *Bones and All* reconfigures cannibalism as the act that provides the textual space for the ultimate negotiation of identity and morality, conscious and unconscious, human and monstrous.

Key words: cannibalism, identity, repression, instinctual urge, fragmentation

Introduction:

Cannibalism has had a role as a transgressive motif in literature for a very long time. Interrogating cannibalism within the framework of psychoanalysis reveals the unstable nature of identity and the constant conflicts involved in the formation of the same. However,

despite the symbolic capacity of cannibalism, its literary representation is usually limited to shock value and sensationalism.

Camille DeAngelis' *Bones and All*, published in 2015, breaks free from this monotonous representation, as it reconfigures cannibalism as a site of identity formation, exploring the complicated negotiations of a fractured identity. This reconceptualisation invites the need for a more nuanced understanding of the representation of cannibalism in literature.

Framed as a bildungsroman, *Bones and All* follows the journey of a sixteen year old Maren, whose cannibalistic hunger isolates her from both her family and society. After her mother abandons her, she undertakes a journey to find and meet her father and, through that, to understand herself better. Along the way, she encounters other cannibals like Sully and Lee, each with their own motivations and paths in life. While the novel has been analysed as a "cannibal romance" (Kérchy) with "metaphorical representations of queerness" (Pick) in its portrayal of cannibalism, there remains a significant gap in the understanding of the psyche of the characters and the role of cannibalism in the exploration of identity itself.

The novel's thematic concerns lend itself to a psychoanalytical study. Freudian tripartite model of id, ego and superego along with his theory of repression illuminate the fragmentation of identity of the characters, as a result of their cannibalistic impulses. Complementing this framework, Carl Jung's concept of Shadow presents cannibalism as a transgenerational inheritance and manifestation of the ancestral unconscious.

Moreover, understanding the effect of cannibalistic urges on identity is reflected through the narrative structure as well. The novel's avoidance of graphic details of the cannibalistic act mirrors the characters' psychological conflicts and their repressive tendencies. Here, cannibalism becomes both a thematic metaphor and a stylistic symbol, a site of psychic and narrative complexity.

Significance of the study:

The analysis focuses on the unique representation of cannibalism in the novel as opposed to its general representation in literature, transcending its use as a shock factor or just an element to satisfy morbid curiosity. The novel reconceptualises cannibalism as a psychological metaphor for primal and innermost thoughts and desires that go far beyond conscious control.

The exploration of cannibalism psychologically and by reflection, textually and stylistically, without any visceral or detailed descriptions of the act itself, provides a need for deeper understanding of the depiction of the act in literature, especially for all the metaphorical and symbolic weight it carries. The analysis helps in the interpretation of cannibalism socially and psychologically, analysing the different roles of the act in the novel.

It also interrogates literature's capacity to broaden the understanding of the act, moving away from the narrow and restricted theorisation as a taboo and providing fresh perspectives on the same.

Methodology:

The study analyses the aspect of cannibalism in the chosen novel through the lens of psychoanalysis. Employing the approach of close reading to the text further helps in the understanding of the nuances involved in the narration and representation. Analysing the consequential fragmentation of identity through Freudian concept of Repression opens up avenues to understand the deeper psychology behind the act and its consequences on subjectivity.

The Jungian concept of Shadow helps in the comprehension of the nature of cannibalism in the novel as a hereditary compulsion beyond the capacity of conscious control. Coupling this analytical perspective with Freudian triadic model of id, ego and superego provides the necessary distinctive viewpoint to understand cannibalism as a latent subconscious, becoming the driving force of the characters' self-perceived subjectivity.

Discussion:

Fragmentation of Identity:

The novel *Bones and All* presents cannibalism as the element that fractures subjectivity and self perception. This fragmentation can be better understood by looking at the psychological and emotional trajectories of three characters closely: Maren, the protagonist, Frank, her father, and Sully, her grandfather.

The story begins with Maren's mother stumbling upon young Maren "asleep on the floor beside the bone pile, tears still drying on [her] cheeks and blood wet around [her] mouth" (DeAngelis 9) after Maren had cannibalised her babysitter. While describing this incident, Maren says, "I loathed myself even then. I don't remember any of this, but I know it." (DeAngelis 9).

Over time, a self defense mechanism warps her memories in a desperate attempt to preserve her sanity and protect herself from her monstrous side, allowing her to repress the unbreakable truth: "Memories distort themselves, turning over into truths that are easier to live with. It had been a satanic cult. They'd murdered my babysitter, bathed me in blood, and given me an eardrum to chew on. It wasn't my fault—it wasn't me" (DeAngelis 14). These instances highlight the transitory nature of consciousness and despite that, its profound influence on identity formation. This important event becomes the foundation of her identity struggle throughout the novel.

Maren's tendency to turn to fiction to find a sense of belonging and acceptance for her true nature highlights her need for external validation for her own identity. Her disappointment in literature mirrors her frustration with the moral binaries of the world

around her: “Roald Dahl disappointed me. The heroine never ate anybody, and the nasty man-eating giants all got their comeuppance. What was I expecting? Somebody like me could never be the good one.” (DeAngelis 31, 32). Her commitment to collecting information about monstrous cannibals symbolises her search for representation: ““It’s like a book of monsters,” he said. I ran my fingers over the marbled black-and-white cover. “It makes me feel less alone.”” (DeAngelis 108). Her dependence on external sources of recognition prevents any chances of genuine self acceptance.

Freud’s tripartite model of id, ego and superego provides a framework to understand the process of comprehension and consequentially, identity formation. The id operates by the pleasure principle, containing the primal instincts and urges; the superego is governed by the moral principle, constantly warning about the consequences of acting upon the instinctual urges; while the ego, abiding by the reality principle derived from the dynamic external experiences, influences and bodily sensations, is constantly negotiating between them.

Throughout her childhood, Maren has looked up to her mother, Janelle, for moral guidance, striving to suppress her urges to commit cannibalism, trying to be the “model child” (DeAngelis 14) that Janelle expects her to be. To succeed in this endeavour, she regards her mother as the superegoic voice of repression, the voice of reason. Superego, which is typically co-constructed in intersubjective space as it is not mere internalisation of societal rules and restrictions but mutual recognition, is externalised in Maren’s case, in the form of her mother. This underscores the absence or failure of the mutual recognition of social rules, impacting the ability to control the instinctual urge to commit cannibalism.

The socio-cultural interpretation of cannibalism as an evil taboo is emphasised by the physical embodiment of her superego: her mother. As a result of the externalised superego, Maren’s decision-making, especially with respect to her id’s instinctual urges, are not halted by an internal voice. Moreover, the external voice of reason attempts to hide the undesirable part of her identity: “My mother was kind to me. She never said things like what you did or what you are” (DeAngelis 10). Janelle’s refusal to address Maren’s actions unconsciously prevents Maren from confronting her true nature. In turn, her denial of her own daughter’s nature and drive counterproductively accentuates the compulsion further. This leads to a number of instances sprinkled throughout her childhood, where she gives into her hunger and cannibalises.

This externalisation is vital in understanding the disintegration of Maren’s identity. When her mother abandons her, Maren’s moral anchor, and thus her sense of self, collapses. Her immediate reaction captures this perfectly: “I looked at my hands, palms up, palms down, like they didn’t belong to me” (DeAngelis 12). She loses her bodily identity immediately with the departure of her mother, leaving her at a complete loss.

The sense of bodily dispossession deepens with the realization that her mother's departure signifies emotional emptiness as well: "I couldn't cry either, because she hadn't left me anything to cry over. If she loved it, she took it with her" (DeAngelis 13). The identity Maren had carefully constructed with her mother's presence, as her own moral anchor, disintegrates, forcing her to embark on a journey to reconstruct her self, as she is forced to develop her own moral compass and sense of self regulation.

The need for an external moral conscience becomes acute given Maren's involuntary and impulsive urge to cannibalise: "'Why do you wear black all the time?'" he asked. Just in case. So the mess wouldn't show." (DeAngelis 36). Her life is structured around anticipation and self-defense against her own instincts.

Freud defines ego as the "coherent organization of mental processes" (Freud 15). Maren's inability to harmoniously connect the different parts of her mental processes results in her unstable and fragmented identity.

In her efforts to fill the void left by her mother and find coherence in her identity, she attempts to negate the cannibalistic part of her identity: "For a second I wished I was that kind of girl. Better a slut than a monster." (DeAngelis 101). This substitution of one stigmatized identity for another reflects her desperate search for absolution. However, her own conscience does not believe that she deserves forgiveness as she believes herself to be irredeemably evil: "Forgiveness was a word that belonged to that other language, the one that vanished as soon as I woke up" (DeAngelis 126). She often wonders if she could ever get over her guilt and accept herself as a whole, underscoring her ongoing conflict between guilt and self-acceptance: "Would I ever be at peace with who I was and what I'd done? How could I be?" (DeAngelis 152).

Maren's confrontation with her father marks a pivotal moment in her psychological development. In her final attempt to understand herself, she meets her father, who is institutionalised in an asylum. Confirming that her father, Frank, is also a cannibal, simultaneously provides understanding as well as terror; it explains her nature while also embodying fear that she might also end up institutionalised with absolutely no sense of identity or recognition of her own self. This fear is accentuated as she sees her father's mutilated hand. Her father has eaten his own hand, after learning that his daughter might be a cannibal as well. This thought breaks him completely leading to self destruction. This act of autocannibalism can be seen as the manifestation of his self-consuming guilt, his psyche consuming itself. Facing this and reading Frank's diary, Maren understands the necessity to confront her own identity to prevent self destruction.

The novel ends with a calm acceptance and tentative reconciliation of her own identity, and an ambiguous hope of stability in the future. As she prepares to consume someone, she accepts it as an inextricable part of herself. The thought of solitude and

alienation that once terrified her, becomes a form of self-possession, learning to live with herself.

Another important character in the novel who has cannibalistic urges is Sully, Maren's grandfather. Sully embodies a contrasting form of psychological fragmentation, as opposed to Maren. Though a cannibal himself, he expresses a sense of deep seated hatred for people who commit the act. His entire selfhood can be seen as a defense against guilt, predicated on denial rather than integration of his identity with his hunger. Sully has the tradition of collecting the hair of the people he cannibalises and making a braid out of them:

At first I did think it was a rope, but then he pulled out the thick, silvery knot of Mrs. Harmon's chignon and laid it out on the calico place mat with a sort of reverence, and I realized what the ropelike thing was made of. There were all sorts of hair woven into it, red and brown and black and silver, curly and kinky and slippery-straight. I never knew something could be so grotesque and so beautiful at the same time. (DeAngelis 60)

This ritualisation of his hunger and desire coupled with his narrative of self-discipline of consuming "only the dead", he believes, elevates him above others. This self-created illusion of mastery over his hunger fractures his identity into two. In one of the incidents, he is seen to devour Mrs Harmon "calmly [and] methodically" (DeAngelis 56). His belief in control masks profound internal division: he both condemns and embodies the hunger he refuses to acknowledge. This duality stems from his denial to recognise the urge as a crucial part of his identity.

Sully's endeavour to eliminate other cannibals, including his own granddaughter, Maren, can be understood as an externalisation of his self hatred and guilt. While confronting Maren in an attempt to kill her, he says, "Every kid's a mistake. (...) Every kid who ever was. You see that, don't ya, Missy?" (DeAngelis 194, 195). This reflects a delusional sense of moral superiority, positioning himself as a vigilante purging the world of "mistakes", while his own cannibalistic acts are considered to have transcended the chaos of appetite and morality through a ritualised order and supposed self-control. In reality, this projection reflects his inability to reconcile his fractured self.

The distinction between the fragmented identities of Maren and Sully lies in the self-perception. While Sully remains imprisoned in denial, constructing elaborate mechanisms to prevent the utter collapse of his precarious subjectivity, Maren understands the current state of her identity and its power and impact on herself as well as the others, and works on it. Through this acceptance, the novel reframes cannibalism not as an act of monstrosity, but as an exploration of boundaries between repression, guilt and self-ownership, with respect to identity.

Transgenerational Trauma:

One of the crucial points to consider while trying to understand the characters' primal impulses, and consequently their sense of self, lies in the hereditary nature of these urges. The narrative reveals that both Maren's father and grandfather possess cannibalistic tendencies, despite their reluctance to embrace them. Their cannibalistic impulses thus constitute what Carl Jung conceptualizes as the Shadow.

As Jung explains, the Shadow represents the "moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality" (Jung 26), residing within the unconscious realm of the psyche. The two different kinds of shadows, personal and collective, can have discrete effects on identity: "it is quite within the bounds of possibility for a man to recognize the relative evil of his nature, but it is a rare and shattering experience for him to gaze into the face of absolute evil" (Jung 28). Within this framework, the inherited compulsion to cannibalise functions as a manifestation of the collective unconscious, or at least a microcosmic representation of it within the familial lineage.

The filial or archetypal dimension of the hunger explains Maren's struggle to reconcile with her identity. It represents a psyche outside consciousness, where the inherited familial traits restrain the free will of the ego, providing limited freedom in terms of exploration of one's own identity, as seen in Maren's case, where the weight of her hereditary impulses constrains her freedom to construct her own sense of self.

The depiction of cannibalising hunger as an instinctual drive and not a learned behaviour reinforces its role as an unconscious, biological inheritance. This compulsion shapes subjectivity that transcends conscious control. In the novel, Maren, overwhelmed by guilt and remorse over her urges and actions, attempts to hide and overcome her hunger. The attempts are futile as the urges go beyond her power. However, remaining conscious while committing the act, along with her incapability to stop committing it, intensifies her guilt and fractures her identity.

This guilt manifests itself through generations; family becomes the psychic chain of repressed desires and remorse. This is explicitly seen in Maren and Frank, while in Sully, it manifests as self-hatred projected onto other cannibals. The involuntary nature of the transgenerational inheritance foregrounds cannibalism as the hyperliteralisation of inescapable desire and guilt, complicating the process of identity formation. Through this dynamic, the act of cannibalism emphasises the tension between inheritance and autonomy, depicting identity formation as an ongoing negotiation between the conscious self and the unconscious forces that define it.

Identity through Narration:

The novel, while dealing primarily with cannibalism, notably refrains from indulging in any explicit and visceral description of the act in its narration. It predominantly maintains a clinical viewpoint and glosses over the material and corporeal descriptions of the act itself. Freud's explanation regarding the workings of a repressed mind explains the narrative style: "He is dominated by a resistance; but he is quite unaware of the fact, even if guesses from his feelings of discomfort that a resistance is now at work in him, he does not know what it is nor how to describe it" (Freud 16). The narrative restraint and choice to focus on not the act but only its aftermath reflects the characters' psyche, especially their inability to vocalise their emotions and actions and the resulting repression of the same.

The controlled narration parallels Maren's inability to articulate her instinctual hunger. By concentrating only on the emotional consequences and the aftermath of her actions rather than the act itself, the narration mirrors Maren's own repression. The absence of the haunting, gory descriptions becomes a looming presence in itself as textual manifestation of her internal conflict, where the omission of details enact her defense mechanisms: repression and avoidance.

This is encapsulated in Maren's description of her first cannibalistic act: "There I was, asleep on the floor beside the bone pile, tears still drying on my cheeks and blood wet around my mouth. I loathed myself even then. I don't remember any of this, but I know it" (DeAngelis 9). The refusal to engage with explicit details of the act itself is a self defense mechanism to protect her identity and psyche from utter collapse, which is reflected through the stylistic choice.

This choice further opens up space for exploration of Maren's identity, resisting the reduction to monstrosity. This redirects the focus from physical to emotional and psychological aspects of cannibalism, presenting an opportunity to transcend the traditional representations of cannibalism as a spectacle of violence and enabling a nuanced understanding of the act and its relation to the characters' identities. This invariably reconfigures the act of cannibalism in the narration as a site of introspection of identities and not mere sensationalism.

Similar restraint is reflected in Sully's portrayal, where the inability to verbalise his hunger as well as its consequences directly finds symbolic representation in the bracelet he makes out of the hair of his victims. The conversation with Maren describing the bracelet reveals Sully's detachment from the horror of his actions and the fact that the horror lies in the narrative restraint to verbalise his emotions:

"It's kinda poetical, when you think about it."

"What do you mean?"

"Makin' somethin' useful, somethin' lovely, out of somethin' that's done and gone. A hundred years ago they used to make bracelets outta corpses' hair, d'you ever hear that?" (DeAngelis 61)

This aestheticisation of violence and normalisation of horror is further amplified by the narrative's refusal to dwell on his cannibalistic act itself. The only point the narration dwells on the act is during Maren's first encounter with Sully:

His head was burrowed deep into Mrs. Harmon's belly—there were shreds of her blouse on the carpet—and her arm fell across his back, stiff as a plank, as he plunged into her nose-first. Mrs. Harmon's head was gone, but there were thick locks of silver hair across the arm of the sofa. I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. How could I scream, when it was all so familiar to me? (DeAngelis 56)

This exception happens at the crucial point of Maren's quest for a sense of belonging and unexpectedly meeting someone who shares her trait. The narration's brief break from restraint underscores both her horror as well as her identification with Sully. The cannibalistic act continues as "he chomped and chewed and swallowed calmly, methodically even" (DeAngelis 56), further exhibiting Sully's dissociation from his actions, consistent with the narrative restraint.

Unlike Sully, Frank is provided with an opportunity to narrate his own thoughts and actions through his journal. However, instead of offering clarity, he withholds; his fragmented confession gestures towards explanation but stops with revelation:

A man had me by the hand and he was leading me into a restroom behind the gas pumps. I don't remember his face, but he locked me in with him and he was trying to get me to do something bad but I did something much worse. I ate him. I am so very sorry for the pain and shock this will cause you. (DeAngelis 175)

The journal reflects the generational silence and emotional evasion that binds all the three characters together as a family, defining their familial identity: hunger, guilt and shame that cannot be addressed directly.

In essence, the text inherits the silence of the characters, where the act itself becomes an enactment of repression within the narration. The stylistic choice functions as a psychological echo of the characters' inability to face or embrace their identities.

Collapse of Binaries:

The unconventional representation of cannibalism in *Bones and All* results in the blurring and subversion of traditional dichotomies. Rather than presenting cannibalism as a marker of evil alone, the novel uses cannibalism as a tool to problematise categories that have been traditionally considered as mutually exclusive, such as conscious and unconscious, human and monster, as well as alienation and belonging.

As discussed extensively, cannibalism stands as the deeper, uncontrollable urge that remains between the realm of consciousness and unconsciousness in the novel. Maren exhibits the dire consequences of occupying this liminal space of the psyche, where her

unconscious impulses and conscious choice constantly fight for dominance. This destabilises the binary of innocence and guilt as Maren is both the victim and the perpetrator of her impulses. As she cannibalises her victims, she is left with deep remorse for her actions.

This tension within the psyche due to cannibalism is extended to the aspect of humanity. The stylistic choice of Maren's first person narration expands possibilities of exploration of her identity as she fights her "monstrous" urges to retain her humanity. The complication of this understanding of cannibalism and identity overthrows the narrow understanding of monstrosity and human-ness, underscoring the likelihood of their simultaneous co-existence.

The blurring of boundaries also extends beyond the internal psyche into social existence. Maren's cannibalism positions her as an outsider, as she is ostracised by her family and the society. However, in her journey searching for a sense of belonging, she finds community and connection with other cannibals along the way, especially Lee. Her impulses both isolate her as well as draw her towards an alternative, yet marginal form of familial and social connection. Here, cannibalism blurs the boundary between isolation and belonging. By positioning Lee as Maren's love interest and introducing a romance sub-plot, the novel subverts the traditional structure and unfolding of a romance story: "The narratological patterns of the heteronormative romance plot are subverted, and the compulsory open ending of "living happily ever after" is mocked in a story about violent deaths and difficult survival" (Kérchy 12).

Conclusively, *Bones & All* resists the simplicity of clear cut binary oppositions, revealing how identity is forged in the unstable space between socially constructed binaries. Cannibalism becomes the catalyst that exposes the fragility of these categories, becoming a radical critique of the boundaries that define what it means to be human.

Conclusion:

Bones and All can be considered as a rearticulation of cannibalism as a deeply psychological site where notions of identity and belonging are negotiated. The exploration of identity of the characters is constantly disrupted by their cannibalistic hunger, reflected through their actions as well as the narrative choices.

The conscious choice of focusing on only the characters with filial connection to the protagonist and excluding Lee, despite his crucial role in the story, had been made to understand the various aspects that constitutes identity better including conscious, unconscious, personal and familial. Although Lee plays an important role in Maren's journey as a companion, the lack of explanation and personal narrative complicates the analysis of his psyche, as generalisation and application of the other characters' processes of construction of identity to Lee's will not do his unique subjectivity justice.

Moving on to the thematic strategies, the subversion and breaking of traditional binaries due to the unconventional representation of cannibalism further adds on to the understanding that identity cannot be compartmentalised into clean, binary categories; rather, at times, they inhabit the unstable space between them.

Ultimately, by combining narrative restraint with an exploration of intergenerational hunger for human flesh, DeAngelis's novel challenges conventional representations of monstrosity and offers a nuanced reflection on the fragile and unstable nature of identity. It invites the readers to confront and reflect on the mechanisms through which identity is formed, fractured, and continuously remade, through the ultimate taboo, cannibalism.

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