

Fear and fantasy:
intersections of horror
and sexuality in
bastard out of
carolin...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

There is a thrill to be had in frightening experiences; this explains the popularity of horror films, roller coasters, and haunted house tours. So many people embrace their fears in order to achieve their desired thrill. In the novel *Bastard out of Carolina*, Dorothy Allison intertwines themes of sexuality and fear, showing how danger can incite desire, as long as it is welcome. Allison uses the character of Bone to demonstrate how fantasy can be used to transform fear into a pleasurable experience. Fear, while considered a negative emotion, is not necessarily the most destructive force possible, especially when the fear derives only from fantasy and not an actual risk of harm.

Allison illustrates this in *Bone* by making her recoil at Daddy Glen's advances while obsessing over them in the privacy of her bed. When she is first molested by him, she does not get any pleasure out of it, saying that "it made me afraid, his big hand between my legs and his eyes glittering in the dim light (46)." Afterwards, she expresses the wish that it had only been a dream (48), because the reality of the molestation incites a real fear of what Daddy Glen, stronger than Bone and in a position of authority, could do to her. A dream, on the other hand, would be thrilling. While the molestation was not in fact a dream, Bone creates one out of it, fantasizing about pain and fear during masturbation: I would imagine being tied up and put in a haystack while someone set the drystale straw ablaze. I would picture it perfectly while rocking on my hand. The daydream was about struggling to get free while the fire burned hotter and closer. I am not sure if I came when the fire reached me or after I had imagined escaping it. But I came. I orgasmed on my hand to the dream of fire. (Allison 63) When she is by

herself with no risk of Glen's violent rage, she is able to desire rather than withdraw, taking an active part in her horror fantasy when in the horror of her reality she can only remain passive and helpless, "too afraid to move."

(47) Sex and fear are often intertwined. Georges Bataille, author of *Story of the Eye*, a book that certainly incorporates elements of horror into a work of erotica, said on the subject that sex itself is frightening to people. "Man goes constantly in fear of himself," he says. "His erotic urges terrify him." He emphasizes the fear of incest especially (Brain 28), which is definitely present in *Bastard out of Carolina*, with Glen being a father figure to Bone.

These feelings of horror do not always dampen sexual arousal, though, making it instead more exciting. As Bone says of one of her masochistic fantasies of Glen beating her, "it was scary, but it was thrilling too (112)." In Bone's mind, the intersections of sex and fear are largely due to her familial background. The stories told to her by her aunts and uncles instill in her an eroticization of what could be considered frightening. She is told by her Aunt Alma, for example, that her Uncle Earle has "a devilish look and a body... made for sex (Allison 24)." Her Aunt Ruth also describes Earle as having "just enough meanness in him to keep a woman interested (25)." Her uncles also joke about Glen's temper and his violently huge hands and "horse dick," saying that a woman would never leave him (61-2). Bone's own mother, Anney, is confused by feelings of fear and lust. When she is introduced to Daddy Glen, "his eyes bored into her and got darker still. She flushed then, and smelled her own sweat, nervously unable to tell if it came from fear or lust (13)." This uncertainty, while terrifying, excites Anney, and her daughter seems to take after her in this sense. Uncertainty and

anticipation is what makes fear so arousing. When Bone masturbates to the fantasy of fire, she is unsure whether she escapes the fire or is consumed by it, but she knows one of those thoughts causes her to orgasm. Bone's sexual climax can be related to the climax of a story arc, where an intense confrontation happens and it is uncertain whether the protagonist will overcome it or not. Fear and uncertainty cause a rush of adrenaline; this excitement can be converted into sexual excitement, a theory known as excitation transfer.

In his book *Masochism and the Self*, Roy F. Baumeister mentions one study of excitation transfer that dealt with fear specifically, in which male subjects who had just crossed "a high suspension bridge that swayed in the wind" were much more likely to flirt with an attractive woman on the other side than those who had remained on solid ground (138). Baumeister goes on to compare this to masochism, saying that bondage situations, like those Bone fantasizes about, are sexually arousing because they make the masochist feel vulnerable (139). Vulnerability means a lack of control, a lack of certainty, and this creates an arousing sensation in the body, which can then be transferred to sexual arousal. Masochists engaging in consensual sexual activities, however, do usually have some level of control, however subtle it may be. As Baumeister writes earlier in his book, "It sounds as if the dominant has seized control, but again it is usually the masochist who desires [the bondage] (77)." Bone takes pleasure in having control over her fantasies when in reality she has no control over Daddy Glen. His beatings and molestations are not at all desired by her. What she desires, then, seems to be some control over her lack of control, which is the paradox of

masochistic desire. The beatings inspire her to take the unpleasant and transform it into pleasure through sexual fantasies. This is not unique to the character of Bone; Theodor Reik, a student and associate of Freud, said that “anxiety and fright... fear and horror... are unpleasant in themselves and yet they initiate sexual excitement.” Reik says these feelings can be the initial cause of childhood masturbation. Reminiscent of Bone’s fantasy of a haystack fire, one woman imagined herself as being on a butcher’s block in order to orgasm. Another woman traced her sexual desire to be slapped in the face back to her childhood (Brain 174). It seems that it is common for children to take frightening situations and turn them into satisfying sexual fantasies. This concept is further illustrated in *Bastard out of Carolina* through Bone’s younger sister Reese, who also seems to enjoy the fantasy of being attacked while not actually being attacked. The terror she experiences as she fights off her imaginary assailants is “mock terror,” the only kind that can be pleasurable (Allison 176).

As Staci Newmahr writes in her book *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy*, sadomasochism can often be cathartic: “Some participants play with the express purpose of healing from past trauma.” She even mentions trauma from incest specifically, saying that “among incest survivors, incest play can sometimes be an example of this (95).” The healing comes not from ignoring the trauma, but by transforming it into a fantasy, just as Bone wished that her abuse had only been a dream. By embracing the fear, masturbating to thoughts of it, Bone was able to take back a part of herself that would otherwise have belonged to Daddy Glen had she tried to forget about it. In the case of Bone, her fantasies do reflect

the abuse she has endured. However, as Anita Phillips puts it, “Masochistic pleasure does not merely reflect inequalities and unfairness ... it eroticizes them ... They are ... rendered tangible, observed, participated in, enjoyed, played out, exhausted.” It is the fantasy, the “theatrical” qualities of masochism that make such inequalities bearable (54). Bone is able to escape from her actual abuse by playing it out and exhausting it. Unlike in her relationship with Daddy Glen, there’s an end to the fear in her fantasies: when she reaches orgasm. As Phillips writes, “a scene of sadomasochistic sex bears little resemblance to actual emotional or physical violence (54).” For Bone, the difference between her sexual fantasies and her actual abuse is huge. She masturbates to thoughts of Glen beating her, but in her imagination, she does not scream or kick in protest as she does in real life. She imagines herself as strong in the midst of horror, “teeth set, making no sound at all, no shameful scream, no begging (Allison 112).” This fantasy eventually helps her to become stronger in real life, refusing to scream during her beatings, something which helps her to endure them by giving her some control over the situation (234-5). Along with masochistic fantasies being a coping mechanism for her abuse, they also seem to serve as a coping mechanism for the intense guilt Bone feels, both about making Daddy Glen angry, and deriving pleasure from it afterwards.

Baumeister argues that masochism is more likely to remove feelings of guilt through escape rather than atonement (98-100). The thrill of it can change the emotional state of a person, thus making them forget, or escape from, their feelings of guilt. Atonement on the other hand, or removing guilt by suffering for one’s misdeeds, tends to be more superficial in sadomasochism.

In Bone's case, however, the masochistic fantasies provide a combination of both escape and atonement. The escape comes from the sensation of it. She feels bad about things, but masturbating makes her feel good. This focus on physical sensation is a major feature of sex therapy, often used to increase sexual pleasure (Baumeister 124). Bone has an obsession with atonement as well though, as indicated by her going to a new church every Sunday to be baptised. Bone is thrilled by the fear of God as well as her horrifying sexual fantasies. She says that what she craves is "that moment of sitting on the line between salvation and damnation (Allison 151)." Just like in her haystack dream, it is the fear of uncertainty that excites her in the church. Her active imagination transforms even feelings of spiritual guilt into fantastic things to be craved. One important example of Bone turning something frightening into something pleasurable is the hook she finds at the bottom of the river. Aunt Raylene discovers the children playing with it recklessly, and she tells them, "It's for trawling, for dragging. You go down in the river and they'll use something like this to pull you up in chunks (186)." Bone has nightmares about the hooks afterwards, but despite their frightening associations, she wants one for herself desperately. She obsesses over it until she ends up sneaking it out of Ratline's basement; she uses the frightening object as a kind of sex toy, pleasuring herself with it.

Bone does not give in to fear, but embraces it. The difference is that to embrace fear is to take hold of it and make it one's own, rather than letting oneself belong to fear. Bone quite literally takes the terrifying hook and makes it her own when she steals it and hides it in her bedroom. Rather than being consumed by the fear of it, she takes comfort in it, locking it around

her hips and thinking, " I was locked away and safe. What I really was could not be touched (193)." Once again in control of the fantasy of bondage, she feels that there is a part of her that Daddy Glen will not be able to violate. The dream gives her protection against the real-life situation. She feels safe because the bondage is something she desired and craved, rather than something forced on her. The hook calls to mind another frightening object: Daddy Glen's belt, which Bone touches and smells almost lovingly when Glen is not around, as if it were an " animal that could be tamed (112)." This taming is something she accomplishes when she takes ownership of the hook. As she moves the chain of the hook against herself, she muses, " Somewhere far away a child was screaming, but right then, it was not me (193)." The hook goes on to further serve as a parallel for Bone's coping with abuse when she uses it to get onto the roof of the Woolworth's store and break into it. Like Daddy Glen's beatings, Woolworth's represented an unjust punishment. She was humiliated by the owner and banned from the store after admitting to stealing Tootsie Rolls. By breaking into the store with the help of her beloved hook, Bone was able to take ownership of a part of herself that was lost in the unfairness of the situation. The hook, though frightening in appearance, served as a " talisman" (Allison 194) which made her feel powerful and enabled her to bring justice down upon the cruel owner of Woolworth's.

Bone often takes comfort in frightening things such as the hook or " the hope of the apocalypse" because they represent vindication. She fantasizes about Revelations and its " rivers of blood and fire (152)." This ties back into her haystack fantasy. Later on in the novel she fantasizes about not only herself

being burned by flames, but all of Greenville County with “ haystacks burning and nowhere to run, people falling behind and the flames coming on... (254)” She thinks of the fire as “ purifying,” much different than the dirty, unwanted rage of Daddy Glen. When Bone thinks of Glen beating her, she wonders if he came in his pants and the thought makes her gag with disgust (253). Bone’s fantasies are pure in contrast with her revolting reality. This is something that further separates the two. In a study by the evolutionary psychologist Diana Fleischman, it was found that “ women exposed to disgusting stimuli before watching porn were three times less aroused by that erotic stimuli than those in other groups. And there were no significant differences in arousal between women who had viewed frightening images before porn, and women who had not — indicating that being grossed out has a substantial negative effect on your desire to get it on (MacMillen).” Daddy Glen’s presence prevents Bone from getting any pleasure because she is disgusted by him as well as afraid of him. In his absence, however, she is able to be aroused by frightening thoughts alone.

In sadomasochistic communities, Bone’s obsession with the combination of horror and pleasure might be called “ fear play.” As Newmahr points out, “ play” is the term for the activities sadists and masochists engage in, and their interactions are called “ scenes.” (8-9) It’s this theatricality that makes masochism or sexual pleasure derived from fear understandable, because the pretend aspect of it separates the fantasy from the reality. In *Bastard out of Carolina*, Bone uses this fantasy to cope with the reality of abuse. Her constant fear of punishment in reality is nowhere near as pleasant as the sensation as she fantasizes about it. Through sex, she is able to turn fear

into a pleasurable experience. She takes terror, something that could easily paralyze a child, and despite its horror somehow uses it to develop strength and grow.

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