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Meeting your Monstrous Self:

Fractured Identity and Duality in the Slender Man Mythos as Seen Through *EverymanHYBRID*

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Thesis Proposal

Master of Arts in English Education

Introduction

In this hybrid thesis project, I will analyze how the internet figure of Slenderman, created by Eric Knudsen under the alias of Victor Surge on the Something Awful forums for a Photoshop contest on June 8th 2009, and his portrayal in series like *EverymanHYBRID*, *Marble Hornets*, and *Tribe Twelve* exemplify the fears and anxieties modern society has towards mental illnesses like depression and bipolar disorder, as well as the feelings of loss of control that accompany these disorders. This hybrid thesis will also explore how series like *EverymanHYBRID*, *Marble Hornets*, and *Tribe Twelve* use the character of Slender Man as a metaphor to effectively represent mental illness, the fracture in the Self -produced through meeting the bogeyman figure of Slender Man-, and its consequent creation of duality in the form of a horrific other, because of their reliance on multimodal media that allows them to reach an audience that lives digitally. The analysis of this video series will be guided by the theoretical lens of gender studies and will present Helene Cixous's theory of binary opposition as the primary approach to understanding the duality present in these series, with scrupulous emphasis given to the character of Evan in *EverymanHYBRID*. In addition to this, the analysis will also employ a structuralist theoretical lens, noting the work of important theorists such as Claude-Lévi Strauss and Michel Foucault, in order to understand the structures shaping the view of madness in society. The analysis will also make use of the theories employed by Jacques Lacan such as his contributions to psychoanalysis and views of the Other. Moreover, I will also employ Homi K. Bhabha's views of the Self, the Other, and the Third Space. Furthermore, I will also implement Sigmund Freud's theory of the Uncanny as a way to explain what makes Slender Man so frightening to modern audience.

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The first chapter of this hybrid thesis will contain an in-depth exploration of the complicated mythos of Slender Man, with special interest given to the popular YouTube video-series *EverymanHYBRID* and its portrayal of the internet's most infamous creepypasta. My analysis of Slender Man and *EverymanHYBRID* will focus heavily on the dualities presented and will thus make use of the theory of binary opposition. My second chapter will be a creative component of my own creation. The hybrid component of this thesis project will be an autofiction, multi-genre, multimodal text that will include artwork, creepypasta influences, poetry, and aspects of a memoir. This part of the thesis will create a modern take on the struggles of young adults with mental illness and will bring in the genre of creepypasta in order to craft a text young adults can resonate with in this digital era.

The third chapter of this hybrid thesis will focus on how the original autofiction, multi-genre, multimodal text produced in the previous chapter is influenced by the analysis and thorough exploration of the primary literature of the first chapter. This analysis will allow me to make connections and trace a direct path from the mythos of Slender Man to the creation of an original fictional work that accurately displays how creatures like Slender Man stand in for mental illness in the lives of young adults.

In the conclusion of this hybrid thesis project I will address the implications of creating such a work of fiction while restating the importance works of this manner have for young adults and all users of digital media. I will discuss how the failure to connect with young adults through non-assigned literature that is not only accessible but also important to them can lead to horrific consequences like that of the 2014 Wisconsin Slender Man related stabbing. Moreover, I will address how scholars should not be discouraged from approaching important topics like the connection between Slender Man and mental illness because it is a disservice to the literature and

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mythos created and to the people who are able to understand and come to terms with their mental illness through this character, series, and culture. I will then conclude my analysis by painstakingly pointing out how mental illness is without a doubt inseparable from the mythos of Slender Man and how connecting with young adults through non-assigned, digital, and multimodal literature allows for a deeper connection and sense of understanding of the situations they face in this digital age.

Research Questions

The following are some of the questions that will guide this hybrid thesis project:

1. How do multimodal episodic video-series allow for a thorough exploration of fictional characters who develop mental illness and see themselves become a horrific other?
2. How does *EverymanHYBRID* present the fracture of the Self through the character of Evan and how does this echo the fracture produced by a diagnosis of mental illness?
3. How do encounters with Slender Man allow for the manifestation of horrific forces that distort the reality of the characters in *EverymanHYBRID* and how does this echo untreated mental illness?

Horror as a Genre

The genre of horror is constantly undergoing a never-ending process of rebirth, evolution, and innovation. Horror is generally seen as a modern genre that began in the eighteenth century and seems to have come about as a subset of the Gothic genre that was popular at the time (Carrol 4). Although horror had been around for over a century, it was not until movies came into the public

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and popular eye that horror was able to take an important role in mainstream culture. Horror scholar Noël Carroll explains how “what seems to have happened in the first half of the seventies is that horror, so to speak, entered the mainstream” (2). From this time on, horror became inescapable in the media. This infatuation with horror allowed for the creation of novels, movies, television series, and even music videos that still haunt their audiences. In spite of horror’s popularity as a genre, there was little importance given to the portrayal of characters and monsters as anything more than figures meant to frighten and entertain. Carroll even notes how “in works of horror, the humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order”, thus explaining the lack of development and importance monstrous characters often have (16). However, more recently horror has resurfaced as a way to safely, albeit sometimes in a detrimental fashion, explore mental illness and its effects on the perception of reality. Moreover, horror studies often focus on identifying the appealing aspects of horror such as the sublime or the destruction of an unreachable ideal. Ultimately horror allows for the exploration of the unknown and uncanny from a safe distance.

Although horror is considered a relatively new genre, there is no denying the incredibly strong link it has to folklore. Many myths and urban legends share an uncanny similarity to folklore. Although often times folklore is quick to dismiss any association with horror, it is hard to deny the correlation between the two. Carol J. Clover argues how “the fact is that horror movies look like nothing so much as folktales” (10). He later expands upon this by asserting that:

students of folklore or early literature recognize in horror the hallmarks of oral narrative: the free exchange of themes and motifs, the archetypal characters and situations, the accumulation of sequels, remakes, imitations. This is a field in which there is in some

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sense no original, no real or right text, but only variants; a world in which, therefore, the meaning of the individual example lies outside itself. (11)

By applying Clover's view of horror as deeply linked to folklore and Carroll's exploration of the monster I will be able to analyze Slender Man -my representation of horror- as related, or perhaps even linked to the mythical creature known as the Bogeyman -my representation of folklore-.

The Bogeyman and Der Großmann

The mythical creature of the Bogeyman is not uncommon across a plethora of cultures and he often serves as a way to frighten children into behaving appropriately. The Bogeyman is an incredibly widespread myth and Spanish speaking countries have their own version of it called "El Cuco". Even I was brought up on threats that "El Cuco" would visit me at night if I was naughty and my mother used to sing me a lullaby that strongly encouraged me to fall asleep, lest "El Cuco" come eat me for disobeying her. Although this idea no longer scares me the same way as it did before, I still shiver whenever I think of the possibility of "El Cuco" hiding in my closet or under my bed. Childish fears do not disappear, just as "El Cuco" has not disappeared for me, they instead change their shape to encompass more terrifying and unimaginable horrors. In *The Bogeyman: Some Preliminary Observations on Frightening Figures*, John Widdowson notes how "when we speak of bogeys or bogeymen we may perhaps think primarily of childhood days when they may have had a specific meaning for each of us. On the other hand as adults we may simply use these words as general cover-terms for anything which inspires fear" (99). This explanation of the Bogeyman and subsequent development of the mythical figure follows a growth and expansion of fears to include even societal fears as part of the Bogeyman.

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The Bogeyman has no specific features, meaning that he does not look a particular way, and can thus, take any form desired. This Bogeyman figure draws most of its fear inducing qualities from its unknown nature. Widdowson furthers this argument by postulating one of society's biggest fears. Widdowson explains how "one aspect of the operation of fear within society which merits the folklorist's attention is the way in which we conceptualise our fears. More specifically, we may focus attention on those figures which symbolise our fears, especially our fear of the unknown" (100). These figures Widdowson mentions are made possible because of the immense dread the unknown causes in us. Fear of the unknown is precisely what spawned the creation of a figure called Der Großmann that follows the motif established by the Bogeyman. Der Großmann is German for "the tall man" and is said to take naughty children into the forest and make them disappear. The similarities between the Bogeyman figure and Der Großmann are frightening, but the horrific aspect comes from the fact that he was only recently created as a way to build upon the credibility of Slender Man. In my analysis of the folklore that often leads to the creation of myth, I will use the figure of the Bogeyman as a way to once again bridge horror and folklore. In this particular case I will explore how the fear caused by the Bogeyman, as explained by Widdowson, directly correlates to the fear of Slender Man.

Slender Man

I've always enjoyed horror. Ever since I was young, I was fascinated by the mysterious and terrifying, even if I was later unable to get a good night's sleep. I've always felt that the chill horror produces is a way to engage with the sublime even if just for a second. This led me to enjoy looking for creepy content and stories online. This affinity and interest for horror drove me to the genre of Creepypasta. Creepypasta is a play on the term copypasta, a word used to

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describe text that is oftentimes copied from online forum to online forum until it takes on a sort of viral nature. Creepypasta though, refers to often short internet horror stories that get spread around through emails, online forums, and other forms of digital media. These stories often present monsters that haunt protagonists or cause significant amounts of physical and emotional distress to them.

Most Creepypastas are supplemented with audio, images, and sometimes even video to add veracity to the subject, but not all are. Some Creepypastas rely exclusively on the text to impart fear upon its readers. These stories used to follow a set path in the beginning, following one of three general storylines. These were anecdotes, rituals and lost episodes. In anecdotes the author was the active participant in the story, meaning that they had been tormented by the entity in question. Ritual Creepypastas were usually presented as instructions to games or rituals that after being followed could either show the reader something amazing or horrifying. In lost episode Creepypastas, the narrator of the story writes about a never before seen or unreleased episode of a TV show that has the characters acting in an odd manner. These types of Creepypastas often use children's TV shows and cartoons as the subject of the story. In more recent years some of these storylines have fallen out of style and writers have opted for more creative approaches to writing Creepypastas. Although there are many Creepypastas, no other iteration has enjoyed the same attention that Slender Man has been given by both the digital community following him and popular media outlets that fail to understand what he is about.

Slender Man first appeared online on the Something Awful forums as part of a Photoshop contest in 2009. He was created by user Victor Surge, whose name is actually Eric Knudsen, as a set of photos that proved eerie to do their vague yet unsettling nature. Slender Man was created with ambiguous intentions by Knudsen and with no specific goal in mind. The doctored images

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initially posted associated him with children, which helped cement his status as a monster who steals children for unknown purposes. The first image presented by Knudsen consisted of a group of children in a playground with the caption "One of two recovered photographs from the Stirling City Library blaze. Notable for being taken the day which fourteen children vanished and for what is referred to as "The Slender Man". Deformities cited as film defects by officials. Fire at library occurred one week later. Actual photograph confiscated as evidence. – 1986, photographer: Mary Thomas, missing since June 13th, 1986" (*Slender Man in the Park*). The second altered image presented a group of teenagers walking on a dirt road with a dark forest behind them and the caption ""We didn't want to go, we didn't want to kill them, but its persistent silence and outstretched arms horrified and comforted us at the same time..." – 1983, photographer unknown, presumed dead" (*Slender Man with Children*). After the images were posted people immediately started creating new material that added to the mythos of this newly created character.

A week after Knudsen's images were initially posted on the *Something Awful* forums, a user called ce gars posted his own addition to the Slender Man mythos which in turn spawned the popularity of Slender Man video series. The first video series to come of this was Troy Wagner's *Marble Hornets*. The web series follows Jay, a young man who begins looking through the tapes created for his friend Alex's abandoned student film with the intention of finishing it. Jay seems concerned by Alex's unexplained distancing and his strange behavior. Jay convinces himself to figure out exactly what caused this change in his friend in order to mend their relationship but encounters unsettling and disturbing circumstances that broaden his understanding of the situation. Things begin to get complicated when a strange figure known as The Operator (Slender Man) begins showing up in the videos recorded by Alex. Jay soon begins

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to film himself out of fear and even records The Operator showing up at his house as well as some other mysterious figures that haunt him constantly. Many of the happenings in *Marble Hornets* are now taken as fact in the Slenderman mythos, as it is the most popular Slender Man video series to date.

In the video series that popularized his character, Slender Man is often accompanied by video distortions, violent coughing, and the loss of time. Moreover, Slender Man is known to create proxies that follow his commands. Meeting Slender Man or encountering him often produces a fracture in the psyche of the characters. Those who meet Slender Man are often thought to be lying or unreliable. Although *Marble Hornets* is the most viewed and popular of the Slender Man video series, there are a total of three series that are well known for constructing most of the canon around Slender Man. These other two series are *TribeTwelve* and *EverymanHYBRID*. As a whole these series are known as the “Big Three” because they popularized many of the concepts now associated with Slender Man. Even though these series have all added to the canon and mythos of Slender Man as we know it today, *EverymanHYBRID* has innovated and diversified the mythos by including not only Slender Man, but also, the Rake and their own creature called HABIT.

When considering how widespread the character of Slender Man has become throughout the years and how many versions of him have appeared, it is important to consider why Slender Man is such an appealing character. I would argue that Slenderman’s ability to suspend reader’s sense of disbelief plays a great part in his spread, as do the additional bits of lore that add credibility to the tale. In Jeffrey A. Tolbert’s article on Slender Man he postulates that “behind the success of many great works of fiction is a convincing appeal to “fact,” or at least to everyday experience” (38). Videos, images, and even made up folk tales like that of Der

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Großmann add a sense of veracity that contribute to the myth's seeming truthful nature. Even Knudsen himself expressed his surprise at the spread of the myth in an interview with *Know Your Meme*, a website dedicated to researching the origin and scope of memes and internet culture. Knudsen mentions how he “didn't expect it to move beyond the SA forums. And when it did, I found it interesting to watch as sort of an accelerated version of an urban legend” (Tomberly). Contrary to Knudsen, Caitlin Dewey's article on Slender Man mentions how Shira Chess, an assistant professor at the University of Georgia and popular Slender Man scholar, is unsurprised at the popularity and sense of belief that surrounds Slender Man. Dewey shares how Chess explained that “horror stories take on a specific significance and importance because they function metaphorically — the horror stories that are the best are often metaphors for other issues that affect our lives on both cultural and personal levels” (“The Complete History”). This use of horror as a metaphor then allows the figure of Slender Man to stand in for other issues that plague the conscience of society in modern times, such as mental illness. Slender Man serves as a blank slate for society to regard as a metaphor for any fear they might have.

EverymanHYBRID

EverymanHYBRID was created in March 2010 by Vincent Caffarello, Evan Jennings, and Jeffrey Koval as a fitness video-series that slowly distorts into a maddening active reality game, or ARG, that threatens both their lives and their sanity. The main characters, Vinny, Evan, and Jeff are all life-long friends who find themselves unable to escape the grasp of Slender Man when he suddenly becomes a force that threatens their lives. The characters in the series begin by presenting Slender Man as a gag, but as the series progresses, they admit that they are no longer behind Slender Man's appearances. As the series develops the character's encounters with

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Slender Man become exponentially dangerous, causing major trauma and even the death of those around Vinny, Evan, and Jeff.

Although the series implements many aspects of the established canon that had been presented up to its creation, it allows for new characters and even other Creepypastas to be incorporated. In *EverymanHYBRID*, Slenderman is accompanied by another Creepypasta character called “The Rake”, and an original character created by the series called HABIT. Slenderman, HABIT, and The Rake become forces that threaten the sanity and lives of the characters. Evan’s story and plotline, although interwoven into that of every other character, is what truly drives the narrative forward because of the relationship he has to HABIT as well as the conflict he constantly produces for the main cast. HABIT, Slender Man, and the Rake serve as the main antagonists of the series, but special attention is given to the development of HABIT because it allows for the direct interaction of the main cast and the monsters chasing them. This is particularly true for the character of Evan who is later revealed to be possessed by HABIT, or as the series explains it, inHABITed.

EverymanHYBRID’s story allows for horror to be used as a vehicle to explore mental illness and the division of the Self and the Other. This division allows for the incorporation of binary opposition theory as a way to explore how characters like Evan and his horrific Other, HABIT, serve as a metaphor for the healthy and sane Self, and the sick and insane Other. Moreover, a close examination of Evan’s character allows for the examination of his meeting with Slender Man as parallel to a meeting with the Bogeyman that produces a fracture in the self and a consequent duality that cannot be erased.

I chose to focus my analysis on *EverymanHYBRID*, and more specifically on the character Evan, because my close reading of the series and previous interest in Slender Man has

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allowed me to see the story as something more than entertainment. Through careful and thorough analysis of this video series I have been able to understand how Slender Man is shown to be a modern and physical representation of mental illness. Furthermore, I've also identified his popularity and proliferation to the societal fear of mental illness. Depression, Bipolar Disorder, Dissociative Identity Disorder, Schizophrenia, and many other mental illnesses have become this generation's very own Bogeyman. Series like *EverymanHYBRID* allow for an exploration, expression, and understanding of mental illness that young adults can relate to. Producing digital content in the form of serialized *YouTube* videos allows for this series to reach young adults more effectively and broadly than more traditional forms of media.

Meeting Point and Fracture

Regardless of the video series being analyzed, meeting Slender Man in any way, shape, name, or form always produces adverse effects on those who come into contact with him. Moreover, meetings with Slender Man and his associates often lead to physical harm and even death. In *Marble Hornets*, *TribeTwelve*, and *EverymanHYBRID*, those who encounter Slender Man often manifest symptoms of physical illness like violent coughing, flu-like symptoms, and nose bleeds. Aside from the physical symptoms of illness, all series present symptoms of mental illness like hallucinations, loss of time, moodiness, irritability, impulsivity, periods of anger or aggression, suicidal thoughts, isolation, insomnia, and delusions of grandeur. These symptoms of illness after meeting and interacting with Slender Man are then a manifestation of depression and mental illness as a whole.

The fact that these altercations with Slender Man produce a manifestation of mental illness is seen clearly through Evan. After encountering Slender Man the first few times, Evan

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becomes reckless, impulsive, and aggressive; which leads to an attempted attack on Slender Man that goes horribly wrong. From this point on, the series changes as HABIT makes his first appearances. In Evan's case, meeting Slender Man is the trigger that produces a fracture that allows for HABIT to possess him. After his violent meeting with Slender Man Evan becomes disconnected from reality at times, even going as far as to attempt to harm his friends and those around him. This uncharacteristic behavior from Evan is what marks the unreparable fracture in Evan that leads to the splitting of the Self and Other. This fracture creates a horrific other in Evan that takes over all aspects of his life and leaves him unable to regain control.

Duality

Duality is an essential part of the Slender Man mythos as it is present in all three of the main video series on Slender Man. Characters who demonstrate duality are often corrupted by Slender Man and become proxies. This is the case in *Marble Hornets* where Masky and Hoodie both serve as Slender Man's proxies. In *TribeTwelve* Slender Man has a plethora of proxies that range from Firebrand who is Noah's horrific future Other, to the Observer who serves as the Administrator's (Slender Man) main assistant. In contrast to the other Slender Man video series, *EverymanHYBRID* displays duality through Evan and Habit's cohabitation, but HABIT is not Slender Man's proxy. Habit is his own entity that regards Slender Man and the Rake as friends, at times almost seeing them as rivals.

In *EverymanHYBRID*, duality is most often shown through the Evan/HABIT divide. Evan's character is slowly split into Evan and HABIT, but it is hard to pinpoint specifically who is in control at times. This struggle with duality allows for the exploration of a horrific other, and later leads Evan to the realization that he is the very monster he fears. Evan is unable to accept

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that he shares his body with a creature like HABIT and rejects himself in the process. This exploration of duality through the character of a young adult and the descent into chaos produced by the inability to recombine as a singular self serves as a metaphor for a struggle with depression and how it permeates one's life. Moreover, Evan's duality is seen as a split in his psyche that denies him the ability to become his former Self, forcing him to coexist as both the Self and the Other.

Chapter Outline

As discussed at length, this Introduction allows for the construction of a frame that analyzes the duality present in the Slender Man mythos, with a particular focus on the video series *EverymanHYBRID* and the character of Evan as a metaphor for depression that allow young adults to explore mental illness. I will use Helene Cixous' theory of binary opposition and the theories on Psychoanalysis as well as those of the Self and the Other built upon by Jacques Lacan. Through this examination of the video series *EverymanHYBRID* I will demonstrate that Slender Man is an effective metaphor for depression that produces a fracture in the Self and that Evan's duality serves as a thorough exploration of a character with mental illness who is thus seen as a horrific other. In the second chapter of my hybrid thesis I will craft a multi-genre, multimodal, work of autofiction that will resonate with young adults through its nuanced portrayal of mental illness. In the third chapter of this hybrid thesis project I will connect my first chapter and my creative second chapter in order to demonstrate Slender Man's potential as a metaphor for mental illness that young adults can understand. In my conclusion I will restate the importance of providing connections and explorations of mental illness that young adults can relate to and understand, and how a failure to provide young adults with the necessary tools for understanding mental illness creates a lack of understanding of the subject matter.

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