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## Eleven: The Bitchin' Subject of Desire in *Stranger Things*

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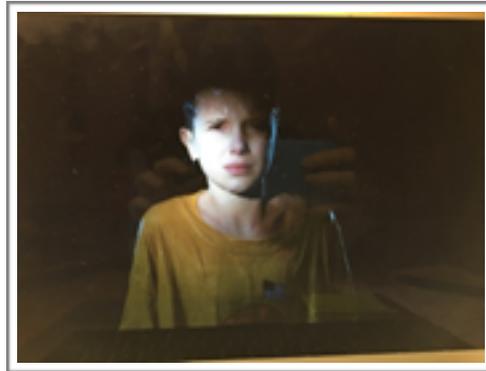
**A**T THE END of season one of *Stranger Things*, Eleven kills the Demogorgon, then disappears into black dust as the three boys run around the classroom frantically looking for her. Mike even begins to tear up as he screams her name. Throughout the series, Eleven's telekinetic monster-fighting abilities incessantly establish her as the girl who everyone wants on their side. The way she is closely shot on camera and the fact that nearly every other character seeks her help or companionship establishes her as the continual subject of desire — a figure that is present in many Gothic texts. In this essay, I wish to present a brief genealogy of that figure: Lucy in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Miles in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* are two examples of early figures whose depictions suggest that Gothic genre relies on and deploys women and children as figures around which other characters' and the reader's, desire can coalesce. In these texts, the desirous narration and plots that are nearly, if not entirely, centered around Lucy and Miles establish them as the primary subjects of desire in their respective worlds, much like Eleven in *Stranger Things*. Both characters are strongly desired by others, and those who desire them experience a destabilization when all their attention is cast upon their subject. Although all three stories occur in different fictional worlds, Lucy, Miles, and Eleven similarly destabilize their societies by accepting or inviting such desire.

Lucy Westenra is a prime example of the continual subject of desire in Gothic literature because nearly all the men in *Dracula* amorously desire

her. Near the beginning of the novel, Lucy receives three marriage proposals, from Quincey Morris, Jack Seward, and Arthur Holmwood and she writes to Mina “[w]hy can’t they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble?” (Stoker 67). Here, Lucy is essentially advocating for polyamory—something that would not have been accepted in Victorian society. Her wish to marry all three men, however inane and unrealistic it might be, reveals that she is content being the subject of desire in her world. However, despite that Lucy is content being desired, her sexual fervor, which is much more pronounced when she is a vampire, eventually provokes the men to kill her. Before they kill her, Seward describes vamped-Lucy as having “pointed teeth, the bloodstained, voluptuous mouth- which it made one shudder to see- the whole carnal and unspiritual appearance, seeming like a devilish mockery of Lucy’s sweet purity” (228). The reference to her “sweet purity” implies that they saw human Lucy as pure and virginal and vamped-Lucy as hyper-sexual, but the reader knows she was never entirely pure because she tells Mina she would like to marry all three men. As a vampire, though, Lucy gives in to her own desires and essentially becomes a menacing seductress.

Despite the fear that vamped-Lucy evokes in the men, Jonathan’s narration and Lucy’s dialogue continuously force her back into the position of being the subject of desire. When describing vamped-Lucy, Seward writes “She flung to the ground, callous as a devil, the child that up to now she had clutched strenuously to her breast, growling over it as a dog growls over a bone” (226). His syntax in describing her, such as “callous as a devil” or comparing her to a dog, appropriately suggests that she is a monster. However, he then switches to describing her in a desirous way as he notes her “languorous, voluptuous grace,” and “something diabolically sweet in her tones” (226). The switch to desirous language is discordant with his description of her in the preceding paragraph in which he highlights her frightening behavior. Lucy’s own speech then suggests that she willingly accepts being the subject of desire as she says to Arthur, “My arms are hungry for you. Come, and we can rest together. Come, my husband, come!” (226). The repetition of the word “come” intimates a suggestive tone in her begging him to join her as Stoker likely meant to play on the sexual double meaning of the word. The entire scene reveals that nothing can prevent the men from desiring Lucy, because even when she is a frightening monster,

Seward's narration and Lucy's acceptance of her role perpetuate her as the continual subject of desire.



Stranger Things Season 1 Episode 2

In *Stranger Things*, Eleven is only twelve years old, and while she is not sexualized to the extent that Lucy is, close up camera shots of her and the yearning gazes of the men and boys that populate her life continuously establish her as the subject of desire. However, even though she has special powers, she cannot control who desires her— she can only control who she desires. When the boys first meet Eleven in the woods, they shine their flashlights on her face and the camera moves closer to her, thus suggesting that she is a figure in whom they are all interested. The camera then switches between shots of the boys staring at her and closer shots of her clearly

distressed face (S.1, Ep. 2). In the shots of the boys (which also get closer every time,) Mike's face becomes the focus, while Dustin and Lucas' faces are increasingly shadowed.

The focus on Mike subtly establishes him as the one who desires Eleven the most among the three boys. Over the course of the season, there are several moments between Mike and Eleven that intimate the beginning of a romantic relationship and in season two, when she is gone, Mike becomes obsessed with attempting to talk to her via the walkie-talkies. To build the pain of her absence in the first episode of season two, a shot from Mike's point-of view lingers on the fort she used to sleep in and then he picks up the walkie-talkie and says "El, are you there? It's day 352." His incessant need to try to talk to her and his inclusion of the number of days reveals that he is obsessed with remedying her absence. Even when she is physically gone, she is still his subject of desire.

In season one, the boys dress Eleven in feminine clothes to help her blend in, but in doing so, they are also feminizing their subconscious subject of desire. They could have put her in more casual clothes but instead they choose a frilly pink dress— the epitome of femininity. Their choice in dressing her like this suggests that they want her to better fit feminine stereotypes since she is a subject of desire for them. Mike certainly knows he desires her, and whether the other boys know it or not, the camera shots and their facial expressions admit their desire. When she emerges in her new attire, the camera shoots her with a timid expression on her face, suggesting that she is still uncomfortable in her position as the subject of desire. The camera then pans to the boys' faces, which hold various expressions of awe, but Mike's face becomes the focus again as his eyes widen. Dustin says "She looks..." and Mike interrupts with "Pretty...Pretty good" (S1, Ep 4). That they are talking about her in the third person even though she is present further supports the idea that she is a subject of desire, rather than an autonomous person. Although the boys do not lust after Eleven to the degree that the men in *Dracula* lust after Lucy, they all subconsciously desire her, but Dustin and Lucas allow Mike to be the one who actually pursues her. Similarly, all the men desire Lucy, but they graciously allow Arthur Holmwood to marry her since she chooses him.

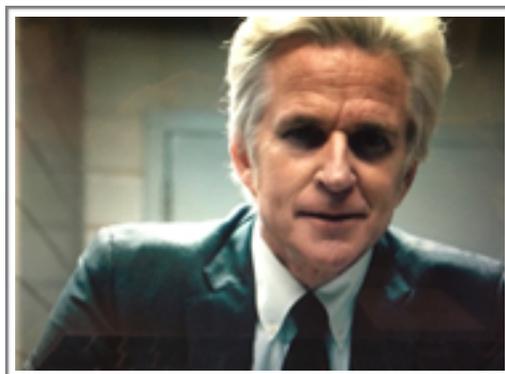


Stranger Things Season 1 Episode 5

The moment when Mike says Eleven is pretty is also one of the first moments in which she knowingly accepts his desire for her and admits hers for him, which eventually disrupts the friend group. After Mike says she is pretty, she looks in the mirror and calls herself pretty, thus suggesting that she accepts her role as the subject of desire among the boys, namely Mike. It is also notable that even when she is looking at herself in the mirror, Mike is standing behind her, also looking at her reflection. She smiles at herself, then at him through the mirror. This moment visualizes Mike's desire for Eleven and Eleven's acceptance of that desire. Although Mike and Eleven feel the same way, Eleven's invitation of Mike's desire destabilizes the entire friend

group. When Lucas accuses Eleven of sabotaging their plan to find the gate to the Upside Down, Mike tries to defend her but Lucas says “You’re blind! Blind because you like a girl who isn’t grossed out by you. Wake the hell up man! Wake the hell up!” and they have a fistfight (S1 Ep5). This is the first time within the series that the friends fight. That Eleven is the cause of this temporary destabilization of the friend group supports the idea that the subject of desire always destabilizes those who desire them. The destabilization that Eleven causes almost mirrors the destabilization that Lucy causes in her own world. While the men in *Dracula* get over the fact that Lucy chooses Holmwood, they do so by bonding together in a common act of destroying Lucy once she becomes a vampire.

If Eleven shares the gothic legacy of female desire with Lucy, she is also similar to the child Miles in *The Turn of the Screw* in that adults inappropriately desire both of them. The Governess is unexplainedly obsessed with Miles in a similar way that Dr. Brenner in *Stranger Things* desires Eleven for her powers. In James’ novella, the Governess’ syntax and narration of Miles is often full of desirous language, for example, she writes “He was incredibly beautiful, and Mrs. Grose had put her finger on it: everything but a sort of passion of tenderness for him was swept away by his presence” (James 164). Her use of the phrase “incredibly beautiful” is odd in that it describes a young boy whereas most people would rely on words more commonly associated with children to depict him, such as “precious” or “adorable.” That she uses more romantic language when describing him insinuates that she desires him in a way that goes beyond maternal love. In the same scene, Mrs. Grose says to the Governess, “My dear woman, look at him!” to which she replies, “I assure you, Miss, I do nothing else” (164). This statement solidifies her unrelenting desire for Miles, thus further establishing him as a figure of desire for her. Throughout the novella, there are countless similar moments that perpetuate Miles as the Governess’ figure of desire.





Stranger Things Season 1 Episode 4

While Eleven accepts and purposely invites Mike's desire, she does not accept yet sometimes unknowingly invites Dr. Brenner's desire for her. Dr. Brenner mostly appears in Eleven's flashbacks, such as when she crushes a Coke can with her powers then refuses his request to kill a cat. After she crushes the Coke can, the camera cuts to a shot of Dr. Brenner proudly beaming at her. The expression on his face could match that of a proud parent, but the close up shadowy shot and the ways we see him incessantly objectify her casts this moment as eerie and inappropriate, rather than fatherly or loving. The Governess' comment that she looks at Miles all day could easily be said about Eleven by Dr. Brenner as he is constantly obsessing over how to harness her powers for his own use. Later in the same flashback, Eleven kills two of the Hawkins guards in self-defense and when Dr. Brenner discovers this, he cradles the face of a distressed Eleven and then picks her up and carries her out of the isolation cell. As he holds her, he smiles down at her, amazed that she just killed two people because that is exactly how he wants to use her powers. Conversely, Eleven's facial expression reveals that she is remorseful for killing the men and her nosebleed shows that she is in physical pain from using her powers so much, thus suggesting that she at least subconsciously objects to Dr. Brenner's desire for her.

Although Eleven does not like that Dr. Brenner desires her powers, she must passively accept his desire as she relies on him for everything when

she lives in the labs, including emotional comfort. In a flashback, Dr. Brenner asks her use her powers to spy on someone, then repeat back what the man says “Just like we used to do with those old nursery rhymes. Can you do that for me?” (S1, Ep4). Dr. Brenner’s mention of nursery rhymes suggests that they have had a relationship since she was very young, thus explaining his strong hold over her. In a similar flashback, before she makes contact with the Demogorgon, Dr. Brenner brings her a potted flower and says, “[t]oday we make contact” and lightly touches her nose with his finger in a loving, paternal manner (S1, Ep 6). Her past memories of Dr. Brenner acting as a paternal figure suggest that her dependence on him influences her to passively accept his desire while she is under his reign.

Beyond being desired by adults, Eleven and Miles are also similar in that both give in to and accept their respective parental figures’ desire because they know it will get them what they want. Although Miles causes plenty of trouble for the Governess, he eventually accepts her desire and affections because he thinks that if he goes along with it, he will be able to manipulate her into allowing him to go back to school. When the Governess catches him outside at night and tells him to come in, she tries to scold him, but he kisses her before she can. She writes “I shall never forget the sweetness and gaiety with which he brought out the word, nor how, on top of it, he bent forward and kissed me. It was practically the end of everything. I met his kiss” (James 205). In this moment, Miles takes advantage of her desire and kisses her to get himself out of trouble. Later, when he asks her if he can go back to school, he lets her “kiss him, simply taking it with indulgent good humor” (227). Whereas Miles only gives in to the Governess’s desire when it gets him what he wants, Eleven often gives into Dr. Brenner’s experiment requests because she knows that if she does not, she will be sentenced to the isolation chamber. Due to her lack of agency as a test subject, she is unable to manipulate Dr. Brenner as much as Miles controls the Governess, but she still accepts his desire and requests as a means of controlling her environment as much as she possibly can.

Once Eleven is away from Dr. Brenner, she realizes that he is bad and even tries her best to refuse his comforts, thus rejecting her place as his subject of desire. After she uses her powers to fend off the Hawkins team at the school, Dr. Brenner finds her weak and out of energy. He cradles her face and says “I’m here now, (shh) you’re sick, but I’m going to make you better, I’m going to take you back home where I can make you well again” to

which she responds “Bad...bad” (S1, Ep 8). Again, his dialogue could match that of a concerned parent, but the camera shoots this in a darkly lit close up as Dr. Brenner cradles her head. The darkness and shadows around his face suggests that Eleven finally accepts that he is evil, which contrasts previous shots of them sharing intimate moments in the brightly lit Hawkins lab. Her rejection of his desire is then confirmed when the Demogorgon— something she is inextricably linked to— attacks and (presumably) kills him, only seconds after she calls him bad.

That Lucy, Miles, and Eleven are all subjects of desire who destabilize their environments and die or disappear at the end of each work suggests that the subject of desire is not only a person that other characters yearn for, but also an outside force which threatens a previously established society or system; a force that must be destroyed. Lucy threatens the men with her hyper-sexuality, Miles manipulates the Governess to try to get his way and messes with the power hierarchy at Bly, and Eleven temporarily disturbs a close-knit group of friends and seemingly has something to do with Dr. Brenner’s death. It is only an unconfirmed theory that the Demogorgon is somehow part of Eleven, but if this is true, then it makes sense that after years of suffering abuse as an objectified test subject, that a monster linked to Eleven’s mind would act out. Lucy is only able to be her true, lascivious self once she is a vampire and Miles dies before he is able to tell the Governess what he said at school, but perhaps the Demogorgon is Eleven acting out, finally and forcefully rejecting her place as a subject of desire who does not want to be desired by Dr. Brenner anymore. Whether this theory is true or not, Eleven exhibits traits typical of a Gothic subject of desire: she has little agency but does what she can to control her situation, often destabilizing others’ lives to do so, and eventually resulting in her own death.

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