

**CAGED PEOPLE: IDÉES FIXES IN KAREN RUSSELL'S
BESTIAL TRANSFORMATION STORIES**

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Abstract

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Karen Russell writes imaginative short stories that often feature elements of fantasy. Main characters' obsessions often drive the plot of the stories. This thesis examines how *idées fixes* are used to propel plots of bestial transformations within those stories. In the process of appeasing those obsessions, deeper themes are explored. The first chapter examines the role of humor and horror within Russell's texts; the next two more fully show how the animal transformation stories are interconnected. The story "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves" examines what constitutes humanness and human behavior. "Reeling for the Empire" shows how freedom is attained through the loss of humanity. "The Barn at the End of Our Term" functions primarily as a supplemental text as it doesn't show the actual transformation, however it touches upon death and the past, which are relevant to the two above stories.

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Introduction

Karen Russell's main characters don't have hobbies. They have fixations, goals, obsessions, some variation of an *idée fixe*; but whatever you call their "thing," whatever propels them, it's nothing so innocuous as a hobby. This common characteristic between the various protagonists drives the plots of their stories in Russell's short story collections, *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*¹ and *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*.² Russell debuted to critical acclaim³ and has drawn comparisons to Franz Kafka⁴ and George Saunders.⁵ Her first published

1 Russell, Karen. *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*. Penguin Random House, 2014.

2 Russell, Karen. *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*. Penguin Random House, 2007.

3 Corrigan, Maureen. "Karen Russell's 'Vampires' Deserve The Raves." *NPR*, 21 Feb. 2013.;

Williams, Joy. "The New Uncanny." *The New York Times*, 7 Feb. 2013.

4 Strafford, Jay. "Book Review (Fiction): Vampires in the Lemon Grove." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 10 Feb. 2013.

5 Hendrix, Jenny. "'Vampires in the Lemon Grove' by Karen Russell." *The Boston Globe*, 16 Feb. 2013.

work, “Haunting Olivia,” a short story that is also featured in *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, debuted in the *New Yorker*. In addition to her short stories, most of which are in the two collections, Russell has published a novel, *Swamplandia!*, which was a Pulitzer Prize finalist for fiction,⁶ and a novella, *Sleep Donation*.

Characters’ fixations dominate the plots of Russell’s short stories. The most appropriate word for the characters’ fixations is *idée fixe*, which is an obsession that is so prevalent that it becomes a primary motivator for action in a text.⁷ I use the assumption that the *idées fixes* are intrinsic to the premises and development in Russell’s short stories and use them as a guiding point for finding and exploring themes in this thesis. In “Haunting Olivia,” for instance, two brothers desperately search for the corpse of their little sister who died at sea. They blame themselves for her death, and their overwhelming guilt drives them on this morbid quest. The *idée fixe* of the story — the search itself — clearly propels the plot.

The main characters’ fixations often explore the painful process of growing up, but they are spurred by varying forces. In some cases, the *idée fixe* is a means of escape, in others, it is driven by the desire to achieve a goal. Through these *idées fixes*, Russell explores different aspects of experience. She usually does this by creating a world in which the protagonist feels immense pressure imposed by an institution or idea. Either the character obsesses over achieving an ideal or the character is constrained by the rules and expectations from a system. “Proving Up,” a story from *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*, fits the former method. The main character and his family desperately want to hold the title for their land on the frontier as a part of their pursuit

⁶ “2012 Pulitzer Prizes.” *The Pulitzer Prizes*, Columbia University, www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-year/2012.

⁷ Gorlinski, Virginia. “*Idée Fixe*.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc, 20 Sept. 2012, www.britannica.com/art/idee-fixe.

of the American Dream. They and their neighbors go long measures to pass the requirements to do so, and the story takes a fatal turn in this endeavor. “St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves” fits into the second method. This story traces the experiences of a girl raised by werewolves as nuns indoctrinate the narrator and her sisters into human society. In order to thrive, wolf-girls must play along with the rules of human social conventions.

Russell covers many different themes through the *idées fixes*. To lay down groundwork for understanding how Russell frames her stories, I first write about how she uses humor and horror in her stories. I then examine two themes that are connected to the main characters’ *idées fixes* — humanness and freedom — to show how Russell utilizes almost every component of her stories to explore at these broad themes. Russell addresses the former in “St. Lucy’s” and the latter theme in “Reeling for the Empire.” The story is about a young woman, Kitsune, who signs a contract to work in a silk factory. She drinks a special tea and when she awakes at the factory, her body slowly morphs into a grotesque silkworm caterpillar-human hybrid, like the other girls in the factory. She is then forced to reel out silk from her body.

Russell predominantly uses characters’ obsessive behavior and their fixations on a singular goal or idea to evoke in turn humor and horror. The humor helps give the reader a sense of normalcy and elevates the sensation of horror and disgust towards corrupting forces. The combination of this approach to storytelling as well as Russell’s use of the fantastical provides a jumping point for challenges to popular ideas and beliefs. Humor and horror are intrinsic to Russell’s stories. In order to fully understand the stories, it helps to have a solid idea of what literary traditions Russell conforms to in relation to these subjects.

A single point of incongruity with the real world serves as the keystone of each of Russell’s stories. Russell adds one element that is fantastical in most stories. That single element

usually contains numerous details and ramifications within the story. Werewolves and vampires and girls-turned-silkworms and dead-U.S.-presidents-reincarnated-as-horses live in completely separate spheres from each other. This control and limit of the (im)possible is what qualifies these works as fitting into the broad category of magic realism. Magic realism was originally associated with very specific and separate movements in Latin America and Germany⁸; however the term has expanded to cover works that are fantastical or have elements of fantasy, but are in a realistic setting or treated as if they are congruous with the real world.⁹ The elements of whimsy almost invariably serve as either the cause or the object of Russell's main characters' obsessions. All the animal transformations in Russell's stories rely heavily upon the supernatural.

Three of Russell's stories feature main characters that undergo bestial transformations. These transformations serve as the primary point of fantasy. Two of these stories — "St. Lucy's" and "Reeling" — lend themselves well for tracking what exactly is being examined because the changes upon the characters are gradual and intentional. The characters initially have no say over what they are expected to become; because outside forces impose the transformations, it's clear that every point of change is intentional. The main character, the deceased former U.S. president, Rutherford B. Hayes, of the third transformation story, "The Barn at the End of Our Term," doesn't experience a gradual bodily change. He merely wakes up in the body of a horse and finds himself in the company of other ex-presidents trapped in horse bodies. This story is also featured throughout the thesis, however it is primarily used as a supplemental example.

"Reeling" and "St. Lucy's" feature transformations that occur in opposite directions. The idée fixes of the characters draw attention to different themes — freedom and humanness,

⁸ Bowers, Maggie. "Introduction." *Magic(al) Realism: The New Critical Idiom*, Routledge, 2004, pp. 1–5., p 2

⁹ Bowers, p 2

respectively — however the two themes are interconnected. “Reeling” focuses more heavily on freedom; however, the silk-girls become detached from what makes them human in the process. “St. Lucy’s” is an examination on what constitutes appropriate human behavior. In their journey to becoming adjusted normal humans, the wolf-girls of “St. Lucy’s” lose freedom.

In sections where similarities seem particularly striking, I draw upon parallels from Franz Kafka’s short stories, to compare, contrast, and offer nuanced insights. The first such combination explores human identity through Kafka’s “A Report to an Academy”¹⁰ and Russell’s “St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves.” In “A Report to an Academy,” an ape, Red Peter, who has apparently gained the social skills and knowledge of a human, delivers a speech describing his transition from primitive ape to intellectual ape-*man*. In the stories, both narrators explain the processes through which they abandoned their animalistic pasts to join human society. The two feature many similar markings of humanness, but they show the characters in different phases of transformation. The wolf-girls are going through the major changes; Red Peter shows the final product of the transformation and the continued conflict of old versus new identity.

In the following and final chapter, I compare Kafka’s and Russell’s takes on workers and freedom through Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” and Russell’s “Reeling for the Empire.” “The Metamorphosis” depicts a man, Gregor Samsa, who wakes up as a cockroach one day. Both short stories feature characters that agree to work in order to support their families; they diverge in how the animal transformations affect the characters’ relationships to work. After the main character in “The Metamorphosis” shifts, he is forcibly kept back from work and *spoiler* dies; in contrast, when the main character in “Reeling for the Empire” transforms, she does so as a

¹⁰ Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony, and Other Stories*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1995.

way to thrive and lash out at her oppressors. The two offer opposing insights as to how different forces of constraint, such as family and physical ability, and dehumanization, such as isolation and loss of value, can affect people in similar situations.

Chapter 1: Humor and Horror

In order, the general subjects of each short story from *Vampires in the Lemon Grove* are as follows: a vampire's existential, insatiable thirst; the transformation of girls into silkworm creatures for others' profit; a boy investigating an impossibly large influx of seagulls; the son of a minotaur's pursuit of the American Dream on a frontier; U.S. presidents reincarnated as horses; Antarctic tailgating; a masseuse helping a veteran cope with PTSD by manipulating his tattoo of a day gone wrong, which represents emotional pain he experiences; a doll that represents a disappeared, bullied boy. Guess which two serve as the most lighthearted of the bunch.

Russell diffuses moments of humor into all of her stories, but "Dougbert Shackleton's Rules for Antarctic Tailgating" and "The Barn at the End of Our Term" (henceforth "Rules" and "Barn") are a lighthearted reprieve from the much darker stories that dominate *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*. The concepts and the distinctive narrative personas of these stories set jovial tones. Reviewers sometimes criticize Russell for the more comedic stories. One critic for *The Washington Post* dismissed the two stories above, writing, "The two remaining stories feel more like writing exercises, pallid imitations of George Saunders," not bothering to name them after exalting every other story in *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*.¹¹ There is validity within that argument, as they are based on quirky premises, however they are connected to darker, deeper themes than the criticism acknowledges. The stories skew saccharine in their dedication to

¹¹ Hand, Elizabeth. "'Vampires in the Lemon Grove,' by Karen Russell." *The Washington Post*,

11 Feb. 2013.

facetiousness at times, but their high concentration of humor makes them perfect representatives of Russell's brand of comedy.

The titular narrator of "Rules" magnanimously introduces readers to the concept of the Evolution Games. Humans rally behind their favored species and watch as they prove their status of the fittest by eating and outlasting other species. Dougbert tailors his guide to fans of the ultimate underdog: krill. To root for Team Krill is "[to try] to do nothing less than reverse the course of history. We want Team Krill to defeat Team Whale."¹² Dougbert oscillates between dispensing practical advice ("*Rule Ten: Don't fall overboard*"¹³), throwing jabs at Team Whale ("cetaceous fucks"¹⁴), and providing dark examples to highlight every point ("When you make small talk, use your judgment. Keep it light. Nobody wants to kill the spirit in the ice caves with some downer questions about the recently deceased"¹⁵).

In "The Barn at the End of Our Term," the narrator is Rutherford B. Hayes, and he and several other former U.S. presidents are horses. Almost all of the other presidents attempt to run for office as representatives and generals over the various, non-presidential animals on the farm. In their plots for escape, they assume they will be rewarded with triumphant reinstatement into the American political sphere. It would be awkward for Russell to write either story with a completely serious tone and to convince readers to consider the stories equally seriously because of how intrinsically whimsical the scenarios are.

These are two prime examples of stories driven through characters' *idées fixes*,¹⁶ as is the case with the vast majority of her other short stories. The main characters and those around them

¹² Russell, *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*, p 136

¹³ Russell, p 144

¹⁴ Russell, p 141

¹⁵ Russell, p 137

all have extreme relationships with their motivating forces. Almost all of the presidents in “Barn” split their time between politicking over other barn animals and conspiring to escape so as to resume power over human constituents. Rutherford drives himself to starvation because he is so fixated upon the sheep he believes to be his late wife. Dougbert recommends taking eight months leave of absence from work in “Rules” and frequently mentions ways people die while Antarctic tailgating, so it’s safe to assume that no one involved in that activity merely dabbles.

Postirony

“The Barn at the End of Our Term” is one of Russell’s most comedic scenarios. The absolute seriousness in which the presidents take in terms of their ambition provides most of the humor in the story. As mentioned before, they make up titles for themselves as they represent their “constituents” (other animals in the farm) and pass laws. The presidents are discontent with their situation, but after an adjustment period, they don’t question the absurdity of being placed in horse bodies. As John Adams is in the adjustment period and in denial of the situation, Eisenhower offers a conspiracy theory: “‘I’m not dead, either, John Adams,’ Eisenhower says. ‘I’m just incognito. The Secret Service must have found some way to hide me here, until such time as I can return to my body and resume governance of this country. I can’t speak for the rest of you, but I’m no horse.’”¹⁷ The presidents take their situation very seriously, but Russell revels in portraying Eisenhower as particularly paranoid and determined. Despite touching upon

¹⁶ See Marina Van Zuylen, *Monomania: The Flight from Everyday Life in Literature and Art* for more information on the subject of monomania and its definition’s development through time.

¹⁷ Russell, p 120

political themes, the other presidents primarily function as comic relief and contrast to Rutherford's more humble and sincere desires.

In other sections, the presidents, including Rutherford, seriously consider whether or not they are in heaven (or hell). Instead of delving into philosophical territory, Russell opts to use this subject to poke fun at how subjective experiences shape perception. James Buchanan is convinced he is in heaven because of his stellar deeds in life. “‘Do you know that I have an entry in the Royal Ledger of Equine Blood-lines, Rutherford? It’s true.’ His nostrils flare with self-regard. ‘I am being rewarded,’ Buchanan insists, ‘for annexing Oregon.’”¹⁸ The joke in Buchanan’s pride over having elite horse lineage is made better through its contrast with the feat of annexing a state. In this monologue, Russell takes advantage of the horse premise. The nostril flare cleverly reminds the readers of how the presidents now express themselves, but it could easily be a human gesture. Warren Harding, on the other hand, hates the horse’s caretaker, Fitzgibbons, and holds a different perspective on the barn: “Warren Harding is a flatulent roan pony who can’t digest grass. ‘The presidency was Hell’ he hiccups. ‘... Dispatch for Mr. Dante: Hell doesn’t happen in circles. This Barn is one square acre of Hell and Fitzgibbons is the Devil!”¹⁹ This interpretation of the barn follows shortly after Buchanan’s. The wavering between whether the presidents are in heaven or hell is a consistent theme. In spite of Russell’s more serious treatment of Rutherford compared to that of other presidents, she does not put him above being the subject of humor. When Rutherford first meets his caretaker, Fitzgibbons, the man brands Rutherford. “*The Devil!* Rutherford thought ... But then the man reached up and gave him a gentle ear-scratch and an amber cube of sugar, confounding things further. ‘God?’”²⁰ This

¹⁸ Russell, p 117

¹⁹ Russell, p 117

²⁰ Russell, p 115

is a more extreme case of how the circumstances affect the presidents and their perceptions of events.

In specific aspects of the two stories, Russell veers into postironic territory, **which is essentially the sincere treatment of the subject matter**. Postirony is specific to the 20th century and tangent to postmodernism.²¹ Postirony arises from a writer's awareness of the audience's expectations of irony.²² People have different ways to define postirony,²³ depending on how they define irony. I work with the understanding that an ironic point of view acknowledges the overwhelming subjectivity of language. To borrow another's words, "Irony, in short, is *freedom* — the subject's freedom from meaning, conviction, and the negation of untruth. ... it importantly *is* dissembling among other things" (emphasis his).²⁴ Language is constantly shifting, thus the writer cannot control how others interpret what they write, so the truth of their writing is subjective.²⁵ The philosopher Richard Rorty wrote ironists are "in the position which Sartre

21 Jonathan Fitzgerald, "Sincerity, Not Irony, Is Our Age's Ethos."

22 Postirony is also referred to as "New Sincerity." However, as Lukas Hoffmann nicely puts it, that phrase ignores postirony's relationship to irony and postmodernism. See the introduction to his book for a deeper exploration of terminology: *Postirony: The Nonfictional Literature of David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers*.

23 For further reading on the subject, see Adam Kelly, "Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace" and Lee Konstantinou, "No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief," *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*.

24 Brennan, Timothy. "The Case against Irony." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 47, no. 3, 29 May 2014, pp. 379–394. *Sage Journals*.

25 Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge University Press, 1989, p

called “meta-stable”: never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware [sic] that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves.”²⁶ The issue with irony, famously pointed out by David Foster Wallace in his essay “E Unibus Pluram,” is that it is used to deconstruct and criticize but never offers a solution to what it criticizes.²⁷ Wallace is attributed as being one of the most influential writers whose work is considered by critics to engage in postirony.

In direct opposition to the ironist, the postironic writer is ultimately sincere, and by being sincere, they forge a connection between the reader and the text. With Wallace in mind, Lukas Hoffmann, who draws heavily from the writings of Rorty, defines postironists as those who have “a struggle between their private ironic belief in contingency of vocabularies and their public advocacy of liberal solidarity.”²⁸ The first half of Hoffmann’s equation is in line with the ironist point of view; both ironists and postironists believe language changes over time and can be interpreted in a multitude of ways. The latter part of Hoffmann’s definition distinguishes postironists from ironists because they recognize that the writer is responsible to a high degree for how their work will be interpreted, as there are common conceptions among the audience they recognize and play off of. This belief in the writer’s control over meaning leads the writer to mean what they say. In conclusion, postirony is the use of sincerity in a way that is conscious of the prolific abundance and expectation of irony. Russell makes her protagonists objects of humor

26 Rorty, p 73-74

27 Wallace, David Foster. “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.” *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 13, no. 2, 22 June 1993.

28 Hoffmann, p 45

to the readers; however she treats their feelings and motivations sincerely. This factor is what qualifies aspects of Russell's pieces as being postironic.

"Barn" is more clearly a postironic story in comparison to "Rules," because Russell doesn't treat the main character, Rutherford, as solely an object of humor. Russell writes this story from an objective third person perspective with insight on the thoughts of some of the presidents/horses. This nonjudgmental narration of the story shows Rutherford in a sincere, sympathetic light. At one point, when a threateningly ambitious colleague, Dwight Eisenhower, pressures Rutherford to work toward reclaiming his former political success, Russell writes, "He doesn't want to return to Washington, if there even is a Washington. He just wants a baaa of recognition out of this one ewe."²⁹ Here, Russell and her narrator are in alignment in terms of sincerity: Rutherford's wishes are clearly stated, and Russell outlines them without language that trivializes the character's feelings. Russell pokes fun at Rutherford for his other misconceptions, but she never does so when it comes to his relationship with Lucy.

Russell takes "Rules" in a much different direction from "Barn." While Russell portrayed Rutherford in "Barn" as a sympathetic character, she exaggerates the narrator of "Rules," Dougbert — even his name, simultaneously unusual and familiar and dorky, is an indication of Russell's playful approach — to an extreme degree. In "Rules" Russell highlights the narrators' unflagging dedication to the tailgating lifestyle with the absurd extremity in the content of his advice. Russell frames "Rules" as a man's guide for newbie tailgaters for the Evolution Games. Russell quickly asserts Dougbert's persona, positioning him as a tailgating fanatic through his knowledge on the Antarctic landscape as well as through his break from format to say, "here comes the real Rule One: if you are a supporter of Team Whale, you can go fuck yourself, my

²⁹ Russell, p 127

fine sir. This list is for the fans of Team Krill.”³⁰ This candid address to the readers shows his transparent intentions, and as such, it is safe to assume Dougbert wouldn’t mislead the fellow Team Krill fans he writes for.

The Unexpected

The standout moments in Russell’s works occur when she betrays expectations. The humorous segments often play well into Incongruity Theory. This idea states that humor arises from the betrayal of the audience’s expectations.³¹ This technique stands out the most when she interrupts dark moments with frivolous details. Dougbert is the master of this type of tonal shift.

At times, Russell elicits humorous moments through shock value. She presents extreme or animalistic behaviors as normal. The narrator in “Rules” obsessively hates Team Whale and loves Team Krill; Russell mocks both, but Team Krill is the more prominent subject of derision. Team Whale is rich; Team Krill makes do. Dougbert’s fanatical brand of tailgating provides the basis for the entire piece and the humor within it. This is perfectly shown through the briefest section, Rule Seven:

Rule Seven: Tailgating is all about sharing

Quick and easy cooking is a must for the Antarctic tailgater. Here is a family recipe that will give your Antarctic tailgate some “regional flavor”:

1. Whale meet
2. Fire

30 Russell, p 136

31 Morreall, John, "Philosophy of Humor", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

Salt to taste and all that.

Although, typically, I don't bother with salt. I don't really bother with forks and such, either. I like to pluck the meat from the burning coals and bare my teeth and let out a piercing, unearthly howl at the Team Whale tailgaters moored across the ice floes, personally. Just to razz them a little.³²

The section starts out innocuous enough. Sharing is caring! Who can convolute that message? And cooking tips seem practical; sharing a family recipe is cute. But Dougbert surpasses initial expectations of sassiness by escalating the behavior throughout the section. He starts with endorsing the consumption of whale meat — harsh, but fairly practical — and jumps to feral behavior. Dougbert's preferred method of consumption qualifies as psychological warfare, "Just to razz them a little." The final wording is even cute. You razz your friend by teasing them about a crush or freezing their bra during a sleepover. You might place a curse on an enemy by eating the flesh of a species precious to them.³³

Russell uses escalation and juxtaposition elsewhere in her stories. In "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves," sisters raised by werewolves enter the care of nuns who wrangle them into adjusting to human society with the help of a Jesuit guidebook. At one point, Claudette the narrator explains, "Jeanette was the first among us to apologize; to drink apple juice out of a sippy cup; to quit eyeballing the cleric's jugular in a disconcerting fashion."³⁴ In this segment,

32 Russell, p 142

33 There are historical examples similar to this. Here is a recent one: "Peace Through Pork – Jihawg Defensive Ammunition." *Ammoland*, AmmoLand.com Shooting Sports News, 10 June 2013, www.ammoland.com/2013/06/peace-through-pork-jihawg-defensive-ammunition/#axzz5D0gD07Yv.

34 Russell, *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, p 232

she describes how her older sister took best to the transition from wolf-girl to human-girl. The listed positive behaviors increasingly describe how uncivilized and feral the girls are during their transition process.

The other stories in *Vampires in the Lemon Grove* feature more serious premises and as a result have more prevalent somber or morbid tones overall, with comedic details sprinkled in. “Rules” has the opposite situation; it’s a humorous story seasoned with subtle, frequent references to death. At one point, Russell describes probable cannibals as “suspiciously fat and sheepish in their snug parkas.”³⁵ This descriptor portrays Antarctic cannibals in an unexpected direction. She gives them both a sense of shame and a corresponding visual of excess and sin. The flecks of morbidity comes from descriptions such as the one above that hint at but do not deeply explore matters that would be very serious in most other contexts.

In other stories, the dark sections that Russell juxtaposes with humor get at deeper, ominous issues. For instance, in “The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis,” the narrator describes a tree to which the titular doll is tethered as “covered with markings from our delinquent forebears: V <3 K; DEATH 2 ASSHOLE JIMMY DINGO; JESUS SAVES; I WUZ HERE!!!! The scarecrow’s head, I noticed, was lolling beneath our own inscription.”³⁶ In the story, the scarecrow looks like and represents Eric Mutis, a boy who had been bullied by the narrator and his friends. The scarecrow’s location places blame on the narrator and his crew. The adjacent inscriptions sharpen the moment. Asshole Jimmy Dingo (or the detractor who etched the message about him) and the anonymous person who carved the familiar “I WUZ HERE!!!!” are thrown into the same camp as the narrator and co. It makes the bullying they participate in seem like something commonplace, but the doll makes it simultaneously shocking.

³⁵ Karen Russell, *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*, p 137

³⁶ Russell, p 207

The Familiar

Some stories entirely forego the pretension of normalcy as Russell makes the entire storyline horrific. One of the best and most eerie examples comes from “Reeling for the Empire.” Kitsune, the narrator, and the other workers she’s with are turned into silkworm caterpillars and eventually enter cocoons. As many a pastel children’s book will inform you, a humble, ground-hugging caterpillar will enter a chrysalis and emerge a glorious winged creature: a butterfly.³⁷ Russell doesn’t write about pretty butterflies. In “Reeling,” the silk-girls are creatures. “They grow wings and teeth. If the caterpillars are allowed to evolve, they change into moths. Then these moths bite through the silk and fly off, ruining it for the market.”³⁸ Russell creates her own myths, and the most effectively unnerving part of them is that they play upon the familiar. Those children’s books contain the subtext that *you* are the butterfly-to-be; *you* are beautiful and capable of such growth. Russell twists this kindergarten-friendly caterpillar/butterfly narrative into a tale of exploitation, but keeps the butterfly moral. The final result evokes sympathy and revulsion towards the silk-girls. “Reeling” is set in Japan’s industrial

³⁷ A small sample: *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle, *Waiting for Wings (Rise and Shine)* by Lois Ehlert, *Pete the Cat and the Cool Caterpillar* by James Dean, *Charlie the Caterpillar* by Dom DeLuise, *Ten Little Caterpillars* by Bill Martin Jr. and Lois Ehlert, *Glasswings: A Butterfly Story* by Elisa Kleven, *Are You a Butterfly?* by Judy Allen and Tudor Humphries, *Bye, Bye, Butterflies!* by Andrew Larsen, *10 Wiggly Wiggly Caterpillars* by Debbie Tarbett, *My, Oh My—A Butterfly!:* *All About Butterflies (Cat in the Hat’s Learning Library)* by Tish Rabe

³⁸ Russell, p 46

revolution. The Agent forces girls who agree to work in a factory into drinking a concoction that slowly turns their bodies into monstrous human-silkworm hybrids. Under the front of working for “the Empire,” they are confined to a room and forced to reel silk in return for mulberry leaves. In the end, though, the girls find the strength to overcome their situation.

Like “Reeling,” the animal transformation component of “St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves” plays upon the familiar. The idea of children raised by wolves is common and well documented. In myth, the founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus, were raised by a she-wolf. More recently, there have been reports of children who grew up away from human society and sometimes raised among animals. They have been labeled feral children. One of the most prevalent groupings of such tales is that of children raised by wolves. In the 1920s, a missionary in charge of an orphanage claimed that he rescued two girls who had been living with wolves, Amala and Kamala.³⁹

Toward the beginning of the 20th century, Sigmund Freud introduced the concept of the uncanny. The concept of the uncanny has developed a lot since then, but the basics of how it can be defined is that it is “the feeling of unease that arises when something familiar suddenly becomes strange and unfamiliar.”⁴⁰ Similar to how irony changes as vocabularies change, the 39 Squires, Paul C. “‘Wolf Children’ of India.” *The American Journal of Psychology*, vol. 38, no. 2, 1927, pp. 313–315. *JSTOR*, JSTOR.

It should be noted that it was later revealed that the girls’ backstory was a ploy for attention: Aroles, Serge. *L'Enigme Des Enfants-Loup*. Publibook, 2007.

⁴⁰ This quote paraphrases Freud’s initial definition. The source this quote is from traces the development of the uncanny’s growth from this simple definition to a pervasive viewpoint.

Masschelein, Anneleen. *Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory*. State University Of New York Press, 2011. p 1

uncanny is defined through what is unsettling, and what unsettles us is constantly shifting.

“Reeling” convolutes the caterpillar/butterfly narrative. The above example from “The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis” uses the uncanny on both the readers and the protagonist. I’ve seen similar carvings on trees and the bottom of every single camp bunk bed I’ve slept in. The placement of these familiar markings next to a creepy doll feels off to me, although it could seem innocuous to another. It transforms the casual, childish vandalism into a signature of responsibility, like a claiming of a crime. The narrator partook in the carving one of the tags, so the effect is amplified to him. Furthermore, when he first saw the doll, he thought it was a real boy. Even the most insensitive of the narrator’s friends, Gus, had a voice “high with relief”⁴¹ once he discovered the doll wasn’t a real human. The tension of the doll’s similarities to the real (and disappeared) Eric Mutis torments the narrator’s conscience throughout the story, which makes him a sympathetic character. Horror in Russell’s stories serves to highlight injustices and acts as social critique. In “The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis,” Russell emphasizes how bullying harms the perpetrator through the frayed nerves of the narrator. The story becomes a foreboding modern day parable against bullying. Dark moments such as the tension the narrator feels in “The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis” and descriptions of how eerie the silk-girls have become cut to the quick of deeper meanings behind the overall stories.

41 Russell, p 204

Chapter 2: Humans Versus Animals

Adolescent and pubescent characters play lead in a large portion of Russell's short stories. In two cases, the journey between childhood and adulthood reaches further extremes as the main characters undergo animalistic metamorphoses. Russell has crafted three stories in which characters shift to a new form: "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves," "Reeling for the Empire," and "The Barn at the End of Our Term." The former two closely track the changes the young characters go through on an emotional and physical level as the main characters develop in opposite directions. "St. Lucy's," the primary subject of this chapter, challenges what exactly constitutes proper human behavior. "Reeling" addresses this only insofar as how the main characters become detached from the things that tie them to human society. In

“St. Lucy’s,” Claudette’s *idée fixe* is getting by. In order to do so, she must learn how to act human and not stick out.

Triumphant streams of urine, furiously paced pelvic gyrations (accompanied by jealous nuns), and a girl’s attempt to bristle by holding out her hair characterize the behavior and state in which the wolf-girls arrive at the titular institution. Despite the amusing imagery presented in these descriptions, they symbolize the battle between converters and the soon-to-be converted. The last of those images is one of blatant fear. The nuns damage the girls’ self regard in the process of remodeling them. During stage two of five of the *Jesuit Guide*, a fictional text that leads outlines the phases that define the girls’ transition, Claudette admits, “I’d begun to snarl at my own reflection as if it were a stranger.”⁴² The girls have no real choice in whether or not they want to integrate into human society. They initially believe that if they fail, they’ll just be sent back to their families, however when Claudette returns home after graduating, there’s no indication that Mirabella, the sister who failed, is there.

Community and Competition

In “St. Lucy’s” and “Reeling,” group identity is of critical importance. It’s one of the most significant things that Claudette loses in the pursuit of becoming human. With the wolf-girls, group identity is convoluted from something good to something harmful. They are pitted against each other through comparison, which generates a compulsion to be average in Claudette as a manifestation of her *idée fixe*. The wolf-girls conform to societal standards. In doing so, they lose a sense of group identity.

42 Russell, p 233

The girls don't acknowledge what makes them cohesive, what defines their sense of communal identity, until those things are stripped away from them. We aren't given any specific information about the girls until unless it is mentioned in how the girls lose their sense of attachment to it. Russell first describes the girls spraying their territory as a joyful event, however the nuns thwart their attempts to mark their new home as theirs. Claudette notes, "Someone was coming in and erasing us. We sprayed and sprayed every morning; and every night, we returned to the same ammonia eradication. We couldn't make our scent stick here; it made us feel invisible. Eventually we gave up."⁴³ Here, the nuns not only in part erase the girls' smell and sense of presence, but they also start to deconstruct the girls' sense of "us." The scent of their mixed urine served as a means to denote a communal space for the girls. This marks the commencement of the girls' transition to humanhood. This makes the girls feel vulnerable and weakens their bonds to each other. The nuns literally and metaphorically stripped away that sense of community and belonging. The fracturing of their unity, however, occurs as outliers emerge. The two extremes incite annoyance and jealousy amongst the sisters. These emotions lead to Claudette's attempts to avoid association with the two outliers.

As Claudette becomes more human-like, her dissociation from her sisters furthers as she starts to hold resentment toward some of them. She becomes leery toward the sisters who are not on a similar level as her. The purpose of the group shifts from a being pillar of support and belonging to being a median of achievement as competitiveness mars the girls' relationships. It's a force of manipulation and constraint. Outliers are treated cruelly. Claudette explains that self-preservation is different among humans. "I'd seen what happened if you gave into your natural aptitudes. This wasn't like the woods, where you had to be your fastest and your strongest and

43 Russell, p 230

your bravest self. Different sorts of calculations were required to survive at the home.”⁴⁴ One of the few wolf-instincts that serve the girls well in their transition is their compulsion to please the humans. Claudette claims, “Being around other humans had awakened a slavish-dog affection in us.”⁴⁵ This affection becomes the basis for jealousy amongst the girls. The nuns worsen the effect by comparing the sisters, praising those who excel, disparaging those who fall behind the pack.

Russell foreshadows the two outlier sisters in one of the first scenes, when the nuns hunt down the girls one-by-one to tag and name them. Jeanette, the most successful sister, is caught first; Mirabella, the complete failure, is caught last. Jeanette becomes isolated; Mirabella becomes an embarrassment, a reminder of the girls’ former, craven ways. Despite her perceived inferiority, Mirabella is the only one who bounds over to Claudette’s aide when she encounters a stumbling block. For the duration of the story, the average sisters remain invisible and anonymous.

Claudette is petty toward Jeanette, the older, more talented sister. Dislike even colors Claudette’s narration. She spends a substantial amount of text on Jeanette’s superiority and annoyingness. Claudette’s relationship to Jeanette is captured well when, a few weeks into the program, she encounters Jeanette having an emotional moment. Upset, Jeanette “blew her nose into a nearby curtain. (Even her mistakes annoyed us — they were always so well intentioned.)”⁴⁶ Then Jeanette points out a passage in a book. Claudette pretends to not be able to read as “none of the pack besides me could read yet, and I wasn’t ready to claim a common language with Jeanette.”⁴⁷ This incident gives a window into how the little things are handled — a mere sneeze

44 Russell, p 232

45 Russell, p 231

46 Russell, p 239

47 Russell, p 239

is described as annoying. Despite the underlying jealousy Claudette holds, she refuses to associate with the object of her envy. However how innocuous this encounter seems, it demonstrates part of a buildup of tension between Claudette and Jeanette. Later in the story, Claudette ignores Jeanette's call for assistance when Mirabella messes with Jeanette, and Jeanette retaliates by ignoring Claudette's plea for help during a panic attack.

Toward Mirabella, Claudette acts cold and at times outright hostile. The most significant moment Claudette has with Mirabella is when Claudette blames Mirabella for ruining the dance, just after her sweet (and successful) attempt to protect Claudette. Before this, though, the self-centered attitude Claudette holds, particularly in relation to her littlest sister, shows itself in a few incidents. At one point, she flat out refuses to help Mirabella when the youngest gets splinters:

“Lick your own wounds,” I said, not unkindly. It was what the nuns had instructed us to say; wound licking was not something you did in polite company. Etiquette was so confounding in this country. Still, looking at Mirabella — her fists balled together like small, white porcupines, her brows knitted in animal confusion — I felt a throb of compassion. How can people live like they do? I wondered. Then I congratulated myself.

This was a Stage 3 thought.⁴⁸

Here, Claudette knows there is something wrong in rejecting her sister, however her pride at conforming to the Jesuit Guide eclipses any such suspicion of her new culture. The moment is funny, especially because it is followed by Stage 3, which reiterates, “How can people live like they do?” almost verbatim, but Mirabella's pain makes it less palatable. It's made even worse when taking into account how Mirabella saves Claudette later.

48 Russell, p 235

Shame

The Jesuit Guide is worded so that it is clear the subjects should be able to fluidly interact in both their old and new cultures, however in practice, no one seems to want the girls to go back to how they were before arriving at St. Lucy's. Claudette's return to her parent's home is marked by awkwardness. The girls' rejection of their past is represented through Mirabella. She frustrates every character in the story, as she embodies what the girls used to be. Mirabella consistently fails to meet the nuns' standards in both large and small-scale ways. To her dismay, Claudette is paired with Mirabella to, as the nuns put it, "Go practice compassion for all God's creatures"⁴⁹ by feeding ducks. Claudette is concerned because Mirabella is incapable of balling up bread into small pieces (small scale failure). Claudette runs away with the bread for both of them; Mirabella is later found attacking a duck (large scale failure).

Mirabella represents more than just a straggler. She is found attempting to strangle a duck with her rosary when she was supposed to have been feeding the ducks' bread. In this scene, the girls represent the nuns, the bread represents the care the nuns offer, and the ducks represent the girls. Considering how Claudette repeatedly mentions that Mirabella eats small animals, it's unusual for Mirabella to assault the duck with a rosary. This metaphor can be interpreted in two ways. The reader can deduce that Mirabella is different from the other girls in that the mission of the nuns is metaphorically choking her, while the rest are receiving nourishment. Or the reader can conclude that the choking is not restricted to Mirabella. Instead, the bread and rosary can be applied to all of the girls; despite the nuns' task of helping the girls, the nuns are suppressing them or harming them.

⁴⁹ Russell, p 233; This instruction reiterates how the nuns place an emphasis on actions, believing they automatically reflect internal changes.

Mirabella not only exhibits the shameful behavior of the wolf-girls' past, but she reminds her sisters that failure is always lurking nearby, the uncertainty of which haunts the girls. Claudette sums up this sentiment in a paragraph: “‘Whatever will become of Mirabella?’ we asked, gulping back our own fear. ... It was the disgrace, the failure that we all guiltily hoped for in our hard beds. Twitching with the shadow question: *Whatever will become of me?*”⁵⁰ The nuns eventually send Mirabella off to an unknown but vaguely hinted at fate. In a prior scene, the nuns show Claudette a video of failed wolf-girls. They are maladjusted and repulsive to her, but they are still a part of human, rather than wolf, spheres. Mirabella is conspicuously absent from her parents' cave in the final scene, which is where the girls at St. Lucy's Home speculated she would have been sent, when Claudette visits at some point after she has graduated from St. Lucy's.

In contrast, the dynamics between the silk-girls are much more simplistic. The silk-girls maintain both group and individual identities. They are united in their common suffering, and they ease the passage of time by telling made-up stories of their pasts. Those stories both serve as a way to bond and as a way to assert their individuality. Eventually, they are further individualized when they start producing silk of varying colors. The girls rejoice in their differing colors; however, they remain a cohesive unit when Kitsune discovers they are able to make cocoons. The only individual who struck out, Dai, starved herself to death. The girls, particularly Kitsune, mourn her death, and it later serves as inspiration for their eventual escape.

Behavior and Performance

50 Russell, p 233

In order to gain recognition for their newly human ways, the wolf-girls in “St. Lucy’s” have to perform to impress their caretakers, the nuns. The physical transition from crawling and succumbing to physical impulses to being able to dance mirrors the wolf-girls’ progress in becoming civilized. Initially, the girls crawl, and Claudette describes herself as having four feet during this period. During the earlier stages of the program, the girls sometimes get overexcited and unintentionally pump their hips to imitate a wagging tail, which indicates that even habits of theirs that are animalistic are learned ones. The werewolf gene apparently skips generations, so the girls are always stuck in human form. Thus, the tail wagging must be an internalized behavior. The process of becoming human is slow, and the narrator, Claudette, must remind herself things like “mouthshutmouthshut.”⁵¹ Because of how unnatural the rules feel for Claudette, to act human requires near-constant attention.

The ape Red Peter gains fame in among humans Kafka’s “A Report to an *Academy*.” He, too, was removed from his home, named by his captors, and recounts the specific steps he took to become like humans. The parallels go on: Both him and Claudette recognize they have the option to attempt to escape, but choose not to do so; they both try hard to please the human authority figures around them; they both feel a dissociation from the animals they once were. In order to come into their new, human-like identities, they must shed their past selves. This transition in pursuit of humanness is the main thrust and the most important point of similarity for the two stories. The first step in Red Peter’s transformation is him uncorking and chugging a bottle of rum.

The two narrators must initially prove themselves through an arbitrary show of humanness. Claudette attempts to achieve this by following rules such as keeping her mouth shut and her shoes on. Eventually, she is expected to dance at a party in front of reporters in order to

⁵¹ Russell, p 229, 238, 243

exhibit her progress. The engineered demonstration of the moment sums up the entire process the nuns are putting the girls through. They care most about the performance, about the girls' ability to convince others of their humanness through taught motions. The test of progress the nuns expect the wolf-girls to provide is surface level. Like Red Peter, Claudette must perform to impress strangers of her progress in humanness. For both the ape and the wolf-girls, what matters is their adherence to gestures. The internal lives of the captives don't matter nearly as much as the former animals' behavior to the captors.

The diction of the wolf-girls is very rehearsed. The wolf-girls grew up speaking "a slab-tongued pidgin in the cave, inflected with frequent howls."⁵² At the party, the children only know a few phrases so conversations are amusingly irrelevant; they merely use premeditated phrases in order to give the appearance of engaging in social intercourse in order to appease the adults in charge of them. Claudette's brother Kyle (formerly BTWWWR!) attempts conversation:

"'Yeees,' Kyle growled back. 'It is beginning to look a lot like Christmas.' ... a freak hailstorm had sent Sister Josephina to an early grave. But we had only gotten up to Unit 7: Party Dialogue; we hadn't yet learned the vocabulary for Unit 12: How to Tactfully Acknowledge Disaster."⁵³

The exchange with Kyle is completely regurgitated from the siblings' lessons. The nuns' control over the children's vocabularies further limits their ability to express themselves; for example, they aren't allowed to howl or pump their hips in imitation of tail wagging. The conventions of speech affect how the siblings treat others. On the final page, Claudette greets her family at their cave and tells her first human lie as they anticipate "a display of what I have learned."⁵⁴ The act of lying itself is a demonstration of what she has learned. Throughout her time at St. Lucy's

52 Russell, p 227

53 Russell, p 242

54 Russell, p 246

Home, Claudette had to act in compliance with what she knew the nuns wanted from her. Here, Claudette anticipates what her parents want to hear and tells them, “I’m home.”

The wolf-children’s forced conversations are in direct contrast to the narrative voice of the story. Older, narrating Claudette communicates with words even thesauruses wouldn’t lead one to: hirsute, gamboled, abasing, frottage, etc.⁵⁵ Claudette’s big lexicon provides subtle proof of how far she’s progressed in her shift to human. Similarly to Claudette, Red Peter’s diction is elevated and is evidence of how advanced in human behavior he has become. Both Red Peter and Claudette develop from performing in order to survive, to internalizing the lessons thrust upon them.

Direction of Transformation

A dual identity is a conflicting one in Russell’s works. In the midst of their transformations, the characters are unhappy: Rutherford miserably deludes himself; Claudette miserably tries to adopt new ways of thinking that seem wrong to her; Kitsune miserably tortures herself with regret as she miserably slaves away at work for the people who forced an irreversible, horrific change upon her body so as to commodify it. Once the characters start their transitions, the only way is forward, whatever forward means to the people in power. Russell’s characters are discontent during their gradual, transitory periods and cling to what they once were. None of the characters can stop their evolutions until they have shed their past lives and embrace their new phases of existence.

The characters that transition from human to beast take to their transformations with much more ease than the ones who shift in the opposite direction. Animals that transform into

55 Russell, p 226, hairy; p 227, to frolic; p321, degrading; p 236, the act of humping

humans seem more human in the end. Humans that transform into animals tend to retain a level of humanness, which makes their new bodies more wretched. Similar to “Reeling,” Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” features a character who unintentionally turns into an insect — in his case a cockroach —while clinging to the notion that he is still a human. Russell shows both how extreme the girls’ transformations are at the end of the story, just before the girls attack the Agent:

I’ve spent the past few months convinced that we were still identifiable as girls, women —no beauty queens, certainly, shaggy and white and misshapen, but at least half human; its only now, watching the Agent’s reaction, that I realize what we’ve become in his absence. I see us as he must: white faces, with sunken noses that look partially erased. Eyes insect-huge. Spines and elbows incubating lace for wings.⁵⁶

Kitsune doesn’t recognize how inhuman she and the silk-girls have become until she reconsiders their appearances through the Agent’s perspective. In this moment, Kitsune sees the truth of her transformation: She’s a monster. Kitsune’s lingering misconception that the silk-girls still looked like girls indicates she was changed away enough from being human to not appreciate how monstrous she has become. Once the silk-girls undergo major physical transformations, their bodies and needs are much different from what they once were. Red Peter and the wolf-girls, on the other hand, don’t undergo such intrinsic physical shifts; they merely adapt their behavior.

Similar to Claudette, the period before containment for Peter was a time of lower self-awareness. Peter vaguely recalls his past as a time when blithely existed. He says that as time goes on, he loses his connection to that past to the point at which he feels a complete disconnect from it. He doesn’t want to be fully human, however he can’t bear to be ape anymore. For Red Peter, his removal from his origins is shown through his relationship with a trained female ape,
⁵⁶ Russell, *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*, p 51

who he doesn't like to look at because her eyes contain the "perplexity of trained wild animal."⁵⁷ This descriptor indicates Peter doesn't identify as a "trained wild animal," which is what he is on paper. Peter's disconnect from the female chimp suggests he feels intrinsically changed from his time in captivity. Rather than be classified as a trained animal, Red Peter might fit better into the category of a cultural transplant.

In Red Peter's case, we only see the final product. Graduated Claudette is only glimpsed at in the final scene of "St. Lucy's." The unanswered questions that pertain as to what category Red Peter qualifies for is important, because they are similar to what isn't addressed in "St. Lucy's." How similar is he to humans? Does his behavior and capacity for emotion qualify him as a person? Or is it just the genetic makeup humans are born with that allows such a distinction? Red Peter demonstrates how, despite acting in all the correct ways, he still isn't accepted as a human. At the same time, while he is an animal, he doesn't act like one, so he doesn't belong among them either. While the wolf-girls might look more like humans, they may have similar internal conflicts that are similar to the questions above.

Claudette talks about how she can't bear the thought of going back to her parents; she thinks about how that would bring her mother shame. But she's also held back from returning to her past because of the condescension instilled in her towards the previous ways. She looks at Mirabella and is appalled by how she "locomotes."⁵⁸ At one point she was shown images of girls who didn't transition correctly. They are objects of revulsion for those around them; they are outsiders. Claudette recognizes her own changes with mixed feelings, saying that she now smells

57 Kafka, p 235

58 Russell, p 231

"like an easy kill"⁵⁹ as she visits her family on the final page. In order to reach a new freedom of sorts, Claudette must abide by the rules.

Claudette's eventual distance from her former ways is shown through her relationship with Mirabella. Claudette recounts her disconnect from her former self as she describes Mirabella: "She was still loping around on all fours (which the nuns had taught us to see looked unnatural and ridiculous — we could barely believe it now, the shame of it, that we used to locomote like that!), her fists blue-white from the strain."⁶⁰ Claudette's reaction to her little sister here reinforces the theme that behavior is learned.

Conversion

In many ways, "St. Lucy's" is also an analogy for conversion and immigration: Wolf-girls who don't meet the expectations of the nuns lead miserable existences. They fail to reach their full potential, similar to how some religions depict sinners or how some people view immigrants who are learning (or failing) to fit in with a new culture. The idea that "St. Lucy's" is a conversion narrative is most explicit in the beginning. Claudette explains that "Our parents wanted something better for us; they wanted us to get braces, use towels, be fully bilingual. ... The nuns, they said, would make us naturalized citizens of human society. We would go to St. Lucy's to study a better culture."⁶¹ The rhetoric here is familiar. The parents hope for a better future for their children through the kids' acceptance into a different community. The nuns' treatment of the girls' past culture serves as a metaphor for how foreign powers often treat the

59 Russell, p 246

60 Russell, p 231

61 Russell, p 227

original culture as inferior. In this case, the culture they steadily flush from the girls' systems is subhuman. The girls are all past the commencement of the age of reason — 7. If a person enters the Catholic Church after reaching this age, they take the sacrament of Confirmation in addition to Baptism. Confirmation is essentially a grown member's declaration that they intend to be a part of the Church, thus reaffirming the vows of Baptism. Confirmed members are expected to remain active members of the Church and to raise their families in it as well. The girls are disconnected from their upbringings by the end and as such, it is presumable that they would raise their own children within human society.

Peter is reminiscent of citizens born in colonialized societies. He is different from the people who invaded his life, and they bring him back to their homeland in order to be a spectacle for others. This is similar to the real life people taken out of their homelands to be displayed in freak shows, such as Hottentot Venus, a woman who was taken from her tribe in 19th century South Africa.⁶²

The captors claim the wolf-girls and Red Peter in part through naming them. Naming has religiously and historically carried weight. The Judeo-Christian God gives important people new names in the Bible; members of some Catholic orders and the pope must assume new names; people receiving the sacrament of Confirmation choose a saint and may opt to use that saint's name as a part of their own. Here, naming is a form of initiation and acceptance into a community. By naming the girls, the nuns make the statement that the girls now belong to their side, the human side. Their former names are guttural and inhuman: HWRAA! GWARR! TRRRRRRR! BTWWWR! (the exclamation points are a part of the names). The latter name belongs to a brother; there is no apparent trend towards name reflecting gender. The nuns give

⁶² “The Hottentot Venus Is Going Home.” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 35, 2002, pp. 63–63. *JSTOR*, JSTOR.

the girls hyper-feminine names. Outside of the previously mentioned sisters, only one other is named, Lavash, in a brief cameo. The girls live in a highly gendered space, yet another component of the human experience; they are made to wear bows — they go so far as to put one on Mirabella’s muzzle — and are surrounded almost exclusively by women. The names reaffirm their expected roles.

In Red Peter’s case, name change can be used as a tool of degradation. The captors name Red Peter as such in reference to a bullet wound he bears. Red Peter laments this fact, lambasting the name as “disgusting, and wholly unsuitable sobriquet — really, it might have been invented by an ape.”⁶³ From Red Peter’s view, his name is cruel and mocking.⁶⁴

Red Peter and the wolf-girls diverge in important aspects. Red Peter is an unexpected curiosity, an ape; people never expected him to learn to act like a human to the degree in which he did. The girls in “St. Lucy’s” are human; they’re expected to adapt. Red Peter first learns how to imitate physical acts in order to impress his captors and learns words much later. This makes sense in relation to how the two different narrators were educated. The girls were put under a specific program to become human; Red Peter figured out how to adapt on his own. He only won the right to so many tutors later in life after he was able to smoke and drink a bottle of rum, quelling his strong negative reaction to the liquor. In part, the more apparent animalness of Red Peter may hold him back from being more integrated into human society because that society views him as other.

More so than “St. Lucy’s,” “A Report to an Academy” addresses nature. Red Peter’s goal was always to stay out of a cage. He doggedly works so that his partial freedom is attained and

⁶³ Kafka, p 226

⁶⁴ At least, though, his name is a sort of acknowledgement by the workers. It could have been more diminutive. From my observations, not many name their pet gerbil Peter.

continues to work so he can keep it, but he never aspires to more. In contrast, Claudette doesn't announce a specific goal. She merely expresses a desire to not let down her parents. What she is left with after her successful adoption of human culture remains untold.

It is ambiguous how better or worse off any of the girls are after their time at their respective institutions. In her transition to humanness, Claudette turns self-centered. She loses her sense of community with her sisters and acts cruelly toward Mirabella and Jeanette. The latter is also successful in her transition and retaliates against an act of pettiness on Claudette's part, the former doesn't understand. Despite the promise of a better future, it doesn't appear like Claudette is happier. Outside of her transition, the readers know very little about the narrator. She has no interests or specialties; she seems wholly molded by St. Lucy's Home. The final line of the story leaves it on a melancholy note: "So, I said, telling my first human lie. 'I'm home.'"⁶⁵ Here, it is evident that the narrator is no longer able to interact with her family with ease. Stage 5 claims "At this point your students are able to interact effectively in the new cultural environment. They find it easy to move between two cultures."⁶⁶ The interaction with her family combined with the distance and revulsion Claudette holds toward Mirabella, a representation of Claudette's former, lycan self indicates that she did not maintain the ability to shift between the two cultures. Kitsune and the silk-girls, on the other hand, came from varied backgrounds. The conditions of living while in the factory were atrocious, but the story is open ended, with the promise of some sort of freedom.

In a way, even the *idée fixe* of this story isn't chosen by its holder. Claudette only tries hard to succeed out of a sense of necessity; her obsession suits the intentions of the nuns, who

⁶⁵ Russell, *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, p 246

⁶⁶ Russell, p 245

are also in control of exactly how the *idée fixe* is carried out. Peter admits his main goal is to attain a type of incomplete freedom. But he is able in part to become so successful in being non-ape because he doesn't remember his past. The freedoms Russell's characters attain vary dramatically between the individuals. These freedoms are narrowed down by the physical limitations of the characters and society's attitude toward them. In some stories, particularly the human to animal ones, societal constraints are dropped entirely in the final form of freedom attained. But they at least aren't constrained by the past, which is the largest consistency amongst all the characters that attain freedom in Russell's stories.

Chapter 3: Freedom and Constraint

In her bestial transformation stories, Russell ties humanity to constraints and animals to freedom from said constraints. The characters in “The Barn at the End of Our Term” and “Reeling for the Empire” transform in the opposite direction from the characters in “St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves.” Unlike in “St. Lucy’s,” the metamorphosis is a tool in “Reeling” rather than the primary subject of examination. The story hinges on the personal experience of Kitsune, the narrator. Kitsune’s *idée fixe* is her actions that lead to her exploitation within the factory. When recruiting women to work in the silk factory, the Agent appealed to fathers and male guardians. Kitsune goes behind her father’s back and lies to the Agent, telling him her father is too ill for company but approves of the contract. She then signs away her life and freely drinks the tea that triggers her transformation. The *idée fixe* pertains specifically to how Kitsune lost all semblances of control over her life. Ultimately, Kitsune weaponizes her *idée fixe*, which allows her to find freedom and power, which are the exact opposites of the immediate ramifications of Kitsune’s entrapment. The freedom is only attained once Kitsune is no longer attached to the various, human forms of constraint in her life.

People in Power

The girls go from being dependent on their male family members to being under the complete control of the Agent to being autonomous. One of the few common denominators between the silk-girls is that the men in their lives controlled them before they went to the factory. “Reeling” is that the main characters primarily find freedom by rising up against the men who force them into their isolated rooms and taking charge of their own destinies.

Kitsune has a complicated relationship with the Agent. Her infatuation with him skews her portrayal of him throughout the entire story. Kitsune recounts the specifics of her first encounter with him, however she only provides bare, generalized details in regards to how the other girls remember and regard him. The Agent flirts with Kitsune when they meet, which affects Kitsune, who is ugly and single at 23, to the point that she completely falls for his charade. She finds him handsome and in a bid to impress him (and help her family), she signs herself away to the factory. Kitsune, with the eager bravado of a freshman pledge attempting to prove they can hang, valiantly consumes all of the *kaiko* (silkworm) tea — a mysterious blend smelling of rot with a live silkworm dropped in — at once.⁶⁷ Like many an 18 year old who chugs a drink of questionable origin and taste, she regrets this particular moment of self-imposed peer pressure once she wakes up. Kitsune mentally manufactures the pressure to please in the moment: She is alone with the Agent, and she tosses back the drink, despite seeing the silkworm, “Without so much as consulting the Agent.”⁶⁸ It’s her desire to please this man that propels her to drink so rashly. Instead of questioning the smell or the worm in the tea, she tells herself that she is being tested to prove she has the mettle and commitment to make it in the factory. Her conviction in the absolute greatness of the factory before and during her captivity stems from the Agent. Kitsune doesn’t directly bear witness to the Agent acting cruelly until she sees how he handles Dai’s body. Before this point, the Agent’s wrongdoings are confined to descriptions from other girls. After this scene, Kitsune embraces her dark side and plots the Agent’s slow death.

Kitsune’s past haunts her throughout the story, however she is later able to weaponize it. Prior to this show of strength and rebellion, though, Kitsune participated in the indoctrination of

67 Russell, p 36

68 Russell, p 36

other girls. Upon arrival at the factory, the new girls initially just deny the reality of their situation; they think they'll only be in the factory for a year, and certainly not *this* factory, with its hairy creatures. Eventually, new girls come to accept their station, although they still desire an out. The experienced girls facilitate the new girls' acceptance by explaining the realities of the situation — such as the need to reel silk — and spouting the Agent's words. Despite the fact that the shame of her compliance in joining the factory haunts Kitsune, within the story she is the most vocal in reiterating whatever words of support the Agent feeds the girls. As she indoctrinates two new sisters, Kitsune brags:

The art of silk production was very, very inefficient, I tell the sisters. Slow and costly. Until us.

I try to weed the pride from my voice, but it's difficult. In spite of everything, I cant help but admire the quantity of silk that we *kaiko-joko* can produce in a single day. The Agent boasts that he has made us the most productive machines in the empire, surpassing even those steel zithers and cast-iron belchers at Tomioka Model Mill.⁶⁹

Kitsune is so blinded by the Agent's praise, she repeats that the girls are “productive machines” with pride. This rhetoric serves as yet another constraining force. The propaganda instills a sense of accomplishment in the girls, which helps appease the frustration and horror they hold toward their new bodies. New girls are thrown into the workroom and left to the guidance of the girls already there.

In Kitsune's memory, the Agent sweetly literally and figuratively entraps her. When they initially met, “He lunged forward and grabbed playfully at my waist, ... ‘You will reel for the

69 Russell, p 30

realm, for your emperor? For me, too,' he added softly, with a smile."⁷⁰ The Agent's words as well as the title of this story, "Reeling for the Empire," remind us that underlying all the oppressive forces apparent in the silk-girls' lives, there is the Empire. The state demands that the girls are under the various men's control. The girls can be put under contract by their family, but they don't have the power to sign themselves over. (Kitsune lies to the Agent in order to do so.)

Bodies

The nature of the girls' new bodies requires them to reel. The silk-girls, when introducing the last two arrivals to the factory, are unaware of the exact consequences of not reeling. The girls in the factory reel because they are told to, and they eat leaves because of the "deep, death-thwarting taste of the mulberry."⁷¹ The girls can't help but to succumb to their situation, which is necessitated by their bodies. Kitsune frets, "my stomach is so full of thread that I'm not sure I'll be able to stand. I'm afraid that it will all be black. Some of us are now forced to crawl on our hands and knees to the Machine, toppled by our ungainly bodies"⁷² as her silk comes out a mottled green-black. The buildup of silk in their bodies tethers the girls to the factory so that they must dispense themselves of their byproduct through the machines. The quote above shows too much un-reeled silk weighs down the girls' bodies, making the girls physically incapable of escape. When they don't comply, their bodies naturally dole out punishment. The girls dutifully reel for most of the story, so they aren't fully aware of the consequences of not reeling, other than that it causes discomfort. They later learn that to refuse is to face the same fate as Dai, a girl

70 Russell, p 35

71 Russell, p 33

72 Russell, p 41

who refuses to eat or reel: “her belly is grotesquely distended and stippled with lumps, like a sow’s pregnant with a litter of ten piglets. Her excess thread is packed in knots. Strangling Dai from within.”⁷³ This description furthers the idea that through the transformations, foreign forces violate the silk-girls’ bodies.

The transformation is intrinsic for the silk-girls. On multiple occasions, Kitsune acts on instincts unnatural to humans. On one such occasion, the machine pulls too much thread from her body, putting it at risk. Kitsune saves herself by “swivel[ing] my head around and bit[ing] blindly at the air; at last I snap the threads with my *kaiko* jaws.”⁷⁴ The imagery here is odd. It’s less extreme than her ability to weave, which requires little instruction; however, it is more behavioral. Kitsune acts with inhuman self-preservation reactions.

Despite how much harm the burden of producing silk has on the girls, it also helps them. The transformation into silkworm hybrids was forced upon them, however the girls instigate their next metamorphosis once they start thinking for themselves. They grow to desire escape from their workstation-homes once they believe it is possible. Dai starved herself to death and stopped reeling so as to no longer play the Agent’s game. This drags the girls to the present and triggers their feelings of resentment toward their situation. Through Dai’s death and Chiyo’s industry insider knowledge on silkworms, the girls learn about their own capabilities and limits. With the hope newly instilled from the information, Kitsune is able to tap into her instincts to make a cocoon with the help of a reeling machine, which she alters. The silk-girls only free themselves from their condition(s) by accepting them and using their new circumstances to their advantage. When Kitsune learns about the life cycle of silkworms, she finds a way to utilize the silk to her advantage. She uses the commodity that she’s being abused for to create the cocoon

⁷³ Russell, *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*, p 44

⁷⁴ Russell, p 39

that will transform her into a moth. Even the loom that alleviates the girls of their silk is repurposed to aid the girls as they create their cocoons. Once the girls emerge from their cocoons, they will have moth wings. Their future bodies will grant them new means of mobility that will free them in a completely new way.

Kitsune and the girls postulate that the different silk colors reflect the auras of the girls they belong to. Kitsune's silk transitions from green to black as she festers in regret. During this period, Kitsune is reeling from the death of a comrade and wants to be free of the Agent. The black silk alarms Kitsune, she knows its color is affected by her thoughts, however she becomes emboldened by it when she adopts a vindictive attitude. Kitsune found the mottled silk she emitted while wallowing repulsive, but when she became convicted in her thoughts of rebellion, she finds a way to produce a pure black. In order to produce pure black silk as opposed to the mottled variation from before, Kitsune bitterly embraces and replays the day she signed her life away to the Agent. This transition mirrors Kitsune's shift from passive victim to scheming leader. Compared to black, green is a vibrant color, it's the color of the "death-thwarting" tasting mulberry leaves; the color transition feels like a corruption or loss of innocence. A silk-girl euphemistically says Kitsune's thread is, "Black as the sea, as the forest at night, ... She is too courteous to make the more sinister comparisons."⁷⁵ The color of Kitsune's thread results from negative thoughts, though. The more sinister comparisons would be appropriate. Her thread is black like the ink she signed her contract with. Her thread is black like the memory of that moment, which poisons her thoughts with self-reproach and disgust. In the end, Kitsune looks into the black eyes of the Agent, and in them she sees her reflection for the first time since she arrived at the factory. It is in the blackness that Kitsune moves on from her past and accepts herself.

75 Russell, p 39

Kitsune regains power over herself during this time as she flips the situation with the Agent by wresting control over his body and future. Kitsune takes the first step toward freedom by letting herself feel all her accumulated negative emotions. This results in her being able to make the thicker, pure black thread with which she builds a cocoon. Once Kitsune demonstrates how to do this, she convinces the other girls to follow suit. Kitsune ends up making an extra cocoon for the Agent, showcasing her marvelous silk-reeling skills in the process of entombing him. When the Agent arrives, prompted by the girls' refusal to work, Kitsune entraps him. Kitsune narrates, "I alight on his shoulders and hook my legs around him. ... I [speak] directly into the Agent's ear. I clasp my hands around his neck, lean into the whisper."⁷⁶ The movements here seem intimate. The position could be that of lovers, which hearkens back to Kitsune's infatuation with the Agent and his flirtatious actions toward her when he convinced her to sign away her life. This time, though, Kitsune approaches him with the murderous intent. On the last page of the story as she is sealing the Agent into a cocoon to suffocate, she says, "I smile at the Agent and instruct the others to leave his eyes for last, thinking that he will be very impressed to see our skill at reeling up close."⁷⁷ In this moment, Kitsune reveals a perverse desire to show off for the Agent, even as she is killing him. The possibility that Kitsune is still hung up on the Agent causes tension, as she seemed free of his influence prior to this moment; she acts in direct opposition to him after Dai's death before this moment. If Kitsune is just toying with the Agent, which seems like the more likely, she is acting inhumane. But that may be the point, since the Agent never treated the girls humanely. He literally forced them to become inhuman.

All the descriptions of the girls' new bodies either bring up how unnerving they are or the suffering brought by the bodily needs. Only at the end, once the girls embrace their changes upon

76 Russell, p 51

77 Russell, p 52

their bid for freedom do the girls derive something positive from their bodies. Cocoons are an obvious sign of transition and change and growth. Kitsune is growing before entering the cocoon, but entering it is the first step into an even more dramatic transition. The girls believe they will be free after they emerge from their cocoons. They will be able to fly. In a passage that would not be out of place in a bitter breakup monologue, Kitsune tells the Agent, “These wings of ours are invisible to you, ... And in fact you will never see them, since they exist only in our future, where you are dead and we are living, flying.” Here, Kitsune presumes what will literally happen to her body and metaphorically describes the freedom she hopes to attain.

In "Reeling," "Barn," and "The Metamorphosis," the main characters derive power of sorts through food. In their animalistic states, food is a means of control. Initially, food is a symbol of the new bodies the characters have. They can't eat human food Gregor is a cockroach and once it is discovered he is repulsed by human food, he is fed cockroach food. The girls eat mulberry leaves, the only food provided to them, voraciously, helpless to their physical urges. They're ravenous for the leaves; they're always hungry. They recognize that they are miserable. The girls stockpile food and eventually enter a state in which they don't need sustenance, the cocoon phase. The silk-girls stop eating as a show of defiance to their oppressors, it's a symbol of wresting power back over themselves, whereas Gregor stops eating so as to alleviate his family from his now burdensome existence. Gregor starves to death because he knows his family wishes him dead. In his final moments, “He thought back on his family with devotion and love. His conviction that he needed to disappear was, if anything, still firmer than his sister's.”⁷⁸ Gregor acts selflessly in the best interests of his family despite the fact that earlier he had overheard his family ranting about how Gregor should leave or die.⁷⁹

78 Kafka, p 141

79 Kafka, p 138-139

In “Barn,” Rutherford B. Hayes compels an ewe he believes to be his late wife, Lucy, to follow him around by feeding it his food. This is his way of caring for the sheep, and it affords him power of sorts over it (although he wouldn’t think of it in such terms) in a similar way to how feeding a dog will endear it to you. By feeding the sheep, Rutherford has less to eat, but he doesn’t seem to care because he wants her to be Lucy so desperately. This compulsion is similar in selflessness to that of Gregor. Both men are conscious of what they are doing, but to them, their family members are worth the suffering.

The Past

Once signed over, the silk-girls were then taken away from their families, who were a large part of the girls' lives. This is evidenced as Kitsune recounts several girls' real and fabricated backgrounds. Kitsune observes, “And the more our *kaiko*-bodies begin to resemble one another, the more frantically each factory girl works to reinvent her past.”⁸⁰ They are all individuals — their silks and cocoons are different colors; however, the different silk colors aren’t enough. The girls identify themselves through the context of who their family members were. At one point, Kitsune claims she’s the great-granddaughter of a warrior, and then playfully acknowledges how her father was someone else entirely the previous day. She and other girls are imaginative in their stories: “Some of our lies are quite bold: Yuna says that her great-uncle has a scrap of sailcloth from the Black Sips. Dai claims that she knelt alongside her samurai father at the Battle of Shiroyama.”⁸¹ This passage contains the most information about the other girls’ pasts, made up as they may be. The girls don't seem to dwell on their real past lives too much:

80 Russell, p 23

81 Russell, p 23

When the silk-girls prepare to enter their cocoons, they make no mention of a desire to return to their families. This may be a ramification for signing the girls' freedom away. They don't bemoan how they miss their previous stations in life. When they talk, it's about fabricated pasts, not real ones.

The pseudo identities are obvious forms of escapism that are meant to be shared in order to break up the monotony of double-digit-hour workdays. The past only served to distract Kitsune, but once she focuses on acting to change her circumstances, she finds a way out. Kitsune at the end identifies herself as "Kitsune Tajima of the Gifu Prefecture."⁸² She then goes on to list the names of all the girls at the factory. She isn't quite free of the Agent's influence when she seeks recognition from him, because his reaction here seems to matter to her. The names don't register with him, and immediately thereafter, Kitsune finishes sealing him up in a cocoon, effectively silencing him. Earlier in the story, the past dictated how the girls identified themselves, but the Agent denies their status as humans. His lack of memory of the girls once again shows his lack of courtesy for them as human equals, while Kitsune's words demonstrate how the girls care for one another.

As the narrator, Kitsune has the privilege of sharing her own background in detail. She introduces the dismal past saying, "All Japan is undergoing a transformation — we *kaiko-joko* are not alone in that respect. I watched my grandfather become a sharecropper on his own property"⁸³ The first clause of this text is ominous. The *kaiko-jokos*' (silkworm-workers) transformations are terrible. In connecting the *kaiko-joko* to Japan during this period, Russell casts criticizes the powers that instigated the transformation.

82 Russell, p 52

83 Russell, p 33

The silk-girls take strength from unifying with each other. Kitsune poetically claims camaraderie through the girls' shared aspirations: "Long before the *kaiko* change turned us into mirror images of one another, we were sisters already, spinning identical dreams in beds thousands of miles apart, fantasizing about gold silks and an 'imperial vocation.' ... Industry, trade, unstoppable growth: years before the Agent came to find us, our dreams anticipated his promises."⁸⁴ Ironically, the very dreams the girls share are what lead to in their enslavement.

The silk-girls' real pasts, if clung to, would have obligated them to remain in the same miserable situation. The families get paid for a certain number of years of work and the Agent threatened to take back all the money the family received if a girl runs away or dies. Cutting free from the factory impedes the family from receiving more money from the girls. Letting go of the past — both the real and fake versions — allows the characters to move on. But before she lets go of the past, Kitsune uses the poisonous memory of signing her life away.

“The Barn at the End of Our Term”

“Barn” reinforces the theme that the past is a tether. In addition to the silk-girls, Rutherford’s case is one of the few examples where a character is freed from their fixations. Unlike “Reeling,” it is free of political subtext, although it pokes fun at politicians, and the late president’s equine body doesn’t affect his being in the intrinsic way that the silk-girls are affected. In “Barn,” the majority of U.S. presidents desperately want to escape in order to gloriously take the reigns of the country once more. To them, the concept of freedom is the ability to do this. “Adams has convinced a half dozen of the former presidents to be his running mates in a charge on Washington. Whig, Federalist, Democrat, Republican—Adams urges his

84 Russell, p 25

fellow horses to put aside these partisan politics and join him in the push for liberty.”⁸⁵ Russell pokes fun at the insatiable thirst for power. The presidents forgo partisan politics in order to regain their former glory. They don’t talk about reuniting with their loved ones, as Rutherford does; they don’t question whether the U.S. is fine without them. The goal of liberty is an American ideal used as a front to indulge this itch.

Like all of Russell’s other bestial transformation subjects, the presidents have no illusions of reversing their physical transformations. (Except for Eisenhower, who speculates that his new form is the Secret Service’s temporary doing. He is the most power-hungry of the bunch.) “Barn diverges from the other stories in that the presidents don’t experience a transition between natures. They just wake up horses after they die. They react to the shock of the situation, however they all mentally remain human. Rutherford’s first death was peaceful: “Then Rutherford’s throat began to close, shutting him off from all words, and he felt himself filling with silence. The silence was a field of cotton growing white and forever inside him. Rutherford wasn’t afraid to die. *My Lucy*, he remembers thinking, *will be waiting for me on the other side.*”⁸⁶ The peace is not attained, though.

Ultimately, he realizes the sheep he once believed to be Lucy is not his wife, and he loses his worldly attachments, he faces his reality. In a transcendent state of mind — one in which he stops fighting his equine existence and gives up on hope for a greater beyond and a reunion with his wife — he jumps the fence around the farm. Russell describes the experience of jumping the fence as a revelation:

What am I, Rutherford wonders, *a horse’s body or a human mind?* Both options are

twining together like a rope then fraying. ... Rutherford knows from the certainty of his

85 Russell, p 125

86 Russell, p 122

heartbeat that he is alive, that there isn't any "after." There is no reason to believe that anything better or greener waits on the other side of the Fence. ... suddenly he stops worrying about cause and effect ... or why any of this should matter ...⁸⁷

This is a challenge all the other presidents hope to and fail to accomplish (with the exception of Andrew Garfield, who did it earlier). Similar to the silk-girls, Rutherford relies upon instinct to accomplish this feat. In the end, the Rutherford lets go of his cares and desires and worries. Despite how dear he holds these things, they limit him.

Exploitation

Russell delicately frames the *kaiko* (silkworm) tea transaction as a form of rape: "The Agent improvises his tearooms: an attic in a forest inn or a locked changing room in a bathhouse or, in the case of Iku, an abandoned cowshed."⁸⁸ The conspicuous locations set the foreboding tone for the violence that then takes place for the rest of the girls. Kitsune feels shame in how different her experience in drinking the tea is from the others. She chugged an entire pot at once, whereas "Only through the Agent's intervention were [the silk-girls] able to get the tea down. It took his hands around their throats."⁸⁹ The regret is particularly cutting as other girls show off trophies of resistance — marks, "proof of their innocence"⁹⁰ — from their struggle against the Agent and his insidious tea. To take the metaphor further, the Agent ignored the girls' resistances

⁸⁷ Russell, p 132-133

⁸⁸ Russell, p 27-28

⁸⁹ Russell, p 36

⁹⁰ Russell, p 37

and imposed a change upon their bodies, invading them with the silkworm. The girls are left transformed from the experience, and the silk forms in their swollen bellies. The suggestion that the girls' transformations are the results of a rape-like encounter automatically implies that what the girls' transformations stand for, worker exploitation, is a form of rape.

Whatever occurs to the girls doesn't matter to their captors, the girls are treated as subhuman. This is because, to their employers, the silk-girls are nothing more than a commodity:

Three days after her death, he finally shows up. He strides over to Dai and touches her belly with a stick. When a few of us grab for his legs, he makes a face and kicks us off.

"Perhaps we can still salvage some of it," he grumbles, rolling her into his sack.⁹¹

When Dai eventually dies, the body is treated as nothing more than an object, and the Agent only cares about the potential profit that can still be derived from her body. This isn't the first time the Agent dehumanizes the girls. In feeding them the special tea that instigates the girls' transformations in the first place, he treats the girls as if their bodies are his to manipulate, thanks to the contracts their families signed the girls away with.

The most compelling points of similarity and contrast between "Reeling" and "The Metamorphosis" are through the characters' relationships to work. In both stories, the employers only care about the characters' capacity to work. Gregor eventually dies because he remains beholden to that system of values, which dehumanizes him in a way that deprives him of any worth. In contrast, the silk-girls stop abiding by what their employer wants and embrace their inhumanity, which then frees them. At points, both the main characters value themselves in the work they complete and the money their families receive from it. In "The Metamorphosis," prior

⁹¹ Russell, p 42

to his transformation, Gregor wasn't subject to the whims of another in the same way the girls were; he wasn't at the mercy of another family member, and he could theoretically quit his job. However, obligation to support his family kept him stuck in his miserable job. They take him for granted: "They had just become used to it, his money, which he willingly handed over, but there was no longer any particular warmth about it."⁹² Despite this, he doesn't bear resentment toward his family once he becomes a cockroach, entrapped in his own room because of their disgust. Gregor's relationship to his family keeps him from attempting escape, even when he suffers. When Gregor cannot work, the parents treat him without sentiment; the family represents a microcosm of the society they live in.

Gregor and the silk-girls all inhabit vulnerable spaces. They are constrained to a room and dependent upon outsiders for nourishment. Twenty silk-girls are literally crammed into a single room that is both their living space and their workspace. Gregor initially keeps to his room because of the bruising disgust of his family, but later they lock him in there. During the course of the short stories, the rooms they are constrained within take on different significance to them. In an article about the relationship between transformed insect/humans and their spaces, Elizabeth Boa succinctly writes, "[Gregor] Samsa seeks relief from the burdens of petty-bourgeois masculinity: the room is his refuge from oppressive work in a ruthless public sphere. ... On ceasing to pay the bills, however, Samsa immediately loses the power to lock his door ... his room thereafter is open to endless penetration."⁹³ When he was a worker, his room was an escape. Once he can't escape it, the room symbolizes the impotence he feels by not being able to

⁹² Kafka, p 113

⁹³ Boa, Elizabeth. "Creepy-Crawlies: Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis.'" *Paragraph*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1990, pp. 19–29. *JSTOR*, *JSTOR*,

www.jstor.org/stable/43151703. p 21

work or live with any autonomy. Isolation has varying effects on the different insect-people. Gregor's transformation and subsequent confinement releases him from the obligation to work and support his family, but it later dehumanizes him to the point that it deprives him of any worth. Gregor becomes a burden; the girls become commodities. The silk-girls are also stripped of their choices once they are trapped in their room. Instead of keeping them away from work, the room forces them to always be near it. Once the girls act to regain power over themselves, the room transforms into an avenue of freedom from human society and its constructs.

The silk-girls come into contact with two people: the blind, old woman who delivers their food and the Agent. At the end of the story, the Agent viscerally reacts to seeing the mutated girls, so during his infrequent visits, it's probable he doesn't expend time interacting with the girls. The isolation of the rooms allows the inhabitants freedom from an obligation to social norms. Class doesn't exist in the silk-girls' room because they have homogenous bodies and the same worker bee roles, which are reinforced by the setup of the room, where the workstations are immediately next to the girls' sleep spaces. Thus, the girls only have each other to impress, and they cling to what they know to maintain the semblance of civility. Upon Kitsune referring to the girls' feeding time as a "mulberry orgy," another girl protests, "'call it *the evening meal*, please, don't be disgusting,' Dai pleads, her saliva still gleaming on the floor."⁹⁴ Here, Dai still clings to the comfort of human sensibilities in spite of her base, animalistic eating compulsion. The girls cling to whatever semblances of humanity they can sustain because they still identify as humans.

Animal to Human Transformations

94 Russell, p 33

Both narrators from the animal to human transformations, Claudette and Red Peter, reject the temptation of absolute freedom as they weigh the consequences of it. They instead choose to live according to the institutions of people with higher authority. The loss of their absolute freedom marks the beginning of the shift between animal and human. Red Peter cannot remember his time as an ape, but he recounts his desire for a “way out” after his capture, claiming, “I don’t mean the great feeling of freedom on all sides. As an ape I may have known such a feeling ... freedom is all too often self-deception among people.”⁹⁵ Key word: people. The last word in the quote is ambiguous as to whether Red Peter identifies as human or not. Earlier in the quote, Red Peter reveals he doesn’t identify as an ape. He scorns the absolute freedom of his pure animal days. In part his relative ease of transition is aided by his lack of memory and former state of absolute freedom. He didn’t need to think things through; he merely existed. Because of this, he had little to cling to once he was captured.

Similar to Red Peter, Claudette explains her and her sisters’ choice to not escape despite the opportunity to do so by supplying “But we knew we couldn’t return to the woods; not till we were civilized, not if we didn’t want to break the mother’s heart.”⁹⁶ The reasoning is simple, but the ramifications prove difficult to bear at first for her. It’s Claudette’s rejection of freedom that in large part keeps her compelled to follow the rules and reject former kindnesses such as tending to her sister’s wounds. Claudette exhibits more strife in her transition because she had conscious behaviors prior to arriving at school. She goes from licking her sisters’ wounds to inflicting new, less visible ones.

The insect people’s contrasting physical constraint and freedom from society is particularly stark in its direct opposition to the situation of the wolf-girls in “St. Lucy’s.” The

95 Kafka, p 229

96 Russell, *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, p 230

wolf girls can go wherever they want to, but they are introduced to human norms, which compels them to comply to their captors' wills and stay at the home.

Conclusion

In her short stories, Russell consistently scratches at deep, serious themes through characters' obsessions; however, her exuberant writing style and imaginative details can distract from them. The stories themselves may be comical, however the *idées fixes* of the characters always focus on serious themes. I explored two such themes in depth through "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves" and "Reeling for the Empire" and supplemented my interpretations with similarities in other stories. The transformations in "Reeling" and "St. Lucy's" occur in opposite directions. Because of this, they feature counterexamples to each other. As the girls in "St. Lucy's" become more human, they become less free; the girls in "Reeling" only start to attain freedom in accepting their animal sides.

At the crux of the former story, Russell explores what constitutes appropriate human behavior by showing the wolf-girls in "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves" learning

how to act human. In a first pass of “St. Lucy’s,” it’s the facetiousness and levity that stands out. The darker moments are often obscured by the humor. The nuns train the girls to act out of propriety, which, as Russell demonstrates, is often grounded in self-interest.

“Reeling for the Empire” scrutinizes freedom through the context of oppression. For Russell’s characters, freedom is attained when the characters stop adhering to human norms. In the story, to make the oppressive present circumstances becomes the past because the silk-girls stop complying with human-constructed rules. The constraining element of being human is evident in “St. Lucy’s,” because the wolf-girls are introduced to the expectations of society. This portrays constructs we may take for granted through fresh eyes. “Reeling” more fully explores freedom because the silk-girls eventually attain freedom. The characters that are forcibly changed into animals eventually escape their situations because they free themselves from their preconceptions of how they should be. This is impossible for the characters that become more human in an attempt to integrate into human society, which keeps them trapped within its standards of behavior. None of the characters act out of leisure; they act out of a sense of necessity.

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