

***House of Cards*: Reflection on Dark Eros as Creative Action**

Joli Hamilton

Abstract: This essay turns a depth-psychological lens upon the drug abuse, sexual manipulation, and murder scenes in the American television rendition of *House of Cards*. The Underwoods, who are obsessed with power, yet strangely enticing, invite the viewer to upend their moralistic perspective challenging notions of innocence and evil. By applying post-Freudian Lacan's Phallus theory, the unconscious and persistent desire for power in some individuals is explored. Then, in a move toward understanding why audiences flock to such grotesque imagery, post-Jungian Moore's notion of dark eros is extended to argue for the necessity of accepting the sadistic aspect of psyche. The notion of libertine consciousness is used to illuminate why the darkness draws us in even as it is repulsive and suggest the cautious, reflective digestion of these grotesque images as a creative action for those challenged by current political darkness. Bringing Lacan and Moore into dialogue, it is suggested that sexually toned darkness may necessarily balance the pull toward light aspects of psyche. Through close reading, intense scenes are reimagined as more than just Jungian shadow material. They also illustrate the sacrifice of innocence required as one attempts to increase consciousness.

Keywords: *House of Cards* (TV program), dark eros, psychological image, sadism

Introduction

The American television series *House of Cards*, created by Beau Willimon, offers a dark image through which I intend to explore a fresh perspective on Lacan's concept of the Phallus. The darkness depicted in the fictionalized contemporary political atmosphere will also allow me to extend post-Jungian scholar Moore's notion of dark eros, or the Sadeian consciousness, to the series. An unflinching examination of *House of Cards*' grotesque imagery persuades depth psychologists of the necessity of sadism. The ruthless, sadistic behavior we watch episode after episode becomes more than cheap entertainment when viewed through these depth-psychology perspectives. Through a direct viewing of the grotesque, one may potentially find a protection from psychological naiveté; rather than turning away from the shadowed aspects of humanity, one is drawn closer to darkness. This paper invites a psychological contemplation of the underbelly of life, and specifically American presidential politics. I contend that there is something to be gained, psychologically, from viewing dark eros, perhaps even evil, on the screen, if one engages in a reflective practice, extending the imagination to more fully grasp the potential good and harm to be found in real-life politics. In other words, a stretching of the imaginal capacity is argued to be a necessary task in the current political climate, which is highly divisive and rich with opportunities for power to be exploited. To become

responsible, engaged citizens in what can easily be termed dark times, it is suggested that a turn towards the grotesque image rather than away from it is preferable. Additionally, engaging with the dark image in a creative way is proposed as a potentially nurturing act of self-care on an individual level.

Relentlessly Seeking the Phallus

Before delving into specific images from *House of Cards* it is necessary to grasp the idea of the Phallus established by psychoanalytic theorist Lacan. The Phallus is an idea of power and potency so encompassing that it can only be understood in what Lacan terms the realm of the Imaginary, where sensory perceptions and linguistic structures combine to create the opportunity to form subjectivity. The Imaginary realm predates a child's language acquisition, when concepts must begin taking shape in order for the infant to recognize its being. As ideas are formed the child eventually brings its inner world into relation with the outer by accessing what Lacan calls the Symbolic realm. In the Symbolic realm the signifiers (representations of things) become useful by being linked to signifieds (the ideas themselves) (Bailly, 2009, p. 92). When this linkage occurs, the child accepts the initiation into a world beyond the Imaginary. The Subject, a distinct aspect of being, separate from the ego, is born (Bailly, 2009, p. 96). Bailly (2009) wrote: "The completion of the individual's initiation into the Symbolic comes with the acceptance of the Name-of-the-Father, and of castration" (p. 97). As will soon be demonstrated, the central character in *House of Cards* appears to have been unable to complete this psychological task, thus consigning his Subject to a limbo state.

Coming to terms with the Phallus is a psychological task of initiation into the realization of one's lack of power. Not to be confused with the literal penis, the Phallus is a signifier; it is that which the small child painfully recognizes as having won his mother's attention. When the mother pulls her away from the baby, he is left to piece together what could possibly draw her attention from him. In these first experiences of duality (mother is here, mother is gone) the infant is left to imagine what thing might be powerful enough to compel her absence from him. This what-ever-it-might-be Lacan names the Phallus; it takes on the primary importance for the child-self. Lacan proposes that desiring the Phallus grips one in an irrational trajectory of action, a pattern of attempts to be something that is not attainable because does not exist in reality. The Phallus is what is always sought but cannot ever be found, invested with a profound amount of imagined power. According to Lacanian theory, the entirety of a life can be spent searching in vain for that which has captured and held the mother's attention unless the castration complex is successfully negotiated. In other words, the child must renounce their attempt to be or have what the mother seeks or forever consign part of his attention to the unconscious search for the Phallus. The castration complex for Lacan is the symbolic relinquishing of the desire to be the omnipotent one. Here it becomes possible to see how the massive drive of presidential candidacy *could* possibly stem from an unsuccessful castration complex. Though American presidents do not actually gain omnipotence, the holder of the office is granted social status as the most powerful person in the free world.

House of Cards illustrates what a constant search for a level of power only possible in the Imaginary realm might look like, thus portraying what dangers might lie

down such a path. In *House of Cards*, the main characters, Francis and Claire Underwood, exemplify Lacan's Phallus-seeking outcomes in their egregious actions, seemingly willing to sacrifice anything on the altar of power. Each grows increasingly driven and more terrifying in their attempts to obtain this elusive, perfect object. Power-seeking consumes all, an unconscious desire projected onto real objects over which they can hold dominion. Unlike our typical sense of the word penis, Lacan's Phallus is psychologically present in both genders. Residing in Lacan's realm of the Imaginary, it is the signifier (a sound-image that carries an idea) associated with the perfect object baby desires to own in order to regain control of the mother. The Phallus cannot be obtained, nor can the child become the Phallus—it exists only as a psychological structure (Bailly, 2009, p. 75). Complicated images of sex and gender are depicted in *House of Cards*, demonstrating that contemporary fiction is gaining traction with gender-bending scripts. The psychological impact of de-literalized gender is significant. Loosening of the stricter gender roles imposed upon previous generations as well as increased diversity among erotic plotlines is evidence of a psychological shift in the modern American culture. As the penis gains some neutrality as a sexual object desired by both genders, it may be possible that the Phallus can be portrayed more precisely—less entanglement with the biological object could allow new consciousness around sexual appetites. Lacan (1977, p.142) asserted, “the motives of the unconscious are limited...to sexual desire,” and thus, the goal of a therapeutic analysis is to bring desire to consciousness, to admit and name the desire. This moves the person in question from the Imaginary to the Symbolic realm—the step Lacan suggests is necessary for psychological maturation. In this attempt, Francis and Claire fail. There is no psychological movement away from the Phallus. They see only power; Frank and Claire cling to their unconscious desire, never allowing language to give psychological birth to the new thing. “In naming it, the subject creates, brings forth, a new presence in the world” (Lacan, Miller, & Tomaselli, 1988, pp. 228-229). The characters do not successfully bring consciousness to their desire, sublimating it still further as they use anything, even each other, as stepstools to the top of the political heap. Thus all their mighty effort is converted into little if any, apparent psychological development.

Francis's and Claire's bodily sexual desires, quite different from the psychological desire for the Phallus also seem reflective of Lacan's theory: Frank appears to be sexually stimulated only when he is manipulating that which he holds as the Phallus—never for love, somatic connection, or soul-fulfilling purposes. The latter only confound him and result in an impotent reaction on Frank's part. Sexual desire for his conventionally attractive wife only bares Francis's impotence to our sight; power compels all of his attention. In other words, because he has not successfully transitioned to a mature psychological state, unconscious desire for the Phallus is the primary motive for Francis's action. Their needs to merge with the Phallus, identify with it completely, permits both Francis and Claire to engage in numerous depraved acts, from coercive sex to murder, despite a concurrent need to present a perfect persona, or mask, to the world. I question an apparent ethical anomaly that occurs in the viewer of *House of Cards*: despite morally repugnant behavior on both of their parts, we the viewers frequently, if subtly, root for Francis and Claire's general success. One might say that this is only a desire to see the series carry on, but perhaps it is our own psychological needs that are being mirrored.

As part of a long tradition of attractive villains, the Underwoods compel us to consider darkness again and again. In subtly taking the side of evil, might we nurture our own repressed selves as projected onto Francis and Claire? The surname Underwood reinforces this dark potential, pointing toward the shadow quality of Frank and Claire. So too does a common Internet meme born of the series that reads: “One nation, Underwood”. Knowing that murder, betrayal, and lascivious power drove the fictional Underwood White House did nothing to curb the darkly comical line from its popularity. The meme implied that an Underwood presidency would be preferable to either of the two major political candidates in 2016. If an election is understood to be a psychological reflection of the nation at large, the willingness to accept a power-obsessed and manipulative leader might have pointed to an unconscious desire shared by the populace. The collective cries for more Underwood may have been expressing an infantile hope to *become* the omnipotent nation Americans long to be. Individually, this overwhelming yet repressed desire for power might be teased out through an introspective viewing of the dark images in *House of Cards*. The loathsome gods depicted by Francis and Claire might instruct us to face and embrace that power-hungry aspect within, to keep our most devilish drives within view in the hope that we might balance that energy with our better angels.

Power Seeking

Power for power’s sake is at this point a familiar trope. Thus it is unsurprising that in Chapter 2 Frank Underwood disparages lobbyist Remy Danton, “He chose money over power—in this town, a mistake nearly everyone makes.¹ Money is the McMansion in Sarasota that starts falling apart after 10 years. Power is the old stone building that stands for centuries.” He continues to drive his point hard: “I cannot respect someone who does not see the difference.” The Underwoods will continue their united and individual crusades for power for years to come as we watch, expending every resource at their disposal in a singular direction. The illustration of such relentless work is worthy of attention. The psychological impetus to power above all other desires is starkly depicted in *House of Cards*, yet the power-seeking seems to be an unquenchable thirst. Five seasons pass with no sign of satisfaction on the part of Francis or Claire. Though neither character lacks creativity in their search for power, nothing seems to fill the desire gap. Thus Lacan’s Phallus contention seems quite a suitable psychological lens through which to understand the particular type of seeking the Underwoods are engaged in. When someone compelled by the search for the Phallus occupies the White House, perhaps the citizen must shift to a more creative stance.

Francis carries the nickname Frank out in the political arena, an ironic moniker since he is constantly hiding the truth. Frank is on an unending quest for power, which he initially asserts will be attained when he achieves the role of president. Soon it is clear that nothing will fulfill Frank’s desire and one has to wonder what level of political dominion over the world he will reach during his quest. Though it never slakes his longing, the pretension of authority must stand in for Frank’s psychological desire to *be* power. No amount of action is too much work, and no act is too depraved for him so long as it moves him in the direction of wielding more power. Only inaction is disgusting to Frank, “I’ve always loathed the necessity of sleep. Like death, it puts even the most powerful men on their backs” he says in Chapter 23; not even bodily function is worthy

of a break in the search for the Phallus in Frank's view. Here we have an example of the Phallus—something so precious it is imbued with symbolic qualities and so unobtainable that it exists only in the realm of the Imaginary. In this case Imaginary is neither fictitious nor unreal; it is the realm of all that is illusory in nature but which has impact upon reality. Lacan points out that the Phallus is trapped in the Imaginary, or the identification of the specular image of oneself (Evans, 1996, p. 142). The Imaginary Phallus ought to evolve into what Lacan would term the *l'objet petit a*, or object-cause-of-desire, if one negotiates the castration complex successfully. However, the completion of the castration complex requires that one give up identifying with the Phallus—in other words, one must renounce the desire to be what one cannot be, the object of the mother's need. Frank is utterly in the grip of his incomplete castration, as illustrated in his acts of wretched violence in his quest for power. Beginning war, committing murder, and manipulations of every type appear reasonable actions to him; psychologically his devotion to his unconscious quest outweighs any moral stricture. This devotion to the Phallus appears in Frank as malignant narcissism, which is a state where all investments are for the ego, regardless of any cost to the remainder of psyche. Lacan posits that narcissism is an unavoidable pathology resulting when the castration complex is not completed (1994, pp. 208-209). Frank demonstrates that he has fallen prey to this devilish outcome. He cannot relate to the Object as other, because he does not properly relate to his own Subject. In other words, because Frank never came to relate to himself as a Subject, he cannot by extension relate to others as Object (Freud, 1989, pp.545-546). Frank is unable to relate to the Other in any meaningful way, unwilling to submit to the rules and laws of society. This makes him a thoroughly frightening leader. Even within his marriage to Claire, whom he is ostensibly in love with, Frank is alone psychologically. The movement towards the imaginary power overrules any vow or promise he has made; nothing is perceived as more valuable than the Phallus. Despite 25 years of co-creating their powerhouse, Francis shows that he can relinquish not one inch of power in favor of Claire's agenda or needs.

Frank's thirst for power seems unquenchable. Each time he grows closer to his stated goal he finds yet another level of power must be sought. This demonstrates the crusade of the adult unable to relinquish the imaginary Phallus. Bailly (2009) explained: "Castration is the acceptance that one is less-than-perfect, limited, not all powerful or able to control or satisfy the world." He elaborated, "Castration is therefore a symbolic process, which allows the child to situate itself within the Law, and to accept that its own desires are not paramount" (p. 80). Frank refuses to be subject to anything or anyone, even the law of the very land he seeks to lead. As a member of Congress, nor as head of state, Frank will not bow to the law. In fact, he seems to value infinitely increasing power over order and patriotism. In a fictional setting, this trait is discomforting. With its current president taking a similar tone regarding power acquisition, America is experiencing the reality of this psychological principle in action. With years remaining in this presidential term, now is the time to explore the uses of psychological theory to navigate during times of immature leadership.

Sadism as Psychological Necessity

Francis and Claire are Willimon's artistic representation of sadism. Put differently, Frank and Claire can be seen to derive pleasure, with the connotation of

sexuality, from the inflicting of pain. Sadism is not vilified here, however, but is presented as a necessary counterpart to innocence. Jung conceived of wholeness as encompassing the dichotomy of innocence (purity) and evil (shadow) (1959/1990, p. 215, [CW 9 pt.1, para. 396]). Assuming an attitude friendly to libertine values, which lean towards appearing evil, provides a useful, albeit jarring, upending to the moral *zeitgeist*. The term libertine here deserves some attention; it carries with it certain connotations that make it particularly suitable for application to *House of Cards* as a text. A libertine refers to one who is morally loose, particularly in sexual and religious matters. In *Dark Eros* (1990) Jungian analyst and cultural critic Moore calls the dark, sexually toned, evil-seeming aspect of psychology the “Sadeian consciousness”, after the Marquis de Sade and alternately refers to this particular style of consciousness as “libertine nature” (p. 9). Through an examination of Sade’s thousands of pages of lurid fiction, Moore provides a very unusual perspective from which we can understand our own attraction to the Underwoods. “Morality is complex, full of shadows of uncertainty,” wrote Moore (1990), providing a window into the depraved desires of humankind, rejecting the simplicity of moralism for the nuanced imagination of polytheistic psychology (p. 12). Eros is sometimes presented synonymously with libido or life-energy, but in this lack of specificity, eros suffers. What of the inevitable death that awaits us all, the reality of which commands our attention even in the face of our happiest moments? Perhaps the darkness as depicted sexually speaks directly to our eventual decay, and no amount of light will make up for submitting to the dark. A common tendency is to search for the transformative and the wholeness in psychological language, and in this way, the darker aspects of humans are sometimes left in the shadows of the shadows. Eros must maintain its sexual connotation, for instance, as well as the connection to the body. C. G. Jung even seemed a touch leery of Eros’ fullness, saying, “Eros is a questionable fellow and will always remain so. . . he belongs on one side to man’s primordial animal nature which will endure as long as man has an animal body” (1953/1977, p. 28, [CW 7, para. 32]). Jung has here noticed the dark, fecund, underworld aspect of eros, yet the stuffy attitude of the Swiss psychologist’s writings makes it difficult for the modern person to connect with this inherent darkness without a text such as *House of Cards*. When it comes to fully exploring the indomitable evil that lurks in the shadow of the human soul, fiction may just serve its finest purpose.

Thankfully, Sade suffered no such aversion to the perverse attitude eros frequently assumes, and by drawing upon his fiction as well as Moore’s analysis of it we can find the psychological depth in an utterly modern text. In his immense body of work, which centers on the libertine philosophy, Sade disturbs the typical moralistic standpoint. A libertine is one who senses the full potential of rules and structure; that is rules not just in service to public welfare, but as tools to gain power and to experience any and all pleasure desired. Moore (1990) unpacks this unusual consciousness, “to ‘own’ the libertine, and not just girlishness [virtue], implies that one can transcend the boundaries of morality and propriety that give the ego a certain effective, yet narrow, supporting structure” (p.43). In other words, bucking societal oppression in the name of pleasure leads to shocking sexual exhibitions and violent debauchery in Sade’s fiction, and this dark power exchange may be frightening if we confuse the image of sadism with sadistic actions. It is tempting to reject the libertine perspective out of hand for its unfathomable cruelty. But Moore also points out: “A perverted image has the power to turn *us* upside

down, forcing us to consider experience from an inverted perspective.” Taking us further into the potential of Sadeian consciousness he continues, “This may be a disorienting and painful experience, but if nothing else it does offer a fresh point of view” (1990, p. 105). In light of contemporary ecological, political, and cultural problems a fresh perspective should be a welcome thing. In the current political situation, for example, many American citizens claim to feel disempowered and unrepresented by elected officials. In such a state, a creative action originating from within remains within reach. Put differently, in the face of seemingly untenable leadership, perhaps the citizens themselves are turned upside-down, thus rendering the world from a fresh perspective. Although this is likely to feel disturbing, the inversion offers a new element into what may have seemed an implacable set of problems.

It has long been said that there are two things no one wants to see being made, laws and sausages. In *House of Cards*, we devour images of libertine indulgences, digesting the perverse, immoral image of Frank’s law-making without turning away. Even The Underwoods most disgusting acts draw us in; why do we not wish for their failure? Moore may be pointing the way: we know we must be flipped upside down in order to gain a full appreciation for the complexities of life. We experience pleasure in our inversion; Frank’s perverse sexual interests illustrate the underbelly we must not reject:

Chapter 7: Zoe is speaking on the phone to her father, meeting her obligation for Father’s Day. Frank begins stripping off her panties, pushes her onto her back, and descends to pleasure her orally. She struggles to get off the phone before Frank gets her off. As she hangs up the phone she says, “Happy Father’s Day,” and Frank looks up from between her legs. In a gravel-voice, he intones, “Aren’t you gonna wish me a happy Father’s Day?” Zoe replies, “You don’t have any children.” Turning his attention back to his pleasurable task he says, “Don’t I?” and the sadistic, sexually libertine overtones are unmistakable.

Moore (1990), taking the Sadeian perspective, says, “The moment we cease identifying with the innocent puella [innocent], we lose a certain basis for self-worth” (p. 42). But he is not suggesting that we attempt to maintain our posture of innocence. Instead, we must “transcend the boundaries of morality and propriety . . . cultivate a new attitude where honesty of intention and genuine power might coexist” (p. 43). It is a mistake, in other words, to assume that innocence ought to be favored over all else, yet we fall into this habit of thinking precisely because those in power (the church, governmental bodies, even therapeutic traditions) have a vested interest in keeping their power through this dangerous innocence identification. To put it another way, a person, like Frank, who wishes to keep control of a population is motivated to increase the illusion of virtue and innocence as desirable values, qualities to which their constituents must strive, thus rendering their control ever more powerful.

Lacan and Moore in Dialogue

Much can be gained by bringing the post-Freudian Lacan and post-Jungian Moore into dialogue. Lacanian psychoanalytic theory claims that desire structures the unconscious and sexuality underpins all human drives (Lacan, 1977, p. 142) is not so far

away from Moore's archetypal claim that we must contemplate the necessity of dark sexuality and the implications of ignoring the perverse sexual imagination (1990, p. 4). Indeed Moore says, "sexuality is the raw material of one of the most potent mythologies of today" (1990, p. ix). Although there are marked differences in Lacanian and Jungian theory each explores the phenomenon of sexual fantasy as a potential source of psychological insight. Further, the serious study of sexuality as phenomena has gained traction in the public arena over the past several decades, creating an avenue for depth-psychological insights to reach modern audiences. In other words, television imagery is an accessible format through which to propose that the public take up the task of introspective soul-making. Examining specific images from *House of Cards* the underworld and eros are revealed as inherently connected aspects of psyche. For instance, Claire will harness the power of sexual response when she feels objectified, turning its underworld darkness into a protective cloak:

Chapter 6: On his deathbed, the former head of Frank's detail, Steve, makes a private confession to Claire. He says he's been thinking about what he never said, what he never did. He says he hates her husband. She replies that many people do. Steve continues his expunging, croaking that he was always watching Claire, always protecting her, wishing for . . . Claire responds in a measured voice that her husband won her heart by being "the only one who understood me, the only one who knew that I didn't want to be coddled and put on a pedestal." Then, in a turn toward the libertine attitude, she kneels next to him and says, as she reaches under the sheets to fondle his near-dead member, "is this how you wanted it, the way you wanted it? My husband is a man who knows how to take what he wants." With that, she stands. "You told me your truth, now you know mine."

Dark eros has psychologically protective potential if not rejected wholesale for its inability to meet the popular moral standards of society. Cautious psychological exploration of evil must not be literally enacted but instead be embraced as part of the work necessary to become increasingly aware beings. Claire and Francis are willing to live with a foot in the light and one in the dark, no compunctions. Morality for its own sake is explicitly called into question when Francis speaks directly to the camera and explains: "In politics, you either eat the baby or you are the baby." He will only get more repulsive from there, eschewing morality entirely in favor of the Phallic desire. Francis moves toward the Phallus with no hesitation, allows no moralistic doubt to defile his libertine quest for power, while we must find ways to live moral lives without repressing the desire for this cannibalistic devouring power that lives within.

Dark as Necessary Counterpart to Light

Americans have traditionally had a penchant for demanding that their politicians present personas of perfection and light while at the same time requiring them to participate in the underworld of sensationalistic media and unchecked capitalistic machinery in order to be elected (Schenk, 2012). The 2016 presidential elections are either the exception to prove that rule or a shift in American culture, time will tell. When Francis and Claire are subjected to this paradoxical system, they answer it with an ever-

darkening vision; a Sadeian consciousness normally relegated to the backrooms and only spoken in hushed tones gains energy. Eventually, in Chapter 52, the Underwoods bring their dark vision into our view:

Claire Underwood: We can't fight everything off one by one, Francis. But if we make this—we make it work for us.

Frank Underwood: Create chaos.

Claire Underwood: More than chaos.

Frank Underwood: War.

Claire Underwood: Fear.

Frank Underwood: Fear. Brutal. Total.

Claire Underwood: I'm done trying to win over people's hearts.

Frank Underwood: Let's attack their hearts.

Claire Underwood: We can *work* with fear.

Frank Underwood: Yes, we can.

Shudder. Backed into the possibility of losing what power they have collected, they are willing to press fear into the hearts of their own nation in order to continue their eternal striving.

In *Dark Eros*, Moore (1990) comments, "if nature puts 'sick' fantasies in our imaginations, then perhaps nature is expressing an unfathomable and revolting truth" (p. 6). Perhaps *House of Cards* has enjoyed immense popularity, despite using disturbing imagery of murder and torture and having central characters that act in anti-social ways for exactly this reason. Here is a truth imagined in a form that commands our attention and gives an outlet to the unspeakable aspects of human nature.

Frank shares with us early on that he understands his role as a libertine: one who believes that the rules are made to be broken and that the rules create the opportunity to exert control. Most rule-makers would not so boldly admit to leveraging their knowledge of the rules into power. Early in the series Frank speaks directly to us, the audience: "What a martyr craves more than anything is a sword to fall on, so you sharpen the blade, hold it at just the right angle, and then 3, 2, 1," and Donald Blythe, an image of innocence in this scene, falls on the sword just as Frank predicted: "It should be me. It was my bill." If we hold to the necessity of sadism, what we have just witnessed is the innocent being given the chance to fulfill his role, just as the libertine does his. Frank's manipulation of Donald's dedication to education is ugliness, but this ugliness does not disappear when we ignore it. Beyond questions of right and wrong, it simply is. Turning a deaf ear to such an exchange only finds us once again identifying with the innocent out of default, as Sade and Moore have warned against. If we instead take the disturbing image as a metaphor we might instead find the necessity of darkness. Dark images might be understood as instructive, just as necessary and obvious as the opposing sides of a coin. To deny the dark image its place in psyche is to deny death, decay, and entropy. Hades himself would be barred from the psyche unwilling to entertain this aspect of consciousness. The mythopoetic psyche does not stick to an image of light. By playing with images in *House of Cards* or other grotesque dramas perhaps the innate darkness of being might be entertained in our consciousness with slightly less rigid terror.

Innocence Splayed for Inspection

The world rarely presents us with black-and-white simplicity, it is in the grey areas, we say, that life is lived. Fiction, however, can illustrate a world that does swing boldly from evil to good, vivifying both innocence and sadism, allowing us to dance with the devil psychologically without corrupting or destroying our literal lives. *House of Cards* is a fictional setting where light and dark are conspicuously on display, at least to the viewer. The Underwoods clearly embody what Jung (1959/1990) would call shadow, yet they also, particularly in the first two years of storyline seem driven towards what might be called *good works*: the clean water initiative and public education funding, for example. The Underwoods do not shy away from any means to achieve their more virtuous goals. In Sade's work, the libertines take advantage of the virtuous because in being true to their own dark eros they *are* in the right. This confounds our standard morality, to say that evil has its place in the natural order. But psychologically, Jung (1959/1990) says we must meet the shadow—the repressed parts of ourselves, including morbid darkness—in order to take even the first steps toward wholeness. Moore (1990) extended this idea: “innocence is held by inertia that can be stupid and blind. It does not want to be corrupted, and it will insist for as long as possible that evil is not real” (p. 45). Here we have a critical aspect of Claire Underwood—she admits the presence of evil, even as she struggles with her personal moral compass. Unlike Frank, she displays infrequent but seemingly genuine capacity for self-reflection. She appears to empathize, and yet this does not diminish her ability to capitalize on any situation. In fact, her empathy and emotional awareness may be the most finely honed weapons in her political arsenal. She finds a way to work with the most unlikely creatures of politics, manipulate them to create what she deems needed in the world, whether that is funding global non-profit water initiatives or subverting the electoral system.

Displaying her libertine nature, Claire rejects moralism, sexual and otherwise, and in doing so, she throws off societal conventions and lives in accord with her personal convictions, dark and twisted as they may be. Rejecting identification with the persona required of her by the public, Claire brings consciousness to the choice between innocence and knowing. She takes lovers who serve her purposes and uses sexual encounters—even with her husband—as strategy. Claire moves through the world, dark to light and back, without shying away from the opportunities offered by sexual acts, both physical and psychological. Utilizing the power she knows she has, Claire engages in sex as suits her at the moment, not as might suit the cultural narrative of morality. She takes her pleasure and her fertility into her own hands. Yet Claire remains unconscious of her wholeness. She stymies her own individuation process in turning a blind eye to Francis's most depraved acts. From the Lacanian perspective as well, bucking moral constraint in favor of sexual desire makes discernible the presence of the unconscious, whose will, according to Lacan, is always sexual at the root. Claire becomes stuck when she identifies too closely with her husband, thus she slips into the roles of have and have-not in the mud-wrestle for Lacan's Imaginary Phallus.

The use of innocence and darkness is a strengthening paradox in the American political game (Schenk, 2012, p. 31). Claire is required to present a persona of the diminutive feminine while also holding her ground in the face of any darkness, be it the Russian president or impending war. Moore (1990) asked us to look at what the libertine

consciousness does to innocence: “the libertine brings it down . . . stretched carefully for inspection” (p. 41). Do not look away from the slicing exposure life has brought. This messy inspection is what brings about the movement in therapy as well, though this requires courage. While the butterfly it remains inside its cocoon little can be learned of its beauty, but once stretched out, intricate, individual details are available, allowing an understanding the butterfly’s complex workings. In other words, it is necessary to *look* directly into one’s most shame-laden, dark corners in order to see where *innocence can be met with enough cruelty to submit to knowing*. Claire is playing both the innocent and the libertine, but she is missing the psychological ability to bring the two into relation. Another character has appeared and will perhaps do just that, in the lover Claire has most recently taken, Tom Yates.

Tom has a flexible relationship to imposed morality. Having lived at the edges of society as a junky and a prostitute, he looks deeply into the people around him, with no apparent judgment or investment in social norms. He seeks the story rather than the good. In other words, he is in quest of complexity. He does not turn away from the evil he sees, just looks behind it. His steadfast insight is an example, I believe, of the consciousness Moore called Sadeian. To integrate the Sadeian consciousness is to get comfortable with paradox and to hold personal convictions while maintaining space for the multiple truths that make up any relationship. From Chapter 39:

Claire Underwood: There’s a lot more to Francis and me than what you wrote.

Tom Yates: Maybe so, but I never got a chance to ask.

Claire Underwood: Then ask. Whatever you want.

Tom Yates: Why aren’t you with him in Iowa?

Claire Underwood: *[pause]* I’m headed there tomorrow.

Tom Yates: You see? I ask a question, and neither of you answer. It’s tiresome constantly swinging a sledgehammer at the facade, just to get a glimpse beneath the cracks.

Claire Underwood: Tell me what you see.

Tom Yates: Somebody who’s lost. But I don’t know, maybe it’s all for the best. I’d rather imagine who you might be than who you actually are.

Good luck, Claire.

Tom has immense patience for the unfolding of innocence and evil, but little for the evasion of personal reflection. One could hope that his involvement in the Underwood family (in the fourth season he is openly in a triadic sexual—almost familial—situation with them) will shift the dynamic of unconscious drives. Frank may be subsumed in his identification with the shadow, but at least until the final chapters of Season 4, the possibility of some degree of shadow integration remains in Claire.

The Line

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of Frank as fictional president is that we must live with the full knowledge that he is a murderer, not in some removed sense as commander in chief, but in a personal, bloody-handed way. Surely this is the moral line that should not be crossed? Here we must stretch towards the metaphorical, allow the

fiction to paint a harsh image for our close examination, for death leaves none of us untouched, and murder is quite real indeed. As viewers, we have proof that Frank is guilty of at least two murders with his own hands. Witness the calculation of Peter's death and the cold harshness of Zoe's:

Chapter 11: With Claire gone to seek respite in the arms of a lover, Frank is awash in the mess he created with Peter Russo's life. From the moralistic perspective, this is when Frank crosses the line from politically heartless to unredeemable. He has led Russo deeply into the labyrinth of the congressman's own personal demons. As the darkness closes in, Frank comes to realize that he has one way out of the mess, and he moves to eliminate his problem. Frank drives a drunk Russo home, parks in a tiny garage and leads him into a drunken stupor-sleep, finishing off the job by lulling Russo down with a bedtime confession of his own. As Peter drifts off, Frank hastily wipes off the car, uses Peter's finger to press the ignition button, and quietly exits, closing the door and killing Peter in a cloud of carbon monoxide by morning.

Chapter 14: Descending the escalator into the D.C. metro tunnels, Zoe can hear makeshift drums beat out an intense rhythm. An overconfident Zoe finds Frank lurking in the shadows of a temporary fence structure between the train tracks. They are supposedly cleaning the slate to begin working together again, he tells her to clear her phone of contact information and she complies. He asks if, "we can trust one another, help one another again." She agrees but with one further question: "Russo, the passenger seat—I need to know if I was a part of someone's murder." She scrambles for words, almost begging him to clear her conscience. He mutters, "Jesus," as he turns and heads away, she follows and in a split second, he lunges and from an invisible position, shoves her in front of the moving train. We see and hear her body splatter across the hulking metal train. The scene changes quickly, and Francis is met by Claire with a small cake bearing one lit candle. It is his birthday. He extinguishes the candle with two fingers.

Even if we had not witnessed Peter Russo and Zoe Barnes dying, we would likely know for certain that Frank caused their demise. He sees himself as little more than a particular force causing two deaths. "Time would have killed Peter, I simply moved the timeline," he says to us, reminding us that his libertine nature and Phallus seeking rule all actions. Is this not what we call evil? I think that it is. But the fictive image is nonetheless instructional as to the harsh reality of animal life and the myriad paths a soul can take in its time on earth. "To live this life with full participation in nature is to adopt its cruelty and vulnerability," wrote Moore (1990, p. 165). We cannot escape cruelty through ignorance. Perhaps a better question than the definition of evil is what we might gain by looking at evil through the screen or on the page. Again, it is important to draw the distinction between looking at evil, admitting it as the polarity of innocence, and actually engaging in terrible actions. To embrace Sadeian consciousness is not the same as committing violent or evil acts.

Conclusion: The Uses of the Evil Image

Throughout the seasons, a small number of people have been privy to some of Frank's unlawful acts. Some have died, some have been silenced through intimidation, and some have pushed the truth from their own minds. Lucas Goodwin, a journalist who knew Frank's darkest crime, was silenced through intimidation, incarceration, and humiliation, but he never defected from his virtuous stance.

Chapter 42: Lucas has grown increasingly obsessed over the past two years in prison for the Underwood set-up sting charge of cyber-terrorism. Lucas is willing to submit even to trading his body, his sexual favors in order to get the truth about Frank Underwood into the hands of someone who can change the future. He leaves the relative safety of his identity protection house and in desperation finds a way into contact with Frank's major opponent and the former solicitor general, Heather Dunbar. This is a fool's errand, however, and as she back away from his insane-sounding conspiracy theory/truth, he breaks apart, weeping in a stairwell. There is nothing left for Lucas, but still, it is hard to imagine what is about to come.

Lucas will go on to choose a suicide mission in order to end what he perceives as Frank Underwood's wrongful life. Moore (1990) explains how we might navigate the dark eros, with a more hopeful outcome than Lucas':

Our task is not to rationalize this evil with the whitening language of psychology, or to integrate it with our personalities so that its black becomes gold, but rather eternally to find ways to allow evil to coexist with our preference for good, darkly infect everything we do and think, and especially reveal its own poetic reading of our lives and its own meaningfulness. (p. 185)

In depth psychology, there is the temptation to use metaphor in order to focus on the light and growth aspects of life—in other words, to turn away from the dark through the fantasy of transformation. In Lacan's Phallus, we can choose to recognize a complex that can be surmounted with intense psychoanalysis and cautious recognition of the unconscious. In classical Jungian psychology we can, as Moore (1990) said, always be attempting to exchange black for gold, to individuate, to move toward wholeness. Either way, we risk missing a valid, if strange, perspective of our inner world by diverting all attention to the light and away from the dark. Feeling compelled to convert the dark into light demonstrates a limitation that might be overcome if one opens to the perverted image. I contend that it may even be an act of self-care to embrace the dark images of *House of Cards* and other sadistic art, suggesting to oneself that the shadow is welcome and that unconscious desires can be given imagistic representation. Creating space for what has been as yet unwelcome can be seen as a nurturing attentiveness to soul—all aspects of soul.

Moore (1990) suggests that the best way to react to evil in artistic work is with more art (p. 193). *House of Cards*, I would argue, does just that. The artistic eye and ear have been tuned more finely to the presence of darkness first during the creation of *House of Cards* and again through our digestion of this art. As Moore (1990) said of Sade's work: "Here, the sexual imagination symbolically represents the necessary

ravishing of the innocent, pure part of our soul” (p. ix). Willimon does likewise; in *House of Cards*, we witness the ravishing of our political ideal in the hands of politicians. Taking in the warped depravity of the Underwoods our imaginations are stretched to include a multitude of perversions possible in the bureaucratic shadows. In 2016, the United States presidential election results shocked many around the world. Despite open hostility towards minority groups, violent language, and anti-intellectual attitudes, Donald Trump ascended to the presidency. The pretension of perfection or light that previously attached itself to presidential politics appears to have dissolved. It remains to be seen what level of darkness becomes visible during the totality of this presidential term. To protect ourselves against the blindness brought on by staring at the light I suggest we follow Moore’s thinking—our society is in need of more art of a dark nature, not less. The psychological, intentional digestion of such works is a necessary aspect of our contemporary age, just as it was in Sade’s so long ago.

Contributor

Joli Hamilton teaches postgraduate sexuality education with a focus on intimacy and communication in western Massachusetts. She holds a master degree in depth psychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute where she is currently completing a dissertation on the archetypal nature of jealousy as experienced in polyamorous individuals.

Notes

¹ The text is cited by chapter numbers, which run sequentially through five seasons.

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