

TRANSCRIPT

Gina Brandolino | The Tale of the Bloody Child & Foul Play

1

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Hi! I'm Gina Brandolino, and I teach at the University of Michigan. I don't usually have a mohawk, but I'm taping this during the pandemic, and this is my pandemic haircut.

2

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This video highlights ideas about teaching an exemplum from an early 14th century Middle English text in tandem with a 1950s American Horror comic. These two texts are moral tales whose narrative strategies make for fruitful comparison. Now, before I get much further, I want to just let you know that I've got some quotations and some comics panels that include graphic violence. Be advised.

3

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The exemplum that I'm talking about today comes from the text *Handlyng Synne* by Robert Manning of Brunne. This is a devotional text that was used by priests for instruction of their parishioners, or if you were a literate lay Christian in medieval England, you might have read from this text on your own. It explains the 10 commandments, the 7 deadly sins, and so on. And it is packed with exemplum meant to get your attention with a compelling story and teach a lesson while it has your attention.

4

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Now, you might be asking yourself: Why teach an exemplum like this, or any other exemplum, and I would answer that exemplum are perhaps not literature in the canonical sense of that term, but they are stories. And because they were one of the primary teaching tools of medieval Christianity, most--virtually all--medieval Christians heard a few exempla, even if they were not able to read them on their own. So with the exemplum, you're getting a medieval story that was, in its own day, better-known more widely-circulated than the canonical medieval literature that we study.

5

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Now, the exemplum I'm talking about today, the Tale of the Bloody Child, comes from the section of handling sin about swearing oaths, or what we would call today cursing or swearing. And the story goes like this: There is a man who is visited by the apparition of a woman carrying a badly injured baby. And you'll see here I've got some quotations from the text, the Middle English and then also a modern English translation of my own. And it is full of gore and full of body horror. The man sees this baby and says to the woman, "My God, who did this?" And the woman, who reveals herself to be the Virgin Mary, says, "Well, you did this and this, by the way, is the baby Jesus. And every time you swear a new injury appears on him. All of these injuries come from your instances of swearing."

6

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The man feels terrible and asks how he can undo this damage, and the Virgin Mary, after making him sweat it for a little, says, "Well, you can stop swearing, and you can compel others to stop swearing as well." Now, this

is a story that, once it has your attention, works by fostering your identification with this protagonist. It puts you in the position of the “doer,” and the voice of the narrator in this passage here, from the end of the tale, warns you not to be this guy, sort of calls out to you in the second person, right? Calls out to the audience as “you” and advises “you” against the kind of behavior that so injured the baby Jesus.

7

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Now, the comic *Foul Play* is a horror comic from 1953, which was the heyday of horror comics, and it's by two of the most prominent creators of those comics, Al Feldstein and Jack Davis. This comic also tells a moral tale, but it tells a more complicated moral tale. The protagonists of this story are bush league baseball players from the city of Bayville playing a championship game. And a player from the opposing team, Herbie Sutton, paints his cleats with poison and slides into second base cleats up, killing Bayville's star player. Now, the poisoning scheme isn't readily obvious; it takes a little detective work to get to it. But when the Bayville players realize what's happened, they don't call the police. They want to take care of the matter themselves. And what they do is lure that player Herbie to the ballpark at night. And they eviscerate him, and they dismember him, and they play a game of baseball with his body parts. And you can see here in these two panels that this comic has gore and body horror galore.

8

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Similar to the *Tale of the Bloody Child* and also like the *Tale of the Bloody Child*, the moral moment of this comic involves a victim, but this victim is no baby Jesus, right? This victim is a murdering ballplayer who actually deserves punishment. Now, unlike in the *Tale of the Bloody Child*, the voice of the narrator doesn't issue any warning in this story. It doesn't ask you to do your part to stop the violence or the injury. Indeed, what it does is it ask you to watch and witness what happens. You can see all the imperative verbs in these panels, usually the repetition of “see”—you, look at this. See this; see what they're doing. And in sort of inviting audiences to witness this act of vigilante justice, it also asks us to participate in it. And you don't exactly feel good about participating in it. You feel sort of conflicted. Herbie was somebody who deserved punishment, but is this really the punishment that he deserved? Horror comics are notorious for creating this kind of gnarled moral situation.

9

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So, there you have it: the *Bloody Child* exemplum and the *Foul Play* comic: a pairing that, first of all, allows for exploration of different narrative techniques that compel moral consideration in audiences, and second, a pairing that spotlights popular culture. Neither of these texts count as highbrow literature, but in their own day they were widely-circulated and very well-known stories. Thanks very much for watching.