Clovis - The American Victorian

In The Peripheral (2014) by William Gibson, characters mask their identities through secrets, lies, and disguises using peripherals. The plot of the novel is the murder mystery of Aelita West, with characters navigating entangled timelines and spinning webs of deception themselves. We see this with Flynn assuming the identity of Annie Courrèges before being exposed (Gibson 455), Wilf lying to others because he feels like he lacks an identity (Gibson 347), and characters like Lowbeer hiding their true identity followed by surprise twists (Gibson 429). However, the character Clovis is a contradiction whose dual identities reveal an honesty towards herself and in perceiving how the world is. The two halves of Clovis are first introduced as the older “Fearing” in Netherton’s timeline (Gibson 323) and the younger “Raeburn” in Flynn’s timeline (Gibson 333). It is also through trauma experienced by Raeburn and her transformation into Fearing that we see her role being the embodiment of America and her role as an alternate version of Flynn, who experienced The Jackpot.

We first see Fearing with a sad, time-scarred appearance, a “crumbling relict saint” with wrinkles and a Victorian mourning cloche (Gibson 323). Analyzing her attire, appearance, and her store specializing in Americana, we have the initial impression of the effect that surviving The Jackpot has on a person who tries to cling to the past world which no longer exists. The meeting between Lowbeer and Fearing emphasizes how old survivors of The Jackpot are, with their tired dissociation from reality and us gaining more insight into what Lowbeer says about feeling unreal, “I’m very old, elaborately and artificially so” (Gibson 429). In the article “Dorian Gray Syndrome,” Dorin Gandrabur (2015) summarizes the key points of “The Picture of Dorian Gray” (Wilde 2003) where aestheticism, a movement in which materialism and beauty through art are ends in themselves, is shown by the character Dorian Gray whose sins and perverse lifestyle don’t affect his beauty but a painting which slowly grows more hideous and represents the corruption of the true Dorian’s soul. An ironic allusion is shown where Lowbeer, in employment of the corrupt Klept, is youthful (Gibson 284) and, in contrast, Fearing represents the true appearance. Although Lowbeer and Fearing have a shared history of being British spies, we don’t realize how important Fearing’s role in the story is until much later when Flynn, using her relationship with the younger Clovis Raeburn, can deduce that Griff is Lowbeer (Gibson 405).

The contrast is striking with Raeburn, who bears little resemblance, sporting military clothing and acting flirtatiously towards Connor (Gibson 333). It is through this shock value in Raeburn’s introduction with the shared name of Clovis that makes us analyze Fearing’s sections of the novel and understand that Clovis is a uniquely dynamic character, her character growth being shown between the two timelines. Raeburn, unlike Fearing, more embodies aspects of proud pre-Jackpot America, and the loss of her youth relates to the historic decline of French kings represented by her name and also to the Victorian genre where female American expatriates become jaded when forced to conform to a new European society. Clovis and her sister Tacoma symbolize America, being named after American towns, and symbolize a loss of American identity with Tacoma’s absence in the future and Fearing nostalgically clinging to Americana. Like the Merovingian Kings, which were eclipsed by a new order of Carolingians (Mark 2023), Clovis represents the American values of authenticity and family and the absence of those values in European Klept. In the article, “Henry James and the American Idea,” Susan Goodman et al. (2011) discuss how Henry James’ vivacious, full-of-life American heroines like Daisy Miller (James 1995) and Isabel Archer (James 1994) move to Europe only to be stripped of their youth, symbolized by innocence and identity. Through Americans like Flynn, Daedra, and the duality of Clovis in Raeburn and Fearing, The Peripheral acts as a Victorian novel, showing, respective to each character, a struggle to maintain their identity (Flynn), submission to appease The Klept through the literal shedding of identities (Daedra) (Gibson 348), and loss of identity (Raeburn) who, in the future, has become a hoarder clinging to a past of former American glories (Fearing) (Gibson 323).

Throughout the rest of the novel, we see Clovis in her prime as she explores her dual identity, which is both caring and ruthlessly tactical. Her first introduction gives us the impression that she is a generic nurse with a red cross medical bag, which earns her the unfortunate nickname “hot nurse” (Gibson 331). However, Raeburn shows a complex side to her when Flynn wakes up and sees Clovis acting as an angelic figure of good, her face blessed with beautiful skin as she hovers over Flynn, protectively looking at the white crown-shaped autonomic cutout as they plan to inflict hellish war crimes through party time on the religious Luke: 4:5 (Gibson 356). When it is later revealed that Raeburn knew that the use of party time was a ruse by Lowbeer to test Flynn, we still see somewhat of a ruthless loyalty in her military discipline (Gibson 378). The backdrop of Raeburn’s beauty and her capacity for violence plays into the theme of her Victorian double side (Dorin 2015) and is hinted at when Macon says, “That EMT bag of hers is mainly full of guns…” (Gibson 340). Through protecting Flynn and Burton in a squidsuit ambush, we see Raeburn is not just a pretty face, and we see her other face as she kills the assailants, “… and no more expression on her face than if she’d just been driving, paying serious attention to the road” (Gibson 365). It is then revealed that this other side to her is the soldier persona she has to wear to deal with trauma similar to Burton’s “speed, intensity, and violence of action” (Gibson 192) and, after the shootout, Raeburn shifts immediately back to saving Burton’s life and accompanies Burton and Flynn to the pill bug drone at Walter Reed (Gibson 370). Later, as Homeland Security prepares to drone strike, Clovis saves Flynn and Burton’s lives a second time but as Fearing, where her hoarded intel is used to stop Sir Henry Fishbourne, head of Matryoshka, rescinding the strike (Gibson 442).

By the time Clovis becomes Fearing, she wears the trauma she may have received or inflicted in The Jackpot timeline, in which she ends up alone, never having met Flynn or Connor and compounded by the hinted death of her sister Tacoma. In “Covering Over Trauma with a Fetishized Body Image,” Andrees (2014) discusses “knowledge in the Real,” a concept from Jacques Lacan where individuals who experience trauma need to address it to gain insight, and plastic surgery is a superficial fix. A form of “The Real” in the novel is The Jackpot, with characters like Ash and Fearing’s daily acknowledgment of it through mourning, which stops them from struggling with their identities (Gibson 319). When Flynn’s implant talks to Daedra, a shallow skin-level imitation inspired by the real-life plastic surgery performance artist Orlan (Andreescu 11), the performance falls flat because Daedra has never experienced trauma, and her narcissism insulates her from experiencing the complexities of the world. The quote, “Attempts to encompass the real, outside of hegemony… The Other. Heroically. A boundless curiosity, informed by your essential humanity. Your warmth” (Gibson 450), would be more suitable for Fearing, who experiences “The Real” through her self-torture in her traumatized appearance, hoarding the broken remnants of her American identity, and Victorian mourning attire. Re-exposing Clovis to trauma every day helps her make sense of an unreal future.

**Works Cited**

Andreescu, Florentina C. “Covering over Trauma with a Fetishized Body Image: The Invasive Imaginary and Cosmetic Surgery.” Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture, vol. 18, no. 1, Feb. 2014, pp. 7–26. EBSCOhost, [**https://doi-org.ezproxy.occlib.nocccd.edu/10.2752/175174114X13788163471587**](https://doi-org.ezproxy.occlib.nocccd.edu/10.2752/175174114X13788163471587).

Gandrabur, Dorin. “Dorian Gray’s Syndrome.” Intertext, no. 3/4, Dec. 2015, pp. 291–94. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=118550342&site=ehost-live.

Goodman, Susan, et al. “Henry James and the American Idea.” The National Endowment for the Humanities, [**https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2011/julyaugust/feature/henry-james-and-the-american-idea**](https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2011/julyaugust/feature/henry-james-and-the-american-idea).

Mark, Harrison W. “Merovingian Dynasty.” World History Encyclopedia. World History Encyclopedia, 13 Mar 2023. Web. 12 Apr 2023.

Wilde, Oscar. The Picture of Dorian Gray. Penguin Books, 2003.