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**Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* and the Question of Being
Human in Freak Form**

A Thesis Presented

by

ABIGAIL HESS

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Bridgewater State University
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Introduction

In Katherine Dunn's novel, *Geek Love*, the freaks do not hide. Geeks are sideshow performers who are the result of human interest in the manipulation of bodies. Often, the entire act would consist of a person eating the head off of an animal on stage. Her description of freakish children growing up in a traveling sideshow places the visceral and bizarre closer to nostalgia, and what most would consider a routine outing suddenly become locations for tragedy. The opening scene of the novel begins with a children's story, the small Binewski children ask their father to tell them about their mother's past career as a circus geek. They love this story of their mother. They ask for him to retell it again and again:

There never was such a snap and twist of the wrist, such a vampire flick of the jaws over a neck or such a champagne approach to the blood. She'd shake her star white hair and the bitten-off chicken head would skew off into the corner while she dug her rosy little fingernails in and lifted the flopping, jittering carcass like a golden goblet, and sipped! Absolutely sipped at the wriggling guts! She was magnificent, a princess, a Cleopatra, an elfin queen! That was your Mama in the geek pit (Dunn 6).

Mr. Binewski describes her performances with a repeated juxtaposition between grace and the grotesque. While the geek is a circus role usually reserved for the desperate and the deplorable, the Binewski family reveres the unusual. They find beauty in asymmetry and grace in savagery. The children grow to inherit their father's fascination with unexpected form as the novel progresses. Dunn magnifies the beauty to be found in the freakish human body and the bestial to be found in the human. In *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination*, Rachel Adams explains that freak shows like the fictional Binewski Fabulon "...performed

important cultural work by allowing ordinary people to confront, and master, the most extreme and terrifying forms of Otherness they could imagine, from exotic dark-skinned people, to victims of war and disease, to ambiguously sexed bodies” (2). This study entails acknowledging human traits that are otherwise often ignored. The sideshow allows its audience to satiate their curiosity of the vast variations of the standard conception of the human body and to expand the cultural imagination of what a human can be.

Geek Love is packed with freakish bodies either born fantastic, or created by the Binewski family themselves through genetic manipulation. Olympia Binewski, the narrator, is an albino-hunchback-dwarf born from one of her parents’ experiments with self-selection by having the mother consume chemicals and other drugs during gestation in the hopes of creating a sideshow freak, interesting enough for a single-act in the family carnival. Alas, Olympia is deemed ugly by her family’s standards, but is not freakish enough to have her own show like her flipper-limbed brother Arturo, the Aqua Boy, or her twin Siamese sisters Iphy and Elly. And so, she must prove her devotion to her family and their Fabulon by finding her own unique talent, using her alluring voice to draw in the crowd as an apprentice to her father, the outside barker whose role is to attract an audience from the midway into the freak show tent.

While the Binewski children’s favorite story may be that of their doll-like mother dancing in the grit of the geek pit, the family uses language to reorganize their value system for physical beauty. As Jack Selzer writes in his introduction to *Habeas Corpus*, the Binewski family believes in the materiality of language, where “Words have been mattering more than matter” (4) and the outside barker’s delusive descriptions of the wonder behind the tent becomes reality. In Dunn’s novel words like *fabulon*, *amazing*, *wonder*, *unusual*, and *shocking* stand in for synonyms for perfection rather than oddity.

While the freakish acts and bodies Dunn describes may incite disgust, she also recognizes the almost universal human wish to change the shape and structure of one's own body. Whether through dress, violence, amputation, or art, Dunn's novel portrays both the freaks and the audience as victims of discomfort in our own bodies and confusion at perceptions of the other. Such an extreme treatment of the human body raises a challenge to modern sensibilities. We tell our children not to stare, that it is polite to ignore the unusual, that pointing causes pain, but Dunn's novel shows us that all bodies deserve to be acknowledged as human, whatever that may mean.

This thesis is ultimately a study of the question of humanity. How can we further understand what it means to be human by focusing our attention on a subset of human beings who make their living by displaying their bodies because they appear to be almost inhuman? *Geek Love* welcomes readers to change their perception of the value of an average human body—one centered head at the top, a torso, two arms, two legs, mostly symmetrical, five fingers, five toes. Instead of exalting this common form, Dunn's novel addresses how human identity is much more flexible than that; human identity can be found in beings with bodies that diverge from the instructions of normality. In fact, human beings push against the borders of the categories of beings and objects found within the world. The Binewski children's bodies seem layered with animal and alien qualities and were created by their father's performance at a mad scientist. Even the audiences in Dunn's novel eventually want to take part and use both medicine and innovation to change their bodies, whether it is to blend with or distinguish themselves from the public conception of the average human body. *Geek Love* is not a sensational book. Instead, Dunn writes within a larger ongoing conversation about the impacts of modern technology, cybernetics, and the lengthened average lifespan of all humans, due to advanced medical

technology. Whereas humans have stared in wonder at freakish, misshapen, and foreign bodies, at freak shows in the past, the freak show has moved from the traveling carnival or installations like Barnum's American Museum in New York to the hospital, to the genetic laboratory, to the Internet, and through the skies as streaming messages from our mobile phones. Today, humans all over the world partake in cosmetic surgeries or enjoy sending photographic messages of themselves manipulated, turned into animals using SnapChat's puppy filter. Facebook Spaces allow humans to meet and communicate in virtual settings as animated avatars accessible through virtual reality headsets. Humans are now used to seeing their own image manipulated by filters and mixed reality technologies. The human conception of human identity is expanding as these technologies advance. By understanding further what inhuman aspects the freakish body displays in order to be called "freakish," we can touch upon the borders that differentiate the human from the animal, the machine, or the object and see that these borders may not fully contain the human at all.

Dunn's exploration of the human perception of freakish bodies should be studied in the context of posthumanism, which requires to give the body a more crucial role as the vehicle for perception of the spaces through which it moves. Particularly, I am writing to join the posthuman conversation to Dunn's work using ideas primarily originating from thinkers who were influential to modern posthuman studies: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, but also Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida as well as thinkers like Carey Wolfe, Katherine Hayes, and Donna Harroway who are actively engaged in the posthuman discussion and have taken the chance to distinguish posthuman thought from other forms of literary criticism. Part of this thesis also includes information from historians who have focused on the role of the sideshow freak in the nineteenth to twentieth century American culture. In his book, *What is Posthumanism*, Cary

Wolfe defines the movement as “a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatics, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore” (15). Posthumanism acknowledges the human body as a transformative mixed media, which can contain and become permeated with what would be considered traditionally inhuman qualities.

Hayes researches the history of a growing technology, cybernetics, to see how the human body and mind is adapting and changing alongside our technology, while Agamben searches to “explore ontologies that allow for the fraternal and non-hierarchical coexistence of all forms of life” including animals (Seri 1). Wolfe’s description of posthumanism differentiates itself from other forms of literary criticism that traditionally assumes that humanity is a separate, definable existence separate from other dimensions of life and the world. Instead, the modern human is also a combination of man-made objects and ideas and can be understood by thinking about all things previously considered inhuman. We only have to look at the vast amount of personal information that exists on a single mobile device to see how that device has become an extension of the owner’s identity and body. But technology is only a piece of what posthumanism maintains affects the human body. The animal, the object, and the other dynamic layers of the world around us are also due consideration.

While Dunn creates characters who were purposefully created to have freakish bodies, history thrives with famous and infamous freaks who were born with their deformities. These freaks inspired Dunn’s work as well as the modern fascination with the almost extinct freak show. Best sellers like *Water for Elephants* and *The Night Circus* have reintroduced the carnival and circus as popular settings for mystery and magic while the widely watched television series *American Horror Story* cast freak show as a place of terror. The reemergence of the freak show

as a setting of public interest owes tribute to historical freaks like Ella Harper, who was born in 1873 and toured the U.S. for four years as “The Camel Girl...pronounced by scientists the most wonderful freak of nature ever seen since the creation of the world, a beautiful young lady with the classic features of a woman but the body of a camel” (Hartzman 45). While one might picture a hairy, quadruped body with hooves and a tail, one or two humps, a long neck, and a doll-like face, Ella Harper was a normal girl, but for her knees. They were inverted, bending behind her instead of in front, and she would often walk on all fours as a result. Her freak show debut is cataloged in Hartzman’s collection of professional freaks, *American Sideshow: An Encyclopedia of History’s Most Wondrous and Curiously Strange Performers*. The historical treatment of Camel Girl and other animal hybrids like her, shows a reemergence of interest in freak shows prevalent in the eighteen to nineteen hundreds. While the mind may notice similarities to already known objects, especially through suggestion, modern audiences reading Hartzman’s book or searching historical freaks online more clearly recognize people like Ella as human. Onlookers to Ella’s show in Tennessee or Kentucky in the twentieth century would have noted the inward turn of her legs like that in the spindled legs of a camel, a foreign animal, of which, they may have never seen anywhere besides an encyclopedia. Without the constant whirl of foreign images pervaded by film and the internet, past generations were more likely to take outside barkers—the announcers meant to draw in the crowds—at their word.

While asking the question whether or not Ella Harper, while playing her role as The Camel Girl, became any closer to becoming a camel, one finds his or herself asking a question of a posthumanist kind. Did she deserve her nickname? Surely, with the suggestion of the advertisements and the barker, and the spatial influence, the audience would know that they are intended to notice the similarity between the bend of Ella’s legs and a camel’s. Likewise, in

Katherine Dunn's novel, the narrator's brother, Arturo, is billed as Aqua Boy and his limbs are consistently referred to as "flippers". His parents recognize his potential to be a seal-like act, and "He was taught to swim in infancy and was displayed nude in a big clear-sided tank like an aquarium" (8). After these prepubescent displays of his body, Arturo finds that his act is much more interesting if the audience finds him in a tank of water and this set up seems to attract and create enthusiastic returning fans as "The bright tank in the dim tent was a focus. The water and his floating form were soothing, hypnotic. People stared at the tank and his undulating figure as they would a bright fire" (50). The fact that Ella was physically separated from the inside a tent, on a stage, or that Arturo literally has a glass wall between himself and his audience highlights their physical differences from the audience before them. Olympia, the narrator of Dunn's novel explains that "The tank made him exotic but safe" (50). The freak is viewable but will not touch the audience, a fear that could arise from the threat of attack or contagion. Ultimately, the final threat that the freak presents is the threat of becoming less human, of missing crucial aspects of the body, of death.

The main ideas that this thesis explores are highlighted in the example of Ella Harper and Arturo Binewski. As we analyze the phenomenology of professional freaks, they change the way we think of humans interacting within spaces. They also change how we perceive a human body in relation to animals and machines, and they ultimately remind the audience of the one aspect of life that connects all things—death. Chapter one of this thesis, *Torture Acts: Inclusion and Exclusion in Katherine Dunn's Geek Love*, delves into the alignment of social and physical spaces through which freakish bodies exist and disappear, where they are safe and where they are in danger. Chapter two, "The Bestial Body/Cyborg/Enhanced Body" addresses how the freakish body dwells near the borders of the divinations between humans and other beings of the world—

animals and machines. Chapter three, “Death and Identity: Probing the Extremes” deals with the most natural event that impacts the lives of all mortal beings and objects—death. All of these discussions use Dunn’s freaks as primary examples to analyze the extent to which the definition of humanity can be stretched to cover not only disfigured human bodies, but also to take notice of the human relationship to the other living and non-living pieces of the world which a usually forgotten during reflection on the reach of humanity. Humans share an embodied existence with almost every other being of the world. By taking note of human bodies that are unusual, we can perceive more commonalities between humans and all other beings and objects that share the same world.

Discussing spaces of safety and of violence, where freaks are able to be included or are excluded are crucial to understanding the question of the ways that humans organize themselves to animals. Keeping an animal requires cages, fences, and containers so they do not escape the space in which they are meant to be. Sideshows were also often associated with circuses, and freak show tents may even be placed within the menagerie of caged lions, bears, and camels leading to the big top. In this formation, the audience would have become accustomed to the physical separation of animal and freak as they would walk from spectacle to spectacle. However, the construction of the physical space of the sideshow, or the suggestion of the carnival outside barker are not the only reasons that displayed freaks have been compared to and treated like animals. Merleau-Ponty’s thinking reappears here along with the writing of Giorgio Agamben. Both have set the precedent that the bodily human existence calls on us to question why we perceive living things in animal and human categories and further, asks us to reevaluate our reasoning for this separation. In *What is Posthumanism* Cary Wolfe asks posthuman critics in animal-studies to take a Foucault-inspired approach to analyze the animal by questioning the

methodologies and theories of thinkers who have delved into animal-studies and the social systems that have caused people to believe they ride the line between animal and human (108-109). In other words, the posthuman approach to the question of what separates the human from the animal, requires a researcher who does not take it for granted that they are the human standard, or that they cannot be called animal as well.

The reemergence of interest in the human-animal hybrid parallels the popular concern of prosthesis technology, which allows amputees to run faster climb farther, and sense more intensely. In part two, I further explore this posthuman interest in the enhanced human and the creation of the cyborg where machine, technology, and the object converge with the flesh to create new enhanced creatures to rival the human and the animal. The cyborg body studied here includes analysis into the necessary Binewski style of play at genetics and physical manipulation. In Dunn's novel, it becomes clear that the Binewski parents treasure all of their creations, those that were able to live and those that died shortly after birth. All of their children are tantalizing precursors of the next kind of human, precursors to the cyborg.

Dunn's novel and her characters live in the shadow of death as they constantly must find spaces of safety and prove themselves to have the same rights as other average-bodied humans. The freak show itself features both living and non-living bodies as Lillian Binewski preserves her failed experiments, the children who did not live, in "the Chute," a museum of dead bodies (54). The audience of the Binewski Fabulon is implicated in this chapter as well as the freakish body proves to engage with what Kolnai calls a human "intention towards death" (75). The previous chapters both lead to a discussion of not just death of the body but also of the human identity as Dunn's novel allows the reader multiple access points to understand her freaks as humans, but humans who also share traits with animals, machines, and immobile objects.

Many reviewers have called Dunn's work a grotesque. They either write it off as a gruesome, cheap thrill, or acknowledge its repulsiveness as an unfortunate side effect of her failed goal—representing the humanity of the freak. But the human existence is an embodied one, no matter how misshapen. Embodied existence makes the human visible and solitary, a capsule charged with specific traits which we have come to define as human. In *Sideshow U.S.A.* Adams reminds us that culture's perception of the freakish body has changed over time; "Whereas once human prodigies were treated as the bearers of divine meaning, by the nineteenth century freaks had no inherent significance, although their anomalies seemed to cry out for interpretation" (5). As sideshow performers, freaks satisfy this need by marketing themselves as spectacles. They imagine creation stories for themselves that make their disfigurement easier to believe for the audience. They tell their audience there was a freak accident or that they have traveled from an exotic place. By requesting these creation stories the audience denies that the freak is fully human, but by looking at these interactions more closely we can see how freak shows reveal humanity at the edge of distinction between other categories of life and bound toward the posthuman.

All in all, Merleau-Ponty and the later writings of Foucault lead to a posthuman wonder in the use and necessity of the human body in an increasingly virtual world. Wolfe explains that posthumanism is a call to forgo "our taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes and affective states of *Homosapiens* itself, by recontextualizing them in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings," things, and spaces (25). This *sensorium* may sound magical, eerie, a frontier of fully animated bodies where before stood a quiet room. In *Geek Love*, Dunn places us inside this sensorium and the active stages of the freak show, where all eyes are on the body and all bodies are game for consideration. Dunn's extreme

representations of embodied experience foreground the body's role in creating the divide between the norm and the freak. By looking deeper into Dunn's novel, we can find traits of humanity throughout the sensorium and come to realize that humanity overlaps with animals, machines, and objects. In fact, humans search to incorporate the benefits of the animal and the object into themselves as technology advances. Perhaps, it is only by accepting that humanity uses and is highly related to other creatures and things, will we be able to continue to thrive within the world.

Torture Acts: Inclusion and Exclusion in Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love*

The presentation of freakish bodies in carnivals and sideshows used to be quite common but began to disappear as medicinal science found names and causes for many of the performers' conditions. Audiences have experienced guilt and discomfort at viewing individuals who could now be considered handicapped or exploited by show managers. The movement of the freakish body from performative stages to disguised, hidden states within communal space takes a similar course to thinker Michel Foucault's study of how punishment moved its focus away from the body to the mind—or soul—in the “non-corporal system” of the shadow box prison (16). In *Geek Love*, the freakish body is transferred back onto a public stage, portraying bodies that are bestial, surgically altered and preserved. Dunn pushes her characters and their bodies to their extremes until they are almost unrecognizable as human, testing for the fragile stitching where the freakish body is allowed to be observed and where it should be hidden. In doing so, she explores the spaces of inclusion and exclusion of the freakish body, which pushes the boundaries of social acceptance and pushes freakish bodies into the realm of isolation. Dunn's novel resists the modern American cry for the polite protection of the disfigured that ultimately leads them to seclusion. Although her frank and unrelenting writing makes readers uncomfortable, by keeping the tortured body centered, in visceral detail, Dunn reveals hidden social systems through which the body is punished today.

This punishment echoes the works of Michel Foucault, whose idea is important for the analysis of *Geek Love*. But before Foucault wrote about the panopticon of the prison, Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote *Phenomenology of Perception*, first published in 1945, and discusses many ideas of the body and its crucial role in human experience eventually used by posthumanism. He advocates for the body as a prerequisite for a conscious understanding of the self, soul, and true

method for interacting with the world. He asks, “Can I not find in the body some threads that the internal organs send to the brain and that are instituted by nature in order to give the soul the opportunity to sense its body?” (78). For Merleau-Ponty, we must search for this method of perception that takes the body into consciousness, an introspection of the physical. Otherwise, we are doomed to an existence where “Consciousness of the body and of the soul are thereby repressed, and the body again becomes that highly polished machine that the ambiguous notion of behavior had almost made us forget” (78). Ultimately inspiring Michel Foucault, who eventually popularized embodiment, Merleau-Ponty’s writing is crucial as we understand how the bodily experience, especially the estranged experience within a freakish body like those of Dunn’s characters, tell us more about humanity as they move through the world.

Foucault agrees with Merleau-Ponty that the body is a crucial role-player a determined consciousness of life and self. Rather than focusing on the body as the perceiver, Foucault is interested in the ways the body has been used as a subject to be perceived. Part one of Michel Foucault’s *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* is called “Torture” and is broken into two chapters, “The Body of the Condemned” and “The Spectacle of the Scaffold.” In his introduction Foucault recounts a particularly violent public execution of an individual who is burned, torn apart with metal forceps, drawn and quartered, and then burned again. He doesn’t leave out the excruciating details of how the executioner struggled to rip apart the strips of skin and muscle or how the horses were not strong enough to quarter the body and the executioners had to saw the limbs to start them off (3-4).

Foucault places this vivid example in the forefront of his reader’s mind and then traces the history of the movement from public execution and torture to the impenetrable modern prison system where punishment is blocked from the public eye and operates separate from it. Public

punishment was deemed to be grotesque, offensive, and a social recreation of the criminal's crimes. And so, once moved to the shadow box of the prison, punishment became "a less immediately physical kind" (8) that shifted its focus from the body and "physical pain" (8) to an amorphous idea that uses the body as an "instrument or intermediary: if one intervenes upon it to imprison it, or to make it work, it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as a right and as property" (4-9). For Foucault, there is also a tremendous, if not equal, horror in moving punishment away from the body to the mind—or soul—in this new "non-corporal system" (16).

While Mrs. and Mr. Binewski have no physical deformities of their own, their children cannot easily hide their unique bodies in public. Even though Olympia does disguise herself in public life as a grown woman with a hat, glasses, and "goat wig" (12) she still gets stares from passersby on her daily route to work. In Merleau Ponty's introduction of *Phenomenology of Perception*, he acknowledges the limits of embodied perception and how he "can see one object insofar as objects form a system or a world, and insofar as each of them arranges the others around itself like spectators of its hidden aspects and as the guarantee of their permanence" (71). Because we live in a multi-dimensional world, we can only notice sides of objects, the outer shells and angles of passersby on the street. Understanding that there is more to perceive than what a single gaze allows helps to create the world in association with other passersby in the same plane. Although only part of Olympia can be perceived and although she covers most of her body while in public, her physical difference is still unmistakable. Bestial bodies are so misshapen from the normal human body that they are at once noticeable; they meet a threshold of change in shape that causes onlookers to gawk and disrupts passersby in action.

Roger Lund explores the possible causes of the human disassociation from dwarfs, hunchbacks, and persons with physical deformities. He looks mostly at writings by authors and poets during the eighteenth century, which he calls a “callous” (92) age where mockery of the deformed was very common by persons of all classes and associations. Lund argues that deformed persons were considered inhuman during this time period because their bodies do not follow the argument of design, which dictates that nature “display[s] a visible and unmistakable beauty and order” (94). Because deformed bodies are often not symmetrical, they cause a disturbance in the observer’s view of nature and stand out annoyingly like a warp in a glass or a wrinkle in a shirt (94-95). The difference between a bestial body and a normal one, is that the shape is distorted enough to cause a repeated experience of disturbance.

Thus, Olympia describes the stare of the passerby as the “ice moment” (14) where the observer notices the freak, pauses, and is immediately ashamed at having done so. A similar experience happens when an observer passes a beggar. Eyes are diverted, and a sense of guilt is felt. However, the passerby feels guilt at the beggar for not donating money or offering any help, while the passerby of the freak feels guilt for noticing their existence in the first place, the fact that they are different from other unobtrusive bodies around them. This noticing is not a conscious mental act; instead, the experience is much like Taylor Carmen’s description in the forward of *Phenomenology of Perception*, it derives from “skillful bodily responsiveness and spontaneity in direct engagement with the world” (5). Somehow, the recognition of freakish bodies is highly attached to the normal plane of perception stationed by the structure of the body norm. Olympia is a dwarf, and because of this bodily deformity, her movement exists on a lower plane than that of most other passersby. In the same way that one might notice the swift

movement of a mouse scurrying across the floor from the periphery, Olympia's stature attracts attention with her isolated intersection across the bottom of the normative plane of sight.

In Olympia's description of this occurrence, *thawing out* of the ice moment involves sharing the experience with others and coming up with a reason for the interruption. They ask, where did these freaks come from? Olympia imagines they suppose her and her mother "are residents of an institutional halfway house, or that the circus is in town. (14)" Here, Olympia strikes upon two spaces in which the bestial body is expected to be found. The ice moment does not occur under settings where the bestial body is meant to be the primary focus. In what Merleau Ponty calls the "object-horizon structure" or perspective, Olympia's body uses this structure as a means to recede into the background or unveil herself into the foreground (70). In the introduction to *Phenomenology of Perception* Donald Landes notes "the movements of the body or the apparent sizes of objects do not *cause* the structures of the visual field, but they motivate them" (39). Olympia's difference in size and shape motivates her unveil. Because of her freakish body, she has less control of where and when she moves between the hidden and active lines of sight. In either case, because her figure is highly unique from those around her, she is ultimately isolated everywhere, whether she hides in the shadows or when she is drawn into the light.

Lund notices that the 18th century public culture was less guilty about laughing at physical deformity and traveling sideshows, which were much more popular than they are today. Dwarves, giants, bearded ladies, Siamese twins, the armless, and the limbless found wealth and security in displaying their unique bodies. Branded as anatomical wonders and dressed for high-class society, these freaks found employment where otherwise, they would not be able to. As medicine advanced throughout the 20th century, doctors found causes for the conditions of

famous freaks like the pinheads or people with large growths or missing digits. Instead of marvels, freaks were more rightly deemed patients. And this understanding allowed for less bestial bodies to be born with advances in prenatal care. The sideshows all but disappeared as they offended the public's collective sentimentality. Rachel Adams opens *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* by arguing that even "During the period of their decline, [sideshow] maintained a firm hold on the imaginations of many Americans who had visited them in better days. This imaginative afterlife gave rise to a certain paradox: as actual freak shows were evicted from culture, their representational currency multiplied, granting them symbolic importance" (2). Adams describes this afterlife as a world where the average person yearns to see the spectacular, the bally line, the freaks on stage. Cultural memory of the sideshows spikes curiosity, but shows themselves are gone and the proper space in which the masses are allowed to stare has been stripped away.

In Dunn's novel, the freaks live during this time after the sideshows were no longer actively traveling across the country. The deformed are primarily civilians rather than performers and the average person does not see the bestial in public or daily life. The Binewski family lives normally within the confines of their trailer (the domestic home) or the sideshow (the stage). One day, when Mrs. Binewski tells her children that they will all go out to the store together, the eldest, Arty, asks her "Do you think it's a good idea if we all go" (56)? He then makes a point to choose his wheelchair rather than the rubber pads for his belly that he uses to slither across the ground and clarifies, "It's easier in public" (57). Arty knows he can't use the mode of transportation that he prefers in his domestic life, because it will never have been seen before by the inhabitants of the outside world. His small comment foreshadows the extreme reaction from the social world. Dunn does not just re-invoke the ice moment, instead, one of the most

commonplace public spaces—the store—becomes the most dangerous place for the freak children. As they get out of the family van, they are seen by another man in the parking lot who, horrified by the site of the creatures filing from the vehicle, grabs his gun and opens fire, trying to kill them all (58-59).

There is blood and smoke, tears, a mother begs for her children's safety, all narrated by Olympia when she was only six years old. The drastic change between spaces of safety and danger, of living and trespassing are immediately made apparent by the extremity of the situation. In this scene, Arturo, who chooses to publicize himself as being a combination of man and seal, morphs further into this hybridity as he senses the danger before it happens and is ultimately hunted like animals are. In *What is Posthumanism*, Wolfe acknowledges the posthuman interest in the human-animal relationship and argues that “we can no longer talk of *the* body or even, for that matter, of *a* body in the traditional sense” any longer (23). Dunn exaggerates this hybridity as the children are instantly mourned as both children and the hunted, freaks, and an endangered species. Though Dunn is not directly exploring the notion of posthumanism, this work could be important posthuman analysis as scenes like the parking lot shooting show how the freakish body's movement through space changes characters from a human family to desperate animals. As the spaces become more dangerous, the characters morph from their confident personas as super-humans to sub-human prey.

As an adult, Olympia travels the city alone, in semi-disguise, moving as quickly and quietly as possible. She spends time only at her work as a radio personality, where her body is invisible, and her home where she is solitary. While she grew up in the carnival she could reveal herself freely, living within community of her family. There, her bodily presence was wanted and fit the pattern of randomness that a freak show provides. If Olympia and her brothers and

sisters were to stand in a line up, the eyes focusing on them would move erratically across their drastically disparate heights, sizes, colors, and shapes. Within the randomness, Olympia could live in the background. Inside the city, she must actively work to change her appearance to go unseen.

In *How We Became Posthuman*, Katherine Hayles writes of the conflicting experience of the “embodied” and “weightless” human experience, where individuals are familiar to their temporal and physical existence as well as a transcendent one “made possible in part by the near-instantaneous transfer of information from one point on the globe to any other” (394). She is wary of the trend to consider the weightless experience superior for its sense of freedom, unbound by time, space, and pain, and forewarns doe-eyed thinkers, arguing that there is an influential human “connection with direct sensory experience” (395) that would be lost in a completely unembodied existence. But as a radio voice, Olympia does this daily. She uses technology to assert her presence and spirit dissociated from her body. However, the physical world and city that she is a part of continues to exist outside of the radio studio. Each time she leaves the studio, her body rematerializes, only to wish she could hide herself again. Although Olympia is able to live, if only during working hours, as a bodiless voice, as information flowing through waves from the station’s tower, what she really needs, is to find a space when she can exist in safety, rather than a new medium through which to exist.

One night, as she often would, Olympia secretly follows her daughter, Miranda, who is completely unaware of her heritage or her mother’s existence. This night, she goes to a strip club where Miranda works as a dancer. The club specializes in women with small deformities that are fetishized, like Miranda’s small pig’s tail at the base of her tailbone. There is a topless contest that night and in a savage moment, much like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame’s* contest for the

Pope of Fools, Olympia is unwantedly pulled onto the stage and her bestial body is exposed (18-21). In his second section of Torture, “The Spectacle of The Scaffold,” Foucault argues that the public execution needs to be “spectacular” and “seen by all almost as its triumph” (34) to be successful in its purpose, that being to scare off or warn the public of committing crimes. The stage creates a space where Olympia’s deformed body can become spectacular, as it is presented as a unique object worth viewing, rather than a disability that should not be identified:

The college girl, dumbfounded, is still pumping away with her mouth open, her knees and arms still following an old order to dance, as her mind is pummeled by what I am, and what they have done to me, and wondering if I am in on it...How proud I am, dancing in the air full of eyes rubbing at me uncovered, unable to look away because of what I am. Those poor hoptoads behind me are silent. I’ve conquered them. They thought to use and shame me but I win out by nature, because a true freak cannot be made. A true freak must be born.

(20)

Dunn allows Olympia this one triumphant moment where she can safely be proud of her body and re-materialize in the most indelicate of places, the stage of a strip club. The extremity of the indecency of the situation provides the spectacle that Foucault mentions. Not only is she on display, but she is naked and proud where many would think she never could be. *Geek Love* toys with the social delineations of space where the bestial body has power and where it does not. Within the audience she was nothing, unwanted, merely surviving in secrecy. On the stage, she is purposefully exposed and exuberant.

Dunn’s freaks wish to gain control of this power, in their attempt to do so, they ultimately explore the same questions as Merleau Ponty on the issue of gaze; “We must attempt to understand how vision can come about from somewhere without thereby being locked within its

perspective” (69). Throughout the novel, the Binewskis have power when they are located in the carnival or the stage, but they are isolated once they move out of these spaces. Near the end of the novel, a reporter asks Olympia if she had the power to magically make her family “physically and mentally normal” (282) would she do it? She responds in the negative “That’s ridiculous! Each of us is unique. We are masterpieces. Why would I want us to change into assembly-line items? The only way you people can tell each other apart is by your clothes” (282). Here, Dunn creates two planes of human isolation. What Olympia says is true. The normal body can also feel alone amongst a sea of other normal bodies. In the moments that the freakish body is on the stage, it isn’t just powerful, it is also coveted. While the freakish body is isolated amongst the masses as a unique shape, normal bodies can also feel isolated amongst the crowd. Each body fights to either come in or out of focus, to be seen or go undisturbed.

Merleau-Ponty readdresses the question of how gaze truly works and how humans access the world within the space of their vision. In the essay “Eye and Mind” Merleau-Ponty describes an existence where moving about and viewing objects does not ultimately prove to the subject that they are separate from the object. Instead, the act of seeing joins the subject to what is being seen. Here, the body, “because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are incrustated in its flesh, they are part of its full definition: the world is made of the very stuff of the body” (125). If I were to invite an audience into this world view as the barker of a sideshow, I might describe the world beyond the tent to be just as relevant as vertebrae and neurons. All the objects of the world working together to house life and allow for being as skin covers the body and binds it together. That’s sensational billing, a suggestion offered to the audience that Olympia is trained to provide. But a such visceral description of the world would most likely enrage an expecting audience once they

would walk into the world beneath the sideshow tent and see that the world is still exactly as they know it, objects resting on other objects, and their own separate bodies moving amongst them, all cold strangers to each other. But if, the audience could understand the world as Merleau-Ponty's connected body, perhaps Olympia, her brother, and sisters would be more easily perceived as human and to the same extent of the audience members themselves.

While freaks can have any number of variations from the average human body, Merleau-Ponty describes a particular physical configuration in where the human body would no longer perceive like a human. This amounts to a forced reallocation of the eyes from the front of the face to the sides of the head "like certain animals...with no cross-blending of visual fields". Merleau-Ponty argues that this type of configuration "...would not reflect itself; it would be an almost adamantine body, not really flesh, not really the body of a human being. There would be no humanity" (125). Humanity devoid, because the fish or horse-headed human would not be able to see their limbs, would not allow for shared lines of sight where the eyes join focus, and would not see a fully connected world. However, Merleau-Ponty doesn't grant that a girl who is born with eyes on either side of her head ceases to be a human girl. The correct configuration of body parts clicking to place like Barbie and Ken dolls does not define the human. Instead, Merleau-Ponty suggests that humanity exists in the space between "... the see-er and the visible, between touching and touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand a kind of crossover occurs, when the spark of the sensing/sensible is lit, when the fire starts to burn that will not cease until some accident befalls the body, undoing what no accident would have sufficed to do..." (Merleau-Ponty 125). In other words, humanity exists within an active perception of and connection to the world. This human interaction with the world does not merely take place between what Aristotle would conceive of as the space between the rational

soul and the body, with a synapse from the mind to the limbs. Rather, humanity exists between the viewer and the viewed, and spontaneously between all pieces that make up the body, cells, tendon, bone, hair in association with space and other objects. For Merleau-Ponty, humanity is movement toward the calling from the worldly body that makes up all things.

The freaks in Dunn's novel do not just include the born freaks of the Binewski family. Dunn also incorporates freaks that are created through a warped kind of medicine, people who chose to become amputees in order to feel less isolated amongst the masses of normal bodies. Arturo creates his first cult follower by catching ahold of her fear, the same sense of isolation of being a normal body amongst other normal bodies. She is an obese woman, and Arturo asks her if what she really wants is to be beautiful, to be loved, or to be "all right" (177-179). Arturo's confidence in his freakish body is instantly attractive while he is in his tank, surrounded by an audience there to see only him. When he asks her again what it is she wants, she replies, "I want to be like *you* are!" (178). The Arturians find peace because they believe that by removing the body parts that made them fearful of judgment, and by giving up any hope of having a perfect body, all that will be left is peace. Without limbs they can't *do* anything, but also don't *want* to do anything or feel like they need to prove something. Their catch phrase becomes "Peace, Isolation, Purity" (227).

The Arturians search for the disembodied experience that Katherine Hayles mentions has become a more popular with the rise of technological advancements. She notes that in both liberal humanism and cybernetics "Embodiment has been systematically downplayed or erased" (4). The Arturians are looking for an existence that will ultimately separate themselves from the psychological problems associated with the body, but ultimately, their real troubles are a sense of isolation inside their bodies. The Cartesian separation of body and mind and all other bodies is

what mistakenly holds them captive. In his introduction to *Phenomenology of Perception* Claude Lefort explains why Merleau Ponty's work argues against this sense of isolation where humans often find themselves; "the body and its surroundings cannot be defined in isolation, if every attempt to describe the constitution of one presupposes a reference to the constitution of the other, and if every relation of cause to effect or means to end can only be determined in function of a certain given meaning of 'configuration,' then the classical distinction between the subject and the object is no longer viable" (23). The Arturians did not need to try and lose their physical bodies to find peace and community, rather, if they lived more like Dunn's freaks, in glory of their bodies, in a community constructed by appreciating bodies, and in understanding of the embracing nature of the universe, they would have been fine.

Dunn continues to play with the irreversible and the eternal by introducing freaks as preserved bodies of the once living or barely born. In the business of the carnival, Mr. and Mrs. Binewski are frugal with their resources. Through the many attempts to create the perfect freak, the mother gives birth to six infants that were so deformed they did not survive. They are kept bottled and set on display like science experiments in "the Chute...six clear-glass twenty gallon jars...each lit by hidden yellow beams and equipped with its own explanatory, push-button voice tape" (52). It is the Binewski women's task to tenderly clean the jars daily and to remember that the preserved children are still part of the family, to be loved and cared for as any of them (52-55).

Although shocking, Dunn's Chute is a tribute to what used to be a common travelling show across America throughout the 1800-1900s. In his book, *Secrets of the Sideshows*, Joe Nickell has a chapter dedicated to what he calls "curios" (320) or preserved bodies. Preserved fetuses and infants were referred to as "pickled punks" (322) by carnies, and in later years the

specimens in these displays were often not real at all but made of rubber, in which case their name changed to “bouncers” (325). There was a hierarchy of value according to show managers, who would pay the most for the pickled punks that were born alive, the next highest for those that were real, and the least for the rubber bouncers, which would then also differ in levels of realism (322-326).

The most horrifying aspect of Dunn’s Chute is not only that the fetuses *are* real or that two of them *were* born alive—one was named Apple and lived to the ripe age of two—but that the maternal mother is the one who keeps and displays them. While the death of a newborn is normally a private affair and display of the body would be sacrilege, the Binewskis believe that their unique bodies are the most important aspect of themselves, and by displaying their dead, they give them a chance to be fantastic, a wonder even in death. This act of preserving the dead became family tradition even before the jar children. After Olympia’s grandfather died, his last wish was to remain with the carnival forever, and her parents happily stuck his urn atop the generator truck as a shrine (7). While the children of the chute are greatly valued, they only exist together as part of the blow off--a freebie to view after the main shows. The Binewskis do share the same tendency as the 1800s show manager to rank their acts according to their proximity to life. The living *are* more valuable. Olympia remembers how her mother would repeat over and over, “We had such hopes for her” (54) to the jar child that would have been marketed as a Lizard girl, with a flat face and large tail.

The patron’s experience of the Chute also forces the audience to think about the strangeness of birth and development of even normal bodies. Walking through the Chute’s dark tent itself evokes the image of birth—of coming out from the dark to the light, wide world. They pass by children in different forms of development, like a stages of conception poster where the

fetus must grow, split, combine, and enclose correctly, with infinite mistakes possible. While many pickled punks in American sideshows did contain deformed fetuses, normal looking fetuses were also an attraction, as the normal developmental stages of the fetus do look alien or amphibian, as the fishy groupings of cells bulge and grow limbs. The Binewski family display is even stranger as all of their potential children, like the Lizard girl, also show the potential for freakishness. One with two heads, another with no bones, and one that is not even self-contained. This one the children secretly call “the Tray” and Olympia describes it as “a lasagna pan full of exposed organs with a monkey head attached” (54). Within the Chute, the freaks seem even less human because they are still, inanimate objects. It is more of a museum than a show, where the jars are to be studied, closely. The jar itself, though transparent, creates a contained space and more visible separation between the observer and subject. Here, the audience is meant to fear the simple possibility of creating one of these monsters themselves as they look at the two-headed baby, or the Tray, or they can view the normal development of the body, and see how it is just as freakish, for a time.

Apple, the jar child who lived until she was two, seemed to have little physical deformity other than lazy eyes. She was almost completely unresponsive to stimuli however, and most likely had a severe cognitive disability. As an almost normal looking child, she had no place in the family sideshow. Olympia mentions her death nonchalantly, in a blameless, practiced way: “A pillow fell on her face” (54). Although there is some mystery to Apple’s death, which is almost a family folklore, it is clear that Dunn’s characters are ready to murder their children if they are not born to the freakish standards of their parents. Apple was more valuable to Mr. and Mrs. Binewski as a pickled punk than as a daughter. While Mrs. Binewski may have condoned the murder, she is still, eerily, a caring mother to her jar children. Once made a freakish curiosity

through preservation, Apple can safely reside at the carnival. By creating an extreme distortion between the mother's role of protector and executioner, Dunn shows how the space of the carnival can be just as dangerous to average bodies as the outside world can be to the bestial.

There is a point where Olympia, in her early teens, upset that her secret crush did not return her love, imagines herself dead and that her family would cremate her and set her urn next to her grandfather's in tribute to her memory, but the thought is discarded after she imagines them preserving her "in the Chute in the biggest jar of all and I'd float naked in formaldehyde and the twins would bicker over who had to shine my jar" (172). Small, white, and underdeveloped, Olympia does look like the pickled punks without the glass around her. To be placed there would mean she was a failure, like the others, who had so much potential—*we had such hopes for her*—but ultimately could not survive.

In the novel the grotesque descriptions of bodies paired with the extreme behavior of the Binewski family's flipped value system that prefers the freakish body over the norm, highlights and underscores the inhumane systems in place that subjugate freakish bodies to specific, confined spaces. To regulate the populace's discomfort at running into a freak on the street, the hospital, television, freak show stage, and museum have become the only spaces where freakish bodies can materialize completely and live safely in the physical realm. Otherwise, they are forced to dematerialize, and in accordance with social etiquette, the observer ignores their existence. "Not staring" becomes a denial of existence and a reflexive motion toward the all but disappearance of the freakish body in popular society. Dunn has layered her novel with freaks who are the Binewski family's conscious experiments. They are developed, born, and created using modern technology and medicine. While many critics have considered her extreme treatment of the body to be grotesque, in actuality, she touches on the many ways that the human

body is increasingly transformed by our technologies and forces us to understand our bodies in conjunction with objects, animals, and the physical spaces through which we wander.

Surgical bodies also maintain spaces that are isolated from normal society. Like the physical freak that may have a genetic disease, the patient of surgery undergoes a grace period where they are treated as breakable objects. The leg cast, neck cone, and sling are all visual indicators that a person is not their normal self and should be treated much like an invalid. Staring at a person's shaved head and scar after brain surgery is disrespectful in the same vein as staring at a bestial body. The difference between the surgical body and the bestial is that the surgical body will heal, and they can return to normal society once again. However, in Dunn's novel, surgery is always irreversible. It leaves its mark on the body, takes away pieces of it, and adds new pieces that are essential for the body to continue to exist.

After the shooting in the store parking lot, the shooter is sent to a mental hospital and eventually returns to his house, shoots his wife with a shotgun and turns the gun on himself (215-217). But he doesn't die. Instead, modern medicine somehow saves him. As a result, he becomes an awkward contraption. With most of his face gone, his is half tubes and bags of liquid powered by a squeezable air pump. In public, he wears a covering over his horrible face and is forever after called "the Bag Man" (217). The Bag Man is a freak both because his physical body is mangled and altered forever after his many surgeries, and because he is a visible failure of death. The lingering feeling of death surrounds him as his IV-like bags dangle in place of his face. He is a walking hospice, only alive with the help of machines that are now part of his body. The Bag Man is the human cyborg, part man, part tube and machinery. In *What is Posthumanism?* Wolfe notes that critics must transform their understanding of the human from the mind to include the ways in which the body and the artificial parts of the body "bring forth a world" and speaks to

“the evolutionary history and behavioral and psychological repertoire of the human itself” (25).

Dunn’s character, the Bag Man, exhibits the next step in human evolution, surpassing the historical animal-human relationship toward what will ultimately be the human descendent, the immortal, the cyborg. His prosthetic body defies the old world of blood and flesh, and “brings forth” a new definition of life, forever after carried forth by machines.

The Bestial Body/Cyborg/Enhanced Body

Sideshow acts require exaggerated contrast; the World's Tallest Man holds the World's Smallest Woman in the palm of his hand; the Bearded Lady is demure and masculine; the Skeleton Man dines beside the Seven-Hundred Pound Woman. These bally sideshow advertisements emphasize differences between what is considered average size, animal characteristics, gender identification of human body and its representation in a freak show. During the heyday of the sideshow in the eighteen-hundreds through the early twentieth century, curiosities were often billed as human-animal hybrids: the crab people, the dog-faced boy, the leopard boys (Hartzman 1-60). Bally lines were a tease. They did not reveal the freak; instead, they created him. The outside caller gathered crowds to the tent by promising his audience an ordinary subject that looked, astonishingly, like something else. Misshapen bodies were further exaggerated by the caller's suggestions, making audiences see similarities between the people on the stage and animals and objects—anything non-human.

Cary Wolfe's introduction to *What is Posthumanism?* notes that humanist definitions of the human identity depend on whether humanity is "achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether" (xv). Status as human is always conceived in opposition to the animal and is divorced further from plants, objects, and the natural world. As humans evolve and lose more animal characteristics, humanist thinking contends that we grow closer to reaching an ideal humanity. Posthumanism is interested in the human estrangement from the animal, the object, and the natural world. It calls for a focus on not only the growing differences between the human and animal, but also the apparent similarities. Posthuman thinkers like Giorgio Agamben and Donna Harroway invest in analyzing how human

identity and perception changes as we sway between the animal and the machine. The human-animal hybrid and the cyborg as portrayed in Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* serve as a study in reclaiming the value of the animal as an enhancement to the human form, moving toward transhumanism. Her novel also shows that highlighting the dynamic layers of the world through which the freakish body lives reveals that the human identity is more of an uncomfortable, twisting amalgam than a definite category, touching up against and pushing away from vestiges of the animal, desperately toward the machine.

The freak show family in *Geek Love* believe that their unusual bodies make them superhuman. They hold power and prowess over the norms who fill their audience. For the Binewskis, human life is pointless without a unique talent, form, or act. To be hopelessly noticeable is not a curse for the carnival-owning family, who dabbles in a dangerous kind of eugenics to create their freakish children. Mr. Binewski regularly thrills his children in describing their creation. Referring to them as his "Rose Garden" Al's description harks back to early genetic experimentation, much like cross-pollination and Mendel's peas (9). At other times, he refers to the children as his "dreamlets" (1) as if he is able to create his freakish children with only his mind rather than the very real, experimental regimen of drugs and toxic serums he feeds to his pregnant and willing wife. The idea came to him while looking at an actual garden, "It was a test garden, and the colors were...designed. Striped and layered. One color inside the petal and another color outside'...the roses started him thinking, how the oddity of them was beautiful and how that oddity was contrived to give them value...he realized that children could be designed" (9-10). Al Binewski immediately jumps from enjoying the peculiarity of engineered flowers to the human body. He sees little difference in his choice of medium for his experimentation. He does not question that his experience of moving from the sight of the unusual to awe will change

once the experiment is human form. Instead, the particularity of the object makes it glorious, and this is the same philosophy that he shares with his children and the world of between beauty and normalcy that he generates for them. By the time Dunn's novel takes place in the 1990s, Al has noticed the mental shift of the masses away from the animal and so conjures the freakish human body, which proudly exposes its hybridity to become maybe further from human but closer to beautiful. Al's actions and philosophy of beauty disagree with the humanist categorization of perfection. Rather than viewing human evolution as an ever-growing ladder away from the rest of the world, Al views evolution as a mutation that takes place deep within it, sprouting legs and tails that place the being in between previously designated species.

In his chapter "Mysterium disiunctionis" from *The Open*, Agamben makes it clear that humans have an obsession with defining life and differentiating themselves from other living plants and animals. This realization is important in the context of posthumanism, which seeks to understand how humans change as they relate to other living and non-living beings. The trend is that humans feel the need to formulate a break between ourselves and animals. This break has traditionally been agreed upon by philosophers of the past. After all, we are the only ones who seem to be doing mental work beyond the basics of survival. Humans, Agamben argues, have logos, or an ability for thought that is beyond that of animals, a distinction that has been taken for granted for quite some time. However, he notes that the human need to separate the self from the animal deserves increased attention; he wonders, "if the caesura between the human and the animal passes first of all within man, then it is the very question of man—and of 'humanism'—that we must be posed in a new way" (16). Thus, while many philosophers have assumed that man is made of a duality of natural, animalistic instinct and something more rational, Agamben recognizes that this way of thinking means that humanity is differentiated by this internal

confrontation. We are perplexed as our animal and human natures oppose one another, but other animals and objects don't have this concern. The fact that humans do recognize a conflict of identity may be a distinction from animals in itself. From the distinction emerges a new human identity, "We must learn to think of man as what results from the incongruity of these two elements, and investigate not the metaphysical mystery of conjunction, but rather the practical and political mystery of separation. What is man if he is always the place—and, at the same time, the result—of ceaseless divisions and caesurae" (16). This ongoing conflict between the animal and the logical aspects of human identity is a focal point from which posthuman thinkers can investigate the impact of the animal on the human rather than resolving to forget it as a long, lost artifact of evolution.

Dunn's novel presents a new, engineered kind of human being that accepts these divisions Agamben mentions. As the Binewski family lean to the left of this evolutionary battle and tease out the animal/logical conflict within their sideshow acts. Arturo, in particular, is presented as a master manipulator of both his family and his fans. Even though he is the least mobile of the bunch—he crawls like an inch worm or uses a wheelchair—Olympia differentiates her Siamese twin sisters and Arty by the effect of their performances, where "Electra and Iphigenia were high-powered performers, they wrung your heart, cramped your brain, brought silence on thousands for half an hour at a time. And the crowds that watched Arturo were funneled out of themselves, pumped into the reservoir of his will" (17). While Ellie and Iphy's body is a transhuman creation that awes audiences with their beauty, skill, and sexual potential. Olympia describes their piano skills as if they are geniuses, "Their compositions for four hands were thought by some to have revolutionized the twelve-tone scale" (8).

Arty's body allows him to control his audience by presenting a hidden fear—that they may also be, in some way, bestial. He forces his audience to remember the divisions that exist inside themselves and he accentuates it by moving like an animal as he swims through his tank and contrasting that with intelligent conversation. Olympia herself, in awe of Arty's strength and intellect, remembers that he “always talked to people. It was a central charm of his act that, though he looked and acted alien, part animal, part myth, he would prop his chin on the lip of the tank to talk ‘just like folks” (Dunn 49). As Arty's act gains popularity, the members of his audience become active in an experiment of the imagination, where they too, can change their bodies to gain particularity. Arty's strength and confidence in his show forces the audience to not only question the value of human limbs to stand upright and the thumbs to hold objects, it helps them imagine the possibility of happiness and power that can be gained by having a misshapen human body.

Thomas Nagel also breaks from the traditional understanding of the human as a mind separated from the body in “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” as he attempts to further understand the relation between the mind and the body by thinking in an inherently different way than that of past philosophers. Why not, like a bat? The practice becomes difficult immediately as he “cannot perform it either by imagining additions to my present experience, or by imagining some combination of additions, subtractions, and modifications” (3). Ultimately, humans can only imagine the experience of other creatures as an extension of their own bodily perception. We are unable to actually know what the real experience might be of a species unlike ourselves, or of another being with different methods for perception. Nagel describes how the task is impossible now, but he optimistically calls the individual human experience “a challenge to form new concepts and devise a new method—an objective phenomenology not dependent on empathy or

imagination” (6). Thus, Nagel is frustrated with the human tendency to reduce the experience of animals and other beings inherently different from humans to simplified explanations. Scientific observations may state fact of what tasks certain animals can accomplish, or they can predict where animals will migrate, how they may move, but we still equate expressions and actions to base human characteristics. Many people assume their cat is happy when it purrs, while scientists have found multiple reasons why a cat may purr, including discomfort or fear. The fact is, we don’t know exactly what a cat may be feeling.

This redirected thinking that Nagel introduces works well in analysis of the freaks in Dunn’s novel attempt to change the way their audiences think about other species. Although attending Arty or the Iphy and Elly’s shows do not give the audience an objective view into the experience of the Other, they do the first step of work by forcing the audience to imagine what it would be like to have deformities, to embrace the bestial. As Arty swims in his tank like a seal, “flashing wildly from glass wall to glass wall with the lights flaming on his gleaming body...” he reminds the audience of his humanity, “talking to people through the microphones set against the glass. Talking until they people talked back, talking until they cried for him, talking until they called out his name...” (206). Arty becomes a creature who is something more than human. He is a reimagining of the human body, removed of limbs, enhanced with the flippers of a seal. His human voice breaks open the sectors of experience to include both the human and the animal in one body. Likewise, Elly and Iphy are Siamese twins, two minds in one body. They intrigue their audiences with their cooperation, and perplex them with their disunity. One body with opposing interests and separate powers of control enhance Nagel’s challenge to find a method to understand objective experience of the Other. The Siamese twins reveal the conflict between mind and brain as two minds contend inside one body. As they grow older, Iphy and Elly

disagree on the way to make use of their body as Elly is interested in profiting from sex, and Iphy would rather keep her body inside the freakish family and marry Arty (203-204).

Like Nagel, Agamben also describes exercises that ask a human subject to view the world as another species, a “hedgehog, a bee, a fly, or a dog” to enact an “experiment [that] is useful for the disorienting effect it produces in the reader, who is suddenly obliged to look at the most familiar places with non-human eyes” (45). These imaginative exercises allow the human to begin to detach from a particular human identity, wholly separate from other beings. However, Arty’s act is interesting because it exaggerates the animal aspect of the human and surprises an audience who is used to viewing oddities without personal interaction.

Agamben uses examples from a zoologist’s descriptions of different types of animals to illustrate how animals relate to the world in ways that are difficult for humans to understand. His thought experiment asks the reader to imagine themselves as a tick. The human imagination immediately dives into the possibly sounds, sights, and smells that a tick might greet in nature “immersed in the sunlight and surrounded on all sides by the colors and smells of wildflowers...” but, the zoologist notes that the tick’s body does not allow for any of these perceptions that would derive from human imagination of a new experience. Every example of how we might assume a tick would *feel* comes down to perceptions that it does not have, “one might reasonably expect that the tick loves the taste of the blood, or that she at least possesses a sense to perceive its flavor. But it is not so” (46). While the tick cannot participate in sensory observations in the same way that humans do, Agamben makes an interesting conclusion, that the tick actually participates in a “passionate relationship the likes of which we might never find in the relations that bind man to his apparently much richer world. The tick *is* this relationship; she lives only in it and for it” (47). How can this be so? The tick is only able to perceive the function

that she is meant to live for and that allows her to live—to drink blood. In a similar way, the Binewski freaks live—are born even—for interactions with an audience. They are able to survive because of the income from their shows as well and Olympia mentions multiple times how her family tends to give Binewski babies away that look too human. Olympia herself, understands that she was close to being abandoned if it were not for her strong voice, that could be used to attract audiences to her more talented sibling's shows (8).

Even long after the sideshows, after almost all of her family are gone and Olympia is successful on her own, she does not lose the wish to be even more special, to be have even further differentiation from the norm. As her daughter, Miranda, confides to Olympia that she is struggling with the decision to rid herself of her one physical deformity—her tail—Olympia surprises Miranda with her reaction to her question:

‘What I’m asking is, am I crazy to have this liking for my tail?...You must have wished a million times to be normal.’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘I’ve wished I had two heads. Or that I was invisible. I’ve wished for a fish’s tail instead of legs. I’ve wished to be more special.’ (Dunn 34)

Later in the novel, even once Olympia no longer relies on her freakishness for survival and there are no more shows or audiences, she still longs for her body to have power of the particular over the average human. She wants her body to act as a tool to allow her to climb an invisible division between the norm and over to the fantastic from which she was raised.

Olympia and her siblings were raised to use their bodies to work for a living. From the time they were babies, they were the head liners of the family Fabulon. They are hyper aware of

what their bodies can do for them and how to use them to aid in survival. In *The Use of Bodies* Agamben opens his chapter, “The Animate Instrument and Technology” with a discussion on Heidegger and equipment. For Heidegger, tools have value in what they can do. However, a tool can have multiple functions with multiple levels of significance. Agamben uses peasant’s shoes as an example. Compared to other common tools and utensils, “to the peasant shoes there belongs the magical power, for the person—or to the woman, since it is a question of a peasant woman—who uses them, of disclosing her world, conferring meaning and security on it” (66-67). Shoes in themselves are valuable to help us walk without hurting our feet, but for the peasant, shoes become even more significant, as they arise as a crucial tool, a thing of delicacy and grace. Shoes become more valuable to the peasant than many of other tools that an average person may take for granted. The peasant has less, and therefore places greater value on their tools, and especially those that ease pain. Hence, the Binewskis are aware that their freakish bodies are tools, but they too, transcend instrumentality, because they also find their unique physical traits beautiful. The Binewski children cannot be mass produced, instead, they are loosely engineered. They are experiments, and Al Binewski’s method seems to be trial and error. He does not try to recreate a prior success. Instead, he only attempts to replicate and increase the degree by which his creations divert even farther from the norm. This distance, being human and yet still differentiated from average form creates an oddity, which can be appreciated as beauty.

Agamben’s further exploration of the idea of the human as an instrument is particularly important for EXPLAIN FURTHER as he deciphers Heidegger. He describes how equipment, “opens to the human beings its world” and at the same time, human beings rely on equipment’s, “‘serviceability,’ and only by means of it do they enter into their world. In this sense, the relation with equipment defines the human dimension.” (68). Agamben’s analysis of Heidegger asks to

search for a point when the human being truly interacts with the world. Do human beings break free from mere serviceability? Agamben and Heidegger attempt to prove that humans do transcend an existence focused on survival toward one that encounters beauty and is beautiful. Dunn's freaks to the audience are like shoes to a peasant. They are scarce, yet crucial for understanding and being a part of the full world, which includes hybridity, mutation, and engineered creations. Beauty is in the strange, the bold, the unexpected, for Dunn's freak show family.

Dunn's novel intensifies the distortion of the beautiful, purposeful life. While the Binewski children's bodies make them appear bestial, they also embrace the contradiction of the internal animal/logical duality. They believe that their unique bodies are closer to works of art than the average shaped humans who attend their shows. Even though it is the children's bodies that act as their tools for their survival, the sideshow becomes the world in which their bodies relate, where they make sense, and where they thrive. Their bodies also create the freak show and power the business that is the Binewski Fabulon. The freakish body as equipment in *Geek Love* takes an unexpected route from mere livelihood to a stage of truth, where the freaks can prove that the grotesque is the beautiful; their bodies and lives are works of higher art.

Although Olympia and her siblings appreciate and love the particularity that their bodies give them and use it as a productive tool for their survival, they still are not safe from living an enslaved life. In *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben moves his focus from equipment to technology which is "nothing other than a human action directed at a goal" (68). Therefore, technology is a movement, an expense of human energy to solve problems. The issue is whether or not technology is an action that will help the conflicted human appreciate the beautiful life—to both appreciate the world and technology itself, he argues, does not lead to freedom: "slavery is to

ancient humanity what technology is to modern humanity: both, as bare life, watch over the threshold that allows access to the truly human condition (and both have shown themselves to be inadequate to the task, the modern way revealing itself in the end to be no less dehumanizing than the ancient)” (Agamben 78). Slavery involves an inability to interact freely with the natural world. While the Binewski family appreciates their bodies, they rarely leave the freak show. They choose to remain in a version of the world that seems adequate to accept and protect them, rather than enter the wider world where they would find openings to new experiences beyond their instrumentality and their placement on the stage.

Posthumanism seeks to re-analyze the human connection to the animal as well as the human interest in and relation to technology, “The slave is, on the one hand, a human animal (or animal-human) and, on the other hand and to the same extent, a living instrument (or an instrument-human)” (78). Here, Agamben adds yet another layer to the conflicted human being beyond the animal/logical conflict, insofar as the human “relationship with nature is no longer mediated by another human being but by an apparatus, human beings have estranged themselves from the animal and from the organic in order to draw near to the instrument and the inorganic to the point of almost identifying with it (the human-machine)” (79). The final important connection and third identity that butts against the human identity in Dunn’s novel is the category of the cyborg. While the human-machine introduces yet another conflict in the human identity along similar lines as the animal-human, modern society has widely embraced technology to fix, enhance, and change the makeup of the human body. From cellular devices manufactured to increase the ease for communication and access to information to medical advancements, technology is constantly interacting with the human body. Donna Harroway calls the twentieth-century, “a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of

machine and organism” (150). The digital tools we use daily become a part of our consciousness and our body, as the smartphone has become a crucial piece of the human body. When missing, bodies that are used to having access to the mobile phone as a tool to perceive information have a similar reaction to a phantom limb. Although, Merleau-Ponty writing in the 1900s would not have known about modern technology, his observations on the phantom limb are important here.

Harroway’s thinking on the concept of the body is very much in the tradition of Merleau-Ponty and Agamben as she considers the conflict between machine/human. She argues for humans to move on from traditional ways of thinking about the mind-body problem and allow themselves to feel “*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction” (150). Harroway believes that the cyborg generation will evolve to accept the inherent divisions within human identity and erase the notion that there is one natural, human identity that is distinct from the animal and the machine (150). She does this by using modern technology as a mode to further her argument, ultimately, feminist call for economic equality. She re-envision the structure of the human body with cybernetic principles, “It can even be argued that biology has ceased to exist and that the organism has been replaced by cybernetic systems” (57). Harroway asks her readers to view the body as a complex relation of systems rather than the more straightforward biological description of muscle, bone, and tissue. As future generations learn the benefits of creating hybrid beings, made of flesh and metal, thinking with both the mind and the computer, the definition of human identity will change. Accepting the cyborg moves humanity closer to appreciating and accepting divergent bodily forms as well, in other words, as technology assimilates as a crucial extension to the natural body, humanity will come closer to understanding the what it is like to be a freak. Accepting the inherent divisions of the human identity: the logical, the animal, and the machine, is an acceptance of the freak.

Accepting the cyborg as a part, or even, the future of humanity forces us to question which aspects of the machine mind are useful and which may be dangerous. An uncountable number of science fiction novels and films warn that the programmed mind may distrust ethics in lieu of a more logical and structured world, often without human spontaneity. Harroway notes that in our time of intense, technological innovation, it is already difficult to tell the cyborg from the human. Where once it was impossible for a person to be truly tricked by the machine, “Now we are not so sure. Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed...Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (152). Harroway’s description of modern technology portrays disturbed and fearful reactions to both modern machines and the people who live through them. This is reflective of the general distrust and confusion over which emotions and actions are inherently human and inherently machine. Interaction with machines decrease the necessity for humans to move and work and provide virtual space where the mind can play and interact with very little interaction from the body. Chatrooms, video games, and social media create external worlds that do not require much movement from the body other than mouse clicking, key typing, and button pushing. Even though this is not the world directly discussed in Dunn’s novel, they still depend on scientific discoveries of the modern era. Likewise, machines take on more active roles within the world automatically. Humans can decide on settings and let them run on their own, whether that’s cleaning our carpets, navigating directions, or paying our bills. While these machines enhance our lives, it is still shocking to realize when that our machines are almost as active in the world as we are. It is equally startling to find humans who are hermitic, emotionless, and logic-

oriented. These robotic people are not cyborg physically, but emotionally. And this breed of technologic humans have the chance of proving science fiction to be true.

A new danger threatens the Binewski children's existence in their protected, freak show world. For most of their lives, Al Binewski has filled the role of both ringleader and father, as well as genetic engineer and nurse for any ailments that his family of employees encounter. As they grow older, Arturo gains power both over his audiences and his family and begins to make decisions for the family business. He hires a doctor to join their caravan. Al Binewski had always treated illnesses of his sideshow family and, "fancied himself a healer" (118), but Dr. Phyllis introduces modern medical technology to the show. Olympia and her sisters are instantly uneasy in the doctor's presence, "'I think she's creepy,'" Ellie says (120). This statement is significant, coming from a girl who has two heads and often feeds tigers and lions from her hand. Doctor P is first described as the "white lady" as she completely covers her body "in white—the uniform, the shoes, stockings, gloves, and of course the snug cap and the face mask. Only her glasses were neutral, clear, the eyes behind them blurred by their thickness" (119). While it seems that the doctor may have a reason for her attire, attempting to hide some horrible scar or deformity, Dunn makes it clear that Doctor P. looks completely normal without her uniform. Instead, she chooses to hide herself and presents herself as an amorphous, white figure. She also lives, works, and stay almost exclusively in her laboratory trailer. When Arty tries to have Olympia get her to talk about herself, conversation is almost impossible. She rarely speaks but in "rigid orders...Her voice scratched out of the speaker" from her trailer (123). Dr. P. is obsessed with order and cleanliness as well, and forces Olympia to package and re-package something as in consequential as her trash like a paranoid program. She is the most inhuman of all the non-freaks in Dunn's novel. She lives and thinks like a machine, even when it comes to her own body.

Years later, Olympia finds a news article that describes Dr. P.'s first major experiment, a "major abdominal surgery" that she performed on herself to remove what she thought was a bugging device, "implanted next to her liver by an unnamed undercover organization" during college (124). Arturo is impressed by her surgical prowess and passion for bodily experimentation. While Al Binewski focuses on the creation of what he would consider a *natural freak*, or own born freakish of flesh, it becomes clear that Dr. P. is only concerned with creating, adding, and cutting from natural bodies to serve an end—sometimes their own, and sometimes Arturo's. The doctor herself does not seem to be so concerned with the final creation or with proving and medical theories, instead, she loves the process of surgery. She does not seem to rise above what Agamben considers instrumentality either in her purpose or personality.

Dr. P.'s first creation for the Binewski Fabulon is the horse with no feet, a present Arty offers his twin sisters for their birthday. The horse could no longer walk on his damaged hooves, and Dr. P. replaced the horse's feet with four "rubber-padded half-leg stumps" (142). In Dunn's novel the horse represents the possibility for mechanical manipulation of the body. While Al and Lillian cheer on Dr. P.'s success at creating a new creature, and saving the horse from his painful disfigurements, Olympia and her sisters are wary of the horse's happiness. It's Elly who realizes what Arturo is looking to prove by bringing Dr. P. into their world; "'So this is what it's going to be like,' she said. Her voice was as dry as the sand that stretched to the sad edge of the sky" (143). He wants is interested in improving his method of transportation and wishes to walk on his own, without humping across the ground or being pushed in his wheel chair. For the first time, he tests technology to see if it can help him gain more power than his freakish body already allows. In this moment, he hopes to gain the love of his sister, Iphy, but ultimately, it fails.

Even though Arturo never uses Dr. P.'s prosthetics to change his form, Dr. P. does ultimately create a cyborg. While it has already been mentioned, it is important to clarify that a cyborg is not solely a machine, and are distinct from robots, designed to complete specific tasks that are sometimes built to look and act human. A cyborg is a human who has enhanced their body using technology to be able to complete certain tasks better than they could otherwise. This kind of body is of particular interest to posthumanism, because cyborgs further push against the limit of the human toward the object and push the object closer to being human. In her essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" Donna Harroway employs the cyborg as an "ironic political" tool and defines it as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (149). Rather than being purely machine, a cyborg is instead a human who participates in transhumanism through mechanical means. While it's unclear whether or not having an implanted pacemaker is enough to call a person a cyborg, there is a legal precedent for that distinction. The cyborg poses an important question—when does a human change into something else with surgery, amputation, or prosthetics?

Part one of this thesis recounts one of the most gruesome sections of Dunn's novel, the shooting in the grocery store parking lot, where Oly, Elly, Iphy, and Arturo are attacked by a gunman. The shooter is sent to a mental hospital and eventually returns to his house, shoots his wife with a shotgun and turns the gun on himself (215-217). But he doesn't die. Instead, modern medicine somehow saves him. As a result, he becomes an awkward contraption. With most of his face gone, his is half tubes and bags of liquid powered by a squeezable air pump. In public, he wears a covering over his horrible face and is forever after called "the Bag Man" (217). The Bag Man is a freak both because his physical body is mangled and altered forever after his many

surgeries, and because he is a visible failure of death. The lingering feeling of death surrounds him as his IV-like bags dangle in place of his face. He is a walking hospice, only alive with the help of machines that are now part of his body. The Bag Man is the human cyborg, part man, part tube and machinery. In *What is Posthumanism?* Wolfe notes that critics must transform their understanding of the human from the mind to include the ways in which the body and the artificial parts of the body “bring forth a world” and speaks to “the evolutionary history and behavioral and psychological repertoire of the human itself” (25). Dunn’s character, the Bag Man, exhibits the next step in human evolution, surpassing the historical animal-human relationship toward what will ultimately be the human descendent, the immortal, the cyborg. His prosthetic body defies the old world of blood and flesh, and “brings forth” a new definition of life, forever after carried forth by machines.

While Dr. P.’s work seems like something only a futuristic machine could accomplish, real scientists have made comparable advances as they are learning how to control the genes that act as the overseeing engineers of body construction. Michael Levin is a scientist at Tufts University whose goal is to prove how “bioelectric signals surging through and among our cells act as an instruction to kick-start gene expression” (1). “In doing so, he has created a startling Island of Dr. Moreau zoo of freaks. He forced tadpoles to grow an eye on their gut, induced frogs to sprout six legs; and caused worms to grow two heads, which, when severed, will grow back just like a salamander’s severed tail—all by manipulating the faintest of bioelectric signals” (1). These kinds of experiments would not surprise Al Binewski. While Levin’s research ultimately focuses on discovery of how to enhance the human body with animal traits like that of a salamander, his focus is in creating organisms that can self-repair. Al’s experiments, although he does create salves and seems to be the doctor for his tribe of carnival workers (quote from book),

the majority of his experiments are unable to heal or extend the life of his subjects. Instead, his experiments ultimately harmed his wife, Lillian, as she is later cared for by Olympia in secret, disoriented and blind as she is. Rather than attempting to reactivate deadened limbs with metals objects, batteries like had been done in the past, Levin “is the first to precisely tweak bioelectric signals at the cellular level” meaning, he uses the natural machinery on which bodies are already built, rather than introducing foreign machinery (1).

Experiments like Levin’s almost seem closer to wizardry than medical science. While Dunn’s Bagman and horse with prosthetic legs are miraculous, they still follow a semi-realistic narrative about modern technology. Arturo, Olympia, Iphy, and Elly are freaks, but believable as eugenic experiments. Throughout the book, Dunn stretches the human body in almost every possible direction, manipulating its form, and drawing the body into the bestial and mechanical aspects of human identity. The youngest Binewski child takes the human body a step further, beyond the power of advanced technology, into fantasy. Fortunado, or Chick, as his family calls him, does not look like a freak. In fact, Olympia remembers how her parents almost gave up the baby, who “had a close call in being born to apparent normalcy,” a death sentence for a Binewski child (8). On the very night they choose to leave him on a doorstep, Chick displays his true power—a combination of telekinesis and telepathy—the infant raises his mother into the air and pulls off her brassiere with his mind, eager for a last feeding. It’s not long before Al realizes “‘He’s a keeper, darling. He’s the finest thing we’ve done! He’s fantastic” (71). As he grows, Al is tempted to try many different acts for Chick, but it becomes clear that he is too powerful to display to the world, and is in constant danger of being taken by scientists interested in his powers. Chick has the ability to control objects with his mind, and throughout the novel, practices his art until he can also control the sensations and internal processes of other characters.

Because he is so in tune with the bodies of other people and animals, he is tortured by their pain, and focuses his mental powers on easing their suffering. Ultimately, Chick replaces Dr. P. as he is able to not only move large objects and people, but also molecules, atoms. He is able to focus on the interior of animal and human bodies. Dr. P. unknowingly gives him enough knowledge to take over her job. This is orchestrated by Arty, who wants Chick out of the spotlight and put to use. It was Chick who replaced general anesthesia for the horse with rotten feet: “She’s teaching him to be a pain killer...She told Chick about the pain dingus in the horse’s brain, drew pictures, and had him fool around inside until he figured out how it worked” (143).

Dunn incorporates Chick as the next level freak—the human with powers even beyond that of the cyborg, an advanced form of being who can accept Nagel’s challenge to understand the experience of others and animals. By incorporating fantasy into her novel, Dunn succeeds in avoiding an obvious commentary on biology and technology alone. She surprises not on the reader, but the Binewskis as well with the introduction to Chick’s powers. Fantasy opens even more the field of manipulation of the human body. Dunn imagines the next step in human evolution. Her goal is to stretch out what the human body can be and do. Chick is the most empathetic character in the novel as he has the ability to feel the pain and joy of other beings, “...Chick himself had only one ambition and that was to help everybody so much that they would love him,” but he is also the most dangerous of the Binewski freaks (92). Although Arty was jealous of Chick, he predicts the end of the Fabulon and Binewski family as he yells, “Can’t anybody see but me what he [the Chick] is? What he’ll do to us? He’ll end up smashing this whole family like an egg if we’re not careful...” he’s “As innocent as an earthquake” (103). Chick’s power for empathy makes him the most human out of Dunn’s freaks, but he is still the ultimate cause of destruction. Introducing Chick into the freak show adds a level of abstraction

that asks the question: how extreme can the body differ in function and still be human? And asks this question afresh, rather than stopping at technology, the cyborg, who already walks within modern society.

Artificial reproduction is an example of modern transhumanism as human beings move away from natural reproduction through modern techniques such as surrogacy, in-vitro, and even genetic selection. No longer, does the sperm and egg need to reside within the human body, instead, it is becoming normal to begin the reproductive process outside of the body itself. In both Olympia's youth and her adulthood, she believes that her family is inherently better than the average human because of their exceptional bodies, but she distinguishes her family from self-inflicted freaks; "Hunger artists, fat folks, giants, and dog acts come and go but *real* freaks never lose their appeal" (278). The cyborg then, may not impress Olympia as much as her own siblings, but the freakish body itself, recognizes the potential and the need for additional tools than the normal human body.

Olympia believes that her genes contain a passionate connection to her siblings and a heritage of freaks. As she dances on the stage of the Glass House Club, she knows, "...I win out by nature, because a true freak cannot be made. A true freak must be born" (20). Even though her father created his children with genetic experimentation, Olympia has pride that they were all born to be unique, rather than having artificial alterations after birth. However, Olympia herself, conceives her own child without sexual contact. She uses a new form of in-vitro that incorporates Chick's focused powers. Olympia asks him to impregnate her with his Arturo's sperm after she has realized she is unlikely to find any other man to love; "'Chicky, listen. Remember how you used to pick pockets? Well, you know the sperm in Arty's balls?' I had his attention at least. 'Could you move that sperm—the wiggly little things—could you move them into me and get

‘em into the egg thing in me so I could have a baby like Iphy’” (297)? Because Chick has already been able to complete hundreds of surgeries with only his mind, Dunn makes the fantasy of Chick’s powers feel like medicine. It’s not surprising that he is able to facilitate life with his mind as well. Chick’s ability to fertilize Olympia with their brother’s child tangles even further our understanding of ‘natural’ birth as opposed to an engineered human. Believing in Chick’s powers make it easy to believe that he would even have known which sperm and which egg to choose to create the most beautiful combination that would result in Miranda, the child whom Olympia loves so dearly.

Dunn accomplishes pushing the human body beyond the traditional and modern convolutions of the animal, the natural, the logical, and the machine. Chick’s birth breaks into the realm of fantasy, the incomprehensible power of the human body to control the construction of other objects and beings without direct touch. Chick becomes much like Nagel’s example of the bat, with ability to perceive more using methods that are not accessible to humans or technology. And in doing so Dunn surprises the reader with additional questions about the human experience. Either Chick is superhuman, with enhanced ability for empathy and understanding, or, he is less human as his powers have already broken an inherently human trait Agamben and Harroway believe we must embrace—a perplexing, multilayered existence, interweaving the animal, the logical, and the machine.

Death and Identity: Probing the Extremes

Freak shows are intriguing to audiences because they create a space where they are free to stare at objects of fear, disgust, and curiosity and wonder at the same time. *Geek Love* embraces this complexity of emotion and inter-personal relations that arise from freak shows. While the Binewski children were raised to believe that their unique bodies make them superior to people with average bodies, they are simultaneously aware that their audience comes and returns again because they remind the audience members of their own mortality. As a teenager, Arturo tells his sister Olympia that he reads horror novels because they help him create a better show for his audience. Arty explains that horror novels “are written by norms to scare norms. And do you know what the monsters and demons and rancid spirits are. Us, that’s what. You and me... These books teach me a lot. They don’t scare me because they’re about me” (46). Most of the Binewski children have a talent for taking advantage of the way their audiences react to the sight of their bodies, but Arturo is the strongest at understanding the underlying emotions that draw average people to him. While his sisters more often attempt to make people love them in spite of and for their freakish bodies, Arturo controls his audiences by making them *need* him, as an intermediary between life and death.

The cult that develops around the fascination of Arturo’s flippered body, the Arturians, pushes the narrative to focus on a new level of understanding about the human body. The cult members are in awe of Arturo’s limbless body and how it is able to survive. The extreme manipulation of the human body no longer is limited to the freaks themselves as Dunn draws out the deep, dark fears and grievances that the average person feels about their own body. Within the stage of the freak show, the Binewski family and their audience ultimately confront death in

addition to curiosity and fear. Dunn employs multiple emotional entry points to death as she describes the extreme differentiation of the freakish body from the norm: disgust, change, and sacrifice. Dunn explores questions of humanity through created humans, freaks who were not meant to be alive without the extreme manipulation of the body during Al Binewski's experiments.

In his book *On Disgust*, Aurel Kolnai explores the connections that humans make to disgusting objects and how an encounter with a disgusting object can reveal more about how humans interact with the world. His observations about the emotion of disgust show how this reaction to unpleasant forms is connected to, and reminds humans of death. Kolnai engages in a posthuman conversation, a phenomenological investigation that he conducts in hopes to understand more about the human identity through pathways previously ignored. A freak always ignites some level of disgust as the viewer observes a body that seems unnatural, displaced, or bestial. Olympia feels the reaction of disgust daily as she hides in her goat wig, big sunglasses, and long coats (12-13). She learns as a child, that the shape of her body would be disturbing to the average person, "the mechanics of my life were not going to run on the physics that ruled the twins or Mama in her day...If I loved it wasn't the same as Iphy's love or the love of bouncy girls in the midway" (287). Olympia is aware that her form denies her many of the opportunities and relationships available to other women who may be considered beautiful, and that her mere presence ignites disgust rather than wonder as the Binewski philosophy predicts. But Kolnai describes the reaction of disgust as a more complex emotion than just a knee-jerk reaction to ugliness.

Disgust, instead, can also repel humans by reminding our own bodies of death at seeing a living freakish body. Kolnai describes types bodies and objects that also have a "surplus of life

[and] may be either a matter of some more or less exaggerated aspect of a still existentially coherent individual life (a gross, undignified, as it were perspiring, steaming impulse of life), or the *danse macabre* of living matter occasioned by the coming to an end of a real existence as a personal being: decay, repulsion, and the secretion of substance” (72). Here, Kolnai understands disgust as a reaction to death as well as to life, to too much life, to an overbearing life, or to a show of life that welcomes its audience toward death. Arturo’s followers are first attracted by the same features that Olympia loves about her brother, his strength, confidence, and the way he is so wonderfully mobile in water, while he is forced to crawl, legless on land. Arturo’s freakish body in particular, is an example of how being quadriplegic—a condition that is considered one of the ultimate forms of the handicapped—can hoist him to a position of power. Even in his condition, Arturo is able to control hundreds of followers and he feign a serene demeanor. The way that Arturo’s act disgusts his audience and ultimately his followers, doesn’t just remind his audiences of a decaying body, with pieces missing, but one that is at peace in his decomposition.

Kolnai’s description of “The disgusting object” reveals that sometimes it does “not hold before our eyes an hourglass but a distorting-mirror; it shows us not a skull in its dry eternity but rather precisely what no longer attaches to the skull and is still a matter of fluid decay” (78). While there are many things that can be disgusting, Kolnai recognizes that part of the fear of the disgusting object is that it makes clear the active decomposition of the mortal object and viewer. Arturo attempts to control such a reaction of disgust as his audiences view his performance. His goal is to change their recognition of the decomposition of his body to a recognition of his power over this decomposition. Ultimately his followers wish to live a peaceful dissipation, as they choose to relinquish control of and parts of their physical body—fingers, toes, legs, and arms—to Arturo’s will.

While most of the novel is described from Olympia's perspective, the activation of the Arturian cult calls for another narrator, an outsider who is not under Arty's spell. Dunn includes private journal entries of Norval Sanderson, a reporter who is intent on writing about the Arturians and understanding why they are so willing to become quadruple amputees. Sanderson is a national reporter for a magazine called *Now*. Having written previously about "wars, treaties, executions, and inaugurations for two decades" he tries to understand Arturo's philosophy and psychology as well and ultimately creates a small rivalry between Arturo and himself. Sanderson documents Arturo's movement as well as the happenings within the cult. Arturo seems to believe that the Arturians listen to him because they fear their own normality. He tells Sanderson, "I get glimpses of the horror of normalcy. Each of these innocents on the street is engulfed by a terror of their own ordinariness. They would do anything to be unique" (223). Whether or not the Arturians hope to be in some way special, it is clear that they are discomforted in their pre-Arturian, average lives and think that they can make their lives better by losing parts of their body. Sanderson describes the cult as a "quasi-religion cult making no representation of a god or gods, and having nothing to say about life after death. The cult represents itself as offering earthly sanctuary from the aggravations of life" (227). Even though Dunn preps the reader for disgusting aspects of the freakish body and violent actions taken against it in the first two hundred pages of the novel, the introduction to the Arturian cult expands the realm of the sideshow to the entire world. It opens the reach of the Binewski Fabulon by readdressing it as a safe haven for average people as well as the freak show family and their employees. Ultimately, Dunn addresses the question of humanity in relation to the human body, exposing how each body is game to become in some way freakish, and how everyone has what Kolnai calls an "intention towards death" (75). This intention goes further than the aging toward death. The trajectory

toward death is not just a physical decomposition. The mind also yearns for disintegration and distraction from life itself.

The motto of the Arturians becomes “Peace, Isolation, Purity” and is quickly shortened to “P.I.P” (227). The cult ranks its members by the amount of time they remain loyal and rewards them with amputations and slave-like workers (227-228). Dr. P. is the over-worked surgeon, who quickly tires of merely amputating toes and fingers. Like a machine, she yearns for efficiency and would rather complete the amputations at once. She asks Sanderson, “Why wait?...Why itch in places you’ve no longer got? Cut once! Cut deep! Cut where it counts” (272)! Dr. P. makes it all too clear what the ultimate goal of the Arturians actually is—to find peace in death and relinquish of the body altogether. The example of the Arturian cult helps to truly describe a fundamental drive behind human disgust. Kolnai explains that disgusting things often have a “surplus of life that is here so pronounced we were to become caught, as it were, in a short-circuit towards death, as if this intensified and concentrated life should have arisen out of an impatient longing for death, a desire to waste away, to over-spend the energy of life, a macabre debauchery of matter” (74). The freak is often a surplus of limbs, of angles, a distortion of form, size, and ultimately an active example of the malleable body, how it eventually will shrink and curls into its coffin. Even Olympia fears that her own freakishness will wear on her daughter Miranda should she tell her the truth about her heritage, “I can’t be sure what it would do to her to know her real mother. I imagine her bright spine cringing and slumping and staying that way. She makes a gallant orphan” (12). The fear of contamination through the mere sight of the freakish body, or a connection to it elicits fear of an expedited route toward death.

The existence of freakish bodies prove that the templated, average-shaped living body is not stable. This unsettling thought leads to an acknowledgement of death even while viewing

life. Kolnai acknowledges that this “passing into death through the culmination of life has a character which is peculiarly distorted in comparison with simple dying or ceasing to exist. It is as if we acquire a fascination, as is often the case with disgusting objects, with a kind of vitality somehow conjured up within the framework of death” (74). Death actively changes the body, whether we pass from a heart attack or a car wreck there is movement, distortion and transformation happening to the body.

It is an old cliché that we are always in the process of death, but the Arturians seek peace in this process. While humans normally do not want to acknowledge death, the awareness helps the coping process for Arty’s followers. A famous distinction made by Heidegger is that humans do differentiate themselves because they are conscious of awaiting death, “And other things – animals, plants, stones and planets – are ‘temporal’ in precisely the same way. But what makes the temporality of human beings special, one might say, is that, as well as being in time in the way other things are in time, human beings are also conscious of time and take account of time” (Heidegger 155). Because humans understand that they will die, it may in some way prove their humanity over other beings in the world. But the freakish body forces a reoccurring acknowledgement of death as their bodies fight for survival, rather than a conscious understanding better kept in the back of the mind. What Dr. P. doesn’t understand is that it is the gradual loss of pieces of their body that is reassuring to the Arturians. They continue to make small choices, prescribed to them by rules of the cult, and take small steps toward death rather than sudden expiration. Kolnai and Dunn prove that the process of dying is disgusting, but also riveting. It is an experiment in the incredible number of transformations the human body can make—the sheer mass that can be lost and still be living. The reader wonders as the pages go on,

how much further Dunn will go until the Arturians disappear completely? And when peace is ultimately found?

While the Arturians choose a more obvious route toward death, the Binewski freaks also invoke recollections of death because their bodies are shaped in such ways that they look almost inhuman. To what extent do the Binewski children move closer to death as their bodies further stretch the human identity? Death, for the human, can be physical, but it can also be a shift in identity or an inconsistent understanding of the self-identification as human. The Binewskis regularly differentiate themselves from the masses by referring to freaks as “us” and others as “norms.” The children very rarely imagine continuing their family by marrying outsiders from their freak show, but more significantly, their first choice for companionship and propagation is usually within their own genetic line. Olympia decides to have her baby with her brother, Arturo’s sperm. Iphy imagines marrying Arty just as Oly does. And Arty seems intent on controlling and keeping his sisters away from other men entirely. Once Arty finds out that Oly is pregnant, his first reaction is to harm her and the baby because he thinks that the baby was fathered by an outsider. Oly wakes from a blow as Arty whacks her with a toilet plunger. He shouts to the rest of the family, “She’s stuffed. Knocked up. The stupid traitor” (303). He only forgives Olympia when he finds out that the baby is his own and allows her to carry it to term (307). Olympia and Arturo value their genes more than anything else and are trained by their parents that if a Binewski is born without freakish qualities, then they are better off dead. Each Binewski child understands, even through whispered stories about their parents, that they were chosen to live because of their deformities. Each of them has beat the threat of death and abandonment, as their parents made the choice to keep them over other Binewski experiments

who were not as lucky. Thus, the Binewski children reach toward life by virtue of their freakishness.

Even though their freakish attributes gave them life, the freakish bodies exclude many human qualities required for social participation with the world outside of the freak show. The present tense sections of Dunn's book display the struggle of the freak in public society as Olympia must to hide to survive in the open, human world. Their venture as children to the store where they are shot at by the Bag Man reminds the Binewski children that they do not belong in social arenas outside of the freak show. Ultimately, the Binewski children are genuinely in threat of death all of the time. Because of this condition, they accept a kind of social death. The ways in which the Binewski children engage in social death and approach the border of human identity present posthuman questions about how humanity is informed by death and how humans define themselves in light of their mortality. While Heidegger differentiates animals as having lesser access to the world because they aren't conscious of their future death, by the very act of courting death, Dunn's freaks make the distinction that they are not animal (116). The Binewski children prove themselves to be closer to human than animal as they actively try to survive the stressors of the social world.

Posthumanism is responsible for the surge of interest in human identity in light of death and along the borders of human existence. In Ian Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology*, he summarizes how the true posthuman thinker would see the world as he quotes Levi Bryant. Instead of understanding the human as a separate, focal point and redeemer of meaning, "a posthumanist ontology is one in which 'humans are no longer monarchs of being, but are instead *among* beings, *entangled* in beings, and *implicated* in other beings'" (16-17). Thus, the Binewski

children attempt to separate themselves from the rest of the world and replace the humanist approach to understanding the world with one where the not-quite human is the creator of reality.

From the Binewskis' perspective, they create a world where their bodies surpass the norm in every way. Early on, Al and Lillian Binewski begin allowing even their failed experiments to perform. Their children don't make it to term, or who survives only a few days after birth, are jarred and preserved to reside as side show residents permanently. The children refer to the tent that holds this display as "the Chute" and "The sign in the jar room was bolted to the wall and had its own spotlight... 'HUMAN,' it said, 'BORN OF NORMAL PARENTS'" (54). The fact that the horrifying forms in the jars were born human, gives them an exalted value over average human babies. While Dunn is attempting to disgust the reader by mentioning the chute she is giving the jarred children, in a way, extended death rights over average human corpses. Cary Wolfe considers thinkers like Derrida and Diamond as he delves into posthuman, ethical questions. He comes to realize that humans "feel a strange kind of responsibility and debt [to the dead] that is unsettling because unanswerable" (94). Even though the children are dead, the Lillian Binewski knows they are valuable and deserve some of the glory that she is able to grant her other children. She can still make them visible, even those that died inside her womb. People pay to see them. They are allowed to be displayed in full view rather than be hidden away in coffins underground or compressed into an urn. Their bodies have the privilege of preservation and continue to awe audiences around the country.

However, Dunn is not encouraging that we preserve our dead and send them on tours across the nation. The Binewski philosophy is tainted with an obsession with death and so is unabashed at this kind of display, but the children grow to fear the Chute as they grow to

understand what it really means. There is a moment when Olympia is so upset that she imagines her own death and how her family would react to it:

I crawled into my cupboard and tried to swallow my tongue or hold my breath long enough to die. I hoped they might give me a half-pint urn and bolt me onto the hood of the generator truck behind Grandpa.

Chick would come to rest his cheek on my cool metal when he was sad. Mama would polish me every morning before she went to the Chute and blink away tears remembering my sweet smile. Then it occurred to me that they might put me in the Chute in the biggest jar of all and I'd float naked in formaldehyde and the twins would bicker over who had to shine my jar. I gave up on dying and went over to blubbering into my blanket instead... (Dunn 172).

Olympia cannot dwell on the fantasy of death, the hope of her family's sorrow at her absence because she knows that in death she is perhaps more likely to be put on display. The Chute is an oddity within their own freakish family. While Lillian still cares for her dead children and places value on them because of their wonderfully deformed bodies, her living children are unnerved by their jarred siblings. There is an understanding that while the jars are treasured, they are also all seen as failure, a loss. Olympia cannot find solace in death because she can only succeed in being a true freak if she is alive. The live freak is inherently more valuable than a dummy or a preserved body, because the living freak proves that the human body can dwell, work, and prosper even when changed. Therefore, the disfigured body is miraculous when it is alive and moving, but it disappoints in some way as part of a failed theorem, or a miscalculation once dead.

As Arturo creates a cult-like religion based on his deformity and his interactions with the world as a limbless man, he reorganizes our understanding of power, strength, and health. He turns previous notions about the disabled on their head. The Arturians believe that reducing their bodies to an almost immobile state and actively expel human anatomical attributes—thumbs, hands, feet, legs, elbows, biceps. The Arturians relinquish their ability to actively enforce and change the world, and instead, find peace in being within it. The final phase of P.I.P, the removal of all four limbs, enacts to understand the world through the lens of alien phenomenology, where the Arturians search for a peaceful existence similar to household objects. Bogost searches as he meditates on the phenomenology of objects, to find whether things that cannot directly interact with us can be considered alive, “The alien might not be life, at all. As Bernhard Waldenfells observes, the alien is ‘the inaccessibility of a particular region of experience and sense’” (34). The Arturians seek to become part of the posthuman world by physically stripping themselves of their ability for humanist interpretation. They must lie flat, and soak the world in. Only after death do we become the quiet objects that can truly listen with the rest of the world.

Dunn does not glorify the Arturians, instead, she presents them as failed posthumanists and alien phenomenologists. To understand their place in the world, they needed to transform physically rather than mentally. The Arturians enact Nagel’s thought experiment of “What it Is Like to Be a Bat” by transforming into the object they want to understand rather than considering its phenomenology. It is as if, instead of trying find peace as humans, they felt they could only do it as objects, by limiting their ability to experience the world, and floundering in it. Freaks, on the other hand, search for that connection to the world in light of their physical deformities. Dunn’s freaks value their unique bodies because they allow them to think differently than the norm. They are forced to create spaces of peace, to work for power, and are more likely to

achieve it because of their difference. However, in the case of Arturo, Dunn reveals how this aggressive method of living and the urge to maintain the freakish genes of the family line, ultimately endangers life.

Dr. P.'s amputee horse with prosthetic legs was an experiment that ultimately allowed Chick and Dr. P. to perform the amputations for the Arturians, but it was also practice for another surgery Arturo had in mind. As mentioned in chapter two, the prosthetic-legged horse is a precursor in Dr. P.'s experimentation to create a human cyborg and the creation of a cyborg itself is an attempt to defy death by replacing the vulnerable parts of the body. It is early in the novel and in the lives of the Binewski children that their eldest brother, Arturo, is already searching for ways to help them continue to survive, and to make use of the malleability of bodies to do so. However, this attempt at the creation of a cyborg also shows how Arturo has an intense awareness of death. Whether his ultimate goal was to become a cyborg, super human or not, the horse was the first time Arturo realized he could use the doctor to remove a part of the body that was unwanted, and retain life throughout the rest. Throughout the novel it is evident that Arty despises any member of the freak show or of the family who is a threat to his station as future manager of the show. The show, for Arty, includes a strict control over the internal and external relations of his family as well. Oly notices how Arty and Elly disagree, and by the time they are teenagers, despise each other. Where Iphy is happy to agree to anything Arty wants, Elly demands to have control over their body, which they already share with one another. Arty's solution to maintain his power and control the twins is to attempt to rid their body of Elly. He asks Dr. P. as they planned the surgery, "What if I was willing to sacrifice one twin to keep the other?" (268) By attempting to remove Elly by a lobotomy, Dunn comments on the human inability to kill part of the self. The Binewskis are used to manipulating their own and other

bodies to achieve greater freaks. Arturo is able adjust his conception of Elly, from his sister to a parasite in order to ask Dr. P. to extract her. The lobotomy to Arturo, becomes a necessary procedure, an act of medical care, rather than attempted murder.

Elly's lobotomy and the aftereffects of this procedure pose posthuman questions about the borderline between life and death. How many inhuman characteristics (those of a high functioning animal, a cyborg, etc.) does a being have to before we can justify an execution? Must the being pose danger to a human being? Dunn provides an example where a character must make this decision when Arturo feels that Elly is dangerous to Iphy and the family as she masterminds their side performance—sleeping with men for money. Once Arturo finds out about their new trade, he assumes that Elly has started this business to sever his relationship with Iphy, “Iphy, tell me. Did she do it to keep you away from me?” (244) and he decides to “get rid of the parasite,” meaning Elly, his sister (269). In *What is Posthumanism* Cary Wolfe describes several posthuman ideas that can help explain how we ought to judge Arturo for his decision to execute Elly. While deciding whether or not humans have a right to kill other species of the world, Wolfe points out that thinkers like Jacques Derrida have offered a new way to consider this question that asks the judge to consider the phenomenology of other species rather than their abilities. Rather than asking questions like: do these species have the ability to do things that we consider to be human? Wolfe offers up a question Derrida asks, namely “can they suffer?” (81). Wolfe notes that this question deal with whether the beings have the ability to do things we consider to be human vulnerability rather than power to do something. This is important because by asking whether something can feel pain or be hurt by human actions requires the human to take notice of commonalities between the human and these species, the “mortality that we share with nonhuman animals...lie at the core of ethics” (81). By deciding to rid Elly of her other half,

Arturo has to reimagine Elly as an inhuman animal, with a dangerous, parasitic relationship for Iphy.

Wolfe notes that whether another being can suffer should force us to think more like Derrida and be aware of “‘our responsibilities and our obligations with respect to the living in general, and precisely to this fundamental compassion that, were we to take it seriously, would have to change even the very basis...of the philosophical problematic of the animal’” (82). While Arturo is forced to undergo an extreme manipulation of the conception of the human to order Elly’s execution, Dunn’s book provides examples that address how humans have an obligation to at least remember the suffering of other beings. A short scene where Norval Sanderson runs into Chick. Just a few pages before the lobotomy, Chick is seen “crushing ants...in the dust,” a common activity for a ten-year-old boy. Children gleefully kill ants, hunt down their tunnels and crush them with their shoes. However, because of Chick’s gift, he is able to hear and he does feel the pain of the ants under his feet. Sanderson quickly learns that Chick is killing the ants out of woeful frustration rather than joy. As Sanderson approaches him Chick stops and begins “wailing like his heart was boiling out through his ears” (263). The pressure of sedating all of the pain around Chick builds up a destructive urge, a cry of suffering and need that eases once life around him is either healed or dead. *Geek Love* makes the reader rethink the distinction between human and animal as Chick is confronted with the answer to Derrida’s question of, “do they suffer?” at every point of the day. He does feel the suffering of other humans and animals.

Ultimately, Dunn’s scene illustrates that living this thought experiment may be too much, as Chick confesses to Sanderson, that he “tries ‘to be good and help but it seems like everything turns out wrong’ and he’s ‘no good to anybody and ends up hurting instead of helping people’”

(263). Chick finds that while his gift allows him to truly understand the experiences of others and animals, he is unable to handle being responsible for limiting the suffering of every living being he comes in contact with. By working with Dr. P. and the Arturians, Chick comes to realize that people seem to be happier when they cannot feel the pain of their surgeries or the emotional pain from interpersonal conflict. Chick tells Olympia that is “Seems like there are a lot of people hurting. Seems like I should put them to sleep” (243). Chick understands sleep, or death, as an existence without pain. However horrifying this may seem, Chick understands death as a way to give another person bodily respite forever, even in the cases when he can no longer focus on their pain in an attempt to sedate it. In *The Gift of Death*, Jacques Derrida explores how the conscious anticipation of death is an important ability that gives humans an obligation toward one another as well as a chance to free the self. The gift can be to one’s self as well as from God, to allow a person to truly accept their self as a being with a right to peace, “only gathering in the preparation for death but when it is ready to receive death, giving it to itself even, in an acceptance that delivers it from the body, and at the same time delivers it from the demonic and the orgiastic. By means of the passage to death the soul accedes to its own freedom” (41). These investigations are very important to partake in the surge of exploration of human identity as posited by posthumanism. If humans share the mortal experience with all other living animals, plants, and objects of the world, then death itself may be the one connecting factor that somehow invites each of us to be responsible for each other and care about the well-being of others, no matter the difference in species, ability, or form.

Dunn incorporates Chick, the Binewski baby with no physical deformities, into the novel to introduce the ultimate freak. He is the most freakish of all, but just because of the extreme power he holds, but because he can truly understand the experience of others. He is the most

alone even though he can hear the inner voices of the world—the thoughts of animals, audience members, and his own siblings. Dunn’s last chapter detailing the Binewski family of the past is called “All Fall Down” and the Binewski is ultimately stripped of the safety of the sideshow (316). Olympia and Chick find Lillian Binewski screaming from inside the twin’s trailer. Iphy has killed Elly after she had slowly gained enough strength to murder their monstrous child, the baby of the Bagman. As Iphy dies from Elly’s wounds Chick fills with not only their pain but his own as he yells “I can’t fix her” (318). He leaves the trailer with Olympia tailing him, running to tell their brother Arty of the tragedy, but ultimately, the shock and pain is too much for Chick and his mind blows up the main tent, the freak show, his father and brother, and then Chick explodes, too (318-319). The outcome is tragic, “Many died. Many burned...all the dark, gaping corpses, in their fiery ballet, flexed and tangled in the dreams of the finders” (319). By including this extraordinary tragedy, I am convinced that Dunn does not admit that even if humans had the ability to truly understand one another that the pain would be too much, that it would be easier to burn everything to the ground than deal with our responsibility toward one another. Instead, Dunn includes this tragedy to show that mortals have an inherent struggle to apply their responsibility to each other and the self in so little time. Derrida analyzes thinkers like Kant, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Levinas, and Patočka, to try to understand how death impacts human identity during life. He comes up with an understanding of death as a concept that is able to explain *Geek Love’s* tragedy:

What gives me my singularity, namely death and finitude, is precisely what makes me unequal to the infinite goodness of the gift, which is also the first appeal to responsibility. Guilt is inherent in responsibility because responsibility is always unequal to itself: one is never responsible enough. One is never responsible

enough because one is finite, but also because responsibility requires two contradictory movements. It requires one to respond to oneself and as irreplaceable singularity, to answer for what one does, says, gives; but it also requires that, being good and through goodness, one forget or efface the origin of what one gives. (Derrida 52)

Here, Derrida explains that human mortality requires that humans be responsible for each other, but the fact that we are mortal also makes this impossible to do accurately. Because of this, humans are wracked with guilt at our inability to ease all suffering but are rewarded with our own death which can free us. A hundred pages before the explosion, young Olympia thinks considers death to be inherently straightforward, “I throw death aside. Death is not mysterious. We all understand death far too well and spend chunks of life resisting, ignoring, or explaining away that knowledge” (240-241). For her, the real mystery is how people build loving relationships during life. For Olympia, the real mystery is not death, but how we should live in a way that others will accept her freakish body as another member of human society that will allow her to share in the responsibility we have toward one another—love.

The freak show creates an opening in the borderland between humanity and the alien world, where freakish bodies are accessible to the masses, and where the masses are accessible to the freak. Bogost as a philosopher, asks the reader to “write the speculative fictions of their processes, of their unit operations...Our job is to go where *everyone* has gone before, but where few have bothered to linger” (34). As Bogost asks the reader to consider the existence of objects, he is also asking us to consider what it would be like to have an existence that is closer to death. However, posthumanism asks us to consider how the death of the human by imaging an existence as an object doesn't necessarily force us to lose anything. We cannot deny that the

human imagination is still human, no matter how hard we try. Instead, by allowing one's self to explore alternate existences without worry of death, or a loss of identity, we can slowly expand our understanding of the human, its relation to other beings and objects, and be closer to truly being part of the world, rather than separating ourselves by looking down upon it.

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