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Law, Culture and the Humanities published online 13 February 2012

DOI: 10.1177/1743872111435189

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Law, Culture and the Humanities
1–22

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DOI: 10.1177/1743872111435189

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Penny Crofts and Honni van Rijswijk

UTS Law School

Abstract

School bullying has been recognized only relatively recently by policy-makers, media and the courts as a serious and widespread social problem. But despite this recent notice, there has been no evidence that techniques adopted to stop bullying have led to anything more than modest success, implying that we need to do more work to unpack and theorize the nature of bullying. In this article, we consider a recent vampire narrative as a story about bullying. We offer an interpretation of this story via the theories of Claudia Card and Jacques Derrida, arguing that together this archive provides a more nuanced understanding of the kinds of damage inflicted by bullying than has been provided by realist or sociological accounts. In particular, it illuminates damage to the morality of the victim, to their soul, which is a kind of damage that has previously not been given great attention. It also highlights the ways in which practices of judgment can become very tangled when trying to resolve bullying situations, making these experiences resistant to the achievement of justice.

Keywords

Bullying, vampire figure, sociological and fantastic horror, Claudia Card, Jacques Derrida, gray zone, moral indeterminacy, transgressive justice.

*I'd say you were within your rights to bite
The right one and say, 'What kept you so long?'*

—Morrissey, “Let the Right One Slip In”

Corresponding author:

Penny Crofts, UTS Law School, PO Box 123, Broadway NSW 2007, Australia.

E-mail: Penny.crofts@uts.edu.au

School bullying has been recognized only relatively recently by policy-makers, media and the courts as a serious and widespread social problem.¹ Sociological studies have highlighted the harmful effects of bullying, recording the fact that repeated exposure has long-lasting effects on its victims – as well as its perpetrators.² But despite this recent notice, there has been no evidence that techniques adopted to stop bullying have led to anything more than modest success.³ There continues to be something difficult about bullying, which limits prevention, judgment and justice. We think we know what bullying is, but there is much about the experience that has been resistant to knowing; this unknowing is evidenced in the law's inadequate response, as well as that of society more generally. We need, then, to do more work to unpack and theorize the nature of bullying. In this article, we consider a recent vampire narrative as a story about bullying. We offer an interpretation of this story via the theories of Claudia Card and Jacques Derrida, arguing that together this archive provides a more nuanced understanding of the kinds of damage inflicted by bullying than has been provided by realist or sociological accounts. In particular, it illuminates damage to the morality of the victim, to their soul, which is a kind of damage that has previously not been given great attention. It also highlights the ways in which practices of judgment can become very tangled when trying to resolve bullying situations, making these experiences resistant to the achievement of justice.

The novel *Let the Right One In* by John Lindqvist was published in Swedish in 2004,⁴ translated into English in 2007,⁵ made into a Swedish film in 2008,⁶ and remade as an American film in 2010.⁷ In all these incarnations, it was described as a work of horror, and

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1. See for example, <http://www.aic.gov.au/documents/1/9/6/{196C613C-E600-4592-9530-31DB7F4BA95F}rip09.pdf> Australian Institute of Criminology, Covert and cyber bullying, Research in Practice TIPSHEET No. 09 February 2010, accessed September 1 2011; http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/reviews_crime_justice/index.php David Farrington and Maria Ttofi 2009. School-based programs to reduce bullying and victimization. Campbell systematic reviews no. 6, accessed September 1, 2011.
 2. Susan K. Egan and David G. Perry, "Does low self-regard invite victimisation?," *Developmental Psychology* 34 (1998), pp.299–309; Ken Rigby, "Peer victimisation at school and the health of secondary students," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 22 (1999), pp.28–34.
 3. Ken Rigby, "Addressing Bullying in Schools: Theory and Practice," *Trends and Issues in Criminal Justice* 259 (2003), pp. 1–6.
 4. Bullying is a particularly appropriate subject of a Swedish novel, as Scandinavian studies led the way in pioneering studies of bullying among boys in the 1970s and 1980s. See, for example, Dan Olweus, *Aggression in the Schools: bullies and whipping boys* (New York: Halstead Press, 1978).
 5. John Ajvide Lindqvist, *Let the Right One In* (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2007).
 6. *Lat den ratte komma in*, Dir Tomas Alfredson, Magnet Films, 2008.
 7. *Let Me In*, Dir Matt Reeves, Hammer Films, 2010. We will refer primarily to the novel throughout our analysis, as the films were mostly faithful adaptations. However, some differences did arise in the films, and where relevant we will analyse these in terms of their consequences for the gray zone and justice.

Lindqvist was compared with the great horror writer, Stephen King.⁸ The central character of the story is Oskar, a 13-year-old boy who lives with his mother in a Stockholm estate. He is horribly bullied by other pupils both in and out of school, experiencing physical and psychological violence that escalates throughout the story. Despite Oskar's various strategies, there is no way out, no way to stop the trajectory of violence. It seems that Oskar's suffering occurs below the radar of his community, or perhaps his suffering is so commonplace – as one of the legions of bullied little boys and girls – that it goes without remark. Eli, a 12-year-old girl, moves in next door, and although she tells Oskar that they cannot be friends, they gradually develop a relationship. The book's logics and aesthetics are firmly planted in the horror genre, as Eli is in fact a vampire, a monster who disrupts and transgresses cherished boundaries between the categories of dead/living, child/adult, and female/male. And there are some scary scenes:⁹ Eli survives by drinking blood, and needs to kill; so she and her partner/father/friend Hakam move to Oskar's town and commit a number of killings. But the novel and films also tell a complex, challenging moral tale, in which the horror comes not only from the monstrous actions and nature of the vampire, but from the *need* for the vampire, as the transgressive figure of justice, to redress a horrific situation of bullying. The vampire marks the contradictions and difficulties of Oskar's situation, and the failure of his community's response to his suffering, in ways that have not been captured by realist representations of bullying. As readers and viewers of Oskar's suffering, we feel the impossibility of Oskar achieving justice or resolution, a feeling that is heightened at the story's moment of judgment, when Eli flies in to save Oskar as he is being drowned by the bullies. Eli's way of saving Oskar is to decapitate his bullies, and although these actions are obviously extremely violent, and possibly excessive, this scene is also triumphant and exhilarating – as readers and viewers, we feel a complicated satisfaction.

Oskar's rescue comes seemingly out of nowhere, at a point when all hope seems lost, not only for his physical and emotional safety, which has been progressively eroded throughout the story, but for his life. Further, the depth of this feeling of complicated satisfaction arises in part because *Let the Right One In* does such a good job of showing the many ways in which Oskar is morally tainted and compromised, and so we sense that we are witnessing not only the saving of Oskar's life, but also of his soul. The horror of the story lies partly in the entanglements of Oskar's situation – and so, at the point of crisis, one way of evaluating Eli's actions is to ask a set of questions concerning the kind of justice that is available for Oscar in the absence of Eli, and the nature of his future without her: Why do Eli's actions feel just? Should we trust this feeling? Should her actions rather be characterized as vengeance? What does it mean that a vampire delivers justice, and what does this suggest about the possibility of justice in the absence of the vampire (in the "real" world)? In considering these questions, we will draw on the work of two theorists, whose work is derived from the contemplation of ambiguous, tangled situations. We begin with Claudia Card's ideas about the "gray zone" from her book *The Atrocity Paradigm*, which she uses to interrogate the complexity of choices and judgments of responsibility

8. For example, the blurb on the back quotes the *Independent on Sunday*: "Reminiscent of Stephen King at his best." John Ajvide Lindqvist, *Let the Right One In* (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2007).

9. See for example, <http://www.imdb.com/video/imdb/vi761004825/>.

under severe moral stress. Card uses the gray zone to explore situations where there is no clarity about right or wrong, good or evil, and where judgment is difficult, if not impossible. Card's theories make visible certain qualities of bullying, clarifying the nature of the harm done, and the suffering experienced, which, she demonstrates, is not solely physical or even psychological, but also gets to the victim's *moral* essence. Victims may physically survive the gray zone, but their self-image may be corrupted, and they bear the burdens of guilt and shame. Our analysis of the gray zone highlights the importance of anti-bullying strategies – but also the difficulties facing those reacting to, or seeking to prevent, bullying. We will then turn to the work of Jacques Derrida to consider the vampire as the transgressive figure of justice who becomes essential in such a zone. Derrida's contemplation of the indeterminacy of justice in his essay "Force of Law" provides a starting point for us to theorize the difficulties of justice in such an ambiguous, shifting space.

I. The Gray Zone

In this section, we argue that *Let the Right One In* provides an in-depth representation of characters, motivations and context in the gray zone, and the audience reaction to the story demonstrates the difficulties, and complexities, of both judgment and justice. In the final chapter of *The Atrocity Paradigm*, Claudia Card constructs the notion of the gray zone to explore situations where victims become implicated through their choices, in perpetrating on others the evil that threatens to engulf themselves.¹⁰ In gray zones, victims of evil are under great stress, and although not altogether without choice, they become complicit in evil-doing. They are implicated in perpetrating on others the evils that threaten or engulf themselves. By the end of *Let the Right One In*, characters make moral choices in complex situations from which there is no apparent escape, and where there is not necessarily any good or right choice to be made. The responsibility of the captive in these gray zones is best described as problematic, rather than as non-existent. Accordingly, gray zones confuse "our need to judge,"¹¹ as it is difficult to determine the terms of evaluation appropriate to judging victims who do bad things in extreme circumstances.

Card's theory draws upon Primo Levi's idea of "the Gray Zone" in *The Drowned and the Saved*, but modifies it in significant ways.¹² Levi did not define the gray zone specifically, but conveyed the idea through the example of Hitler's death camps. Gray zones arose here, Levi argued, when prisoners, already victims themselves, were selected for positions of authority over other prisoners. Prisoner *kapos* (captains) were rewarded, through a temporary reduction of their own torture, for applying the evils of the camps to others. The gray zone arose where the two camps of masters and servants both diverged and converged. Levi stated that this system was designed in an "attempt to shift onto others – specifically the victims – the burden of guilt" and to show that "the Jews, the subrace, the submen, bow to any humiliation."¹³ If *kapos* survived, they bore, in addition

10. Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm: a theory of evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

11. *Ibid.*

12. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage, 1989).

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 52–3.

to the harms and suffering of the camps, the burdens of guilt and shame of what they did to others. Card argues that the concept can be extended beyond the specific contexts that led Levi to articulate it, taking a theory formulated with respect to the Holocaust and applying it to everyday violence such as racism and misogyny. There has been a recent critical turn to use “the everyday” as a problematic, promoting “an ethics and politics of everyday life that is not simply subordinated to sublime, ecstatic, or peak experiences.”¹⁴ By introducing the problematic of everyday, routinized suffering, different injustices become visible from those that are exemplified in limit-experiences such as the Holocaust.¹⁵ This is not to say that it is a simple process to apply the conditions of limit events to everyday life, and Card acknowledges that she risks “misappropriating the experience of Holocaust victims” in doing so.¹⁶ But there are benefits to thinking through the “patterns in the complexity of choices and judgments of responsibility under severe moral stress,”¹⁷ which are present in the everyday, drawing from the conditions of exceptional events, with the necessary proviso that such events have their own particularity. In this case, the goal is to complicate our understanding of the moral choices people make in the oppressive circumstances of bullying, and of the responsibilities victims have to and for one another.¹⁸

Let the Right One In provides a powerful representation of bullying, generated and occurring within a gray zone. Although *Let the Right One In* bears no comparison with the choices that confronted camp or ghetto prisoners, the genocidal foundations of the gray zone are present from the first scene when Oskar contributes to class:

He had put his hand up in class, a declaration of existence, a claim that he knew something. And that was forbidden to him. They could give a number of reasons why they had to torment him: he was too fat, too ugly, too disgusting. But the real problem was simply that he existed, and every reminder of his existence was a crime.¹⁹

This idea that a person has no right to exist is consistent with Arendt’s definition of genocide.²⁰ Throughout the novel it is apparent that there is nothing that Oskar does, or can do, that either produces the bullying, or which can stop the bullying. Neither his passivity nor activity change the situation, as he is simply “marked out for destruction.”²¹ It is his existence that is at fault.

14. Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 15.

15. See for example Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit*.

16. Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm*, p. 221.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. John Ajvide Lindqvist, *Let the Right One In*, p. 10.

20. In the Epilogue to Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), Arendt had the judges say to Eichmann: “you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations...”

21. Desmond Manderson, “Apocryphal Jurisprudence,” *Journal of Legal Philosophy* 27 (2001), pp. 27–59, FN 109.

The gray zone is interpersonal, but also spatial. The events take place in Blackeberg, which is not a village *per se*, but a low-income council housing project that lies northwest of Stockholm, anomalous amongst the middle-class suburbs that surround it. Set in 1982, the failures of the welfare state are apparent in Blackeberg's collection of lonely figures, which include Oskar and his mother. However, the story does not suggest that the inhabitants of Blackeberg are less morally culpable than the norm – the message is not that Blackeberg is aberrant, but that perhaps its citizens are more vulnerable compared to those who live in the surrounding, comfortable suburbs. Although the book, especially, is concerned with the particularity of Blackeberg, this does not take away from the allegorical nature of Oskar's story – that the bullying involved is both specific and universal. In fact, both the book and film combine a number of genres, so that while the story references some of the stock characteristics of the vampire – its aversion to food, need for an invitation, reliance on blood, role as outsider—these are combined with a nuanced rendering of the social environment of Blackeberg, of Oskar's experiences of bullying, and of the developing relationship between Oskar and Eli, to make the story a vampire story, but also more than that. In other words, it becomes an allegory of bullying that is grounded in particularities.²²

The concept of the gray zone clarifies the temporal and spatial experience of bullying, as neither exceptional nor demarcated – it is a pervasive trauma, rather than one confined to a specific event. We tend to think of a victim as someone who has been harmed or killed as a result of a specific event, but the word “victim” also denotes a way of being in the world, a form of subjectivity that goes beyond the role played in any one event. It denotes “a person who has come to feel hopeless and passive in the face of misfortune or ill-treatment.”²³ This idea of harm reflects research in Criminology concerning “hot victims,” as it has been found that, once victimized, people are more likely than non-victims to be revictimized, a risk that increases with further experiences: “the greater the number of prior victimizations, the higher the likelihood the victim will experience future victimization.”²⁴ Once victimized, “people may carry the risk of violence around with them.”²⁵ This finding records the “stickiness” of bullying, which has implications for its victims, who may carry the marks of harm with them, even after they change schools.

In the following section we delineate Oskar's story as an example of the gray zone, and the individual and collective harms that bullying causes. Card argues that there are

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22. For an exploration of the film's relationship to the vampire film genre, to the history of Swedish film, and its many plays on the outsider (including Eli's role as a non-Swedish outsider), see Rochelle Wright, “Vampire in the Stockholm Suburbs: *Let The Right One In* and Genre Hybridity,” *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 1(1) (2010), pp. 55–70.
 23. “Victim noun,” Oxford Dictionary of English. Edited by Angus Stevenson. Oxford University Press, 2010. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. University of Technology, Sydney. 22 June 2011 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t140.e0927190>>
 24. Ken Pease and Gloria Laycock, “Revictimisation: Reducing the Heat on Hot Victims,” *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice* 128 (1999), pp. 1–6, p. 2.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

three elements of the gray zone. First, its inhabitants are victims of evil. Second, inhabitants in the gray zone lack the discretion to walk away. Third, these inhabitants are implicated through their choices in perpetrating some of the same or similar evils on others who are already victims, like themselves. We will explore each of these in turn.

1 Its inhabitants are victims of evil

It may seem extreme to label bullying “evil,” but *Let the Right One In* is a story of the ongoing and escalating victimization of Oskar, which goes beyond mere “badness.” There is no settled definition of evil, but Card asserts that “evils are foreseeable, intolerable harms produced by culpable wrongdoing.”²⁶ Culpable wrongdoing covers situations where human agents either engineer harm, or fail to intervene or prevent harm when they could or should have.²⁷ Card defines the infliction of harm as depriving others of the basics that are necessary to make life possible and tolerable or decent.²⁸ The ringleader of the bullying, Jonny Fosberg, intentionally creates situations to inflict harm on Oskar. With his gang, Jonny holds Oskar’s head down a toilet and flushes, punches him, hits him with sticks, pushes his head into an oncoming train, and attempts to drown him.²⁹ In addition, Oskar suffers fear and unremitting humiliation.³⁰ Finally, Oskar is made complicit in his own harm, an experience that compromises his moral capacity – an issue we will consider later.

2 The victim lacks discretion to walk away

This leads to the second aspect of gray zones outlined by Card: agents lack the discretion and power to walk away.³¹ *Let the Right One In* demonstrates how this exacerbates the intolerability of the harm of bullying. The law is conspicuously absent as a force to adjudicate the bullying – as are the school and Oskar’s family. Oskar cannot leave or resolve the situation in which he is enmeshed. Oskar’s inability to walk away is at times physical, as he is frequently either restrained or surrounded by the bullies. But Oskar also experiences a general psychological and social helplessness – it seems he does not have the knowledge or skills to help himself, and nor can others help him.

As with many victims of bullying, Oskar chooses not to tell his teachers or parents, and this reluctance may be in part due to a perception that there is nothing they can do to assist.³² Oskar’s reasons for not seeking help are persuasive and suggest his inability to escape the situation are not due to any individual choices that he can or should make. Throughout the story, Oskar considers possible avenues of assistance, but ultimately

26. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

28. Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm*, p. 17.

29. John Ajvide Lindqvist, *Let the Right One In*, p. 10.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

32. Australian Institute of Criminology, “Covert and Cyber Bullying,” *Research in Practice Tipsheet 9* (Canberra, Australian Institute of Criminology, 2010).

concludes these will be futile. In the first scene of the novel, Oskar dreams of talking to a police officer who is visiting his school:

Then he would tell him everything. And the policeman would understand. He would stroke his hair and tell him he was all right; would hold him and say ...

“Fucking snitch.”³³

The futility of Oskar’s dream is indicated by the interruption of Jonny Fosberg driving a “hard finger into his side.” This points Oskar to the realization that “Policeman or no policeman, someone would knee him, another pull his underpants up in a wedge.”³⁴

He also realizes he cannot get help from his mother. After Tomas whips Oskar in the face, the bullies fear that Oskar will tell his mother the truth about why his cheek is swollen and covered in blood. But he doesn’t. Even though he imagines that, if he did, they would merge into a blissful grief together, that she would “hug him and hug him and he would sink into her arms, into her tears, and they would cry together,” he also realizes that if he tells his mother, not only would his situation worsen, but it would also reveal his mother’s social powerlessness: she would tell Tomas’s mother, who would do nothing. In the novel and Swedish film, Oskar’s parents are divorced; his mother works long hours to pay for basics, and she has a good relationship with Oskar on the occasions when she is home. The novel and film do not attach any blame to her for Oskar’s bullying and her failure to help. In contrast, the American film portrays the mother as an alcoholic, who is absent even when physically present. The American film thus offers an easier explanation for Oskar’s isolation, whilst the Swedish story and film problematize any suggestion of individual responsibility of the mother and indicate wider social responsibility for a situation of vulnerability. This lack of individual responsibility reiterates the horror of Oskar’s predicament, as a lack of responsibility suggests the lack of any possibility that his mother could help. Oskar is learning helplessness – not only his own, but also that of others who we might otherwise assume would provide assistance, such as parents, teachers, and representatives of the law.

The novel and films also illuminate the strange and simultaneous in/visibility of bullying. In one sense, Oskar’s bullying is not acknowledged as happening – which is a general problem with bullying, despite its recognized ubiquity. The violence Oskar experiences is beyond the reach of law; perhaps it is assumed to be trivial since children are involved, despite increasing institutional and sociological recognition of harms caused by bullying. This may in part be because it is so ubiquitous – it is everyday and regarded as a normal (albeit undesirable) aspect of growing up. It is in some ways children’s business, impervious to the policies and rules of adults, institutions, and societal norms. Although the perpetrators of these harms are children, the story questions the assumption that this reduces the stakes, first because Oskar is also a child, with a child’s resources and strategies, and second, because the extent of harm is so great. At the same time, *Let the Right One In* challenges the idea that bullying is invisible, showing that it is more a

33. John Ajvide Lindqvist, *Let the Right One In*, p. 8.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

case of society refusing to see, or being unwilling/unable to respond. Oskar knows this: he knows that his story of falling off the play structure “didn’t really ‘work,’ but Mum would *want* to believe it.” Oskar’s teacher is also aware of the bullying, offering physical training to strengthen him.³⁵ A teenager, Tommy, also notices that Oskar is being bullied, but asserts his inability to stop the situation:

They would keep beating Oskar until he finished ninth grade. He was the type. Tommy would have liked to do something but once it got started there was nothing you could do. No stopping it.³⁶

The harms of bullying continue not because we cannot see them, but because there are problems in the way we tell the story of bullying: either that we cannot prevent it, and/or that it is trivial. Whilst we are aware of the generalities of bullying, we choose not to know specifics because of the (perceived) pointlessness of assistance. This in/visibility of bullying is another attribute of the gray zone – it is neither seen nor unseen. It is known about and yet ignored.

Oskar is, in fact, highly visible to some. He is marked. It is his very existence that has led to the bullying, and the more he is bullied, the more likely it is that he will continue to be bullied. And yet it is the invisibility of Oskar’s treatment, injuries and suffering that is destroying him. After an early scene of bullying:

He got up and left the bathroom. Didn’t wipe up the drop of blood. Let someone see it, let them wonder. Let them think someone had been killed here, because someone *had* been killed here. And for the hundredth time.³⁷

Oskar has a great need for his suffering to be witnessed, and for someone to understand the nature of his suffering – not just the physical wounds, but the way in which each event is experienced as a form of psychic death. He intuits that he needs a physical metaphor for this suffering – that the only way a witness might understand would be for that witness to see blood and imagine a killing. This in/visibility of bullying exacerbates the harm, because Oskar knows that others are aware of it, and yet do nothing – augmenting feelings of shame, degradation, and helplessness. *Let the Right One In* credibly depicts the reasons why Oskar believes that there is no escape from the bullying, and no possibility of effective assistance.

3 *Corruption and complicity*

Card asserts that the third aspect of the gray zone is that victims of evil with no apparent escape may become complicit with the very evils they have suffered. In other words, victims may do bad things and become corrupted in the process. It is these harms that Card is particularly concerned about, and it is this aspect that makes judgment and justice in the gray zone so difficult. Card starts with the premise that diabolical evil involves

35. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

forcing another to choose between the risk of horrible physical suffering or death on the one hand, and the equally grave risk of severe moral compromise, even moral death, on the other.³⁸

This is stress geared to break the wills of decent people, to destroy what is best in us on any plausible conception of human excellence. For that reason, it deserves to be regarded as diabolical. The devil wants company and is a willing corrupter, plotting others' downfall. This is how evil extends its power.³⁹

For Card, diabolical evil is the corruption of the character of victims. She is concerned particularly with the problem of victims who find themselves drawn into complicity with the very evils that they have suffered. Even if a victim physically survives in these circumstances, they are burdened with guilt, and their souls are damaged. This continuing pattern of victimization suggests that bullying harms the victim deeply, marking them out in a way that has ongoing effects beyond any specific event. Card's theory also helps to articulate what is at stake beyond physical, and even psychological harm. Her focus is upon the destruction of an individual's moral capacity, or, using older language, of a victim's soul:

Only someone who has moral sensitivities can carry the burdens of guilt and the obligations of perpetrators, as well as possess the moral powers of a victim. These are the capacities that hold the promise of disrupting cycles of evil. To destroy them is to destroy this promise as well as goodness in the soul of the individual.⁴⁰

A person with moral sensibilities who is placed in the gray zone suffers not only physical pain and psychological humiliation, but also the agony of "choices" in oppressive circumstances where there is no good choice to make. Thus, moral conscience can be corrupted or destroyed, and this process causes further suffering to the victim. This harm has ramifications not only for the individual, but for the possibility of wider justice – for, as Card points out, the maintenance of moral capacity is necessary for the potential disruption of evil. The lexicon of "soul" harkens back to older notions of a devil or malevolent force interested in the infliction of a particular kind of harm. Even if victims survive the gray zone, they are permanently changed. This aspect of the gray zone is powerfully represented in *Let the Right One In*. The corruption of Oskar can be divided into harm he does to himself, retaliation against his bullies, and harm to unrelated others.

One of the most shocking aspects of the bullying is the extent to which the bullies implicate Oskar in the bullying. The bullying is described as a "game,"⁴¹ with rules of engagement on both sides:

38. Card constructs this notion of "diabolical evil" in response to Kant's denial that evil in human beings was ever diabolical. Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm*, p. 211.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 212.

40. Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm*.

41. John Ajvide Lindqvist, *Let the Right One In*, p. 10.

Theirs was the intoxication of the hunter, his the terror of the prey. Once they had actually captured him the fun was over and the punishment more of a duty that had to be carried out. If he gave up too early there was a chance they would put more energy into the punishment instead of the hunt.⁴²

It is significant that the bullies take pleasure in the hunt, whereas Eli does not – relying on Hakam to hunt, as much as possible, and drinking blood only in order to survive. The purpose of the hunt is to bring pleasure to the hunters, in part out of Oskar's humiliation. Oskar adopts strategies of survival that are soul destroying, including a commitment to doing "whatever it took to survive."⁴³ The bullies present offers or choices that are intended to be unrefusable. To avoid or reduce "punishment," Oskar is told to squeal like a pig:

He wrinkled up his nose like a pig's and squealed, grunted and squealed.⁴⁴

Oskar's destruction of himself, in complicity with the bullies, and his complicity with his own humiliation (causing a kind of psychological death), are some of the most difficult horrors of the story. Oskar participates to avoid extreme physical pain:

Oskar carried on. Shut his eyes tight and kept going. Balled his hands up into fists so hard that his nails went into his palms, and kept going. Grunted and squealed until he felt a funny taste in his mouth ...

He always felt worse when he managed to avoid punishment in that way, by playing the pig, or something else. Worse than if he had been punished. He knew this, but couldn't handle the thought of the physical punishment when it approached. He would rather sink to any level. No pride.⁴⁵

Further, his acts here are acts of self-betrayal. He always feels "worse," afterwards, when he avoids physical pain by "playing the pig, or something else," than if he is physically hurt – but he "couldn't handle the thought of the physical punishment when it approached," revealing to himself that he had "no pride." The terror and humiliation he experiences has led to Oskar's ongoing incontinence. Oskar also goes along with the bullies' demands to avoid them discovering this secret:

If he squealed they would sometimes leave it at that. He put extra effort into it this time, afraid they would otherwise force his hand out of his pants in the process of punishing him and uncover his disgusting secret.⁴⁶

In order to minimize physical and psychological pain, Oskar plays along, inflicting violence and suffering against himself, and providing a consensual veneer to the bullying.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*

This jeopardizes his self-respect, and causes self-hatred. *Let the Right One In* demonstrates the ways in which the gray zone can lead to corruption and diminishment of one's sense of self, through strategies of survival that are in themselves harmful. In *The Atrocity Paradigm* Card asks:

But can one person be both perpetrator and victim? I tend to characterize evils as inflicted on others. Is that overly narrow? Can one do evil to oneself?⁴⁷

He perpetrates harms upon himself to survive bullying, but Oskar's strategies of survival are soul-destroying. These strategies of survival are "chosen," but in circumstances of oppression that are so coercive that the notion of Oskar's responsibility and agency for these strategies is at best problematic. His strategies also render the likelihood of seeking outside assistance (even if it were available and effective) less likely because of feelings of shame and degradation.

Oskar also harms others. By the end of the story, Oskar has hit Jonny with a stick so hard he causes permanent damage to his ear, stolen a knife, shop-lifted lollies, set fire to the school, failed to tell police of his knowledge relating to murders in the area, and pushed a man to his death. This bald summary of Oskar's criminal offences relating to property and person suggest that by the end of *Let the Right One In* Oskar has been corrupted. It also suggests what he might become in the future, in the absence of Eli's intervention. The story details how his actions come about in such a way that our sympathies remain with Oskar.

Oskar's acts of retaliation against his tormentors are most easily justified. This notion of retaliation appears to fit within criminal law notions of self-defense. People acting directly against imminent threats are entitled to argue self-defense, a complete defense in criminal law.⁴⁸ Self-defense requires that an accused must have believed that force was necessary based on reasonable grounds. The fundamental idea is that an accused/victim acted out of fear and necessity, rather than because they *wanted* to inflict violence. The law will often look at the proportionality of the accused's response to danger, and whether or not the accused was responding to an imminent threat to determine if an accused was acting out of necessity or desire. If an accused used excessive force, or was not reacting to an imminent threat, this would suggest that they *wanted* to break the law, rather than that they had to.

However, Oskar's retaliation does not fully conform with the defense of self-defense. His retaliations are not necessarily in response to imminent threats as he premeditates extreme actions that seem more like vengeance than actions based on fear. The first time Oskar meets Eli he is stabbing a tree with a stolen knife imagining that it is Jonny Fosberg:

He would make him plead and beg for his life, squeal like a pig, but in vain. The knife would have the last word and the earth would drink his blood.⁴⁹

47. Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm*, pp. 18–19.

48. *R v. Katarzynski* [2002] NSWSC 613.

49. John Ajvide Lindqvist, *Let the Right One In*, p. 23.

Although the language of Oskar is melodramatic, he is physically enacting his wish to kill Jonny. The idea of making Jonny “squeal like a pig” is a re-enactment of his own humiliation, and possibly, an expression of his desire to kill the part of himself that allowed the humiliation. Oskar’s retaliation challenges some of the assumptions of the defense of self-defense, and the potential for language slippage in the gray zone. In a criminal trial where Oskar had retaliated against his bullies, he would be the accused, and they the victim. Yet we would tend to regard Oskar as victim, and the bullies as perpetrators.⁵⁰ This undermines the security of the victim/perpetrator dichotomy in criminal law doctrine. Of particular importance in the novel and films is that Oskar is only 13 years old.⁵¹ This emphasizes his innocence and the corruption of this innocence.

Oskar’s wish to kill his tormentors is a motif throughout the novel and films. For example, when he is threatened by the gang, he plans to throw a rock in Tomas’ face:

Tomas looked at Oskar as if he were a rat, still alive, writhing in his trap.

‘I think Piggy needs a whipping’.

There were three of them. They had whips. It was a maximally unfair situation.

At this point, he fantasizes throwing a rock in Tomas’ face. He imagines punishment by the adults, and what he would say in response:

I was ... desperate.

But then he admits that

He wasn’t desperate at all. ... They could whip him as long as it gave him the opportunity to smash the rock in Tomas’ disgusting face.⁵²

This scene demonstrates that Oskar is old enough to be aware of the language of self-defense. He constructs a story in his head, of acting under compulsion and desperation. But “he wasn’t desperate at all.” This shows the extent to which the bullying has corrupted Oskar, turning him into a potential killer:

He saw the world through the eyes of a murderer, or so much of a murderer’s eyes as his thirteen-year-old’s imagination could muster. A beautiful world. A world he controlled, a world that trembled in the face of his actions.⁵³

50. This language slippage is apparent where an accused arguing Battered Woman Syndrome tends to be regarded as victim. It has also been noted in cases of homosexual advance defense. See Nathan Hodge, “Transgressive Sexualities and the Homosexual Advance,” *Alternative Law Journal* 23(1) (1998), p. 30.

51. The director of the American film stated that producers suggested that he change the story to have older central characters, but he asserted that he believed that the youth of the protagonists was integral to the plot as it emphasized their innocence.

52. John Ajvide Lindqvist, *Let the Right One In*, p. 102.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Murder is seen as a “beautiful world. A world he controlled.” His fantasies of vengeance, in which he imagines himself as a Murderer, go far beyond self-defense regarding his physical safety as in this scene when he imagines killing Jonny:

One stab for what you did to me in the bathroom today. One for when you tricked me into playing knuckle poker. And I’m cutting your lips out for everything nasty you’ve ever said to me.⁵⁴

Here, Oskar imagines an excessive physical manifestation of the logic of Old Testament justice, consisting of individual stabs and cuts for each injustice done to him.

The effect of bullying and his desire for retaliation is shown in another scene after he had been bullied:

He took at the pissball and rinsed it out. He was about to put it back but stopped and looked in the mirror.

Oskar. That’s ... Oskar.

He took the rinsed pissball and put it on his nose. Like a clown nose. The yellow ball and the red wound on his cheek. Oskar. He opened his eyes wide and tried to look crazy. Yes. Creepy. He talked to the clown in the mirror.

“It’s over now, it’s enough. Understand? This is it.”

The clown didn’t answer.

“I’m not standing for this. Not even one more time, understand?” ...

“What should I do? What should I do, do you think?”

He twisted his face into a grimace until it hurt, distorted his voice by making it as raspy and low as he could. The clown spoke.

“Kill them. Kill them. Kill them.”⁵⁵

Oskar transforms the symbol of his humiliation, and his self-humiliation – the pissball – into a grotesque mask that makes him “look crazy,” prompting his chant of violent revenge. The repeated question: “What should I do?” reiterates how trapped Oskar is. The only way out is the repeated answer: “Kill them. Kill them. Kill them.” His soul is compromised by bullying. In putting the pissball on his face Oskar is manifesting the humiliation and degradation of the bullying. He creates a scary alter ego, “twist[ing] his face into a grimace until it hurt.” The hurt is not just physical, but located deeply in his sense of self and his being.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

Too, his fantasies of murder go beyond Jonny and the bullies, and extend into the future to the killing of unknown, innocent others – a particular theme of the gray zone. This violence is expressed through his collection of newspaper articles, which document the most awful murders, and into his imagining of his future self, hazily gleaned, on the basis of these articles. He views an entry that “concerned a Swedish murderer who had mutilated his victims’ bodies,” who had “murdered two male prostitutes in his home sauna, butchered them with an electric chain saw, and buried them out back behind the sauna” and reflects “*Could be me in twenty years.*”⁵⁶ He imagines “a world that trembled in the face of his actions.”⁵⁷ Oskar knows of only two roles available to him – victim or perpetrator. If he survives childhood and has the choice, he will choose not to be a victim. He engages in petty theft and sets fire to a classroom. These kinds of criminal actions would be perceived as the actions of a delinquent likely to continue a life of crime. Oskar also becomes complicit with Eli’s murders. As the acts of bullying accelerate, Oskar becomes increasingly isolated. His only friend is Eli, and they are both drawn to each other out of their own unique and deep loneliness. But this vulnerability and reliance further compromise Oskar: he becomes aware that she is either directly or indirectly involved in the gruesome murders in the area, but does not report her.

Both the bullying and Oskar’s responses to it escalate. There is no good choice that Oskar can make in reaction to the bullying. If he plays along, he is humiliated, and then assaulted. If he does not play along, then he is also assaulted. Oskar can only guess at each moment the strategy likely to cause the least harm – and the effects of his actions seem random. When Oskar lashes out at Jonny after being threatened on an icy pond, his reaction is understandable, but it is not clear whether or not this makes the bullying worse. At the time, Oskar imagines Jonny’s death might be the only way out:

He hadn’t meant to hurt him so bad. He crouched down next to Jonny, steadying himself on the stick and he was about to say “sorry” but before he had a chance, he *saw* Jonny...

That tiny bleeding bundle on the ice would not be able to do anything to him. Couldn’t hit him or tease him. Couldn’t even defend himself.

I could whack him a few more times and then it’s all over.⁵⁸

It is significant that the point at which Oskar sees Jonny as the most vulnerable – as a “tiny bleeding bundle” – that his next thought is murder. This reiterates the potential for corruption and moral degradation caused by situations of fear. Oskar has enacted violent wishes just so the bullying will stop, but the bullying is such that it appears inexorable and is exacerbated no matter what. There is no right or good thing for Oskar to do in these circumstances. Whatever his response, the bullying continues and the harm worsens.

Oskar’s fantasies ostensibly exceed the violence necessary for self-defense. His fantasies are of killing, smashing and destroying – some of which he enacts by the end of the

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid., p. 210.

story. However, if we consider Oskar's fantasies and actions in terms of his psychological and moral wellbeing, and take these harms into account when measuring proportionality, his actions seem less excessive. His complicity with the bullies' actions, and his failure to react and defend himself, are both destroying his soul. Passivity in the face of threats is disheartening and demeaning. But there is no good choice for Oskar to make. If he takes action, then the action of retaliation is corrupting. It is difficult to conceptualize a form of self-defense in this situation that would be effective, proportionate, and non-corrupting.

Levi asserted that gray zones were intentionally created because of the oppressors' need for "external auxiliaries" and the oppressors' realization that the best way to bind those auxiliaries is to "burden them with guilt, cover them with blood, compromise them as much as possible, thus establishing a bond of complicity so that they no longer turn back."⁵⁹ Although Eli is more complex than a pure figure of diabolical evil, her actions do put blood on Oskar's hands, and she capitalizes on this to justify her own actions:

"I ... don't kill people."

"No, but you would like to. If you could. And you would really do it if you had to ..."

"If you got away with it. If it just happened. If you could wise someone dead and they died. Wouldn't you do it then?"

"Sure."

"Sure you would. And that would be for your own enjoyment. Your revenge. I do it because I have to. There is no other way."

"But it's only because ... they hurt me, because they tease me, because I ..."

"Because you want to *live*. Just like me."⁶⁰

Eli asserts her actions in killing to survive are equivalent to what Oskar wishes he could do. She capitalizes on Oskar's isolation and his moral compromises. The result is that Oskar cannot say no to Eli, and he protects her when she is under threat.

As Oskar becomes increasingly isolated and fearful through the bullying, he becomes increasingly dependent on Eli: "Eli was beautiful and Eli had given him back his dignity."⁶¹ Through Eli, Oskar shifts from being a passive victim to someone who *wants* to stand up for himself: "For a few seconds Oskar saw through Eli's eyes. And what he saw was ... himself. Only much better, more handsome, stronger than what he thought of himself. Seen with love."⁶² Oskar shifts from being a mere bystander to Eli's murders, to assisting in the death of Lacke, who goes to Eli's house to kill her. Oskar distracts him

59. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 43. Quoted by Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm*, p. 20.

60. John Ajvide Lindqvist, *Let the Right One In*, p. 382.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 446.

with a Rubik's cube to show Lacke that "the thing in the bathtub was his friend."⁶³ When Lacke still tries to stab Eli, Oskar smashes the cube into Lacke's head.

Even before the penultimate scene of the story, Oskar is outside society. He has stopped attending school, and he will not answer the phone.

*Stop it. Understand that I don't exist anymore.*⁶⁴

He is so corrupted and compromised by the time of the attempted drowning that he becomes no-one. He has been victimized and degraded, and has been complicit in deeds which place him beyond the bounds of society. Although to a certain extent he remains innocent, he is also not innocent. As a victim of oppression he has become an instrument of evil.⁶⁵ By this stage in the story, it is unclear what would be an act of justice for Oskar. How should we judge Oskar?

II. Interpreting the Scene of Violence

In the crisis scene, Oskar is attacked by a number of boys in a swimming pool: Jonny's older brother Jimmy comes to the pool armed with a stiletto, and threatens to stab out one of Oskar's eyes unless he can stay underwater for five minutes. This is an act that proceeds from the logic of Old Testament revenge: "an eye for an eye," Jimmy tells Oskar in the film;⁶⁶ it is "pure payback" for Oskar's earlier attempt to stop Jimmy's bullying by hitting Jimmy in the head with a stick.⁶⁷ At the point at which Oskar passes out and is about to drown, Eli flies in to save Oskar. The moment of Eli's arrival is triumphant, uplifting and beautiful. In the film we experience it through Oskar's eyes, as he is held underwater, and the water of the pool turns pink with blood, as parts of his tormentors, including their heads, drift past him, having been destroyed by Eli. The key scene of violence in the story is also the central moment of judgment. The question we will consider in this section is whether this is also a moment of justice. Here we explore the possibilities for resolution in the gray zone, and then turn to Derrida's analytics to theorize the meaning of this violence, and its relation to justice.

What is the quality of this violence? We feel it as satisfaction, as something like "justice," as viewers, but should we trust this feeling? How should we evaluate the final act, and the authority behind it? It is certainly not a legal authority – the law is conspicuously absent in the book, and the police are notably several steps behind the murders committed by Eli and Hakan. Eli's actions in killing the two boys (and in the film version, the conspirators and witnesses) exceed the requirements of physical protection or assistance, which would require only the amount of violence necessary to stop the boys drowning Oskar. But does justice here rely on Eli's actions being proportionate, as with the rules of self-defense? Derrida's essay "Force of Law" is useful in interpreting the violence here,

63. *Ibid.*, p. 476.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 491.

65. Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm*, p. 213.

66. *Lat den ratte komma in*. Dir Tomas Alfredson. Magnet Films, 2008.

67. *Ibid.*

as Derrida undertakes an exploration of the nature of just and unjust violence, through a reading of Walter Benjamin's essay, "Critique of Violence" (1921). Derrida argues that making calculations (such as those concerning proportionality) and following rules are not the bases for just decisions:

Law is the element of calculation ... but justice is incalculable, it requires us to deal in the incalculable; and aporetic experiences are the experiences, as improbable as they are necessary, of justice, that is to say of moments in which the decision between just and unjust is never insured by a rule.⁶⁸

Here, "justice" emerges as a process, rather than as a concept or theme. Essentially Derrida is describing the tension between the rule-following, proportion-seeking acts of law, and the aporetic space of justice. The achievement of justice is inseparable from its non-achievement: it is "the experience of what we are not able to experience" or "an experience of the impossible."⁶⁹

This tension operates beyond the politics of revenge, which is the prerogative of law:

If right or law stems from vengeance, as Hamlet seems to complain that it does – before Nietzsche, before Heidegger, before Benjamin – can one not yearn for a justice that one day, a day belonging no longer to history, a quasi-messianic day, would finally be removed from the fatality of vengeance. Better than removed: infinitely foreign, heterogeneous at its source?⁷⁰

Justice moves beyond retaliation and calculation of injury, but this is not an easy transcendence. Rather, we are directed to a zone that incorporates movement between the rule and the exception. The calculation of the appropriate reaction – of what would be proportionate violence – is not the logic here. But neither is the general rule completely left behind. It is not just to seek vengeance, but this does not mean that forgiveness, or any simple transcendence or resolution, is available.

In evaluating the character of Eli's violence as either just or unjust, we need to determine what is at stake in her actions. The gray zone assists here in drawing out the nature of the suffering inflicted, as described above. It suggests that we need, first, to go beyond any single event of bullying in evaluating its harms; and that second, we need to consider harms that go beyond the physical and even the psychological. Given Oskar's particular history, it is difficult to see how a smaller violence would work to effectively rescue him; a smaller act risks an alternative story in which Oskar is physically saved but returns to the gray zone of bullying, and returns to hating himself and others. Oskar makes attempts to evade the bullies through strategies as various as passivity, complicity and violence, and none of these strategies work. We are given hints of Oskar's alternate life, in the absence of his being removed from the gray zone, in his fantasies of the "Murderer," whose victims "tremble[] in the face of his actions."⁷¹

68. Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law," in Drucilla Cornell et al., eds., *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 16.

69. Ibid.

70. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 25.

71. John Ajvide Lindqvist, *Let the Right One In*, p. 25.

Further, the destruction of each person's moral being in the gray zone has wider, political implications, ensuring that the gray zone continues:

Fighting oppression from within – where it must be fought to be lastingly effective – is difficult and unlikely because of psychological and moral damage to the oppressed.⁷²

We should consider the ongoing and wider political effects of such everyday violence in evaluating the proportionality of Eli's reaction. Gray zones have consequences for both the individual involved, and the wider community. They:

... set up victims of oppression to pass along oppressive practices to the next generation. The evils of everyday misogyny, racism, homophobia, and anti-semitism are not always imminent or looming in the form of well-defined events. They take shape gradually, over a lifetime or even centuries. They are less readily noticed or identified, and yet they shape our options and perceptions. They may inflict social rather than biological death, or permanent deformation, disability, or unremitting pain. They can produce self-hatred.⁷³

The idea of the gray zone as an area, rather than an event, where boundaries between good and evil, right and wrong are undermined, uncertain and breached, and there is an absence of goodness or grace, illuminates the potential for contamination. The gray zone extends beyond a blurring of boundaries of victim and perpetrator to other children in the story. Card's definition of culpable wrongdoing would extend to Jonny's gang-members, who assist and contribute to the bullying. A related question that arises is the extent of culpability of bystanders – of those who failed to intervene or prevent the bullying when they could or should have, thus tolerating and maintaining harms. Some, like Tomas, embrace the bullying with gusto. Others contribute to the bullying, but are then horrified by the escalation. Others are involved because they fear Jonny. The question and problem of the responsibility of bystanders is raised by the story. All of the children are aware of the bullying and yet do nothing (at best). Central to the sustained bullying is the absence of moral authority – whether adult or child – and the failure to prevent or interfere with Jonny's gang.

Even children who were friends with Oskar at primary school will not be seen to be his friends now, because they fear contamination. If they are seen with Oskar there is a risk that they, too, will be bullied. This demonstrates the extension and reach of the gray zone beyond the immediate perpetrator and victim. Bystanders who do nothing when they could have done something that might have made a constructive difference may be morally responsible, and tainted by their failure. This expresses the notion of wickedness as absence, in this case, a failure to step in. These bystanders have not intentionally inflicted harm, but have stood by whilst it was occurring. The young bystanders are part of and generate the gray zone. Their failure to step in, their very passivity, is corruptive. They feel guilty and morally compromised despite and because they did not do anything. This failure to act is encouraging and enabling to the bullies, and disheartening for Oskar. The gray zone forces them to make such far-reaching moral decisions when so young, and when there is no clear right or wrong action to take. For example, by the end of the

72. Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm*, p. 213.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

story, Oskar is not an innocent victim. Many of the other students are angry with him for destroying their things at school.

In the novel, only Jonny and Jimmy are executed – thus focusing judgment and justice upon the primary instigators. However, in the films, the bystanders are also executed – raising questions about our willingness as audience (as bystanders) to ascribe responsibility to bystanders and see them punished. The idea of the gray zone is thus important in highlighting the way in which moral responsibility exceeds and disrupts the classic victim/perpetrator dyad, and extends to, and potentially corrupts, others in the vicinity. But would decapitation exceed our judgment and ascription of responsibility?

Eli's violence, which seems so excessive at first glance, seems more justified when the depth of harms suffered in the gray zone are more clearly understood. And yet this is clearly a tangled matter. *Let the Right One In* is so resonant in part because it is a complex moral tale. The story problematizes the language and oppositional structure of “perpetrator” and “victim,” “doer” and “sufferer.”⁷⁴ Eli is the quintessential figure of the gray zone. She exists between life and death, a form of virus that is itself both endlessly deconstructive and dangerously infectious.⁷⁵ She is ambiguous, and is simultaneously a victim and perpetrator. Is a vampire necessarily a victim of a “very unusual disease”?⁷⁶ Zizek described Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* as a film “where the ‘undead’ are not portrayed as embodiments of pure evil, of a simple drive to kill or revenge, but as sufferers, pursuing their victims with an awkward persistence, coloured by a kind of infinite sadness ... a melancholic sufferer longing for salvation.”⁷⁷ As a vampire, Eli is an example of Derrida's undecideability. She is unable to die and exists between life and death. She is neither boy nor girl, young nor old. She destabilizes fundamental cultural dichotomies and in the process undermines binaries of good/bad, present/past. If the basic distinction between life and death is not operative, then neither are other cherished binaries.⁷⁸ The vampire figure renders fluid what we understand to be fixed. Card's notion of the gray zone is primarily focused upon moral ambiguity. Derrida uses the term “undecideable” and Kristeva “abject” to represent things, people or categories that are neither one thing nor another.⁷⁹ Mary Douglas uses the term “disorder” to denote the disruption of cherished classificatory systems or order.⁸⁰ All these authors note our desire to resolve undecideables, disorder, and the abject. Eli is both an abomination and essential to Oskar's rescue.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

75. Wendy Pearson, “‘I, the Undying’: The Vampire of Subjectivity and the Aboriginal ‘I,’” in Annalisa Oboe, ed., *Mongrel Signatures: Reflections on the work of Mudrooroo* (New York: Rodopi, 2003), pp. 185–202, p. 189.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 306.

77. Slavoj Zizek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1992), pp. 23–4.

78. Wendy Pearson, “‘I, the Undying,’” pp. 185–202, p. 188.

79. Kristeva uses the example of the skin that forms on boiled milk as abject – it is neither solid nor liquid. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

80. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2002).

The story complicates our assessments of the choices characters make in oppressive circumstances. Oskar did not ask for, or consent to Eli's violent rescue. Eli is a killer, but here she is not killing to survive – rather, she is acting in the capacity of rescuer/avenger. Eli saves Oskar's life and rescues Oskar from the gray zone. By destroying Jonny and Jimmy, the agents of Oskar's own particular hell, and by removing him from the space of the zone, Eli saves his soul as much as his body. He no longer has to adjudicate within himself what he is, and is not, willing to do. She commits the killings herself, sparing Oskar from committing these and further acts of violence towards the bullies; she also rescues him from further violence he might commit against himself, and from his hatred and fantasized violence against the rest of society. This is an act of grace. It leaves Oskar's hatred to the realm of fantasy – at least for now. Something must be done if Oskar is not to lose his life: some intervention is required to change his way of being in the world that goes beyond a tortured victimhood, and emerging nature as a perpetrator. Since the society of Blackeberg is also a participant in the gray zone, and doomed to enact the cycle of violence, Eli's actions also constitute an act of liberation for the town. This is the perspective of some of the witnesses to the violence. The police notes from witnesses state that “one word had turned up frequently: angel. Oskar Eriksson had been rescued by an angel. The same angel who, according to the witnesses had ripped Jonny and Jimmy Fosbergs' heads off and left them in the bottom of the pool.”⁸¹

III. Conclusion: Indeterminate Justice in the Gray Zone

Card's concept of the gray zone enriches our thinking about wickedness. This has implications for judgment and justice. Criminal law expresses and organizes a victim/offender dichotomy, and associated dichotomies of good/bad, innocence/guilt – even whilst recognizing that these dichotomies are not always applicable. The gray zone demonstrates the inadequacy of our existing legal and moral concepts in representing the truth of difficult situations:

Are there really always right and wrong choices in such situations? Are there always responsible or excusable choices? Is there always such a thing as the agent's real motive? Does our moral vocabulary fail to mark distinctions that we should want to make, to capture the way things really are? Would gray zones cease to be gray if we had more fine-tuned concepts? Or are some gray zones ineliminable?⁸²

Eli's actions are neither just nor unjust: she performs an ambivalent rescue that includes elements of grace. The final scene refuses to decode an ultimate meaning to Eli's relationship to Oskar, or to his future: as Oskar and Eli travel out of Blackeberg by train, to an undisclosed destination, we have to wonder whether Oskar will be truly free now, or whether he has become bound to a circle of exploitation with Eli, exemplified by her instrumental “love” with Hakan.

81. John Ajvide Lindqvist, *Let the Right One In*, p. 512.

82. Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm*, p. 226.

The story provides a realistic portrayal of bullying, and in the absence of the fantastical vampire figure, the hope of justice for Oskar is grim. The gray area cannot be resolved, and so it is appropriate that justice is administered by the impossible figure of the vampire. Eli is impossible for many reasons, not least because she is both outside history, and part of it. The vampire is neither wholly particular nor wholly abstract – she exists across time but also carries a specific history. The victim is also a figure who lives out a particular life that carries an ahistorical quality: that quality of Oskar's, summarized as: "the real problem was simply that he existed."⁸³ This quality has not been protected by the law, by the State, by parents or school. Oskar's situation leads to an ambivalent justice that is delivered by an impossible figure, the vampire/angel who brings with her both grace and damnation.

Acknowledgements

This paper was supported by a grant from the Public Purpose Fund of the Law Society of New South Wales.

83. John Ajvide Lindqvist, *Let the Right One In*, p. 10.