Deposing an American Cultural Totem: Clarice Starling and Postmodern Heroism in Thomas Harris’s *Red Dragon*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, and *Hannibal*

**STEPHEN M. FULLER**

Surveying the extensive catalog of customer reviews posted on the Barnes & Noble Web site not only reveals the enduring popular interest in Thomas Harris’s *Red Dragon* (1981), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), and *Hannibal* (1999), but also the profound sense of outrage and betrayal that many American readers felt after finishing the third installment in the trilogy.

Karie, July 6, 1999, *Not Even 1 Star, What a HORRIBLE Ending*  
I had looked forward to this book for quite some time, and stalked the librarian until I had a copy in my hands. The beginning read beautifully, and I was surprised at a few events as the book progressed. However, I STILL can’t believe the ending?! I can only say that this ending was THE BIGGEST disappointment, and I don’t see HOW it will be adapted for screen. I wish I hadn’t wasted my time and excitement on this book. Please don’t waste yours—read ‘Silence’ again . . .

Shane, a book reader, July 2, 2002, **Harris’s worst**  
I have to say I loved it until the last 100 pages, but the end killed me. She would never give in to him like that! I can see that this is the perfect film for Julianne Moore. I should have known that The Silence of the Lambs was sacred and not bothered with the sequel. I’m sorry. This author has lost a fan. I will not read anything from Thomas Harris again, and that is a promise
These vociferous rejections from readers and others\(^1\) proceed chiefly from their objections to Harris’s treatment of Clarice Starling, the moral center and venerated hero of *The Silence of the Lambs*. Through her presentation in this extraordinarily successful novel and through Jodie Foster’s remarkable performance in the equally acclaimed 1991 film, Starling developed into an American cultural totem and feminist icon. For American women of the late 1980s and 1990s, she offered an appealing construction of femininity divested of its stereotypical markers of intellectual weakness, emotional susceptibility, and professional ineptitude. According to Janet Staiger, public opinion by the fifth week of the film’s release had already crystallized: “the character of Clarice Starling played by Jodie Foster was a positive image of a woman working in a patriarchal society and, thus, empowering for women viewers” (161). This formidable detective added to the ranks of other women-sleuths whose proliferation in film, television, and fiction since the 1970s challenged the “spinster sleuth” (Irons xi) archetype of Agatha Christie’s Jane Marple by displaying an “outgoing, aggressive, and self-sufficient” (xii) attitude. Starling certainly meets these criteria: she prizes her acute ratiocinative powers and holds neither babies nor men’s hands, but a Smith & Wesson “snub-nose revolver” (*Silence* 66) and a “double major in psychology and criminology” (3) from the University of Virginia, which she pointedly characterizes as no “charm school” (11).

Moreover, Americans generally responded favorably to Starling’s pluck, her self-reliance, her violence, and her holding to a recognizable code of moral simplicity. Her seemingly immutable principles provided late-twentieth-century audiences with a comforting antidote to the anxieties engendered by the moral complexities of the world confronted outside the fictional universe. An unflinching moral arbiter, Starling clearly belongs in the line of classic detectives whose fiction Kathleen Gregory Klein observes as perpetuating the “formulaic illusion” that posits a “safe view of a world in which a single hero can both know and correct an important problem, usually one as serious as deliberately caused death” (224). And Starling’s solving of the mystery at the core of *The Silence of the Lambs* rights the novel’s threatened moral balance and reasserts the “mythos or fable” (Cawelti 12) of all detective stories in which the “detective reaffirms the fundamental soundness of the social order by revealing how the crime has resulted from the specific and understandable motives of particular individuals” (12). For
epistemologically bewildered Americans and for those who flatly de-
nied the instability of knowledge, moral or otherwise, Starling em-
-bodied adherence to, faith in, and the success of reason and a universal
set of truths and certainties that her identity as an American seemed to
legitimate, and indeed, produce.

Her moral clarity also appealed to those less bewildered, the ide-
ological conservatives whose political prominence grew rapidly in the
1980s, a decade marked by the Cold War bulwark of the Reagan-Bush
presidency. This Republican administration took office in 1980, draw-
ing electoral support from the emergence of a widespread grassroots
conservatism that expressed itself through the coalescence of the secular
New Right and the religious Christian Right, representing the “most
influential movement on the US political scene” (Diamond 228). In an
era of Cold War threats and retaliations, of damaged national prestige
in the wake of the Vietnam and Watergate debacles, and of mounting
pressure for and against racial and gender equality, Starling entered the
cultural landscape—a comforting, old-fashioned, gun-slinging hero
who hailed from America’s interior, an Eden where the just are raised
hardworking, chaste, and Lutheran; in fact, her emergence coincided
with what turned out to be evangelist Pat Robertson’s “surprisingly
successful” (245) 1988 presidential campaign. Thus, many fans rel-
ished the traditionalism of this Mustang-driving urban cowgirl, while
others celebrated her tough femininity, and this combination trans-
formed Starling into a national totem, blending continuity and dis-
continuity with the past and mobilizing a deep and diverse range of
public sympathies.

Given the enormous critical and popular triumph of *The Silence of the
Lambs*, the appearance of its much-anticipated sequel, *Hannibal*, in
1999 represented a giant cultural event, both nationally and interna-
tionally. *Time* magazine reported that on its day of publication in the
United States, more than 1.5 million copies of *Hannibal* lined “display
shelves” (Grey 72), while the *London Review of Books* announced that in
the United Kingdom, publishers printed 175,000 hardbacks and sold
an additional 71,000 copies on its first day there. The *Review* went on
to describe an Edinburgh bookstore that had stocked sixteen copies of
*Hannibal*, and how on the morning of publication, they ordered one
hundred more. And “on the afternoon of publication day they rang and
ordered another 500. *Hannibal* went straight in at number one on the
bestseller list, to no one’s surprise; what did attract comment was the
fact that it outsold numbers two to fifty-one combined” (Lanchester). These extraordinary sales figures evince the high level of popular interest in the book and testify to the immense commercial bonanza that *Hannibal* produced. But Starling’s return to the public imagination was eclipsed by the rapid dissipation of many fans’ ardor for her.

This repudiation, as exemplified by my prefatory reviewers, constitutes a cultural phenomenon in itself and makes examining her loss of favor a matter of critical curiosity. Why did so many enthusiastic fans turn vociferously to rebuke *Hannibal*, a novel that Stephen King lauds as “one of the two most frightening popular novels of our time, the other being *The Exorcist* by William Peter Blatty” (4)? How did Harris disappoint and offend so many devotees? For the origins of this rejection, one must examine Harris’s approach to characterization in *Red Dragon* and *The Silence of the Lambs*. In these two novels, Harris works hard to mostly maintain the distinctions between hero, antihero, and villain. Both books satisfy those who prize conclusions that see evil vanquished and virtue prevail, and tend to erase from memory any subtle imbricating of the hero, antihero, and villain categories. In *Hannibal*, however, Harris not only suggests the permeability of these categories, but he also wholly collapses the boundaries, accomplishing this dissolving of distinctions by coupling Clarice with Hannibal Lecter, thereby merging hero with antihero/villain. The reviews that preface this article show that many regarded this coming together of lovers as the novel’s most devastating betrayal; however, reading the two novels as a unit supplies intertextual evidence that shows their union as anything but illogical or inconsistent with the spirit of the saga. *Hannibal* reveals both lovers as suffering from a crippling neurosis that transforms one into a serial killer and the other into an FBI agent. When, at the end of the novel, Lecter compassionately rehabilitates Clarice, many react sourly because they view Harris as depicting the degradation of an American hero and champion of traditional conservative values. Harris seems to intentionally provoke such distress, and he accomplishes this irking precisely by showing that Clarice’s heroism does not reside in her identity as an American or as a Protestant, or any other essential marker of her person. The novel sustains a critique of American political conservatism through a meticulous examination of Clarice’s psychological instability, and by demonstrating that her exaggerated sense of compassion and her obsessive pursuit of justice originate not in any intrinsic national quality, but in the burden
of her unresolved oedipal conflict. Additionally, the convergence and merging of hero and villain that so enrages right-leaning readers undercut the rigid moral framework that supports the traditionally optimistic and socially conservative ethos of detective fiction. By upsetting the formula that informs his readers' expectations, Harris engages in the sort of experimentation with and questioning of the assumptions of the detective genre that John G. Cawelti identifies as a postmodern characteristic (13).

The dynamics of a reader's relationship with Hannibal Lecter determine what reaction he or she experiences at the dénouement to *Hannibal*. Lecter occupies a critical position in each of the three novels because he straddles the divide between hero and villain. His indeterminacy marks him as a typical representation of the modern/postmodern antihero who neither warrants full approval nor complete condemnation. This complexity contributes to his position as one of twentieth-century fiction's most frightening and compelling inventions. Lecter's textual and cinematic presence in *Hannibal*—the book and the movie—offers the audience an opportunity to accept or decline him in his entirety, and although Harris delays this proposition until his final novel in the trilogy, strong evidence of Lecter's general appeal emerges early in the first two books.

Reacting emotionally to *Red Dragon* and *The Silence of the Lambs* encourages readers to separate Lecter from the two apparently unmitigated villains of these narratives, Francis Dolarhyde and Jame Gumb. Part of this response originates in Harris's preventing our immediate exposure to the horror that Lecter has visited on his victims and on the world. In *Red Dragon* and *The Silence of the Lambs*, Hannibal's incarceration prevents the enacting of his cannibalism and has the effect of magnifying the torture that he threatens to exact. “Lecter's menace,” Tad Friend notes, “was born of the suppression of his desires; our imaginings of the terror he would wreak if he escaped exceeded what that terror could ever be” (84). Ultimately and rather unsettlingly, responding emotionally to Lecter produces a liking for him; he demonstrates an amusing, if perverse, sense of humor, a formidable intellect, an admirable code of etiquette and honor, and an unimpeachable civility. One “former” admirer clearly still revels in her sexually charged recollection that “[h]e was an extraordinarily charming man, absolutely singular. Sort of made a girl's fur crackle, if you know what I mean” (*Hannibal* 339). Lecter embodies all of the ideals that
enlightened adherence to rationality has supposedly effected in humans, yet he murders quite instinctively and without detectable scruple, demonstrating a seemingly impossible combination—a refined civility and equally developed primitivism. Making audiences love Lecter to the point of divorcing him from the novel’s other less stylish serial killers highlights one facet of Harris’s demonstrable talent.

Reacting more rationally to Lecter, however, reveals him to occupy quite the same villain’s category as Dolarhyde or Gumb. Neither of these two purported villains appears to have much to recommend him to readers. While Harris supplies an extensive biographical portrait that attempts to explain Dolarhyde’s murderous psychological genesis, it does little to generate the allure that the glamorous Lecter commands. Born out of wedlock, Dolarhyde suffers a degrading childhood under the supervision of his maternal grandmother, who uses the child to victimize her daughter, Marion, whom she spurns for moral laxity. Despite offering a sympathetic and well-developed portrait of a miserable and unjust boyhood, Harris seems more preoccupied with exploring how cruelty breeds malignancy of the most fearsome kind. For example, driven by a state of high sexual excitation, Francis hatchets a chicken and lets its blood smear him, providing a pivotal psychological moment in which he associates violent killing with sexual gratification: “The Love swelled in him unbearably tight and he could not gasp it out. He walked toward the chicken house, hurrying now, the ground cold under his feet, the hatchet bumping cold against his leg, running now before he burst” (Red Dragon 271). Repeated insults and other degradations further injure Dolarhyde, but Red Dragon suggests that this brutal act and its attendant exhilaration set his life’s execrable course.

Likewise, Harris provides Gumb with a biography, although it appears almost as an afterthought and furnishes few details in comparison to Dolarhyde’s. Through these biographical insights, Harris attempts to give rationales for such aberrant behavior, but few details ingratiate Dolarhyde or Gumb to audiences. The former lives a dreary existence as an anonymous manager of a photo-processing plant, while the latter, trained as a tailor, scratches out a living doing odd jobs. Neither man shows Lecter’s intellect, his panache, his taste for good wine and food, or his beguiling and winning humor. Only class attributes, then—such as Lecter’s impressive erudition, his cultivated aestheticism, and some appealing personal qualities—distinguish villain from antihero, and
Harris’s ensuring that his audience responds favorably to Lecter and not to Dolarhyde and Gumb assures readers’ complicity in dissolving the distinctions that appear to keep these personalities discrete.

Not only do Red Dragon and The Silence of the Lambs use Lecter to imbricate the categories of villain and antihero, but they also use him to show overlaps between antihero and hero. Lecter develops key relationships with both novels’ heroes, Will Graham and Clarice Starling. In Red Dragon, Graham solicits Lecter’s advice in order to apprehend Dolarhyde, nicknamed the Tooth Fairy, for he comes to his victims in the night. Before Graham leaves Hannibal’s cell at the end of one visit, Lecter reveals why he believes that Graham succeeded in catching him: “The reason you caught me is that we’re just alike” (88). Lecter has a point here because Graham’s talent for arresting serial killers rests on his uncanny ability to project himself and imagine exactly what gratifies the murderer about a particular killing. Only a few lines later, Harris reinforces the parallel between criminal and detective when he describes Graham’s face appearing in the National Tattler next to the last two words of a stone sign that reads, “Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.” Despite insisting on the closeness of the identification, Red Dragon does not develop the Lecter—Graham relationship beyond this rather limited point, but The Silence of the Lambs introduces a replacement for Graham—Starling—whom Harris deploys to disturb the boundary between hero and antihero much more thoroughly.

Harris reflects Starling’s heroic virtues in the morphemes that form her name. Star suggests the star-shaped badge of American justice, her shining credentials as a ranking FBI cadet, and her establishment as the “chosen one” whom the FBI selects to confront Lecter and Gumb. Harris reinforces this identification between Starling and the Messiah when he describes a wristwatch that displays Clarice’s head superimposed on Jesus’ crucified form: “On this watch face, Jesus is on the cross, as you see there, and the arms revolve to indicate the time, just like the arms on the popular Disney watches. The feet remain at six and at the top a small second hand revolves in the halo” (Silence 160). In addition, the ice of Clarice indicates her unshakable faith in the application of cold reason to process circumstances, while signaling honesty and forthrightness through its suggestion of transparency and clarity, which is echoed in the Clar of Clarice. Burying her feelings and depending on a rational frame of mind, Clarice relies on a calmly
composed demeanor and a suppression of emotion to effectively question Lecter and solve the puzzle that leads to Jame Gumb’s apprehension.

On the other hand, Starling shows great emotional depths by sacrificing painful details from her personal life in order to win the freedom of Gumb’s victim, Catherine Martin. Starling discloses sensitive memories about her father, a town marshal who died in the line of duty. She also tells of her mother’s decision to send her away to her uncle’s farm in Montana and her removal to an orphanage following an attempt to flee the screaming of the spring lambs at slaughtering time. An unyielding sense of justice supplies Clarice with the emotional fortitude required to suppress her distaste for Lecter’s lines of questioning, which often borders on the salacious and vindictive. At least, one might think that Clarice tolerates meeting Lecter only out of professional obligation, and the text allows for such a reading. However, her repeated visits to interview Lecter, both in Baltimore and Memphis, suggest that Clarice derives more from these sessions than just clues to Catherine Martin’s whereabouts. Engaging the doctor certainly provides clues that move the investigation forward, but equally the visits constitute therapy for Clarice, whom Lecter interrogates and forces into confronting the psychic origins of her fierce desire for justice. “Do you think,” Hannibal urges, “if you caught Buffalo Bill yourself and if you made Catherine all right, you could make the lambs stop screaming, do you think they’d be all right too and you wouldn’t wake up again in the dark and hear the lambs screaming? Clarice?” (Silence 230). Starling replies hesitantly, but to Lecter, her resistance signals an admission of truth, a level of candor that he values, putting him “oddly at peace.” The Silence of the Lambs, then, shows Dr. Lecter once again practicing psychotherapy only behind prison walls, and, as a result of this contact and the subsequent effects of transference, he grows enamored of his patient, who represses her fondness for him. At the close of their final meeting, Clarice vehemently resists separation from the man who has evolved into a surrogate father whom she fights against losing a second time. In fact, Lecter remains in Starling’s mind “caught in the instant when he did not mock” (231) and “arched like a dancer,” images of almost unblemished and timeless perfection.

Harris’s sketching of this courtship between analyst and analysand more intensely threatens the separation between hero and antihero that
Red Dragon respects. And the number of parallels between cop and killer increases as the plot develops: Clarice and Lecter share a meticulous intellect that provides for the marginalization of painful emotional considerations; they each demonstrate a keen sense of humor; they share a dislike for creeps and toadies such as Migs and Dr. Chiltern; and each subscribes to a strict code of honor that ostracizes them from their respective communities and deems them mavericks. By the novel’s conclusion, they have developed an intimate friendship and a close bond through their exchanging of information, both personal and professional. Lecter’s farewell note/loving missive to Clarice reveals the particularities of the relationship in its combination of romantic sentimentalism and paternal officiousness:

Well, Clarice, have the lambs stopped screaming?. . . . I won’t be surprised if the answer is yes and no. The lambs will stop for now. But, Clarice, you judge yourself with all the mercy of the dungeon scales at Threave; you’ll have to earn it again and again, the blessed silence. Because it’s the plight that drives you, seeing the plight, and the plight will not end, ever. . . . I have windows.

Orion is above the horizon now, and near it Jupiter, brighter than it will ever be before the year 2000. (I have no intention of telling you the time and how high it is.) But I expect you can see it too. Some of our stars are the same. (Silence 367)

The last paragraph of the letter particularly evinces Harris’s intention to vex the neat bifurcation between hero and antihero. Lecter’s romantic language, dwelling on planets and stars, serves to emphasize the amorous attachment that connects detective and murderer, and to stress the compatibility and conjunction of their ideals. Harris further intensifies the pressure on the distinction when he concludes the book by describing Clarice in bed, her rosy face resting peacefully on a pillow in an old house above which stands Orion, “high in the clear night” (367). Here, in the constellation of Orion, shedding its light impartially on both hero and villain, Harris signals his belief that Lecter and Clarice do in indeed share an emotional coincidence.

If evidence from Red Dragon and The Silence of the Lambs demonstrates Harris’s problematizing of the binary distinctions between good and bad, hero and villain, and detective and criminal, Hannibal shows his utter disregard for such categories. The effusive outpourings of scorn for Hannibal result in part from Harris’s rearranging of the
formula of his previous two novels. Although troubled, the categories by which readers can judge the characters in *Red Dragon* and *The Silence of the Lambs* remain settled, but *Hannibal* inverts the moral order. By making Lecter the protagonist of his own book, Harris asks his readers to identify with Lecter and to condemn those forces ranged against him—the corrupt Florentine policeman, Pazzi, and the American capitalist, Mason Verger. Verger, Lecter’s only surviving victim, bribes the FBI to assist him in his search for the doctor. Of course, Clarice opposes such a trade, and continuing to hold to her code of honor precipitates a professional and personal crisis. As a result of her unwillingness to capitulate, the FBI rejects her, and Paul Krendler, Starling’s superior and enduring enemy in the bureau, backs Verger, who has captured Lecter. The novel moves toward an unlikely climax in which Clarice attempts to rescue Lecter from Verger and his henchmen, only for Lecter to save her from a herd of vicious swine. Harris produces a disorienting effect upon his readers by lifting these figures out of their conventional classifications and reassigning them to new positions. In the *London Review of Books*, John Lanchester registered this shift in moral categories when he observed that “the FBI of the first two novels was, more or less, the usual idealized crime-busting machine of popular fiction. The FBI of *Hannibal* is the FBI of the Ruby Ridge massacre: a poisoned, dysfunctional institution, part of a Washington world of backbiting, infighting and incompetence.” Thus, the purported forces of probity, the FBI and the Italian police, assume positions as agents of villainy, exemplifying professional misconduct and malfeasance, while Lecter moves from antihero to hero—one who kills only for self-preservation—and Clarice adopts a supporting position at his side.

For those invested in Clarice’s heroism, what proceeds from this disorienting shifting of classifications makes the novel truly repugnant. Through the novel and the hugely popular cinematic version of *The Silence of the Lambs*, Harris creates a figure who rises to totemic status in US culture. For many, her sacredness as an American hero emanates from her unclouded moral purpose and her identity as a chaste, industrious Lutheran born in the pastoral, Edenic heartland. Having installed Clarice with all of the required qualities of a conventional American hero and having ingratiated her with his fans, Harris punishes his audience for their shallow idolatry. Following his problematizing of Clarice’s heroism through her support of Lecter, Harris compounds and completes the degrading of this totem by transforming
Starling into a cannibal in one of Hannibal’s final scenes—a moment that has since passed into the mythology of American popular culture: “Dr. Lecter placed the browned brains on broad croutons on the warmed plates, and dressed them with the sauce and truffle slices. A garnish of parsley and whole caper berries with their stems, and a single nasturtium blossom on watercress to achieve a little height, completed his presentation” (532). Responding to Starling’s indulging in Lecter’s fare, some critics, such as Robert Winder and Ann Gottlieb, read the cannibalism of these closing scenes as depicting Clarice’s initiation into Lecter’s order of vampirism (Winder 44 and Gottlieb 31). More fully, however, Starling’s induction into Hannibal’s cannibalistic practices represents part of the process of her psychic rehabilitation; that is, it marks her passage from repression and innocence to sexual awakening, and it signifies her literal and symbolic embracing of carnality, a transformation of feminine sexuality beyond most social conservatives’ tolerance threshold. Those (such as my prefatory reviewers) who revile Hannibal’s conclusion condemn Harris’s decision to cure Clarice of her burdensome heroism and to develop her full humanity by making her sexuality conspicuous by its presence rather than its absence.

Moreover, Harris’s decision to show Clarice’s mental instability as the cause of her heroism (and not some intrinsic national or racial quality) effects a diminishing of the totem at the profoundest level. Some claim that she would never capitulate to Lecter and that such an acquiescence violates the spirit of the previous book. However, Hannibal’s collapsing of boundaries between hero, antihero, and villain merely brings to completion a process begun in Red Dragon some eighteen years earlier, and furthered in The Silence of the Lambs. In fact, Hannibal enacts the rounding out of Clarice’s therapy, which The Silence of the Lambs begins. Some may want to claim that her heroism originates in her exceptionalism as an American or as a pure Protestant country girl, but the conclusions to The Silence of the Lambs and Hannibal respectively demonstrate that Starling’s heroism finds its provenance not in any essential genetic attribute, but in the complex of conflicting oedipal emotions that she harbors toward her dead father.

The conclusion to Hannibal enacts the purging of Starling’s compulsive heroism, which novels two and three in the trilogy articulate as the product of a paralyzing neurosis. Lecter compassionately brings
peace to Clarice’s troubled mind. Through a combination of hypnosis, drug therapy, and the performing of a series of elaborate charades, Lecter eases Starling’s neurosis by facilitating the venting of deeply repressed anger toward her father for dying when she was only a young girl. “From the beginning of their acquaintance,” Harris writes, “Dr. Lecter had needled her about her father, calling him a night watchman. Now he became Lecter the Protector of her father’s memory” (507). The cannibalism sequence works as an integral part of the therapy, permitting a ritualized exorcising of Clarice’s hate through consumption. Throughout The Silence of the Lambs and Hannibal, Starling reveres a number of father figures, such as her boss, Jack Crawford, and her friend, Jack Brigham: “Ever looking for situational sets, Dr. Lecter believed that Starling saw in John Brigham her father’s good qualities—and with her father’s virtues the unfortunate Brigham was also assigned the incestuous taboo. Brigham, and probably Crawford, had her father’s good qualities. Where were the bad?” (510). Part of her cure, then, comprises Brigham’s and Crawford’s deaths, which Hannibal effects, and the murder of Krendler, another paternal imago and “icon of failure and frustration,” and his sacrificing by consumption. For Starling, the eating of Krendler allows for an expending of rage and a loosing of sexual energy that finds an object of desire in Lecter. This transference of libido from the series of paternal presences or figures symbolizing and perpetuating her unrelenting pursuit of justice empowers Clarice with a new liberty and humanity.

If Hannibal enacts the purging of Starling’s heroism, it equally effects Lecter’s metamorphosis from serial killer to contented lover, establishing an obvious parallel. Both transformations demonstrate Harris’s holding to a nonessentialist position regarding the deformation and reformation of human psychology. Around midway through Hannibal, Harris supplies a revealing vignette designed to supply a rationale for Lecter’s killing. Following the death of Lecter’s parents and the collapse of the Eastern Front in 1944, retreating soldiers sheltered in a hunting lodge on Lecter’s parents’ war-ravaged Lithuanian estate. For food, the soldiers ate a number of captured children, including Mischa, Hannibal’s adored sister. The second half of the novel develops this narrative of trauma to explain why Lecter kills and consumes his victims. Despite this flimsy and ultimately unsatisfactory rationale for serial murder, the logic of the novel predicts Mischa’s return to Lecter through Clarice, also an orphan, who offers her breast
in substitution for the mother he has lost and the sister whom the soldiers sacrificed:

Clarice Starling reached her cupped hand into the deep neckline of her gown and freed her breast, quickly peaky in the open air. “You don’t have to give up this one,” she said. Looking always into his eyes, with her trigger finger she took warm Château d’Yquem from her mouth and a thick sweet drop suspended from her nipple like a golden cabochon and trembled with her breathing. (536–37)

Lecter’s acceptance of Clarice’s offer of salvation by consumption (also Clarice’s mode of redemption) constitutes the novel’s finale and provides a moment of high moral tension, reinforcing Stacy Gillis’s observation that “the villains of the detective genre posit the nebulous boundaries of morality” (1–2). Hannibal’s dénouement fully disturbs the integrity of these boundaries by showing the convergence of hero and villain/antihero rather than offering a predictable end that effects a clear and safe separation.

Hannibal suggests that the childhood traumas that Lecter and Starling have endured have far-reaching consequences in adult life. By providing a psychobiography for each figure, Harris emphasizes the role of conditioning in shaping their individual psychologies, which leads Clarice into the FBI and Lecter into the life of a serial killer. When Harris muses, “Now that ceaseless exposure has calloused us to the lewd and the vulgar, it is instructive to see what still seems wicked to us. What still slaps the clammy flab of our submissive consciousness hard enough to get our attention?” (Hannibal 144), he has his audience and Hannibal’s conclusion in mind. The psychological presentations of trauma and the success of therapy work to minimize, if not wholly collapse, the distinction between cop and killer and serve to diminish the urgency of essentialist claims.

The kind of vituperative language that the prefatory reviewers direct at Harris and Hannibal should resonate deeply with critics of popular culture. Examining the origins of reactions like this fierce resentment toward such cultural artifacts as popular novels yields provocative insights into the qualities that a national culture exhibits at a particular moment in its historical, political, and cultural development. While these reviewers cannot fairly represent the response of all readers, they do undoubtedly reproduce the feelings of many millions of American consumers whose political conservatism continues to inform America’s
zeitgeist, and whose definition of heroism and moral virtue often corresponds to the essential markers of Starling’s identity as a provincial white Protestant American.

In Hannibal, Harris targets such readers and assails them by depositing the cultural totem that he invented and they extolled. Starling’s messianic portrayal in The Silence of the Lambs valorized her in the eyes of many who considered her conservative credentials themselves as generating her indefatigable moral courage and righteousness. Harris demonstrably subscribes to a more complex, nonessentialist, postmodern position, however. He slaps hard at his fans’ flabby consciousnesses and at the detective genre generally, ruthlessly anatomizing the categories—hero, antihero, villain—by which readers comfort themselves and by which the genre traditionally operates. Through exposing illness subsequent to untreated trauma as producing both the acts of a saint and the acts of a sinner, Harris issues a challenging postmodern view of heroism in its accentuation of the constructedness of identity and its refusal to capitulate to the established conventions of the genre.

NOTE

1. This small sampling could have been supplemented with many others, including the two that follow.

Jeff, a 38 year old avid reader in Oregon, April 16, 2001, *HUGE DISAPPOINTMENT IS AN UNDERSTATEMENT. Don’t even get me started on the GARBAGE THAT HARRIS CALLED AN ENDING! I keep reading on these posts ‘don’t buy this book, borrow it from a friend.’ I’ll go one farther . . . DON’T EVEN BOther TO BORrow iT FRoM A FRiEND!

A reviewer (gad716@hotmail.com), November 1, 2000, *Not good eating or reading This novel falls short of his previous works. Please, what kind of ending was this? This book is shallow and betrays the characters of Hannibal and Clarice. This is pure drivel. Don’t buy it. Borrow it from a friend. It’s not worth the money.

Works Cited


Stephen M. Fuller has a PhD in American Literature from the University of Southern Mississippi, where he currently teaches.