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The Crow: Gothic Vigilantism and 1990's Alternative Music

The cultural and societal backdrop of the late 1980's and 1990's leaves a distinct imprint on James O'Barr's *The Crow* graphic novel, first published in 1989, primarily due to the inspiration that O'Barr took from the visual and lyrical aesthetics of the alternative music scene that arose during this period, specifically gothic rock and post-punk. This extends toward the accompanying 1994 film as well, the soundtrack of which includes popular musical acts like The Cure, Nine Inch Nails, and Violent Femmes, among others. What is so notable about the musical atmosphere in the original graphic novel and film is that O'Barr turned to alternative music as a coping mechanism to come to terms with the loss of his girlfriend, which was the event that spurred him writing *The Crow*. Fusing lyrics from Joy Division and The Cure into *The Crow* helped O'Barr to assuage the trauma that he had been suffering through. In both cases, the musical accompaniment helps to paint a larger portrait of the artistic and societal values that defined the world during the 1990's. The gothic literary tradition also serves as the basis for the narrative of *The Crow*, primarily with protagonist Eric's motivation to seek revenge for the brutal murder of his fiancée Shelly. Eric decides to situate himself as a gothic Christ-like figure who sees vigilantism as a tactic to seek salvation in the eyes of both God and Shelly. By avenging Shelly's honor, Eric is also able to achieve a sense of catharsis, knowing, in his eyes anyway, that he has done right by Shelly and can finally rest peacefully. *The Crow* is a remarkable visual and literary work because it utilizes motifs from alternative rock music and the gothic to paint a compelling portrait of the heartbreak Eric suffers through and why he is so motivated to seek revenge against perpetrators in a cold, unloving world.

The British postpunk and gothic rock scene were monumental influences for O'Barr as it reflected the inner pain and turmoil he felt at the time of his girlfriend's death, which is encapsulated in the dark aesthetics of *The Crow*. While postpunk and gothic rock first started to emerge in the late 1970's and early 1980's, their impact can still be clearly seen in the postmodern 1990's landscape of *The Crow*. The genres built themselves on a foundation of speaking to issues of religion, alienation, death, and loneliness. In addition to examining religion, the music itself has a melancholic mood and makes extensive usage of guitars and synthesizers to create an atmospheric, avant-garde scene. Beyond Joy Division and The Smiths, other popular bands during this period included The Cure, Bauhaus, and Siouxsie and the Banshees. Within *The Crow*, there are lyrics from The Cure printed on whole pages as well as chapters named after Joy Division songs. The physical look of Eric was also inspired by Peter Murphy, the vocalist for gothic rock mainstays Bauhaus, and Iggy Pop, wisely considered to be among of the most influential figures in punk music, with O'Barr stating in an interview with Mark Voger that "Physically, Eric is kind of a mixture of Iggy Pop and Peter Murphy" (Voger 51). The crossover between music and the visual nature of *The Crow* shows the interwoven nature of alternative rock music and art. After O'Barr's personal tragedy, he turned to both mediums as a coping mechanism and transferred the powerful emotions he felt onto the page, creating a beautiful masterpiece that reflects the utter pain he underwent.

While James O'Barr's enthusiasm for the British gothic rock scene is apparent, the alternative rock scene that took place in America also serves as an important touchstone for his work. This is due to the more immediate, raw, grunge, and industrial influenced sound, which transfers over to protagonist Eric's personality. He is driven to seek revenge on the people who hurt him and Shelley, and is not dissuaded from doing what he thinks is right, which reflects the

cynicism and dissatisfaction with authority that encapsulated both the music and overall cultural episteme of the 1990's. What also helps bolster the relationship between rock music and *The Crow* is the inclusion of many seminal American rock bands on *The Crow* film soundtrack. Toward the beginning of the film, after he is awakened by his crow companion, Eric sits in his and Shelley's old apartment, attempting to recollect his memories regarding the atrocities committed against him and Shelley. Violent flashbacks occur, and Eric can envision what his true purpose is: to make T-Bird and his gang pay for their crimes. When Eric travels outside of his apartment, jumping across rooftops, Nine Inch Nails' cover of Joy Division's 'Dead Souls' is playing in the background. The lyrics point to the agonizing dilemma that Eric faces by stating:

Someone take these dreams away

That point me to another day

A duel of personalities

That stretch all true reality (Nine Inch Nails 1:18-1:36)

This song becomes more important with Eric's personality in mind: he has horrific dreams about the death of his soulmate that take him back to a time that he cannot relive because the love of his life is gone. Moreover, Eric's own soul is stuck between two worlds: not quite dead, not quite alive; he has a breakdown of his corporeal reality and this colors the actions he takes to finish the quest of taking revenge on the ones who took his and Shelly's souls. The inclusion of this song during this integral scene helps to uncover just how much pain Eric is dealing with and goes to show just how much the emotional and lyrical content of rock songs such as "Dead Souls" bears a direct connection to *The Crow*.

Even though the influences from the British and American rock scenes are apparent and help to shed a light on Eric as a character, it is important to recognize the profound influence it has had on O'Barr and his writing. In an interview with GuitarInternational.com, O'Barr goes on to say that with Joy Division, his primary musical influence, "I kind of discovered Joy Division right in the time of my life when I needed to hear something like that, and Ian Curtis, the singer and the vocalist and the guy who wrote all the lyrics, he was a really big influence on me. There was a lot of truth and honesty in his lyrics." (O'Barr). Music was a form of therapy for O'Barr after the death of his fiancée in a drunk driving accident and allowed him to come to terms with this loss. The discovery of Joy Division came at a time when he needed to hear their music the most. The emotional resonance that O'Barr found within the lyrics, as mentioned earlier, had a clear effect on the dialogue of Eric, with his melancholy and introspective musings seemingly coming straight from the backdrop of British alternative rock. The chapter titles named after Joy Division songs, including 'Shadowplay,' 'Atrocity Exhibition,' and 'Atmosphere,' among others also point to the lineage of British alternative rock. Additionally, considering the tragic personal life of Ian Curtis, the frontman for Joy Division, and his untimely and early death driven by mental health issues, one could make the argument that given O'Barr's own struggle with depression, he saw Ian Curtis, and by extension Eric, as people he could relate to, which drove his motivation to include them in his work.

The integral relationship that *The Crow* graphic novel and film have to music allowed the works to resonate with like-minded audiences, allowing them to tap into alternative subcultures. O'Barr himself speaks to this fact by pointing out in an interview with the *Austin Chronicle* that:

The *Crow* was more referenced to music than it was to comics, so it ended up getting into a lot of record stores. They picked up on it right away with all the

musical references, and you have to remember that this was '88, '89, way ahead of that goth curve. It didn't even have a name back then. It was just alternative, although alternative to what I don't know ... but I knew that if I liked that kind of thing, there was an audience out there for it. (O'Barr)

While *Crow* is a trauma narrative in a graphic novel format and is a part of that literary canon, the abundant musical references helped to turn music fans who might not normally be exposed to the comic medium through its circulation and music and record stores. While the gothic rock scene flourished overseas in the late 70's through the 80's, in America at least, gothic rock did not emerge as a genre until well into the 80's with bands like Cabaret Voltaire, Ministry, and Skinny Puppy being some of the first emerging bands. This was a wholly new art form that represented an alternative way of thinking, which made a work like *The Crow* all the more appealing with music audiences.

Beyond a link to a larger musical tradition, *The Crow* is also a unique work due to it having overt gothic literary stylings. In *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction*, author Nick Groom paints a larger picture of the gothic literary canon by noting “[The Gothic] was the stuff of the nightmare, the fantastic, trauma, repression, and perversion (Groom 132)”. With the context of *The Crow* in mind, it is largely based on O'Barr's personal tragedy and loss, which can be seen in Eric's guilt over not being able to stop Shelly's death, thus leading him to internalize and repress, and later externalize through gothic vigilantism tactics, the trauma he feels toward this. Eric constantly revisits this nightmare that he yearns to escape. Moreover, in *Gothic Realities: The Impact of Horror Fiction on Modern Culture*, L. Andrew Cooper explains that what makes gothic fiction so memorable is because it “is a fiction that primarily represents fear, the fearful, and the abject, even if the representation is comic; every work...with represents

fear, the fearful, and the abject, even if the representation is comic; every work...with the big G makes fear and fearful its main business”(Cooper 6). Eric has a fear that there will never be justice served, which causes him to take action into his own hands, now instilling fear into the perpetrators that caused these senseless deaths. When he is resurrected by the titular crow, his body and sense of self is suspended in an abject state; Eric is essentially stuck between two worlds: on the border between life and death.

The palpable and heartbreaking nature of Eric’s trauma fuels his thirst for vigilante justice, to the point where he does not care about the harm he inflicts upon himself. During the “Watching Forever” chapter in *The Crow*, Eric’s crow companion begs the question “Why do this to yourself,” (O’Barr) as Eric is writhing in pain, surrounded by drug paraphernalia and bullets from a gun. A poem by famous Victorian era writer Elizabeth Barrett Browning is also quoted on the next panel “I love thee with the breath, smiles, tears of all my life!—And if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death”(O’Barr), which suggests that Eric’s love for Shelly absolutely consumes him, and he sees his vigilantism as his one way to achieve what he wants, and by bringing death onto others, he feels that will afford him salvation and justice will be achieved.

Since the events of *The Crow* revolve around Eric avenging Shelly’s brutal rape and murder, he could be considered an advocate for social justice for victims who cannot speak up, though his own vicious killing of T-Bird and his gang calls into question the morals and ethics of his actions. During an encounter with Fun Boy, “Irony,” T-Bird’s closest companion who is also sleeping with the mother of Eric’s friend Sherri, in the third book of *The Crow* titled “Irony”, Eric says “Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster”(O’Barr) Even though Eric seeks revenge on the people who have harmed him and

Shelly, he still retains an ambiguous moral compass and ethical code. He does not want to stoop to their level. During that same exchange, Eric also says “Funboy, you were dead the moment you touched that girl” (O’Barr) Eric sees rape and sexual abuse as a heinous offense, and by acting and punishing those who are culpable in these crimes, he could be considered as a crusader bringing forth justice for victims that do not have agency or a voice. Eric also has an encounter with Sherri in the fifth book of *The Crow* titled “Death,” where he says, “I’m sorry for everything that has happened to you and will happen to you” (O’Barr) This encapsulates the fear and trauma women in particular face at the hands of a culture dominated by patriarchy and predatory behavior. They feel as if they have no power or voice to act because abusers will retaliate against them, and this is not something that is solely exclusively to the gothic landscape of *The Crow*. Fear and danger are palpable and lurk around every corner and Eric could be deemed necessary because he has the motivation and the ability to right these wrongs.

While avenging Shelly’s death, Eric has a need to dismantle the oppression and patriarchy that is inherent in society and that transcends Shelly’s death, playing into his status as an androgynous gothic Christlike figure and warrior of justice. O’Barr’s own fear about being responsible for the death of his girlfriend carries over to Eric’s own fear of not doing right by Shelly; their descents into grief mirror each other. The story of *The Crow* reminds us of the pain and torment that come with trauma, but also ultimately how we can come to terms with and accept it. The story of *The Crow* reminds us of the pain and torment that come with trauma, but also ultimately how we can come to terms with and accept it. By utilizing Gothic imagery and influence from poetry and alternative music, O’Barr ultimately creates a unique visual and literary masterpiece that acts as a reflection of the cruel, unforgiving society we live in.

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