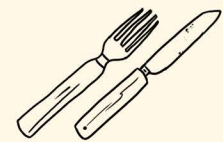


# Not a Man: The Allure of Cannibalism



When does a man become meat? The question is central to AMC's *The Terror*, with men on both sides of a mutiny forced to consider eating the flesh of other men for survival. Across the ages, we have found ourselves drawn to stories of cannibalism again and again: in writing from Herodotus to Melville; in sensational news stories from the Greely Expedition to the Andes airplane disaster; and, of course, in movies, which cast cannibalism in symbolic roles from psychopathology (*The Silence of the Lambs*) to love (*Bones and All*). With its prevalence in both the natural world and human history, perhaps a better question to explain our interest in cannibalism would be: when does meat become a man? If we decide that eating other human beings is inherently unacceptable, we imagine a line between human and animal: cannibalism "constitutes the cultural; it makes difference; it fabricates humanness".<sup>9</sup>

## Exploration and Survival

In 1884, the "custom of the sea" was brought into the public eye by the case of the *Mignonette*, in which a crew transporting a yacht survived shipwreck off of the coast of South Africa, only to spend the next 24 days adrift in the yacht's dinghy<sup>18</sup>. Before resorting to cannibalism, the crew did not cast lots (a custom wherein the sailor who drew the short straw would be killed and eaten by the others). Instead, the captain killed cabin boy Richard Parker, who seemed near to death. The remaining men then ate Parker. This case was notable because of the strong public support exhibited when the crew was tried for cannibalism.

The naval custom of the sea, upon which the crew of the *Mignonette* had depended, came very close to sanctioning survival cannibalism: "cannibalism was legitimated [...] survivors who had followed the custom could have a certain professional pride in a job well done"<sup>16</sup>. The custom of the sea did not negate the humanity of its victims, but elevated the humanity of those who partook; it indicated that saving the lives of some was worth the lives of others.

On the 1881 Greely Expedition, First Lieutenant Adolphus Greely led 25 men to establish an encampment at Lady Franklin Bay<sup>7</sup>. When rescuers found the expedition's survivors, "[t]here was evidence that seven of the dead had been cannibalized"<sup>7</sup>. An article by the *New Haven Evening Register* quoted a relief officer: "This does not look like a pack of heartless cannibals. No sir; they are men to the last"<sup>15</sup>. Likely leaning on popular racist ideas of the time that connected non-European native peoples with cannibalism, this statement implied that the men could not be cannibals *because they were men*.

## Western Society Taboos

The encounter between Europe and the Americas introduced the "discourse of cannibalism" as a defining feature of colonial encounters<sup>12</sup>. The cannibal became a "signifier of barbarism"<sup>11</sup> and "the cultural 'other'"<sup>12</sup>. Cannibalism became a Western taboo, despite documented European medical cannibalism, because it implied a connection to "less civilized" or "barbaric" cultures.

As Beth Conklin writes, "many [...] who considered cannibalism antithetical to what it means to be human [...] appear blind to the possibility that people different from themselves might have other ways of being human"<sup>12</sup>. While we can recognize how racism has affected discussion of cannibalism, the "frisson of pleasure to be experienced in [...] cannibal transgression" still leads to cannibalism being portrayed with the intent to titillate audiences<sup>12</sup>.



## The Terror

Exploration and survival: Captain Francis Crozier refers to flagship *Erebus* as "the raft of the *Medusa*". The *Medusa* was a famous 1816 shipwreck in which survivors, forced onto a makeshift raft, swiftly resorted to cannibalism<sup>6</sup>.

Western society taboos: When James Fitzjames says, "My body. Use it. Feed the men," his offer is rejected.\* The characters' strong initial rejection of cannibalism lends narrative weight to their later decision to discard their societal taboos and consume one another for survival.

Times of starvation: With the men of *The Terror* clearly starving, weak and sick William Gibson's murder and consumption parallel the murder of Richard Parker, the ailing cabin boy of the *Mignonette*.

Destroying societal roles: In offering himself to be cannibalized, James Fitzjames completes his narrative arc and abandons his vanity. The mutineers, who commit most of the cannibalism seen onscreen, have rebelled against the expedition and the society that spawned it entirely.

Erotic metaphor: Cornelius Hickey is sexually involved with William Gibson, whom he later kills and eats. Hickey strokes the meat as he eats Gibson, which could have a visually erotic connotation.

\*They should have eaten him!<sup>14</sup>

By dehumanizing either the subject or the perpetrator of cannibalism, we create boundaries around humanity. We imagine that a human, no matter their dire plight, could not perform such an act. *The Terror* presents cannibalism in a more neutral light, connecting it to various facets and histories of cannibalism that create a well-rounded picture of the circumstances that can drive one person to consume another. Rather than fabricating humanness by disowning taboo acts, *The Terror* presents us humans who have decided to eat other humans.

## Times of Starvation

An example of historical starvation leading to cannibalism is Virginia's Jamestown Colony, where the harsh winter of 1609 drove the two-year-old colony to eat their own to survive<sup>2</sup>. Tales of starvation connect with other themes that make cannibalism interesting to the public: gruesome circumstances and questions of ethics and necessity. When those committing survival cannibalism wish to distance themselves from the act, it has been reported that the head and limbs of the body are often cut off to make it seem less human. Even in desperate times, we may consider it more acceptable to eat a human body if we remove its human identifiers first, reducing it to meat.

## Destroying Societal Roles

Dutch political leader Johan de Witt, after his defeat in the Franco-Dutch war and the collapse of his political power, was killed and potentially eaten by an organized mob<sup>3</sup>. His brutal murder and alleged consumption by a crowd of his own people was the final negation of the leadership role he had held above them.

Recorded evidence of widespread cannibalism in the Guangxi province of China, in 1968, pointed to pressure put on the "masses" to kill bourgeoisie "class enemies" as the motivation which drove townspeople to murder<sup>32</sup>. While there were obviously layers of political and cultural conflict involved in this incident, the insistence on destroying and consuming supposed societal superiors was a source of fuel and inspiration for the attacks.

## Erotic Metaphor

We have commonly seen consumption portrayed as erotic across the centuries, especially in poetry. More recently, cannibalism as an erotic metaphor has come to the screen. In NBC's *Hannibal*, human flesh is consumed in opulent settings where the "ache" of hunger is paralleled to the ache of love. In the 2022 movie *Bones and All*, cannibalism and the desire to share it with another comprise the primary romantic impetus for the film, which culminates in one lover eating the other. One of the movie's final shots makes the transition from kissing to biting to eating explicit. In portrayals like these, "there is the affirmation of an appetite, a hunger, which has to do with desire and is therefore erotic," explains literary researcher David Conte Imbert<sup>1</sup>.

# Sources

1. Benalal, Noah. "Ambition, Sex, Cannibalism: Why Stories about Ravenous Women Have Multiplied." EL PAÍS English, 18 May 2023, [english.elpais.com/culture/2023-05-18/ambition-sex-cannibalism-why-stories-about-ravenous-women-have-multiplied.html](https://english.elpais.com/culture/2023-05-18/ambition-sex-cannibalism-why-stories-about-ravenous-women-have-multiplied.html). Accessed 27 Oct. 2024.
2. Burley, Mikel. "Eating human beings: Varieties of cannibalism and the heterogeneity of human life." *Philosophy* 91.4 (2016): 483-501.
3. Dash, Mike. "The Most Terrible Polar Exploration Ever: Douglas Mawson's Antarctic Journey." *Smithsonian Magazine*, 27 Jan. 2012, [www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-most-terrible-polar-exploration-ever-douglas-mawsons-antarctic-journey-82192685/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-most-terrible-polar-exploration-ever-douglas-mawsons-antarctic-journey-82192685/).
4. Durey, Michael. "Exploration at the edge: Reassessing the fate of Sir John Franklin's last Arctic expedition." *Great Circle: Journal of the Australian Association for Maritime History*, The 30.2 (2008): 3-40.
5. Goldfarb, Kara. "The Brutal End of Dutchman Johan de Witt, Who Was Torn Apart and Eaten by His Own People." *All That's Interesting*, All That's Interesting, 21 May 2018, [allthatsinteresting.com/johan-de-witt](http://allthatsinteresting.com/johan-de-witt).
6. Hirsch-Allen, Jake. "The Raft of the Medusa."
7. Jampoler, Andrew C.A. "Disaster at Lady Franklin Bay." U.S. Naval Institute, 1 Aug. 2010, [www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2010/august/disaster-lady-franklin-bay](http://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2010/august/disaster-lady-franklin-bay).
8. King, C. Richard. "The (mis) uses of cannibalism in contemporary cultural critique." *Diacritics* 30.1 (2000): 106-123.
9. Kuta, Sarah. "DNA Reveals Identity of Officer on the Lost Franklin Expedition—and His Remains Show Signs of Cannibalism." *Smithsonian Magazine*, 26 Sept. 2024, [www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/dna-reveals-identity-of-officer-on-the-lost-franklin-expedition-and-his-remains-show-signs-of-cannibalism-180985154/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/dna-reveals-identity-of-officer-on-the-lost-franklin-expedition-and-his-remains-show-signs-of-cannibalism-180985154/). Accessed 27 Oct. 2024.
10. Leane, Elizabeth, and H. M. Tiffin. "Dogs, Meat and Douglas Mawson." (2011).
11. lieutenant-catboy-little. "Hear Me Out: There Should Have Been More Survival Cannibalism in *The Terror* (2018). A James Fitzjames-centric Analysis." *Tumblr.com*, 22 Dec 2021, [www.tumblr.com/lieutenant-catboy-little/671298472806383616/hear-me-out-there-should-have-been-more-survival?source=share](http://www.tumblr.com/lieutenant-catboy-little/671298472806383616/hear-me-out-there-should-have-been-more-survival?source=share). Accessed 27 Oct. 2024.
12. Lindenbaum, Shirley. "Thinking about cannibalism." *Annu. Rev. Anthropol.* 33.1 (2004): 475-498.
13. Portner, Gerald. "The tender cabin boy. Cannibalism and the subject." *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 47.1-2 (2002): 69-77.
14. Pryor, Cathy. "How Cannibalism Became Society's Ultimate Taboo." *ABC News*, 3 Mar. 2017, [www.abc.net.au/news/2017-03-04/cannibalism-from-widespread-practice-to-ultimate-taboo/8322762](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-03-04/cannibalism-from-widespread-practice-to-ultimate-taboo/8322762).
15. Reck, Stephen Noah. "'The Greely Sensation': Arctic Exploration and the Press." (2018).
16. Simpson, A. W. Brian. 1984: *Cannibalism and the Common Law. The Story of the Tragic Last Voyage of the Mignonette and the Strange Legal Proceedings to which it gave rise.* Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.
17. Stromberg, Joseph. "Starving Settlers in Jamestown Colony Resorted to Cannibalism." *Smithsonian*, *Smithsonian.com*, May 2013, [www.smithsonianmag.com/history/starving-settlers-in-jamestown-colony-resorted-to-cannibalism-46000815/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/starving-settlers-in-jamestown-colony-resorted-to-cannibalism-46000815/).
18. Thompson, Carl. "Cannibalism at Sea: The Starving Victorian Sailors Who Ate a Cabin Boy." *HistoryExtra*, 24 May 2021, [www.historyextra.com/period/victorian/cannibalism-at-sea-sailors-ate-the-cabin-boy/](http://www.historyextra.com/period/victorian/cannibalism-at-sea-sailors-ate-the-cabin-boy/).
19. Yusoff, Kathryn. *Arresting Vision: A Geographical Theory of Antarctic Light.* 2005.
20. Zheng, Y. (1996). *Scarlet Memorial: Tales Of Cannibalism In Modern China* (1st ed.). Routledge.

## Visual Sources:

1. Screenscaps from [kissthemgoodbye.net](http://kissthemgoodbye.net).
2. *The Raft of the Medusa* by Milton Sonn.
3. Golden frames from [inspiredpencil.com](http://inspiredpencil.com).
4. Artwork by me!