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THE ANGEL OF CROCKETT ISLAND: IS *MIDNIGHT MASS* (2021) A VAMPIRE STORY?

Review by Kat Humphries

Flanagan, Mike, director. *Midnight Mass*. Performances by Zach Gilford, Kate Siegel, Hamish Linklater, Samantha Sloyan, and Rahul Kohli. Intrepid Pictures, 2021. Television.

Over the past decade, Mike Flanagan has become a household name in Horror. His early feature films, *Absentia* (2011) and *Oculus* (2013), met with positive responses from audiences and critics alike, followed by *Hush*, *Before I Wake* (2016), and *Ouija: Origin of Evil* (2016), and the subsequent Stephen King adaptations *Gerald's Game* (2017) and *Doctor Sleep* (2019). Yet Flanagan's greatest success to date has been on the small screen, where a deal with Netflix has produced three critically acclaimed horror television series – 2018's *The Haunting of Hill House*, 2020's *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, and most recently, 2021's *Midnight Mass*.

Unlike his first two series, which were adapted from classic works of Horror fiction, *Midnight Mass* is Flanagan's first original story for television.¹ Heavily influenced by his childhood experiences with the Catholic Church and subsequent struggles with alcoholism, Flanagan admits in a guest essay for *Bloody Disgusting* (2021) that "there has probably never been a project more personal to me." Yet there is still a great deal in *Midnight Mass* that feels familiar, particularly to Horror fans – there is the bleak setting of Crockett Island, a declining community isolated from the rest of the world. There is the religious iconography, the Catholic church's influence, and a suspicious, charismatic new priest. And then, of course, the mysterious creature arrives at the same time as Father Paul (Hamish Linklater) and begins to exert an insidious influence over the island and its people.

In our position as viewers, familiar with the generic conventions of Horror and Flanagan's previous work, we go into *Midnight Mass* with certain preconceptions. This context leads us to identify the creature – unable to emerge in daylight, drinking the blood of other living things – as a vampire. Yet to Father Paul – a devoted Catholic priest on the verge of death whose life is miraculously saved by a winged figure – it is unquestionably clear that the creature is an angel. The juxtaposition of these two interpretations demonstrates a key theme running through *Midnight Mass* – the way in which events, symbols, and words can be re-purposed and manipulated to reinforce the desired narrative.

It is Father Paul's complete and utter faith in the narrative of the angel and his determination to enact that narrative on others, with or without their consent, that ultimately leads to the downfall of Crockett Island. By focusing on signs and events that reinforce his beliefs, such as the improving health of the islanders and the 'miracles' that occur, he overlooks those that contradict them – being

burnt by the symbol of the cross, mysterious deaths and the immoral act of tricking his congregation into unknowingly drinking vampire blood. Yet despite his undoubtable culpability for the horrors in *Midnight Mass*, Hamish Linklater portrays Father Paul with charisma, nuance, and empathy that we cannot help but lapse into occasionally rooting for him. It helps that Father Paul's motivations are repeatedly reinforced to be altruistic, if misguided, and by the end, he realises that he's made a terrible mistake.

However, Crockett Island's other prominent Catholic figurehead is another matter entirely. Samantha Sloan's portrayal of Bev Keane perfectly encapsulates what can happen when religious devotion tips into zealotry, fanaticism, and downright evil. Like Father Paul, Bev justifies her actions via religion, claiming she is acting according to the will of God. She reels off Bible verses to justify increasingly immoral acts, from poisoning a dog to covering up a murder and finally advocating the mass slaughter of the 'unfaithful.' Unlike Father Paul, however, it becomes increasingly clear that Bev acts according to her own self-interest and doling out judgement on those she considers unworthy or less pious than herself.

Where does the angel fit, then, in all of this? One might expect that in a show featuring a monstrous vampire that infiltrates a small island community, the vampire would be the focus, the evil to be overcome. Yet, throughout *Midnight Mass's* seven episodes, no one mentions the word 'vampire.'. In an interview for *Netflix Geeked* (2021), Flanagan explains that this was a deliberate omission because "the minute you say that it changes the story into a vampire story" (n.p.). In a sense, then, it seems that Flanagan is attempting to exert his own narrative control by distancing *Midnight Mass* from other 'vampire stories,' suggesting that his use of the vampire is somehow distinct from what we may traditionally associate with the classic archetype in Horror.

There is no single blueprint for a 'vampire story' following the ever-changing depiction of vampires in Horror throughout the years. Early vampires were generally antagonists, monstrous invaders threatening the stability of civilised society, as in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Gradually we saw the rise of the sympathetic vampire to a point where modern Horror media is more likely to depict vampires as potential love interests, allies, or even protagonists themselves, as in Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* books (2005-2008) and their adaptations or television shows like *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017) and *True Blood* (2008-2014). The vampire has always been a malleable symbol, utilised by storytellers to suit the changing times and evolving appetites of their audience – which is exactly how Flanagan uses it in *Midnight Mass*.

In *Vampires Among Us* (2012), Linda Heidenreich writes: "Popular culture uses vampiric discourse to voice fear of change, fear of the other, fear that the other is bringing change into our communities" (93). While these fears certainly exist in *Midnight Mass*, it is not the vampire itself that represents them. These fears are, instead, demonstrated most plainly through Bev's treatment of the 'outsiders' on Crockett Island – Riley, an ex-choir boy, turned atheist and recovering alcoholic who returns to the island after serving a prison sentence for killing a young woman while drink-driving; Erin, a pregnant schoolteacher who comes back to her hometown with no husband; and most of all Sheriff Hassan, a single father and Muslim trying to fit into a predominantly Catholic community.

These are the threats Bev sees on Crockett Island and attempts to control, ignoring and indeed becoming a far greater threat herself in the process.

The angel, then, is not a symbol of an external threat invading a safe community but instead represents a threat from within – the threat of fanaticism and fundamentalism. The angel itself may come from another place, but it is brought to Crockett Island by Father Paul – a man of faith and someone whom the islanders implicitly trust. It is Father Paul who conceals the angel's presence and spikes the communion wine with its blood, and later it is Bev and himself who cover up a murder to keep their secret and continue with their plan. Eventually, even as Father Paul comes to his senses, Bev is the one who unleashes a horde of newly turned vampires out into Crockett Island, encouraging them to murder their unsuspecting neighbours. As Flanagan states in his interview with *Netflix Geeked*, "the vampire isn't the thing that tears this community apart" (n.p.).

So – is *Midnight Mass* a vampire story? The fact that there is no simple answer to this ostensibly simple question demonstrates that Flanagan has utilised the vampire in *Midnight Mass* in a complex and interesting way. Much like *Hill House* and *Bly Manor* are ghost stories but not *about* ghosts, it could be said that *Midnight Mass* is a vampire story that is not about the vampire. Yet is this not the nature of the vampire and, indeed, often of Horror as a genre – the use of something monstrous, supernatural, or otherwise horrific to interrogate something far more human?

Following on from the success of *Hill House* and *Bly Manor*, as well as his wider cinematic works, *Midnight Mass* is another triumph for Flanagan. It is a touch self-indulgent, undoubtedly due to the extremely personal nature of the story (which Flanagan had been trying to bring to life for many years before Netflix gave it the green light), and some viewers might find themselves frustrated by the slow pace and long, expository monologues. The build-up is certainly worth the wait, though, for the show's frenetic and violent conclusion. As well as the stellar performances from Hamish Linklater and Samantha Sloyan as mentioned above, there are also fantastic turns from Flanagan regulars Kate Siegel and Rahul Kohli. After the intensely personal nature of *Midnight Mass*, Flanagan's next television projects all take him back to the realm of Horror adaptation with three more upcoming Netflix series with Flanagan at the helm. Judging by the quality and the richness of his efforts to date, both fans and scholars are likely to find much to enjoy and explore in Flanagan's works for the foreseeable future.

NOTES

1. *Hill House* is based on Shirley Jackson's 1959 novel of the same name, while *Bly Manor* is an adaptation of Henry James' 1898 novella *The Turn of the Screw*.

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BIONOTE

Kat Humphries completed the MLitt in Fantasy Literature at the University of Glasgow, UK. Her dissertation focused on the figure of the monster hunter hero in American Fantasy television, specifically on how *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) influenced subsequent shows *Supernatural* (2005-2020) and *Grimm* (2011-2017).