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The Vivified Sacrificial Rites as the Site of Conflation of Man and Animal in Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice*

The article juxtaposes two explanations of the ancient phenomenon of sacrifice, one of which, formulated by René Girard, emphasizes the aspects of scapegoating and transference of people's violent inclinations, while the other, developed by Jonathan Klawans and focused on the ancient Israeli sacrificial customs, attributes chief significance to the notions of purity, defilement, and achieving the state of *imitatio Dei* by the offerer. Though these explanations are at odds in many respects, with Klawans being vocally critical of Girard's approach, the article seeks to present both of them as applicable to the context of a contemporary sacrifice depicted in Adele Wiseman's novel, *The Sacrifice*. Its protagonist, the article argues, finds a way of blending these two orders together largely by the use of the mental figure of the animal, the projection of which onto his victim allows him to perceive her in dualistic manner, as simultaneously sacred and wicked. In the light of this, the ostensibly morally sanctioned practice of ancient Abrahamic sacrifice is shown to contain an unaccounted for potential to instigate ruinous acts, and the figure of the animal, within a situation characterized by the blurring of boundaries and distinctions, with which a sacrificial crisis is unalterably associated, attains an ambiguous, if not sinister, significance.

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The phenomenon of sacrificial killing ranks among the ancient cultural customs most likely to confound modern sensibilities. With its depiction largely relegated to vulgar exploitation narratives in contemporary media, usually intended to portray the act as barbaric and inhumane, the subject arguably merits a more serious and in-depth treatment, especially in light of how prevalent the practice once was among a multitude of cultures, including those that form the bedrock of western civilization. One of the most eminent scholars dealing with the subject of sacrifice was René Girard, the author of *The Scapegoat* and *Violence and the Sacred*. Among his significant claims was that the overarching reason behind the various manifestations of sacrificial violence was always the preoccupation with either preventing or stopping the escalation of other forms of violence deemed more damaging to the community – particularly reciprocal violence, occurring between members of the society without regard to the relations, distinctions or hierarchies instituted by it. As Girard maintained, the spiritual elites tended to be conscious of the always latent risk of a potentially disastrous breakout of such violence in the society. Their solution was to provide scapegoats: designated victims, the killing of which or whom was meant to allow the members of the community to release their pent-up aggression and reaffirm the bonds between them in “a deliberate act of collective substitution performed at the expense of the victim and absorbing all the internal tensions, feuds, and rivalries pent up within the community” (Girard, *Violence* 7). The victim, while in actuality chosen arbitrarily, or rather on the basis of being susceptible “to violence without fear of reprisal,” without the risk of incurring vengeance (13), was posited as the culprit behind any perceived ailments befalling the community. Paradoxically, however, in a motion of “*double transference* . . . those involved in the collective violence transfer

the disorder and the offenses producing it to the victim, but they transfer also their newly found peace to the victim, ascribing to him or her the power that brings it about” (Girard, *The Girard Reader* 68). The victimizers would imbue the scapegoat with the capacity to restore the state of tranquillity, which could unfortunately only be actualized by the act of killing. The capacity in question would often be attributed to the divine bestowing upon the victim a sacred status in response to its very function as a sacrificial object. The victim’s culpability, on the other hand, was not always attributed to direct acts of inducing disorder, but also to acts that were seen as constituting a transgression of the social boundaries, such as filicide or incest. These transgressions were perceived as sowing the seeds of chaos and violence in the community often, again, by unspecified, supernatural means; the accused’s crime was indiscernible from their being, perceived as an intrinsic “fantastic essence or ontological attribute” (Girard, *The Scapegoat* 36) potent enough to affect their surroundings. Because of the need to establish the sacrificial victim as “tainted” or corrupted, frequent choices for scapegoats were the various social outcasts, the “other,” who, by virtue of their foreignness, lack of identification with the social whole, “suggest[ed] a certain affinity to the monstrous” (34), the inhuman.

Now, Girard based his explanation of sacrifice in part on ancient myths and literary works which often referred to times that represented a distant past already at the time of being first formulated. As time went on and the institution of sacrifice became more formalized, the actual human sacrifices became far less common and were substituted instead with animal sacrifices or other forms of sacrificial rites with a more symbolic function. Girard nonetheless insists that those later practices share the same anthropological origin, which presents one with a possible alternative perspective on the accounts of sacrifice being performed among the ancient Israelites, which, according to the Bible, always explicitly banned the use of human victims. If one were to apply the Girardian interpretation, then using animals for sacrificial purposes would become a means of diverting the minds from directing their violent impulses towards other human beings. One could respond to that by arguing that animal sacrifice is incongruent with the notion of scapegoating as there is no direct correspondence between sacrifice understood as eliminating “culpable” parties in order to prevent reciprocal violence, and sacrifice understood as killing animals, particularly tamed animals such as livestock, which can hardly be deemed guilty of any moral transgression. One of the main goals of this essay, however, is to demonstrate, by means of analyzing the plot of *The Sacrifice*, a 1956 novel by Jewish Canadian author Adele Wiseman, that this incongruity is not as clear cut as it may seem and that these two ostensibly disparate phenomena can, under the “right” conditions, conceptually intermingle.

That being said, I hasten to add that Girard’s enunciation of sacrifice is not quite sufficient to explain the ancient Jewish variation of its practice, and in turn, the events depicted in the novel. Therefore, before delving into its contents, I believe it would be prudent to introduce the work of Jonathan Klawans, who, in analyzing specifically the Jewish accounts of ancient sacrifices, identifies an aspect apparently peculiar to them, termed *imitatio Dei*. As he states in the article “Pure Violence: Sacrifice and Defilement in Ancient Israel,” the Jews’ antecedents sought in their rituals to follow in the footsteps of their God, who cares for his people the way a herder cares for his flock, tending to its needs yet sometimes also bringing upon it carnage and death. Hence, the pastoral Israelites saw it fit to make sacrifices as “the controlled exercise[s] of complete power over an animal’s life and death” – an animal to whose existence they could claim an absolute right of possession. The exercise of this claim, of one’s power over creation, meant also the exercise of the ability to kill a “subordinate being” (Klawans, “Pure Violence” 145) in a seemingly arbitrary manner.

Striving to achieve the state of *imitatio Dei* was hardly something done for its own sake, though. It was believed, Klawans maintains, that emulating God was to result in “attracting and maintaining the presence of God within the community” (“Pure Violence” 139). God, apparently, had to be sated by similar expressions of devotion, and it was through such acts that man could attain a special, deep communion with Him. Offerings taking place in the temple were to ensure that the divine essence would permeate its walls, and the very term “offering” was related to closeness (150). In other words, killing was to bring the doer closer to God, implicitly elevating him above the corporeal world. Klawans states firmly, partly in response to Girard’s theories, that “[t]heories of sacrifice which identify the (usually innocent) animal with the (usually guilty) offerer without identifying the offerer with something or someone else – as analogy would require – can only hope to explain half of sacrifice at most” (149). He does not wholly negate Girard’s conclusions but draws attention to another aspect of sacrifice, which the former, perhaps due to his preoccupation with the polytheistic Greek civilization, did not consider in detail. Thus, we may now take heed of the less than obvious relations between each of the intended participants in the act of sacrifice – the performer, the object, and the receiver. All of these relations will be pertinent to our reading of *The Sacrifice* and determining the significance of the concept of the animal – the inhuman – in the story it portrays.

The significance of Klawans’s work to the themes of the novel does not end here, though. In the book *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism*, the scholar focuses on the subject of impurity as perceived in the ancient Israelite society, drawing the crucial distinction between the “ritual” and “moral impurity” (22). The former, generally more widely recognized kind, referred to a defilement incurred by coming into contact with, among other things, carcasses, genital discharges, and certain diseases (22). Such defilement, being basically unavoidable, was also temporary and removable by specific cleansing rituals. The latter type, on the other hand, was brought about by sin (sexual sin and bloodshed, in particular) and, as such, it was deemed far more difficult to erase. Being afflicted with either type of impurity was supposed to bar one from entering sacred precincts, but the consequences of moral impurity were, according to Klawans, still more dire than that. The accrual of moral impurity among the people of Israel resulted in “rejection by God” (34), the defilement of the holy altar as well as the very land of Israel, which led to the degradation and subsequent expulsion of the Jews from its borders (27). The Jews could afterwards no longer claim to carry the Lord’s blessings, being effectively cast off. Especially notable in light of this is the fact that, according to Jacob Milgrom, a scholar cited by Klawans, sacrifice in ancient Israel should be interpreted as “a ritual of purification” (qtd. in Klawans, *Impurity and Sin* 14), where, however, it is not the offerer who receives purification in the act, but rather the defiled altar. The solution for the incidence of morally impure persons was, Klawans proposes, to put them to death or to render them outcasts or pariahs (34).

At this point, it is not difficult to envision how the two introduced systems of interpreting sacrifice can be conflated. If a sacrifice can be perceived as a means of purifying an environment – and, by extension, a society that inhabits it – afflicted by defilement stemming from people’s moral transgressions, then it is arguably not an overreach to suggest that one could be driven to seek out scapegoats who could be implicated in sowing said defilement and executed in an act perceived as a sacrifice in which the offerer’s devotion to the divine is reiterated. That is not to say such interpretation of the individual’s sacrificial duties is wholly compatible with the original understanding of the sacrificial ritual by the Israelites as determined by Klawans; only that it could

conceivably emerge in a particular set of circumstances, especially without a solid fixed authority to maintain and impart the orthodox conception of the sacrifice to the faithful. After all, Klawans himself has traced how details regarding sacrifice and defilement underwent changes in various Jewish communities across history, and it hardly requires saying that religious customs are not exempt from changes resulting not only from the passage of time, but also from people's propensity to bend and distort received knowledge to suit their needs or agendas.

Klawans has offered a rather scathing criticism of Girard, accusing the latter of a singular preoccupation with the origins of sacrifice as a phenomenon, and the resulting tendency towards reductionism, evolutionism and mythmaking presented as unveiling of that which the ancient narratives sought to conceal (*Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple* 23–26). His reservations are not without merit, although they seem to be founded in a difference between the approach and methodology of one whose priorities are chiefly anthropological – as is the case with Klawans – and those assumed by one concerned with the analysis and criticism of literary narratives. With that said, the subsequent reading of Wiseman's novel is meant to highlight a way in which a mind ostensibly embedded in a tradition whose perception of the sacrificial ritual is basically in tune with the depiction presented by Klawans nonetheless comes to assume a point of view similar to that described by Girard. The purpose of that is not to assert supremacy of one interpretation over another, or to try to identify a culpable strain inherent within the ancient Jewish tradition of sacrifice. It is rather to indicate that even if the Abrahamic religion explicitly forbade the inclusion of human offerings, the fact that sacrifices still involved violence and killing as a means of compensation for the inadequacy of man has left open the possibility of them turning into scapegoating human sacrifices, with the boundary between man and animal being not firm and definite enough to ensure that such a transition would at no point take place. The narrative portrayed by Adele Wiseman in *The Sacrifice* allows us to examine the inner workings of just such an upheaval, even if it is securely confined within the realm of fiction. The potential tenuousness of the mutual exclusivity of the terms *human* and *animal* within one's mental workings of categorization is definitely exposed in the course of the story and can be aptly recognized as the chief reason why its protagonist can even momentarily find justification for his heinous crime of murder in his inherited understanding of sacrificial ritual.

If the title of the novel was not enough to communicate that the motif of sacrifice plays an important role in its narrative, the fact that its main cast consists of a family of Jews with the father named Abraham and the son named Isaac should certainly put any confusion to rest. The book is set in 1920–30s Canada, where the family immigrates after losing its two older sons to a pogrom in Ukraine. Abraham is a man with grand aspirations for his bloodline, not all that stifled by the tragic losses he has suffered. His main goal in life is to be seen as a progenitor of men who steadfastly maintain the ancient covenant made between Jews and the Lord. Accordingly, the deaths of his sons assume in his mind the significance of a divine test of his faith, whereas Isaac's continued survival against the odds (which include a bout of typhus) becomes a sign of God's "reiterated promise" (Wiseman 23) to keep his bloodline alive and guide the family's fate, according to a preordained plan. This plan, according to Abraham, is written by God on every man's forehead upon his birth (132). Mental associations with the practice of branding livestock as a means of signalling ownership over it would in this instance be quite justified.

Abraham's manner of interpreting the family's course of life and eventual purpose does not sit well with everyone concerned. As the young Isaac grows, so does his more relativistic and secular view of the world, which leads to friction between him and Abraham. The latter initially responds by recounting to his son various Biblical tales, in particular the Binding of Isaac. The

father attaches great significance to the absolute submission displayed by the biblical son, stressing how the will of each of the participants – the receiver, the giver, and the object of sacrifice – became entangled with one another at the point when the knife was about to plunge, due to both father and son's readiness to perform their designated roles:

[i]n that moment lay the secrets of life and death, in that closed circle with just the three of them, with Abraham offering the whole of the past and the future, and Isaac lying very still, so as not to spoil the sacrifice . . . And God himself is bound at that moment, for it is the point of mutual surrender, the one thing He cannot resist, a faith so absolute. (Wiseman 177)

Such explication of the Biblical story hardly serves to assuage Isaac's existential doubts, but it provides an insight into the father's reasoning. While never in any way entertaining the notion of actually violently sacrificing his son, he does evince conviction in the efficacy of sacrifices, which according to him served to renew the Jewish forefathers' "wonder and fear and belief" (38). To kill was to imbue one's faith with newfound vitality, feel the presence of and one's kinship with the divine on a much more personal and immediate level, in keeping with the notion of sacrifice as an act of communion described in Klawans. To perform the act normally relegated exclusively to God's domain was also to assume a position closer to equal standing with God, acquire an insight into the mysteries of creation, and thus have a measure of influence on His judgments. As noted by Edna Froese, "Abraham is drawn to the older blood rituals that seem closer to mystery and closer to a God who could be held to his promises – who could be manipulated" (15). But in order to do the deed of sacrifice, one must come bearing offerings, bring to the altar that which is wholly his and wholly subordinated to his will, which is why the – apocryphal – aspect of Isaac's willing compliance with being designated as a sacrificial object is given special attention in Abraham's account.

The protagonist's conviction and preoccupation with the phenomenon of sacrifice is by his own admission linked to a traumatic event from his childhood, when, while working as a goy butcher's apprentice, he was forced to substitute for an absent shoichet and ritually kill a cow. Though initially paralyzed by the blasphemy of the demand, the act then transformed in his mind into something nearly transcendental. The face of the creature awaiting its death at his hands, its eyes "so fine and large under their veil" (Wiseman 38), became suffused with metaphysical meaning. The boundary between the animal and the human seemingly dissolved, prompting Freda Zipursky to remark that "the cow, as it is about to be slaughtered, takes on human characteristics" (43). Abraham found himself "stand[ing] alone on the edge of creation [with o]nly God [to] understand him then" (Wiseman 37). The blasphemous slaughter, in his estimation apparently more than any other moment of his life, brought him into a position of deeper intimacy with the nature, the essence of God and allowed for a sense of "bonding with the Creator and Destroyer of life," to quote Ellen Jean Gordon (43). An actualization of *imitatio Dei* was brought about here in a most radical manner. By performing the sacrifice, Abraham experienced an irruption of the ordinary, profane realm of being, and the momentary revelation of a different, sacred perspective. The sensation is implied to be rather overwhelming – Michael Greenstein notes in *Third Solitudes* that the act "initiates him into blindness, paralysis, absence" (106) – sensations which will reoccur during the novel's tragic climax, and which are now merely alluded to in Abraham's recounting. Within this scheme, the cow served as a mediator between those two realities, providing an opportunity to peer into what lies beyond the corporeal. Its capacity to perform such a function can be attributed to the "mystery" it is implied to contain inside itself, a mystery inextricably bound to its status of a sacrificial victim and likely related to its innocence and purity. It should be noted that in the beliefs of ancient Israelites

only those deemed pure could perform the functions of either offerers or objects of sacrifice, for impurity was perceived as ungodlike. The figure of the animal as a mediator between disparate modes of being will be proven to be applicable in the reading of the novel beyond this singular event.

Despite undergoing such a mystical and defining experience, Abraham did not take the path of a shoichet later in life, and while his profession is that of a butcher, the work never again presented him with similar revelations. Meanwhile, the matter of uncovering the purpose set out for his bloodline has been growing more pressing on his mind. His aspirations have begun to appear increasingly less viable in light of what he sees as Isaac's atheism, and Ruth's – Isaac's wife – refusal to conform to the role assigned to her gender by the patriarchal orthodox norm. The rearing of his grandson, Moses, turns into a matter of nearly open conflict. However, it is only once Isaac, in his desire to please the father, falls ill and eventually succumbs to the disease after saving the scrolls of Torah from a burning synagogue, that Abraham's convictions are thrown into complete disarray. As his only son, the one who lived when the others died, Isaac was considered special by his father, was regarded as someone who had a "sign [to] bring to his people" (Wiseman 132). His death at home in bed, so bereft of pathos or significance – with the news that the Torah Isaac saved was donated by an exploitative mortgager, whose name will now be enshrined alongside that of Isaac – perplexes Abraham, so intent on ascribing meaning to every event concerning him. He "cannot accept Isaac's death as part of God's plan" (Gordon 41).

As the young Moses is left to the care of his enterprising mother, with Abraham finding himself unable to actively take part in his nurture, the aging patriarch, overwhelmed with the decimation of the ones nearest to him, struggles to find meaning in the daily grind, to locate any semblance of a divine design, in the certainty of which he used to feel so secure. Just like the local Jewish community has been made to feel deprived of God's tangible presence due to the destruction of the temple, so Abraham has come to sense a lack of God's providence in his own reality. His prior attempts to maintain the divine essence, based on building, nurturing and planning ahead, appear utterly ineffectual, which contributes to his sense of failure. The ensuing anguish, where the world appears before his "salt-washed eyes . . . with a ruthless, useless clarity" (Wiseman 224) is compared by Greenstein to "the blinding purification of sacrificial revelation" ("Movement and Vision" 31). This purification, however, turns out to be either incomplete or only temporary – perhaps because the "sacrifice" in question here did not involve him directly – as the growing consciousness of an inner, puzzling and unaccountable corruption soon becomes Abraham's overriding preoccupation.

Along with the crumbling sense of inclusion in a larger design, Abraham is also afflicted with a deteriorating confidence in the bases of his very identity. In his own words, he starts envisioning himself as "the tiller of the soil who worked only so the earth should bloom and finds instead that everywhere where he has passed the earth is seared, as though an invisible destroyer had followed, malignant, in his path" (Wiseman 259).¹ This outlook is related to Abraham's belief that death constitutes "a seed that is sown, like life, inside of a person, and comes to fruition from within" (144). In light of such a view it follows that just as one can cultivate, or bring life to fruition with one's manner of being, so can one bring about death because of one's "aura," some immanent, perhaps concealed feature which nonetheless exerts a baleful influence on those within its reach. Death functions in a way similar to a disease – or a defilement – whose carrier

¹ Note here the similarity to Girard's depiction of the mythological scapegoat as one for whom "[e]verything shrivels under his feet" (*Scapegoat* 36). Considering that in actuality the scapegoat's damning features were those projected upon him or her by the accusers, the correlation here is not insignificant.

can spread it all around before succumbing to it himself. Becoming afflicted with such disease is of course also not a random occurrence, as Abraham's outlook does not admit the possibility of anything significant happening without a reason. And since one of the chief tenets of his faith is the belief in death having its origin in sin, it becomes clear why Abraham comes to suspect that it is the incidence of sin which has brought about the calamity upon his family. He is now compelled to wonder whether he himself may actually be the one harbouring this defilement, in spite of his stoutly professed intentions to stand for life and growth.

This reflection develops alongside increasingly frequent instances of Abraham's behaviour that testify sharply against his ingrained self-conception. Chief among them are withdrawals from and failures at communication, which are particularly significant in light of the fact that at the very beginning of the novel, when the Canadian train conductor does not comprehend any of the four languages with which Abraham addresses him, the latter reacts by calling him an animal (4). Freda Zipursky observes that "[m]an is distinguished from animal for [Abraham] in his ability . . . to communicate through language" and that "[i]gnorance . . . [v]iolence, hate, and irrationality are also seen by Abraham as characteristic of animals" (25) and unbecoming of man. Abraham assumes these animal characteristics by becoming "a man of silences" (Wiseman 229), but also by sleeping on the floor – while dreaming of scurrying "[l]ike some four-footed creature" (226) between the coffins of his family members – and lapsing into bouts of aggression in his interactions with Ruth.

It is at this juncture that Abraham's attention becomes drawn to Laiah, a middle-aged single woman held in low regard by the town's Jewish community due to her close associations with multiple men and her fraternizing with the goyim. Laiah takes interest in Abraham while visiting his employer. Attracted to his rugged and firm looks and character, she sees in him, as a widower, a potential candidate for marriage. To Abraham, though, she and her advances take on a far less straightforward significance, instead figuring in his mind as a possibly insidious mystery. Her blatantly promiscuous lifestyle appears to him blasphemous and abhorrent, responsible for deaths of untold number of human beings – for to deny the potential gift of life that a woman's womb can offer is in his mind the same as "to annihilate" (261). Her coquettish remarks he inscribes with veiled meanings implying that the life in which he endeavoured to create a lasting legacy, in the end did not amount to more than her hedonistic indulgence, that in the end there turned out to be an irrefutable affinity between them – both bear death inside themselves. An instance when she offers to read his future from tea leaves strikes him with particular force; the word "witchcraft" comes into his mind and he infers that her message was that the course of his life, "God's secret intentions," could be found "in the dregs of [his] empty glass," just like hers (245). However, while Abraham leaves her "enraged by the presumptuousness of the belief that she can read the future in tea leaves" (Zipursky 41), he no longer has enough inner conviction to wholly discount the idea – no matter how blasphemous it may seem – being in a desperate need to identify "signs" that would show him the way.

It is at this point that one should note the correspondence of Laiah's characterization, as it is formed in the lens of Abraham's point of view, with the definition of a person afflicted with moral defilement, as provided by Klawans. She is ascribed, after all, with the sins of sexual licence and murder (the latter admittedly not in an entirely explicit manner), while the tea leaves episode leaves her with the additional designation of an idolatress. Hence, she can emerge to him as the perfect culprit for the apparent departure of God's grace from his life. Donna Pennee, who also makes reference to Girard in her reading of the novel, quotes from *Violence and the Sacred* in order to explain why a woman may be more susceptible to being selected for a sacrificial victim due to the perceived weakness and lower social status of her gender (26). This is, however, hardly sufficient to

demonstrate why it is Laiah that is ultimately targeted in Abraham's attempt at a sacrifice. Gender is certainly a factor as it is quite evident that in an orthodox patriarchal society women's morality is not judged by the same standards as that of men. However, one must consider the relevance of Abraham identifying Laiah in particular with sinfulness, with moral impurity, in order to arrive at a reason why it is she that becomes the focus of his increasingly obsessive preoccupation – a preoccupation that comes to its tragic resolution once the mental image of a sinful woman merges with that of a – pure and innocent – sacrificial animal.

Obviously, Abraham's reaction to the tea leaves episode constitutes an overreaction stemming in turn from an overinterpretation. Nonetheless, he clings to the notion of its more profound significance to the very extent of his ability. During one evening, he gets into a row with Ruth over the matter of responsibility for the deaths of Isaac as well as Abraham's own wife. His arguments turn into bitter attacks intended, as he later acknowledges, "not to persuade, but to maim, to hurt," leading to a situation where both sides started verbally "tearing like beasts at the raw entrails and the naked heart" (Wiseman 287). In the aftermath Abraham storms out of the house, overwhelmed by his own attitude; an attitude which, by his own unspoken admission, engendered violence in his house and between his family members. This event is an example of reciprocal violence actualized in the transgression of the most sacred relations. For Abraham, this act signals most emphatically an internal division within his selfhood; a discrepancy between stated intentions of nurturing and creating, and actual acts, which lend evidence to the presence of a mean, vicious streak in his character. This discrepancy, he now suspects, may have been present for the entirety of his life and may have contributed to the losses he sustained and which he believed he had a right to mourn – a right he feels would be revoked had he admitted an attraction to, or affinity with, Laiah and the emptiness, the shadow, which she stands for in his estimation (277).

While in the aftermath of the row he comes close to acknowledging his inner flaws and capacity for violence, Abraham is not yet ready to assume responsibility for them. Instead, he goes to Laiah's home to "confront" that which "lurked always in the shadow of their new life in the city" (293), the one who lay on the society's margins while committing the sin of not conforming to its norms. To her, Abraham's unexpected visit late at night clearly signifies an affirmative response to her advances. Like him, she desires to relive a moment from her youth. In her case, it is her first sexual encounter, and the desire makes her surrender herself to him, offer him what he sees as equally voluptuous and voracious flesh. To Abraham, however, in a near-comical act of misreading, her words and body language take on a different, unintended significance. On the one hand, they constitute the admission of her own sinful condition, her crime of filicide and her identity with "the other part of him – that was empty, unbelieving, the negation of life, the womb of death" (299–300). On the other hand, though, in her physical submission to his power, she starts to acquire the characteristics of a different figure from his past, his previous sacrificial victim.

For Abraham, it would not be the first time he resorted to a "bovine metaphor" (Greenstein, "Movement and Vision" 27) in thinking of Laiah, comparing her at an earlier point to a cow that would "wave its tail and show its rear to every passing bull" (Wiseman 26). Zipursky notes that "[f]rom the outset, Laiah is associated with a lower form of life" (25). Despite his professed humbleness, Abraham is guilty of having dehumanized others before, as shown by, among other examples, his remark about the conductor. Now, the dehumanization takes the form of framing his perception of Laiah so as to make it correspond with that of a sacrificial animal. Not capable of consciously taking the life of another human being, Abraham must push himself past any rational constraints, must subsume the actual image of the woman before him with an image of the animal from his past: hence Laiah appears in his sight "as though for the first time, and yet as though he had always

seen her thus” with her eyes “large and fine” (Wiseman 303). This perspective is necessary for him for the purpose of desensitizing himself to a level which would enable him to perform the deed of sacrifice. Abraham believes this deed will bring him back to the so desired position of intimacy and familiarity with God “who would speak if he ask, who would give if he offered” (302). He hopes, paradoxically, that an act of murder will serve to purge him of his inner evil, which prevents him from reattaining that position. This is where we should recall Milgrom’s proposal to consider ancient Jewish sacrifices as acts of purification. While according to that theory the purified object was to be the temple, seeing as the novel’s Abraham functions in a setting marked by its absence, one can see how he would be prone to extrapolate his understanding of the rituals for them to apply not merely to the confined (spatially as well as temporarily) space of the temple, but to his life as a whole. It is his own selfhood, his own “essence,” which assumes the status of the temple in this arrangement, with the signs of its defilement rendering themselves apparent in the surrounding reality. LoVerso states that Abraham, “[r]ather than facing the evil in himself” goes through the effort of “metamorphos[ing] himself into something like an ordained seeker of the truth” to which quest conventional morality does not apply. In failing in his lifelong effort to create, Abraham, mystified by the reality he has found himself thrown into, repositions himself to a course of destruction to achieve the state of *imitatio Dei* and shed light upon the existential mystery he has been grappling with.

Right as he succumbs to the impulse to slash her throat with a knife, Laiah, without losing her abject features – as her sensuous side is to Abraham abject in its nature – is for the first time perceived by him simultaneously as “something holy . . . a willing burden, to offer, to receive, as once another” (Wiseman 303). This, again, is due to the mental manifestation of the cow – the sacrificial animal figure, which represents absolute innocence and the mystery of the non-human other. Abraham comes to believe that in the act of what simultaneously demonstrates submission and dominance he will gaze beyond this emanant mystery, as he thinks he did back in that moment from his childhood, and apprehend the answer. Let us remember that the perceived duality of the scapegoat victim as both holy and corrupted was according to Girard inherent to his or her perception by the victimizers. For Abraham, this paradox is possible due to apprehending in Laiah both human and animal characteristics and reading them in a manner influenced by religion. The animal characteristics render her a proper candidate for the offering, whereas the fallen, impure, human qualities position her as an ideal scapegoat, onto whom he can “transfer [t]he evil and guilt which he senses may live in him” (Gordon 48). This practice of transferring is one which Girard ascribes to a “savage” mind from which the concept of human sacrifice originated (*The Girard Reader* 27), making its inclusion in this scenario all the more appropriate.

Yet while what we see here is an attempt at a fusion of pagan and Judaic notions of sacrifice, it is evident that these two systems cannot seamlessly cohere. For even if one were to put aside the matter of Judaism’s injunction against human sacrifice, it still needs to be noted that, as affirmed by Klawans, sacrifice among the ancient Israelis required perfect purity on the part of both the object and the offerer. Here, neither side can be considered pure in this sense, with Abraham in particular being tainted by his nascent potential for evil. The novel symbolically articulates this problem through the detail that he cuts himself soon afterwards with the knife used to deal the fatal blow. Blood signifies ritual impurity, which translates to both the knife and its wielder being unfit to perform the task. LoVerso notes that the text establishes that a proper use of the knife indicates an acknowledgment of being “only an instrument doing God’s will and that the power to create and destroy comes ultimately from God.” But according to Wiseman (qtd. in Froese 19), Abraham, on the contrary, “demands that God should consider him” and strives to force a divine intervention with an effort of his own will. As

John Moss eloquently puts it, “[Abraham’s] corruption of ritual killing and his knowledge of God’s holy ordinance against sacrifice merge in his pride, humiliation, and madness” (101), although I would rather venture to say that this knowledge becomes submerged beneath the passions enumerated by Moss, to reappear only once the critical event reaches its denouement.

The act does bring Abraham the clarity he craved, though not immediately fully so, and not accompanied by reconciliation either. The message which the act reveals is composed of the singular word: “[I]ife” (Wiseman 304). This message is delivered to him in the voices of his sons, and it signifies his crucial error in forsaking the notion of life’s sanctity in his hubris-suffused desire to wrestle a revelation out of God. Abraham gropes feebly and futilely to staunch the blood loss he caused, and when the murder becomes reality, he suffers a total nervous breakdown, after which he is soon taken into an insane asylum. The readers are still treated to a scene of his reunion with the now young adult Moses within the asylum. There, the old man reiterates the book’s lesson of treasuring life above all else. He imparts onto his descendant the lesson of the human gift being the ability to conceive of life as inherently beautiful and self-justifying, instead of the ability to debase and subjugate life to one’s egotistic narratives and aspirations: “‘I took what was not mine to take,’ said Avrom, ‘what was given to me to hold gently in my hands, to look at with wonder’” (344). He acknowledges his wrongdoing and in doing so finally achieves reconciliation, with Moses experiencing a near-mystical moment of feeling his and the grandfather’s joined hands “becoming one . . . fused together” (345), which is ironic, considering that *the loss* of categorical distinctions was among the factors that engendered the outbreak of violence in the first place.

We are led to believe that the new generation will be more successful and less misguided in the endeavour of creating a new destiny for the Canadian Jewish people. In this way, the “sacrifice” does succeed in serving the function of bringing about a communal renewal, which is the role attributed to the practice by Girard. However, while the renewal in practices described by the scholar was marked by the retention of the sense of self-assurance and righteousness on the part of the sacrificers, here it is rather accompanied by a forceful self-revaluation on the part of the local Jewish community, as best illustrated by a comment in a group discussing the incident, accusing Abraham of proving to the world that Jews “can have murderers too” (315). If the act committed by the protagonist were to be evaluated and categorized on the basis of its results, then it would need to be considered a self-sacrifice, where the victim/perpetrator sacrificed his own freedom, respectability and virtue by taking away an innocent life, in order to shake his community out of their moral stupor brought on by the sense that their faith situates them above the other. However, if the character of Dreiman the shamus is any indication, the effectiveness of this sacrifice, when considered from such an angle, can hardly be considered full. Dreiman is quick to deny the legitimacy of Abraham’s faith in the aftermath of the murder, evidently vexed by the fact that “one of them” could lend credence to the notion of Jews’ essential moral kinship with the goyim, and even takes advantage of the incident to cast doubt on the prior sacrifice of Abraham’s son Isaac. The true face of his prejudice, judgmental self-righteousness, and arguably also simple spite is hence brought into full light, to be rightfully chastised by Abraham’s friend Chaim, a man considered a figure of spiritual authority in the local Jewish community. It is left ambiguous which side of the argument ends up commanding more respect among the listeners, but one can hardly deny that purification needs to be preceded by the uncovering of the taint. Abraham’s deed seems to have achieved, on some level, the latter result at least. With that said, one must naturally mention that said taint did not end up emerging where Abraham sought it out in the first place, and even if it did, he was hardly at a liberty to take such drastic measures to unearth it. Laiah’s life was by no means one he could lay claim on, which is why, regardless of any unforeseen benefits of the act, it cannot be justified all things considered.

In the end, even after taking the above reservations into account, the affirmative nature of the novel's ending should not distract us from the disturbing connotations its narrative raises, particularly when read in the context of the origins of the Abrahamic religion and various scholarly theses we have just seen verified by the text. For one, the novel strongly corroborates Girard's theories of scapegoat violence as well as the connotations of *imitatio Dei* drawn by Klawans in analyzing ancient Israeli animal sacrifice. Most importantly, though, it presents a case study of how the two orders can, despite their supposed incompatibility, contaminate one another to a devastating effect; how certain ambiguities in the ancient Israelite interpretation of, in particular, the sacrifice as a means of purifying the site defiled by the presence of the sinful, may be seen as leaving open an avenue to the practice of scapegoating, killing of men and women viewed as fundamentally righteous. Furthermore, Wiseman's narrative shows how blurring the boundaries between the human and the animal can, instead of inspiring one towards an increased appreciation of the latter, lead one to denigrate the former. It also shows how ascribing to an individual the uniquely animal quality of purity and innocence can paradoxically constitute a prelude to committing violence upon said individual. In this light, the figure of an animal becomes deeply ambivalent, providing as it apparently does an opportunity and divine sanction to exorcise man's most dubious "right" over creation wherever and whenever it appears. Man's will entails an ability to name, to categorize, to draw, but also to redraw and transgress distinctions, and the ancient religiously informed conception of the category of the animal manifests itself as leaving not just the actual animals vulnerable, but human beings as well. In the event of a crisis, when man's predilection towards violence fails to be contained by modern society, and the distinctions and categories become unhinged, resorting to the act of projecting outwards the mental figure of the animal at the same time as that of a scapegoat turns out to have the potential of erasing one's moral boundaries and facilitating the kind of acts which to a rational, secular mind may be both monstrous and incomprehensible. An "ordained" permission to commit violence upon one category of beings can, regardless of the explicitness of the prohibitions, always spill over to other categories.

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