

‘Your Morality isn’t the only Morality in the World’:
The Morality of Life, Death, and Monsters from a
Care Ethics Perspective in the Anna
Dressed in Blood Series

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As anyone who watches television shows like CW’s *Supernatural* knows, morality, when it comes to monsters, is fraught with complications. Sam and Dean’s clear-cut “us versus them” mentality, which fuels such mantras as “what’s dead should stay dead,” becomes less and less clear cut as the series progresses. In the introduction to *They Suck, They Bite, They Eat, They Kill: The Psychological Meaning of Supernatural Monsters in Young Adult Fiction*, Joni Richards Bodart claims that “monsters can . . . teach us about how to build our own concept of morality, based on how we relate to the monsters in the story—are we the ‘good guy’ or the ‘bad guy,’ acting with or without honor?”¹ As the show progresses, we see Sam and Dean oscillate between being “good guys” or “bad guys,” between acting with or without honor. It is this same moral dilemma that Theseus Cassio Lowood, the protagonist of Kendare Blake’s Anna Dressed in Blood series, demonstrates as he follows closely in the vein of the Winchester brothers. While Cas, as he prefers to be called, begins the series as a teenage ghost hunter intent on eliminating any threatening spirits, his moral development over the course of the narrative demonstrates that the choice of who “lives” and “dies,” even among spirits, is a complicated moral issue. In this essay, I examine Cas and his growing relationship with Anna, the murderous spirit he intends to kill, from a care ethics perspective to argue that care ethics’ focus on

relational identity and individual situations characterizes the growth that problematizes Cas's previously established moral perspective on ghosts. The development of Cas's morality, in light of his evolving relational identity, exemplifies how important relationships and his relational identity are to Cas's moral framework.

Care ethics is a branch of moral theory that emphasizes a person's relational identity—the identity formed in relationship with others—and situates that relational identity at the heart of morality. Care ethics theorists, such as foundational theorist Nel Noddings, assert that “relation will be taken as ontologically basic,” which “simply means we recognize human encounter and affective response as a basic fact of human existence.”² In other words, each and every person is inherently situated within a network of relationships with other people, and a person's relational identity is constituted by all of those relationships in which they are involved. We are, in many ways, made up of the relationships we have with others. In *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, Noddings focuses on relationships, particularly the relationship between the one-caring (giver of care) and the cared-for (receiver of care), as the basis of morality. “An important difference between an ethic of caring and other ethics that give subjectivity its proper place,” Noddings notes, “is its foundation in relation.”³ Relationships are not simply a basic fact of human existence, but they also drive the participants toward ethical behaviors through the existence of caring. The memories of caring and being cared for “form the foundation of ethical response,” because “the recognition of and longing for relatedness . . . form the foundation of our ethic.”⁴ Thus, “we want to be *moral* in order to remain in the caring relation and to enhance the ideal of ourselves as one-caring.”⁵ Essentially, the desire to maintain caring relationships motivates people to act morally, and moral action comes from maintaining caring relationships.

Within this construction, morality happens situationally because no two people will have the exact same need in any given situation. Moral

action, then, requires the one-caring to meet the needs of the cared-for in that moment. The focus on meeting specific needs in a specific moment emphasizes a second crucial aspect of care ethics, which is the importance of individual situations. Many traditional constructions of morality rest on the *universal* application of a moral tenet or directive, with the understanding that there is a set, stable definition of “right” for any instance within those certain parameters. Care ethics, on the other hand, attempts to avoid such universal principles and “reject[s] the notion of universalizability” of ethical action.⁶ Instead, care ethics shifts the focus to the circumstances of the situation and the needs of the people involved, as those factors may drastically alter the appropriate, moral course of action. Noddings asserts that in theorizing the desire to “mee[t] the other morally—our insistence on caring for the other—I shall want to preserve the uniqueness of human encounters. Since so much depends on the subjective experience of those involved in ethical encounters, conditions are rarely ‘sufficiently similar’ for me to declare that you must do what I must do.”⁷ Rather than having a single solution to apply to any formulation of the equation, care ethics theorists realize that an equation cannot be solved without understanding the individual factors involved. It is only “[t]he caring attitude, that attitude which expresses our earliest memories of being cared for and our growing store of memories of both caring and being cared for, [which] is universally accessible.”⁸ Relational identity and situational context, then, work together to create a moral theory that becomes crucial to understanding Cas’s development throughout *Anna Dressed in Blood*.

PRE-ANNA ETHICAL IDEALS

As Sam and Dean Winchester teach their viewers, the life of a hunter is a lonely one. When readers first meet Cas, he is almost entirely alone. His life consists of him, his mom, and their cat Tybalt moving from town to town chasing hunting jobs while she makes

money as a “mobile witch.” Cas’s father, from whom he inherited not only the ghost hunting mantle, but also the ritualistic knife (or athame) to do it with, was killed on a hunting case when Cas was young. Cas describes his life as “lived in a maze of packed boxes” and “a traveling circus” without roots.⁹ Other than his mother and Gideon, an old family friend who occasionally helps him with cases, Cas’s relationships are limited. Rather than friends, Cas merely has “contacts,” old friends of his father’s and others who send him tips and help with cases. He spends his time not only surrounded by, but also hunting the dead, which does not leave a lot of time for socializing. Further, Cas’s isolation is, at least in part, self-imposed. Cas feels almost entirely removed from the world of the living. He says, “Death is my world. Everything else, school and friends, they’re just things that get in the way of my next ghost.”¹⁰ When he moves to Thunder Bay, Cas describes the process he goes through inserting himself into the social strata at any new school. He says, “I could go and try to insta-bond with the lead jock, I suppose, but I’ve never been good at that.”¹¹ He is not there to make friends; buddying up to people at school serves Cas’s agenda because he sees them as a means to be “plugged into the social pipeline” because he “need[s] to get people talking to [him], so [he] can ask them questions that [he] needs answers to.”¹² Therefore, in the beginning of the novel Cas’s relational identity is very limited, shaped almost entirely by his relationship to death and the dead and the moral imperative he feels comes from that relationship.

Cas’s sense of this own moral standing is another primary facet of his characterization at the beginning of the novel. When Cas’s mother calls him a superhero, he responds by contradicting her statement and comparing himself to Grendel from *Beowulf* or Rorschach from *Watchmen* instead.¹³ The comparison to Grendel denotes that Cas sees himself as isolated, murderous, and monstrous. Rorschach, on the other hand, is a moral absolutist bent on eliminating evil at any cost. By comparing himself to Rorschach, Cas is saying that he believes

that there are absolute moral truths that apply regardless of situation or context. This is the most important comparison Cas makes because it clearly outlines his understanding of his own morality and the actions he takes because of it, but his actions throughout the book don't uphold this assertion.

Despite his lack of relationships and his understanding of his own moral outlook, Cas is predisposed to caring action. While it might seem that Cas's self-imposed isolation and viewpoint on people-as-tools characterize him negatively and in opposition to the philosophies of care ethics, he demonstrates that his reasoning behind keeping his distance is actually an act of caring in itself. When his mother chastises Cas for hanging out with Carmel, the "queen bee" of his new school, and implies that he is going to end up breaking someone's heart, he informs the reader, "I don't appreciate the implication that I'm going to hurt someone. Doesn't she think I'm careful? Doesn't she know the trouble I go to in order to keep people at arm's length?"¹⁴ Cas lives a dangerous life, one that he does not want to drag others into. Further, making friends with people only to have to leave them shortly after when he moves on to a new case is emotional strain that he is unwilling to inflict on others. He "doesn't want to miss people, and [he doesn't] want them to miss [him]."¹⁵ On principle, Cas operates with a deficit of relationships because he believes this is the only way to avoid causing harm to others. Noddings argues, though, that "[w]herever there is a principle, there is implied its exception and, too often, principles function to separate us from each other."¹⁶ And in this case, the principle by which Cas lives functions explicitly to separate him from others.

Additionally, rather than hunting all ghosts indiscriminately, Cas only hunts dangerous, murderous spirits. This is his one real absolute moral truth. In describing the state of Thunder Bay, Cas notes that it is "more haunted than I thought it would be, an entire layer of activity just under the dirt: whispers behind people's laughter, or movement that you shouldn't see in the corner of your eye. Most of

them are harmless—sad little cold spots or groans in the dark. Blurry patches of white that only show up in a Polaroid. I have no business with them.”¹⁷ The kind of ghost he does have business with, the “one that matters,” is the kind “who is strong enough to squeeze the breath out of living throats” and willing to do so.¹⁸ Instead of seeing ghosts, in general, as unnatural and monstrous, Cas’s job is to protect others from being harmed. During the first hunt readers encounter with Cas, the hitchhiker ghost tells Cas, “I do not want to do this again,” to which Cas replies, “This is the last time.”¹⁹ This ghost, like most others Cas encounters, is a victim of violence and murder; “the truly evil move on, to burn or turn to dust or be reincarnated as dung beetles. They use up all their rage while they’re still breathing.”²⁰ The victims, on the other hand, “like to pass around the badness that happened to them” while also reliving the same traumatic moment over and over.²¹ With the hitchhiker ghost, Cas can sense his distress at the cyclical nature of his existence and not only kills him but also reassures him beforehand. While he may claim that he doesn’t know and doesn’t care what happens to the ghosts once he takes care of them, his motivation for hunting is, at heart, caring for those in danger, and even, to an extent, caring for the ghosts themselves because he is relieving them from having to endlessly re-experience their deaths. So, while not necessarily intentional, Cas does possess the natural inclination to act caringly toward others that could be developed into a caring ethical ideal.

Although he is predisposed toward caring tendencies, Cas does not have the relationships to fully craft a caring relational identity or ethical ideal, though he does desire those relationships. Noddings defines an ethical ideal as “the memory of how we have responded over time in our best encounters as carers and how others have cared for us.”²² Part of crafting an ethical ideal is reflecting on times you’ve cared successfully, times where you’ve met the needs of the person with whom you are in a relationship. Noddings asserts that it is “this ethical ideal, this realistic picture of ourselves as one-caring,

that guides us as we strive to meet the other morally. Everything depends on the nature and strength of this ideal, for we shall not have absolute principles to guide us."²³ At various instances, Cas admits that, although he is devoted to his job, at times he has the desire to settle in one place, make friends, and start a real life. His tendency to care for others by preventing their closeness to him does not prevent Cas from desiring to create bonds; he just doesn't allow himself to do so because of the damage he fears it would cause others. Instead, he gets to know the ghosts he's hunting. He says, "This is my favorite part of the hunt. Getting to know them. Hearing their legends. I want them to be as large in my mind as they can possibly be, and when I see them I don't want to be disappointed."²⁴ The ghosts are the most important relationships in Cas's life, and he has to make as much out of these relationships as he can, although he is not so much getting to know them as getting to know *about* them. More importantly for Cas, he doesn't have to worry about hurting anyone with those relationships because he doesn't consider ghosts people since they are already dead.

Moreover, the interactions between Cas and the ghosts he hunts do not seem to fit into this paradigm of a caring relationship that contributes to the ethical ideal because Cas is not successfully meeting the ghosts' need he identifies; Cas claims that the only need ghosts have is the need to kill because "it's the only thing they have left to do."²⁵ But in killing the ghosts, he does not meet that need but rather subverts it. Additionally, none of these ghosts care for Cas in any way; they are often trying to kill him as well. Noddings argues that a truly caring relationship requires reciprocity: "As we examine what it means to care and to be cared for, we shall see both parties contribute to the relation; my caring must be somehow completed in the other if the relation is to be described as caring."²⁶ If these interactions are creating any kind of ethical ideal, it is not necessarily a caring one. These "relationships" are not reciprocal nor beneficial and so do not contribute to a caring ethical ideal. Although they

may not be caring in and of themselves, what these interactions do is lay a foundation for future care that can (and will) be taken up given the appropriate circumstances. The predisposition to care for others, especially when there is no real relationship with those others, though, is not enough to push Cas into a new framework of morality where caring is at the center.

THE ANNA TRANSFORMATION

For Cas, it takes a very unique relationship to assuage his fears and allow him to open himself up to forming caring, reciprocal relationships with others. Obviously, a caring relational identity and ethical ideal are not possible without relationships. But Cas's fear of others getting hurt prevents him from forming those relationships. What he needs is the right relationship to instigate his ethical development. This relationship comes from Anna Korlov, the ghost who Cas moves to Thunder Bay to hunt. Anna is, as Cas says, "not like any other ghost [he's] faced."²⁷ Anna is sentient where most ghosts, especially the ones Cas has encountered, are not. Where other ghosts are stuck playing out the same loop of their lives and death, Anna can carry on an actual conversation. She not only talks, but "she knows that she's dead" where most ghosts don't; "most are just angry and scared, more an imprint of an emotion—of a horrible moment—than an actual being. You can talk to some of them, but they usually think you're someone else, someone from their past."²⁸ This sentience is disturbing for Cas, it throws him off his game, but that alone does not cause Cas to change his mind about killing her. It does, however, open the door for the relationship to develop. Rather than Cas getting to know *about* Anna through research, like he does with the other ghosts, Cas actually gets to know her when she tells him about herself and her life. This sort of conversation allows Cas and Anna to form a bond in a way that he cannot with any other ghost because she can reciprocate like no other ghost has. And while

Cas originally resists this bond, because Anna's vulnerability makes it harder for him to kill her, he finds himself drawn to her and her story. Initially, Cas thinks that once he figures her out, figures out what makes her special and so powerful, he will be able to kill her. While this tactic has worked for all of Cas's past cases, it doesn't work when it comes to Anna because she truly is a unique case—and the reciprocity of their relationship enables him to care for her.

The more Cas gets to know Anna, and they bond over their mutual isolation and distance from the world of the living, the more Cas begins to care about Anna, which initiates the shift in Cas's understanding of his moral imperative. It starts with him worrying about what would happen to her once he kills her. Raised in the culture of ghost hunting, Cas was taught by both his father and Gideon not to question where the ghosts go after they are killed. It wasn't important; what was important was that they were hurting people and it was Cas's job to stop them. But knowing Anna causes Cas to begin questioning those principles he once held steadfastly. Getting to know Anna reveals to Cas that there are two sides to her: there is "the goddess of death" with "the strength of a storm, black eyes, and pale hands, not a dead person at all but a dead goddess" and "a pale girl with long, dark hair" and "a thoughtful face and soft, violet eyes" who makes something in Cas's chest "soft[en], ceas[e] to growl."²⁹ While the monstrous part of her may be more powerful and dangerous than anything he's ever encountered, the other part of her is just a girl, like any other girl his age (save that she's dead), who tries her best to control the monstrous goddess, especially when he is around. Because she can, at times, hold the goddess in her at bay, Cas sometimes forgets she's even dead. He even goes so far as to say that she's more "alive" than any other ghost he's ever faced.³⁰ Cas lives in the world of the dead, but there are no viable relationships there; the world of the living, though, doesn't fit into Cas's lifestyle. Although Anna is not actually alive, her sentience and her ability to control the murderous part of herself allow her to become the bridge

between the worlds of the living and dead—the two worlds Cas inhabits—that Cas needs to open himself up to caring relationships.

Once he begins crossing the figurative bridge of his and Anna's relationship, Cas becomes more open to other relationships as well. Pre-Anna Cas was isolated and closed off, not allowing others to get close to him for fear of them getting hurt. And these fears are not unfounded. When Cas first arrives at Thunder Bay and attempts to insert himself into the social structure of his school, he encounters the "Trojan Army," a group of three guys of the popular, meathead jock stereotype. While Cas is trying to glean information about Anna from Carmel, the queen bee of the school, the boys take it upon themselves to assert their masculinity and dominance by not only taking Cas to Anna's house, but also knocking him out and throwing him inside. This exchange ends up the worst for Mike, the leader of the group, as he gets torn in half by Anna.³¹ It is this very outcome that Cas always tries to avoid, and he feels immense guilt because someone he "dragged into" his world ends up dead. But Mike's death is not Cas's fault, and it certainly is not a product of Mike and Cas forming a caring, reciprocal relationship. Despite this initial setback, as Cas forms a relationship with Anna he also lets Carmel and Thomas, a young psychic, get close to him. Thomas and Carmel both shift from tools in Cas's arsenal to people he willingly calls his friends. Admittedly, Carmel and Thomas both also tend to have a foot in both worlds, Thomas because his psychic abilities and witch heritage attune him to the world of the dead and Carmel because she refuses to be cut out of the action after Mike's death and being "in on the secret" tends to take them out of the living world a bit.³² But it turns out that these bridge-friendships are the kind of friendship Cas needs. It is only those who are aware of both worlds and Cas's involvement in them that can truly understand Cas and work to care for him appropriately. These three, new relationships (as well as the ones with his mother and Gideon) can be categorized as caring and work toward developing his ethical ideal because reciprocity exists;

Cas can care for and be cared for by people who understand his needs because they also understand the situation and context of his life.

CONCLUSION

Cas's new openness to relationships definitively affects his moral status as it causes him to deviate from his one "absolute" moral truth. As Cas and his friends dig deeper and deeper into Anna's past, they discover that Anna is not just another garden variety vengeful spirit. Through a spell, they see that Anna's mother, a powerful black magic witch, murdered Anna and put a curse on her that created the murderous, monstrous goddess Anna fights so hard to control. It is here that relational identity and situational context come into play. Through the development of his relationships with Anna, Carmel, and Thomas, Cas's relational identity has changed. He is not just a ghost hunter; he is Anna's friend, and that changes things. Now, Cas is not just killing a murderous spirit, he is losing a friend and does not know where or to what fate he is sending her. Additionally, Anna is not just Cas's friend; she is a victim of dark magic, who never wanted to kill anyone and wouldn't have done so if not forced. Context and relational identity are particularly important to this situation because once they know Anna and know the truth of her story the good and right thing to do becomes to help her, not to destroy her, which undermines Cas's understanding that all ghosts who kill are to be killed themselves. Because of his relationships, Cas's morality has developed so that he goes from believing in an absolute truth to valuing context, from having to kill Anna to having to save her. And this development, in turn, saves him. Cas finds out that an extremely powerful voodoo spirit, even more powerful than Anna, was the thing that killed his father and in doing so attached itself to his athame and has been absorbing the power of all the ghosts Cas has killed since. Desperate for Anna's power, the Obeahman "obeahs" Cas, basically cursing him so that his insides essentially liquefy, if he

doesn't kill Anna to feed the Obeahman. It takes a combination of Thomas's and his grandfather Morfran's magic, Carmel's and Cas's mother's support, and Anna's power to sever the tie between the Obeahman and the athame and save Cas's life. If Cas had stuck to his absolute moral truth and killed Anna, the Obeahman would've kept growing stronger and feeding on other ghosts until it was too powerful to defeat. It is only because Cas allows himself to develop relationships, which in turn change the way he understands right and wrong, that the Obeahman can be defeated.

Cas's struggle is not necessarily finding his identity as a "good guy" or a "bad guy," but rather deciding which relationships he will let inform his relational identity, and, in doing so, dealing with a moral dilemma about how he relates to "monsters." The basis of Cas's character growth is the development of his ethical ideal. What is great about this book is that Cas's moral development is not some reform from bad to good. He was always a "good guy" doing what he thought, at least, was good work in stopping murderous ghosts. But had he not opened himself up to caring relationships and re-centered his morality around his relational identity and moral imperative to care for Anna, things would have ended up much worse for him. Although Cas's relationship with Anna is not ultimately sustainable, the experience of it has contributed to the further development of his ethical ideal, which he can then draw on in future relationships. The emphasis here is not on one form of morality trumping another or one being right and another wrong; it is to show how a relational identity and caring ethical ideal work together to inform moral decisions and, especially in Cas's case, can show a completely different perspective on the world. Cas, with his tendency to care for others, was always right on the cusp of care ethics, but his lack of relationships held him back. Developing relationships with others, redefining the way he related to his "monsters," changed and broadened Cas's understanding of the way the world works. Relationships do, at least in part, define us, and for Cassio Lowood they also save us.

NOTES

- 1 Joni Richards Bodart, *They Suck, They Bite, They Eat, They Kill: The Psychological Meaning of Supernatural Monsters in Young Adult Fiction* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2011), xxiv.
- 2 Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 3-4.
- 3 Noddings, *Caring*, 6.
- 4 Noddings, *Caring*, 6.
- 5 Noddings, *Caring*, 6.
- 6 Noddings, *Caring*, 6.
- 7 Noddings, *Caring*, 5.
- 8 Noddings, *Caring*, 5.
- 9 Kendare Blake, *Anna Dressed in Blood* (New York: Publisher, 2011), 15, 21.
- 10 Blake, *Anna*, 138.
- 11 Blake, *Anna*, 42.
- 12 Blake, *Anna*, 42.
- 13 Blake, *Anna*, 22.
- 14 Blake, *Anna*, 58.
- 15 Blake, *Anna*, 170.
- 16 Noddings, *Caring*, 5.
- 17 Blake, *Anna*, 31-32.
- 18 Blake, *Anna*, 32.
- 19 Blake, *Anna*, 13.
- 20 Blake, *Anna*, 38.
- 21 Blake, *Anna*, 62.
- 22 Noddings, *Caring*, 79.
- 23 Noddings, *Caring*, 5.
- 24 Blake, *Anna*, 57.
- 25 Blake, *Anna*, 47.
- 26 Noddings, *Caring*, 4.
- 27 Blake, *Anna*, 144.
- 28 Blake, *Anna*, 102.
- 29 Blake, *Anna*, 77, 84, 101, 103.
- 30 Blake, *Anna*, 189.
- 31 Blake, *Anna*, 78.
- 32 Blake, *Anna*, 173.