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CHICAGO TRIBUNE CULTURAL CRITIC COLUMN DEVIL IN A PANTSUIT OR THE DEMONIZATION OF HILLARY CLINTON

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When the doctor checks to see if the patient is still breathing, it's disgust, not compassion, that leaks out between his syllables: "You couldn't kill her with an ax," he sneers.

That patient--the wide-hipped, unwieldy woman at the heart of Dorothy Parker's 1929 short story "Big Blonde"--is a familiar image in books, films, songs, comic books, TV series, video games and, now, politics: The woman as monster. The over-large, over-ambitious, overbearing creature who irritates everybody, the death-defying witch who just won't go away--and who therefore must be destroyed.

She's a vampire, a zombie, an alien, a werewolf, a psychopath, a serial killer. She's Alex, the Glenn Close character in "Fatal Attraction" (1987), who ... keeps ... on ... coming. She's the looming, clutching, stifling mother or wife or girlfriend in a Philip Roth novel. (Which novel? Take your pick.) She's the eerie, outlandish creature in the Sylvia Plath poem "Lady Lazarus" (1965), who proclaims, "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air." She's the vengeful giantess in the 1958 film "Attack of the 50 Foot Woman."

And to judge from the media commentary about the first woman to get anywhere close to a major party's presidential nomination, she is Democratic Sen. Hillary Clinton.

Revealed in the coverage of Clinton's campaign is the persistence of an ancient and distasteful cultural theme: the powerful, ambitious woman as cackling fiend, as fantastically terrifying ghoul threatening civilization. And because this creature (or "she-devil," as MSNBC commentator Chris Matthews called Clinton) is not human, the only solution is to kill it. Not just derail its career--obliterate it. Smash it to smithereens. Vaporize it. Leave not a trace of the foul beast behind.

Hence the appalling preponderance of violent, death-infused imagery in conversations about Clinton, smuggled into otherwise ordinary political discourse like a knife taped on the bottom of a cake plate: On CNN, pundit Alex Castellanos said democrats must realize that "it's time to take the family dog to the vet." Matthews' MSNBC colleague Keith Olbermann expressed the hope that "somebody will take her into a room--and only he comes out." CNN's Jack Cafferty gleefully floated the specter of Clinton being run over by a flatbed truck. A recent Tribune editorial compared Clinton to a euthanized Kentucky Derby contender.

She is, according to author Andrew Sullivan, akin to the zombies in the film "28 Days Later" (2002), as well as that knife-wielding harpy in "Fatal Attraction"--the one with the relentless, rapacious, inhuman will: "It's alive!" Sullivan wrote, adding, "Whoosh--She's back at your throat." The comparison between the Close character and Clinton also seemed apt to U.S. Rep. Steve Cohen (D-Tenn.), who wrote, "Glenn Close should've stayed in that bathtub."

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Translation: Death. Comedian Chris Rock loves the "Fatal Attraction" link as well. Ditto for blogger Wil Wheaton, who played Wesley in the TV series "Star Trek: The Next Generation," who dubbed Clinton "the psycho ex-girlfriend of the Democratic party."

And we know, don't we, what to do with psycho ex-girlfriends? Drown them, club them, electrocute them. Meanwhile, analogies between Clinton and that flat-eyed, metallic, multimovie franchise character "Terminator" are copious to the point of cliché. You may or may not like Clinton--or any other female candidate. You may or may not agree with their policies. But is it really necessary to order a hit? Isn't it enough just to vote for somebody else?

Something more sinister This is not simply sexism or racism. Those prejudices are familiar, if still repugnant, and leaders as strong as Clinton and her opponent, Sen. Barack Obama, have faced them many times. This, though, is something different and more sinister, because it is not just a commentator's opinion about a person's fitness or unfitness for public office. It is not about using colorful, vivid language in order to wish that a person might or might not continue a campaign. It is an unprecedented public call--albeit metaphorically, but still violently and persistently--for a person's death.

In their landmark book of literary criticism "The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination" (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar were among the first to spotlight this noxious theme, this isolation and ridicule of powerful women by labeling them crazy, hysterical, perverse, monstrous. To challenge male domination--of the world, or just of oneself--was to be risk being marginalized, ostracized, locked away like Rochester's wife in "Jane Eyre" (1847), the fate that gave the book its title. In real life, behavior that strayed from the polite, demure norm expected of women in the 19th Century was rewarded with psychiatric evaluations and often, imprisonment and death.

One extreme measure One of the most barbaric medical procedures ever performed legally in this country was the lobotomy, and a look at its early history is chilling. As Jack El-Hai recounts in his book, "The Lobotomist: A Maverick Medical Genius and His Tragic Quest to Rid the World of Mental Illness" (2005), the frightening operation that could leave patients catatonic or dead often was employed as a way to deal with "difficult" women, with wives and mothers who had minds of their own, with willful daughters and headstrong sisters. The message was clear: Do whatever you have to do--but shut her up.

The notion of a powerful, driven, influential woman as a hideous threat--a threat that can be curtailed only with her death--ripples through literature, from the D.H. Lawrence novel "Sons and Lovers" (1913), with its protagonist's conviction that he must escape the clutches of his looming, clingy mother if he is ever to realize his destiny, to the 1962 novel "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" by Ken Kesey, with its way-scary female character: the loathsome, larger-than-life Nurse Ratched. The joyless, hulking harridan who wants to keep her patients drugged and miserable so she can control them. From the Furies in Greek literature onward, the women-as-mythical-monsters theme has shrieked, flapped and lurched its way through the arts.

These observations, by the way, have nothing to do with the issue of Clinton's or Obama's continued candidacies. That's a subject to be debated on the editorial pages, not here. This corner is reserved for cultural imagery, for a spirited exploration of the way a shared belief or preoccupation ultimately manifests itself in our entertainment products. Such an idea is like a splinter driven so deep, resting undisturbed for so long, that for a time you may not even be aware of it. Then slowly, slowly, it begins to work its way to the surface. One day, the sharp tip breaks the skin, and you see what's been down there all along, spreading its poison.

What does Obama think? It's natural to wonder whether Obama approves of the death-haunted images that surround his opponent like a phalanx of vultures. Surely he doesn't. He is an intelligent, sensitive, enlightened man whose life has been enriched, as he frequently acknowledges, by the presence of strong women, most notably his late mother and his wife. I wish, therefore, that he would publicly condemn the trend of evoking death and destruction when it comes to Clinton. Perhaps, someday, he will.

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Meanwhile, the pile of death images continues to rise, like corpses outside Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory door. After Clinton's victories in recent primaries, the New Yorker's Elizabeth Kolbert called it a "back-from-the-dead" moment. Walter Shapiro, Washington editor for salon.com, opined last week that Clinton had entered the "death with dignity" phase of her campaign.

Death, death, death. The steady, depressing drumbeat continues. What these commentators seem to seek is not just a proud female's withdrawal from a political contest--but her outright annihilation. They evoke the nightmarish vision of a commanding woman intent on destruction--thus she must be destroyed before she can launch her evil scheme.

In a thriller by Irish novelist Tana French, "In the Woods" (2007), a detective muses about a psychopath who has outwitted him, "I wanted her not just dead but obliterated from the face of the earth--crushed to unidentifiable pulp, pulverized in a shredder, burned to a handful of toxic ash." With that attitude, he won't have to worry if the gumshoe gig ever fails him: He can always apply for a job with MSNBC.

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