Perhaps it seems a little silly, comparing a twenty-two-year-old comedy about a
teen werewolf to a seven-year-old bloody horror film about a teen werewolf. It seems a
discussion better left to a group of college students crowded around a not-quite-clean
table at a diner under a full moon. But critics have hailed *Ginger Snaps* as being
“subversive” with “real thematic resonance” and the movie has become the subject of a
few academic articles (Elley; Kehr). In addition to being a darkly funny, compelling
werewolf story, *Ginger Snaps* brings a real sense of being female to the usually-male
cinematic world of the werewolf. While the more feminist-bent critical authors compare
Ginger Fitzgerald to Stephen King’s Carrie White with good reason, a comparison and
contrast with *Teen Wolf’s* Scott Howard can only add to the “feminist scrutiny” that Dr.
Bianca Nielsen asserts that Ginger Snaps “demands” in her article "‘Something's Wrong,
Like More Than You Being Female’: Transgressive Sexuality and Discourses of
Reproduction in *Ginger Snaps*” (Nielsen). But while puberty in *Teen Wolf* can be a bit
hard to handle at times, Scott Howard should try being a female werewolf sometime—it’s
monstrous. The sad truth of the matter is that when the events of *Ginger Snaps* and *Teen
Wolf* are put side by side, the revelation is a familiar one, one that society has been telling
women for thousands of years: it is better to be a man, even if you are a monster.
Scott Howard is the quintessential small-town boy who wants “more” in ways he cannot define. Scott is generally a good guy but his dissatisfaction causes him to reject the advances of best friend from childhood, Boof, and the advice of his father—people that he looks down upon for living small-town lives. Instead, he would rather pursue the blonde, popular Pamela, despite the fact that she has a boyfriend. (Scott’s Nice Guy-ness is portrayed to the audience by him being oblivious to Pamela’s boyfriend, rather than him trying to “steal” her.) He is on the school basketball team and is a mediocre player, perhaps in part because he is physically underdeveloped.

Ginger Fitzgerald, on the other hand, is a “Goth” teenager who also lives in a small, picturesque town, this one called Bailey Downs. Ginger is unhappy with her life and has made a suicide pact with her younger sister, Brigitte, to be “out by sixteen or dead in the scene, but together forever.” This nonsense expression—and Ginger’s insistence on using it in the beginning of the film, despite being almost sixteen years old—highlights Ginger’s immaturity, which is in part a physical immaturity: Ginger has yet, at this point in the movie, to get her first period.

The difference in the modes of transmission of the lycanthropy for the teenagers is startling when examined through a feminist lens. Scott is a werewolf by heritage; it has been passed down to him through his father’s line. This makes perfect sense for a movie where lycanthropy is a metaphor for puberty. In fact, it should be that way for Ginger, but instead of being passed through the father’s line, it should be passed through the mother’s. Sadly, this is not the case, and in fact Ginger’s mother never discovers what has happened to her daughter. Ginger’s lycanthropy is brought about by a vicious attack by the neighborhood werewolf while she is in a playground with her sister, almost
immediately after she has discovered her menarche. The smell of her menstrual blood—
of this occurrence that determines that she is a woman—lures the beast to her. She is
dragged from the playground—metaphorically ripped from her childhood—into the dark
forest, which could be seen as representing fertility. She is then assaulted “in a gruesome
and sexually violent fashion, pinning her to the ground, slashing her thighs and tearing at
her abdomen” (Miller 284). While Scott Howard is receiving a Facts of Werewolf Life
talk from his father, Ginger is literally screaming her way into puberty. She is then
invaded, as with a rape, and infected with the “disease” of lycanthropy. That lycanthropy
plays the part in two metaphors—that of puberty and that of disease—works only
because the metaphors are linked together by sex, and the latter finds itself on shakier
ground as the movie continues. It is in the metaphor of lycanthropy-as-puberty where
Ginger Snaps shows itself to be most clever and meaningful.

Dave Kehr of the New York Times stated in his review of Ginger Snaps, “In
comparison to the horror of the real thing, lycanthropy is almost a comforting explanation
for all the disturbing developments of late adolescence: the sudden sprouting of
unfamiliar hair, body parts going through odd transformations and the appearance of
deep-seated urges that just won’t go away.” For Scott Howard, this transformation is
unexpected and strange but painless and ultimately controllable. The first sign of Scott’s
transformation is a growl from deep in his throat—like a voice lowered by puberty.
Compare this to Ginger’s first sign of “infection” by the werewolf that attacked her:
profuse bleeding, the “more than you being female” that Dr. Nielsen quotes in the title of
her article. Both characters are sprouting body hair, but Scott’s is appropriately on his
face while Ginger’s is on her shoulder. While Scott has to deal with being able to register
dog whistles with his enhanced hearing, Ginger has to have her sister strap down her tail for gym class, to which Charlotte O’Sullivan of the Independent points out, “Anyone who's ever tried to keep an old-fashioned sanitary towel from flying into the sports ground fray will shiver with recognition at Brigitte's grim concentration.” Scott has one point in the movie, around the half-hour mark, where his transformation seems to make him ill. Ginger spends almost every moment up to her final transformation in either physical or psychological pain, to the point where she tries to amputate her newfound tail with a knife—not unlike the stereotype of the teenaged Goth “cutter” who tries to remedy hormonal depression by tearing into his or her flesh with sharp objects. Finally, once Scott “wolfs out” for the first time, the transformation becomes relatively simple for him. As the transformation is linked to his anger and aggression, Scott can stop it by repeating phrases to himself such as “Don’t change” and “Stay calm” or else bring it forth by thinking of something that makes him angry. Ginger has absolutely no control over her transformation, and has no information as to how to bring it to a halt, if she can at all. Her sister Brigitte tries to “purify” her by piercing Ginger’s belly button with a silver earring, but all this does is bring her animal-like changes to the surface, with her metamorphosed teeth and nails clearly visible in the scene. Other than aggression and a dislike for dog whistles, Scott shows little “animalistic” behavior, whereas Ginger begins with murdering dogs and moves on to murdering people. At the end of Teen Wolf, Scott chooses to not to wolf out and can go on to have a normal life. At the end of Ginger Snaps, Ginger is no longer human in any recognizable way, except perhaps for recognizing Brigitte—and in that case, it may not be Ginger recognizing Brigitte so much as the Werewolf recognizing another creature like itself, as by this time Brigitte has been
herself infected. To reach that point of transformation, Ginger has gone through an excruciating process, during which she coughs up blood and her entire body pulses and shifts into the creature she becomes. It appears as if she is screaming, or perhaps howling, and the result is a giant creature that seems to be neither wolf nor person and can only be called Werewolf. Ginger will never get to settle down as Scott most likely will with Boof. Ginger will never be normal again and in fact will die because of this change, in what Nielsen calls a “phallic punishment,” although that might be too simple a generalization to make. It is more likely that Ginger is killed by a knife—rather than a gun, or a vehicle as with the werewolf that infected Ginger—because it allows proximity between Ginger and Brigitte, between whom there has been more of a “love story”—although a platonic, sisterly love—than Ginger with her sex partner, Jason McCarty.

Sex is another area where the two teenaged werewolves differ and is incredibly telling from a feminist perspective. Scott’s attention is almost entirely focused on Pamela Wells, the blonde, popular “actress” starring in the school play, most likely because Pamela’s acting ambitions might eventually take her out of the little town in which they live, although the status gained by dating an attractive, popular girl might be enough for someone as “ordinary” as Scott complains of being. Pamela dismisses Scott until she believes he has gained enough status to be with her, at which point she seduces him in her dressing room. His childhood friend Boof is attracted to him from the beginning, and they have one encounter within the first half hour of the movie where, during a party game, the two of them spend “Two Minutes in the Closet” together. When Boof comes out the closet, the back of her shirt has been shredded. In both cases, the women
welcome these specific changes in Scott and this aspect of the wild, “animal” nature in
him is pleasing to everyone involved.

This seems like this might be the case for Ginger as well, at first. After the first
couple days of pain from Ginger’s attack/her period, Ginger begins to transform into a
more confident young woman, casting off her oversized layers and accepting her
attractiveness, even using it to her advantage when she seduces Jason McCarty. It is not
that Ginger was unattractive beforehand, as Scott was perceived by Pamela. In the
beginning of the movie Jason snickers with his friends over Ginger’s attractiveness. But
Ginger is seen as too much of a “freak” to be courted. Nielsen directly links Ginger’s
lack of menstruation to her “outsider” status but because one cannot look at a girl and tell
whether she has been or is menstruating, it is more likely that Ginger’s morbid interests
and refusal to conform to her classmates’ ideal of “normal” keeps her from being popular
despite her intelligence and attractiveness. Even when Ginger begins to smoke pot and
have sex, as her classmates do, she is not accepted into the popular crowd and instead as
viewed as either an object of lust and/or disgust by her peers. This is not surprising
though, as it is not uncommon for a young woman to be ostracized for her choice to be
sexual, even—or perhaps especially—by other young woman. Trina Sinclair, a popular
girl at Ginger and Brigitte’s school, has been sexually active with local drug-dealer Sam
and is ignored by him early in the film, thus being “punished” for her actions. He does
not even show her enough respect to break up with her kindly. Trina is judged too by
Brigitte, who refers to her as “cum-buckety date bait,” and “Ginger confirms that their
dislike for their popular classmate is related to their knowledge of her sexual experience”
(Nielsen). Nielsen tells us that casual woman-bashing “could explain why both sisters
view the onset of Ginger’s menses as a threatening, even shameful thing” and that
“[c]ontrastingly, their male classmates view their own sexual transformations as
celebratory occasions which give them confidence.” However, while Ginger’s sex partner
Jason does make cliched comments to his friends about his sexual experience, he is later
mocked when his experience with Ginger leads him to bleed through his pants—perhaps
because of her aggression, perhaps because he has been infected with Ginger’s disease;
his friends ask him if he has gotten his period, which Nielsen describes as Jason being
“feminized by his peers.” Scott Howard’s relationships with Boof and Pamela never lead
to negative consequences for either girl.

It is not only Jason who suffers because of Ginger’s transformation. Ginger
Snaps spends as much time with Ginger’s younger sister, Brigitte, as it does its
eponymous character. When first we meet Brigitte, she is Ginger’s shadow, to the point
where her mother makes a disparaging comment when Brigitte follows Ginger from the
dinner table. It is obvious that Brigitte is supposed to be the younger, less attractive sister
who is always following in her sister’s footsteps. But as the movie continues, Brigitte
comes into her own, which pits her against her sister. Ginger and Brigitte’s bond of
sisterhood begins to dissolve when Ginger precedes her to womanhood—that is, Ginger
gets her period first. While choosing which sanitary product to buy in a drug or
department store, Ginger snaps at her younger sister for her ignorance, telling her, “Just
so you know, there’s no such thing as ‘just cramps.’” Ginger is now in a different world
from Brigitte, where she is gaining new knowledge all the time, even if some of it is not
welcome.
As Ginger quickly progresses from menstruating young woman to sexual aggressor, Brigitte first stands on the sidelines while Ginger spends time with Jason, and then takes a slower, more traditional path to maturity, beginning when she exchanges barbs with the local drug-dealer, Sam. Here, Brigitte does what many, many pre-pubescent girls have done before her: she pretends to dislike Sam to mask her attraction. However, while they can hide their interest from one another and perhaps even themselves, Ginger is not unaware of the situation and tries to turn Sam from Brigitte by offering details of “Brigitte’s” transformation, as Brigitte is protecting Ginger by pretending that she is the afflicted one. When that does not work, Ginger brings up Brigitte’s age in hopes that Sam will be shamed by the fact that Brigitte is underage. He is not, and finally Ginger tries to seduce Sam to turn his attentions from her younger sister, but Sam rejects her. Unbeknownst to Brigitte, Ginger has crossed a line that might, under normal teenaged circumstances, seriously damage their relationship, but this is possible only because of the existing break between the sisters.

Brigitte and Boof share similar roles as voices of reason in the films, but Boof and Scott’s relationship does not go through nearly the amount of tension and emotional anguish that Brigitte’s and Ginger’s does. Scott and Boof go through a brief period of conflict when Scott wants to “wolf out” as part of his formal attire for the school dance, but when Scott arrives at the dance in his werewolf form, Boof shows no signs of continuing the conflict but rather accepts his offer to dance. There is a suggestion here that Boof must let Scott slide on his immaturity so that she may “win” him from Pamela in the end, and later the two leave the dance together, all forgiven just a bit too easily. Brigitte cannot take such a soft line with her sister. Brigitte, in part taking on the
traditional role of the older sister—that is, the more responsible one—is constantly trying to pull Ginger back from making bad decisions, whether it is smoking pot with her classmates or transforming into a werewolf. But Brigitte’s own transformation from sullen, rebellious pre-pubescent to responsible teenager dooms her to a life like her sister’s, for Brigitte cannot escape puberty. This is why at the end of the film Brigitte, having been bitten by her sister, cannot bring herself to inject the cure—because there is no cure for growing up. It either must be done or one must cease to live, or perhaps it must be done and one then eventually ceases to live. While Scott and Boof may go on to procreate and pass down Scott’s rather benign werewolf genes to the next generation, Ginger’s legacy is pain, aging, and death. *Ginger Snaps* tell us that this is all that Brigitte, as a woman, has to look forward to.

The underlying messages of *Teen Wolf* and *Ginger Snaps* are so different that they are horrifying: *Teen Wolf* teaches that if you are a man, puberty will lead to becoming a controllable animal, but *Ginger Snaps* teaches that puberty for a young woman is the first step in a treacherous, always-downhill path that inevitably ends in death. I think if I had been around that diner table discussing the movies with my fellow students, this revelation might have caused me to lose my appetite.


Kehr, Dave. “Film in Review; Ginger Snaps.” *New York Times* 26 October 2001:


Nielsen, Bianca. “‘Something's Wrong, Like More Than You Being Female’: Transgressive Sexuality and Discourses of Reproduction in Ginger Snaps.”

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<http://www.thirdspace.ca/articles/3_2_nielsen.htm>.
