The Journey

Vanessa Ives and Edgework as Self-Work

Schubart, Rikke

Published in:
Refractory a Journal of Entertainment Media

Publication date:
2017

Document version
Accepted manuscript

Document license
Unspecified

Citation for published version (APA):
Citation:

Abstract: This paper analyzes the witch Vanessa Ives (Eva Green) in ensemble horror series Penny Dreadful (2014–16). Witches have been television material since Bewitched (1964–72), usually in comedy or light drama, and often for teen audiences. Penny Dreadful, however, is a horror-gothic show for adults, and Vanessa a woman plagued by her powers. She is traumatized by earlier sexual escapades and family losses, and now fights evil in late-Victorian London as part of a group led by Sir Malcolm. In this paper, I read Vanessa’s journey to know herself as a form of edgework, which in sociology is a term for when we in our leisure time perform extreme, exciting and dangerous activities that take us beyond the limits of safety. In sport sociology, ‘edgework’ is when participants ‘work’ the edge of danger (Laurendeau, 2008). Whether in sport or fiction, ‘edgework’ can both challenge social rules and facilitate self-growth. This analysis therefore takes an interdisciplinary approach to screen horror as phantasmagorical play (Sutton-Smith, 1997) that enables emotional edgework.

Keywords: Penny Dreadful, the fantastic, horror, edgework, witch, television, Eva Green
The Journey: Vanessa Ives and Edgework as Self-Work

By Rikke Schubart

“Man, know thyself, and you are going to know the Gods.”

Egyptian proverb written inside Luxor Temple

Vanessa: “It all began several years ago and far from here. The moors of the West country. I went in search for answers to who I was, to a woman I came to know as the Cut-wife of Ballentree Moore. She was the first witch I ever met.”

Penny Dreadful, “The Nightcomers,” 2.03

In the television horror-drama Penny Dreadful (Showtime/Sky, 2014–2016), the character Vanessa Ives (Eva Green) speaks verbis diablo, can cast curses, and is called Mother of Evil. Over the show’s three seasons, she struggles to understand her powers and know her self. Is she the Devil’s whore? A witch? Or the Mother of Evil? She pursues these questions until she is killed at the end of the series.

In this paper I read Vanessa’s journey to know herself as edgework, which in sociology is a term for when we in our leisure time do exciting and dangerous activities which can get us killed, like skydiving or BASE jumping. In edgework, players do activities from which they learn to manage their emotions, manage their selves, and become more skilled at their choice of edgework. When they “work” the “edge,” they risk their lives, and they feel more alive than they do in their ordinary and safe lives. The edge takes them to an emotional peak experience, which is desirable, exciting, and dangerous. Edgework is this struggle to reach the peak, live on the edge, and push one’s edge still closer to death.
Sociologist Stephen Lyng (1990) explains edgework as, “most fundamentally, the problem of negotiating the boundary between chaos and order” (855). Thus, edgework is both physical and exterior and also psychological and interior. So, too, for fictional character Vanessa and for us, the audience, who engage with her. Vanessa faces exterior supernatural forces and her inner demons. We, the audience, face fictional events and our inner demons or, in the words of psychologist Michael Apter (2007), we do self-substitution edgework. We use fiction characters to substitute for our selves and do our edgework. Furthermore, edgework is gendered, and the paper will discuss Vanessa’s journey over the three seasons with the stereotypes (or tropes or scripts) of the medium, the witch, and the hysteric.

The journey to know one’s self is not easy or happy. It is an exploration of the darkness in the world and the darkness within. Vanessa’s journey is hazardous and the terrain hostile, but when offered an ordinary life, she refuses. Rather explore the dark than be bound to the light. The goal of such a life journey is not to “find” one’s self. The self is not a pot of gold at the end of one’s journey; rather, the self unfolds in the process of doing edgework and in the journey as lived life.

The article starts with a brief look at Penny Dreadful and Vanessa. Next, I unfold further the theory of edgework before I examine Vanessa’s journey through the lens of edgework. I then return to the difference between a fiction character’s edgework and the audience’s edgework and, last, speculate how imaginary edgework can be self-work for the audience.
“Vanessa, c’est moi”: Penny Dreadful as Edgework Television

John Logan, creator and writer of Penny Dreadful, referred to Vanessa as “the beating heart of the series” (Ryan May 4, 2016) and at the show’s end said that, “Vanessa Ives, c’est moi,” echoing Gustave Flaubert’s famous words “Bovary, c’est moi” (Ryan June 20, 2016) about his protagonist in Madame Bovary (1856). I take this as a sign that Vanessa is a deeply personal creation and that her life’s journey reflects if not Logan’s own personal journey (this is not an auteur article), then values and themes Logan find important. For Flaubert, at least, Mme Bovary was a treasured artistic progeny and became his creative legacy.

Penny Dreadful is a horror-drama series conceived and written by the American playwright Logan and produced by American TV-network Showtime and English telecommunications company Sky. The plot centers on a group of four – fifty-year-old explorer Sir Malcolm Murray (Timothy Dalton) and about-thirty-year old aristocrat Vanessa who has supernatural powers, American sharpshooter and werewolf Ethan Chandler (Josh Hartnett), and doctor Victor Frankenstein (Harry Treadaway) – who battle dark forces in Victorian London in 1891. The show takes its title from so-called penny dreadfuls, cheap serial fiction sold in the 1830ies for a penny per weekly issue, and it uses a mash-up of

Figure 1. Poster for Season One of Penny Dreadful (Showtime, 2014-2016). © Sky/Showtime, 2014.
characters from Gothic novels such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891), and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). Around the group we find Egyptologist Ferdinand Lyle (Simon Russell Beale), decadent aristocrat Dorian Gray (Reeve Carney), and Frankenstein’s creatures John Clare (Rory Kinnear) and resurrected prostitute Brona, now Lily Frankenstein (Billie Piper).

In the first season, Sir Malcolm is searching for his daughter Mina who has been abducted by a vampire. Vanessa Ives first joins him. The Murray and Ives families were once neighbors and Mina and Vanessa once best friends. But when Vanessa was engaged to Mina’s brother Peter, she seduced Mina’s fiancé, which caused a rupture between the families and led to Vanessa’s commitment to a mental clinic, the death of Vanessa’s parents, Peter’s death, Mina’s abduction, and Malcolm’s divorce. At the end of season one, Malcolm forgives Vanessa her “sin” and accepts her as his ward and new daughter. In Season Two the group battles a witch coven, and in Season Three they battle Dracula and the onset of an Apocalypse.

Among the show’s fantastic characters, Vanessa can be said to be the protagonist. She is prominent in publicity material and graces the cover of monthly comic book *Penny Dreadful* (June 2016–) which continued the story after the show’s end. She is presented as a strong woman: “It’s all about strong women, for me, this show, in spite of all the incredible male characters there are. The core is always going to be a woman,” Logan explained and emphasized Vanessa was “why I started writing it in the first place” (Ryan May 4, 2016). *Penny Dreadful* was popular with critics, rose from 70 to 83 on Metacritic, and received numerous nominations and won, among others, a Critics’ Choice Television Awards for Most Exciting New Series and a Satellite Awards for best television series and best actress (Green) in 2014, and an IGN Awards for best actress (Green) in 2014. Thus, fans were surprised
when season three ended with Vanessa’s death and the words “The End.” After the last episode was aired, Logan explained to fans that midway in writing season two he knew Vanessa should lose her faith and die in season three to regain her faith and be with God. And that it would be “an act of bad faith” (Ryan June 20, 2016) to continue *Penny Dreadful* without Vanessa. Frustrated fans speculated that the show ended because Showtime, disappointed with ratings, offered Logan a new show to write.¹

Sidestepping the discussion of why the show ended, we can think of *Penny Dreadful* as edgework television: it balances on a precarious tightrope with, to one side, dark emotions and a complex intertextual mash-up horror plot and, to the other side, economic demands of commercial television. *Penny Dreadful* is an example of what Jason Mittell (2015) calls complex television, also known as quality television and “literary” storytelling due to complexity of stories and psychological depth of characters.² Also, season three spends considerable time with Vanessa’s depression. However, whether or not the show was intended to be three seasons, we will read Vanessa as a complex and completed character, like Mme Bovary.

*Edgework, Fiction, Play: “What Games We Will Have Now”*

Let us return to edgework and to how Vanessa and we work the edge. Most edgework research I know discusses activities such as risk sports, criminal behavior, running with bulls in Spanish cities, and risky sex. In short, activities where players risk physical trauma. How is fiction, then, edgework, if the audience cannot break a leg or loose our life when watching? It is beyond this article to discuss the relation between fiction, engagement, and psychology, however, let me offer two arguments: First, when we are fully engaged with fiction, we experience events and emotions *as if they were real*.³ When we watch a horror film we scream when characters scream, and we are happy when characters are happy. Second, we
understand that fiction is an *as-if world*, and that we will not die when characters die. Thus, fiction is an example of what Apter calls a *detachment frame*; we can detach ourselves from events by telling ourselves they are “only” fiction and cannot hurt us. Psychologically speaking, fiction can be edgework where the audience does high-level and low-level cognitive work, oscillating between experiencing real emotions and telling ourselves that although our fear is real, events are not real.4

Another way to look at edgework is as play. Thus, mountaineering and watching horror are different activities, yet, mentally both play in the sense that they are voluntary, exciting, and non-instrumental – they are for “fun.”5 When we play, we are in play mode, meaning that we agree with those we play with that what we do is play and not real, and we momentarily exchange the rules of the real world with play rules. To play is ambiguous and paradoxical and can feel more “real” and “serious” than reality. Play is experimental and free, yet bound by play rules. The player who brings a gun to the football match to take down the opposite team’s players breaks the rules of soccer. Or if a player says he or she doesn’t care about winning a match, the player also breaks the rules. Apter uses watching horror films as an example of edgework (but does not discuss this type of edgework). We can say that audiences treat fiction worlds and fiction characters as play and as *as-if* events. Thus, we feel real emotions yet know we are safe from physical trauma (but not safe from psychological trauma or being “hurt” by a fiction).

*Penny Dreadful* is aware of being fiction and leisure time entertainment, and it alludes to its status as play by having characters visit theaters, cabarets, fairs, and wax museums. The first season’s vampires hide at the Theater du Grand Guignol, and the group fights them on the stage in the last episode. And in “What Death Can Join Together,” when Vanessa is possessed during her kinky sex with Dorian, the Devil greets her, “Good evening, my child. I’ve been waiting. *What games we will have now*” (1.06). Playing with fiction and playing
with risks in risk sports are different yet similar activities. The fiction characters are extensions of us, the audience; without our engagement they would not be alive, but merely words on paper or colors on a canvas. To sum up: fiction characters do substitute edgework, and the audience experiences real emotions in an as-if world.

What, then, is edgework? Edgework is voluntary, dangerous, and exciting. Lyng, who takes the term from gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson, uses edgework about the excitement in risk sports like skydiving. The “edge” is the line between order and chaos, life and death, “edgework” is the management of one’s performance on this edge, and practitioners are “edgeworkers.” Edgework is, on the one hand, an individual and inner psychological experience, but also, on the other hand, a social and skilled activity you do in a world with others. “The ‘edge,’ or boundary line, confronted by the edgeworker can be defined in many different ways: life versus death, consciousness versus unconsciousness, sanity versus insanity, an ordered sense of self and environment versus a disordered self and environment” (857).

Apter expands edgework from risk sports to a variety of activities like fast driving, hooliganism, watching horror movies, committing crimes for fun, or giving a public lecture. Apter also uses the concepts of mental zones. Edgework activities take the player from a safety zone into a danger zone, which is next to the trauma zone. In the safety zone you are safe, in the trauma zone you risk being traumatized or dying, and in the danger zone you “work” to push the edge as close to trauma as possible. Furthermore, Apter explains players use “safety frames” when they do edgework. There are three: the confidence frame (they tell themselves they have the skill to perform the dangerous activity), the safety frame (they tell themselves they are still in the safe zone), and the detachment frame (the player feels psychologically detached from events, either because she feels she is an observer, fantasizes,
remembers, or uses fiction). Safety frames give players a *psychological experience* of being safe, whether they are safe or not.

A paradox in edgework – the same that is often asked about fiction horror – is *why* we want to risk our lives for fun (in horror, why do audiences voluntary seek out negative emotions). Not all play involves negative emotions, however, many types of play do (you can loose a game or get hurt while playing). The paradox is addressed on several theoretical levels. On a social level, Lyng explains edgework as a response to over-socialization in modern society. When society is (too) safe, we feel restricted, bored, and lack being challenged. Edgework takes you to the very edge of your abilities. On an evolutionary level, Apter explains risk-seeking behavior as innate; we are naturally born to seek out exciting and dangerous activities, a behavior which is not sex-specific, but varies from individual to individual. Some are more risk-seeking than others, and young more than adults. Risk-taking behavior is adaptive to a group: it is better that one dies on the edge than the entire group, and the individual thus brings valuable information about risks and dangers back to the group.

On a neurological-chemical level, Apter points out edgework is characterized by our simultaneous experience of excitement and anxiety. In terms of neurochemistry, these two emotions are identical: both prepare for a fight-or-flight response to a situation. They both start as an adrenaline rush (which we will return to). The difference between them is in our appraisal of the risk/danger situation: If we think we can manage the situation, we feel excited, and if we don’t think we can, we become anxious. Cognitively speaking, we interpret the adrenaline rush as an emotion of either excitement (we feel safe) or anxiety (we feel fear). The closer we get to trauma, the harder adrenalin kicks in, and the more intense is our experience of excitement. “In other words, one buys excitement with fear, and the greater the cost, the better the product,” says Apter (43). As a mountaineer puts it: “Death is so close. You could let go and make the decision to die. It feels so good” (39).
On an individual-psychological level, finally, edgework is linked to self-work. “I wasn’t thinking at all – I just did what I had to do,” a skydiver explains, “[a]nd after it was over, I felt really alive and pure” (added emphasis, Lyng 1990 860). Lyng says, “[i]n edgework, the ego is called forth in a dramatic way” (860). It is this urgency that makes you feel alive. On the edge there is no time for doubt, one uses skills without questioning them. When Vanessa in Season Two suddenly speaks verbis diablo, the Devil’s language, she says it came to her “like an animal instinct” (2.01).

This self, finally, is a gendered self. In the development of our self, we use what cognitive psychology calls mental schemes, scripts, and stereotypes, which we can describe as socially created ideas we use to know the world and construct our self. There are schemes for every social role, and gender is a basic scheme we internalize from the age of five. Edgework is gendered, and sociologist Jason Laurendeau (2008) says, “the ways skydivers, freeclimbers, mountaineers, or BASE jumpers, for example, ‘do’ risk are also – and simultaneously, and always already – ways that they negotiate gender” (304). We recall that the drive for excitement-seeking is not sex-specific and that differences in how players do edgework is thus a result of cultural learning, not biology. In my discussion of Vanessa’s journey to know herself, I will pay attention to how her edgework is gendered through the use of the scripts of the medium, the witch, and the hysteric.

Season One: Vanessa, the Medium

“I see things sometimes. I am affected by forces beyond our world,” Vanessa tells Ethan in episode three. In season one Vanessa’s script is the medium for the living’s communication with supernatural forces: ghosts, monsters, the Devil and even Egyptian Gods.

The séance held by Ferdinand Lyle at a party (“Séance,” 1.02) is an excellent example of Vanessa’s script and edgework. The séance was a popular Victorian parlour entertainment,
and Lyle has invited medium Madam Kali, who appears to be an entertainer rather than a medium. Lyle encourages Vanessa to take a seat at the table: “It will be an adventure!” When Madam Kali (Helen McCrory) summons the spirits, Vanessa is possessed. The well-behaved and elegant Vanessa transforms into a medium and a “possessed woman” who speaks in the tongues of Malcolm’s children Peter (dead in Africa) and Mina (who is missing), and also speaks as what seems an Egyptian God: “Amunet? No, much older.” Vanessa makes quite the spectacle, loosening her hair, bending backwards on top of the dinner table, and next leaves to have sex with a stranger in the street.

As said, we internalize the gender schema at the age of five, and unless we make a conscious effort to not be gendered, our every move, thought, and behavior is performed through a gendered lens. So, too, with edgework. Our choice of an edge, how to work the edge, and how to think of one self when doing edgework, this is all unconsciously gendered. In her study of gender and edgework, sociologist Jennifer Lois (2001) followed a team of voluntary mountain rescue workers for five and a half years. She observed that the women and men used the same meta-narrative about gender that said men were emotionally strong and women weak, and the workers shared a “norm of masculine emotional stoicism” (387). The meta-narrative about gender provided positive scripts for men (male stoicism), but undermined women’s belief in their ability (if stoicism is male, it means women are weaker than men). Male rescue workers were self-confident, and women were anxious and set low expectations. “[W]hen I talked to equally experienced men and women, apprehension still dominated women’s anticipatory feelings . . . and confidence dominated men’s. Furthermore, even when women performed well on missions, it did not seem to boost their confidence for future situations, while conversely, men’s poor performance did not erode theirs” (389). The difference was in anticipation and expectations, however, Lois observed no difference in men and women’s management of their emotions when working the edge.
Returning to Vanessa, we can interpret the supernatural domain as her “edge” and her communication with the supernatural forces as “edgework.” In “Night Work” Vanessa describes the demimonde to Ethan as “a half world between what we know and what we fear. A place in the shadows, rarely seen but deeply felt” (1.01). We can see the demimonde as a version of the danger zone situated between the safe zone, which is the “ordinary” world, and the trauma zone, which would be where vampires, monsters, and Gods exist. The trauma zone is then the “other” side, whereas the demimonde Vanessa describes is a zone where humans and supernatural entities communicate. This “half world” is open to those who want to enter it. Thus, it is an edge, and if you go over the edge you will be “traumatized”: Mina becomes a vampire, the witch who enters a pact with the Devil becomes a Nightcomer in the second season, and when Vanessa gives in to Dracula in Season Three she becomes Mother of Evil. Vanessa the medium, however, works the edge and can return to the ordinary world.

The role as medium is gendered female in Western bourgeois society. Howell and Baker (2017) describe Vanessa as typical of the Victorian medium: “In the spectacle that
Vanessa Ives makes of herself, the scene registers the appeal and disruptive potential of the female medium in the Victorian and Edwardian era spiritualist movement as one who could ‘invade and upturn the domestic havens of respectable gentlemen and their obedient wives through the subversive and often highly-sexualised séances’” (Howell and Baker). The efficiency of social scripts is that we do not invent them; they are already written and ready for us to perform, which Vanessa does when Lyle urges her to the table.

We might imagine the ability to communicate with supernatural forces had nothing to do with one’s sex, yet Victorian society’s script as “Medium” is female. Cognitive psychologist Sandra Bem (1981) says that when a schema (in our case a script) is gendered, it means it “conforms to the culture’s definitions of maleness and femaleness” (355) and it also “teaches that the dichotomy between male and female has extensive and intensive relevance to virtually every aspect of life” (362). In the first season, Vanessa performs as medium – that is, allows supernatural forces to “talk” through her physical body – three times: First at the séance, next in the flashback in episode five when she is committed to Dr Banning’s clinic, and the third time when she is possessed (after she has had sex with Dorian) and the group performs an exorcism on her in episode seven, “Possession.” The situations portrayed here connect supernatural communication with transgressive sexuality: having sex with a stranger in public, seducing one’s best friend’s fiancée, and implications of sado-masochism when Vanessa cuts Dorian with a knife during intercourse.

As we perform the social scripts, we also negotiate them. We can follow them, or vary them, or, if we are conscious of them, try to change or reject them. Bem wants us to reject the gender schema because it is a negative schema that restricts women. In Vanessa’s case, her supernatural powers are represented in a script where woman is sexualized, unable to control her desires, and these desires presented as transgressive. Vanessa is also a sexualized spectacle; in her youth, her mother dies from heart attack at the sight of the naked
daughter tied to the bed and possessed by the Devil, a spectacle the audience also sees (1.05). The sexual acts are overlaid with negative emotions of jealousy, shame, guilt, and the concept of sin. When Vanessa discovers her mother’s affair with Mina’s father, she starts to pray to the dark and becomes jealous of Mina. “How I envied you. Perhaps even hated you” (1.05). Vanessa’s mother blames the daughter for the social catastrophe: “Have you no shame?” Malcolm, too, accuses Vanessa: “I always thought my traveling would kill my family . . . I never thought it would be a cruel little girl.” When the adult Vanessa recalls this past she is ready to assume her guilt. “Perhaps it was already inside me, this demon” (1.05).

Figure 3. Vanessa (Eva Green) possessed in Season One of Penny Dreadful, Season 1, Episode 5, “Closer Than Sisters.” © Sky/Showtime, 2014.

It is clear from episode one, when Ferdinand deciphers the ancient writing on a vampire body, that Vanessa is the object of dark forces’ desire to take over the world of the living. However, the events of season one create ambiguity about whether she is predestined to be “the devil’s whore” (as a vampire calls her) or if this is her choice. When Vanessa is back from the clinic, lobotomized and tied to the bed, the Devil at her bedside says, “you always had a choice. You sought it out and fucked it. You could have shut the door at any time. You still can” (1.05). Is her sexuality her own, or is it manipulated by the Devil? It turns
out that Malcolm has used Vanessa’s susceptibility to the dark forces by encouraging her to have an affair with Dorian. Malcolm hoped this would open the door to the demimonde and allow him to contact his daughter. “You are now in a very special place between our world and the other. Perhaps between life and death. Reach out to Mina,” Malcolm asks Vanessa when she is possessed (1.07).

Vanessa’s “edge” is sexualized encounters with dark forces on tables and in beds. The season ends with Vanessa repressing her desire and rejecting Dorian after the exorcism: “Mr. Gray, I’m not the woman you think I am. And with you I am not the woman I want to be” (1.08). The last episode has a “decent” Vanessa, properly dressed and fighting vampires along the three men in the group, thus signaling that she is playing to a modified script. At this point in the series we can call this modified script a “Mina version” since, like Mina in _Dracula_, Vanessa is medium and vampire hunter. Although Vanessa actively participates in the vampire attack, the men do most of the killing, and the season ends with Malcolm forgiving Vanessa her sin and making her his ward. In the season’s final scene, Vanessa asks a priest about exorcism. He says, “Now, if you have been touched by the demon it’s like being touched by the backhand of God, makes you sacred in a way, doesn’t it? Makes you unique. There is a glory in suffering. Now here’s my question: Do you really want to be normal?” (1.08).

**Season Two: Vanessa, the Witch**

Season two turns to the script of the witch which I later in this section differentiate into two subscripts, the Christian witch and the magical witch. Where the medium is a channel of communication and thus object rather than subject of supernatural forces, the witch is an active agent who can control and use supernatural forces. The medium sees where a witch acts. In Season One it is unclear if Vanessa does edgework out of choice (free will) or
because it is predestined (“who wants to know they are hunted by the Devil?” 1.02). Season Two casts her journey in different terms: Vanessa is gifted (or cursed) with supernatural powers, but can she learn to master her powers?

The season presents the witch script as a process of learning, and from the opening episode to the finale we follow Vanessa from being unable to control her powers to be able to defeat the Devil and the witch coven. In edgework, too, the player must learn to perform on the edge. Lois divides edgework into four phases: “[P]reparing for the edge, performing on the edge, going over the edge, and extending the edge” (385). In Lois’ theory, to prepare is to train and learn before approaching the edge. To perform is when players actually work on the edge, use their skills, and experience the adrenaline rush which takes them into a state that creativity researcher Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2013) has called flow, where we are focused, lose sense of time, and perform our best. Edgework is performed in flow. Next, to go over the edge is when players release tension after working the edge and they allow themselves to experience emotions from the adrenaline rush, which might be joy if work went well or guilt if work went badly. To extend the edge, finally, is when players evaluate and assess their performance and emotions and set expectations for future edgework.

Now, as said earlier, the “edge” in edgework is both a geographical place – the location of one’s actual edgework whether BASE jumping or battling the Devil – and a mental location. The danger zone is the zone between the safe zone and the trauma zone, and within the danger zone, the edge is the border that touches the trauma zone. The edge is the literal place where you are in danger of being traumatized but are confident you can manage, and it is also where you “touch” trauma yet are confident you can return to the safe zone. One of Lois’ rescue workers, criticized for walking on dangerous cornices, explains, “Well, I wouldn’t be doing it if it wasn’t safe. It’s not safe for you to be doing it, no, but it’s safe for me because I know what I’m doing” (388). In her study of BASE jumpers, Men on the Edge
(2012), anthropologist Caitlin Forsey says, “loss of control, fear, anxiety, dread and discomfort were connected to understandings of risk, as was the need to control the future through careful consideration of the potentially fatal consequences of the sport” (52). Or, in the words of a BASE jumper, edgework is “taking necessary precautions and then knowingly doing something that could kill you” (52). The sport is a way to manage risk instead of avoiding risk. Laurendeau says BASE jumpers are “courting danger while still maintaining control over themselves, their equipment, their surroundings, and/or their sanity . . . The ‘edge,’ then, is that point at which risk takers are in peril of losing control” (294).

The season opens with Vanessa and Ethan being attacked by witches who try to abduct Vanessa. She defeats them by speaking *verbis diablo*, the devil’s language, which she did not know she could speak – “words came to me blindly, like an animal instinct. I don’t even know what I said” (2.01). It turns out Madam Kali (the medium in season one) is Evelyn, a powerful witch and head of a coven with four young witches. Evelyn has entered a contract with the Devil to deliver Vanessa to him in exchange for power, youth, and beauty.

To fight the coven Vanessa must remember the past. In the flashback episode “The Nightcomers” (2.03) she remembers how many years ago, after Mina’s abduction, she became apprentice to a witch known as the Cut-wife. The Cut-wife, whose name is Joan (Patti LuPone), leaves Vanessa days outside the house before inviting her in. “You’re strong-willed and agile, like the scorpion,” says Joan (2.03), and Vanessa’s sign becomes the red scorpion she draws in her blood. It turns out Evelyn and Joan are sisters, the first using her powers in the service of the Devil, the second using her powers to serve her community.

Joan teaches Vanessa to harness and control her powers. “Why do you want to learn the arts?” “To find out who I am.” “And if the answer you don’t like?” “Better to know who I am.” When Vanessa cannot draw a Tarot card, Joan slaps her hard on the head and tells her to “feel” the cards, to “believe” in her sight, and says “you’ll know” and “you can do better”
about interpreting signs. Vanessa then selects a card: “The Devil.” In season one it was unclear if Vanessa invited the Devil in. Season Two removes this doubt: “I learned it. You were born with it,” Joan says about the powers. Joan shows Vanessa to use plants and herbs for medicine, teaches her to talk verbis diablo, to cast the Tarot cards, and shows her a book with curses. Joan warns that verbis diablo can lead to evil. “If you believe in God, better you pray with all the God in you. Only if all fails, speak the devil’s tongue, but mark me, girl, it’s a seduction and before you blink twice, it’s all you can speak” (2:3).

We can situate the witch narrative in *Penny Dreadful* by taking a wider look at history and witches. The powers of a witch are believed to be a magical relationship with the world; she can control the weather, kill crops, cause disease, kill and raise the dead, and tell the future. The extent of her magic depends on the intensity of her powers. Edgeworkers, too, report an almost magical ability to manage danger and master the physical world and “speak of a feeling of ‘oneness’ with the object or environment. For example, motorcycle racers and testpilots describe a feeling of ‘being one with their machines,’ a state in which they feel capable of exercising mental control over the machines” (Lyng 1990 861). Joan warns Vanessa against the spells. “Forbidden. The poetry of death. If ever the day comes when my little scorpion is crushed and beaten, if her God deserts her completely, only then does she open it. And on that day, she will never be the same. She will have gone away from God. Forever” (2:3). At the end of episode seven, Vanessa uses spells to kill the local Lord who burnt Joan as a witch and branded Vanessa, and now threatens her again. Ethan is upset, “You’ll never get your soul back,” he says and adds: “Welcome to the night, Vanessa.”

Season Two has only female witches: The sisters Joan and Evelyn, Evelyn’s coven of four young daughters, and Vanessa. The show draws from a Western culture’s belief in witches, which we can divide into two scripts: a Christian witch and a pre-Christian, or magical, witch. Evelyn is in league with the Devil and a Christian witch, whereas Joan uses
her skills to serve a community. Joan, thus, is a magic witch. Let us briefly look at historical witch studies. Scottish historian Lizanne Henderson in *Witchcraft and Folk Belief in the Age of Enlightenment Scotland, 1670-1740* (2016) examines historical witch trials and witch beliefs. Witches are an old superstition and Henderson points out that not until 1450 did the Church claim that a witch was demonic, that is, in league with the Devil. Between 1450 and 1800, 100,000 people were accused of witchcraft and more than 60,000 executed, most of these women. But before 1450, the term “witch” was used about many practices such as charmer, diviner, sorcerer, magician, necromancer, warlock, and more. The Bible’s Witch of Endor (I Samuel 28:3-25) was for example a necromancer who had “divinatory powers and could raise the dead” (81) and the passage “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live” (Exodus 22:18) has *kashaph*, a Hebrew word that “carried the meaning of magician, sorcerer or diviner, but was not considered diabolical” (81).

Now, Joan is a magical witch who uses her powers for the good of the community and Evelyn is a Christian witch who uses her powers for her own greed and serves the Devil. Next to these historical scripts – the Christian and the pre-Christian witch – there are also several popular culture witch scripts. There is the old evil hag with “bad skin, crooked teeth, foul breath, a cackling laugh and a big nose that has a wart at the end of it” (66) and the young pretty witch we know from *Sabrina – The Teenage Witch* (ABC, WB, 1996-2003). Also, we find a middle-age witch obsessed with youth in the fairy tales like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937, William Cottrell). If we ask Henderson what the typical historical witch was like, she was neither old, nor young, nor obsessed with youth. Of women accused of witchcraft in Scotland between 1670 and 1740, 78 per cent were married and only two per cent single, and if a common trope is the midwife (Joan’s calling name, Cut-wife, is because she performs abortions), only nine of 4,000 Scottish cases were midwives by occupation. Records show the typical woman accused of witchcraft was ordinary, belonged to the middle
class, could be any age, and that accusations started with quotidian quarrels, “reflective predominantly of tensions between women” (84). And although 95 per cent of witches in Scotland were women, on Iceland, in contrast, of 22 executed witches only one was a woman.

So, Evelyn is the middle-aged witch who has made a deal with the Devil, and Joan is a good and magical witch slowly growing older. What kind of witch, then, is Vanessa? Joan says, “I have never known a Daywalker with such power, truly, I don’t know if your heart is good or bad.” At the end of the season, Vanessa goes alone to Evelyn’s mansion to battle the coven and the Devil. Evelyn creates voodoo dolls with the hearts of murdered babies and the face of whom they represent, and Vanessa faces a doll with her own face and the Devil’s voice. He shows her a nuclear family with Vanessa, Ethan, and two children: “Let me show you what I can give you: to be free of pain. To be normal. To be loved by others. Is that not the aim of all human beings?” Joan had earlier asked if Vanessa would follow in her footsteps and be witch in Ballentree Moore. Vanessa refused (to serve the community) and she also refuses the Devil (her desires). She instead chooses her personal quest, to find Mina. “You selfish bitch, you will never have a happy life,” Joan warns.

“The Nightcomers” ends with Joan’s words “be true,” which we will read as meaning Vanessa must be true to herself. When you are on a journey to know your self, you must stay the course even if a storm is coming. In “And They Were Enemies,” the Devil says: “There is no more powerful inducement than this: Face yourself” (2.10). Vanessa’s “self” is in her ability to repel the Devil with his own words, verbis diablo, a gibberish that makes no sense. She refuses to be “normal” and stands her ground. “You offer me a normal life. Why do you think I want that anymore? I know what I am – do you? . . . Beloved, know your master” (2.10). Her edgework is to force the Devil back and her powers – her mental edgework – are her ability to manage the adrenalin rush, which edgeworkers experience as a magical unity.
with one’s environment. They say they feel “self-realization,” “self-actualization,” and “self-determination” and “a purified and magnified sense of self” (Lyng 860). They feel more alive on the edge than in their everyday lives. This aliveness and strength from the adrenaline rush becomes terrifying rather than purifying when granted a woman. In season two Vanessa learns to use her powers, and she kills a bounty hunter (with a knife) and a Lord (with spells) before overcoming the Devil. And such display of strength is awesome and terrifying.

Henderson links history’s witch trials to society’s fear of women. The witch is an “independent adult woman who does not conform to the male idea of proper female behavior” because she is “assertive . . . [and] does not nurture men or children, nor care for the weak” and “has the power of words – to defend herself or to curse” (Henderson 77). In a patriarchal world, “the imagery of a rebellious, subversive woman must have seemed incredibly threatening to men and women alike” (77). Henderson reminds us that the rebellious witch script is modern, since the historical witch was no rebel.

Vanessa, thus, is a complex and modern witch script: she is desired by the Devil whom she rejects, and she is also asked to be a magical witch, which she rejects too. Thus she takes neither the path of Evelyn or Joan. She learns the power of words to defend herself, and she claims the independence to pursue her own path. We can read Vanessa as a re-authored witch with an eye for modern feminism: a selfish witch choosing to reject the nuclear family as well as the Devil, a witch who, however, is not egocentrical but on her very own journey, and willing to pay the price for stepping off the beaten track.

At the end in Season Two, characters set out on each their life journey. Ethan pleads guilty to his werewolf murders and is arrested, Malcolm travels to Africa, Victor becomes a drug addict, and Vanessa is alone. Losing Ethan, she loses her faith and burns her crucifix. “So we walk alone,” are the season’s last words.
Figure 4. Edgework as Self-work in *Penny Dreadful*. Vanessa (Eva Green) kissing her voodoo doll in Season 2, Episode 10, “And They Were Enemies.” © Sky/Showtime, 2015.

*Season Three: Vanessa, the Hysteric*

As said, the journey to know oneself is not a merry one. *Penny Dreadful* is about the encounter with dark forces, and edgework is about facing trauma and possible death, and season three takes us to the perhaps darkest of all places, the depression. The first two seasons cast Vanessa as medium and witch and we now come to the script of the hysteric and the setting of the padded cell in the Victorian mental clinic for “women’s diseases.”

First episode, “The Day Tennyson Died,” opens with Vanessa having isolated herself for five months in Malcolm’s mansion to dwell on the loss of her faith and of Ethan. The Egyptologist Lyle visits her and recommends an alienist (the Victorian age’s term for a psychoanalyst). Vanessa consults Dr. Seward (Patti LuPone), who tells her to do “something you’ve never done before.” Vanessa visits the Natural History Museum, where she meets museum director Dr. Alexander Sweet (Christian Camargo), who later turns out to be Dracula. Vanessa asks which creatures Dr. Sweet prefers? “The unloved ones. The unvisited ones. The broken and shunned creatures.” (3.01). At the end of the episode Vanessa combs
her hair and looks in the mirror: “The old monsters have gone. The old curses have echoed to silence and if my immortal soul is lost to me, something yet remains. I remain.” This “I” is a physical entity.

The third season intertwines supernatural forces with clinical depression, faith with flesh, medical treatments with a talking cure. Somewhere in this matrix is the person Vanessa, trying to locate her “self,” whatever such an ephemeral and mythized thing is. In her sessions with Dr. Seward, Vanessa recovers herself. Dr. Seward tells the patient, “I don’t care about politeness. There are no manners here. If you want to scream like an animal you should. Or cry. Or yell. There are no emotions unwelcome in this room” (3.02). On a date with Dr. Sweet, Vanessa is in a labyrinth of mirrors, where a creature tells her she earlier met the Master in “the white room.” Vanessa therefore asks Dr. Seward to use hypnosis to return her to the Banning clinic, where she spent five months in a padded cell. Dr. Seward warns her: “The emotions can be very raw, I am warning you, are you willing to give yourself over to it?” (3.03). Although she is emotionally fragile after the depression, Vanessa insists to visit her old trauma: “Can I be more traumatized?”

Banning’s clinic was introduced in season one, where Dr Banning performed trepanning (drilling a hole through the skull into the brain) on Vanessa. In the late nineteenth century, the historical setting of Penny Dreadful, female hysteria was a common medical diagnosis and women were believed to be of a weaker mind and more emotionally frail than men. Season One presented Vanessa as both a hysteric and possessed. Dr. Banning diagnosed Vanessa’s condition as “hysteria of a psychosexual nature” to be treated with “narcotics and escalating hydrotherapy. Cold water reduces circulation to the brain thereby reducing the metabolism and motor activity. The agitation and mental trauma will slow down and cease,” and if this does not help there are “surgical options” (1.05).

The audience is returned in season three to the Victorian treatment of “women’s
disease,” which in Vanessa’s case has supernatural causes. She is, however, cast as hysteric, scratching her hand repeatedly during sessions which makes Dr. Seward comment on this physical symptom of inner conflict. Also, her isolation and unkept appearance signal mental disturbance. In “A Blade of Grass” Vanessa returns through hypnosis to the clinic. Here, her only visitor is a nurse, played by Rory Kinnear who also plays the creature John Clare. Vanessa laments: “God has forgotten me. He can’t find me here. I’m not Vanessa Ives here. I’m no one. I have no name. No purpose” (3.04). She is scratching the padded walls, attacks the nurse, refuses food and must be force-fed, and her thoughts ruminate about God and the Devil. At one point Dr. Seward is in the cell. “It’s a dissociative break, something like a coma,” Seward explains, “you will come out of it. When you’re at the heart of your trauma. When you’ve found what you’re looking for.” Vanessa then sees the fallen angels Lucifer and Dracula (both played by Kinnear), one wanting her soul, the other her body. Dracula tells her: “You’re powerful. You feel it coiling within you. Become the wolf and the bat and the scorpion. Be truly who you are . . . In this world you will always be shunned for your uniqueness but not with me. They will brand you as a freak and a sorceress” (3.04). Vanessa resists Lucifer and Dracula, levitates in the room and defeats them with verbis diablo (which, paradoxically, in the time-line of the story, means she knew verbis diablo before learning it from Joan).

The role of emotions in edgework is interesting. In her observation of how the male and female rescue workers handle emotions, Lois say they interpret emotions. On the edge, everyone experiences the so-called adrenaline rush. This is not an emotion proper but first a feeling state, which next leads to emotions of urgency and fear. Low-level fear improves edgework but high-level fear impedes it. How you handle the adrenaline rush is crucial to your performance on the edge. Lois also observed that the rescue workers’ gendering of emotions – excitement was masculine and anxiety was feminine – led to emotions being
considered appropriate and inappropriate. “For example, they believed that emotions such as uncertainty, urgency, fear, upset, vulnerability, and guilt were undesirable because those powerful feelings were potentially disruptive. They could interfere with members’ performance, causing them to sacrifice the efficiency of the mission as well as the safety of other rescuers and the victims” (401).

In a talking cure, the patient must examine his or her emotions. From an emotions research perspective, shame, guilt, and anxiety are not intrinsically feminine or masculine, but are equally innate in both sexes. Further, research in gender and power, e.g. in leadership, shows no sex difference; female leaders, for example, are not more emotional than male leaders, and male leaders not more rational than female leaders. Where there is a difference in behavior, this difference is a result of mindset, stereotyping, and assumptions about gender appropriate behavior. When Dr Seward tells Vanessa all emotions are welcome, this prompts the patient to open up instead of repressing emotions. At the same time, the emotions Vanessa is about to re-experience are those society deems “female,” unwelcome, and unworthy: guilt, shame, anxiety, and paranoia that she is haunted.

We recall Vanessa’s mother and Malcolm in the first season blamed her for the social consequences of her seduction of Mina’s fiancée. This “sin” was forgiven at the end of the season, however, it remains within her and we now re-visit Vanessa’s trauma, a knot of sexual transgressive behavior (the seduction), sin, and social disgression resulting in self-punishment, self-blame, shame, anxiety, guilt, and physical reactions (scratching). I understand the trauma as Vanessa’s “edge” in season three and her work with the trauma as her edgework. The show interweaves the scripts of the hysteric with that of the possessed woman and voices a modern feminist critique, expressed in Vanessa’s conversations with her nurse. “It’s science, it’s meant to make you better,” he says and asks her to pretend to be normal so the force-feeding and her treatments stop. Vanessa objects, “It’s meant to make me
normal. Like all the other women you know. Compliant, obedient” (3.04). Whatever she is, she cannot be normal. Where the medium is welcome in the Victorian home, the hysteric is banned and isolated. The hysteric needs a cure, and Vanessa was released in her youth after trepanning. In the present, under hypnosis with Dr. Seward, Vanessa returns from the trauma when she knows the name of her adversary: Dracula

As the season progresses, Vanessa is seduced by Dr. Sweet, and after they make love one night in the museum, she learns he is Dracula. When Dracula promises to love her to the end of time, never to leave her, and to let her be her “self,” she accepts to be his bride and lets him bite her. “I accept . . . my . . . self,” she says at the end of “Ebb Tide” (3.07), and London falls into the Apocalypse. “This is what I am. I have brought this terrible darkness to the world,” she says in the final episode, “The Blessed Dark” (3.09).

Vanessa’s character expands from the tropes of medium, witch, and hysteric to include the martyr-hero. That is, a hero who sacrifices her or his life in the service of one’s
When Dr Sweet asks whom Vanessa admires, she says Joan of Arc, who died singing, keeping her faith in God: “She heard a voice and believed it. And to believe with confidence is heroic” (3.02). Now, martyrdom and edgework seem different activities, however, both are voluntary, dangerous, and can take players to the extreme of trauma. We may also not think martyrdom a matter of play, however, play can be as obsessive as faith. Thus Carl Boenish, the father of BASE jumping, died at the age of 43 when he jumped off a mountain in Norway, recorded by a film crew that was with him.\(^\text{12}\) And the film *Everest* (2015, Baltasar Kormákur) celebrates the death of mountaineer Robert Edwin Hall, who died leading an expedition in 1996. When the group comes to save Vanessa, she begs Ethan to shoot her to end the darkness. At this moment she has become darkness itself and only her death will stop the Apocalypse. We can understand this belief as literal – there are forces of evil – but also as a psychological embrace of darkness within – that she is her self when she works the edge and touches trauma.

The third season ends with a visit to her grave. Here are what remains from the original group – Ethan, Malcolm, and Victor – and three characters introduced in the last season: Ethan’s Indian father Kaetenay (Wes Studi), Dr. Seward, and vampire hunter Catriona Hartdegen (Perdita Weeks). The creatures John Clare and Lily are alive and free to write their own life scripts.

*Extending the Edge: Free Will and Self-Work*

Let us now turn to edgework as self-work. What does it mean “to face yourself,” as the Devil challenges Vanessa to do at the end of season two? What do players take from edgework? And what can we, the audience, take from fiction edgework? Until now, we have discussed how Vanessa has prepared for and performed on the edge. In the last part of this article I want to explore the last phases, to “go over the edge” and “to extend the edge.” All four phases of
edgework contribute to edgework as self-work, an activity already, simultaneously, and involuntarily also gendered self-work. We will now ask how Vanessa’s edgework is gendered.

We recall Lois found that men and women do edgework differently: Men anticipate the edge with confidence and excitement, women with trepidation and anxiety. This is because men’s positive expectations are supported by society’s meta-narrative. “Yup. I am a cocky, young, think-I-can-do-it-all kid. I can get out of a situation . . . I perform tremendously under pressure. That’s when I shine at my absolute, top of my game. And I love being put in the hot seat,” says a 28-year-old male rescue worker (387). Women, on the other hand, are undermined by society’s meta-narrative and constantly worry that they will be unable to manage emotions. “I mean, I always second-guess myself in the field. I guess my problem is that I’m always unsure of myself. Like, I’d be afraid that I would do more damage than good, in a way . . . And that’s where my hesitation always comes in” (386).
We can read exterior and interior darkness as Vanessa’s “edge,” which is expressed differently over seasons: As guilt/Satan/vampires, as witchcraft/Satan, and as depression/Dracula. If we look at the four phases, then in the phase of preparation, Vanessa worries whether she will be strong enough to face evil, if she is worthy of being forgiven past sins, if she is haunted by evil, and if she will ever be happy, like the female rescue workers. Other characters despair too in *Penny Dreadful* (especially Victor and his creature), however, men do not experience the same amount of shame, anxiety, guilt, and trepidation. In the second phase, performing on the edge, Vanessa’s performance is often sexualized, making her an unconsenting spectacle and subject of erotic acts and sexual abuse. Here, male characters’ edgework has the form of traditional “masculine” activities such as battling, fighting, killing, and doing unethical science, rather than having sex. However, when Vanessa confronts evil in the finales of season one and two, she controls her body, her emotions, and her desires, and she is dressed in decent Victorian fashion. In these situations, Vanessa works the edge without anxiety or worry. Yet, edgework is gendered: In the Grand Guignol Theater Vanessa is the damsel-in-distress to be saved by the men, and in Evelyn’s mansion she almost kisses the voodoo doll, metaphor for the narcissistic desires the Devil promises to fulfill, which she refuses by cracking the doll’s face.

The third phase, to go over the edge, is when players release tension after working the edge and allow the adrenaline rush to become emotions. If edgework goes well, rescue workers hug one another and celebrate, but if a rescue mission fails, men and women cope differently. Female rescue workers cry, but male rescue workers do not allow themselves the “feminine” release of sadness and tears, and instead drink to stop negative emotions. In *Penny Dreadful* men drink too. Vanessa, however, cries to release tension, like the female rescue workers. She cries when she is possessed (1.07), she cries when Ethan leaves her (2.10), and in season three she cries in sessions with Dr. Seward (3.03, 3.04), when Dracula
bites her (3.07), and when she begs Ethan to kill her (3.09).

How, then, can we understand Vanessa’s death? Does she work the edge (manage chaos), does she go over the edge (let go of emotions), or does she extend the edge (go beyond existing limits)? The crying Vanessa wears a creme-colored simple dress which looks a bit like a bridal dress, perhaps to signify virtue and her soon-to-be union with God. “This is what I am. And this is what I’ve done. Brought this terrible darkness to the world,” she says (3.09), taking responsibility for the spread of the vampire plague. We can see her acceptance to become Dracula’s bride, to embrace inner darkness, and her surrender to death, as neither working the edge nor going over the edge, but instead as letting go. As ceasing her battle with chaos. But edgework is not a mountaineer’s willingness to fall to his death, or a BASE jumper jumping off without a parachute. Edgeworkers report being turned on by the risk of dying and be willing to take this risk. To embrace evil and beg for death is another story; it is not play, but suicide.

We could instead interpret Vanessa’s death is as martyrdom (like her favorite hero, Joan of Arc), yet this seems out of character compared to Vanessa’s earlier persistence in fighting. Fans complained about the season’s development and, for instance, found it wrong to introduce the action-heroine-like vampire hunter character Catriona. A female blogger and film critic commented, “It felt like they [wanted] to introduce a character who could physically protect Vanessa, because Vanessa wasn’t a fighter like that, but Vanessa has her own powers. She doesn’t need a ninja/fencer lady.” Or we could understand Vanessa’s death as an act of free will. Show creator Logan described her death as an expression of control: “[T]he show is about empowerment, and she controls her own destiny. To me, whether you’re male, female, gay, straight, whatever – you control your destiny. You make the choices that are right for your morality and your ethics and your heart, and that’s what she does. She owns her life, and at the end of the day, she owns her death” (my emphasis, Ryan
June 20, 2016). Vanessa’s death, then, can be seen as a depressed woman giving in to darkness (suicide), martyrdom (sacrificing her life, like Joan of Arc, for her faith), or free will (freely choosing Dracula/evil as her destiny).

Let us return to why people do edgework. Sociologists explain edgework as *an escape* from the conventions of a safe and boring life, as *a rebellion* against social conventions, and as a way to create *personal transformation* and character development. It is, on the one hand, protest against over-socialization in a society which does not allow people to express their true selves, and, on the other hand, a self-development which late-modern society encourages. Drawing from Beck’s theory of the risk society and Foucault’s thinking of the “govermentality” of bodies, Lyng (2005) points to edgework as a paradox intrinsic to modern society where “the risk society and governmentality perspectives may capture two dimensions of the same social order in the late modern period. The paradox of people being both pushed and pulled to edgework practices by opposing institutional imperatives reflects complexities in the contemporary experience of risk that we are just beginning to appreciate” (10). When society is overwhelmingly organized, it leaves little space for our “I,” and edgework re-connects edgeworkers to their “I,” a self where they feel more real and, paradoxically, more in control than in their normal life.

By choosing death, Vanessa is then – if we take Logan’s words at face value – more in control of her own life than by living a “normal” life. She “owns” her death. However, in the line of my argument to see her engagement with darkness as edgework, this is not edgework because it crosses from the edge into the abyss. Arguably, I think Vanessa in her death change from being an edgeworker to becoming a martyr, and perhaps not even a martyr, since a martyr is disinterested and Vanessa has become Dracula’s bride, Mother of Evil, and Queen of darkness. Perhaps, in fact, Vanessa has become a slave to her nature; her darkness is no longer for her to battle, but to give in and fall victim to. In which case Vanessa
is, like the evil queens in fairy tales, destined to die. Or, like Mme Bovary, destined to die by her author’s hand.

**Conclusion: Choosing Death and Doing Edgework**

Playful engagement with death is expressed from the start of *Penny Dreadful* when Lyle recognizes the writings on the skin of a dead vampire as text from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. Lyle explains to Malcolm that if the Gods Amun-Ra and Amunet were joined, “Amunet would become the Mother of Evil. All light would end and the world would live in darkness,” and adds, “I would not tell Miss Ives this” (1.02). Vanessa is about to become the center of an edgework show where the mythesized nuclear family is a temptation to be rejected and a love story must be played out as tragedy. Her life journey is that of the edgeworker, reaching for the next challenge, and her self-work is that of the risk-taker.

Let us, in conclusion, step back and view edgework in a bigger perspective. Empirical studies show that leisure edgework is popular in rich Western nations and done overwhelmingly by white middle-class men. Today, five per cent of BASE jumpers and twenty per cent of skydivers are female. Laurendeau points out that “willingness to place one’s body ‘in harm’s way’ is . . . one of the central ways in which sport acts as a proving ground for masculinity” (296). Laurendeau underlines that gender is not static, but constructed in our choice of edgework and in how we perform edgework. Risk-regimes are lived as gender-regimes, and play with danger constructs risk as gendered. When men do edgework, they construct a masculinity sustained by society’s meta-narrative about gender. Edgework is a revolt, but this revolt is individualistic, independent, and requires a skilled, fit, and strong body. In short, the body of the quintessential male Western hero.

When women do edgework they, too, embody gendered risk-narratives, but without the support of the meta-narrative. Thus, when Rob Hall died in 1996 on Mount Everest he
was portrayed a hero in *Everest* and noone held against him that he left behind a pregnant wife. In contrast, when elite mountaineer Alison Hargreaves died on a climb in 1995, she was described as “an errant, unthinking mother” (Laurendeau 296). When people do edgework, they choose what edge to work and how to work it and, moreover, are viewed differently by society. So, too, with fiction characters. It is only fair to say that several characters in *Penny Dreadful* risk their lives to battle darkness, however, they embody different scripts, different emotions, and have different journeys. Ethan is cursed with lycanthropy, but not raped by the Devil, and when he cries, his are tears of love, not of traumatic pain like Vanessa’s. Joan of Arc might have sung when she burnt, but Vanessa cries when she dies. Joan and Vanessa’s fates are not parallel. Joan is triumphant and Vanessa heartbroken. Ethan becomes the hero destined to kill his beloved who has surrendered to dark forces (the story also of Wolverine and Jean in *X-Men: The Last Stand* [2006, Brett Ratner, 2006]). In fact, Ethan’s struggle is the edgework of season three’s finale, and he says, “I have stood at the very edge, I have looked into the abyss. Had I taken on one more step I would have fallen. But no matter how far I ran away from God, he was still waiting ahead” (3.09).

Vanessa’s life journey illustrates that women are ambiguously able to take the stage as protagonists in fantastic fiction, yet remain restricted by gendered tropes and scripts that limit their range of action. If Vanessa illustrates a “politics of self-expression, identity and power,” (Owen 1989 240) hers is a conflicted journey. Writing about the Victorian female medium, Alex Owen (1989) describes how women then negotiated roles as medium, female hysteric, and wife, daughter, or independent woman, the latter by far the most dangerous. “We are left with the unresolved question of what is meant by a feminist politics, and the problem of how we deal with the crucial issues of power and strategy,” Owen concludes (240). Fantastic fiction can take women beyond the limits of the natural world, however, not beyond a male author’s decision to end their lives or, from a production perspective, beyond
the rules of commercial television. If Vanessa’s edgework was too dark for a mainstream audience, she remained popular with critics and fans who protested her end. “I’m done with Showtime. I cancelled my subscription last Friday,” a fan wrote and another lamented, “you let her die in that evil. Shame on you for sure when you could have given it an other ending [sic].”

Vanessa did not manage to extend her edge so she could continue edgework, however, in afterlife she demonstrates that women, too, can work the edge. And if her creator and production company killed her, she is not their property. She belongs to us, the fans. We can use Vanessa to feel and work on our own emotions and life journeys. Thus, “Vanessa, c’est nous.”

**Bibliography**


**Notes**


4 See the introduction in Grodal, *Embodied Visions*, pp. 3-21.

5 Elsewhere, I write about horror as mental play fighting and as imaginary edgework. Schubart, *Mastering Fear*. 


The linguistic Deborah Cameron describes the meta-narrative as, “a larger framework into which research findings on male-female differences can be slotted, whether their immediate subject is the differing behavior of men and women in shopping malls or their differing rates of involvement in violent crime . . .” (353). For the meta-narrative, see Deborah Cameron, “Evolution, Language and the Battle of the Sexes: A Feminist Linguist Encounters Evolutionary Psychology,” *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 30, no. 86, 2015, pp. 351-358.


See the documentary *Sunshine Superman* (2014, Marah Strauch) about Carl Boenish. The failed jump was a repetition of a jump performed successfully the day before, where Boenish and his wife set a world record by jumping off the highest point in BASE jumping history.

Dorian is an exception, because although the character is sexualized, his escapades are not edgework. This character does not do any edgework in *Penny Dreadful*.

Female blogger and film critic Theresa DeLucci quoted in “Geek’s Guide to the Galaxy.”
