The Dark House and its Inhabitants

Emily Bielski
bielski.emily@wustl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/mfa_illustration

Part of the Fiction Commons, Graphic Design Commons, Illustration Commons, Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons, Literature in English, British Isles Commons, Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Other Film and Media Studies Commons, and the Visual Studies Commons

Recommended Citation


This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the All Graduate School of Art Theses at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in MFA in Illustration & Visual Culture by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.
the dark house and its inhabitants

by Emily Bielski
One of the most occupying fascinations of the Gothic narrative is that of the domestic space in distress. Though we avoid fear in our own lives and try keep it out from our own homes, we have long sought out the depiction of violence and family ruin through narrative fantasies. Originating in the 18th century, Gothic fiction is defined as the tradition of European Romantic fiction which invoke atmospheres of fear, dread, suspense, and mystery. This literature frequently drew from sensationalist aesthetics and settings of the medieval, with the narrative often framed in dark castles, ruins, and manors. “Medieval,” in this context, refers to the extended period between the 12th and 16th centuries in Europe, in which the style of art and architecture evolved out of preceding Romanesque traditions to form what is known as “Gothic” art—from which the body of fiction itself derives its name and trappings. Works within this category often deal in themes of violence, terror, and despair through inter- and intra-personal relationships and conflict, informed through the socially and emotionally charged or heightened settings.

The concept of “horror” has evolved in media significantly since the 18th century, in no small part due to the advent of the film industry in the 20th century. Changing cultural landscapes, technologies, aesthetics, and attitudes ushered in different subgenres and eras of horror that better reflected contemporary audiences. Indeed, the haunted castles and shivering damsels of the Gothic subgenre can seem antiquated in comparison—how could fanciful language and demure visuals possibly invoke scares in modern audiences desensitized to graphic violence? Rather than being seen as a narrative tradition that confronts specific themes and anxieties, modern understanding of the Gothic is often relegated to its aesthetics. The term is frequently and incorrectly used as synonymous to “dark and brooding”—or interchangeable with the broader term of horror—in describing a film’s atmosphere or its settings, as if the mere presence of the castle qualifies a story as Gothic.

---

A Warning from the Author

Reader discretion is advised for adult content. This book contains discussion or imagery of domestic violence, intimate partner abuse, rape, incest, homophobia, violence with bladed weapons, murder, execution by hanging, danger to children, and description of injury that may constitute as body horror.

---

The Dark House and its Inhabitants

by Emily Bielski

From the inception of the genre, Gothic horror has been fixated on the domestic space in distress. This essay explores domestic archetypes and roles of the Gothic novel, serving as a “tour of the house”, analyzing the iconography of the dark castle, and how it externalizes and exacerbates the fears and behaviors of its inhabitants. The power dynamic of the household is starkly divided by the expectations and authority of masculine and feminine figures. In turn the “house” becomes a vehicle for the anxieties of the inhabitants—both experienced and inflicted—regarding gender, sexuality, isolation, and abuse. Exploration of the visual and thematic vocabulary of the genre allows for discussion of the afterlives of the tradition, and how the scaffolding of the genre can be used to address issues of domestic abuse and gendered violence in a nuanced way.

---

However, the longevity and persistence of the genre, and the enduring afterlives of its vocabulary, make it necessary to re-examine it. Why is this still relevant—why has the Gothic form and its archetypes not only survived but evolved as long as it has? Gothic horror narratives are uniquely capable of addressing domestic instability—if horror exists as a vehicle for examining cultural anxiety. The body of the "household" still exists, and the gender expectations which were a part of the social framework of the original Gothic body have clear implications on the structure of the domestic through the 20th and 21st centuries.

The essay will serve as a tour of the house, outlining the trappings of the dark castle, and how it was built with intent to frame domestic trauma in a nuanced and heightened way. As we move through the space, we will explore how different inhabitants negotiate with gender expectations, and how their performances impact not only their role in the Gothic novel, but also the fears they experience and inflict in the story. The separate sections will additionally break down the social cultural origins of gendered archetypes and tropes, and how they can be readily and thoughtfully adapted to speak to contemporary domestic anxieties, and motivate change to address them.

Engaging the Gothic through the lens of domestic issues is not to suggest that these works are only concerned with these issues. Most of examples of Gothic fiction have dense thematic landscapes. Each piece could be subject to their own special analysis examining the intersection of many issues, including on the concepts of science, medicine, industrialization, religion, and colonialism. None of these topics exists in a vacuum—they represent the social conditions which existed at the same time and therefore intersect and inform one another. This is certainly the case in talking about modern works, or where the Gothic intermixes with other genres. However, the secondary or tertiary role of these themes in this essay's analyses should not be mistaken as a sign that they are less relevant and influential to a story.

From its inception, the symbol of the "dark castle" or "dark manor" and its trappings has been a core feature of Gothic fiction. The genre is steeped in the aesthetics and set dressing of the historic medieval, which serve as backdrops that reflect the intensity of the narratives and characters themselves. In an architectural sense, the Gothic setting takes on many forms, such houses, cottages, castles, tombs, attics, basements, and underground passages. Crucially, each are a source of a spectrum of emotional reactions, from terror and loathing through longing (hopeless and hopeful) to melting satisfaction. The genre engages with the ostentation and pageantry of ornamentation to accentuate the heightened emotion that its narratives invoke. The scale and complexity of the structures equally facilitate the dread and mystery of the Gothic—massive architectures that loom over land and figures alike, while also containing labyrinthine paths, corridors, and dark rooms, lending to feelings of isolation, confinement, and secrecy.

These structures themselves and are closely associated with concepts of power, order, and hierarchy, in that the existence of these concepts facilitated the construction and control of such grand symbols. By the same token, the common qualities of darkness, moldering ruin, and sublime mass invoke the decay of that order. The acceptable social structure or world that the characters are accustomed to has been altered or contaminated, and it manifests physically in the house. In this respect, the Gothic castle is always slightly unstable, a space which is at once overpowering and unconquerable, as well as confining and confusing. This instability provides the ground for transformation and revelation by the inhabitants within. As Valdine Clemens writes in *The Return of the Repressed: Gothic Horror from The Castle of Otranto to Alien*, dark Gothic edifices "represent descent into the unconscious, away from the socially constructed self and toward the..."
The darkness and degradation of the structure, literally and figuratively, open cracks in the foundations beneath the characters. Things that had been buried away or repressed within the walls can no longer be hidden or contained, or are actively dredged out. As Clemens describes, "moments of crisis inevitably involve a violent breaking, disruption, or transgression of boundaries: doors, walls, locked drawers, taboos drawn on speech and action, and so forth".

This concept of corruption and transformation is especially potent when considering the castle through the lens of the home. Gothic horror narratives, as discussed in the introduction, are heavily concerned with gender and family dynamics within the domestic sphere. The castle has a practical function as a home, and serves as a living vessel, as well as a witness for generational history that takes place. Understanding this, the "dark castle" moves beyond a symbol of general social decay or isolation, and comes to be dressed with the connotations of the household at whatever moment in time the story depicts. In context of the domestic conflict or agony within the Gothic genre, the setting represents the corruption of the household itself. The structure indicates wealth, protection, and longevity, which has since been inflicted by dark or violent acts within its walls which threaten the "natural" social order, or natural family unity. However, the symbol of the castle and its thematic meaning are not static, even within a single work. While the castle represents the domestic space and hierarchy, the characters themselves have unequal places in this hierarchy. The domestic space was inherently gendered during the 18th and 19th centuries, with men and women occupying separate roles and expectations within it. As such, the castle is perceived and navigated in harshly different lights by Gothic male and female characters, dependent on the level of power they have over the household, or that the household has over them.

The castle (or comparable environmental iconography) appears throughout Gothic literature, resulting in myriad examples that illustrate the interplay of character gender and status on the setting. Thornfield Hall from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) is just one of many narratives that displays shifting connotations. While, the reader is only privy to the direct perspective of Jane, through her voice as the narrator, each character's relationship to the manor is distinct. Access and movement throughout the manor, and thus through the narrative, are widely unequal between Jane, Mr. Rochester, and Bertha Mason, each occupying different levels of power.

The perceptions of the castle are distinct and dependent on the gender performance which is being demanded of a character, with its symbolic meaning shifting based on their relative control or subordination to the household. Therefore, as the roles of Gothic men and women of the household are examined individually, the castle will be revisited through eyes of the masculine and feminine.

4 Clemens, 7.
It is better, then, that the question of “What is the Gothic man afraid of?” exist inextricably with another one; “Who stands to be afraid of him?”

1. The Master of the House

Masculine Control and Madness

Through the 18th to 19th century, the home was considered a sacred space, given its function as the site of communion and education of children. It served as the moral center for the family, with female figures—in the role of wife and mother—responsible for adhering to and upholding these values. While the domestic sphere and interior spaces of the household were the responsibility of women, the male figure was not prevented from entering. Rather, while wives and mothers were expected to perform emotional and moral labor from within the home, their male counterparts (husbands, guardians, and fathers) were expected to oversee the labor within it. Their position at the top of the social hierarchy ultimately placed them in control of the household and its ongoing affairs, setting the expectations for performance inside of it. Men were seen as the masters of the household, and they were thus in control of it and defined the boundaries of it.

Although the caretaking of both male and female children fell to the mothers, they were reared under starkly dissimilar cultural expectations. Boys, as they grew into young men, entered the larger cultural area as a fully formed “self”—economically, socially, and psychologically independent and mobile. Entering their adult lives, they occupied the same role as their father and male companions did, accepted as equals and therefore competitors. The dominance, cunning, ambition that facilitated competition and social movement were perceived as positive masculine traits. Men took on the wealth and expectations of the father figure, and were meant to successfully continue the system over the household.

However, when the household is built inside of the horror narrative, it is unstable. The Gothic is so deeply concerned with the domestic space because it is concerned with the fears of those inside. The question of “What is the Gothic man afraid of?” is distinct from his “subordinates”, those under his control in the social hierarchy—fear over social change and disruption to cultural status, or desire for more control at all costs. The instinct to protect or regain control, to reject something that is alien, results in drastic and violent actions that, from the masculine perspective, are justified and unavoidable. When characters are presented with the heightened reality within Gothic narratives, engaging with the repugnant “unnatural” or supernatural is a necessary evil in order to dispel it. But the conflict here goes beyond good versus evil. The motivation of the Gothic hero in these instances is never truly selfless, even when impertinent women and children are invoked as innocent victims that need to be protected. The house is not only subordinate to the male owner, but it is sympathetic to him—he is able to shape it to his will and for his needs. When darkness or “unnatural” elements manifest in the castle, they corrupt not only his dominion, but his “possessions”—the inhabitants of the household that he possesses. Victimized women and children are not only human casualties, but objects in his control which the masculine figure stands to lose. The restoration of order and the status quo from evil back into good fundamentally means the restoration of an order which itself is unequal—in which he is on top. The masculine figure in power, after all, is the one who gets to define what is “good” and what is justified.

The endings of Gothic stories, of course, are rarely so triumphant, rarely so black-and-white. That is to say: it is often the Gothic masculine figures themselves causing disruption to the order, and for their own ends, at the expense of those beneath him. This is where the line between hero and villain is severely blurred. If Gothic men answer to the instinct to maintain social power, and order over the household, so too do they give into to baser instincts to obtain more power or pleasure, or oppress those that “threaten”

6 Sally Allen McNall, “Who is in the House? A Psychological Study of Two Centuries of Women’s Fiction in America, 1795 to the Present” (Shelter Science Publishing Co., Inc. 1982) 34-55.

7 McNall, 28.
The Dark House and its Inhabitants

of Usher

9

of Usher, a short story by American writer Edgar Allan Poe (1839). Recluse Roderick Usher is directly linked to the fate of his manor. He believes that his survival (and implicitly that of his family and bloodline) is connected to the house, which he believes to be a living entity. This connection gestures to the corruption that Roderick brings on to himself. As the narrator's visit to the house, a large crack in the roof is already present, and during the course of his visit the haunting and decay of the house becomes more and more pronounced. It is this decay of the house itself then collapses, having been corrupted entirely by the masculine figure who controls it.

While his machinations and movement in the house are motivated by the attempt to extinguish the omen of his own existence, he is in reality make her a mistress, and corrupt Jane's virtue. The corruption is already present, rotted from his own actions. Rape and assault, or the threat of it, is commonplace in the genre. Sexual violence is not explicitly stated or described, the anger and domination that men exhibit in the confined and intimate spaces of the "manor" towards their female subordinates, or in company of them, gestures towards a constant sexual danger. Men hold total power over the household; women are entirely unable to leave, and dependent on them for safety—there nothing to stop their own wants or instincts. Rape or corruption, or the threat of it, is commonplace in the genre. Alternatively, even when women do not experience direct sexual violence, they often hear the violent consequences of masculine conflict. They suffer bodily or psychological harm, torture, or death, frequently at the hands of men trying to emasculate or disempower another.

It is here we arrive at the topic which lurks beneath the surface in the genre. Gothic narratives as much as it does this essay itself—that of sexual violence, and romantic abuse. The prevalence of this theme in the genre is not only unsurprising, it is almost inevitable for narratives which pit masculine and feminine gender fears and powers against one another. Even in instances where sexual violence is not explicitly stated or described, the anger and domination that men exhibit in the confined and intimate spaces of the "manor" towards their female subordinates, or in company of them, gestures towards a constant sexual danger. Men hold total power over the household; women are entirely unable to leave, and dependent on them for safety—there nothing to stop their own wants or instincts. Rape or assault, or the threat of it, is commonplace in the genre. Alternatively, even when women do not experience direct sexual violence, they often hear the violent consequences of masculine conflict. They suffer bodily or psychological harm, torture, or death, frequently at the hands of men trying to emasculate or disempower another.


10 Brontë, 465.
A good rule of thumb is that if Satan himself finds you morally reprehensible… it is a good indication that you have done, to use a colloquialism, some pretty sick shit.

—Wyatt Holliday, “Incest in the Gothic Novel”

It is impossible to discuss Gothic fiction through the lens of the domestic instability and violent masculine sexuality without addressing the prevalence of incest in the genre. Attempted and near-marriages or assaults of women by their uncles, brothers, or their father-in-law, are routine. This danger represents the furthest extent of sexual subordination to which Gothic women and girls are subjected to. Unbalanced power dynamics in the household render them as objects to male abusers who are both responsible for placing them in danger as well as freeing them from it. They often become unwilling participants or volunteers in incestuous matches or assaults, and usually unable to escape them on their own without outside intervention by male figures, or death itself.

The Castle of Otranto by Horace Walpole (1764)11, often regarded as the first real Gothic novel, sets the precedent for the threat of incest in the body of work. The story begins when Lord Manfred sees an omen which foretells the annihilation of his family and the loss of his castle immediately following the death of his sickly son. Desperate to preserve his bloodline and name at all costs, he takes possession of the princess Isabella, who was meant to marry his own son. The threat of having to marry and sexually apprise to her own father-in-law disgusts her and others. The pursuit of this depraved behavior ultimately leads to his and his family’s own destruction.

Similarly, in Matthew Gregory Lewis’ The Monk (1796)12, the monk Ambrasio descends from virtue into depravity. Ambrosio’s indulgence of his base instincts through demonic influence destabilize the religious “house,” leading to (among other crimes) his rape and murder of his sister Antonia multiple times (through resurrection, in and of itself affront to Godly and natural order). The horror of the incestuous rape is restated a final time at the end of the novel by Satan himself. Author Wyatt Holliday put it best in saying “A good rule of thumb is that if Satan finds you morally reprehensible… it is a good indication that you have done, to use a colloquialism, some pretty sick shit.”13

Incest is used as a tool of domination and control over women as objects in order to maintain masculine power. If the intent of horror is to disturb audiences, then the inclusion of such an egregious taboo is understandable. The intense preoccupation of Gothic literature with the family and domestic tension lays the perfect groundwork for this trope to be applied. However, we can look at it more broadly as cultural fear over the “corrupted” family unit and taboos against the family. It signals the near total desecration of acceptable and normal domestic functions. Corrupting and unstable conditions within or outside of the house are illustrated through the extraordinary transgression. Additionally, as these relationships are nearly always enforced through violence, incestuous acts manifest the total descent of the Gothic hero or villain into depravity. The masculine figure of power has been entirely polluted, his identity permanently and completely fragmented in a world of cruelty and terror.14

Regardless of the moral or social standing of the male protagonist, they are always at risk of becoming a harmful force. Gothic men hold the safety of the women around them in their hands, and they often do so loosely. Their irresponsibility with it may lead to their own damnation or destruction, but not before gross harm is done to everyone around them. It is better, then, that the question of “What is the Gothic man afraid of?” exist inextricably with another one; “Who stands to be afraid of him?”

The image of the monstrous castle is made all the more unsettling to the viewer, in knowing that the woman has no choice but to enter the space before her—and that there will be no way out.

2. The Angel in the House, the Damsel

Feminine Isolation and Powerlessness

Fundamentally, the woman’s role in the classic Gothic narrative is that of a victim. The emphasis on virtue and their isolation from the masculine power structure ultimately define the strict roles of the female character in the Gothic tradition. Culturally, women were defined through their relationships and expectations to men, first to their fathers as obedient daughters, and then to their husbands as obedient wives and mothers. Gothic women are subordinate in the household itself; expected to be kept within the home, to maintain the home, but truly having no power over it. In truth, they are crushed beneath the weight of it.

Feminine Gothic figures are inescapably terrorized by the walls of the domestic space, because their role in society has been formed adjacent to it. They are expected to maintain the household, and embody the “good” mother—one who performs the emotional labor for both their children and their husbands. They have no other social opportunity to establish their own value. The castle, the home, is thus transformed into a symbol of domestic anxiety and entrapment. Women are antagonized by the shadows and forces within the estate that keep them there or endanger them, but powerless to fight back against the violent elements within it. Little wonder, then, that the feminine horror narratives of the genre inevitably revolve around matrimony and the marriage bed.

Returning to Brontë, we can see the starkly different experience navigating the household from Jane’s perspective. Jane becomes caretaker for Rochester’s young ward, and oversees the home and nurtures the virtue and innocence of the child within it, acting as a replacement “mother” and educator. Despite this, she is utterly subordinate to the household as an employer and commoner underneath Rochester’s wealth. Parts of the house are off limits, unavailable, and throughout the novel, her life and future are endangered by the secrets that are kept out of sight. She is a stranger to a house that is already full of violent domestic history before her arrival, but as an unmarried and working-class woman, she is dependent entirely on it. Her escape from Thornfield in order to maintain her virtue and values, to escape from Rochester’s unnatural actions, results immediately in destitution and near-death.

Similarly, Charlotte Perkin Gilman’s short story The Yellow Wallpaper, published in 1892, presents the house as an entrapping and antagonistic force, but with radically different consequences. The narrator is confined to an attic room while she recovers from “nerves” after giving birth, perceived as hysteria but what would now be understood as postpartum depression and psychosis. She is submissive to her husband, disempowered as woman, but doubly so because she is perceived as unable to perform her role as a wife and mother. She is tormented by the anxiety of being a burden, but also by having no power to free herself of her own situation. In her confinement and infantilization, all enriching parts of her life and autonomy are taken away, and she is left to wish the walls of the bedroom—the prison of the house.

15 Brontë.
Domestic Violence and Sexual Abuse

The threat or act of sexual abuse or assault, facilitated by the established social order which dominates and disempowers women, is the culmination of sexual and domestic anxiety by Gothic women. The virtue and submissiveness applied to feminine figures expose them to these violations and render them entirely powerless to prevent them. Here too is the manifestation of uncontrolled masculine power, and the descent of the Gothic antihero and villain towards desire.

The presentation of sex and sensuality in the Gothic is deeply unromantic and uneasy, even in instances where "normal" romantic relationships occur. They are preceded or stalked by the threat of disturbed sexual order; the trauma lingers. In the Gothic formula romance horror pulps of the 1960s, even as the novels inevitably lead to the heroine's happily ever after in her lover's arms, it is only achieved after having to survive the sexual threat and unsafe domestic environment of the dark castle. The suffering and threat to the woman has to occur and be endured before their satisfaction and safety is achieved.
The dark castle is both a bystander and active participant in acts of sexual violence against women in the Gothic narrative. It is a container inside of which these acts occur, hidden away in its many passages or rooms. It holds not only the instances but the echoes of the actions, the extended or generational traumas of abuse. The violence within the walls of the home corrupt it as a haven of virtue and safety which it is meant to harbor. At the same time, the house is an unwarranting boundary for the female victims, who have no choice but to exist and endure the domestic space due to their cultural expectations. They cannot escape the masculine threat of violence, nor can they escape the prison of the “household” of which men have power and control over. The house is ultimately a tool of the aggressor as much as it is a witness to his atrocities.

The prison-like quality of the house not only extends even after the death of a victim, but in fact worsens. The actions of the past don’t disappear or rest; the walls literally talk. Restless spirits and apparitions return to the household and become tormenting figures for new inhabitants, warning of the atrocities that occurred and may occur again. William Patrick Day’s ruminations on the self-destruction and doom of the Gothic protagonist are pertinent to these feminine shadow figures: “In the Gothic fantasy death is neither an escape nor a door through which one can pass to achieve a final humanity. In death, the protagonist becomes, not simply a victim, but fully a part of what tormented him.”

In Henry James’s novella The Turn of the Screw, serialized in 1898, the governess is disturbed by spectral visions of her deceased predecessor Miss Jessel and the lecherous groundskeeper Peter Quint. It is reluctantly revealed to her that Miss Jessel was in a violent relationship with Quint, and was subject to verbal, physical, and sexual abuse, leading to her eventual obsessive mental disorder and suicide after his death. The spirit of Miss Jessel remains in the confines of the house, but even then, is subordinate to the figure of Quint, whose apparition threatens and dominates the new governess and children even after death.

The 1961 film adaptation of novella, The Innocents (dir. Jack Clayton), not only reenacts the themes of domestic violence as illuminated in James’ prose but expands on them. The film includes a direct verbal reference to rape not included in the original work. The governess confronts housekeeper Mrs. Grose on Jessel and Quint’s previous roles in the household and their demise, which has been unaddressed by staff. When pressed on the true extent of Quint’s behavior towards Miss Jessel, Mrs. Grose finally, painfully, admits to her the phrase, “Rooms... used by daylight... as through they were dark woods.” It communicates brilliantly the depravity of sexual violence, and the trauma which Miss Jessel endured, without being exploitative of women’s suffering by displaying the violence inflicted on her body.

While women are victimized, these examples demonstrate how the genre materializes and legitimizes their domestic fears. The interior spaces and houses in Gothic narratives are consuming, trapping, sickly entities—externalizing their anxieties and giving them weight. It acknowledges, where the public conscious would not, that the household is not just an idealized arena of the family that women can idly and easily adapt to. It is hostile, and Gothic narratives presents it as a confining force whose conditions actively endanger women, or facilitate actions that threaten them.

17 Henry James, “The Turn of the Screw” (Collier’s Weekly, January 27 – April 16, 1898).
Nearly all scholarly discussion of the Gothic genre make a clear distinction between masculine and feminine identities and traits, and how they separately shape the behavior and transformation of male versus female characters within the narrative. Certainly, the historical conceptions of gender within 18th century Western culture informed the original narratives of the Gothic genre. Subsequently, the conventions of the genre that were birthed by these works are imbued with gender polarizations that, on its surface, could suggest that the tradition of Gothic fiction is rigidly binary. However, anxiety about deviating gender identity and androgyny underpins much of the historical canon. Expression of gender and sex that contradicted accepted cultural roles and expectations inherently threatened the system of power and hierarchy in the 18th century. However, the unbalancing of domestic power can be caused by outside forces as well: “othered” monstrous forms which are corrupting agents.

We have previously referenced instances of spirits and apparitions, as well as figures deformed and disturbed, which function as “monstrous” forms in their narratives, and manifest the fears of residents of the house. But the horror genre notably unleashes literal monsters in their narratives, and the supernatural and heightened fantasy elements that they introduce provide unique metaphoric opportunities for authors. Many monster archetypes have appeared in this body of literature, each of which has its own history and social meanings, and is rooted in folklore. Here, it will suffice to look at how vampires function in Gothic narratives, and what they represent to the social order.

While myths of vampires and vampiric creatures predate the 1700s and speak to a multitude of more primal fears (predation, body horror and injury, fear of the undead, etc), the modern vampire figure is derived from Gothic literature.21 The concept of corpses returning to life in an inhuman condition innately contradicts the natural order. Additionally, the act of drinking blood, and consuming the body, is both taboo and extremely intimate. Consequently, Gothic vampires frequently appear with culturally unthinkable, “unacceptable” androgynous and sexualized characteristics to elevate this “unnaturalness”.

Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897) sets the standard for this depiction. The primary vampire characters “defy classification as male or female; they uncannily inhabit the human body and render supposed genital differences between man and woman null and void”22. Both display penetrating teeth that enter and possess both men and women. They commit the same sexualized, inserting acts through their feminine “red” mouths, it itself paradoxically a yonic image. Mina, damsel fiancé of the protagonist Johnathan Harker, later being forced to drink from Dracula’s wound invokes the same sexual deviation.

Beyond appearance, Dracula’s behavior and existence interrupts the ability to act out accepted gender roles. Protagonist Johnathan Harker is trapped within the castle—within the Gothic house—and under constant threat of turning and possession by the male Dracula, imbuing him with the same powerlessness and vulnerability as Gothic heroines. The defining characteristic of the masculine “hero”, the ability to act and effect narrative, is taken away. The monstrous vampiric form becomes a vehicle for sexual limbo. The vampire interrupts heterosexuality by being utterly at odds with social order—its existence tangles the rigid delineations of masculine and feminine. Even after rescue and assisting the group of vampire hunters, Harker’s masculine ego remains haunted by the warping of sexual norms until Dracula is killed; as Cyndy Hendershot states, “The destruction of Dracula apparently restores stable gender/sex distinctions and makes heterosexuality possible again”.

Dracula is considered the most seminal piece of vampire fiction in any form, any genre, the name almost synonymous with the term vampire itself. Subsequent iterations of vampires inherited Dracula’s characteristics, carrying attributes freighted with gender role anxiety through decades and decades of media. However, it is important to note that the form of the “monster” hasn’t exclusively cast fluctuating gender and sexuality as negative or hostile. While Dracula is the most recognizable vampire story in popular culture, it is predated by the novella Carmilla (1872) written by Sheridan Le Fanu, by 26 years. The novella follows the titular vampire Carmilla, who is a lesbian, and the woman whom she is in love with, Laura. Significantly, the work does not antagonize homosexuality outright. Laura is initially confused but not repulsed by Carmilla’s advances, feeling a deep bond and openness to her affections that extends through many years. This bond is destroyed by intervening male characters, who are disgusted by the vampire’s existence and the “corruption” of Laura from being pure, passive daughter. Implicitly, they are disgusted not with the vampirism alone but with the homosexuality which flies in the face of social norms. Ultimately, Carmilla is staked, beheaded, burned, and discarded in a river. As in Dracula, heterosexuality has been restored, but the return to normalcy is troubled and unsteady. Laura recalls her ordeal with “trembling hands,” encounters with Carmilla during which her “passions” were “most wildly and terribly aroused.”

William Patrick Day writes that “Carmilla is not an image of the evils of sexuality in women or the dangers of lesbianism, but rather an expression of the form that active, assertive feminine sexuality would have to take in a patriarchal society. Carmilla’s tragedy is not that she is a vampire or a lesbian, but that her society has defined her sexuality as monstrous.” Here, the vampire archetype demonstrates powerfully how Gothic literature has a legacy of engaging with sexuality outside of the cultural mainstream, as well as using horror as a means of challenging the domestic landscape.
Feminine Shadow Figures and their Warnings

Carmilla serves as an excellent gateway into the topic of feminine shadow figures in the Gothic. These characters form multitude of archetypes that are dark sisters to the Gothic heroine—women who exist and act on the outside of social norms and acceptability. On a basic level, the antonym of the virtuous damsel is the “bad woman,” who fails to enact the goodness and service expected of women and girls. She faces the same dangers as the heroine, but succumbs to them, with no ultimate rescue unless she undergoes spiritual redemption. At its core, “badness” relates to her inability or refusal to adhere to gender and sexuality norms, which threatens the accepted power structure.

Shadow figures can act as a warning on multiple levels. Women’s Gothic and romantic fiction throughout the 18th and 19th century frequently featured the threat of destitution, abandonment, insanity, moral corrosion, and even death for those who strayed from the good path. This appeal to virtue is thus imparted on readership. But I would argue that the appearance the shadow figures function not only as warnings against impropriety, but as vessels that reveal corruption on the underside of the established social order. For the “madwoman in the attic” or the “woman in black” to exist, something must be going wrong, something in the house must be destabilized. They are seen as dangerous not only because they are not controlled by social conventions, but because they threaten to influence feminine characters of the establishment by revealing the danger and violence inherent to that establishment that victimizes them.

Bertha Mason, as mentioned before, is a prime example of the “othered” woman. She is, in fact, from whom the term “madwoman in the attic” originated. She is Mr. Rochester’s mentally ill wife, who is locked in the attic of Thornfield and who increasingly escapes her confines to cause hauntings and disorder. Bertha is dehumanized, seen by Jane with a ghoulish and frightening appearance and wild eyes. Upon her reveal to the outside world, Rochester refers to her a thing rather than a person.

However, Bertha’s appearance is ultimately an omen to Jane, rather than an antagonist. While she does frighten Jane, Jane is never truly in danger—in their only direct confrontation, Bertha appears to Jane before her wedding day and tears her bridal veil apart as a warning to the danger she is in. They are echoes of one another in the narrative, both sexual subordinates to Rochester as romantic partners. Bertha is, notably, a victim of abuse and isolation by Rochester’s hand. Bertha is a threat, but only to her husband. She is an antagonizing force to Rochester, because she undermines his authority and control of the household, culminating in...

26 McNall, 51.

For the heroine, the experience of confronting a shadow figure, their dark sister, irrevocably alters their perspective on the household that they both walk.

Jane’s rejection, and then his near-death in the burning of Thornfield.

Be it Miss Jessel in The Turn of the Screw, Madeline in The Fall of the House of Usher, the woman behind the paper in The Yellow Wallpaper: the appearance of the unnatural figure is brought on by histories of violence within the homes they manifest. For a figure to be haunting a house, something within the house had to harm or violate them. The othered women of the Gothic are more complex than merely being manifestations of “evil”, because at their core, they are both perpetrators of violence and danger and victims of it. They are products of systems of power and oppression which victimized them and led to their corruption. The house itself is a masculinist symbol of power that they are at the mercy of. The figures are a manifestation of the heroine’s repression and anxiety, and illuminate cracks in the foundation of the domestic space. For the heroine, the experience of confronting a shadow figure, their dark sister, irrevocably alters their perspective on the household that they both walk. Even when the othered figure is vanquished or disposed of, removing the threat to gender norms and behavior, the power structure cannot return to its previous state. The trauma or abuse which created the shadow figure have been revealed.

Interrogations of gender expectations and heteronormative ideals are becoming more commonplace in current popular culture, but discussions of these topics in fiction (specifically through the lens of horror) are not new. I believe it is important to understand the thematic history of “monstrous” Gothic visuals because they are reiterated and invoked so frequently in horror media. If we do so unthinkingly, we risk reanimating the elements of them that are harmful—ones which position deviation from the gender norm as demonic or grotesque. On the other hand, Gothic narratives and visuals are uniquely positioned to address gender and sex anxiety in a nuanced way as they already have established visual vocabularies imbued with these themes. Similar to the monstrous features imbued in the dark castle or household, the monstrous bodies that inhabit it can be used as metaphor for social disruption and repression.
Expanding the Estate

The enduring nature of the horror genre begs the discussion of the actual width of the word “Gothic”: what works are actually considered a part of the tradition? This research has referenced works both historical and contemporary, an act which in and of itself could be considered controversial.

In his comprehensive 1985 novel studying of the thematic systems of the Gothic, In the Circles of Fear and Desire: A Study of Gothic Fantasy, William Patrick Day argues that to label a piece of work as part of the true Gothic tradition, it should be fundamentally adhere to the formulas defined by the original canon of works. Day outlines the Gothic as having strict conventions by which authors became a part of by strictly observing and contributing to. Under these guidelines, he separates out many works which bear only “cousinly” affinity to the Gothic, which take liberties from the formulas of the strict historical canon of works. Day writes “Elements in these books certainly indicate the progressive infusion of the Gothic sensibility into the mainstream, but though these texts are doubtless important for the diffusion of the style throughout the culture, they do not belong in the genre itself—they use the tradition, but they are not of it.” 28 While he singles out works such as the Brontë’s Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights, as well as Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, such guidelines exclude an expanse of literature and films that have descended from Gothic horror sensibilities. This represents a traditionalist view of the genre, that curates the included body of work closely to the sensibilities of its origins. Certainly, the word is misused in popular culture and the public conscious when it is treated as synonymous to the general term “horror”. Day excludes tangential literature from his research under the belief that liberal deviation from the formulas which built the identity of the Gothic originally, that which made it so distinct, waters down the clarity and potency of the form.

However, I believe this viewpoint is far too limiting, and is detrimentally exclusive to the longevity of the genre. Day himself argues that “Gothic fantasy is an escape, not only from conventional ideals, but from the realistic novel’s way of dealing with and resolving conflicts of those ideals”, 29 that the nature of horror as separate and heightened from reality opens the door for exploring readers personal “disordered and fragmented” fear and identities. The Gothic allowed for an exploration of 18th and 19th century anxieties which could not be expressly openly in the public conscious. The very archetypes of the repugnant Gothic male hero and the repressed and powerless heroine were constructed as a response to those specific conventions. Contemporary works that borrow from the tradition, transmute it into other genres, or subvert its patterns, don’t do so out of misunderstanding—exactly the opposite. Artists, authors, and filmmakers of these “cousinly” works are rather evolving the genre to address the fears and anxieties of a changing audience. Tension over gender and sexuality, over the domestic landscape, are still deeply entrenched in the public mind, but the culture dealing with it has fundamentally changed. For Gothic works to so rigidly adhere to principles of the historic canon, they will eventually be articulating social fears in a way which is no longer relevant or potent to the audience.

In that same vein, the principles and archetypes of the Gothic were defined nearly 300 years ago by a relatively limited sect of individuals who were shaped by their social boundaries. A majority of these were white, British or European men. If scholars such as Day are to argue that deviation from traditional character conventions—such as that female heroines are paralyzed to inaction by victimhood and
virtue, referenced specifically by Day as a qualifier—precludes a work from being considered truly Gothic, then that would require female writers to adhere to limiting and outdated prototypes. It also disregards the work of the many female authors who produced literature for a feminine perspective, from the Brontë sisters to pulp horror romance authors of the 20th century. Orientalism and “danger” of Eastern values is frequently employed in traditional Gothic works as a threat to the British virtuous and dominant masculinity of the protagonists, and imperialistic might of Europe. Clearly, these speak to the attitudes and apprehensions of the audience and time which they were written.

I argue that the most important aspect of the Gothic is the act of addressing the fears of the audience that are repressed. There are certain thematic elements which are fundamental to the genre (gender roles, the family, sexuality, etc.), and these topics still weigh heavily on the public and private conscious. But it is necessary to let the genre evolve in order for it to survive, which it has been doing fruitfully for this very reason. Valdine Clemens points out that the unique power of the Gothic and of horror is its ability to transmute with other genres—science-fiction, romance, noir, westerns—to articulate the way in which gender polarizations and repressed domestic fears inform and infect all aspects of life.

The longevity and return of horror fiction in the literary body notably occurs at periods of social unrest, change, or cultural decline. Clemens refers to public “crisis periods” England in the late 18th, as well as early and late 19th century, as well as America in the late 20th; she quotes Jack Sullivan in suggesting “when things appear to be falling apart, [and] supernatural horror stories provide their authors and readers a masochistic, but relatively safe means of fantasising their worst fears”.

The separation of the “traditional” Gothic to literature and media which descends from its conception, providing a pathway to confront taboos and anxieties that would otherwise go unaddressed. But this violence—rape, sexual trauma, destructive masculine power, generational trauma—is addressed without lustrating in its depiction. Because these themes agitate the domestic structure, and were culturally unacceptable to address and show in realism fiction or publicly, authors and artists had to create systems of visual language, prose, and metaphor to gesture obliquely to them.

This is especially relevant now in a moment where the public is increasingly inundated by, and desensitized to, violent imagery. There are truly no guardrails on what can be shown or described in writing, film, and television, and this has led to acts such as graphic assault, abuse, and rape to be shown bluntly and in their entirety directly to the audience. While intended to shock or establish “severity” in a mature story, this strategy heavily blurs the line between depicting these themes as horror and fetishizing them, under the veneer of a more liberal and open culture. Women and children’s bodies taking abuse on screen become objects of the viewer’s gaze. The gratuitous depiction risks reconstituting and sensationalizing the trauma it takes advantage of. Gothic horror has the visual and narrative scaffolding to address these topics respectfully, but also severely. Rather than pulling the violence forward and forcing it in front of viewer, the genre systematically gestures into a dark room and invites the audience to look in, to face it on their own terms and confront its implications.

There is both catharsis and agitation—horror is a stage in which to express the repressed, confront it and articulate it for what it is, but also give it this room to speak and address the audience. Inheriting the conventions and precedents of the genre means we have a nuanced structure in which to interrogate very serious cultural traumas and violence. It also means we have a responsibility to understand it, that we might best maintain, preserve, and rebuild it. Perhaps the implementation or blending of Gothic features into contemporary or subversive works shouldn’t be considered stripping the resources out of the genre. Rather, they are additions to the house—renovations and embellishments to old rooms, as well as new extensions and wings. It is an old house, and it isn’t going anywhere, only becoming more complex, more visited, more inhabited.

30 Hendershot, 156.
31 Clemens, 6.
Bibliography


Eyre, Marie. *Blackable Inn*. Pocket, January 1, 1971


LaPoint, Diane. *Flames Over the Castle*. Ace Gothic, 1973


This book was created at Washington University in St. Louis, in the MFA Illustration and Visual Culture program in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, in the spring of 2023.

The body and title text is set in Adobe Garamond Pro, designed in house by Adobe.

The book was designed and typeset by Emily Bielski based on a page design by Ben Kiel. Text editing by D.B. Dowd, John Hendrix, and Heidi Kolk. Production and binding was completed by Advertisers Printing, St. Louis, Missouri. This book is printed on Cougar and 100lb text.