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## Flipping the Castle: Evolution of Gothic Spaces in the Domestic Sphere

Kate Lucas

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FLIPPING THE CASTLE:  
EVOLUTION OF GOTHIC SPACES IN THE DOMESTIC SPHERE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from  
The College of William and Mary

by

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## Introduction: A Brief History of the Gothic

“The pendulum just isn’t the same without the pit.”  
– Dale Bailey, *American Nightmares*

From the first, the Gothic has been a literary genre with deep roots in historical reality—despite its fantastical, melodramatic, and even terrifying ways of expressing it—and its social function has been to either enforce this reality, or more often, to threaten it. This study is based on the interaction between societal domestic structures and the Gothic’s own iconic domestic settings over a period of three centuries. I hope to provide an explanation of how the British Gothic castle evolved into the houses and cabins that haunt contemporary American media; how the structure of the Gothic family was influenced by the pressures of strict Victorian values; how female characters came to endure the never-ending cycle of sexual repression, transgression, and punishment in formulaic horror films; and generally, how the conventions of this genre, particularly those which concern the home, have shaped and been shaped by their historical contexts.

It was a dark and stormy night in the year 410 A.D., and the ancient Goths were engaged in the sacking of Rome, unaware that they were setting the scene for the birth of a literary genre. The Goths were a Germanic tribe that occupied southern Europe from Italy to Spain—coincidentally including many of the faraway regions where British Gothic novels would later be set. In his introduction to *The Castle of Otranto*, Nick Groom notes that “the Goths’ perceived role in history was primarily one of destruction: they were responsible for the collapse of the Roman Empire” (x-xi). The Goths became symbolic of anything un- or even anti-Roman, and “Gothic” art and architecture was perceived as crude, lacking the cultural refinement of the Roman Empire. As the Renaissance’s revival of all things classical swept through Britain, older styles of architecture that did not fall into that category were regarded as Gothic and therefore uncivilized, their detractors connecting them with the structures put up to

replace the ancient buildings destroyed by the Goths (xi). It wasn't until the early 17<sup>th</sup> century that Britain realized just how misunderstood these "barbarians" really were. It was true that they had destroyed many ancient Roman edifices, but they had also vanquished hundreds of years of Roman oppression; it was then that the word "Gothic" was transformed from a signifier of vulgarity to one of liberation and rebellion against tyranny.

Whatever its associations, the Gothic endured most in the popular imagination as an architectural style, one which is well reflected in the castles and monasteries of its literature. Medieval-looking flying buttresses, ribbed vaulting, and lancet arches began to show up in Europe around the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and even while other countries began to prefer Renaissance architecture, the English, reflective of their changing views of their political ancestors—the Goths, after all, were kin to the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes—kept building Gothic structures for four more centuries (Hughes 120). The modern Protestant British identity saw Gothic architecture as a testament to freedom without democracy, and it was generally preferred over the classical and Renaissance structures associated with Roman Catholicism (5). But the Gothic had less pleasant connotations as well, namely the legacy of Norman feudalism in Britain. In the 1770s, just when Britain was finding its national identity, Gothic and Saxon separated in meaning, and Gothic architecture became foreign once again (Chiu 4). Those grand castles and abbeys came to represent the lasting negative influence of 11<sup>th</sup> century Norman feudal militarism on Britain, a reminder of a rigid social hierarchy enforced by a corrupt church and a power-hungry (and foreign) aristocracy. Therefore, in Gothic literature, when the owner of one such abode identifies himself with it as the symbol of his ruling/religious/familial power, it is often the surest signifier of a villain. Gothic heroes and heroines tend to live much more simply, and the reason for this can be summed up in radical orator John Thelwall's

“The Rights of Nature,” written in the mid 1790s: “Contrast the gloomy intricacy of these oppressive systems—these antique temples of fraud and violence, with the simple plans of reason, and of nature” (qtd. in Chiu 20). By the time the first Gothic novel was penned, the complexity of Gothic architecture, once so admired by the British, had come to symbolize the legacy of a malevolent system that would haunt the country forever.

There are a handful of possible sources from which the style and conventions of Gothic literature could have emerged. Although the Gothic precedes the start of the Romantic era of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the latter had a heavy influence on the former, and this influence was what allowed the Gothic to persist (Hughes 216). It’s also suggested that the Gothic novel might find its roots in the revenge fantasies of British Jacobean tragedy, which were popular in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (6), or the early 18<sup>th</sup> century poetry tradition of the Graveyard School, which reveled in the trappings of death in much the same way as the Gothic (7). The sinister subject matter of the Gothic predates all of its possible literary predecessors; witches, werewolves, vampires, and ghouls have haunted our villages since the Middle Ages. During the Renaissance, widespread belief in the supernatural birthed magicians and alchemists. From ancient Roman ghost stories to Elizabethan drama, there have always been ghosts and monsters in Europe, but the Gothic certainly gave them a suitable home: lavish castles of old, dark and isolated, full of twisting corridors and well-kept family secrets, where tyrannical noblemen chased long-suffering heroines through subterranean tunnels, to the dismay of their humble heroes-in-disguise. In his chronicle of the history of horror fiction, “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” H. P. Lovecraft remarks that the Gothic’s various tropes reappear “with amusing sameness, yet sometimes with tremendous effect” (9); though its technique has become subtler over time, the genre’s greatest power has always lain in its ability to adapt thematically to new historical contexts, even if that meant its terror faded as

quickly as the times changed. Valdine Clemens remarks upon this tendency in her 1999 book, *The Return of the Repressed: Gothic Horror from The Castle of Otranto to Alien*:

The historical specificity of Gothic tales helps to explain why their power to shock readers tends to weaken over time, despite the evident consistency in narrative movement and in certain recurring images and themes. What is dreadful to one generation of Gothic readers does not remain dreadful to the next, because there is a continual historical alteration in the precise characteristics of what is being repressed. (6)

In other words, Gothic novels are expository, subversive, and critical at their hearts, and provide what Clemens refers to as a “cultural self-analysis” (6-7) for readers, but they are still very much products of their time.

In the first section of my discussion of the Gothic as it pertains to the domestic sphere, I will explore eighteenth-century British marriage laws, as well as the “Gothic Policy” of resistance to arbitrary power. I will also discuss the popularization of a Gothic counterculture—notably favored by Horace Walpole, who built himself a medievalist Gothic estate, in which he wrote *The Castle of Otranto*, generally considered to be the first Gothic novel, in 1764. As the tipping point where popular narratives began to spiral beyond romantic melancholy into an obsession with death and the macabre, *The Castle of Otranto* is a critical example of how the domestic structures of 18<sup>th</sup> century British Gothic literature reflect aristocratic male anxieties about lineage, power, and right to rule. On the other side of the coin, the women fleeing rape and imprisonment within these domestic structures spoke to a general dissatisfaction and frustration with the female condition, although eighteenth-century domestic values always seem to reign supreme in the end. At the very least, this story and others like it indicated to its initial readers that the protective sphere of domesticity wasn’t always as



safe and pure as it was believed to have been (Clemens 41), particularly for women, whose sense of sense of security in the home could still be easily violated. And if the moral realm of the home wasn't all it was made out to be, what else could possibly compensate for women's lack of freedom and independence outside of domestic life? In the 1790s, women began to read and write Gothic novels in such great numbers that it provoked deep-seated cultural fears about shifting gender roles (41). Gothic authors such as Ann Radcliffe wrote works about the dangers of unchecked male aggression; about the ticking time bomb of repressed female energies; and asked why the societal systems they so depended on always privileged the perceived masculine values of reason and potency over the feminine ones of sympathy and feeling (12-13). It was around this time that the Female Gothic developed, further questioning the dominant social values of the time and all but abandoning supernatural horror in favor of vilifying mortal men and their cruel devices (Hughes 9). Meanwhile, the Gothic began to spread beyond the national borders of its homeland.

As the Gothic entered the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its influence spread throughout the rest of Europe and other parts of the world, but nowhere has it had a more powerful effect on literature than in America, at the time a developing nation with a strong memory of colonialism, haunted by European ideology the way England had once been by its Norman invaders. William Hughes describes the Gothic's ready-made synthesis with its American setting in his *Historical Dictionary of Gothic Literature*: "Certainly, if British Gothic preoccupied itself with religious sectarianism and a fear of Continental European incursion, its American counterpart was shot through with an equally uneasy relationship to races and nations perceived as Other" (Hughes 10). American Gothic took readers into the wild frontiers of a new nation, its supernatural atrocities taking place before a background of inherited European folklore, witchcraft, the adversarial

God of Puritanism, and hostilities with Indigenous and slave populations (Lovecraft 30). While the traditional Gothic school was experiencing a decline in the mid 1800s, readers began to take interest in spiritualism and pseudoscience, and weird tales of mediumism, theosophy, and other strange psychic phenomena began to take shape (18). In the same vein, the villains of these stories were no longer tyrannical aristocrats but figures of authority on the basis of knowledge or occupation, such as judges dealing out unjust sentences or doctors conducting obscene medical experiments (Hughes 12). In the second chapter of my study, I will therefore turn to Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," widely considered to be the first "haunted house" story in American horror fiction, to best epitomize how the Gothic adapted to this side of the pond. Poe embraced the scientific attitudes of the time, setting a new standard for horror realism as he delved into the terrors of the human mind (Lovecraft 26). Like that of *The Castle of Otranto* and many other 18<sup>th</sup> century Gothic works, Poe's Gothic architecture is psychically linked to its inhabitants, twin siblings Roderick and Madeline Usher. And through the cataleptic Madeline's physical decay and the reclusive Roderick's mental deterioration, their family home crumbles around them until it splits in half. To underscore this connection further, I will examine Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," a story which criticizes 19<sup>th</sup> century attitudes towards the mental and physical health of women, the gendered responsibilities of domestic life, and the fabled security of the home. Through these two short fictions, I will analyze the historical inheritors of classic Gothic ideas and the ways in which Gothic tropes adapted to the gendered social anxieties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. All the while, I will consider the evolution of the genre as a change across space as well as a change across time, examining familiar conventions as they become recontextualized to haunt American ideology; towering castles and monasteries become simpler houses and cabins, and the

subverted British values of the Crown and the Church transform into critiques of capitalism and the idealized family.

As the Gothic progressed into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and adapted to keep up with the times, so too did the female condition; the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment granted women's suffrage in America, and with labor shortages during World War II, women began to enter the workforce in unprecedented numbers, which allowed for some shifting of formerly steadfast domestic arrangements—and for cultural anxieties to shift with them. Widespread moral panic in the latter half of the century provoked fears of a liberal agenda for the destruction of “family values,” giving rise to rampant and often violent homophobia and misogyny (Haggerty 11). While 18<sup>th</sup> century readers had been shocked by tales of women fleeing through ancient castles and men desperate to secure their crumbling claims to power, 20<sup>th</sup> century literature appropriately focused on disenfranchised housewives, housebound and economically dependent on their husbands; male breadwinners anxious about maintaining the materialistic trappings of wealth and class (Wisker 1-2); and the cultural attraction-repulsion to queerness, a combination of desire for and fear of the unknown and the taboo. The American dream—the house on a hill, the shiny new car, the loving marriage and the 2.5 kids—is turned on its head in this generation of novels (and now, films) revealing the unlistenable B-side of the record of domestic bliss. Every family has its secrets, and the Gothic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was bent on exposing the flaws of “traditional” relationships, namely matters of the nuclear family such as marriage and parenting (1). In my final chapter, I will explore the influence of the Gothic on late 20<sup>th</sup> century popular fiction, focusing on the ways Anne Rice's 1976 novel *Interview with the Vampire* evokes society's ever-present anxieties around death, Southern American history, female and non-heterosexual sexuality, and above all, family values. *Interview with the Vampire* also marks a significant new development in 20<sup>th</sup> century horror literature: in the ultimate subversion of expectations, the monster becomes the protagonist.

Rice creates a new monstrous paradigm in her *Vampire Chronicles*: the vampiric family, and the parent-child-like relationship between vampire and victim. Diving further into the Gothic's recontextualization in the ideology of the American South, the perversion of vampiric family values and the homoerotic undertones of Rice's vampire transformations all serve to expose the difference between idealization and reality.

Between its aesthetic nostalgia for conventional times past and the progressive potential of its ideals, the Gothic horror story can either defend standards of normality or encourage transgression of those norms. And because of its great versatility, Gothic horror becomes a nightmarish mirror of our own values and fears, reflecting the individual, the time period, and national or regional location. Where the domestic sphere is concerned, the Gothic gives a voice to widespread cultural fears such as loss of power and material wealth, denouncement of morality, and failure in our responsibilities toward our family. Despite all the ghosts, monsters, and melodrama, Gothic narratives speak to a truth we may not realize by making us uncomfortable in the spaces where we feel most at home.

## **Chapter 1: Castle Sweet Castle incest, bloodlines, and succession in *The Castle of Otranto***

“Every man’s home was not just his castle, but his mind.”  
-Frances Chiu, “Faulty Towers”

Although the originators of new tropes and styles often find themselves obsolete within a few years, it is undeniable that with his 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto*, Horace Walpole laid a strong foundation for the Gothic. With its triad of central stock characters, romantic foreign setting, and preoccupation with prophecy, legitimacy, Catholicism, and the supernatural, it was retrospectively subtitled “A Gothic Story” to emphasize its medieval backdrop; the term later came to indicate the supernatural aspects of a novel rather than its historical setting, but it didn’t come to denote genre until the nineteenth century (Gamer 49). *The Castle of Otranto* also gave rise to the Gothic staple of miserable female characters, imprisoned and imperiled not only by the supernatural, but by the desires and ambitions of mortal men. Although the trope of Gothic heroines fleeing from their merciless suitors persisted through much of the history of the Gothic, they were particularly relevant at the time of *Otranto*’s publishing, when women saw their marriage and property rights controlled entirely by their husbands and fathers.

*The Castle of Otranto* is a story about Manfred, the tyrannical prince of the titular castle, his wife Hippolita, and his two children, Matilda and Conrad. Manfred has arranged for his sickly son to marry Isabella, the daughter of the marquis of Vicenza, when a gigantic helmet falls from the sky and kills Conrad on the day of his wedding. Suspecting that his grandfather’s usurpation of the throne has caused supernatural revenge to be visited upon his family, Manfred is desperate for a legitimate claim to the throne and decides to tie his usurping bloodline to the last descendant of the castle’s original ruler. In short, he reacts to the death of his son by attempting to divorce his infertile wife so that he can marry Isabella and produce a new heir to Otranto. Isabella flees to the labyrinthine crypts beneath the castle,

where she meets Theodore, a peasant who helps her escape, and who later turns out to be the rightful heir to Otranto. Theodore and Matilda fall in love, but when Manfred mistakes his daughter for Isabella, he kills her with a dagger to the heart. At the end, Theodore and Isabella, the two rightful heirs to Otranto, marry and take control of the crumbling castle. The story's supernatural elements—the fragments of gigantic armor, moving portraits, ruinous thunderclaps, and ascending ghostly specters—amount to a blood curse, the sins of the father revisited on the children, and it is this impurity of blood that motivates Manfred throughout the novel, set against an eighteenth-century readership's paranoia about property ownership, legitimacy, and contaminated bloodlines (“A Man's Home is His Castle” 73). And notably, the preservation of Manfred's rule is not something he is able to achieve alone; his power to continue his rule depends almost entirely on the women in his life, and so he uses his castle to control them (78).

Though *The Castle of Otranto* focuses itself on the dramas of thirteenth century Sicily—arranged marriages, aristocratic incest, and magical Catholicism—its true preoccupations are with Whig political ideology and eighteenth century marriage laws. At the time of the novel's publishing, the enclosure movement was at its peak in England, and despite ample and often violent resistance from non-aristocrats, land that was open and often settled and/or farmed in the first half of the century was steadily privatized and claimed by property owners. This was cause for a significant increase in antagonism against aristocracy, and Whig reformers embraced the Saxon—and therefore Gothic, some would say—ideals of liberty and democracy, fighting for the right to vote regardless of property ownership as a means of protection from the power of the land-holding aristocracy (Chiu 9). The laws not only empowered aristocrats to claim what was once common land and use property ownership to exercise political power, but also to gain and maintain their wealth by freely exchanging their daughters in marriage. The Hardwicke Marriage Act of 1753 ruled that

marriages were only valid with parental—essentially paternal—consent, and that they must be publicized with a ceremony and the purchase of a marriage license, rendering clandestine marriages illegal. As a member of Parliament, Walpole opposed this treatment of female sexuality as capital (“Eighteenth-century Gothic Novels and Gendered Spaces” 26), as it reinforced both female dependency on her male relatives and male dependency on women to continue their lines, which in turn provoked and justified aggressive sexual behavior as embodied in Manfred. The destructive, dysfunctional, and incestuous husband-wife and parent-child relationships in *The Castle of Otranto* evoke male iniquity and female inequality in domestic spaces; men were not regulated by the law and women were not protected by it (Clemens 39). Until the latter half of the nineteenth century, women did not have significant legal rights to property ownership; their properties were absorbed by their husband after marriage and could only be reclaimed through widowhood. A woman could not write a will, sell property without her husband’s consent, or manage her own inheritance, and even her children’s welfare was up to the father. Divorce was only possible with extenuating circumstances such as incest, which is exactly what Manfred claims in order to divorce Hippolita. At the time of the novel’s publishing, the greatest power a woman had over her marriage and property was her ability to decline a proposal—and in *Otranto*, Horace Walpole imagines a world where this power, too, is taken away (Lay and Voskuil 10).

Manfred’s patriarchal power and unchecked, aggressive sexuality are complemented by the duty-bound subservience of his wife, Hippolita, the embodiment of a woman victimized by the laws of the land. Although Matilda and Isabella adore her, she is a largely absent and powerless maternal figure who holds Manfred dearer to her than her own children and resigns herself to his control, justifying her passivity by saying, “It is not ours to make election for ourselves. Heaven, our fathers, and our husbands must decide for us” (Walpole 91-92). The combination of her infertility, rendering her unmarriageable in Manfred’s eyes,

and her unquestioning deference to him, allowing him to pursue Isabella unchecked, forces Isabella to flee the castle, from the maternal role he would have her assume. In a world where a woman's power lies in her ability to produce children, women who are motherless like Isabella, or sterile like Hippolita, are seen as somehow defective ("Eighteenth-century Gothic Novels and Gendered Spaces" 30). But in the Gothic, where domestic spaces are often livelier than the characters who inhabit them, the castle itself can form a kind of maternal space, which in itself can cause shifts in male power dynamics.

The Gothic castle is commonly identified with the psyche of the villain—and indeed, as Manfred's psychological state deteriorates, so too does the castle—but Otranto's presence is also female and maternal, a physical embodiment of the fact that in order to gain control over his lineage and attempt to purify his bloodline, Manfred must have control over a child-bearing woman. He holds the keys to his castle, but there are some forces that are naturally beyond any man's control. In "A Man's Home is His Castle: Bloodlines and *The Castle of Otranto*," Gretchen Cohenour analyzes the significance of the castle's ruins beyond the typical Gothic metaphors of a decrepit and outdated aristocratic establishment: "Ruins traditionally symbolize the power of nature and, in this case, Manfred's inability to isolate and control powers of nature, especially bloodlines" (76). Where most Gothic stories, as you'll see in later chapters, must *end* with the destruction of the domestic space, Otranto is in ruins from the moment the story begins and steadily deteriorates over the course of the novel. According to Cohenour, the body of the castle is strong enough to be used to repress others, but weak enough that it can be infiltrated (78), particularly by Isabella's father Frederic and his gigantic, phallic sword. And where there is a penetrating phallic symbol, there are also cavernous, womblike spaces in the castle's interior (Clemens 30):

The lower part of the castle was hollowed into several intricate cloisters; and it was not easy for one under so much anxiety to find the door that opened into the cavern.



An awful silence reigned throughout those subterraneous regions, except now and then some blasts of wind that shook the doors she had passed, and which grating on the rusty hinges were re-echoed through that long labyrinth of darkness. (Walpole 26)

Isabella's flight through these subterranean passages is a quest to free herself from the castle's maternal body, from the role that Manfred would force her into, but it is also an exploration of the self and a maturation into a stronger, more imposing feminine Other, the sexually aware woman. She eventually succeeds in escaping from the circuitous passages, her pursuer lacking the same knowledge of the female body ("Eighteenth-century Gothic Novels and Gendered Spaces" 42).

*The Castle of Otranto* is also the originator of Gothic doubling, or the duplication or division of a character into two alternate versions so as to emphasize a character's physicality, psychology, status, or morality. The characters may look similar or mirror each other's actions, and emotion directed toward one character may easily be displaced onto another; such narratives will often involve twins or doppelgangers, disguises, crossdressing, or mistaken identity. As William Hughes puts it in the *Historical Dictionary of Gothic Literature*, doubling often serves to "emphasize polemically the moral dilemmas or social disparities around which a didactic or cautionary narrative may revolve—for example, the fate of one who resists temptation, as opposed to one who succumbs to it" (86). In the case of *The Castle of Otranto*, the doubling of Matilda and Isabella is a signifier of the aristocracy's incestuous quest to maintain its bloodlines and emphasizes the impurity of Manfred's unlawfully conquered domestic space.

Incest, as Cohenour describes it in "A Man's Home is His Castle," "creates a space of the unspeakable, contaminating the ideology of purity that often surrounds domestic structures" (86). In *The Castle of Otranto*, cases of incestuous attraction are analogous to the aristocracy's obsession with bloodlines and the paradoxical effect this has on the purity of

said bloodlines. After Isabella escapes him, Manfred describes himself as her parent when he attempts to demand her release from the church, despite his claim that he must separate from Hippolita because their blood relation in the fourth degree renders their marriage “unlawful” and “ungodly” (Walpole 48). Isabella also claims Hippolita as her surrogate mother, her own having died in childbirth, and in turn, Hippolita treats her like a daughter (19). Even Father Jerome denies Manfred his match with Isabella on the basis of incest; as she was engaged to Conrad, he rules that she was about to be his daughter, so the church would not allow it (47-8). However, obsessed with his lineage, Manfred himself only recognizes bonds by blood (“A Man’s Home is His Castle” 86). Operating with almost the same logic, Hippolita later arranges a marriage between Matilda and Isabella’s father Frederic, as Frederic is attracted to Matilda in an identically incestuous displacement of Manfred’s attraction to Isabella. As “sisters,” Matilda and Isabella are similar enough in build to be mistaken for each other by their own father, and their attraction to the same man, Theodore, cements the blending of the two girls (Clemens 34), so it is likely that a marriage between Matilda and Frederic would have been deemed just as unholy by the religious and supernatural powers that be.

As Manfred is unable to realize his incestuous devices with Isabella, the ultimate displacement of his attraction comes in the form of his accidental murder of Matilda in his rage over Isabella’s betrayal. Hearing the words “Manfred will never permit our union” (Walpole 99) spoken in the crypt, Manfred plunges his dagger into the woman’s bosom, thinking that he is interrupting a tryst between Theodore and Isabella. The stabbing itself, according to Cohenour’s theory of contaminated domestic purity, is symbolic of the incestuous penetration he had planned for Isabella (“A Man’s Home is His Castle” 85). By the same logic, his rejection of Matilda as a daughter might have been a half-attempt to distance himself from the taboo of incest before he was eventually consumed by his evil desires. However, no character is immune to Walpole’s incest analogy. At the end of the

story, Theodore marries Isabella out of displaced love for Matilda, even though the two of them are the closest surviving blood relatives of Otranto's original owner, Alfonso the Good ("Eighteenth-century Gothic Novels and Gendered Spaces" 51). The fact that the two are relatives is received as a positive; with the usurper driven out, the bloodline of Alfonso may finally continue in its rightful place. But of the match itself, Walpole is not quite as optimistic: "Theodore's grief was too fresh to admit the thought of another love; and it was not till after frequent discourses with Isabella, of his dear Matilda, that he was persuaded he could know no happiness but in the society of one with whom he could forever indulge the melancholy that had taken possession of his soul" (105). With the marriage of Isabella and Theodore, the threat of incest and impure bloodlines persists long after the story's conclusion, not with ever-pursued women, but with an unhappy, melancholic marriage between blood relatives.

In many Gothic fictions, there is not only a doubling of characters, as seen with Matilda and Isabella, but a doubling of politics as well. Horace Walpole, for example, was a staunch critic of arbitrary power and believed that George III had exercised far too much of it in using illegal warrants to silence radical John Wilkes. This is evidenced in the tyrannical Manfred's belief that as a ruler, even an illegitimate one, he is above the law; and because his behavior towards women lacks any form of regulation, he *is*. But even though Walpole supported Wilkes, he also feared losing the grand Gothic mansion in which he wrote *Otranto*, Strawberry Hill, to Wilkesite rebellion (Groom xxxiii). Reflecting this duality, *The Castle of Otranto* allows for readers to make double interpretations of its politics. The story was written by a Whig who believed that from absolute power came corruption; however, its fictional translator and editor "William Marshall" is a Tory Royalist, whose purpose in unearthing the novel is to present a narrative about the restoration of a legitimate royal dynasty (xxxii). As a result, conservative readers of the time might have interpreted *The*

*Castle of Otranto* as a nostalgic medievalist piece framing a power-grabbing social climber as the ultimate evil and then come to the realization that its politics were reversible after finding out that the author believed monarchy was a path to corruption. Similarly, although most early Gothic works were hostile towards Roman Catholicism for the same reasons Walpole felt strongly about the deposition of aristocracy, the strong aesthetic of the genre always allowed for a certain nostalgia for times past. While Gothic castles and monasteries are often presented as crumbling, foreign, and gloomy, there are always those who would interpret them as familiar and warm. But however inviting the aristocratic castle may have appeared from the outside to eighteenth century readers, Walpole was determined to reveal the inequitable domestic relationships that existed within it.

## **Chapter 2: American Gothic**

### **Domestic pressures in the short fiction of Gilman and Poe**

“Put horror back where it belongs, in the family.”  
-Alfred Hitchcock

The nineteenth century not only saw the popularity of the Gothic persist into a new era of European history, but it also opened up a new frontier for the literary Gothic across the pond. Today, the United States is the most avid consumer of Gothic fiction (Hughes 15) and also represents a considerable producer of the genre. American Gothic owes its very existence to British Gothic, not only for the inspiration, but for the longstanding legacy of British imperialist ideology that left the relatively young country rife with hostility toward non-European races (11). As a result, in the nineteenth century, America produced a kind of Gothic that was highly anxious about people perceived as Other and concerned with preserving an idealized but ultimately outdated “traditional” way of life. With the change of cultural backdrop came a host of new and distinctly American Gothic tropes; departing from the British preoccupation with Roman Catholicism and feudal aristocracy, Americans drew their horror from the forbidding mystery of the wilderness, the madness of isolation, Puritanical repression, and most importantly, the iconic haunted house. Without Britain’s medieval ruins to set their stories, American authors chose a domestic building with the same symbolic weight as a British castle or church: the house, the ultimate marker of class, which could in turn lend itself to a critique of capitalism, slavery, or patriarchal gender roles. In 1839, Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Fall of the House of Usher” marked the first appearance of the haunted house motif in American fiction (Bailey 6). Decades later, Charlotte Perkins Gilman was one of the first writers to use Poe’s model of the haunted house—which framed the structure itself as the primary evil of the story rather than focusing on the ghosts within it—in her 1892 short story “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Both of these American short stories use the motif of the haunted house as a projection of a family haunted

by the pressures of nineteenth-century domestic ideology, the dominant characteristic of which was placing male and female family members in separate spheres altogether.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” begins with an unnamed narrator approaching the estate of his childhood friend Roderick Usher. Roderick and his twin sister Madeline are the last of a long line of Ushers, and the two of them are now deteriorating from mysterious illnesses in their family home, which is falling apart in much the same way as its inhabitants. The narrator keeps Roderick company and tries to help him through his nervous affliction. However, the same cannot be done for Madeline, who suffers from an incurable physical condition, “a settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character” (Poe 323); the narrator barely catches a glimpse of her until she dies and he notices the “mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face” as well as a “suspiciously lingering smile” upon her corpse (329). Roderick and the narrator bury her in the tombs beneath the house, for fear that scientists may want to dig her up and investigate the cause of her mysterious ailment. Roderick’s hysteria only increases over the next few days, as the two of them begin to hear noises from underneath the house. Roderick reveals that he has been hearing these sounds for days and fears that the cause is his sister, that “We have put her living in the tomb!” (334). Soon enough, Madeline manages to escape her coffin and, in her final act, flings herself at Roderick, who dies instantly of fright. The narrator flees the house, which splits cleanly in two behind him and crumbles, the last of the Ushers dead within it.

With its suggestions of incest, ancestral decadence, and a haunted family past, “The Fall of the House of Usher” is arguably one of the ancestors of 20<sup>th</sup> century Southern Gothic (Hughes 231), which will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. However, the story itself is as much a product of its time as its region, especially when it comes to family matters. According to Leila S. May’s study of the Ushers’ brother-sister bond, Roderick and

Madeline represent a microcosm of the mid-nineteenth-century family, specifically the role of the sister in Victorian domestic ideology, where she is representative of the purity of the home, which the men of the house are duty-bound to protect. In Poe's version of the story, the house, the sister, the fallacy of her purity and her responsibility to uphold it, all fall down together (1). At the time of the industrial revolution and the social upheaval that followed, the nuclear family experienced an upheaval of its own; it was completely restructured around new economic activities, organized so that the home served as both a place to energize and prepare the breadwinner for work and a moral refuge from the competitive workplace (1). This was the folk belief of the "economic battlefield," a patriarchal system where each family member had their own clearly defined role; men went out onto the battlefield, wives tended to their warriors, and new warriors were trained for the capitalist battles ahead (1). This system reinforced the family's—specifically the women's—sense of duty to the system by creating a need to maintain a morally sound domestic sphere outside of a cold, finance-driven, post-industrial world, (1) and Poe predicted its collapse (2). But in a society built on familial foundations, where did that leave the sister figure?

Since the mother figure in the Victorian family unit had already been "tainted" by sexual desire and therefore could not meet the impossible standards of virtue necessary to maintain the illusion of the home as moral refuge, this duty fell to the sister. Her domestic role required her to avoid contact with the evils of the outside world and, in doing so, singlehandedly represent and uphold the family's moral values (2). She was the pure, virginal, self-sacrificing backbone of the family, free from desire to liberate herself sexually or morally from her demanding duties in the home. Like its eighteenth-century Gothic ancestors and, to a lesser extent, its twentieth-century inheritors, the societal background of the nineteenth-century Gothic was made anxious by the power of repressed femininity, and this fear is distilled into the character of Madeline, Roderick's "tenderly beloved sister—his

sole companion for long years—his last and only relative on earth,” who not only suffers a “severe and long-continued illness” (Poe 323) due to the pressures of domestic life but is physically imprisoned within the foundations of her family home. Of Madeline’s confinement, May writes, “Her desire is never expressed, yet everywhere felt” (3).

The reason for Madeline’s everywhere-felt desire is the physical House of Usher, which in typical Gothic fashion, reflects the psychological (in Roderick’s case, and in Madeline’s case, physical) condition of its inhabitants. When the narrator first approaches the mansion, his feelings begin to sink: “I do not know how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit” (Poe 317). As he comes closer, he describes the house further:

...I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones. In this there was much that reminded me of the specious totality of old wood-work which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air. (319-20)

The narrator also points out a “barely perceptible fissure” (320) extending from the roof of the building to the ground, which will later serve as the crack along which the mansion breaks in two. In this initial description of the house’s physical features, the narrator describes the Ushers as well as their ancestral home. Roderick and Madeline descend from an ancient and influential family, but now find themselves alone and unable to maintain the legacy of their house as it crumbles around them. The mansion appears to be intact and



structurally sound as a whole, but each individual stone is crumbling in much the same way as the psychological and physical health of the remaining Ushers as they struggle to support the weight of their familial expectations. The home reminds the narrator of woodwork rotting in a vault, evoking the image of a prison later revisited during Madeline's premature entombment in the vaults beneath the house. Finally, that the house is said to look as if it has never been disturbed by outside forces (or even a "breath of the external air") may allude to incest within the Usher line, which the narrator has already confirmed at the time of description: "...the stem of the Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain" (318). The physical isolation of the house betrays an even deeper isolation of the Usher family from the world around them, emphasizing the twins' reliance on each other, specifically Roderick's reliance on Madeline, without whom the Usher line will be extinguished completely. Given this description of the Usher mansion, the narrator's claim that the name "House of Usher" seems "to include...both the family and the family mansion" rings especially true (319).

In "Supernatural Horror in Literature," H.P. Lovecraft argues that the Usher twins and their ancient house all share a soul (28), which is consistent with the constant doubling of Madeline and Roderick in terms of their physical descriptions and complementary degenerative conditions, which are comparable to the deteriorated condition of the mansion itself. Even the narrator is described as the mirror image of Roderick, blurring the boundaries of identity, gender, and family; another potential twin for Roderick is Poe himself, in a form of doubling often pointed out by critics (May 4). Roderick himself believes that his nervous condition comes from an influence exerted over him by his house: "He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth" (Poe 323), but a far greater source of his suffering

is the slow death of his sister, his only companion, whom he had burdened with so many unhealthy expectations. He demonstrates his need for Madeline to support him, their family, and their home, by picking up a guitar and singing a song called “The Haunted Palace”:

And, round about his home, his glory

That blushed and bloomed

Is but a dim-remembered story

Of the old time entombed. (327)

Though at surface level, the song is about a glorious castle invaded and haunted by evil things, causing it to fall into disrepair, these lyrics in particular belie Roderick’s reliance on his sister to serve as the strong foundation for their family. They communicate his feelings of devastation and hopelessness, which have slowly risen for some time, but come to a crescendo on the night of Madeline’s supposed death. And when Roderick sings of “the old time entombed,” he knows he will also have to entomb his twin sister, and with her bury both his fond memories of the past and his hopes for the future.

The restructuring of the American family unit during the industrial revolution elevated familial relationships to a higher level of importance than other social bonds. The sister-brother relationship was held on a particular pedestal, seen as a higher ethical level of relationship than the dependence of parent and child or the sexual nature of husband and wife (May 3). In America and England in particular, siblings raised in the standard Victorian way were expected to have an intense, marriage-like bond, as the relationship was seen as a kind of practice for the future (4). In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Roderick even admits that the cause of his mental deterioration is, in all probability, his anticipation of Madeline’s death from her illness, and he appears to be bitter and resentful of her leaving him alone (Poe 323). Since the sibling dyad is the most fundamental unit of the Victorian nuclear family (May 2), Poe recreates it in the Usher twins, subjects them to the pressures of domestic life, and then

reveals the fallacy of this ideology by pushing them to destruction. As the house breaks apart, the narrator hears “a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters” (Poe 336), which May attributes to the voices of a thousand sisters, all breaking out of their vaults at once (3).

Where in “The Fall of the House of Usher” Madeline’s domestic pressures manifest as a physical malady, Gilman’s approach in “The Yellow Wallpaper” explores the psychological effect of a woman’s prescribed societal duties. Published in 1892, “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a famous parable of escape from the patriarchy in which a woman struggling with postpartum depression writes a series of journal entries while confined and isolated in an old mansion for three months by her physician husband John and his sister Jennie. The narrator is forbidden from writing, working, or doing anything stimulating, and is prescribed only fresh air and a healthy diet to treat her “temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency” (Gilman 648). However, over time, she begins to feel as if the house is harming her rather than helping her recover; she devotes a large portion of her journal entries to describing the strange yellow wallpaper in her bedroom. At first, she despises the sight of it, but the longer she spends in the house with nothing else to occupy her, the more intriguing the indiscernible pattern becomes. Eventually, at night, she begins to see the figure of a woman trapped behind the pattern, crawling and “creeping” on all fours (656), and the narrator begins to peel away the wallpaper to free her from her cage. When John finds her doing this, she locks him out of their room so she can continue; however, when he finally manages to get inside, he finds her creeping around the room like the woman in the wallpaper, proclaiming, “I’ve got out at last...in spite of you and Jane?<sup>1</sup> And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” (655). Even when her husband faints, she continues to creep over him in circles.

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<sup>1</sup> Jane could be a misprint of Jennie, or the name of the narrator herself.

Though “The Yellow Wallpaper” is consistent with many traditional Gothic themes and elements, such as confinement, “irrational” fears, a distraught or “hysterical” heroine, an old mansion with a troubled past, and an oppressive male antagonist (Davison 47), Gilman also embraces the 19<sup>th</sup> century Gothic staple of exposing and villainizing figures of cultural authority (Hughes 12), specifically those physicians who used their authority to justify unethical medical experiments or to make dismissive and prejudiced diagnoses of women at the time. Gilman wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” after experiencing postpartum depression herself in 1887 (Bailey 29). At the time, the most widely known treatment for such conditions in the male-dominated field of medicine was the “Rest Cure” for female nervous disorders initiated by Philadelphia physician S. Weir Mitchell, of whom Gilman herself was a patient (Stiles 32). Mitchell’s cure involved a six-to-eight-week period of bed rest, seclusion from family and familiar surroundings, and prohibition from intellectual stimulation such as conversation, reading, and writing, which is precisely what John prescribes the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper.”<sup>2</sup> The narrator herself describes John (as well as her brother, who is also a physician) as a preferable version of S. Weir Mitchell, judging by experiences relayed to her from a friend under the doctor’s care (Gilman 650). Bailey argues that the Rest Cure acted as a way of taming women who rebelled against their domestic duties in some way (e.g., exhibiting fear or discomfort at the thought of child-rearing, as is the case of the narrator) by simply boring them until they found pleasure in the idea of household chores (32). In the story, the narrator notes that her husband has threatened her with Mitchell’s treatment, writing, “John says if I don’t pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall” (Gilman 650). As a theorist of sexual politics, Gilman often wrote on the status of women, even proposing new social and economic models that served as alternatives to

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<sup>2</sup> Mitchell’s cure for nervous disorders in men, on the other hand, involved strenuous physical exertion; he also encouraged his male patients to write, thus reinforcing their masculinity in both body and mind (Stiles 32).

patriarchy (Hughes 115). Though “The Yellow Wallpaper” is fictional, it represents an important sustained study of psychological trauma, specifically “a narrative of mental breakdown exacerbated by an ostensibly well-meaning though utterly repressive medical establishment” (116), one which was altogether too close to reality at the time.

Though she is married and has recently given birth to a child, the protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper” demonstrates early on that she does not fit the societal mold of wife and mother. She expresses mixed feelings about her new child: “Such a dear baby! And yet I *cannot* be with him, it makes me so nervous” (Gilman 649, emphasis Gilman’s), and feels frustration that she cannot fulfill her household role: “I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already” (649). Early in her stay at the mansion, she finds that the only thing that makes her feel better is writing, yet she is forbidden from working. Writing was a traditionally male occupation in the 1890s, and though the act makes her tired, the narrator expresses great interest in “congenial work, with excitement and change” as a means of curing herself (648), so that the pressure of ideas in her brain does not build to a breaking point. However, she is met with heavy opposition whenever John or Jennie catches her writing. Jennie in particular expresses a belief that the narrator’s writing was the cause of her illness. The narrator describes Jennie as “a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, (who) hopes for no better profession” (650), which places her in a position of willing agent of the patriarchy. The narrator witnesses Jennie touching the wallpaper and looking rather suspicious when she is caught in the act, which leads her to believe that Jennie is also aware of the female figure behind the pattern, something that John either cannot or will not see for himself. Though Jennie represents the idealized wife figure, she cannot escape her own awareness of the female condition, specifically the pressure to serve as the “Angel in the House,” moral exemplars imprisoned in the domestic sphere (Bailey 31).

According to Bailey's authoritative text on the history of haunted houses, "in this tale, the haunted house—the wallpaper and the woman trapped behind the paper, imprisoned in the walls of the house—must be seen as a perverse literalization of the angel-in-the-house ideology which confined most nineteenth-century women not only within the roles of wives and mothers but within the walls of their own homes" (33). Just as the chorus of screams when Madeline breaks out of her tomb in "The Fall of the House of Usher" represents the plight of a million Victorian sisters, the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" notices that the pattern of the wallpaper traps not only the eyes and head of the creeping woman, but many others: "But nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads" (Gilman 654). The eyes and heads the narrator sees are victims of patriarchal social, legal, and medical establishments who were once like the creeping woman who now shakes the pattern, trying to get out. In a hopeful moment, the narrator wonders whether there is just one animated woman crawling very quickly, or many women trying to escape all around her (654). Though they hide away during the day, at night, under the light of the moon, they attempt to free themselves; and with this realization, the narrator begins to identify with them. Through her rejection of her place in society and the treatment designed to cure her of ambition, the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" discovers that the Gothic Other is really an aspect of herself and has been all along (Davison 66). So rather than fighting the monster, she embraces it, and in doing so, the role of antagonist is instead embodied by her prison and those who keep her locked up there.

From the beginning, the power imbalance of the narrator's marriage is abundantly clear; John controls almost every aspect of her life. Not only that, but his authority as a doctor adds to his authority as a husband (Bailey 30). Both John and the narrator's brother are "physician(s) of high standing" and both have assured her friends and relatives that nothing is wrong with her, and yet push for her to pursue a repressive cure (Gilman 648). She has no

autonomy over her body, her friendships, her career, or her marriage, and like all women at the time of publishing, has no legal power over herself, either (Davison 48). Her husband refuses to believe that she is seriously ill yet will not let her write or interact with others, and the medical establishment at large reinforces and validates his ideas about her “hysterical tendency.” The nature of their marriage also manifests in the very house they are living in; as is the usual case in Gothic narratives, the domestic structure takes on a life of its own, all while reflecting the lives and natures of its inhabitants. In the narrator’s bedroom that she shares with John, their bed is described as “this great heavy bed which is all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through the wars” and could easily represent the narrator’s struggle for an even balance of power in their marriage through her career and her free expression (650). However, the bed is also nailed to the floor, which (along with the room’s barred windows and the gate at the head of the stairs) represents John’s unbeatable patriarchal advantage in their relationship, and the futility of crossing him.

In a much more pointed way than older Gothic narratives, Gilman’s work highlights the dangers of unchecked masculine aggression and repressed femininity, particularly in society’s privileging of the masculine value of reason over the feminine value of feeling (Clemens 12-13). In the Female Gothic in particular, the Gothic villain often represents excessive reason, while the female heroine embodies the excessive sensibility and fancy attributed to young women of the era, particularly those who consumed Romances and the Gothic (Davison 52). Such is the case in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” where John is described as “practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures” (Gilman 647). He is very careful not to let his wife entertain her “fancy” of the woman in the wallpaper, refusing to let her change the wallpaper and dismissing her when she sees the woman walking outside. He speaks to her as if she were a child, calling her pet names,

reading to her, and saying things like “Bless her little heart!” that imply that she is a stranger to reason (652). The narrator remarks several times that John does not seem to understand her condition at all, since he “never was nervous in his life”: “John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no *reason* to suffer, and that satisfies him.” (649, emphasis Gilman’s). To John, the narrator’s psychological condition is no more than a lack of self-control, and over time, the narrator begins to believe him, writing in her journal, “I’m sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition. But John says if I feel so, I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself—before him, at least, and that makes me very tired” (648). The narrator tries to “use (her) will and good sense” to combat her condition, but it does little more than exhaust her (649). The narrator finds herself crying all the time over insignificant things, she has trouble sleeping at night, she cannot bear the thought of reuniting with her child, and she cannot push her fantasies from her mind.

However, to John, postpartum depression is not the only source of her condition; her progressive career as a writer, her “imaginative power and habit of story-making” is what he thinks is causing her “nervous weakness” to produce these fantasies of the woman in the wallpaper (649). Though the narrator and even Jennie understand that the creeping woman is much more than a mere fantasy, John is physically unable to accept the supernatural nature of the wallpaper. The narrator describes the wallpaper’s patterns as such: “I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of” (651). The pattern on the walls is so averse to reason that John finds himself unable to wrap his mind around it. At the end of the story, when John finds his wife creeping around the room after freeing the woman in the wallpaper—and throwing his initial condescension back at him by referring to him as “young man” (656)—he reacts by fainting right across her path, assuming the emotional, weak, traditionally female role in the relationship (Davison 66).



The story's ending is an ambiguous one, with the narrator being free, but at the price of her sanity. While some may read this as the narrator completely giving way to her sensibility, Davison remarks that "Given her perceptive analysis of late nineteenth-century American patriarchy, as delineated in her creative journal, Gilman's narrator may be said to be never so sane as when she appears the most insane" (67). Much as Madeline dies almost immediately after breaking out of her prison, these women escape the clutches of the patriarchy only to realize that society presents them with no better alternative (Bailey 32). The domestic ideology does not topple for them, and so having freed themselves alone from it, madness or death is all they have to look forward to.

Both "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" have unnamed narrators and focus on characters with physical or mental illnesses, but the most solid link between the two when it comes to domestic ideology is that the homes are haunted not by the ghosts of their past so much as the dysfunctional families living inside them. In *American Nightmares*, Bailey writes, "The house is our primary marker of class and our central symbol of domesticity, touching upon everything from women's rights (the angel in the house, not to mention the homemaker) to the deterioration of the nuclear family (the broken home)" (8). There is no symbol more worthy of embodying the corruption of American ideology. The literary haunted house emerged quite suddenly in the period of 1777-1800 and remains iconic to this day (Chiu 1), but the most significant change from Walpole's era to Poe and Gilman's is that the supernatural forces of the Gothic structure shifted from the ghost to the house itself (Bailey 28), which possesses a life of its own and reflects the darkest secrets of those living inside it. Since the beginning, the haunted house genre has appealed to female writers and readers, with the traditional designation of the domestic sphere as the woman's sphere (28); this Gothic trope easily alludes to the legal, domestic, and social institutions that entrap the women who sought them for protection.

### **Chapter 3: Blood is Thicker Than Water** **Anne Rice, Southern Gothic, and the vampiric family unit**

“This may be the cruellest of all the vampire’s  
 fates; his love for family, friends and lovers does not change.”  
 -Victor Lana

From the solitary hunters feared by European peasants to covens of baseball-loving teenagers who sparkle in the sunlight, the vampire figure is not only one of the most persistent staples of Gothic fiction, but one of the most versatile as well. Like the genre as a whole, the vampire is a figure that constantly recontextualizes itself into different historical ideologies, allowing the concept to resonate with early Gothic readers and today’s consumers of popular monster fiction alike. However, to facilitate the ancient monster’s transition to modern appeal, it had to face the three critical turning points of vampire fiction: peasant to aristocrat, solitary hunter to pack creature, and monstrous antagonist to sympathetic protagonist. The latter two turning points are largely attributed to Anne Rice’s novel *Interview with the Vampire* and its subsequent series, *The Vampire Chronicles*, in which Rice redefined the vampire as a literary figure. In general, twentieth-century vampires are defined by a sense of eroticism, attraction-repulsion, and rebellion, and unlike their monstrous Gothic predecessors, *Interview*’s vampires are associated with sympathetic, human needs, specifically the need for community and family in the face of a hostile world. But however like our own human families the vampiric family unit may seem, the vampire’s romantic and parental bonds and domestic roles are altered and othered by immortality, bloodlust, and isolation.

While the vampire narrative has a long and diverse history in Gothic fiction and beyond, *Interview with the Vampire* is a critical point in its recontextualization in the American tradition. William Hughes lays out a brief description of the vampire’s historical evolution in *Historical Dictionary of the Gothic*: “The undead are an evolving species, for the

vampire has changed considerably in his aspect and conventions from his initial incarnation as the creature of folklore, through his various reinterpretations as dissolute aristocrat, foreign invader, degenerate citizen, queer outsider, and eternally youthful rebel” (253). Though blood-drinking monsters existed in some way, shape, or form in nearly every culture of the ancient world, the popular notion of vampirism began to take shape in the early eighteenth century as reports of vampire “epidemics” arose in eastern Europe, particularly Poland, the Austrian Empire, and Greece (253). It is likely that the unwitting purveyors of the vampire myth were merely peasants living in fear of contagious disease, which would physically transform victims’ bodies as well as cause them to “prey” on family members (253). In *The Vampire Chronicles*, European vampires are seen as creatures of the Old World, representative of older vampiric literary tradition, and are nothing more than mindless animated corpses (Rice 192). Vampire literature was popularized in the Romantic era with Lord Byron and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and starting with John Polidori’s *The Vampyre* in 1819, the vampire became an aristocrat (Hughes 255), with the creature’s blood-fueled power over humans linked to aristocratic hereditary power over others (Lana 30). In 1872, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* set an early precedent for female vampires, with the titular character destroyed by patriarchal forces out to suppress her feminine and non-heterosexual sexuality (Hughes 62), a theme repeated later in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, a novel which largely popularized the vampiric tale. *Interview* pulls the vampire further away from its origins and into American culture by disregarding many of the characteristic features introduced by Stoker, most notably by turning the monster into the protagonist. Far from the mindless thirst or feudal avarice that characterized vampirism in the past, Rice’s vampirism is quite simply an enhanced or intensified version of the human experience (150). Like humans, vampires can appreciate religion, experience ethical uncertainty, and most importantly of all, form social and familial bonds with each other. Anne Rice was a major initiator of the

vampire's status as a communal species, with the corollary notions of warfare between vampires, vampiric loneliness and existentialism, and vampiric family units (213).

The plot of *Interview with the Vampire* is just that: a young reporter recording a long conversation with a vampire named Louis de Pointe du Lac as he tells the story of his life. As a human, Louis was a young plantation owner in Louisiana who was turned into a vampire by Lestat de Lioncourt, a vampire who desired both his company as a partner and his large estate. Shortly thereafter, Lestat moved into Louis' home and began feeding on his slaves as Louis grappled with the morality of killing, resolving to feed only on animals. Lestat expressed no such reservations, and eventually, the slaves sparked an uprising and forced the two vampires to flee the plantation to New Orleans, where Louis succumbed to Lestat's influence and began to feed on humans, choosing a five-year-old orphan as his victim. Lestat turned the girl into a child vampire, naming her Claudia and presenting her to Louis as an immortal daughter for the two of them. The family lived happily for six decades, but eventually, Claudia began to outgrow her role as her fathers' "living doll." She blamed Lestat for making her this way and poisoned him. Louis and Claudia dumped his body in the bayou and fled to Europe, where they encountered an ancient coven, the Théâtre des Vampires, and the four-hundred-year-old vampire Armand, who Louis was taken with immediately. Fearing that she would lose him, Claudia forced Louis to turn Madeleine, a dollmaker who had lost her child, in order to replace him as a vampiric parent. However, Lestat revealed himself to be alive and accused Louis and Claudia of the greatest vampiric crime: killing one of their own kind. Madeleine and Claudia were burned to ashes by the sun, but Louis was rescued by Armand. Unable to reconcile with him, Louis eventually returned to America. The reporter, upon hearing all of this, begs Louis to make him a vampire. Horrified that the boy missed the point of his story, Louis attacks him and leaves in disgust.

Rice's redefinition of the vampire as a literary figure extends further than granting them general humanity. She further associates vampires with the South (especially the mixed-race heritage of New Orleans), and with the homoerotic and the homosocial—particularly the hostility and otherness experienced by gay men (Hughes 149). *The Vampire Chronicles* opened the vampire up to a whole new range of symbolic meanings appropriate for a 20<sup>th</sup> century readership, including issues of drug addiction, AIDs, and homosexuality (Benefiel 262). According to Gina Wisker's *Femspec* article, "'Honey, I'm Home!' Splintering the Fabrication in Domestic Horror," Anne Rice's radical transformation of the vampire into a sympathetic character has everything to do with gender: "Radical women horror writers are likely to use the tropes and formulas of horror but refuse stereotypical demonizing and conventional closure, recuperating monster children into a newly configured version of the family, and celebrating the positive nurturing relations between vampire mother/sister/daughter" (10). Through the vampires of *The Vampire Chronicles*, Anne Rice created a versatile vehicle for oppressed voices to be expressed and heard, and further, rather than victimizing underrepresented people through association with the vampire, the idea of vampirism began to transform into something considered appealing rather than taboo (Hughes 255). The physical structures where the vampires dwell—the Louisiana plantation, the townhouse on the Rue Royale, the suite in the Parisian Hôtel Saint-Gabriel, and the Théâtre des Vampires—are also markedly different from their Gothic predecessors because no matter where Lestat, Louis, and Claudia make their home, their presence alone ensures the place is haunted. And each door they darken comes with its own implications about the vampiric family as it relates to the historical legacy of the South, the female condition and domestic role, and changing views of gender and sexuality in the twentieth century.

Over the course of the novel, the location with the most Gothic function is Pointe du Lac, one of the two indigo plantations owned by Louis's family, where he and later Lestat

make their home in the beginning of the story. While Louis persists into the modern day thanks to vampiric immortality, *Interview with the Vampire* serves its Gothic function by rooting its main character in the antebellum South. This is the characteristic setting of Southern Gothic, a subgenre which primarily focuses on conflicts between tradition and modernity, the degeneration of wealthy white planter families, Black culture in the South, and factors such as financial turmoil and regional identity that contribute to the glorification of America's ugly past (Hughes 14). That Pointe du Lac is located in Louisiana, a southern state known for its racial and religious diversity, is crucial to Rice's discussion of dependency and exploitation—both in vampiric relationships and American history.

Despite the French, Spanish, African, Acadian, and Indigenous heritage of Louisiana (Jang 228), the human Louis is no more enlightened than the average white man of his time and profits from the labor of slaves on his plantation without much thought. But once he is subject to the intense physical needs of a vampire, Louis develops an acute awareness and guilt over the fact that he only lives because he is taking from others; and, as it turns out, he has always lived this way. In "Louis the Plantation Owner: The Haunting of Vampiric Slavery in *Interview with the Vampire*," Ki Yoon Jang writes of Louis' status as a slave owner: "The attention to this persistently ignored fact about Louis is the key to Rice's vampires' functioning as Gothic reflector of America, for it brings to light the crucial affinity between vampirism and plantation culture, or, more specifically, between vampirism and the slavery that used to support the smooth operation of the plantation economy" (223).

Vampires survive on blood forcibly taken from others in much the same way as slave owners profited from the labor of their slaves; they have control over their victims, but they are also quite dependent upon them (224). This is reflected constantly in Louis and Lestat's relationship, where Lestat hoards vampiric knowledge away from Louis in order to keep him

around and benefit from his wealth and his company.<sup>3</sup> In the novel, Louis emphasizes how the plantations “had a great deal to do with it, really, (his) becoming a vampire” (Rice 4); he was only fully turned because Lestat wanted Pointe du Lac for his home after Louis brought him there willingly (15). Jang asserts that Lestat’s entrance into Louis’s life was a subversion of Southern hospitality: “He instantly reverses the power dynamics of the guest-host positioning by making himself an owner of what is indispensably valuable to Louis: the knowledge of being a vampire” (232). Lestat enjoys living in luxury at the expense of Louis’s mortal life, exploiting his wealth, status, and property in relative security, knowing Louis would never risk leaving the one man who could answer his questions, but never would. Over the course of Lestat’s stay at Pointe du Lac, Louis unwittingly transforms from slave owner to slave.

Although Louis and Lestat are immortal vampires, during their time haunting Pointe du Lac, both men still have living family members who also utilize their home. Louis prefers to stay distant from his family, making excuses to avoid attending his sister’s wedding and his mother’s funeral, but receives his sister dozens of times “with miserable headaches...in a darkened bedroom, the covers up to (his) chin” (Rice 48). Lestat, on the other hand, brings his father to live with them on Pointe du Lac, where he begins to both shower him with the trappings of his newfound plantation wealth and abuse him relentlessly, claiming, “I’ve put a better roof over your head than you ever put over mine!” (22). For Lestat, who was already quite comfortable draining humans of blood to survive, a parasitic life of luxury on the plantation is nothing more to him than a good way to get “revenge against life itself” (Rice 45). He is so focused on it that he is unable to enjoy the enhanced humanity Louis appreciates about vampirism. In fact, the very first sign of weakness Louis sees in Lestat is when he asks

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<sup>3</sup> ““But I had to stay with him,” answered the vampire. ‘As I’ve told you, he had me at a great disadvantage. He hinted there was much I didn’t know and must know and that he alone could tell me. But in fact, the main part of what he did teach me was practical and not so difficult to figure out for oneself” (Rice 34-35).

him to put the old man out of his misery (56); Louis demands that Lestat first forgive his father openly, and in a small way, he gets some of his power back.

The literary Gothic, according to Hughes, “emphasizes the questionable separation of the living and the dead” (6), which may not just speak to the often-terrifying intrusion of ghosts, vampires, and zombies into our world, but also the power the past holds over our present. Lestat, who mercilessly bullies his father on his deathbed, ends up degraded and living off animals, having to be supported by younger vampires. Louis, a slave owner, ends up having to flee his home when the human vampirism of slavery begins to blend into the supernatural vampirism of murder. Southern Gothic writers characteristically see their corner of the world as in a state of decline (Hughes 232), so it follows that the only way for Louis to escape the legacy of his nightmarish life on the plantation is, in typical Gothic fashion, burning it to the ground himself.

The second domestic structure in the novel may be smaller in size, but it marks the expansion of Louis and Lestat’s vampiric family, the transition from their strained, secluded life on the plantation to the bustling, social day-to-day of a wealthy American family. Escaping to New Orleans, the two vampires begin living in a Spanish townhouse on the Rue Royale, in “a long, lavish upstairs flat above a shop (Louis) rented to a tailor, a hidden garden court behind us, a well secure against the street, with fitted wooden shutters and a barred carriage door—a place of far greater luxury and security than Pointe du Lac” (Rice 99), filled with luxury items imported from all over the world. It’s here that Louis feeds on Claudia, and Lestat returns to finish the job, both of them contributing equally to the vampiric rebirth of the daughter they will raise together. According to Candace R. Benefiel in “Blood Relations: The Gothic Perversion of the Nuclear Family in Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire*,” what plays out in the townhouse is “not some ethereal fantasy involving impossible creatures, but rather a domestic drama that closely resembles ordinary family life” (269-70). Lestat



created Claudia because he sensed that Louis was becoming fed up with his secrecy and wanted to prevent his companion from leaving him, in much the same way that a couple would have a child to save a failing marriage. In their home on the Rue Royale, the vampires more firmly establish their roles as part of a family unit, a supernatural alternative to the nuclear family. The vampiric family is blood related but has no “biological” children, and vampires serve as father, mother, and lover to the victims they turn (263). Their multiple domestic roles compensate for a growing distance between the immortal vampires and their families from human life, indicating the vampires’ inability to live among humans and act in accordance with what is acceptable in human society. According to Benefiel, the vampiric family dynamic in *Interview with the Vampire* serves as a parody of the American ideal: “...the model of mother, father, and children living happily together persists in American culture. Americans are told that this model is, despite mountains of evidence to the contrary, the only acceptable way to achieve a healthy, happy, mortal life. According to this view, anything else is not a family, and anything else is subversive” (264). And Louis and Lestat’s alternative vampiric family does live happily together for sixty-five years, three beautiful people with no marriage license, no strict domestic roles, and an immortal daughter who will never grow old and move out, therefore ending the unit (264). Aside from the fact that they must kill to survive, the only downside seems to be the implication that no vampire can ever relate to the human world in the same way again. However, vampires retain a good portion of their humanity—most importantly, the need for community. And since they cannot meet this need among non-vampires, it is up to Louis, Lestat, and Claudia to fulfill it for each other.

Vampires do not have traditional domestic roles; since the parental roles in vampiric creation can be boiled down to the actions of giving and taking blood, they serve as both father and mother. Lestat has a clear paternal legacy, since Louis and Claudia both have his blood in their veins and will never die or revert to being human (Lana 67). From the first,

Lestat also asserts a dominant paternal role by attempting to force Louis into a more motherly one when Claudia enters the picture: ““You’re our daughter, Louis’s daughter and my daughter, do you see? Now, whom should you sleep with? Louis or me?” And then looking at me, he said, ‘Perhaps you should sleep with Louis. After all, when I’m tired...I’m not so kind’” (Rice 95). Lestat insists that Claudia sleep with Louis, putting distance between himself and his daughter and even attempting to instill fear. Lestat also rejoices in teaching Claudia how to kill, the tools of the trade in their “family business.” Though he relishes watching Claudia grow into a killing machine, he makes the same fatal error in fatherhood as he did with Louis: he withholds information from her. Decidedly not making up for the failings of his own father, Lestat fares no better with his own vampiric children. He fails to teach Louis *why* vampires exist, so the existential and reverent Louis leaves him to find knowledge in Armand. He fails to teach Claudia about vampire society, so the impulsive and inhuman Claudia ultimately dies for a breaking a law she didn’t know existed. A point in favor of Lestat in a maternal role rather than paternal would be his role in Claudia’s “birth.” Louis engaged in the penetrative action of feeding on Claudia’s blood, while Lestat, the ultimate decision maker in the process, nursed Claudia with his own blood to turn her. And when Lestat expresses joy at the thought of adding a new member to their family, the word he puts to those feelings is indeed “mother”: “I want a child tonight. I am like a mother...I want a child!” (89). While Lestat maintains that he turned Claudia to keep Louis from leaving,<sup>4</sup> Louis suspects that Lestat’s motivation is still revenge—this time, revenge on his partner for wanting to leave him (97). In the end, Lestat is much less concerned about Louis loving him than he is afraid of being left alone: “He did not have to be loved, but he would not be ignored” (106).

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<sup>4</sup> “He was going to go away. But now he’s not. Because he wants to stay and take care of you and make you happy” (Rice 95).

As a parent to Claudia, Louis shares intellectual interests with her, teaching her what he knows about the human world rather than the aspects of vampirism he doesn't fully understand, which are better left to Lestat. As Lestat teaches her that killing is her nature, Louis tries to instill in her that eternal life is useless if one cannot appreciate the world's beauty (Rice 100). With his daughter Louis shows his maternal side, though he is initially placed in this role by Lestat: "'What's the matter with her!' he flared at me, as though I'd given birth to her and must know" (106). Lestat heaps responsibility onto Louis to compel him to stay, all the while establishing himself as the head of the family. This in spite of the fact that Lestat depends financially on Louis; although Lestat obtains money for his family through stealing and gambling, Louis is the one who manages it and invests it, ultimately rendering him the unit's primary supporter. Louis learned these skills after becoming the head of his human family back on Pointe du Lac in the years after his father's passing, though ultimately, he would be seen as failing in his duties after his brother's suicide. The family held Louis responsible, and so he began the self-destructive spiral that led to his becoming a vampire. Considering his unsuccessful history as the head of his human family, perhaps Louis does not feel prepared to assume this role again, and so lets the less educated but more confident Lestat take the lead—but not without complaint.

Aside from the subversion of typical heteronormative gender roles, Rice also explores repressed female sexuality and grief in the character of Claudia, the child vampire. Louis and Lestat begin the story with a stable, if unhappy, relationship, but the major turning point of the narrative happens when Claudia enters the picture and begins to assert her influence over them. Imprisoned in eternal childhood, she uses the story's male characters to grow strong enough to leave them for a mother-daughter dyad she finds in Madeleine, the Parisian dollmaker who reproduces the face of her dead daughter endlessly in her dolls. These characters are intensely personal to the author, as Anne Rice wrote *Interview with the*

*Vampire* to cope with her own grief over losing her young daughter to leukemia in 1972 (Lana 75). In the character of Madeleine, she embodies herself as a grieving parent, and in Claudia, the seemingly ideal solution of a daughter who will never grow old and never die (Benefiel 266). All three of Claudia's parents over the course of the novel, Madeleine, Louis, and Lestat, view their daughter in the same way—a living doll—and to some extent, Claudia also views Madeleine as a kind of “lady doll” to use as an escape from her male-dominated world (Lana 73), especially when Louis's attraction to Armand threatens her security. The motif of dolls runs throughout the novel and speaks to more characters than just Claudia and Madeleine. None of the vampires can assume traditional familial roles; they must simply imitate fathers and mothers and children as best they can to get by.

Louis and Lestat see Claudia as a doll not only because of her eternally youthful appearance, but because she is neither fully realized vampire nor full-grown human. Whether through death or growth, childhood is supposed to come to an end naturally, and in the novel the consequences of prolonging it are expressed through Claudia's inhumanity, even by vampire standards. When her two fathers decide to turn her, she nearly kills Louis with the strength of her heartbeat and almost drains Lestat with the power of her hunger (Rice 116). Though at first, Lestat and Louis ignore the red flags that turning Claudia was a terrible idea, as she matures, they both notice something more malevolent within her: “I turned around and saw in the light from the street her eyes, like two dark flames in her white face. A doll from whom someone had cruelly ripped the eyes and replaced them with a demonic fire” (113). Eventually, Louis realizes that Claudia isn't growing to be more like Lestat as he initially feared, but something unlike either of them: “I was not her own kind. Merely the closest thing to it” (150). In one conversation after she is told the story of her turning, Claudia reveals that she has no memory of being human, and so doesn't fully understand Louis's lingering humanity:

“You loved me with your vampire nature.”

“I love you now with my human nature, if ever I had it,” I said to her.

“Ah, yes....” she answered, still musing. “Yes, and that’s your flaw, and why your face was miserable when I said as humans say, ‘I hate you,’ and why you look at me as you do now. Human nature. I have no human nature. And no short story of a mother’s corpse and hotel rooms where children learn monstrosity can give me one. I have none.” (118)

Unconcerned with Lestat’s preoccupation with past injustices or Louis’s existential angst, Claudia’s main anxiety in the novel is that while her mind has matured, her body will never grow past five years old. This puts her at a distinct disadvantage to Louis and Lestat, as unlike them, her physicality renders her completely incapable of surviving on her own, and she expresses this to them often: “Six more years, seven, eight...I might have had that shape! ...Yes, that shape, I might have known what it was like to walk at your side. Monsters! To give me immortality in this hopeless guise, this helpless form!” (Rice 263-4). Claudia remedies this inequality in what ways she can, namely by altering the furniture in their townhouse, and later, in their hotel suite in Paris. She wounds Louis by insisting he take her to buy her own child-sized coffin rather than continue to sleep with him in his adult-sized one (104). The act of buying a coffin of her own allows her to assert her independence in a small way, although she does continue to sleep with Louis anyway. Likewise, in Paris, once Madeleine, a talented craftsman and devoted mother, enters the picture, she begins to create Claudia-sized furniture, proportioned in such a way that when Claudia entered her wing of the house, she would appear to be a normal woman (276). Madeleine’s presence imbues Claudia with a bodily power she has never had before, and when she turns her (with Louis’s help, as she cannot even do this alone), it is with the hope that she will gain the ability to act independently of her fathers.

Although vampiric society is revealed in Rice's later books to be matriarchal, Claudia's small world is a microcosmic patriarchy where she is constantly infantilized and must rely on the men in her life, fathers and lovers, for protection (Tanner 15), though the relationship is rendered taboo by both their vampirism and their queerness. Rather than resigning herself to an eternity of weakness and condescension, Claudia uses her relationship with Louis, who is beginning to see her as a woman rather than a young girl, to transgress against the patriarchy embodied in Lestat. In one section, Louis remarks on the changes he has noticed as his relationship with Claudia begins to take on a new meaning, as they become "Father and Daughter. Lover and Lover" (Rice 102):

Yet more and more her doll-like face seemed to possess two totally aware adult eyes, and innocence seemed lost somewhere with neglected toys and the loss of a certain patience. There was something dreadfully sensual about her lounging on the settee in a tiny nightgown of lace and stitched pearls; she became an eerie and powerful seductress, her voice as clear and sweet as ever, though it had a resonance which was womanish, a sharpness sometimes that proved shocking. (102)

Louis expresses some reservations about Claudia's sexuality, using words such as "dreadfully" and "eerie" even as he describes her apparent maturity. When the motif of incest occurs in traditional Gothic works, typically older male relatives use their relationships with young female wards to establish control, whether over the woman herself or her land (Tanner 5). A Gothic relationship can be classified as incestuous regardless of whether the characters are actually biologically related; for example, in *The Castle of Otranto*, Isabella sees Manfred as a father figure, so their relationship is incestuous by nature even if Manfred is not Isabella's biological father (10). In *Interview with the Vampire*, while Louis and Claudia are not biologically related, they are linked by domestic roles and, technically, "by blood" (8). However, in Ricean Gothic, female characters aren't subjected to threatening incestuous

relationships so much as they are to Oedipal complexes; Claudia uses incest as a means of leveraging the strength she needs from Louis to become independent from Lestat. In a small world where the patriarchal powers that be are themselves taboo, Claudia must engage in the even more dramatic taboo of incest to escape. The vampires realize, as they oscillate between father, daughter, and lover, that their days of acting the perfect American family are over. But still, Louis torches house after house in the hopes that they can clear the slate.

The final significant domestic setting in the novel, the Théâtre des Vampires, appears after the supposed death of Lestat, while Louis and Claudia are living together in the Hôtel Saint-Gabriel as they search for others of their kind. After a time encountering only the mindless shadows of historical vampires, in Paris the two finally meet Armand, the oldest living vampire, who leads them to his home. The Théâtre des Vampires is arguably the most Gothic structure in the novel in appearance, with its ornate beauty and hidden subterranean ballrooms, representative of the rules of an ancient society from which, for most of their immortal lives, Louis and Claudia have been excluded. But this vampiric commune proves to be just as dysfunctional as their own small family, and it is Louis's attraction to Armand and this life that drives a wedge between him and Claudia, who in turn finds a new mother figure in Madeleine so that she need not be alone.

Vampiric love and attraction as presented in *Interview with the Vampire* are unique to the supernatural in some ways, but very human in others. As all vampires have masculine and feminine functions (teeth and necks, essentially), they simultaneously have two genders and no gender at all (Lana 5), and many vampires are bisexual or possess no sexual preference, “transcend(ing) the bonds of gender as surely as they have transcended the bonds of mortality” (Benefiel 268). However, vampiric attraction is also impotent; despite *Interview's*

sexually charged descriptions of Lestat feeding on Louis's blood,<sup>5</sup> the only lust they can feel as vampires is bloodlust. When Louis reflects on his feelings for Armand, he recalls, "The love I felt. Not physical love, you must understand. I don't speak of that at all, though Armand was beautiful and simple, and no intimacy with him would ever have been repellent. For vampires, physical love culminates and is satisfied in one thing, the kill" (256). And when Claudia asks Louis what it was like to make love as a human, after describing the beauty of life to her in so many ways, he becomes uncharacteristically irreverent: "It was something hurried...And...it was seldom savored...something acute that was quickly lost. I think that it was the pale shadow of killing" (Rice 210). Louis describes human sex the way a gay man might reflect on past sexual experiences with women: "seldom savored," "quickly lost," and the "pale shadow" of the queer sex he now has to compare it to.

Vampire homosexuality can be traced back to the vampire's lesbian tendencies in such works as Coleridge's "Christabel" and Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (Hughes 255). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after AIDS was first observed in sexually active gay men, vampirism was also employed as an AIDS metaphor, in ways both literal (AIDS and vampirism are both transferred by blood), sympathetic (the AIDS epidemic contributed to the persecution of LGBTQ+ individuals, paralleling the persecution of literary vampires), and homophobic (portraying vampires and thus the gay man as a predatory Other who tempts and infects the young and weak) (23). Published in 1976, *Interview with the Vampire* precedes the discovery of AIDS by five years and HIV by seven (22), but the novel nevertheless contributes to the Queer Gothic reading of vampire homosexuality, which works to invert the impact of homophobia on the popular interpretation of vampire sexuality. *Interview with the Vampire* does this in three ways. First, by introducing an element of choice into the process of turning;

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<sup>5</sup> "...Lestat whispered to me, his lips moving against my neck. I remember that the movement of his lips raised the hair all over my body, sent a shock of sensation through my body that was not unlike the pleasure of passion..." (Rice 18).



the victim must choose to drink the blood of their attacker in order to fully turn, and many do so willingly (150). Second, by framing vampirism as an elite level of humanity, possessing many of the same feelings but able to experience them in a new and amazing way, something that humans—such as the boy giving Louis his interview—aspire towards, regardless of their level of understanding of the challenges that come with it. Third, by emphasizing the need for an alternative yet equally strong vampiric community and the strength and complexity of a vampiric family united against the world. Hughes argues that the contemporary vampiric community is both idyllically desirable and, at the same time, surprisingly realistic:

“Vampirism may be a disease of the blood, but it is also a fellowship and a family—though few authors depict the vampire-gay communities of contemporary Gothic fiction as being without the tensions that might otherwise be found in their mortal-heterosexual equivalents” (23). Through Louis’s relationships with Lestat and Armand, we see that same-sex relationships are presented as normal and desirable in *Interview with the Vampire*, but just like heterosexual relationships, they are just as likely to be fulfilling as they are to be antagonistic and unfair (149).

According to Barbara Frey Waxman’s research on neo-Gothic postexistentialism in *Interview with the Vampire*, the community of vampires living in the Théâtre des Vampires embodies “the negative traits of the extended nuclear family: unified by kinship and conformity, it is also ravaged by jealousy, mistrust and power struggles” (91). Experiencing this for himself, Louis wonders if all vampiric relationships are eventually doomed to fail. Lestat assuaged his loneliness by hoarding knowledge, manipulating and abusing his family, and even seducing his victims before killing them. Claudia was incapable of relating even to other vampires, let alone humans. And it’s true in the novel that even when vampires are living together in hatred, they stick together because they prefer it to trying to relate to the human world. “We could not bear to live alone! We needed our little company. A wilderness

of mortals surrounded us, groping, blind, preoccupied, and the brides and bridegrooms of death” (117). Louis in particular finds it difficult to accept that he is essentially at odds with humanity, which makes the faults of the larger vampire community even more unbearable to him. It comes to a peak when Lestat returns, hungry for revenge, and Louis’s and Claudia’s transgressions of rules they were never taught cause the Théâtre des Vampires to turn on them. All of his relationships unsalvageable, Louis decides to burn the Théâtre to the ground, just like the home of his human family on Pointe du Lac and the home of his vampire family on the Rue Royale. The continual burning down of domestic structures is, in this case, not the vanquishing of an evil, but the vampires’ struggle against idealized domestic norms.

With a backdrop of 20<sup>th</sup> century misogyny and homophobia stemming from heightened cultural anxieties about the destruction of family values, *Interview with the Vampire* embodies the historical transition of vampire from lone hunter to sympathetic member of a complex and even supportive community. This community transcends sexuality, gender, and traditional domestic and parental roles, all while being subject to normative family drama, and it is united by the single motivating factor of human loneliness. The novel marks a significant turning point in the history of the Gothic at large, as the genre’s shifting sympathies begin to allow the family dynamic to be represented in more nuanced ways.

## Epilogue: The Future of the Gothic

“The house...may at first seem a safe haven, but the same walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become...the walls that hold the victim in.”

-Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*

As the thematic horizons of Gothic fiction have continued to broaden, its domestic spaces have, ironically, contracted. Where once stood an imposing castle or crumbling monastery, one nowadays is more likely to find a humble cabin. Of all the horror subgenres, “cabin horror” seems to have inherited the most from the Gothic. A subtype of the slasher genre popularized around the same time as *Interview with the Vampire* was first published, these campy, often low-budget horror flicks may well pave the way to the future of the Gothic narrative. Over time, the Gothic formula has leveled its castles and monasteries, stripping the domestic structure down to its most basic form, becoming first a mansion, then a home in the suburbs, then an isolated cabin in the woods.

Cabin horror was largely birthed in the early 1980s with slasher films such as *Evil Dead* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* and has since gone through three stages of life: rise, revision, and renaissance. After initially being considered a trend of the slasher genre, the cabin film experienced a decline in the 90s due to oversaturation before bouncing back in the 2000s with a surge of postmodern self-referential films such as *Tucker & Dale vs. Evil* and *Cabin in the Woods* (Grant 6). In every cabin horror film, the cabin is an isolating force with lifelike agency, but its influence depends on which parts of it the characters choose to explore; its main floor may be safe but creepy, but venture into the basement, attic, locked room, crawl space, or surrounding wilderness, and the unsuspecting protagonists may be faced with indescribable evils (5). Slashers are also filled with their own subset of Gothic stock characters; in the 2011 film *Cabin in the Woods*, these character archetypes are referred to by name as the Whore, the Athlete, the Scholar, the Fool (also known as the Stoner, who is sometimes conflated or interchanged with the Scholar), and the Virgin, more commonly

known as the Final Girl. But its defining feature as a subgenre is its ability to cross over into other genres, which it has demonstrated throughout its three phases of life. The cabin horror renaissance of the 2000s cemented it firmly as a subgenre, not a trend, and its lack of significant decline, steadfast formulaicness, and penchant for adaptation marked it as a product of the Gothic. According to Grant, “From its slasher origins and influences to its forays into comedy...pseudo-documentary...and the art film...the cabin is not bound by horror conventions and modes. Able to meld itself to other, disparate genres while retaining its essential qualities, the cabin horror film is both highly adaptable and tightly structured” (6). For example, the first *Evil Dead* film is a classic slasher; the second film, *Evil Dead 2*, is literally a revision of the first; and the third, *Army of Darkness*, is a mixed-genre piece (9). The cabin horror film is the smallest microcosm of society created yet by the Gothic genre, a postmodern playground where filmmakers can experiment and conventions (both of the genre and of society) can be upheld, revised, or mixed.

Cabin horror is a genre of repression and transgression; the isolated nature of the cabin in the woods renders it the perfect location to release one’s repressed desires, in much the same way as it might be cathartic for a viewer to watch a horror movie and see said desires released onscreen (Grant 11). Some desires are necessarily repressed in order to function within society, such as violent behavior; this is known as basic repression. The cabin film also deals with surplus repression, which may be specific to one’s culture (6). This can include gender roles, power dynamics, substance use, and sexual practices. The often-taboo transgression of these cultural and social norms is depicted gratuitously in cabin horror. In the cabin, characters release their repression—typically by partying, drinking, and having sex—and are promptly punished by the cabin and the evil forces within it; as an example, both male and female characters are subject to the ever-popular trope of postcoital death (Clover 33).

While this punishment of sexual expression seems to index repressive cultural norms, traditional gender roles do not often fare well in these kinds of movies. Carol Clover explores the relationship between gender and the slasher film in her book, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*: "...the man who insists on taking charge, or who believes that logic or appeals to authority can solve the problem, or (above all) who tries to act the hero, is dead meat" (65). Likewise, sometimes women die in slashers simply because of their femininity; most slasher killers are men, and most victims are beautiful, traditionally feminine young women (42). They may die because they arouse the killer, or make the killer envious, or perhaps even because the killer sees them as sexual rivals (34). Following a long-standing Gothic tradition of the inherent poetic quality of female death, the deaths of women tend to be more graphic and drawn out in slasher films than those of men (35). The rejection of traditional gender norms, specifically femininity, also shows itself in the "victim-hero" character of the Final Girl, a stock character whose gender expression is analyzed in Clover's research: "Just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine—not, in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends. Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls and ally her, ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself" (40). Though she is chased and tormented in much the same way as a traditional Gothic heroine, Clover argues that the Final Girl is a lot more boyish than her predecessors.

According to Noel Carroll in *The Philosophy of Horror*, the horror story can be empowered to either defend and uphold cultural standards of normality or to encourage transgression of those norms. In classic monster movies, for example, where the monster is always defeated in the end, "...this genre employs the abnormal, only for the purpose of showing it vanquished by the forces of the normal. The abnormal is allowed center stage solely as a foil to the cultural order, which will ultimately be vindicated by the end of the

fiction” (Carroll 199). But the cabin can punish you for conforming just as easily as it can punish you for transgressing. The contemporary cabin horror formula—the assembling of the stock characters, the transgression of boundaries in an isolated space, the punishment-murders, and the destruction of the physical representation of domesticity at the end—indicates that the Gothic has the power to instill the same fear and disgust in the acceptable as it does in the taboo (198). In other words, even if humanity conquers its enduring fear of the unknown, the Gothic will still manage to hit close to home.

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