

# Studies in Gothic Fiction

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## **Studies in Gothic Fiction**

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# The Nightmare of the Unknowable, or, Poe's Inscrutability

Robert Tally

Poe begins and ends his enigmatic study of the man of the crowd with the phrase, *es lässt sich nicht lesen*, “it does not permit itself to be read” (179, 188).<sup>1</sup> The tale, or sketch, emphasizes this point as the narrator follows his curious but illegible subject through the streets of London all night and throughout the following day, but at the end of his wild perambulations he knows no more about the man than he did at first, and is unable to bring his reader any closer to understanding—to really *knowing*—this “man of the crowd.” This story, like others in Poe’s *oeuvre*, pretends to offer a kind of fictional anthropology, a pseudo-science that will grant us a vista into the unknown in order to solve a riddle posed by it, only to pull the rug out from under us. At the end of the tale, the mysterious figure remains a mystery; the hieroglyphic remains indecipherable. The narrator’s conclusion, that this man of the crowd is “the type and genius of true crime,” does not so much offer understanding of the old man’s character as it proffers the notion of inscrutability itself as terrifying prospect. As a dramatization of the futility of reading, “The Man of the Crowd” is itself a tale that doesn’t allow itself to be read. The same observation might apply to much of Poe’s work, in which inscrutability is the basis for the terror, the nightmare of the unknowable.

Indeed, if Poe is perhaps best known for his tales of terror, it is worth noting that the inscrutable—that which will not let itself be read—lies at the heart of them. To some extent, Poe’s engagement with the inscrutable follows from his powerful connections to transatlantic romanticism, which also sought to represent the unrepresentable by giving form to mystic, ecstatic, or ineffable experience. That which invokes real terror, for Poe, cannot be adequately understood. Famously, Poe defended his work from charges of “Germanism” by situating terror in an altogether different locus: “If in many of my productions terror has been the thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul.” As Poe continues in the Preface to his *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, he “deduced this terror only from its legitimate sources, and urged it only to its legitimate results” (“Preface,” 6). This terror is rightly associated with both the grotesque and the arabesque, that is, with the horrifically unfamiliar, as well as with the bizarre and complicated. Such terror clearly interacts with the strange or exotic, typically a fear of the unknown; much more fearsome still is the *unknowable*, the dim and gloomy sense that what is at first merely unfamiliar and perplexing is actually inscrutable, something that we do not, and *cannot* ever really, understand. As Poe notes, the soul is both the source of terror and the ground upon which it unfolds, and yet the soul is also the seat of knowledge, the Cartesian *res cogitans* that is supposed to impose the rational meaning upon the world and hence, in the Enlightenment project of demystification, to remove the terrors of the unknowable. However, in Poe, this terror reasserts itself emphatically, as a terrifying inscrutability itself.

Poe’s work frequently renders problematic the relation between storytelling and knowing; often Poe makes the seemingly knowledgeable narrator a kind of dupe, one who thinks he knows only to discover that he cannot know what is happening. In some cases, the reader as well as the narrator is duped. In “The Balloon Hoax,” Poe obviously delights in his ability to gull readers into believing a story that is utterly fantastic; elsewhere, for example, in “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” Poe presents a quasi-scientific case study that some accepted as true. Poe’s “hoaxes” place the reader in

an awkward position, but not one very much different from that in which the reader is situated in other tales as well. Poe shapes his tales in such a way that the very narratives themselves thwart the aim of clear understanding, deconstructing their meanings on their very pages. No doubt, this is a reason why French poststructuralists have been so taken with his work.<sup>2</sup> A foundational project in many tales seems to be the critique of knowledge itself. Indeed, as I argue herein, the principal characteristic of Poe's tales is inscrutability, the inability to know. This, in the final analysis, is the true terror of Poe's work: not the fear of the unknown, but the fear of unknowability.

## A Voyage into the Unknowable

In Poe's early tale, "Manuscript Found in a Bottle," the unnamed narrator's thrill of "discovery" literally descends into the unknown and the *unknowable*. The very narrative style serves to highlight the inscrutability of the experience, as the first-person narration shifts its forms, tenses, and emotional intensity during the tale. While the conceit manifested in the title assures the reader that the tale is authentic, the narration belies it, as it begins in a calm, dry, reflective autobiographical style (including the past or perfect tense), then moves to a more fragmentary style of diary entries, then breathlessly scrawls its message as the mysterious ship plunges into the vortex.

These shifts may be registered by comparing a few lines from the text. The opening words of "Manuscript Found in a Bottle" lay out the faux autobiographical foundation, while also withholding the sort of information that most readers of autobiographies would desire. "Of my country and my family I have little to say. Ill usage and length of years have driven me from the one, and estranged me from the other" (99). In other words, an "I" is firmly established as the narrator, but very little about the narrator will be known. Indeed, the remainder of the first paragraph serves to establish the narrator's credibility; by underscoring how rational and how unimaginative he is, the narrator insists that he is the least likely *type* of person to create fictions or to be gulled by "the *ignes fatui* of superstition" (99). Yet, aside from being the sort of person who thinks a certain way, the narrator's biography is completely unknown. In some respects, this comports with the generic conventions of nineteenth-century personal narrative. As Jonathan Arac has discussed in *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative*, personal narratives of this time operated as extroverted accounts of unfamiliar or exotic experiences, rather than as introspective narratives of spiritual or personal development (as, for example, in eighteenth-century narratives of religious experience like Jonathan Edwards's "Personal Narrative" or twentieth-century autobiographies that likely include some psychological analysis). However, Poe's perversion of the conventions of personal narrative is precisely his intent in "Manuscript Found in a Bottle," and the effect of the tale is to undermine the authority of such narratives, an authority that rests in personal narrative's purported ability to *know* or *understand* the exotic or foreign experiences they contain. Narrative, as Arac notes, derives from the Latin *gnarus* or "knowing" (76–77), but in Poe's narratives, the force comes from the subversion of narrative's truth-telling conventions.

The first half of "Manuscript Found in a Bottle" recounts events in the somewhat dispassionate past tense, explaining the odd things that have happened, but maintaining a relatively sober tone of one merely describing encounters. A curious break in the text—emphasized by a literal interruption in the textual layout of the page, with a single paragraph separated from the foregoing and subsequent text by asterisks—offers a change in the narration ... and in the narrator.

A feeling, for which I have no name, has taken possession of my soul – a sensation which will admit of no analysis, to which the lessons of by-gone times are inadequate, and for which I fear futurity itself will offer me no key. To a mind constituted like my own, the latter consideration is an evil. I shall never – I know that I shall never – be satisfied with

regard to the nature of my conceptions. Yet it is not wonderful that these conceptions are indefinite, since they have their origin in sources so utterly novel. A new sense – a new entity is added to my soul. (104)

Here, of course, is the Romantic transformation from rational man of science into sensitive (and notably *passive*) subject of mystical or inexplicable experience. Not only is the ineffable experience something that “will admit of no analysis,” but it apparently cannot even be articulated. The narrator who would know has become a narrator who *knows* he *cannot* know. So, too, is the reader now placed in the awkward position of not being able to read. Poe is introducing the text’s inscrutability at the very moment at which a kind of knowledge—at least, a new sensibility or a new conception—has been discovered by the narrator.

Following from this pivotal and bizarre little paragraph, the tense changes again. “It is long since I first trod the deck of this terrible ship, and the rays of my destiny are, I think, gathering into focus.” The “is” and the “are” indicate that the narration has shifted from a personal narrative of interesting past experiences to a running commentary of almost immediately occurring events. Indeed, it is in this paragraph that the narrator announces his plan to write down his experiences (including, presumably, the foregoing text) and predicts that he will not survive to see it published, vowing instead to enclose his manuscript in a bottle and, “at the last moment,” throw it into the sea (104, 105). The inevitable consequence of this shift in tense and the decision to foreground the *written-ness* of the tale, which previously we’d been allowed to follow without regard to its self-conscious textuality, is that the tale ceases to venture into the unknown-but-still-knowable, and becomes a kind of perceptual barrage of stimuli that in themselves seem inscrutable. That is, the narrator—no longer the scientist collecting data and analyzing it at his leisure—moves to the unreflective present tense, as if to say, “I cannot make sense of this, but here it is! Do with it what you will.” The experiences are, in the narrator’s own estimation, “so utterly novel” as to admit of no analysis.

The final lines of the tale accelerate this process and amplify the inscrutability of the text by leaping into the future tense, and thus peremptorily foreclosing on any hope of understanding experiences later. The narrator himself indicates this by notifying the reader that he will be unable to consider the matter further. “But little time will be left me to ponder upon my destiny – the circles rapidly grow small – we are plunging madly within the grasp of the whirlpool – and amid a roaring, and bellowing, and thundering of ocean and of tempest, the ship is quivering, oh God! and – going down” (109). This ending completes the title’s foundational conceit and allows the manuscript to be transmitted by bottle, but it also invokes a fake scientific “discovery”: that is, the discovery of the whirlpool at the South Pole. Poe’s bizarre footnote (and according to the note, it is Poe’s not the narrator’s), in which he seems to “correct” the false impression left by the manuscript and cites no less an authority than the cartographer Gerardus Mercator to vouch for “truth” that such a whirlpool must be located at “the (northern) Polar Gulf” (527 note 2) only confounds matters. The pseudo-scientific explanation further undermines the sense of clear legibility by suggesting an alternative, false knowledge, typical of Poe’s more direct hoaxes.

In “The Poetics of Descent,” I have suggested that Poe uses this narration to undermine the personal narrative form, which became so popular in the 1830s and 1840s (Tally). The popularity of personal narratives lay, in large part, in their ability to present scientific or quasi-scientific knowledge about the exotic regions their first-person narrators had explored. Examples include Richard Henry Dana’s *Two Years before the Mast*, Frederick Douglass’s slave narrative, Herman Melville’s *Typee*, or even Poe’s own *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, which for years was published as a nonfiction travel narrative, despite its utterly fantastic story. (Indeed, a sign of both the popularity of personal narratives and the injunction that they be “true” may be seen in the fact that the publisher of *Pym*,

Harper and Brothers, declined to published Melville's *Typee* in 1846 on the grounds that "it was impossible that it could be true and *therefore* was without real value" [Leyda 196, my emphasis]). Whereas the personal narrative form aimed at making the unfamiliar familiar, domesticating the exotic, or making the unknown known, Poe's perversion of the form—in "Manuscript Found in a Bottle," *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and elsewhere—strikingly asserts the inscrutability and unknowability of these uncanny experiences or events. With Poe, these cannot be "brought home" in the sense of being made knowable, and the anxiety or terror is therefore enhanced. At the risk of being accused of "Germanism" myself, I might label Poe's treatment of the ineffable experiences as *unheimlich*, after Freud and Heidegger, who emphasize the very not-at-home-ness of the uncanny (or un-homely). "In anxiety one feels 'uncanny' [*unheimlich*]. [...] but here 'uncanniness' also means 'not being at home' [*das Nicht zu-hause-sein*]" (Heidegger 233). As I will discuss below, this aspect of Poe's inscrutable work will distinguish it from the tradition of gothic horror, as well as from the nineteenth-century personal narrative form.

### **Terror as the Anti-Epistemic**

In tales of terror, such as "The Fall of the House of Usher" or "Ligeia," Poe deliberately puzzles his readers, leading them to imagine a stable meaning that then will not hold. In such tales, the lure of knowledge is tantalizingly dangled before the narrator's (and often the reader's) eyes, only to evanesce or, more often, to be violently dashed away. The prospect of knowledge—arcane or forbidden knowledge, perhaps, or the mere satisfaction of one's curiosity about some odd happenstance—forms desire from which arises the pleasure of the text, but the terror that excites in the tale derives from the failure of knowledge, the persistence of the inscrutable. In such tales, Poe's famous single effect is encapsulated in this terrifically unknowable phenomenon (395–96). If the pleasures of narrative may be found in the essentially epistemological project of knowing, the terrors of the text are fundamentally anti-epistemic.

In "Usher," for instance, we are presented with another unnamed and largely unknown narrator, who presents the wondrous events of the tale in such a way that we are invited to make sense of them only to have them render themselves inscrutable once more. The narrator's "childish experiment" at the beginning of the tale, in which he tries attempts to implement the romantic theory of the sublime for practical effect, by rearranging the elements of the scene in order to disarm their power to affect him, turns out only to increase the "gloom" felt by that scene (139–40). In attempting to fix things, to assign them stable meanings, and to understand them in their own being, the narrator—and Poe himself—shows how such methods are not only ineffective, but have the opposite of the intended effect: the act of reading the text seems to render the text all the more unreadable. The romantic view that the poet's use of the imagination can transform nature into the sublime—a Coleridgean theory adopted by Emerson in his belief that poets are "liberating gods" (see below)—is here mocked by Poe, whose narrator experiences "an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart – an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime" (138). Later, Poe includes a scene of reading in order to introduce and frame the tale's climax. In what amounts to an absurd blend of horror and humor, Poe's narrator reads the grotesque chivalric romance of "Ethelred" to calm Roderick Usher's nerves; the effect is just the opposite, of course, and the ghastly end to the tale leaves one no more enlightened than was the narrator's first impression of the house of Usher. The narrator can encounter the phenomenon of the fall of the house of Usher is witnessed, but neither he nor the reader has any greater knowledge. It is another text that does not let itself be read.

In "Ligeia," knowledge—or, rather, unknowability—is the very subject of the tale, embodied in the figure of the mysterious woman herself. The narrator, who (just as in "Manuscript" or "Usher")

is not merely one who tells what he knows but one, like the reader, who *seeks to know*, perpetually withholds knowledge even as he discloses it; more to the point, his apocalyptic disclosure of what has happened is inextricably tied to the notion that he does not understand what has happened. In the very first line, he bizarrely concedes that he cannot recall how he “became acquainted with” the woman who is the object such intense passion and love; he suggests that her most powerful characteristics entered his soul—again, reminiscent of the “Manuscript” narrator—“unnoticed and unknown” (110). Yet he admits that he has “*never known*” (emphasis in the original) Ligeia’s family name. Hence, both the narrator and the subject of the study are unknown. The characteristics of Ligeia that *are* known, the reader discovers, are her physical attributes, especially her eyes (to which lengthy descriptions are devoted) and her supernatural intelligence, especially with respect to her voluminous learning in the moral and physical sciences, mathematics, and the seemingly arcane “forbidden” knowledge. The narrator’s explanation of Ligeia’s erudition builds ecstatic, and notably erotic, climax in disclosing his feeling at being educated by her:

With how vast a triumph – with how vivid a delight – with how much of all that is ethereal in hope – did I feel, as she bent over me in studies but little sought – but less known – that delicious vista by slow degrees expanding before me, down whose long, gorgeous, and all untrodden path, I might at length pass onward to the goal of wisdom too divinely precious not to be forbidden. (114)

The phantasmagoria that follows from Ligeia’s death and the narrator’s second marriage makes visible the grotesque and arabesque features of the “divinely precious” wisdom, but the narrator’s delirium (and his confessed opium haze) makes any sense of really acquirable knowledge a dubious proposition. In the apocalyptic end, the avatar of knowledge is a hallucinatory vision, not a triumphant revelation.<sup>3</sup>

The horror of many such tales lies not in a particular fright, but in a general mood of uncertainty. Again and again, Poe presents the arcane, the exotic, the otherworldly, or unique, but he refuses to explicate in detail the foreign matter and to bring it into a safe and familiar intellectual archive. On the contrary, Poe’s work frequently undermines the scientific or pseudo-scientific practices of reading the meaning of events from their surfaces or of empiricism in general. Poe injects greater uncertainty into such proceedings. Even in the detailed science-fiction of a work like “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” which is written as a sort of medical case study, the horror of the inexplicable and unknowable undermines the scientific knowledge it purports to present. The last word there, as always, involves the arrogance thinking that this knowledge is attainable. Poe’s work actively defies interpretation, at times subtly and at others overtly undermining the reader’s assumptions that the story’s “meaning” will reveal itself. In some tales, like the detective stories, “Descent into the Maelstrom,” or “The Gold Bug,” Poe is willing to offer some explanation of the puzzles presented, but more often than not, Poe’s texts frustrate the desire for comprehension. Even in his more explanatory instances—for instance, in “The Man Who was Used Up”—Poe is as likely to confound as to confirm the reader’s surmises. The text does not allow itself to be read.

### **Poe’s Unfathomability**

The narrator in “Manuscript Found in a Bottle” marvels at the strange sailors who inhabit the spectral ship: “Incomprehensible men!” Poe not only makes incomprehensibility a hallmark of the tales of mystery, suspense, and terror, but may himself embody the concept. As a young man, even before writing “Manuscript,” he found the nightmare of the unknowable within his own breast. As a contemporary put it, “He said often that there was a mystery hanging over him he could never

fathom” (Mary Devereaux, qtd. in Ackroyd 58). Poe’s tales also present mysteries that cannot be fathomed, texts that do not let themselves be read.

Poe’s Dupin trilogy, the “tales of ratiocination,” would seem to offer a notable counter-example, but even in these mysteries, Poe does not really give the reader the satisfaction of interpreting clues and gaining knowledge. Rather than offering a puzzle—like a crossword or a Sudoku—where pleasure derives precisely from *figuring it out*, Poe insists on insoluble puzzling. Although detective fiction would seem to be the very model for pleasurable puzzle-solving, Poe’s Dupin stories continue to emphasize the inscrutability of his subject. Unlike later examples in the genre, Poe’s tales do not really invite the readers to “play” the detective, to solve the mystery themselves. Rather, Poe places the reader in the position of the perplexed observer who will marvel at the genius of the one who actually *can* figure things out. Auguste Dupin’s analytical prowess is itself a marvel, and Dupin’s powers lie in his own uncanny ability to *read*—whether he is reading clues (as in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”) or reading people (as in “The Purloined Letter”). We, the readers, cannot *read* in the same way. Dupin, whose character is introduced in “Rue Morgue” only after the fine distinction is made between the chess-player (who merely calculates) and the draughts- or whist-player (who must also be analyze his or her opponent), represents a reader that Poe’s work does not, in the end, permit any of us to be. However, the real mystery might be Dupin himself, whose mysterious background makes him another Roderick Usher, but one whose madness lies in ratiocination rather than phantasm. These detective stories, like the tales of terror, present knowledge as a problem—not something to be gleaned but something to be marveled at—and Dupin’s apparent ability to read the text makes our own inability to read, and the text’s inscrutability, all the more striking.

In his quarter-deck speech explaining why he must pursue Moby Dick, Ahab tells Starbuck and the crew: “He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That *inscrutable* thing is what I chiefly hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him” (Melville 164, my emphasis).<sup>4</sup> In Melville’s novel, it seems that it is really inscrutability itself (rather than the inscrutability of the underlying “malice”) that is most hated. In *Moby-Dick*, the inability to read and know is a concern throughout the novel, as Ishmael’s cetological system must remain “a draught of a draught,” and the Leviathan “must remain unpainted to the last,” and “the mystic-marked whale remains undecipherable.” As Ishmael tauntingly concludes the chapter on the “face” of the whale, “Read it if you can.” Poe and Melville, so different in so many respects, both recognized the horror of inscrutability in the context of the nineteenth-century United States. In a society self-consciously fashioning itself as a model for future successes, such inscrutability appears as a real terror, a repressed but urgent, unconscious tainting of that “optative mood” and “progressive” vision of mid-nineteenth-century American thought.

This is what Harry Levin discussed years ago in his study, *The Powers of Blackness*, where he says “our [meaning Americans’] most perceptive minds have distinguished themselves from our popular spokesmen by concentrating on the dark half of the situation” (7). Tocqueville had recognized that American ideology was thoroughly imbued with dreams of scientific and social progress, progress based in part on the firm belief that knowledge will helpfully expand horizons and that the world and everything in it are indeed legible. (Is not the very label, “American Renaissance,”<sup>5</sup> an acknowledgement of this hope?) But Levin argued that that other part of America, the subterranean or dark vision of an utterly mysterious, illegible world, typified a powerful countercultural strain in American literature. Melville and Hawthorne picked up on it, but Poe made such terror his stock in trade.

Poe is more anomalous still. Much of what I have been discussing as Poe’s exploration of the unknowable and his inscrutability would seem to place him firmly within a romantic or gothic



tradition, a tradition in which he—by reputation—has long been at home, even if American Studies has not always accorded him so high a rank. It is certainly true that Poe is strongly influenced by romanticism, especially German romanticism, and that many of his tales deploys conventions of the gothic to great effect. But Poe's inscrutability cannot be merely ascribed to his romantic gothic affiliations, and I am tempted to add that this disposition in Poe actually distinguishes his work from what is traditionally understood as the gothic. In other words, Poe's terror, the nightmare of the unknowable, as I call it, is not compatible with the terror associated with gothic literature.

Although the gothic is a genre well known, indeed perhaps paradigmatically known, for its presentation of the mysterious, the fantastic, and the terrifying, the genre tends to domesticate its terrors by offering up a comforting narrative to contain the inscrutable by mapping it onto a more familiar terrain. Marshall Brown's *The Gothic Text* offers a surprising thesis on the gothic literature of the romantic era. Contrary to expectation, Brown's first thesis is "Romantic gothic fiction is not exciting," which would seem to fly in the face of the conventions of gothic literature. But, as Brown explains, "Fascination rather than excitement is the hypnotic core of the great gothic novels" (3, 4). Gothic novels are interested precisely in *knowing*, so the fascination is largely intellectual and not visceral. Indeed, Brown holds that lack of excitement, rather than the inability to maintain a "unity of effect," may have been the real reason Poe was so opposed to the length of the novel form. "But if there is a comprehensible reason why Poe dismissed long fiction as an impossibility, it is perhaps because the novels in his gothic mode do in fact constitutively lack the excitement he sought" (4). Noting the lengthy descriptive passages in Walpole or Radcliffe devoted to landscapes or architecture, Brown understands gothic novels as participating in a project similar to Kant's critiques. In other words, the gothic novel is epistemological, and the function of the novels is to bring the unfamiliar data into the structural framework of a knowable system. Scrutability is therefore at their core.

Poe's demand for excitement<sup>6</sup> might disqualify his work from Brown's definitions of the gothic, but another disqualifier seems to me to be Poe's commitment to inscrutability. Poe's work is opposed to the gothic, inasmuch as the gothic presents mystery in order to explain it away. "As their chaotic events unfold, the [gothic] novels return insistently to problems of orientation in time and place, to coherence of experience in a world of magic or mystery, to participation in a community under threat of isolation—in short, to the various continuities of meaning that stabilize a world at risk" (Brown xiv). Thus, the Kantian acknowledgement of the limits of reason nevertheless serves to establish the comfortable knowability of the world in establishing a frame for understanding. But Poe will not allow this comfort. Poe insists on insoluble puzzling, where the principal investigator does not actually gain knowledge so much as recognizes the ineffability of knowledge. Poe's terror, which is not of Germany but of the soul, comes down to a nameless fear of the that which cannot be read.

It is for this reason that I respectfully disagree with the otherwise engaging argument of Jeremy Cagle, who argues that Poe's dramatization of illegibility in "The Man of the Crowd" makes Poe an apt figure, not only of romanticism, but also of an American transcendentalism embodied by Emerson and Thoreau. Although Cagle acknowledges Poe's critique of Emerson's transcendentalism, Cagle concludes that Poe actually imagines the transcendentalist idea to win the day. "Poe's interest in exploring the irrational or unreadable—certainly a prominent theme in 'The Man of the Crowd'—is both a marked divergence from the *zeitgeist* of the mid-nineteenth century and also one of the hallmark tenets of romanticism which connects Poe to American Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau" (29). Cagle argues that Poe resisted the rationalistic "Common Sense" philosophy of his day and embraced a "new philosophy" that incorporated the irrational or the perverse by virtue of a "Higher Reason" based on intuition or imagination, not on rationality itself. Drawing on Emerson's view of the Poet as a "liberating god" who "unlocks our

chains, and admits us to a new scene” (Emerson 277–78), Cagle then argues that Poe endorses the image of the poet as the one who can *read well*. In other words, rather than presenting us with a text that does not let itself be read, Poe (in Cagle’s view) offers a critique of traditional—scientific or rational—reading techniques and promulgates a view of a poetic reading that somehow can read the unreadable texts.

This strikes me a surprising misreading in its own right, all the more striking since Cagle does acknowledge, albeit *en passant*, Poe’s active critique of Emerson’s position. Citing Lawrence Buell’s assessment of Emerson as a poet-priest of a fixed universal order—but, notably, not citing Emerson’s view that the “religions of the world are the ejaculations of a few imaginative men” (279), thus rendering poetry and religious thought identical—Cagle notes that Poe “presents a riposte to Transcendentalists” and utterly denies the Emersonian view that the poet has access to more liberated knowledge of the world. Poe’s is not merely a watered-down romanticism, in which scientific method must take a back seat to poetic impulse (as his critical writings make perfectly clear, Poe does not view these as binary oppositions), but rather a much more forceful argument about the actual legibility of phenomena. Emerson the former Unitarian minister *must* maintain that a transcendental Truth can not only be found but can be understood, whereas Poe is much more skeptical. When Poe notes, in “The Poetic Principle” (as elsewhere), that “In the contemplation of Beauty we alone find it possible to attain that pleasurable elevation, or excitement, *of the soul*, which we recognize as the Poetic Sentiment, and which is so easily distinguished from Truth, which is the satisfaction of the Reason, or from Passion, which is the excitement of the heart” (506–07), Poe is not saying that poetry provides an alternative to rational truth-seeking—that is, another, better way to read an otherwise illegible text—but that the poetic principle operates differently and within a different sphere altogether (to wit, the *soul*). Just as the narrator of the “Manuscript Found in a Bottle” discovered “a new entity is added to my soul,” describing it—but, and this is essential, *unable to interpret it*—as “a sensation that will admit of no analysis,” so too does Poe allow ineffable experience to permeate his tales without allowing them “to be read.” The terror, which is rightfully deep-seated in the soul itself, is one of inscrutability. The reader does not experience the terror of reading terrifying stories, but rather encounters the terror of not being able to make sense of these experiences.

Poe, as he suspected in his youth, is unfathomable in this respect. Although he clearly maintains affiliations with various modes and schools of thought, Poe certainly cannot be captured by labels like romantic, gothic, transcendentalist, irrationalist, and so on. Poe is like Michel Foucault’s mocking persona, who declares, “no, no I’m not where you are lying in wait for me, but over here, laughing at you” (Foucault 17). Poe remains a savage anomaly in nineteenth-century American literature, and a part of that status is his inscrutability. Incomprehensible man!

With Poe, inscrutability is the constant, lurking menace, thwarting the sense of sense-making and troubling one’s confidence in *knowing* at all. Like the purloined letter, the text and its desired meaning dangle right before our eyes, without our being able to comprehend it in any definitive way. Or, like Poe’s narrator in “The Man of the Crowd,” we can marvel at the enigma before us, but we cannot understand. That narrator begins his tale by noting that men “die with despair of heart and convulsion of throat, on account of the hideousness of mysteries that will not *suffer themselves* to be revealed” (179). But, by the end of his long night of fruitlessly investigating the mysterious “man of the crowd,” the narrator changes his tune. Given what greater terrors might be found if we truly could look into those inscrutable mysteries, “perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that *es lässt sich nicht lesen*.” Perhaps this reasonable and comforting will allow him to sleep, but as Goya so memorably depicted it, the sleep of reason breeds monsters. The nightmare of the unknowable remains, for us, a terror of the soul.

## Notes

1. Except for the “Preface” to *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, all references herein to Poe’s work come from *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*.
2. See, e.g., Jacques Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Yale French Studies* 48 (1973), 39–72; and Jacques Derrida, “The Purveyor of Truth,” trans. Alan Sheridan, *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, eds. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 173–212.
3. Etymologically, apocalypse relates to disclosure or uncovering (from the Greek), but in Poe’s tales the apocalyptic endings frequently leave things veiled. In “Ligeia,” the mystery of the story’s end only compounds the mysteries unfolding at the story’s beginning.
4. The other quotations in this paragraph are from Melville, pages 145, 264, 306, and 347, respectively.
5. As Levin explains, he—rather than his mentor, F.O. Matthiessen—is actually responsible for this label. “Matthiessen had wanted to call his book, after an apt phrase from Whitman, *Man in the Open Air*. The publisher had wanted something more descriptively categorical. My groping formulation must have caught Matthiessen’s liberal idealism, his warm feeling for the creative potentialities of American life. But it left out that ‘vision of evil’ which clouds the hopeful picture from time to time” (vii–viii).
6. In his famous review of Hawthorne’s “*Twice-told Tales*,” Poe writes: “A poem must intensely excite. Excitement is its province, its essentiality. Its value is in the ratio of its (elevating) excitement” (394).

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# “Did I scare you?": The Curious Case of Michael Jackson as Gothic narrative

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## INTRODUCTION

On June 25, 2009, Michael Jackson died.<sup>1</sup> Universally hailed as a musical genius and pop icon, Michael's tale is shrouded by rumor, speculation and mystery. Even as this article is written, controversy rages not only over the cause of his death but also the legacy he has left behind.<sup>2</sup> Michael manifested all that we loved and loathed of our humanity – a desire to restore the innocence of the world and yet a dark inclination towards deviant transgressions. He was very much an enigma that many imitated but few identified with. Although he was a hypersensitive recluse victimized by an abusive childhood, his transformations of physiognomy caused him to be the focus of uninterrupted media attention. He reportedly gave millions to charitable organizations yet left behind an inheritance of debt and lawsuits. Pursued by fans and paparazzi, persecuted by accusation and litigation, Michael was paranoid of exposure and betrayal. His eccentric behavior created such an aura of simulacra around him that no one could tell if what the tabloids were saying were authentic or made up. In short, his life read very much like a Gothic narrative, a haunting which was strange, fantastical and Other.

In the short film *Ghosts* (Winston, 1997), a mob of townsfolk who gather to chase away the local spook is confronted by a cloaked skeleton. The skull of the skeleton is a mask that is removed to reveal the Maestro played by Michael Jackson who says his first words “Did I scare you?”. This line does not merely parody the Gothic genre, but also playfully comments on Michael's own life. Following his death, the Special Commemorative Edition of *Time* (June 29, 2009) described him as a “creepy curiosity” but hardly made any mention of the influence of the Gothic in his music and short films.<sup>3</sup> From the maniacal laughter that begins the title track of *Off the Wall* to his *Thriller* and *Ghosts* videos, Michael established himself from the start as Dorian Gray, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, Frankenstein's monster and Dracula rolled into one.<sup>4</sup> In many ways, Michael Jackson embodied the Gothic.<sup>5</sup> His surreal life was a fusion of fantasy, science-fiction and horror and revolved around “themes of abuse and parasitism, loneliness and terror” (Hirshey 223). The narrative of his life is a *bricolage* of his songs, music videos, interviews and short films. Likewise, his autobiography, other alternative biographies and articles written about him create an intertext of competing narratives and sub-texts about his life.<sup>6</sup> Michael's demise did not just spell the end of an era in pop culture; it also concluded a Gothic narrative.

## ANOTHER PART OF ME

The central backdrop of this Gothic world is Neverland Ranch. Both refuge and prison, the architectural configuration of the Gothic castle with its subterranean dungeons and forbidden rooms often parallel the internal psychological mindscape of its owner.<sup>7</sup> An oneiric other-world of wish-fulfillment, fantasy and imagination, Neverland was created as “a safe haven for him from an ever-pressing, ever-difficult world” (Taraborrelli 10). It was a far cry from the claustrophobic lodgings in Gary, Indiana, where Michael grew up with his numerous siblings. The trope of the castle with its narrow passages and gloomy interiors is also representative of the repressed secrets and claustrophobic isolation of the Gothic hero-villain. The *mise-en-scène* of Neverland reflected Michael's desire to redeem the innocence and frivolity of childhood but also contained his deepest,

darkest secrets – the alleged charges of sexual molestation. As a crime scene, Neverland turned from dream carnival to nightmarish farce. When the mansion was raided and searched, Michael was similarly violated in what he would describe as a “dehumanizing and humiliating examination” on December 22, 1993. This incursion into the surreal magic and mysterious sanctity of Neverland was parodied in the short film *Ghosts*. After the accusations of pedophilia, Neverland, like Michael’s career, lay in ruins and never regained its earlier glory.

Like the Gothic cosmos, Michael Jackson’s reality foregrounded the fantastic, the preternatural and the melodramatic. Michael lived in what Lisa-Marie Presley called a “world of wonder” (Taraborrelli 601). She told *Newsweek* (April 7, 2003), “when you go into his world you step into this whole other realm. I could tell you all about the craziness – all these things that were odd, different, evil or not cool”. Disillusioned by the real world around him, Michael seemed to want to retreat into the make-belief simulacra of theme parks like Disneyland and Universal Studios. This regression is displayed as well in his choice of movie projects like the children’s fantasy *The Wiz* (Lumet, 1978) and the science-fiction adventure *Captain Eo* (Coppola, 1986) in which a ragtag band led by the infamous Captain Eo fights “to bring freedom to the countless worlds of despair”. The fusion of animation and live-action to depict the fantastic in both films would feature prominently in his later videos. Listed as the “most successful music video” in the 2006 Guinness World Records, it could be argued that the short film for ‘Thriller’ (1983) single-handedly revived interest in the Gothic and the preternatural in pop culture. Directed by John Landis, who had just finished *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), the video spoofed the horror film genre. It features a cameo rap by horror film veteran Vincent Price and ends with a stylized zombie dance that has become trademark Michael Jackson. While alluding to a strong generic tradition, the video mocks its clichés by juxtaposing Michael’s werecat transformation with a jock jersey with a ‘M’ on it. Catherine Spooner observes “it is only a society that has stopped seriously believing in ghosts that is able to turn them into the stuff of entertainment” (24). Melodrama was a prominent feature of Michael’s ‘live’ concerts, whether he was stopping mock-up bulldozers in ‘Earth Song’, being embraced by an angelic being in ‘Will You Be There’ or standing still for several minutes as the crowd roared at the Super Bowl halftime show in 1993. Less a continuous narrative than a fragmented pastiche of images and videos, Michael’s movie *Moonwalker* (Kramer, 1988) begins with the hysterical pandemonium of tears, screams, swoons, fits and fainting spells reminiscent of Gothic narratives.<sup>8</sup> These three Gothic elements are combined in the ‘Smooth Criminal’ segment of *Moonwalker* (Chilvers, 1988) which borrows the visual style of film noir to express the fantastic in the anti-gravity lean in the dance sequence, the supernatural in the haunted café that comes alive and the melodramatic in the children’s amazement at Michael’s metamorphic nature.

Michael’s physical metamorphosis expressed the familiar defamiliarised and demonstrated the horror of the grotesque body as “doubled, monstrous, deformed, excessive, and abject” (Russo 9). The interest of the Gothic in the vulnerability of the human body is central to its questioning of identity, humanity and existence. The body is the material, tangible, sensual experience of being human, the sign of one’s ontological reality. In the Gothic, the body is mutilated by distortion, penetration, engorgement, dismemberment or mutation. The “body genres” posited by Carol Clover express themselves in excessive images of emotion, sex and violence to convey the sensational effects of the melodramatic, erotic and grotesque. Like Dorian Gray, Michael was obsessed with his appearance and sought to perfect it. Michael had been fixated with the size of his nose since was called ‘Big Nose’ by his brothers when he was 13. This preoccupation was also a consequence of complexion problems as he became a teenager. He was ashamed of appearing publicly because of his acne and admits “I became subconsciously scarred by this ... the effect on me was so bad that it messed up my whole personality” (Taraborrelli 159). The rhinoplasty he received after breaking his nose in 1979 set off a series of plastic surgery operations that would radically transform his

face. This was further aggravated when his hair and scalp were burnt in an accident while filming a Pepsi commercial in 1984.<sup>9</sup> In 1986, he was diagnosed with vitiligo and discoid lupus which he counteracted with bleaching agents and hydroquinone. Like a vampire, he became petrified of exposure to the sun. The combination of plastic surgery and epidermal bleaching caused a public metamorphosis from a brown-skinned African-American boy to a grotesque white mask.<sup>10</sup> The fantastical physicality of Michael's body, not only as a dancer but in the facial fragmentation as he transforms into a gargantuan robot at the end of *Moonwalker* (1988), reflects in reality his own struggle with his appearance. The modifications were so excessive that eventually the structure of his nose collapsed and he wore a prosthetic nose-tip. The motivation for this reconstruction was however not just physical, but also psychological. Some doctors suggest that Michael suffered from body dysmorphic disorder. Taraborrelli believes that Michael made these alterations not to look like Diana Ross as some believed but so that he would look less like his father (206). In 'Threatened', Michael uses a Rod Serling sample to introduce himself as the "monster ... the living dead, the dark thoughts in your head ... your worst nightmare ... a human presence that you feel is strange". As the last song of the final album that Michael released, it is a poignantly accurate description of who Michael saw himself to be.

Michael's amorphous indeterminacy and freakishness characterized him as an abhuman that resisted definition and categorization.<sup>11</sup> The location of the Gothic monster on a borderline between conceptual oppositions like life and death, man and beast, and natural and supernatural threatens the order of society, exposes the relative arbitrariness of the system and demands a rethinking of traditional boundaries of normality. As the Other, who is marked by difference, liminality, fragmentation and monstrosity, Michael Jackson manifested the *unheimlich* return of the repressed that "disturbs the familiar, homely and secure sense of reality and normality" (Botting 1996: 11). The metamorphic body

retains traces of human identity but has become, or is in the process of becoming, something quite different. Alternatively, it may be some indefinable 'thing' that is mimicking the human, appropriating the human form. Either way, it is the integrity of human identity that is threatened; these are liminal bodies, occupying the space between the terms of such oppositions as human and beast, male and female, civilised and primitive. (Punter 2004: 41)

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva describes abjection as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Neither this nor that and yet both at the same time, the monster exemplifies Derrida's *ce dangereux* supplement as its hybrid nature throws into doubt our easy classifications and offers "a site for social and cultural resistance and the exploration of alternative possibilities" (Bellin 175). By transgressing and blurring the boundaries of race, gender and age, Michael questioned the status quo constructions of identity.

Neither child nor adult, nor clearly either black or white, and with an androgynous image that is neither masculine nor feminine, Jackson's star image is a 'social hieroglyph' as Marx said of the commodity form, which demands, yet defies, decoding. (Ingis 124)

When he first came on the scene, some mistook him for a midget, or "an old soul, as if he had been a superstar in another life" (Joseph Jackson in Taraborrelli 37). However, it was Michael's transgression of the biological determiner of race that underscored his status as social pariah. Martin Scorsese eschews the use of colour in the 'Bad' video (1987) to convey how Daryl, the character played by Michael, an African-American studying in a 'white' school, cannot fit in with either 'whites' or 'blacks'. He morphs into a black panther in the 'Black or White' (Landis, 1991) video in which he raps "I've seen the bright get duller / I'm not going to spend my life being a color". In *Captain Eo* and *Moonwalker*, Michael's dance moves are juxtaposed with the movements

of a robot. These transhuman manifestations of manimal and android interrogate fundamental assumptions of our humanity and existence as

the horror of the artificial human, first proposed in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, re-emerges in an up-to-date form with the possibility of new kinds of simulated life, with cyborgs, animated machines, and reproduction by computer of genetic engineering. (Punter 24)

The terror of the Gothic monster lies precisely in its indeterminate constitution. The polymorphic shape-shifting potential of the mutant monster resists categorical containment and reinforces the indefinite shapeless mutability of the monstrous.

In their endeavor to define Michael, the tabloids unwittingly identified characters in his life to serve as alter egos – Joseph Jackson, who was all he did not want to become, Diana Ross, who it was said he increasingly resembled or Jordan Chandler, his epitome of innocent childhood that had been corrupted. The Other is an integral aspect of delineating boundaries between what an entity is and what it is not and thus allows for definition by comparison and opposition. The Double explores 'such themes as 'psychological evil', split identity, sexual perversion [and] pathological self-destructiveness without incurring the censure of a prurient and repressive society' (Schmid 13). In the Gothic, "doubling then is not simply a convention but is the essential reality of the self" (Day 21). This split identity manifests itself in twins, clones, mirror images, shadow selves and other forms of the double life. Although it may be said that celebrities are intrinsically conflicted by their private and public selves, the Jekyll-Hyde schizophrenia between the object and the image is particularly marked in Michael Jackson, the shy soft-spoken person behind the masks and disguises shunning the media spotlight in contrast to the attention-seeking onstage persona. Michael admits "Onstage is the only place I'm comfortable. I'm not comfortable around normal people" (Taraborrelli 177). The nature of the Doppelgänger draws also from the theories of psychoanalysis. As an incarnation of repressed eroticism, the Gothic Double is often misconceived to be a dark evil being as thwarted cravings for the forbidden are displaced and projected onto him but Michael's Doubles were, in reality, more fantastical. First, he identified with the Scarecrow he played in *The Wiz* (Lumet, 1978) saying "Everybody thinks he's very special, but, really, he's very sad. He's so, so sad." (Taraborrelli 178). He sought solace in the role "refusing to take off his make-up after shooting and sometimes going home in his full scarecrow costume" (Wilson & Wilson 188). By naming his home Neverland, Michael, as he told Martin Bashir, believed himself to be Peter Pan. He abhorred the idea of growing old and desired to be forever youthful. Michael also claimed he watched *The Elephant Man* (Lynch, 1980) thirty-five times, never once without weeping all the way through. It was evident that Michael could identify with this hideously deformed freak show performer and his search for acceptance and love.

Like Frankenstein's monster, Michael's exclusion tormented him with loneliness. By conferring a voice to Michael in his songs, the listener is given access to his emotions, struggles and humanity. In 'I Can't Stop Loving You', he sings "A lot of people misunderstand me/that's because they don't know me at all". The Gothic pariah is paradoxically the central protagonist of any Gothic tale. Michael's image as an alienated, isolated and brooding outsider reflected the intense melancholia of the Byronic hero, who possesses a tormented past and hides a dark secret. In truth, Michael shared the frenzied following and media attention of Byron, "the first European cultural celebrity of the modern age" (MacCarthy x). Like the Gothic hero-villain, Michael evoked both sympathy for being persecuted and victimized by the media and disgust for persisting in bunking with pubescent boys. Michael was intensely aware of his difference; he was always abject and conflicted, even as a child. The Jacksons were taunted by the other children in Gary, Indiana where they grew up and even had rocks hurled into their living room because they spent hours practicing instead of playing. His father Joseph Jackson was abusive and his mother Katherine Jackson was a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses, a cult group which Michael rejected only in 1987. Even as a member of



The Jackson Five, Michael was singled out both as the talented younger brother and as lead singer. Ironically, placing him in the spotlight marginalized him further and caused sibling rivalry between him and his brothers, especially Jermaine. With his hypersensitive personality, Michael felt this abjection more acutely. He once said, "I feel like I'm in a well and no one can reach me" (Taraborrelli 144). He kept life-size mannequins in his bedroom, which he wanted to bring to life in order to talk to them.<sup>12</sup> Michael personified the New Monster of the Gothic, the psychopathological freak, who is brutally aware of his pariah condition yet yearns to lead a normal life. Handcuffed by police, hounded by media, cross-examined by lawyers, mobbed by fans, scorned by his detractors, monitored by Child Services, Michael demonstrated Botting's observation that monstrous figures are no longer objects of hate or fear but have become

sites of identification, sympathy, and self-recognition. Excluded figures once represented as malevolent, disturbed, or deviant monsters are rendered more humane while the systems that exclude them assume terrifying, persecutory, and inhuman shapes. (2002: 286)

The public flagellation of Michael Jackson explains how "often referred to as a 'freak of nature', the freak, it must be emphasized, is a freak of culture" (Stewart 109). This persecution and victimization leads to a state of distrust, claustrophobia and paranoia. The monster evokes our sympathy because it is plagued by his indelible past, obsessed by his demented fetishes and fettered to his repressed desires. Horror stories of Michael's childhood include one where their father Joseph woke his children at 2 am to practice and told Michael "that there were people in the audience with guns who wanted to shoot him" (Orth 325) if he did not dance fast enough. Taraborrelli recounts Michael's memories that "whenever the boys left their bedroom window open at night, [Joseph] would go outside and climb into their room and shout at them at the top of his lungs ... while wearing a fright mask ... Michael and Marlon would, for many years afterwards, suffer from vivid nightmares of being kidnapped from the safety of their bedrooms" (Taraborrelli 22). The experience of having to surrender the royalties of their recordings and having to pay \$2M to extricate themselves from their contract with Motown made Michael more aware of the need to acquire the business acumen of trusting no one. He exhibited this when he acquired Britain's Associated TeleVision (ATV) and the Beatles' publishing rights in 1985 in exchange for his friendship with Paul McCartney. The staff of Neverland also had to swear to secrecy and sign a contract of non-disclosure. Still, despite these precautions, Michael was betrayed by those he trusted. His fame and fortune attracted parasites like Evan Chandler who asked for millions instead of reporting Michael's actions, if any, to the authorities. In 'Money', Michael observes the charade of materialism around him

But I say it's just  
In the devil's game  
Of greed and lust  
They don't care  
They'd do me for the money

If you tell me to cry  
Then I will fake it  
If you give me a hand  
Then I will shake it

This extortion was repeated again with Gavin Arvizo who Michael had flaunted in his interview with Martin Bashir. It appears now that Michael may have paid with his life for his misjudgment of who he could trust when he put his life in the hands of his personal physician Dr Conrad Murray.

Besides offering remixed dance double versions of earlier songs from his *HIStory II* (1995)

album, *Blood on the Dance Floor: HIStory in the Mix* also featured two new songs 'Ghosts' and 'Is it Scary' which are noteworthy because they begin with largely the same four lines, thus identifying them as twin texts. While 'Ghosts', the title track for the short film, expresses his paranoia at "the ghost of jealousy" that seeks to destroy and usurp him, 'Is it Scary' asserts his individuality and interrogates the version of Michael that the media sees.

Am I amusing you  
Or just confusing you  
Am I the beast  
You visualised  
And if you wanna see  
Eccentricities  
I'll be grotesque  
Before your eyes

I'm gonna be  
Exactly what you gonna see  
So did you come to me  
To see your fantasies  
Performed before your very eyes

A haunting ghostly treat  
The foolish trickery  
And spirits dancing  
In the light

But if you came to see  
The truth the purity  
It's here inside  
A lonely heart

So let the performance start

These lyrics also parallel the action in the short film, more perhaps than 'Ghosts' does. Besides the Gothic *mise-en-scène*, the short film *Ghosts* depicts other horror motifs of shape-shifting, possession and subversion.<sup>13</sup> His magical powers convince the children while authority and social regulation represented by the Mayor is ridiculed and undermined. The lyrics go on to reverse the perspective that the Maestro is a disturbance to 'Normal Valley' by suggesting "See the evil one is you / you know the Stranger is you".

Am I scary for you  
I'm tired of being abused  
You know you're scaring me too  
I see the evil is you  
Is it scary for you baby

From this point of view, it is the freak who becomes real in comparison to the false and grotesque Mayor. The effect of this inversion is that, instead of being saved from the monster, the norm is seen to be that which is monstrous. This is doubly ironic as the Mayor is played by Michael as well creating a double inversion that compounds his commentary with ambivalence and open-endedness.

## THE WAY YOU MAKE ME FEEL

Sexuality in the Gothic is expressed in a transgression of sexual boundaries and a perverse eroticism. Michael's soft spoken falsetto voice and his effeminate demeanor fit the stereotype of homosexual behavior in the late 1970s. His "sexuality has been the subject of speculation since he was a teenager" (Taraborrelli 156). At 19, he was upset by rumors that he was in a homosexual relationship and was having a sex-change operation. In August 1984, it was alleged that he was in a relationship with Boy George, which Michael had to deny in a press conference. His character in the 'Thriller' video had inadvertently admitted "I'm not like other guys. I mean I'm different." Michael projected both the image of a macho heroic figure and the sensitive new age guy, for instance, in the 'Bad' video. It is interesting to note how the music videos for 'Bad' and 'Beat It' depict male confrontation in which Michael's machismo is questioned or taunted. "C'mon Big Man let me see what you got" he is told in the 'You Rock my World' video. Physical violence is defused by dance, which often emphasizes male sexuality and bravado. In this light, Michael's pelvic thrusts and crotch touching can be seen to be masturbatory, narcissistic and hyper-masculine. Still,

Michael was thought of as not only a virgin, but asexual ... he was an oddity, a brilliant performer and legendary recording artist whose image was perplexing and eccentric, but not sexual. Even when he grabbed his crotch during his performances, the action didn't have a sexual connotation to it as much as it did the imprint of another clever bit of choreography. (Taraborrelli 450)

He had to assert his heterosexuality by declaring his romantic involvement with Tatum O'Neal and Brooke Shields. When he married Lisa-Marie Presley, they even appeared semi-nude in a love scene in his 'You Are Not Alone' video (Isham, 1995) almost as if to convince the public of the authenticity of their love and the sexuality of their relationship. Despite the increasing openness to homosexuality and transvestitism and the acceptance of pop stars like Boy George in the 1980s, no other celebrity has had to go to such lengths to explain his or her sexuality than Michael Jackson.

The depiction of women in his music videos takes the form of the Gothic *femme fatale*, who is tempting, irresistible and potentially destructive. With dance as a metaphor for sex, *Off the Wall* featured songs about wanting to "rock with you all night" ('Rock with you') or expressing how he "would like to groove with you" ('Get on the Floor'). Still, these early songs possess a tinge of jealousy, betrayal and even blackmail. In 'Working Day and Night', he suspects that his lover is "seeing some other guy" while he is hard at work; in 'Girlfriend', the situation is reversed as he threatens to tell on his ex-girlfriend and "tell him what you do to me" and "show him how you feel inside". By the time *Dangerous* was released, the "woman to man" ('In the Closet') relationships were darker. The title track describes the seduction of a *femme fatale* that destroys him in "her web of sin". 'She drives me wild' depicts an uncontrolled fixation on his object of desire while 'In the Closet' suggests that passion must be repressed and "burn inside of me". The themes of emasculation and female deception and domination are also present. In 'Give in to me', the persona suffers in a psychologically abusive relationship in which "you always knew just how to make me cry ... it seems you get your kicks from hurting me" while he yearns for her "to give in to me" and "quench my desire". Likewise, in 'Who Is It', the persona is tormented by paranoia and duplicity as he speculates that his lover is having an affair. The tone of his music in 'Heartbreaker' is almost misogynist at times and acts like a warning to himself concerning his relationships with women, who are depicted as taunting, unfeeling, manipulative and malicious. More importantly, his songs describe how difficult it is to resist the sexual attraction of a woman. In 'Dirty Diana', the loud rock guitars are interwoven with somber violins to bring across the struggle not to yield to temptation. The pleading tone and persistent protests sound like desperate cries for strength to fight the lure of the fulfillment of his sexual fantasies. The ending - "She said he's not coming back / because he's sleeping with me" - is intentionally ambiguous and does not answer the question whether

he eventually succumbs to his lust and is resigned to his fate. This echoes 'Billie Jean'. Despite his protests that "Billie Jean is not my lover", the last verse suggests that he is intoxicated by her perfume.

She came and stood right by me  
Then the smell of sweet perfume  
This happened much too soon  
She called me to her room

The lack of irresolution and closure is typical of the Gothic narrative. Is Billie Jean telling the truth? The song warns

And Mother always told me be careful of who you love  
And be careful of what you do 'cause the lie becomes the truth

Raised to consider homosexuality sinful and aware of the media attention this might garner, Michael "knew that with any relationships he had – be it with a man or a woman – he ran the risk of the other person reporting the details to a newspaper or magazine" (Taraborrelli 158). Still, despite this paranoia and his experience of media scrutiny, Michael's decisions in this aspect of his life were to result in his downfall.

The Gothic roots repression and regression in one's childhood trauma resulting in nostalgia for a redeemed version of the past. As a child star who was much younger than his brothers, Michael's experience of sexuality was a premature and distressing one. Their tour of the Chitlin Circuit included adult bars and striptease nightclubs and part of their act was to have Michael playfully crawl under tables and lift women's skirts. Michael was repelled when his brothers indulged in the voyeurism of peeping into the ladies' bathroom and changing rooms. His brothers would even bed groupies beside him while he pretended to sleep. This distorted his view of sexuality and his own sexual identity. Furthermore, the dysfunction of his family led to a severe Oedipal Complex. He hated his father, whom he called 'the devil' (Orth 326), not just for his hard brutality but also for his infidelity and promiscuous lifestyle on the road. Carole Lieberman observes that "the father's infidelity would certainly have hit the youngest child exposed to it the hardest" (Taraborrelli 33). Michael also felt that he had betrayed his mother by not telling her and thus colluding with his father. The marked resemblance between Joseph Jackson and the monstrous head that Michael becomes in *Ghosts* indicates the extent of this demonization of his father. In contrast, Michael adored his mother whom he described as "my mother, my lover, and my sister all combined in one amazing person" (Inglis 124). However as he grew up, the conflicts he was having with his father as an adult drew him away from his mother and he created other surrogate models of femininity and maternity for himself in Diana Ross, Elizabeth Taylor and Princess Diana. The disgust he felt about his father's affairs coupled with the strict religious platitudes of his mother made sex a horror show for Michael. "He *must* have been conflicted: he had an overly rigid view of the world from his mother and an overly promiscuous view of the world from his father" (Taraborrelli 31). In his attempt to understand his sexuality, he even turned to prostitutes for conversation rather than for sex. Michael laments this lost childhood in his acceptance speech of the Grammy Legend Award in 1993.

When you grow up as I did in front of 100 million people since the age of five, you're automatically different ... My childhood was completely taken away from me. It was not a normal childhood ... I cannot re-create that part of my life.

Unlike other child stars who have their fair share of growing pains and occasional drug use but eventually grow up to lead seemingly normal Hollywood lives, Michael yearned constantly to regain the childhood he never had. This Peter Pan syndrome is expressed in 'Childhood'

No one understands me  
They view it as such strange eccentricities...

'Cause I keep kidding around  
Like a child, but pardon me...  
Before you judge me, try hard to love me,  
Look within your heart then ask,  
Have you seen my Childhood?

This arrested development, however, became the excuse for all his subsequent actions, the root cause of all that Michael was to become and the reason for him acting immaturely, some might say irresponsibly, even in his 40s. As a 12-year old, Michael played pranks on his brothers but this childlike playfulness continued in adulthood with his practical jokes becoming more public. He would order room service for other hotel guests or impersonate Diana Ross on the phone. His attempt to get a female teenager to jump him on stage feigning hysteria during the 1986 Grammy Awards failed.<sup>14</sup> On one hand, his refusal to grow up was a rejection of adult responsibility; on the other, it was a quest for immortality, an escapist wish that his world was different from that offered by the reality he inhabited. Images of Michael playing soldier in full military regalia with an army of uniformed personnel running behind him or blasting off in a jetpack as an astronaut at the end of his *Dangerous* concert suggest this regressed state. In the prelude to his 'Heal the World' video, Michael proclaims that children are "a reminder of the preciousness of all life, especially young lives untouched by hatred, prejudice and greed". Little was he to know how his love for children would embroil him in a narrative of scandal, deceit and ruin.

To Michael, his greatest inspiration came from children who were his muse for creativity and imagination. His regression entrapped him as a child in an adult body.<sup>15</sup> The relationship between children and the Gothic has always been an ambiguous one. On one hand they are associated with an unsullied *tabula rasa* of purity and simplicity. On the other, they are seen to be deeply connected with the irrational unconscious of one's primordial being, thus making them a threat to adult society. In recent films like *Let the Right One In* (Alfredson, 2008) and *Orphan* (Collet-Serra, 2009), the device of using a deviant child to make contact through other children plays on the idea that children are more open and susceptible to fantasy, and thus the workings of the supernatural. Michael's prevalent use of children as signifiers in his videos and 'live' performances hearkens towards a lost innocence and a yearning to return to one's elemental origins. The enlistment of children to recapture that childhood proved to be his weakness. Like the Pied Piper, he lured them with a menagerie of zoo animals, candy, video games and rides on his ferris wheel. David Nordahl who captured Michael's grandiose designs and fairy-tale fantasies paints an idyllic idealization of this in *Field of Dreams*. His *Michael*, depicting a pale Michael in a loincloth surrounded by sylvan cherubs, was a memorable image from Bashir's documentary *Living with Michael Jackson* (Granada, 2003). Notions of pornography, fellatio and masturbation did not square with this gentle romanticized image of the Michael his fans knew. However, despite closing the Jordie Chandler case with out-of-court settlements amounting to over \$20M, Michael continued to brazenly associate himself with young boys. To Michael, the flaunting of these relationships demonstrated his innocence. His excessive insistence to carry on with this behavior was one of the causes of his failed marriage to Lisa-Marie. In his interview with Bashir, he naively held hands with Gavin Arvizo, as "he never imagined anyone would be shocked by it because he simply does not think he or his life is shocking" (Taraborrelli 602).<sup>16</sup> Michael's egocentricity caused him to behave like a spoilt child who was not allowed to have his way and was unable to see the point of view of others. To Michael, there was no transgression. As he "has done whatever he has wanted to do most of his life ... he has never understood the notion of 'appropriate behaviour' because, in truth, he's never had any reason to live appropriately" (Taraborrelli 533). His self-assured invincibility in insisting that there was nothing wrong with sleeping together with younger boys would cost him another lawsuit, ironically from Gavin Arvizo.

Gothic sexuality jettisons conventional notions of heterosexual relationships, monogamy and family. In like manner, the transient duration of celebrity marriages and the sexual openness of celebrity relationships both reinforce and challenge sexual roles. The history of marriage in the Jackson family is riddled with Janet's elopement, Marlon's secret marriage, affairs, divorce and prenuptial agreements. Although this may be seen to be common fare in the Hollywood community, Michael took it much further. Although he featured African-American models like Tyra Banks, Iman and Naomi Campbell in his music videos, he transgressed racial lines and chose a spouse who was beyond anyone's expectation or belief. The King of Pop's marriage to Lisa-Marie Presley, the daughter of the King of Rock and Roll, was read by many as a clever diversion from the ongoing trials. Many thought the union of Graceland and Neverland was a publicity gimmick but the marriage was confirmed albeit only two months later. In the song 'Break of Dawn', Michael dismisses how "people talk, people say what we have is just a game". Even though their love was, by all reports, authentic, the marriage failed on the issue of children – Lisa-Marie's refusal to have any and Michael's insistence in holidaying with boys. After their divorce, Michael had a surrogate mother carry his children, married her and then brought up the children without her before choosing another unknown surrogate mother for his third child, Blanket. Michael married Debbie Rowe at his mother's insistence as a social obligation to legalize her surrogacy and the children's legitimacy. This second marriage was met with public cynicism and his wacky exploits were no longer met with surprise but with ennui. Speculation concerning whether the children were begotten through sexual relations or through in-vitro fertilization again brought Michael's sexuality into the limelight. Michael's unconventional worldview exemplified by the surrogacy of his children displays a defiant attitude to social mores that is characteristic of Gothic subversion. It is this antithetical tendency to transgress normative perceptions and to partake of the forbidden, the illicit and the objectionable that evokes the ambivalent feelings of attraction and repulsion, and fascination and disgust in the Gothic protagonist.

## WHO IS IT

By composing the Gothic "in defiance of rules, critics and of philosophers", Horace Walpole had unwittingly established the Gothic as a mode of subversion.<sup>17</sup> The interrogation of established norms by an alternative sub-version produces a disequilibrium that triggers the fear, unease and dread that typify the effect of the Gothic. "Gothic remains non-, anti- and counter- by definition" (Williams 19). Michael was a ground-breaker, an over-reacher who traversed boundaries. Moreover, he was 'black'. Goddu writes "American authors turn to the Gothic mode in order to disclose the ghostly origins of the nation as issuing from the oppressive social structure of slavery" (Goddu 63). Although Frederick Douglass had commented on 'the myth of the black rapist', African-American men were still negatively stereotyped as criminal, violent, inferior and lower class. Gibbs writes, "Black males are portrayed by mass media in a limited number of roles, most often deviant, dangerous, and dysfunctional" (2). Although Michael and his brothers were marked as the demonic 'Other', it was largely due to Motown, Diana Ross and Michael's young charms that helped the Jackson Five infiltrate a predominantly 'white' control of the mass media. In 1976, the Jacksons were the first 'black' family to feature in a television series on CBS. The fact that they were Jehovah's Witnesses, a cult group known for its aggressive proselytizing, also caused them to be viewed suspiciously.<sup>18</sup> Michael's triumph in getting MTV to play his 'Billie Jean' video was a breakthrough for African-American artistes to come. Working with Eddie Van Halen and Slash, he blurred the boundaries of musical styles and fused Rhythm and Blues, soul, hip-hop and rock. He revolutionized music, video and dance and blurred the lines between the music video and the short film, often re-enacting his videos in his 'live' performances. The deviant tendencies of the Gothic anti-hero are a threat to society yet the audacity to defy conformity and assert individuality

is laudable. Nonetheless, as a purveyor of transgression and subversion, the anarchist must be contained and exiled to ensure the continuity of order and normalcy. Michael's trial was likened to a lynching and he exiled himself to Bahrain in 2005. The media circus became a travesty with Michael in the center-ring. "In identifying with the outcasts, victims and rebels, those 'othered' and 'monstered' by repressive state apparatuses, in regarding their very existence as resistance, they become charged with a romantic idea of freedom" (Botting 2004, Vol. 4, 8). Instead of being taboo, deviance is celebrated.

By parodying its own conventions and exaggerating its clichés, the Gothic subverts, mimics and celebrates itself. "Gothic horror is a highly self-conscious, self-reflexive genre that tends to call attention to its own conventions" (Hurley 142). This knowingness and self-mockery is evident in Michael's fondness for using his songs and music videos as platforms for self-portrayal and doubling. His music contains intentional echoes of previous tracks. For instance, Billie Jean is mentioned in 'Wanna be Startin' Somethin', the sequel of 'Bad', '2 Bad', appears in the *HIStory* album, the line 'Change the World' is used again in 'Cry' and the character Susie appears in 'Blood on the Dance Floor' and 'Little Susie'. Angela Carter, quoting Leslie Fiedler in her epigraph of *Heroes and Villains*, sees the Gothic as "essentially a form of parody, a way of assailing clichés by exaggerating them to the limit of grotesqueness" (1). Michael's Thriller video parodies werewolf movies playing on clichés like the full moon, convulsive transformations and deserted houses. The playfulness is in realizing midway that Michael is watching a Double of himself in a movie theatre. While the rest of the audience cowers in fear, Michael is the only one who is obviously relishing the horror. Michael also alluded to actual personages in his life. In *Moonwalker*, the name of Mr. Big, Frankie Lideo (Joe Pesci), is a parody of Michael's manager's name, Frank DiLeo.<sup>19</sup> Michael's song 'D.S' is a caustic attack on Tom Sneddon, the District Attorney in the molestation trials. Concomitantly, Michael was not averse to parodying himself. A 'Badder' video was produced that featured children mimicking his 'Bad' video. In an episode of *The Simpsons* entitled 'Stark Raving Dad' (Season 3 Episode 36-1), Michael parodied himself as a lunatic in an asylum. He also did a cameo in *Men In Black II* (Sonnenfeld, 2002). This self-parody functions as a form of self-assertion, self-definition and self-interrogation. In his 'Leave Me Alone' video, Michael spoofs the media image of himself by framing himself with tabloids that headline sensational stories of himself as he sings. He then takes a theme park ride through a shrine for Elizabeth Taylor and a freak show which features him dancing with the skeleton of the Elephant Man. In his short films, Michael also mythologised his larger-than-life personality by creating imagined alter egos, zombie Michael in *Thriller*, robotic Michael in *Moonwalker* and grotesque Michael in *Ghosts*. In their 'Can You Feel It' video, the Jacksons are depicted as superhuman behemoths who smile benevolently as they rain down stardust on grateful children. For his *HIStory* album, Michael even erected huge statues of himself in a few European cities in 1995. In creating a history that revolved around himself, he exhibited the main identifying features of the Gothic hero which are "egotism and monomania" (Day 17). He named his sons Prince Michael and Prince Michael II. At the Brit Awards 1996, he was interrupted by Jarvis Cocker in a performance when Cocker felt that Michael was pretending to be Jesus. It goes without saying that Michael often posed with arms outstretched in a crucified pose, symbolically depicting the Messianic Complex he bore to heal the world or that he was being crucified by the media.<sup>20</sup>

This cloud of rumor and folklore is akin to the Gothic blurring of truth and falsehood, reality and fiction. The tabloids created a mythology around Michael "in which what is 'true' or 'false' has become largely irrelevant. In fact, the difficulty in distinguishing between actuality and gossip emphasizes the (racial and sexual) ambiguity contained within the Jackson persona" (Inglis 124). His celebrity status meant that he was perpetually in the public eye. His 'Black or White' video depicts a globe of newscasters reporting on his latest exploits and the controversy raised by the video.

In the 'You are not alone' video, he passes unfazed through a crowd of paparazzi depicting how distancing himself works as a coping mechanism that renders him 'Unbreakable'. Michael had an ambiguous relationship with the media, wanting them to print stories about him but acutely aware of the sensationalism, distortion and the excessive lies the tabloids were capable of. In songs like 'Scream' and 'Why You Wanna Trip On Me' Michael comments on how they find their "pleasure scandalizing every lie". The lyrics of 'Tabloid Junkie' go

Just because you read it in a magazine  
Or see it on the TV screen  
Don't make it factual  
Though everybody wants to read all about it  
Just because you read it in a magazine  
Or see it on the TV screen  
Don't make it factual, actual  
They say he's homosexual

Taking on a menacing defiant tone that is almost predatory, the song 'Privacy' begins

Ain't the pictures enough, why do you go through so much  
To get the story you need, so you can bury me

before he alludes to the death of Princess Diana and concludes

Now there's a lesson to learn, stories are twisted and turned  
Stop maliciously attacking my integrity

Michael, however, was himself a publicist who manipulated the press and manufactured his own rumors in order to be portrayed in an absurd, bizarre way. Despite his seemingly shy personality, Michael enjoyed the limelight. According to Margo Jefferson, Michael was influenced by P. T. Barnum who often built up hype in order to promote his material. Michael wanted his "whole career to be the greatest show on earth" (Taraborrelli 357). When he was 10 years old, he had already learnt to mix falsehood and truth. He was asked to lie that he was 8 and that Diana Ross had discovered the Jackson Five in order to generate interest in the group. He says, "I figured out at an early age that if someone said something about me that wasn't true, it was a lie. But if someone said something about my image that wasn't true, then it was okay. Because then it wasn't a lie, it was public relations" (Taraborrelli 54). The blurring of truth and falsehood created a signifier with no objective signified. No one could tell which tabloid report was rumor and which fact any longer. Michael himself created the story that he slept in a hyperbaric chamber so that he could live longer as a publicity stunt for *Captain Eo*. Looking like a Snow White in a glass coffin, the photograph of him in the chamber was ample proof that 'Wacko Jacko', a moniker he disliked, had gone off the edge. This resembled the extreme states of mind in the Gothic and the resulting inability to tell reality from the fake. Spurred by his eccentric behavior, the tabloids invented other fictitious but credible tales. Michael had proposed to Elizabeth Taylor. He bathed in Evian water. He had encountered Lennon's ghost and had seen Jesus while performing. He was romantically linked to Tatiana Thumbtzen and Princess Diana and "since Michael refused to do any interviews in an effort to maintain his inscrutability, the stories just spread without contradiction or explanation" (Taraborrelli 364). In response, Michael exacted his revenge by creating a hoax that he had proposed to buy the skeleton of Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man. During the 1993 Soul Train Award he performed 'Remember the Time' sitting down, claiming that he had twisted his ankle during rehearsal when he actually had not. In some aspects, truth was stranger than fiction as when he dangled Blanket over a balcony. His children became merely one aspect of the spectacle. Although it suggested a delusional madness that sometimes accompanied genius, the footage of Michael and his children in Bashir's interview was equally disconcerting. Up to the present, there is still speculation on whose children they really are.<sup>21</sup> Ironically, the veils that shielded them from public



scrutiny drew more attention to themselves and their father's peculiar methods of parenthood.

Michael was fully aware of himself as a performer and media phenomenon and, like the Gothic, thrived on exhibition, sensationalism and performance. The extreme emotions, melodramatic heroics and hyperbolic experience of Michael's 'live' concerts are hyper-real spectacles. With reference to his performance at Motown 25, Kooijman observes that Michael's lip-synching was overlooked by the visual illusion of his moonwalk and that Michael had shifted the emphasis "from musical performance to visual presentation" (Kooijman 119).<sup>22</sup> Even as late as 2004, music critic Nelson George writes "It's difficult to hear the songs from *Thriller* and disengage them from the videos. For most of us the images define the songs. In fact it could be argued that Michael is the first artist of the MTV age to have an entire album so intimately connected in the public imagination with its imagery". Bellin opines that "the history of the freak is a history of visual exploitation" (169). Michael's penchant for disguise and masquerade further emphasizes the surface fakery of public perception. "The Gothic is first and foremost a spectacle" (Kavka 226) and tantalises us "not through action, character, ideas, or language, but through spectacle" (Day 63). The adulation of his fans and the attention of the media suggest scopophilia, voyeurism, objectification and fetishism. The spectacle of his transformations from plastic surgery and pigmentation pale in comparison to the intense coverage of his trials, which were re-enacted daily on E! Cable Channel.<sup>23</sup> It is significant that for the artwork of the *Dangerous* album, Michael empowers himself with the gaze as his eyes stare out at the spectator from a cover depicting freak shows and circus acts. The artificiality of reality is thus flouted by exposing the artifice of the constructedness of these representations. The *mise-en-abyme* of the *Thriller* video replicates the Gothic heterotopia transporting the viewer from the movie to the nightmare to the real world. In the 'Black or White' video, Michael leaps from a scene in Africa onto a soundstage with Asian dancers and while dancing with Red Indians, a screen is removed to reveal the desert backdrop. At the end of the morphing sequence, the camera draws back to reveal the set. Likewise, the 'Liberian Girl' video features celebrity cameos who await the arrival of Michael who reveals himself at the end as the director of the video. *Dangerous – The Short Films* (1993) also includes 'Making of' videos overtly displaying the contrivance so that the spectator "is not only seeing differently, but is aware of himself/herself see" (Degli-Esposti 5).

The proliferation of images and the prominence of signs have rendered the Gothic a mirage, a simulation of representation that exists in what Rosemary Jackson calls "a 'paraxial' realm" (135), a penumbra that lies between the reality of the object and the unreality of the image. The phenomenon of celebrity epitomises the fusion of public self, private self and projected self and the bifurcation of object and image. "Gothic devices are all signs of the superficiality, deception and duplicity of narratives and verbal or visual images" (Botting 1996: 14). The commodification, circulation and consumption of celebrity are dependent on image as a saleable commodity. "The freak is exhibited, reflected and reproduced" (Bellin 190) in tabloids and on the Internet blurring the boundary between factual news reporting and fictional invention for entertainment. "What they sell is a sign" (Izod 79). Michael further immortalized himself by associating himself with global concerns and historical figures. By interspersing his own image with those of war, poverty, children and champions of peace like Mother Teresa, Gandhi and Martin Luther King in his 'Man in the Mirror' video, Michael demonstrated that "the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (Debord 12). These images were merely symbolic rather than representative of any actual engagement with the real world. In 'Bad', for instance, the studs, chains and leather buckles were more characteristic of a Goth subculture than that of a streetwise tough 'black' neighborhood. "Michael Jackson had become a postmodern sign" (Inglis 129). Because film has "the capacity to simulate the experience of presence" (Smith 121), the resurrection of the ghost of a person's image in film although he is dead creates a simulacrum of his person. Seeing the dead live on in film is simultaneously heart-rending and comforting as

the virtual presence of the person is simulated. With his death, the spectralization and proliferation of images of Michael Jackson in a digital afterlife will continue to create a cyber-Gothic haunting in our collective cultural memory. Like the Gothic icons before him, Michael Jackson will now be immortalized in endless imitation, multiplication and virtualization.

## CONCLUSION

The fetishization, aesthesizing and ritualizing of death in the Gothic aims consistently to defer the final definitive ending of death and the state of non-existence. The Internet almost crashed with the volume of traffic when news broke on Michael's death. Many felt it was another hoax or prank that Michael had generated to promote his "final curtain call", the upcoming *This Is It* concerts. His memorial service was watched by millions across the world. His ghost supposedly appeared on the Larry King show. Others persist in believing he used a body double to fake his death. In another way, Michael has been resurrected in new editions of his albums, record-breaking sales and through his imitators around the world. For the past two months, Michael has lived on in re-runs of archival footage while his body remains cryogenically frozen awaiting burial. Meanwhile, his estate is being divided and found heavily in debt. It is rumored that Jordan Chandler has confessed that he lied about the molestation.<sup>24</sup> The godfather of Michael's children Mark Lester has claimed he is the real father of Paris. His death has been declared a homicide although the lethal cocktail of drugs was reportedly administered at Michael's own request. In the Gothic, "the end is always deferred ... mysteries are effaced or denied rather than resolved" (Ingebretsen 197). In death, Michael is still a spectacle, a figure of indeterminate speculation.

In his acceptance speech in 1993 for the Grammy Legend Award, Michael claims "I wasn't aware that the world thought I was so weird and bizarre". The schizophrenic doubling of Michael Jackson is most evident in the juxtaposition of aggression and despair in the almost prophetic song 'Morphine'. Although some remain uncomfortable at the thought of him sleeping with young boys, Michael's transgressions, if any, have been mostly forgotten. In his new book, Ian Halperin, while claiming that Michael was a gay cross-dresser, writes "I could not find a single shred of evidence suggesting that Jackson had molested a child. In contrast, I found significant evidence demonstrating that most, if not all, of his accusers lacked any credibility" (Halperin 227).<sup>25</sup> David Punter opines "tabooed objects are those to which we summon up not a simple emotional reaction but a dialectical one in which the mind oscillates between attraction and repulsion, worship and condemnation" (Punter 1996 Vol 2, 190). No other celebrity blurred truth or falsehood to the point that we know almost everything about him yet almost know nothing of him. As he leaves the cinema in the 'Thriller' video, Michael asks his girlfriend, "You were scared, weren't you?". In this sense, Michael Jackson will always remain a "creepy curiosity" who lived a Gothic narrative.

## NOTES

1. Michael Jackson will be referred to as Michael throughout this article in order not to confuse him with other members of the Jackson family.
2. This paper was written in the two months after Michael's death and submitted for publication at the end of August 2009 on what would have been his 51st birthday.
3. This essay studies Michael Jackson's life in light of the Gothic and cultural studies, as opposed to the Goth subculture. To learn more about Goth, see Dunja Brill's *Goth Culture: Gender, Sexuality and Style*.
4. This article will only study songs from Michael's solo career beginning with the *Off the Wall* album. It does not suggest that the Gothic is a predominant theme in all of Michael's songs but posits a general trajectory of Gothic elements in his songs, especially those written by Michael himself.
5. Mark Edmundson, in his book *Nightmare on Main Street*, mentions Michael Jackson briefly but dismisses the idea of making "an aristocratic hero-villain out of a gorgeously lit lounge act" (13).
6. This article is heavily indebted to Michael's biography written by Taraborrelli who is regarded as an authority in the subject. Michael's own autobiography is an unreliable narrative since it was written by Michael himself.
7. James DeBarge, who was married to Janet Jackson for a year in September 1984, coined Michael's house in Encino "The House of Fears" and described Michael as "a ghost, wandering around the place looking for friendship" (Taraborrelli 322).
8. *Dangerous: The Short Films* (1993) begins in the same manner. The videos of his 'live' performances also often cut between his onstage performance and the frenzied response of the audience.
9. As a result, Michael was set on a course that made him increasingly dependent on drugs, steroids, tranquilisers (Valium, Xanax, Ativan) and painkillers (Percodan, Demerol, Codeine) that some suspect may have contributed to his untimely death.
10. The combination of his almost cadaverous skeletal facial structure and his dark aviator sunglasses as Michael rehearsed in *This Is It* brought to the writer's mind Jack Skellington from Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Michael's gaunt frame was accentuated by his boots and a jacket with upturned shoulder pads, a wide collar and rhinestones
11. See Kelly Hurley (1996) for more on the concept of the abhuman.
12. In an interview with Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, writer of *The Michael Jackson Tapes: A Tragic Icon* reveals his soul in intimate conversation, on NBC (September 15, 2009), it is revealed that Michael once said "I was too shy to be around real people ... but it makes me feel like I am in a room with people."
13. For an in-depth study of the "death-ridden, sexually explicit choreography" of Michael's "*danse macabre*, or dance of the dead" in the short films for *Thriller* and *Ghosts*, see Steven Bruhm's "Michael Jackson: Queer Funk".
14. Upon hearing the news of Michael's death, this writer had thought that the reports were another one of his pranks. Although his death certificate has been issued, it will almost come as no surprise if he somehow suddenly turns up alive.
15. In *This Is It*, Michael is sucking a lollipop as he watches the 3-D footage for the 'Thriller' segment of his concert.
16. See Debbie Epstein and Deborah Lynn Steinberg to see how documentaries that were produced contributed to sensationalize the speculation and implication of Michael's guilt while appearing to appear objective.
17. The quote is from a letter from Walpole to Madame du Deffand dated 13 March 1767.
18. In order to assure his fans that he was not associated with the occult, Michael included a preface to his *Thriller* video that read "Due to my strong personal convictions, I wish to stress that this film in no way endorses a belief in the occult".

19. This is a running joke in the movie as Joe Pesci repeatedly laments that his name Frankie Lideo is constantly being mispronounced.
20. In the 'Thriller' sequence in his *This Is It* concert, Michael ends the song with outstretched arms as what appears to be crucified ghosts fall from Heaven on the screen behind him.
21. As this article is being written, their godfather Mark Lester has publicly announced that he had donated his sperm to Michael and that Paris is his daughter.
22. Although the concert celebrated the 25th year of Motown, 'Billie Jean' was released by Epic and was the only non-Motown song performed that night.
23. In the same manner, there has been daily coverage of news reports over the past two months since his death.
24. The saga of Michael Jackson's story has continued to play itself out. On 5 Nov 2009, Evan Chandler was found dead with a gunshot to the head in an apparent suicide.
25. Maureen Orth writes for *Vanity Fair* and is convinced of Michael's guilt as she writes "In the hundred of interviews I have conducted, I have yet to hear about any female child who has shared his bed" (Orth 349).

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## Gothic Revelations of Marriage in *The Witch of Ravensworth* and *The Horrors of Oakendale Abbey*

Monica Miller

Given the Foucauldian notion that the rise of capitalism was concurrent with a split between the public and private spheres, it has been hypothesized that part of what prepared society for this split was the domestic or sentimental novel. By focusing attention on the previously ignored female domestic sphere, the domestic novel drew attention to the previously ignored details of the household. This in turn prepared the public for the demarcation of separate spheres which precipitated capitalism. The Gothic novel, as a subgenre of the domestic novel, takes this split between private and public one step further. The Gothic novel demonstrates that what is typically considered to be the private sphere of marriage should in fact be positioned closer to the realm of the public; it reveals marriage's own hidden, private realm in which secrets are kept. These secrets are unveiled in the Gothic novel through the attempted seductions, rapes, and abductions of Gothic heroines so common to the genre. Ultimately, the Gothic novel draws attention to the "public" nature of the private sphere of marriage by revealing that there is, in fact, a dark underside of this sacred institution.

In this article, I will focus primarily on George Brewer's 1808 *The Witch of Ravensworth* and Mrs. Carver's 1793 *The Horrors of Oakendale*. These novels exemplify the kind of marriage subplot within the Gothic novel which complicates the split between the public and private spheres. In his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault identifies this split as one which emerges with and enables the rise of capitalism in the eighteenth century (84-5). A result of this split has been what modern critics have identified as the emergence of "'women's culture' and the domestic sphere" (Newton 102). The emergent female domestic sphere is reflected in the concurrently emergent domestic novel. As the domestic novel opens up the private domestic sphere to public attention, the Gothic novel, preoccupied with the problems of marriage, moves marriage to a semi-public sphere, revealing a secret sphere underneath.

In using the phrase "secret sphere," I am referring specifically to the infidelities, seductions, and rapes (whether attempted or actualized) which take place in the Gothic novel. Where the domestic novel, in the tradition of the Shakespearean comedy, typically ends on a hopeful note with a marriage, the Gothic novel challenges this hopefulness with its portrayal of varying degrees of dishonesty, infidelity, and outright evil. Fiedler characterizes this development in the novel as one in which there is a substitution of "terror for love as a central theme of fiction" (134). The Gothic novel's revelations of such threats to the evolving institution of marriage concurrent with the division of society into gendered spheres demonstrate the complexity underlying this emergent dichotomy.

Many critics have theorized the nature of the dichotomy which emerged at this time, interrogating the basic split between the public and the private. In her discussion of marriage in Britain between 1700 and 1850, Tanya Evans notes that "recent historians of women and gender have....concentrated on detailing the ways that ideas about, and the experience of, courtship, sex,

marriage, and motherhood changed over time” (57). She goes on to explicitly characterize the “rise of a domestic ideology” which emerged around the turn of the nineteenth century as one which “encouraged the separation of the public world of work from the private sphere of home and family life” (70). Similarly, Maggie Kilgour describes the “bourgeois ideal of the separate spheres [which] separates the domestic from the political, as a female realm of love and harmony which is opposed to a male commercial jungle of strife and conflict” (75). Such separate spheres were necessary in a society which no longer consisted of self-sufficient households, but relied upon surplus value for the accumulation of capital.

Even prior to Foucault, critics noted the emergence of separate spheres which coincided with the rise of capitalism and looked at its relationship to literature. Significantly, Leslie Fiedler saw this split as tied not only to the rise of capitalism, but to the rise of the novel itself. He notes that, “The moment at which the novel took hold coincides with the moment of the sexual division of labor which left business to the male, the arts to the female” (42). It is Kilgour who most specifically identifies this gendered split within the Gothic novel: “The text appears to set up an opposition between a desire for a life of private bourgeois content (female) and one for a life of public and feudal glory (male)” (98). The Gothic novel, then, reflects a significant change in Western culture which accompanied the rise of the gendered spheres of influence which took place around the turn of the nineteenth century.

In addition to this gendered split in spheres portrayed in the Gothic novel, there is a similarly gendered split in the characterization of desire which occurs in this genre. Cynthia Griffin Wolf has noted that, particularly in the Gothic model, “Many men have a tendency to divide ‘love’ into two components: an affectionate (and asexual) element; and a passionate (sexual) element” (98). This dichotomy is not limited to men, however, as Wolf goes on to identify “a ‘Devil/Priest’ syndrome exists which is an analogue in women to the ‘Virgin/Whore’ syndrome in men” (99). Thus, what has typically been seen as a simple split between the private realm of marriage and the home and the public realm of “feudal glory” is complicated by these additional perspectives in terms of what kinds of love or desire are being referred to, or what definition of success in a relationship is in play. The juxtaposition of the complexities underlying desire with the private, domestic sphere of marriage points to the inherent instability of what is typically considered the homogenous nature of the private, domestic sphere.

Certainly, the Gothic novel, as a form of the domestic novel, reflects the domestic novel’s preoccupations with household concerns. This preoccupation with household issues is highlighted in both *The Horrors of Oakendale Abbey* and *The Witch of Ravensworth*, even as both novels begin by introducing their domestic servants as fleshed out characters. In *Oakendale Abbey*, Laura’s primary companion at the abbey is her servant, Mary. In addition, practically the entirety of Chapter Three of *The Witch of Ravensworth* is spent introducing the household servants, including the Baron’s esquire, steward, butler, housekeeper, and domestic (9-10). Janet Todd describes the important role of the manservant in the Gothic: in contrast to the “servant problem” in reality in Britain during this time period, the “Gothic manservant of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries forms part of the fantasy of the Gothic novel” (270). Though a fantasy, the attention given to servants in the Gothic novel emphasizes the significance of household details to the genre.

Besides the attention given to domestic matters in these novels, the Gothic also has a preoccupation with marriage, a primary focus of the domestic sphere. In the Gothic novel, the courtship plot has a more complicated existence than in the more generic domestic novel. However, the very nature of the domestic sphere contains Gothic possibilities: Barbara Welter, when describing what she characterizes the “cult of true womanhood” which reached its zenith in domestic novels of the eighteenth century, demonstrates the Gothic nature of the wife’s role when she compares being a wife to being a “hostage in the home” (151). Welter continues, describing



a woman's role as being completely unchanging: "one thing at least remained the same—a true woman was a true woman, wherever she was found. If anyone, male or female, dared to tamper with the complex of virtues which made up True Womanhood, he was damned immediately as an enemy of God, of civilization and of the Republic" (152). As one of John Ruskin's famous characteristics of the Gothic is, in fact, "rigidity" (5), the stringency of the role of the "true woman" itself contributes to the rise of the Gothic mode.

From the earliest Gothic novels of Walpole and Radcliffe, marriage, though still the romantic goal of the novel, is presented as an unstable entity. Horace Walpole's 1764 *Castle of Otranto*, considered to be the first Gothic novel, from the very beginning shows marriage as doomed. First, after having his arranged marriage delayed by his infirmity, the sickly Conrad is killed on his wedding day, crushed by a giant helmet which falls from the sky. His father, the already-married Lord Manfred, subsequently pursues his late son's fiancée, the Princess Isabella. The primary reason given for all of the drama surrounding marriage in the novel is given to be Manfred's "dread of seeing accomplished an ancient prophecy" which curses his line (17). Thus, from the first page of the first Gothic novel, marriage is presented as a cursed state.

Similarly, in Radcliffe's 1791 *Romance of the Forest*, Madame La Motte assumes that the innocent Adeline is being pursued by her husband, simply because Adeline is a beautiful young woman. Norman Holland and Leona Sherman trace this Gothic subversion of marriage directly back to Walpole, the father of the genre: "In its marvels and terrors, *The Castle of Otranto* actively subverts the prosaic vision of the world implicit in novelistic conventions of probability and verisimilitude" (301). The purpose of many Gothic tropes, then, is at least partly to reflect these themes of subversion: "The crumbling walls of Otranto are not the only structure imperiled by Manfred's design" (Holland and Sherman 306); certainly, such subversion is an example of grotesqueness, another of Ruskin's characteristics of the Gothic (5). In other words, from its very beginning, the Gothic novel functions as a "coda of corruption" to the "happily ever after" of the conventional marriage endings of the domestic and sentimental novels of the period, revealing marriage's unstable foundation.

A primary function of the Gothic, then, is to interrogate the assumption of marriage as a stable institution. For example, a primary preoccupation of the Gothic novel is to demonstrate that marriage, which was typically considered to exist in a more private, domestic sphere, in fact should be considered to have a much more public orientation. Its public nature is mostly explicitly seen in George Brewer's *The Witch of Ravensworth*, which, rather than taking the sentimental novel's strategy of ending with a wedding, instead begins with the very public wedding of the Baron de La Braunch to the Lady Bertha:

The baron had given orders that the castle should be open for a month to every stranger, and that his tenantry and vassals should be entertained during that period....The castle itself assumed a different appearance. The seven draw-bridges had been raised, and every gate was thrown open to the traveler, the pilgrim, and the minstrel (11).

From the very beginning, Brewer orients marriage in an overtly public space. Marriage, rather than representing the kind of "marriage [in which] heterosexual genitality is revealed as the reality principle before which the problematic pleasures of the female body yield" (Masse 680), instead provides a public persona for the Baron, underneath which are many skeletons from his past.

As a Gothic novel, *The Witch of Ravensworth* reveals the hidden realms of both the evil underbelly of marriage generally, as well as the Baron's secret past specifically, primarily through the occult work of the Hag. The novel actually opens with a paragraph-long, hyperbolically stereotyped description of the Hag (who is also known as Ann Ramsay), who is summarized as, "in short... so horrible ugly, that no one would come within two yards of her" (3). A monstrous, unmarried woman, she can be seen "the greater part of the day, bent nearly double, with her elbows fixed upon

her knees, and her chin resting upon the props made for it by the palms of her hands. It was in this attitude that it was supposed Dame Ramsay designed her mischievous machinations” (3-4). Such a description ostensibly shows the horrors which develop when a woman lives an unnatural, solitary, unmarried life. However, once Ann Ramsay’s true identity as Gertrude, the woman whom the Baron scorned for lack of money, is revealed, her decadent surroundings and appearance instead demonstrate the depraved, secret sphere underlying marriage. In fact, around her cottage, “not even a blade of grass would grow”; rather, only “hemlock, and other poisonings, rank, and unwholesome weeds,” with a “stagnant pool...in the midst” (5). This entire description is evocative of not only non-productive but lethal sexuality, from the stagnant pond to the toxic herbs.

Similarly, the Baron’s current marriage is shown to have corruption at its heart. The Hag, as a symbol of this secret sphere of corruption, makes a memorable appearance at the Baron’s wedding, declaring a curse on the marriage. More specifically, she “uttered a curse—a horrid curse: —‘Misery to the Bride’” (14). Ultimately, the depravity at the heart of the Gothic shows that marriage is a less-than-ideal state, especially for women, as the Hag’s curse is directed specifically toward the bride. Nina daVinci Nichols notes that “female powerlessness was built into eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social institutions of which marriage was the cornerstone” (194). However, one of the appeals of the Gothic novel is the agency which women are at times allowed, despite (or because of) the extreme circumstances provided by the plot. For example, in his discussion of *The Witch of Ravensworth*, Allen Grove suggests that “Brewer ultimately suggest that the wife, not the patriarch, governs the unfolding events” (ix). Certainly, the revelations of the Hag’s identity at the end of the book, and the safety which the Baron’s seeming victims ultimately find, support this hypothesis of female agency allowed in the Gothic.

Women in the Gothic novel often utilize the public façade and protection afforded by marriage to provide for their own ends. This is apparent in Miss Rainsford’s decision to marry Lord Oakendale in *The Horrors of Oakendale Abbey*, as “the idea of being a Countess, with all the flattering appendages of a title, gave a preponderancy to the scale of grandeur, and made her accept Lord Oakendale’s proposals, and her father’s commands, without any seeming reluctance,” despite her “heart [being] devoted to Vincent” (118). In her discussion of eighteenth century marriage, Evans notes that “social status remained a crucial determinant in the experience of marriage during this period” (62); for women such as Miss Rainsford, pragmatism takes priority over emotion when it comes to making decisions about marriage.

Such mercenary motives for marriage are not limited to women, however, as Lord Oakendale “found himself so embarrassed and his fortune so little equal to his expenses, that he was under the necessity of repairing it by a marriage, in which love formed no part of the contract”(Carver 38). Unlike the more straightforward relationships in earlier Gothic novels such as Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho*, in which “the narrative of romantic love and theme of malevolent sensuality are expressed in opposition: impeccably good gentry marry and exceedingly wicked foreigners fall prey to exoticism” (Nichols 188), the sides of good and bad are not so clearly defined in these later Gothic novels. For example, while Lady Oakendale’s rejection of her baby, the sight of which caused her to give “a shriek of abhorrence” (122), emphasizes her failings as a proper woman, the baby’s guardian’s use of her secret as a basis for extortion shows that even apparent agents of charity are not wholly motivated by altruism.

Certainly, the public pressure to marry someone of a similar station, as well as the necessity of wealth, drives many of the marriages in Gothic novels. As what I am referring to as “public-oriented marriages,” or those which were primarily arranged to fulfill societal expectations, did not have love as their foundation, marriage partners looked elsewhere to fulfill their romantic or sexual needs. The necessity for public-oriented marriages, then, resulted in the creation of a secret, private sphere underneath the public realm of marriage; it is within this secret sphere that romantic and sexual

love was relegated. The Gothic novel is rife with romantic alliances contained in secret, such as that between Miss Rainsford and Vincent in *The Horrors of Oakendale Abbey*. Miss Rainsford loves Vincent, even though he is an inappropriate marriage partner for her station: “she knew he could not introduce her into the rank in life her ambition led her to suppose she must fill, and she could not endure the sound of plain Mrs. Vincent; yet the idea of a tender lover, encouraged in secret, and met by stratagem, enraptured her imagination” (117-8). Certainly, the secrecy and strategy involved function to heighten the excitement for the participants, especially when compared to the drudgery of a public-oriented marriage: in the case of the Oakendales, “neither of them had endeavored to render the marriage state happy,” as the “fortune she had brought him was the only inducement he ever had for making her his wife” (125).

Such mercenary marriages exist in *The Witch of Ravensworth* as well. Like Lord Oakendale, the Baron admits that he married Bertha “to obtain the splendor and advantages of wealth; I was not enamoured with her, I had not true regard” (26). The result of these loveless marriages is infidelity and adultery. In *The Witch of Ravensworth*, even before the Baron pursues Lady Alwena while he is still married to Bertha, there was a “confused tale of his infidelity to a lady of the name of Gertrude...spoken of” (Brewer 8). In addition, even after the Baron successfully marries Alwena, she herself has a poorly-concealed affair with the white knight, Alaric.

By showing these various instabilities underlying marriage, *The Witch of Ravensworth* in particular draws attention to the Gothic novel as a tragedy of household, through its heavy-handed allusions to the famous Shakespearean tragedies of household, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. Brewer evokes the tragic figure of Gertrude in *Hamlet* by having a character with the same name. Additionally, he evokes the opening of *Macbeth* by opening *The Witch of Ravensworth* with witch imagery similar to that used by Shakespeare. As in the first act of *Macbeth*, the Weird Sisters speak of meeting “upon the heath” (I:1), so the first sentence of *The Witch of Ravensworth* situates the Hag’s home as being “on the extremity of a wild heath” (3). From the very first sentence, then, Brewer uses a similar setting and scene of witchcraft to evoke the tragedy of *Macbeth*.

Also like the Shakespearean tragedies, both *The Witch of Ravensworth* as well as *The Horrors of Oakendale Abbey* use occult imagery and castles with hidden spaces to develop their themes. The use of such settings and imagery—what Wolff describes as the “highly stylized paraphernalia that we now associate with the Gothic-novel—a castle or abbey that is for the most part a safe place, but which has as its foundation some complicated maze of underground vaults or dark passages and in its bedrooms sliding panels and trapdoors” (100)—emphasizes the covert nature of the infidelities occurring beneath the surface of the societal-approved marriages in these novels. With regard to this kind of Gothic setting, Nichols has suggested that “Gothic novels rely upon place not only to situate plot but to evoke the terror of Gothic themes....Since Gothic danger lies in susceptibility as much as in circumstance, tenebrous settings and mysterious places victimize heroines as fully as do villains and other specific perils” (187). What Nichols sees as the victimization potential of Gothic spaces, I read as also representing a hidden realm of depravity and corruption, underlying the public space of marriage.

Both *The Witch of Ravensworth* and *The Horrors of Oakendale Abbey* rely upon spaces of depravity also to illuminate the characters which they represent. Knowledge of the hidden recesses of a traditionally Gothic space is one way in which characters can wield power in these novels: as Nichols notes, with respect to the Gothic house, “only its owners...are privy to the unlit passageways and recesses of ‘house,’ its center and source of strength as well as mystery” (189). *Oakendale Abbey* takes this even further, as even Lord Oakendale, the current owner of Oakendale Abbey, is not aware of all the horrors which have taken place (and continue to do so) in the abbey. Nevertheless, Lord Oakendale is very much aware of the Abbey’s potential for hiding crime; in fact, he notes that “the Abbey was a place well calculated for the very worst designs” (55). Certainly, sending Laura

there under false pretenses, attempting to use it as a weapon against her virtue, and holding her there against her will qualify as “bad designs.”

However, while he knows some of its tragic history, he is completely unaware of its monstrous current use as a rendezvous point for grave-robbers. When the abbey’s current use as a place of storage for corpses is coupled with its history as a weapon against women, the result is an overall gestalt of evil, vice, and corruption. What Oakendale Abbey demonstrates, then, is how the monstrosity of the Gothic setting, originally a part of the villain’s plan, can escape even his control, and ultimately wreak horror upon the villain as well as his victim, as Lord Oakendale is confronted with “ the site of human body, apparently dead, but sitting upright in a coffin!” in his own abbey (113). Unexpected manifestations of the dreadful are the result of unchecked evil.

Despite his ignorance of the extent of the horrors taking place in the abbey, though, Lord Oakendale uses the abbey’s desolation to threaten the novel’s heroine, Laura, hoping that it will scare her into reconsidering his proposal to keep her as his mistress. This particular type of threat highlights the Gothic novel’s tie to the sentimental novel, as it the same threat faced by Pamela, the title heroine of Samuel Richardson’s 1740 seminal sentimental novel of seduction. In Richardson’s novel, *Pamela* is sent to a “handsome, large, old, and lonely Mansion, that looks made for Solitude and Mischief” as punishment for rejecting the advances of her master, Mr. B (108). Like the perfidious Mr. B., Lord Oakendale expects that Laura’s imprisonment in Oakendale Abbey will cause her “spirits [to] become so depressed, and her mind so enervated, that she would gladly fly to him for succour and friendship, rather than be condemned to a hateful solitude, like that of Oakendale Abbey” (55). The abbey, in fact, has a history of being used as a weapon against unruly women: after her escape, Laura learns that Lord Oakendale’s mother “was sent down to this Abbey as a punishment, or rather mortification” (108). Further, as Lord Oakendale originally misrepresented himself to Laura, his secret identity as a married man, is also mirrored in the secrets held within the walls of the crumbling abbey.

Similarly, *The Witch of Ravensworth* contains a decadent space which reveals the corrupt nature of its owner in the setting of Lady Alwena’s “bower of bliss” (53). Hers is not the domestic space of a Welternian “true woman.” A widow, she is described as singularly depraved: she “was not only abandoned to the lust of unchaste desires, but her mind was also impure and wicked....she was ever...seeking to demolish the fair structure of female chastity, wherever she found it erected” (51). In a continuation of the novel’s theme of feminine witchcraft, Lady Alwena’s seduction of the Baron is compared to magic after she has “overpowered the functions of his mind” through “her endearments and caresses” in her bower of bliss (54).

Such “sex magic” further demonstrates the occult potential of these secret spaces. The Baron himself is aware of the corrupt nature of Alwena and her abode: reflecting on his crimes as he goes to see her, he asks himself, “whither...am I going? To a gilded palace, wherein resides a corrupt and hateful harlot, whose beauty and wantonness may invite me to dalliance, but whose embraces are death!” (87). As the Baron reflects on and even questions his own actions, he recognizes that it is his own infidelity which has contributed to the existence of evil in his realm, which is made palpable in both the bower of bliss and the Hag’s hovel.

As the Baron realizes in *The Witch of Ravensworth*, the appearance of the occult is a direct result of infidelity. After the Baron attempts to first seduce and then murder his young love, Gertrude, she in fact adopts a completely new identity as the Hag. The Baron, knowing that Gertrude possesses virtue but not wealth, realizes that marrying her would require him to sacrifice his own ambition, in a decision similar to that made by Miss Rainsford in *The Horrors of Oakendale Abbey*. As a man, however, he has more options at his disposal than Miss Rainsford does, and attempts to trick Gertrude into a “false ceremony of the marriage ritual in Normandy.” Once she realizes this insult to her honor and refuses to comply with the Baron’s wishes, “The baron laid a plan to poison

her. It was the monk, Velaschi, who was entrusted with the plot.” However, Velaschi is not the villain he appears to be. Rather than kill Gertrude, he instead saves her: “Lady Gertrude left the world alive. It was in the deserted castle, that the monk, Velaschi, furnished her a retreat” (102). Yet again, a man is able to take advantage of the secret spaces of a castle in order to facilitate a secret plan; this time, however, its depravity functions as a place of sanctuary for a woman for once, rather than a place of terror. As in *The Horrors of Oakendale Abbey*, knowledge of the hidden spaces within the Gothic setting allows the acquisition of power by those who otherwise might lack it.

The Gothicism of *The Witch of Ravensworth* is particularly noteworthy for its shocking portrayal of the occult: “ghastly visions had appeared, smeared with blood; and the ghost of a lady, who was supposed to have been murdered in one of the rooms...seen after it was dark looking through the windows, with streams of blood running from her throat” (36). Like Macbeth’s vision of Banquo and Lady Macbeth’s bloody hands, these bloody visions are all a direct result of vice and crime. Ironically, those who seem to possess the greatest appearance of evil, whether Gertrude, in her disguise as the Hag who sacrifices babies, or the monk Velaschi, who at one point appears in the guise of a fiend, all “by means of aiding the impulse of vice, [in fact] retarded crime” (103). In *The Witch of Ravensworth*, there is a literally existent secret sphere of satanic figures engaged in “occult” (in both the supernatural and hidden meanings of the word) work, which was both brought about and reinforced by the Baron’s infidelity.

It is this secret sphere, brought into existence by an instable marriage, which provides the sense of the Gothic world described by Ann Tracy as “melancholy, menacing, shot through with guilt and fear...[but still,] despite some bizarre embellishments, recognizable as the grimmer side of the human condition” (104). In fact, Ruth Anolik links the conventions of the Gothic novel directly to the legal effects of marriage on women. She says that “in substituting a literal death for a metaphorical death, the Gothic strategy...encourages the reader to see more clearly the horrible implications to the wife of a metaphoric civil death” (27). When looking at these particular novels, what Anolik sees as the “conflation between marriage and death in the Gothic novel” (27) can be extended to adultery as well. In fact, the entire evil underbelly of marriage revealed by the Gothic novel can generally be linked to the predatory nature of men.

These predatory men are the face of the secret, dangerous underside of marriage, which represents the most immediate danger to the innocent Gothic heroine. It is notable that the Hag who appears at the marriage of the Baron to Bertha as the “misshapen figure” drinks “not a health—not a blessing—a horrid curse—‘Misery to the Bride’” (14). Marriage is itself a curse upon the bride, regardless of her identity. Anolik notes that the “The trope of the dangerous male relative reflects the legal reality that the father and the husband, who promote marriage, whose economic plots and possession of the woman are supported by marriage, are the primary causes of the civil death of the woman” (27). Eighteenth and nineteenth century women were on their guard against this dangerous nature of men: “all True Women were urged...to maintain their virtue, although men, being by nature more sensual than they, would try to assault it” (Welter 155). This explains at least part of the appeal of the Gothic novel to women: it functions as an encoded warning about the dangers of men to its female readers.

The portrayal of such predatory men also provided a cathartic release for the female readers of the Gothic novel. In their discussion of the Gothic tropes portrayed in Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Holland and Sherman note that,

for heroines like Emily [in *Udolpho*], the basic role is resistance. In the fictional as in the real world of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a young woman had to resist objectionable marriages, seduction, jealousy, and rape. Men dominated their world with these tactics. Women had few means with which to defend themselves, and defeat meant ruin. Gothic novels enabled literents, especially women, to experience these conditions in the gothic castle at the hands of

gothic mothers, fathers, and lovers (286)

Certainly, such malevolence is seen in both *The Witch of Ravensworth* and *The Horrors of Oakendale Abbey*. Lord Oakendale, in particular, illustrates this type of Gothic villain in his behavior toward the orphaned Laura. Once she realizes his immoral intentions toward her, she explains that, “I at once saw my ruined situation; and I exclaimed on the cruelty of his conduct, demanding immediate release. [Nevertheless,] he pleaded the most ardent love, protesting that he could not live without me.” Laura, an innocent, virtuous heroine, rejects his advances, even more strenuously once she learns that Lord Oakendale is already married. When she rejects him, Lord Oakendale reveals his villainous side, warning Laura, “silly girl...you are in my power; and if you provoke that power, I warn you to take the consequence” (104).

Lord Oakendale’s actions toward Laura are, indeed, an expression of his attempt to exert his power. As he suffers through his unhappy marriage, he finds himself wishing that his wife would die, “when he might be at liberty to marry some beautiful young creature, without fortune, whose gratitude would secure to him her affections, and whose youth and health would add herself to his possessions” (147). Lord Oakendale’s desire for a young woman who would be completely dependent on him, coupled with his perceiving such a young woman as a “possession” to be collected, further illuminates his villainy and demonstrates the danger to women inherent in the unequal dynamic which existed in marriage at the time. In fact, his duplicity in dealing with Laura began with their first meeting, as he introduced himself to her under the assumed name of “Mr. Thornaby.” Laura later admits her naiveté in her dealings with him, characterizing herself as “young and hasty...with the arts of man” (101).

While Lord Oakendale is willing to ruin the reputation of an innocent woman, Baron de La Braunch in *The Witch of Ravensworth* belongs to an entirely different category of villain, in his willingness to be the perpetrator of multiple murders, including infanticide. Over the course of the novel, he plots the death of his beloved Gertrude, hands over the infant Edward to the Hag as a human sacrifice, takes part in an occult ritual in which he believes he is stabbing his wife, Bertha, three times, and subsequently stabs the Lady Alwena. Despite the vast differences in their degrees of depravity, both Lord Oakendale and the Baron de La Braunch demonstrate what Michelle Masse characterizes as the “Ur-plot” of the Gothic novel:

a terror-inflected variant of Richardsonian courtship narrative in which an unprotected young female in an isolated setting uncovers a sinister secret. After repeated trials and persecutions, one of two possible outcomes usually follows. The master of the house is discovered as the evil source of her tribulations and is vanquished by the poor-but-honest (and inevitably later revealed as noble) young male, who marries the female; or the master of the house, apparently the source of evil, is revealed to be more sinned against than sinning (99)

Both Lord Oakendale and the Baron fall in the former category, as one of the evil villains who is vanquished by the noble young man; only, the Baron is capable of much greater depths of depravity than Lord Oakendale.

Even Lady Oakendale, prior to her struggle within a loveless marriage, must fight against predatory men who would view her as a possession. When Vincent, for whom she feels genuine affection, realizes that he is in danger of losing her to a more titled rival, he tries to force the issue of marriage upon her: “she found herself four months advanced in her pregnancy, by the man whom she had sacrificed to her ambition” (121). Despite her affection for Vincent, her responsibility to the public duties required by her socioeconomic status wins out. While she does bear the child, she ultimately gives it to the doctor to raise. Lady Oakendale is subsequently haunted by her past, another way in which the spectre of the unacknowledged realms of marriage and adultery exist in the Gothic. As Holland and Sherman observed in *The Castle of Otranto*, “the crumbling walls are not the only structure imperiled by [the Gothic villain’s] design” (306). In *Oakendale Abbey*, infidelity, both attempted and realized, are represented by the crumbling Gothic structure, as it unsuccessfully tries to contain the secrets of the Oakendale family.

Thus, the sense of isolation, desolation, and fear evoked in the Gothic novel work to highlight both the anxiety provoked by the instability of marriage at the time, as well as to show marriage to have both a much

more public aspect to it, by revealing a heretofore hidden realm underlying marriage. As Kilgour explains, “A valorization of the bourgeois ideal of marriage, as the quest for a higher purpose, is shown to be destructive....the conflict is itself produced by a separation of public and private that is bourgeois....The modern world reveals, however, a fear of women and the home it creates as an ideal separate from the public sphere” (99). This dichotomy between the public and the private spheres which coincided with the rise of capitalism produced anxieties which were vented through the catharsis of the Gothic novel of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such as George Brewer’s *The Witch of Ravensworth* and Mrs. Carver’s *The Horrors of Oakendale Abbey*. By dramatizing the anxiety provoked by the existence of the unacknowledged, secret side of marriage through their Gothic excesses and secret occult goings-on, the Gothic novel provided both a catharsis for its readers, who could find expression for their fears vicariously along with its heroines, as well as be grateful that their reality, while changing, did not, in fact, include witches, evil barons, or crumbling abbeys.

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# “How I Progress the Gothic Tale: Super Paper Mario and the Sublime”

T.S. Teofilo

*“Gothic in contemporary popular culture is still recognisable as the Gothic of Walpole and Radcliffe, Shelley and Stoker – but it has also changed, evolving new contexts and new meanings, and requiring new forms of analysis and comment.” Spooner (2007)*

Since its inception in the 18th century, the female gothic has rooted itself in a structure akin to Propp’s “Morphology of the folktale,” not often faltering from certain key elements. Major authors of female gothic, such as Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, the Brontës and more recently, Toni Morrison, all adhere to the situational narrative of the feminine gothic tale. The general pattern typically holds the following elements: Tyranny of the past, a stifled present, claustrophobia (in the broadest sense), exaggerated villains, the doppelganger, a family secret, a virtuous heroine spurned or sought by an evil man, a sublime setting (created to exaggerate sickening impressions within the psyche) and a happy ending. These elements appear without fail in the most canonical of feminist gothic, and as time has progressed, they have sought a place in other genres.

Just before the outbreak of the First World War, Eleanor H. Porter began motivating children with a new color of gothic fiction. Her work, *Pollyanna, The Glad Book*, pulled the gothic heroine out of the submissive castle and into the subjective American landscape. This move marked a long-running tradition for the gothic to break into children’s media. Books, films and TV shows allow children to experience the Gothic in an arena suited to their tastes, and now the female gothic novel has made its way to the video game. *Super Paper Mario* for Nintendo Wii houses all of the basic components of a feminine gothic novel in its storyline, including Ann Radcliff’s convention of an ever-present storm on the horizon. This game actually sends the player through all the modes of the genre, and surprisingly, our hero Mario is not the champion of the tale! What I present here is a textual analysis of the gothic modalities in *Super Paper Mario*, looking at the storyline introduced in game play that cannot be skipped over, and must be progressed for play to continue and how it enhances the gothic form. This storyline introduces Lord Blumiere and Lady Timpani, two lovers who have been torn apart by forces beyond their control.

How have developers chosen to use this storyline for the latest in the 20+ year old game platform? According to Korff-Vincent’s “The Mirror and the Cameo” from Fleenor’s *The Female Gothic*, “What constitutes a Gothic novel is not so much elements as attitude - the feeling of fear, the concept of multiple selves...the search not for a “they” but for an “I”” (153). *Super Paper Mario*’s “I” is the player. As the player moves ahead in this game, he helps develop the tale of Lady Timpani and Lord Blumiere. The project at hand focuses on how the Gothic genre continues to flourish in popular culture. The prevalence of the Gothic in popular culture strives to fuel the origins of the genre, making a plea for social change and renewed social focus.

## **Our Virtuous Heroine, the Good Lady Timpani**

An early anonymous critic of the Gothic asked in 1798:

Can a young lady be taught nothing more necessary in life, than to sleep in a dungeon

with venomous reptiles, walk through a ward (wood) with assassins, and carry bloody daggers in their pockets, instead of pin-cushions and needle-books?” (224)

Our heroine Tippi is much like this description. She is charged with the task of helping Mario defeat enemies and disclosing secrets that lead to the salvation of the universe. This maiden is portrayed in *Super Paper Mario* as a butterfly-like “Pixl,” a guide-friend who can perform certain actions to progress the game. Tippi’s power is that of revealing “tattles” about enemies and discovering hidden pathways through the worlds in *Super Paper Mario*.

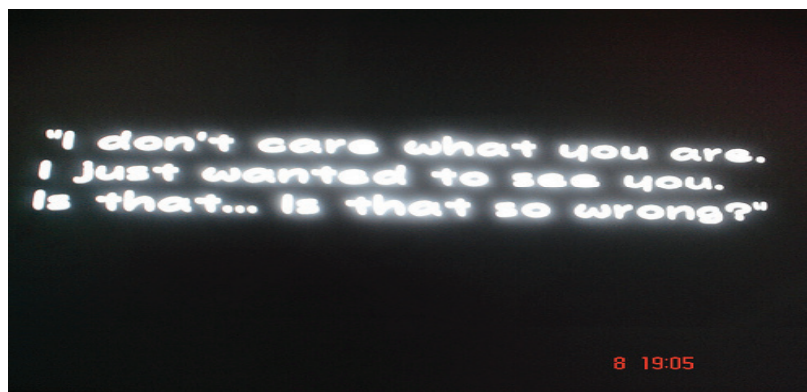
Near the beginning of the tale, players learn that Tippi used to be human, and was turned to a Pixl by the wizard Merlon in order to save her life. Later, it is revealed that Tippi is “Lady Timpani,” a beautiful maiden who was rejected by the family of her beloved and banished to wander between dimensions for all eternity. Since the town of Flipside (where Merlon resides) rests neither in nor out of any one dimension, Timpani finds herself brought back from near death in this quaint city. Swan’s “Gothic drama in Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*” talks of the Gothic heroine’s characterization relying on self-division and an experience of deep loneliness based on past experiences. Tippi is no exception. She has been divided, not necessarily by herself, between her human and her new pixilated forms. She expresses loneliness and loss, but does not know why. The persona “Timpani” is lost for the moment, and Tippi knows something about her has changed, although she will not comprehend what until she reunites with her former lover, Lord Blumiere, later in the tale.

According to Wallace:

The Gothic heroine (and her reader) has to convince herself that the man she has to marry in order to establish a separate identity, is not, in fact, a Bluebeard who will victimise her as her mother was victimised, but a ‘real man’ who will love and protect her. (59).

It is not until in his castle, seeing him near death that Timpani realizes her love for Blumiere is still priority. Here lies the connection of discovering Lord Blumiere, transformed to Count Bleck, was a “Bluebeard,” but is no longer. The virtues of his wish to destroy himself so that Timpani can keep living are key to the heroine’s rekindled love. Tippi must restore her love with Blumiere in order to set the world right, and in the true virtuous nature of the Gothic heroine, she sacrifices herself to be cast into oblivion so long as her love is by her side. This virtue pays off in the end, as will be shown in a later section of this analysis.

The typical Gothic heroine is the most beautiful, fairest, most all-around good young woman in a family of either normal, but wealthy, or extraordinarily decrepit kin (for more on the definition of “Gothic heroine,” see Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*). For Lady Timpani, her acquiescence to the typical female Gothic heroine is shown first in the mysterious description of how she and Blumiere met. Although at this point in the game, a player may not know the identities of “Timpani” and “Blumiere,” a message is flashed in bold, white letters on a black screen:



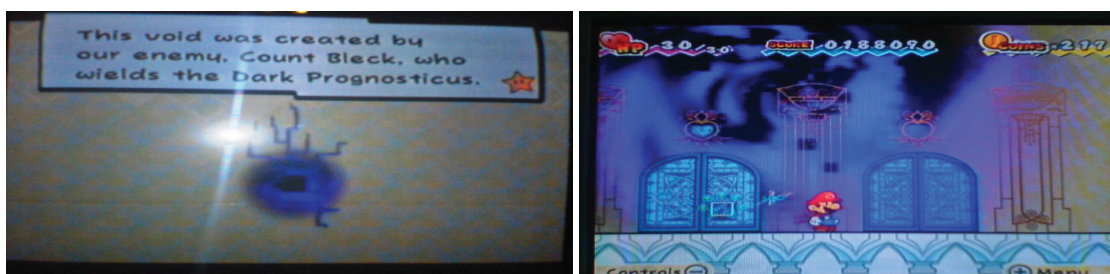
This message continues by sharing that Timpani has come to see Blumiere because he has fallen from a cliff and is injured. Lord Blumiere has at this point been identified as a member of the “Dark Tribe,” a race of non-humans who control all the evil forces of the universe. From this fact, one can imagine that the meeting of Timpani and Blumiere is much like that of Beauty and the Beast in the dungeon of Beast’s darkened castle. Unlike Beauty, however, Timpani never rejects Blumiere for his appearance or relation to supposed evil. She helps and nurtures him in his pain, and the two fall in love.

Timpani’s virtue and honor allow her not only to fall for Blumiere in his injured and presumably hideous state, but also give her the courage to stop the destruction of the universe by fighting at Mario’s side throughout most of *Super Paper Mario*. Although at times she is kidnapped by villains or still with Mario off screen while another hero (Luigi, for example) fights, Tippi’s powers aid in the heroes’ quest. This fact contributes to Tippi’s heroine status as well, and considering the player initially assumes Tippi has no recollection of her former life, she must be necessarily devout by choice alone, rather than by reason of previous circumstance.

### **The Sublime Destruction of the Universe**

Burke defines the Sublime as painful, terrifying and violently emotional experiences and landscapes. Horrifying scenery abounds in the feminine Gothic, and in *Super Paper Mario*. The first sublime setting in the game is shown as Mario and Luigi are sent out to find Princess Toadstool, who has been kidnapped. This sets up a miniature gothic tale, alluding to the greater story to come, one of a kidnapping and a heroine (Peach) being married to a tyrannical ruler (Bowser) by force. Mario and Luigi assume that Princess Peach has been taken to Bowser’s castle, which is introduced to the player by a macabre tune familiar from *Super Mario Bros. 3* and a gloomy, storm-laden hillside hosting a tumultuously foreboding castle. For any seasoned Mario player, this castle is noticeably more villainous than the norm, and it creates emotional distress for the player (and Mario) since it seems a fight with Bowser will ensue. This first instance of the Sublime is merely a preview for the drastic murals of fear painted on the backdrop of the worlds Mario and friends must visit and conquer.

In *Gothic Fiction / Gothic Form*, Haggerty sees the Sublime in the Gothic as a simple event described so masterfully that it maximizes the horror being displayed and also explains that “the sublime takes a person out of herself as a way of expanding who she is...”(34). The Sublime not only affects the characters partaking of its splendiferous terror, but also the reader/player involved. Sublime terror can be called the element that released Timpani from her memory loss: After a large crack in the void created by the evil Count Bleck transports the heroes back to Flipside, Tippi’s mind wanders during a conversation with Merlon and she blurts out, “Blumiere.” This is the first obvious recollection Tippi has regarding her former self, and it was charged by the drastic transformation of the landscape. Haggerty’s description of a simple event described thoroughly is present in the darkened, flashing sky that progressively becomes more ominous as the game moves forward:



DaVinci-Nichols states, “Gothic novels rely on place...to evoke the terror of Gothic themes... tenebrous settings and mysterious places victimize heroines as fully as do villains...” (187). This account of Sublime setting is witnessed in *Super Paper Mario* through the foreboding sky, and also through the heroine’s kidnapping. In a chapter of this game called “The Bitlands,” Mario and company must rescue their new friend Tippi in order to continue the quest to save the universe. Tippi has been taken and caged by a raving fanatic who obsesses over robotic butterflies. Her cage is small and she is lonely and terrified, so when Mario, Peach, Luigi and Bowser rescue her, Tippi is so gratified she produces an item the group needs to progress to the next chapter: One of the 8 “Pure Hearts” that can work together to weaken the “Chaos Heart” that is creating the void in the sky.

The “Pure Hearts” can only be created from real love, and the heroine shows here that her sublime entrapment was so overwhelming she has learned to love her rescue party to the highest possible level. The Sublime in *Super Paper Mario* induces fear at inception and release at its end. The Koopa castle foreshadows the coming void in the sky and Tippi’s cage personifies fear of not realizing her past.

### **Koopas Can’t Breathe: Claustrophobia**

Claustrophobic moments in this text overwhelm the player and characters in order to showcase the impact choices have on the game and to a larger degree, society. This is as the traditional feminine gothic has governed since 18th century Britain, when Gothic women writers were fighting for social change in reality through their novels (see “Introduction” in *A Sicilian Romance* by Ann Radcliffe). This fight for change took the shape of a beautiful heroine being locked in a small closet, usually with the choice to flee into danger or stay and remain eternally unhappy. The tales almost always end with the heroine fleeing and finding ultimate joy, much like that experienced in Roald Dahl’s *Matilda*, as the young girl is adopted by the beautiful heroine and they live together “happily ever after.”

Cohen’s “Kitschen Witches” remarks that Gothic classics hold helpless victims struggling against tyrannically corrupt institutions, families and governments. In *Super Paper Mario*, the end of all worlds is approaching rapidly and the Sublime engulfs the heroes as they trudge through dangerous chapters questing toward the unknown. Tippi’s beloved, in the form of Count Bleck, has minions who at times create a claustrophobic atmosphere for the journeyers. These henchmen are a part of the disorderly government Cohen mentions, as their drive is to create as much chaos for Mario and company as possible. Most notable of these is Mimi, the mimic. In one chapter of the game, the hero crew is sent by Merlon to the home of a sorceress named Merlee who is said to know the location of a “Pure Heart.” When the heroes arrive, Merlee is not who she seems; she is Mimi in disguise. At the end of this chapter, the heroes are faced with two Merlees and forced to decide which is real. This mischief invokes a claustrophobic, choking terror for the heroes and player, as the wrong choice could mean the game is over and lost.

Also in this Gothic mode, Becker talks of enclosure, explaining that the heroine is encased in an environment that was initially thought of as safe, but has now become a prison. Merlon imprisoned Tippi in her pixl form to protect her from death, but as her feelings for Blumiere return to her memory, cut scenes reveal the heroine agonizing over the loss of her original form. In the end of the tale, Timpani (not knowing the outcome) takes the most powerful step from this suffocating predicament as possible: She agrees to put herself in danger to save the worlds. This choice bodes well for the heroine, as in any traditional female gothic tale. Due to her virtuous choice, Tippi is returned to her human form of Lady Timpani.

### **Luigi, Mr. L, Bleck and Blumiere: Doppelgangers**

Carrington explains that the doppelganger causes one to question the barriers between life, death and identity. This sentiment is best realized in the characters of Blumiere and Count Bleck. After Lady Timpani was ousted by Lord Blumiere's father, Blumiere sought solace in an evil book held sacred by his tribe: *The Dark Prognosticus*. Knowing he could never have Timpani back, Blumiere became so distraught that he let the darkness of the book take over and convert him into Count Bleck. Blumiere began to realize through the rationale of his double that using the *Dark Prognosticus* to destroy all worlds would be his only salvation from loneliness. This justification explores Carrington's claim that doppelgangers cause potentially irrational shifts in the comprehension of life and death. Blumiere's alter-identity now examines the relevance of life for anyone because of his loss. Wolstenholme remarks that doubling becomes privileged over sequencing in the female Gothic; a concept that would not permit the above understanding of Blumiere as doppelganger to take place. Sequencing requires the reliability of time, and would not allow for flashbacks revealing the former self that Count Bleck is hiding.

Many doubles occur in *Super Paper Mario*, such as the evil Mr. L, a hypnotized Luigi that Mario must fight on several occasions. Often in the Gothic, as Haggerty iterates, the doppelganger will be a direct reflection of the original self, showing the attributes opposite those of the real. Much like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Luigi and Mr. L are two separate individuals in one body who are unaware of each other. Similar to this relationship are the towns of Flipside and Flopside. The two are exact mirrors of one another and the only residents who know of both towns' existences are Merlon and his Flopside double, Nolrem. Unlike Bleck and Mr. L, Flopside is not dangerous to Mario, Tippi and their fellow adventurers. The town is more akin to Wolstenholme's discussion of the double as counterpart. In this case, rather than affecting the other, each double resides independently, knowing of the other's existence but choosing to stay at a distance until proven necessary.

Tippi and Lady Timpani also function as doubles, but in a way that remains untouched in current research. The only example I can extend comes from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. This novel expresses the concept of "rememory," events that are so powerful to the mind, remembering them takes a character back to that moment. In Morrison's work, this leads the character to have a sublime intervention of thought, where remembering the memory that was thought to be lost overcomes the character and causes stifling anguish as well as euphoria. Since Tippi has lost her former self, each piece she gains back reminds her that she is a doppelganger of her previous form. Tippi's memory sharpens as *Super Paper Mario* progresses, leading to increasing episodes of "rememory," and finally the moment mentioned earlier where she sacrifices herself, only to regain human form.

Doppelgangers in this Mario game are at nearly every turn. Their presence increases the affect of sublime scenery and claustrophobic atmospheres. Count Bleck is the self-chosen double of *Super Paper Mario*, while Mr. L is the Mr. Hyde. Flopside and its residents constitute a model of the double that does not disclose itself or cause harm, and Merlon/Nolrem interact briefly, but generally remain aware of one another without communication. Tippi and Lady Timpani are the hardest doubles to place, but as seen through Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, this duo within one self reflects the feminine Gothic ideal of the doppelganger.

### **The Tyranny of Bleck's Past and Tippi's Stifled Present**

It is important to note here that much as Mary Shelley never named Frankenstein's monster, Lord Blumiere and Lady Timpani were never shown in their true forms. The player knows Timpani is human and Blumiere is not, and this fact is what Count Bleck's past is based on. Wheatley explains:

...the female Gothic narrative often centres on a hidden family secret which necessitates the heroine's position in her new home; these secrets make up the back-story of the drama and the heroine's need to uncover them propels the narrative." (108).

Did Tippi agree to help Mario in hopes of uncovering her past through the narrative? This is possible, but never stated directly. What is known: Blumiere/Count Bleck's family secrets...

1.) Blumiere's father is against "dark tribe" / human relationships. 2.) *The Dark Prognosticus* is something of a family heirloom in Blumiere's tribe. These two facts show the gothic mode of tyranny for the hero and heroine. Blumiere as hero is forced to relinquish his love, never to have her again. At this juncture, Timpani, even with memory loss, is on a mission to recover her past, which will lead to uncovering the secret of Count Bleck.

In Fleenor's *Female Gothic*, Joanna Russ claims that the super-male counterpart to the heroine of a feminist Gothic tale is perceived as either being in love with the heroine, hating her, using her or trying to kill her (32). In the case of *Super Paper Mario*, Count Bleck is acting on at least two of these. He is directly in love with Timpani, even though he thinks she is no longer in the world, but he is also indirectly trying to kill her as he attempts to destroy existence. This stifling of Tippi's present, although unknown to her through most of the game's storyline, impedes on her heroism. It is indirectly Blumiere's fault that she is in pixl form, and it is Bleck's fault that she must spend her time fighting for the lives of all civilization as a brave heroine. With these two facts engulfing her thoughts as her memories return, Lady Timpani is continually stifled by Lord Blumiere's past. According to McMillen-Conger, this suppression ultimately builds the heroine into her best form and leads to reconciliation, tranquility and an "advantageous marriage." Indeed, *Super Paper Mario* comes full-circle from the miniature Gothic tale at its beginning to conclude as all female gothic tales do, with:

### **The Happy Ending**

Just before Mario's final battle against a minion-turned-rogue of Count Bleck's team, Dimentio, Tippi and Bleck discuss their feelings for one another, realizing that they have the tool to help Mario defeat Dimentio: Their love. Realizing that it may mean their death because of the power, Count Bleck and Tippi join together on an altar and confess their undying love. This act causes the two to dissipate into nothing, but also conjures a new set of 8 "Pure Hearts." As Free discusses, we create our own evils, the ones needed for current culture, and this claim explains that Bleck was no more a villain than the others in this tale. He was simply a misguided, lovesick man who fought until the end to prove his love for Timpani.

Hawkins explains that feminist critics of the Gothic often accuse the literature of giving a conservative view of a woman's destiny. For *Super Paper Mario*, it was Tippi's decision to sacrifice herself with Count Bleck, and she even made the suggestion. The feminine Gothic empowers women to act as righteous and live as dangerously as the heroines of the tales. Here it must be noted that after the credits for this game roll through to the end, a couple is seen holding hands on a hilltop. Speculation notes that these figures are Lady Timpani and Lord Blumiere, living happily, far away. This is proof that Hawkins' assertion is lacking in proof, since Tippi made the decision to endanger herself and her love, and in the end, her strength helped her survive.

Morgan's "Toward an organic theory of the Gothic" reminds us that reading the Gothic makes a reader appreciate the fact that she is not encased in a tomb, a concept that relates to the importance of this genre. The Gothic basically strives to express how bad things could be if they weren't this good. Mario players would not immediately call this analysis the revelation of *Super Paper Mario* as Gothic. As Martin puts it in her work "Gothic Scholars Don't Wear Black," Gothic studies and the subculture of the Goths are not necessarily aligned. In reality, it is likely a player will see the storyline's pattern as similar to other works she has read or seen, but she will not have a name for

it. As BIGSuperMarioFan said in a message board post outlining Blumiere and Timpani's story, "It was so romantic that I remembered everything!!!!" Here, I have exposed the Gothic elements of *Super Paper Mario* in order to classify the most likely reading as that of someone who is aware of the tropes of Gothic literature, even though she may not realize the historical context of recognizing the patterns or have the language to talk about it as such.

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*The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination*. Edited by Ruth Bienstock Anolik and Douglas L. Howard. (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2004. 310 pages, \$39.95). ISBN 978-0-7864-1858-9

The Other has long been a key concept to the Gothic since its eighteenth-century inception. Whether manifesting as a brooding Italian, a sadistic abbot, or a vampiric aristocrat, the Other has maintained a haunting presence within the darkened hallways of Gothic fiction, often allowing each of its specimens to reflect on the psychological and sociological forces from the periods and minds that produced them. This insightful and fresh collection of fifteen essays allows further analysis into this recurring theme, while also exploring an eclectic and multicultural selection of film and written texts.

In her introduction, Ruth Bienstock Anolik explains that traditionally “the Gothic represents the fearful unknown as the inhuman Other: the supernatural or monstrous manifestation, inhabiting mysterious space, that symbolizes all that is irrational, uncontrollable and incomprehensible” (1). By laying out this conventional understanding of the Other’s role in Gothic fiction, Anolik goes on to note that this early supernatural and monstrous Other eventually gave way to a more realistic Other rooted in racial and social fears. She strongly asserts that the “writers from many canons and cultures are attracted to the always anxious and transgressive Gothic as a ready medium for expression of racial and social anxieties, and are drawn to the horrifying and monstrous figure of the Gothic Other as a ready code for the figuration of these anxieties” (2). This work thus establishes itself as a lofty and valuable project for the twenty-first-century Gothic critic.

At first glance, this collection treats a dizzying assortment of subjects that range from Charlotte Dacre’s *Zofloya* to the blaxploitation film *Blacula*. To assist the reader with what could quickly become an overwhelming task, the essays are subsequently divided into five groups, designated by subtopics such as ethnicity, religion, and social class. These divisions allow the anthology a more coherent and orderly structure, ultimately eliminating any confusion that could easily accompany a work that is as extensive as this in terms of the variety of materials scrutinized and the diverse approaches taken by the contributors. More importantly, the essays all brilliantly expound on Anolik’s general thesis, with many examining exciting texts that are new to Gothic criticism. Remarking that the “discussions in this collection indicate the pervasiveness of the Gothic mode, haunting texts not generally associated with this traditionally marginalized tradition,” (5) Anolik rightfully identifies a definitive feature of this exceptional collection. Yet it is the racial and social examination of the Gothic Other that is the highpoint of this work; the treatment of a familiar trapping is given refreshing new life by the scholars that have collaborated here.

The essays themselves will be extremely useful to critics and deserve some brief individual discussion. Steven Jay Schneider has crafted a thorough analysis of the Gothic hero-villain in late twentieth century films concerned with race issues, particularly that of the mixed couple. Examining titles such as *Candyman* and *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, Schneider focuses on the ambiguity embedded within the theme of seductive villainy in these racial horror films. Karen Kingsbury’s essay is a fascinating exploration of Sax Rohmer’s infamous Fu Manchu. The dastardly criminal mastermind is looked at in context of Yellow Peril mistrust, which, according to Kingsbury, creates a “Gothic fantasy [that] magnifies, undermines, sweetens, and destabilizes racist content, till the whole narrative fairly writhes with unresolved tension” (106). Writing on France Calderon de la Barca’s *Life in Mexico*, Soledad Caballero explores depictions of the Roman Catholic Church that have seemingly been inspired by Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis. Arguing that de la Barca’s travel narrative “combines the styles of Radcliffe’s female Gothic and Lewis’s male Gothic,”

(158) Caballero explores the Catholic Other from a Protestant viewpoint. Anolik examines the demonic nature of the Jewish Svengali from George Du Maurier's *Trilby*, ultimately arguing that the "demonization of the Other represents an early step in the relentless drift of modern history towards Gothic horror, to the Gothic nightmare of history in the twentieth century and, seemingly, in the twenty-first century as well" (187). In terms of the social Other, Gavin Budge writes on John Polidori's "The Vampyre," exploring Lord Ruthven as an ambivalent aristocrat that confuses and mystifies both character and reader alike. Budge explains that the Gothic nature of this text primarily derives from the social dissolution of aristocratic and bourgeois principles that are at the forefront of Ruthven's character. Sherry R. Truffin finds the Gothic Other within the school teacher of Stephen King, most notably in his *The Shining*, *Rage*, and "Suffer the Little Children." Truffin looks at King's use of modern horror and its effect on the reader against the backdrop of institutions such as schools, noting this as a significant revision for the genre.

The remaining essays of this anthology – Eugenia DeLamotte on the development of the racial Other in Radcliffe's *The Italian* and Dacre's *Zolfoya*, Katherine Henry on nineteenth-century American slavery in Theodore Dwight Weld's pamphlet "American Slavery As It Is" and Walt Whitman's *Franklin Evans*, Daphne Lamothe on interracial union in Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Renee L. Bergland on the Otherness of Native Americans in Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* and Washington Irving's *Sketchbook*, Douglas L. Howard on misguided Western perception of Indian culture in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, Stephanie Burley on the demonized servant in Dacre's *Zolfoya*, Joseph Bodzioc on the demonic slaveholder of a decadent South in Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*, John Stone on Anglo-Indian relations in the film *Black Narcissus*, and Erik Marshall on the deconstruction of the Other in Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* – all diligently approach the concept of the racially and socially constructed Other within a Gothic context.

*The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination* stands out as a superb investment for those interested in the continued development of Gothic studies. The general direction taken by its editors and the varying approaches used by its contributors mark this as a volume whose value is undeniably significant, especially with the ever increasing trend towards multicultural studies. Reasonably priced, it can be acquired via McFarland & Company; for a full list of their available titles, please contact them at either 960 NC Hwy 88 W, Jefferson NC 28640, USA or [www.mcfarlandpub.com](http://www.mcfarlandpub.com).

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