

The Analysis of Gothic Literature's Use of Visceral Imagery and Horror to Explore Idealized Notions of Femininity and Gender

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Received: 30 Dec 2024; Received in revised form: 22 Jan 2025; Accepted: 28 Jan 2025; Available online: 05 Feb 2025
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Abstract— This paper explores the use of visceral imagery and horror within gothic literature, analysing key literature texts such as *Frankenstein*, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *Dracula*, and how the narrative within these texts exposes the darker aspects of womanhood and the constraints society has placed upon the female identity. The study highlights the themes of bodily autonomy, maternal horror, and psychological confinement. This analysis argues that Gothic literature is key to understanding the complex nature of the female experience, while challenging traditional narratives.

Keywords— *Gothic Literature, Visceral Imagery, Femininity, Maternal Horror, Bodily Autonomy*



I. INTRODUCTION

“Hunters have told me about the church. About the gods, and their love. But, do the gods love their creations? I am a doll, created by you humans. Would you ever think to love me? Of course... I do love you. Isn't that how you made me?” The Plain Doll says to the Hunter as the Paleblood Moon takes over the night of Bloodborne. The quote perfectly captures the tension between creation and rejection, central to gothic literature that often explores the complex themes of femininity and gender. Gothic literature, from the 18th century, has always had aspects that weren't socially accepted. Writers never used their names, or there would be stories made up to hide the identity of the one who truly wrote these pieces of fiction. It is necessary to recognise this literature's period and social context. The genre comprises horror, the supernatural, and visceral imagery all of which evoke a strong emotional response in the reader and often challenge societal norms.

II. ANALYSIS

Historically, women are seen as caregivers and moral guardians, which is an often idealized version of angelic figures in person. Gothic literature contrasts this theme,

through the use of visceral imagery, and often speaks about the darker aspects of womanhood, and the expectations of society that confine women. This is a contemporary analysis of gothic literature's use of visceral imagery and horror revealing idealized notions of femininity and how they have shaped our understanding of gender through themes of bodily autonomy, maternal horror, confinement to domestic spheres, and angelic roles.

3.1 The use of Visceral Imagery:

Gothic literature's use of visceral imagery, a gore description of physical experiences, is known for evoking strong emotions and making the readers uncomfortable. This particular description can be found often referencing female characters. In Mary Shelley's “*Frankenstein*,” the Creature's very existence is a metaphor for how society fears female independence and how it is often viewed as monstrous or unacceptable. The creature's lack of autonomy reflects society's fear that women, when empowered, may threaten the social order. (Confined In (Patri)Architecture: How Gothic and Horror Literature Exposes Ongoing Violence and Oppression Against Women 3). Another work that exemplifies this is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's “*The Yellow Wallpaper*”. The

protagonist's mental breakdown is portrayed as a consequence of all the oppressive forces of patriarchy, her domestic environment becoming a manifestation of a prison, a metaphor for the psychological struggles that women go through in the face of a patriarchal society.

3.2 Bodily Autonomy:

Bodily autonomy is having the right to make decisions about one's own body without any interference from an external force. It encompasses control over one's physical self, choices related to health, reproduction and more. In the context of Gothic literature, the theme of bodily autonomy intricately weaves itself into the story of Bram Stoker's "Dracula". Lucy Westenra's transformation into a vampire is a symbol of her losing autonomy over her own body as she falls prey to Dracula's desires. She starts losing her "sweet purity" and "loveliness". Lucy in the beginning openly exhibits her independence and innocence, and this is evident in her desire to marry as many suitors as she wants, "Why can't they let a girl as many as want her, and save all this trouble?" Lucy reveals her underlying desires while being critical of herself. However, once Dracula begins feeding on her, she is unable to resist Dracula's predation, she loses control over herself, slowly becoming a passive victim. Lucy was no longer a master of her fate, but a pawn in Dracula's sinister game. Lucy, a pure and virtuous woman, is "corrupted" by Dracula's influence as she becomes a predatory and sexualised creature that no longer represents who she is, a tragic loss of innocence and autonomy. This is a reflection of the anxiety about female sexuality and the perceived dangers of defying societal expectations as a woman who is "pure and passive". Lucy's fate serves as a cautionary tale about the consequences of straying from the prescribed path of Victorian womanhood.

3.3 Maternal Horror:

Maternal Horror explores the complexities surrounding motherhood. It often delves into the dark side of maternal instincts, and anxieties, and reveals how society's expectations can also turn a caring and nurturing figure into a source for horrors. Maternal horror is often about the conflict mothers go through with the pressure of raising children and keeping up with society's expectations, losing a child or a parent themselves, and traumas they didn't know could trigger them. The genre often challenges the glorified side of motherhood, which shows how pure, nurturing and loving mothers are and turns towards exposing the fear, anxiety, and trauma that can bring out monsters from being in the role. In *The Haunting of the Hill House*, Eleanor Vance's childhood is scarred by her mother's controlling nature which grew resentment and a longing for freedom in the heart of Eleanor. Eleanor's psyche is shaken as she feels the guilt and obligation even after her mother's death, as she

haunts her. The mother's ghost symbolizes how she can't escape maternal expectations and the trauma that arises from them. The haunting is a manifestation, a source for both fear and identity of an unresolved conflict with motherhood.

Ari Aster's "Hereditary" is a compelling example of maternal horror. It portrays the psychological turmoil of Annie Graham, a mother with profound grief over losing her daughter Charlie with a haunting legacy of her mother. The movie follows the events after the death of her mother as Annie grows increasingly isolated from her family, she struggles to keep herself together while dealing with her children and holding the family up. It perfectly illustrates the pressures of motherhood that can lead to a feeling of inadequacy and resentment with a sense of despair that grows within. Annie's relationship with her son Peter, the conflict of guilt and anger culminates in a heartbreaking moment where she screams, "I never wanted to be your mother." This raw expression of her frustration comes out in a final burst. It highlights society's expectations that a mother must love her children with devotion unconditionally when it can destroy a mother from within to live up to these expectations, saying things they can never take back. The film explores the themes of inherited trauma as Annie progressively learns the secrets of her family's past. The revelation that her mother was involved in a ritualistic practice that had a dark influence which passed down to her children is quite unsettling. Annie increasingly becomes consumed by grief, and this connection of motherhood, and the loss of her daughter and mother are the catalyst for horror. *Hereditary* not only challenges the traditional notions of motherhood but also reflects broadly on the anxieties caused by expectations placed on women to fulfil their role as a perfect mother, a terrifying potential for horror that lies within the maternal bond.

3.4 Domestic Spaces and Societal Constraints:

Symbolising the societal constraints that are placed upon women and their struggles against patriarchal expectations, many narratives define domestic spaces as prisons. These prisons trap the female characters in a web of oppression, isolation and despair. In Henry James' "The Turn of the Screw" the governess is isolated in the grand eerie mansion, Bly, where she is tasked with taking care of two children. She finds her way through the responsibilities, but she also increasingly becomes consumed by her fears, which leads to a deteriorating mental state. The claustrophobic environment with the hidden passages and oppressive atmosphere symbolise how it is psychological confinement that she experiences. Similarly, in *The Babadook*, Amelia's home becomes a site for grief and suffocation, it amplifies her feelings of isolation. After the death of her husband, she

is trying to keep up with her responsibilities towards her son while facing her trauma. Babadook is a metaphor for the unacknowledged grief, illustrating how confinement can lead to a sense of entrapment and madness. The labyrinth's structure highlights the psychological struggles that women face as they attempt to break free from societal and patriarchal constraints. These themes highlight the broader societal issues that resonate in contemporary discussions about gender and identity and the understanding of power dynamics that play a role in oppression.

3.5 Angel in the House:

"Angel in the House", a recurring theme in Gothic literature, often represents the idealised image of femininity on the lines of self-sacrifice, devotion, and moral purity. In the Victorian era, this idea was deeply ingrained into societal expectations which dictated how women should aspire to be. Gothic literature exposes the dark implications of such roles and the toll that these expectations can impose on women. Characters such as Catherine Earnshaw in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, embody a spirit of independence and passion that ultimately succumb to societal pressures. This is evident in the destructive nature of her angelic role. Similarly,

In Daphne du Maurier's "Rebecca", the character of the second Mrs. de Winter, struggles to live up to the legacy of her predecessor, Rebecca. Her perfect image perpetuated by the housekeeper represents the ideal that she has to live up to, feeling inadequate and as a mere replacement for Rebecca questioning her self-worth and identity. Du Maurier writes, "I was not sure of myself, I was not sure of my husband, I was not sure of anything." (Du Maurier) this reflects the psychological toll that living up to an unattainable ideal has on her. Ultimately, her journey towards self-assertion and identity reclamation serves as a critique of the "Angel in the House" archetype, emphasizing the necessity of breaking free from the constraints of idealized femininity to embrace individuality and strength (Smith and Wallace).

III. CONCLUSION

Gothic Literature's exploration of visceral imagery and horror provides us with a profound commentary on how femininity and gender were idealised. The themes of bodily autonomy, maternal horror, confinement to domestic spheres, and angelic roles, reveal the psychological and physical struggles that women face in a patriarchal society. Characters like Lucy Westenra embody the loss of autonomy and innocence, while Annie Graham highlights the burdens of familial legacy and maternal horror that carry through generations. The *Turn of the Screw* illustrated the entrapment of women in society's expectations while Mrs

de Winter in *Rebecca* is entrapped in the cycle of living up to an ideal, seeking her own identity. The Gothic genre still maintains a presence as an intersection of gender, power, and horror that encourages us to reevaluate traditional narratives and the complexities of the female experience. The Gothic genre was born out of a fear of being abnormal, questioning the norms of society anonymously, but grew into a critique that examines these expectations and the toll they have on society and women, in particular, is a place for discussion for both historical and modern contexts.

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