Pet Ghosts: The Strategies of Plot in Women’s Gothic

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Abstract

This paper deals with the use of Gothic elements in the construction of plot in several texts written by women. The importance of this study lies in its exploration of some nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century short stories written by women who were widely read then, but are, mostly, not very well-known now. In addition, the study’s contribution is mainly in its emphasis on the Gothic short story rather than the Gothic novel, which usually attracts critical attention.

This selection will allow for a sample assessment of the subjects and strategies which these women writers deployed to broach subjects related to the daily lives of women. It will be argued that women writers found in the Gothic mode a liberating medium of expression through which they managed to face their problems and domesticate their fears. Viewed from a current perspective, these stories can be considered as anticipations of some postmodern novels which markedly utilize Gothic plots.

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A Chronological List of the Selected Stories

Amelia Edwards  “The Phantom Coach”  1864
M.E. Braddon  “The Shadow in the Corner”  1879
Rhoda Broughton  “The Man With the Nose”  1879
Dorothea Gerard  “My Nightmare”  1892
Georgina Clark  “A Life Watch”  early 20th.c.
Dorothy Sayers  “Suspicion”  early 20th c.
Mary Wilkins  “The Lost Ghost”  1903
May Sinclair  “The Victim”  1922
Edith Wharton  “Mr. Jones”  1930
Edith Wharton  “Afterward”  1930s
Margaret Irwin  “The Earlier Service”  1935
Elizabeth Bowen  “Hand in Glove”  1952

I

This study aims at exploring the utilization of the Gothic mode in the construction of plot in selected works by women writers, ranging from Amelia Edwards’ mid nineteenth-century Victorian ghost tales to those of Elizabeth Bowen in the middle of the twentieth century. The term “Gothic” will be used loosely to refer to tales of the supernatural, nightmares, psychological tension, in addition to the regular ghost tale with its menacing atmosphere, mysterious apparitions, and other familiar Gothic trappings.¹

However, what Ellen Moers, in her Literary Women: The great Writers (1976), has coined as “Female Gothic” (90) allows for a more specific treatment of the stories under discussion by focusing on the strategic use of Gothic which women writers introduced in their plots.
The discussion will be restricted to the intricacies of plot so as to reveal its intentional function in the selected texts. In this selection, which is meant to represent the wide range of the Gothic plot in these texts, I hope to show the variety and complexity of the issues that these writers tackled. Moreover, I will focus on the creation of domestic terror in order to show that the domestication of the Gothic in these plots does not only function as a subtle strategy for dealing with social problems, but it also sets the mood for some postmodern novels which utilize Gothic plots.

A close textual analysis of the stories reveals a unifying, though diverse, politics which couch subliminal anxieties under the seemingly conventional surface of the Gothic text. In these stories, the ghost or ghostly appears as a mode of subversion facilitating the expression of contradictory impulses and tabooed topics like sex or death. Examples of this are found in Rhoda Broughton’s “The Man with the Nose” and Margaret Irwin’s “The Earlier Service.” It will be shown that these tales experiment more with effects of terror (fear arising from suggestion), than with those of horror (fear arising from spectacle). These stories often blend elements of the uncanny and the supernatural, and explore psychological problems.

More prominently, the settings chosen for most of these tales are not exotic, remote, or unfamiliar grounds, but conveniently familiar, domestic interiors which dramatically function as the sites of terror. The snug household, with its warm hearth and presiding “Angel in the House,” and its monotonous rhythm of daily chores
provide the setting for the most uncanny narratives. This, ironically, reveals a yearning to disrupt the dull patterns of domestic routine and betrays a repressed desire for wild pursuits and exciting mysteries which send a thrilling shiver down the spine. Enclosed within the comfort of their homes, many nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century women writers were engaged in weaving plots of imaginary ordeals and enigmatic encounters which had both direct and oblique relevance to their daily lives. In many ways, the tales under investigation do not frankly repudiate the domestic domain of women; they simply give it a sharper edge by allowing in forces of the supernatural and the uncanny so as to transform the world of the mundane into a more exciting one, where questions about their role and status as women may be raised, but not necessarily answered. 3

In the stories discussed here, the mysterious plots of the Gothic function as convenient outlets of expression and provide strategies of parallelism and displacement which enable the female writers to discuss serious issues. Among these issues are those of motherhood, the confinement of women to domestic spheres, the grievances of working class women, the problems of house maintenance, the anxieties of pre-marital and post-marital life, and women’s participation in their husbands’ work ethics. Some of the stories, such as Amelia Edwards’ “The Phantom Coach” and Elizabeth Braddon’s “The Shadow in the Corner,” investigate philosophical concerns, such as the relation between science and religion, life and death, rationality and the cult of spiritualism, which preoccupied many writers during the second half of the nineteenth century.
Michael Cox observes that "the golden age of empire was also the golden age of the English ghost story" (xiii). Cox explains that the reason why so many women writers were involved in the writing of ghost stories was because "perhaps women, being on the margins of society during the nineteenth century, were especially impelled to write about the margins of the visible, for the ghost story . . . deals with power and thus might be expected to appeal to those who felt the absence of self-determination in their own lives" (xiii). Along the same lines, Vanessa Dickerson argues that "removed from the power-wielding occupations of the world—law, science, medicine—yet relegated to the higher realm of moral influence, the position of the nineteenth-century female, as influential as it was, was yet equivocal, ambiguous, marginal, ghostly"(5). Women writers, she argues, have utilized the Gothic, or "ghostliness" in particular, to explore their position in a materialist male-dominated society. Many Victorian women, Dickerson persuasively shows, have identified with the ghost's paradoxical posture. Similarly, Diana Basham comments on the affinity between women writers and ghosts:

Both ghosts and women were subject to the same kind of criticism and liable to be met with the same dismissive hostility in their attempts to gain recognition . . . Just as ghosts were mere copies of ordinary human beings, women . . . were mere copyists of male achievement. (152)

Leslie Fiedler, in Love and Death in the American Novel, identifies modern Gothic along the same lines of the nineteenth-century women's Gothic by perceiving it as a form of protestation against the domestic and the
mundane. He further observes: "The final horrors, as modern society has come to realize, are neither gods nor demons, but intimate aspects of our own minds" (xxxiv). The psychological terrors of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century plots stand in marked contrast to the sensational effects and exaggerated horrors of its eighteenth-century predecessors. Moreover, the later Gothic plots reveal various transformations of character and setting. Fred Botting observes that:

Domestic, industrial and urban contexts and aberrant individuals provided the loci for mystery and terror. Haunting pasts were the ghosts of family transgression and guilty concealment; the dark alleyways of cities were the gloomy forests and subterranean labyrinths; criminals were new villains, cunning, corrupt but thoroughly human. Prisons, social injustice, and rebellious individuals were not Romantic sites or heroes of gloomy suffering, but strange figures threatening the home and society. (123)

Such transformations were necessary to confirm the use of Gothic as a means of probing into social and psychological problems which were increasingly claiming attention. It is in this milieu that the Gothic lent itself as a ready mode for women writers who found in it a way of evading direct confrontation with the patriarchal order.

The female protagonists in the majority of the stories targeted in this study pose as mirror reflections of the lives of Victorian and early twentieth-century women. Several heroines are considered to be "nervous," vulnerable, fragile and willingly conforming to the cult of
invalidism in Victorian society, so they simply die or disappear in face of adversity. Others are portrayed as tough enough to stand against the hardship of their ordeals. In representing their female protagonists, women writers mostly adhered to the patriarchal stereotypes of femininity which dominated the nineteenth-century literary scene. It may be observed that women writers of the Gothic have appropriated the patriarchal mode of Gothic to serve their own goals.

Technically speaking, the plots in some of these tales demonstrate an emphasis on impressionistic moods, the process of memory and recollection, with extravagant, sensuous descriptions. At the same time, some tales emphasize the relevance of inner life by investigating the psychological complexities of human behavior, such as nervous anxiety and doubt in Dorothy Sayers’ tale “Suspicion”, sexual jealousy as in Georgina Clark’s “A Life Watch” and disappointment and depression as in Edith Wharton’s “Afterward.” In some of these stories, the female writers impersonate masculine voices as narrators, and often venture into exclusively masculine territories, such as soldiers barracks and public houses. Examples of this are “My Nightmare” by Dorothea Gerard and “The Victim” by May Sinclair. The male characters, generally speaking, appear as cynical, indifferent, hostile or in the roles of rational scientists, strict guardians or amused by-standers. In some other stories, however, the husband is portrayed as caring, indulging and often treating his wife as a child whose susceptibility to “nervousness” prompts him to be highly observant of her comfort.
II

A chronological glance at the stories selected for this study shows that seven of them appeared in the 20th century, though in spirit and in manner they are reminiscent of the nineteenth-century ghost or supernatural plot. Several of these stories deal with the husband-wife relationship. These are Rhoda Broughton’s “The Man With the Nose” (1879); Dorothy Sayers’ “Suspicion”, of unknown date, probably the 20s or 30s of the twentieth century; “Life-watch” by Georgina Clark, also undated; and May Sinclair’s “The Victim” (1922). Long before Freud’s introduction of his concept of the return of the repressed, Rhoda Broughton, in “The Man With the Nose,” had experimented with the dream mechanisms and the consequences of repression. The Freudian speculations over the return of infantile fears that have been repressed become relevant. The repressed fears, which are assumed to have been surmounted, haunt the major character by returning at unexpected moments in her life. Broughton uses the strategy of evasiveness to disguise a tabooed subject, which is that of the sexual relation between a frigid wife and an implicitly impotent husband. According to Susan Friedman, reading women’s narratives as “the return of the repressed,” means “seeing women’s writing [as] an insistent record, . . . a disguise of what has not or cannot be spoken directly because of external and internalized censors of patriarchal social orders” (142). The tension in the plot is built around a recurring dream which haunts the newly-wedded young bride in the story. It seems that some repressed childhood
experience in which the bride had an encounter with a mesmerizer now resurfaces with the appearance of a very ugly mysterious man with a long nose. The tension mounts when she starts perceiving this man as a real person in her nightmares: “Sometimes, in the dead black of the night, when God seems a long way off, and the devil near, it comes back to me so strongly—I feel, I don’t know, as if he were there somewhere in the room, and I must get up and follow him” (119). In Freudian terms, the “devilish” impact of the apparition points to the unconscious libidinal impulses of the bride, who recognizes her trespassing of “godly” accepted limits.

The terror of the experience is alleviated by the husband’s humorous attitude. Bearing in mind the fact that the bride is cast as a frigid, child-like girl, one detects here a clear case of sexual anxiety. The husband, who is also the narrator, reveals in the most candid terms that his bride loathed the sight of another couple holding each other’s hands. The husband laughingly observes that he sleeps soundly as a “log,” and describes his last few weeks of preparation for the marriage as “weeks of imbecility,” thus appearing as sexually inadequate himself. As the nightmare recurs, the wife feels she’s “pulling strongly away” from her husband, and unnaturally drawn to the mysterious figure of the man with the long nose. Even when they change the hotel, the figure haunts her and she breaks into hysterical sobbing. Elizabeth demands that her husband should find the man. He humors her a little and they sit hand in hand since “there is nobody to see [them]” (127). Shortly after, the husband is summoned home to a dying great-uncle of his. In hope of a great inheritance he decides to go, leaving
his wife alone. The husband congratulates himself on having a deaf ear to his wife's entreaties not to leave her, and on her utter obedience to him. Upon his return, he finds that Elizabeth has departed in the company of a man with "a most peculiar nose." The husband relates the events twenty years later, posing more as a humorous narrator than as a bereaved husband. The question of elopement is subtly touched upon here and the moral effect is suggested by the distancing of the home as an immediate setting and the presentation of a series of hotels as an ironic substitution for the settled life of marriage in ideal situations. The major thrust of the narrative, however, is the nightmare which suggests several Freudian interpretations, chief among which is the sexual symbolism of the nose.² The wife's repressed sexual desire, which has been constrained in her childhood and adolescence, is now resurfacing in this recurrent nightmare with the sexual symbol, the nose, as its distinctive signifier. Sexual figures were perceived as a threat to society. This is probably the reason why the man with the nose disappears at the end, taking with him the young bride, who has become a victim of her own repressed desires. ³

In Dorothy Sayers' "Suspicion," the wife is typically cast as "nervous" and fragile, yet it is the husband who is paranoid by fear of poisoning. Throughout the story, the terror stems from a detective-like obsession with the rumors that circulate about a cook who is accused of killing her employers through poisoning.

Again, the wife-child figures passively in this story, while the husband actively plays the detective by tracing
some arsenic in his pie and hot chocolate. Tension mounts as we see the wife receiving morning visits from a young gentleman while her husband is at work. A pharmacist in the neighborhood verifies the presence of arsenical weed killer in the chocolate that was prepared for the husband. The symptoms of poisoning, which slightly and gradually begin to affect the husband’s health, confirm our suspicion that it is the wife, not the un-apprehended cook whom they have recently hired, who is probably behind the poisoning. At this point, the real criminal cook is apprehended somewhere else, which invites the husband to direct his suspicions towards his wife. The story ends with a breach of confidence, with no particular closure: “He glanced around at his wife, and in her eyes he saw something that he had never seen before” (171). These incidents are set against a quiet, domestic pattern of life—newspapers, coffee cups, home-made meals, etc.—which is sometimes disrupted by the wife’s “dreadful, hysterical scenes” (164). There is an indirect complaint of the monotony and boredom of genteel life, which is suggested by the daily routine of the husband’s office work, and by the fact that the wife has nothing to do.

Sexual jealousy is the subject of Georgina Clark’s “A Life-Watch,” whose plot might verily be considered as the prototype of William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily.” Offered in the form of a Chinese Box, the terror of the narrative stems from blind sexual jealousy, when a wife poisons her husband in order to prevent him from keeping a date with a woman who turns out to be only his sister. She had been unacquainted with his sister before due to the fact that their marriage was not sanctified or blessed.
by his parents. The father renounced his son for marrying beneath him, and into a family with a known history of madness. The story unfolds as a confession by the wife to the landlady, who unclaps a secret volume containing this unfortunate history. We find out that the mysterious heavy chest which accompanies the wife in her travel contains none other than the husband’s skeleton, which she has secretly hidden in her desire to possess him. Death-wish marks the penitent widow’s words as she lies dying hoping to be reunited with her husband. A glance at the issues which preoccupied G. Clark in this story will reveal several concerns regarding incompatible marriages, the role of parents in shaping their offspring’s lives, especially as the first narrator, the landlady, who now lives comfortably, has undergone a similar experience in her own marriage when she and her husband married for love and ignored the wishes of their parents.

More prominent is the plot’s rehearsal of the patriarchal verdict associating women with madness. Defined basically as emotional vessels, women were perceived as victims of uncontrollable passions. The infamous deed of the wife in killing her own husband can only be explained by introducing madness as a pretext. A great contradiction appears in the binary perception of women as excessively emotional creatures, who are expected at the same time to act in a rational manner. It is stipulated that marital life is not only threatened by sexual jealousy, but also by hereditary insanity.⁹

May Sinclair’s "The Victim" (1922) demonstrates the ability of women writers to produce detective plots whose
intricacy and suspense can match the best in the Gothic tradition. Again, sexual jealousy triggers a series of events in which a car driver, Steven, who is engaged to be married to Dorsy, gives her cousin, Ned, a thrash when he catches him flirting with her. Dorsy happens to be employed as a maid in the same household of Mr. Greathead, who is Steven's employer. Posing as a possessive lover, Steven terrifies his fiancé by his arrogant bullying. He then suspects that his employer was behind her decision not to marry him, and he plots a most careful plan to kill him. The Gothic trappings are utilized to perfection in this story, where we vividly witness the murder. First comes the strangulation, then the cutting of the body into pieces which are next hidden in a cellar. The darkness of the corridors, the squeaking of rusty hinges, the rattling of door handles, the shuffling of feet—all contribute to the eerie effects of the narrative. The major surprise is in the appearance of the friendly ghost of Mr. Greathead who brings harmony between the lovers again, after having absolved Steven of his crime. The story focuses more on Steven, the big bully, who falls a prey to terror. Terror, so to speak, tames him into a better person whom Dorsy can marry at the end. The story's contribution is mainly in its exploration of criminal tendencies and the psychological transformation, through fear, from callousness to normal behavior. The politics of domination and power which control the relation between couples are introduced here mostly as part of the domestic violence which was a major concern to women writers.

The interest in working-class young girls is also manifest in M.E. Braddon's "The Shadow in the Corner"
(1879). This is a story in which the fragile body of the servant becomes the site of suffering and gradual wasting. As L. Badley observes, the female body becomes the vehicle of expression for “that which cannot be articulated in conventional language” (145). With Gothic overtones reminiscent of *Wuthering Heights*, the story is set in Wildheath Grange, owned by a retired, extremely rational professor. A young girl applies for an appointment as a maid, not knowing that the place is haunted. Her problems begin when she starts sleeping in a deserted room in the attic, where she is distracted by a shadow in the corner. Her daily suffering and waning features are finally detected by the professor, who willingly chooses to sleep in her room for one night to prove that her fears are unfounded. However, she is driven back to her room by the elderly, unsympathetic servants, who fear her advancement in her master’s favors. One morning the girl is found dead, having hanged herself in the corner of that room.

The tragedy of the girl, as Braddon perceives it, is that of a girl who belongs to a decent family and is forced by hard circumstances into labor. We see the girl’s lack of cheer at the sight of the warm fire in the kitchen, where she works. She recollects her past with her father, after her mother’s death, in their “little snug parlour where she and her father had sat beside the cozy hearth on such a night as this, . . . the preted cat purring on the rug, the kettle singing on the bright brass trivet . . .” (62). Braddon emphasizes the sensitivity and modest accomplishments of the young girl, who was driven into employment after the death of her father. In a retrospective manner, we learn about the history of the shadow in the corner. This
is the ghost of Anthony Bascom, the great uncle of the 
master, who had led a dissipated life in London, had a 
runaway wife, and his estate was forfeited before he 
chose to hang himself in that same room, where the 
young girl put an end to her sleepless, haunted nights.

Braddon shows that the weight of the psychological 
suffering of Anthony remained behind him as a very 
disturbing, oppressive ordeal. For a part of the night 
which the professor, a “stern materialist” spends in the 
room, he could feel that his great uncle’s troubled mind 
had haunted the room ever since: “It was not the ghost of 
the man’s body that returned to the spot . . . but the ghost 
of his mind—his very self” (64). The narrator makes it 
clear that it is some “slow torture of nervous 
apprehension” that had disturbed the girl’s mind, while 
the verdict of the coroner is that of “temporary insanity.” 
The master, conveniently, finds consolation in his study 
of science. Several tropes come to the foreground as 
sources of disruption of mental harmony and domestic 
order. One of these is the conflict between the rationality 
of patriarchal figures and the irrationality and hysterical 
tendencies of females, which often constructs the basic 
arguments of feminists who criticized the patronizing 
attitudes of men towards women. Nevertheless, Braddon 
reiterates these views whole-heartedly. The girl’s 
psychological and emotional vulnerability are posed 
against the professor’s extreme rationality and 
empiricism. Moreover, the runaway wife is an active 
agent in bringing about the collapse of her husband. 
Again, this story may be seen as a reminder of the 
destructive consequences of the dissolution of natural 
home-life for children and adults alike.
If Braddon chose to focus on the plight of an orphaned young girl to accent the importance of the home and the family, Mary Wilkins in her "The Lost Ghost" (1903), set in an American town, accents the importance of the mother's role in nurturing and nourishing normal childhood. In a complex narrative framework, Wilkins shows the suffering of both motherless children and childless mothers. The plot opens with a typical Gothic description of the setting. A haunted house is let, this news triggers memories and recollections and the narrative commences in the voice of Mrs. Meserve, a woman with "a nervous face," who was an eyewitness to the ghost story. She narrates the story to her friend Mrs. John Emerson as they comfortably sit at their needlework for the church fair.

Through flashback, we learn that Mrs. Meserve, long before her marriage, was lodging with two sisters, Mrs. Amelia Dennison and her sister Mrs. Bird, a widow who never had children, though she was a "motherly woman." As Meserve is seated by the fire eating apples, she suddenly hears a queer sound at her door which she believes to be caused by a mouse. A baby ghost, with a white face and "eyes so scared and wistful that they seemed as if they might eat a hole in anybody's heart" (195), with two little hands "spotted purple with cold," appears at the door. The baby ghost cries "I can't find my mother" (195). The ghost was as cold as ice, wearing a night gown which showed her little feet. Again, the two sisters hear a knock at the door, and upon looking out, they find the baby ghost teasing a cat, and they offer her some raisins. They become so familiar with the ghost that they decide to tell Miss Meserve about it. The
domestication of the ghost-child is manifested in several warm gestures which invite the ghost into the house to seek food and shelter. At this turn of the plot, a story-within-story commences in which we find out that the baby ghost has been subjected to several forms of child abuse by none other than her own mother.

Wilkins clearly condemns the child’s mother in terms very similar to those of Victorian writers like Charles Dickens, who satirizes negligent mothers in such novels as *Great Expectations* and *Bleak House*. The mother is a singer who neglects her motherly duties, as well as wifely loyalty, not only by having an extra-marital affair, but also by seeking an insignificant career. The husband, who is away on business, comes home to find the mother absent and the child dead—having been locked in and abandoned by her mother. Then, through the neighbors’ reports, it is known that the 5-year old child used to stand on a chair to wash dishes, and to carry in sticks “bigger than her” for the hearth. It is ironic that while the mother is considered a “fine singer” outside her home, she screeches scoldingly at her daughter like an owl. In a fit of anger at the child’s death, the father shoots the mother, and then disappears.

It is at this point in the narrative that Mrs. Bird’s attachment to the baby ghost increases as she always worries about feeding the child and keeping her warm. It comes as no surprise, then, that when Mrs. Bird dies the ladies see her ghost out in the bitter cold, walking hand-in-hand over the white snow with the child, who was holding fast to her hand, “nestling close to her as if she had found her own mother” (204).
While the supernatural element in Wilkin’s story may be explained and understood in terms of everyday reality, it resists interpretation or legitimization in Edith Wharton’s “Mr. Jones” (1930). The narrative focuses on Lady Jane Lynke, a 35-year old woman, who inherits a 600-year old beautiful place (Bells). Unlike other female protagonists who have limited options of success, lady Jane leads an active, independent life: “She had gone early from home, lived in London lodgings, traveled in tropic lands, spent studious summers in Spain and Italy, and written two or three brisk business-like little books about cities…” (355). She is portrayed as an ideal model of the intellectual New Woman, who does not accept things at face value. In this intricate plot, Jane functions as a “chronicler” of the life of the neglected, confined wife.

Wharton domesticates the effects of the Gothic setting and renders its beauty in poetic prose, which endows it with an atmosphere of romantic serenity: “A silence distilled from years of solitude lay on lawns and garden” (354). Wharton juxtaposes Gothic architecture—crooked passages, superfluous stairs, steeples, etc.—with that of romantic retreats. The house, thus, represents for Jane “a perfect asylum” (364): “The very shabbiness of the house moved her more than Splendours, made it, after its long abandonment, seem full of careless daily coming and going of people long dead, people to whom it had not been a museum … but cradle, nursery, home and sometimes, no doubt, a prison” (359). She thinks of the forgotten lives of the women who lived there: “the unchronicled lives of the great-aunts and great-grandmothers buried there so completely that they must
hardly have known when they passed from their beds to their graves” (359).

In surveying the old house, Jane discovers a marble sarcophagus, surmounted by the bust of a Byronic figure of Peregrine Vincent Theobald Lynke, the original owner. His name is engraved in full, and just in a corner below this she reads “Also His Wife.” This marginalization of the wife hits Jane’s consciousness so hard. She is outraged at this and feels prompted to further investigate the identity of the wife.

Mrs. Clemm, the housekeeper, together with her niece, appear as hiding some secret. The house seems to be run completely by the orders of a Mr. Jones, who is described by the maid as “more dead than living” (360). He seems to monitor every movement in the house without ever being seen or interviewed by Jane. His status is revealed to Lady Jane through the housekeeper, as he is her great-uncle, who began as a pantryboy, then footman, then became butler. Meanwhile, Jane is caught in the mesh of domestic housekeeping and house-maintenance. There are keys to be found and locks to be mended, but Mr. Jones always stands in the way of effecting any change around the house. However, Jane spends more time around the house, feeling quite at home. For her, the old walls of this house “seemed to smile back, the windows . . . now looked at her with friendly eyes . . . . The portraits, the Italian cabinets, the shabby armchairs and rugs, all looked as if life had but lately left them” (362).
Hoping to "wake up the place" by surveying the old portraits, Jane contemplates that of the wife of the late owner: "The portrait was that of a young woman in short-waisted muslin gown caught beneath the breast by a cameo. Between clusters of beribboned curls a long fair oval looked out dumbly, inexpressively, in a stare of frozen beauty" (366). She begins to empathize with that prisoner-wife and decides to find more about her in the family records. A particular room is kept beyond Jane's reach as the servants always bar her entry to it by one pretext or another. Playing the detective, Lady Jane finally enters it and finds ashes on the hearth of this deserted "blue room." Sometimes she notices an old man with bent shoulders shuffling about the room, a moving curtain and flickering lights, and sometimes she is jerked by an unseen hand. Upon checking the family records, she finds letters written by the wife to her husband which make a mention of Mr. Jones. To Jane's great horror, it becomes evident that this woman, who was deaf and dumb, has been confined at the commands of her own husband. At this discovery, Jane seems to detect a blush of acknowledgement in the lady's eyes which, seem to be "suddenly wakening to an anguished participation in the scene" (372). Through surveying the letters, Lady Jane relives the tragic life of the wife who complains of her husband's perpetual neglect. He had married her for her wealth, while he spent his time abroad, where he ran into gambling debts, and was apparently involved with other women. In her letters, she sadly appeals to him to release her from unnecessary confinement. Speaking of her handicaps, she reminds him that she had a mind, with full awareness of things: "I would have you consider that my
mind is in no way affected by this obstacle, but goes out to you, as my heart does, in a perpetual eagerness of attention” (373). Yet, as it turns out, this letter remains locked into the drawer. Here, Wharton is deliberately making the “authoritarian male tradition . . . more sinister by the fact that even a (male) servant maintains authority over a wife” (Lloyd-Smith 145). Mr. Jones becomes the embodiment of ruthless patriarchal hegemony; an oppressive presence, lasting from grandfather Jones to the son, whose ghost is now attempting to oppress Lady Jane. Yet, this woman stands undefeated at the end.

In her other story, “Afterward,” Wharton continues to expose the unnecessary gulf that exists between husband and wife. In this context, Allan Lloyd-smith observes that Wharton “utilizes the estrangements of silence and stillness . . . to provoke the irruption of the strange within the familiar, with the consequent possibility of defamiliarized perception” (144). This is a brilliantly plotted story in which anxiety is caused by the sudden and dishonorable striking of wealth in America in the early few decades of the twentieth century. As in the plots of Henry James, we encounter an American couple who seek retirement in England, where they rent a house. Wharton makes her characters feel quite at home in the Gothic setting. They even humorously invoke ghosts and apparitions to divert themselves. The house offers all the paraphernalia associated with a ghost story; the wide hooded fire place, the dark passages and the solitary towers: “It was for the ultimate indulgence of such sensations that Mary Boyne, abruptly exiled from New York by her husband’s business . . . had endured the ugliness of a middle-western town”(562).
Mary Boyne establishes a gentle communion with the house: "Now, as she stood on the hearth, the subject of their earlier curiosity revived in her with a new sense of its meaning—a sense gradually acquired through daily contact with the scene of the lurking mystery. It was the house itself, of course, that possessed the ghost-seeing faculty, that communed visually but secretly with its own past; if one could only get into close enough communion with the house, one might surprise its secret, and acquire the ghost-sight on one's own account" (565).

Soon, the wife begins to notice her husband’s passive moods and estranged manners. He spends most of his time in the library as he is engaged in writing a book on business. Meanwhile, Mary continues in her silent adoration of the house: "Mary was too well versed in the code of the spectral world not to know that one could not talk about the ghosts one saw: to do so was almost as great a breach of taste as to name a lady in a club. ‘What, after all, except for the fun of the shudder,’ she reflected, ‘would he really care for any of their old ghosts?’" (565)

Mary is conscious of her being "like a novel heroine." She feels more out of touch with reality when she discovers "afterward" that the ghost, which she met on the lawn, was none other than her husband’s business associate, Mr. Elwell, who has come to claim the soul of her husband. Only later does she understand the meaning of her husband’s sudden disappearance. A visit from one of her husband’s old officemates reveals to her the foul means by which her husband has tricked Mr. Elwell into losing all his stock. Mary feels a great disappointment at this discovery and begins to question the validity of
keeping women outside the husband’s work sphere. She finally becomes “domesticated with horror, accepting its perpetual presence as one of the fixed conditions of life” (584). For her, the only answer for the mystery of her husband’s disappearance is known only to the house, which develops a human consciousness. She feels more at home with the secrets of the house than with the secrets of her husband. She is horrified not by the spirits of the house, but the horrors of public, material life. The poverty of the Elwell family haunts her and the ruthless success of the American Dream, as she perceives, is only realized at the expense of human integrity.

If the woman’s feelings and thoughts form the major consciousness in Wharton’s tale, the wife in Amelia Edwards’ “The Phantom Coach” (1864) is never brought to the foreground. In introducing a male narrator, A. Edwards offers us a narrative of female absence. The two dominant voices are those of the husband-narrator and the recluse scientist. The husband recollects an event which took place twenty years before. Like the narrator in “The Man with the Nose,” the husband is highly apologetic in manner and presses the testimony of his senses as an evidence of credibility. This husband, still in the fourth day of his honeymoon, deserts his wife in the cold of December and goes out hunting. Upon losing his way in the woods, he seeks refuge at a mysterious Gothic building. Again, as in most of the other stories, the warm hearth is the center-piece of the Gothic setting. A laboratory offers itself to the searching eyes of the husband, a lawyer in profession, who initiates a lengthy interlocution with the reluctant scientist.
The issues that A. Edwards tackles in her plot are very much similar to those found in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, such as the scientific and the philosophical arguments about man and his relation to nature and to God. A. Edwards does not dwell on the details of the life of the woman indoors, but focuses, instead, on the adventure of the husband and the achievements of the scientist which mark a stark contrast to the unimportant protected life of the bride. It is the husband who experiences an almost deadly encounter with an ancient mail-coach which he eagerly seeks to carry him back home. The Gothic effects of this tale are generated by the meticulous description of the coach with its ghostly passengers who ride beside the lawyer. To carry the plot further, the death-coach falls over a precipice. Luckily, the husband is rescued and treated by a surgeon from a fractured skull. He finally returns to his wife never to tell her the story. The wife is conveniently kept out of it for the protection of her “nerves.” We see here a clear example of the appropriation of patriarchal modes of presentation, whereby the female is assigned to the safety of the domestic sphere; whereas the male is associated with intellectual enterprise and physical adventure.

Another tale of female absence is Dorothea Gerard’s “My Nightmare,” (1892). The possessive pronoun “my” strongly marks the desire of appropriating fear; it suggests the intimacy of referring to a house pet. Again, as in several previous tales, this one is narrated by a masculine voice, recollecting events which took place twenty years earlier. To establish credibility, particular attention is given to minute details. We are taken into a soldiers’ barracks, which is given some Gothic
highlights—vaulted passages, dark rooms, etc. The gothic effect is juxtaposed with daily rituals of the soldiers, such as shaving, taking breakfast and reading newspapers. The story is told in a detective tone by a soldier in the squadron of Captain Stigler, whose servant, Baryuk, is now missing. Suspense mounts as the search for the servant commences leading into dark corridors, a maze-like network of passages and finally a deserted cellar, where the body of the servant is found. It soon becomes apparent that the servant committed suicide for some psychological disorder, or probably for feeling homesick. The peculiar aspect of this story lies in the desire to explore masculine territory which is vicariously known to women. The irony, though, is that the narrator, who demonstrates a great valor and courage in searching for the dead body, becomes haunted by the body itself. However, such a lapse in technical closure does not detract from the detective appeal of the narrative.

Margaret Irwin's "The Earlier Service," (1935) appeared in a collection entitled Madame Fears the Dark. It blends two distinct time zones; the twentieth century and the fourteenth century. The medieval setting and dimension of the past are dramatically juxtaposed with the twentieth-century telegraphs, trains, and electric torches. The distinction between the two periods is blurred so as to produce a disturbing uncertainty, which is reflected in the schizoid consciousness of the young heroine. At the age of sixteen, Jane, a rector's daughter, is preparing for the rituals of her confirmation in the Catholic faith. Instead, she is initiated into the terror of sacrificial ceremony. This may be considered as a tale of psychological obsession with purity, virginity and the
dutiful obedience to parents. Terror is evoked by the animated gargoyles, which threateningly overlook Jane’s room. The studded door of the parish church is covered with the blackened remnants of shriveled human skin of heathens who were flayed alive. Jane finds protection in the figure of the Crusader knight, who is captured on the stained glass window of the church. As an adolescent, Jane becomes completely estranged from her world and she develops a full identification with a sacrificial victim, a young girl like herself, who was given at the altar as an offering to Satan in the past. Visions of this sacrifice haunt Jane, and she rushes from the cold, dark menacing atmosphere of the church to the warmth and coziness of the rectory. 

Irwin approximates Jane’s consciousness through the use of free indirect thought. She also focuses on Jane’s mood of uncertainty in alluding to some ancient sacrifice rituals which took place during the dark ages in some churches. A young guest, York, verifies the haunting vision of Jane by revealing evidence about the sacrificed victim in historical records. The story is rich with archetypal themes about the association of women with sin and evil. Thus, Irwin shows how the need to be pure was persistently pressed upon the consciousness of young girls who were taught to be paragons of virtue. It is no coincidence that the mysterious vision starts to haunt Jane just before her confirmation at the age of sixteen. Anxiety about virginity and bodily purity is a sign of the fear of sex and adulthood. The story does not show whether Jane is able to come to terms with her anxieties or not. She remains torn between the necessity of taming the body
and suppressing the flesh on one hand, and her budding sexuality on the other.

The last plot to be discussed in this paper is that of Elizabeth Bowen’s “Hand in Glove,” (1952). This may be considered as the opposite of Irwin’s story, since it shows the frivolous obsession with fashion and clothes, rather than purity and virginity. Like other writers, Bowen domesticates the Gothic, so that the Irish setting is appropriately named “Jasmine Lodge,” and it is set in lush romantic surroundings. However, this story echoes the stories of the nineteenth century in its emphasis on Gothic mannerisms to drive the moral lesson home.

In a quick narrative pace, Bowen outlines the background of her characters. We are introduced to two young sisters, Ethel and Elsie, whose parents died of scarlet fever when the sisters were only little children. An aunt, Mrs. Varley, lives with them in their cozy cottage. She has been widowed in India, where her husband blew up his brain, and she came to live with the family even before the girls were born. Much of the narrative focuses on Mrs. Varley, who is now locked up by her nieces, who treat her as a mad woman. The aunt is propped up to play the role of the chaperone in public, a role which permits the young girls to receive various gentlemen in their cottage.

The preoccupation of the girls with fashion, despite their poverty, appears when they attempt to re-style their aunt’s old but fancy dresses, which they don when they are invited to their social gatherings. Bowen takes great pains to emphasize the stereotypical obsession of women with fashion and artificial appearances. Mirroring the
evils of Pandora's Box, Bowen introduces a locked trunk which contains the best finery of Mrs. Varley, who guards its keys with her life. Then, in a feminist tone, Bowen points to the fact that female beauty is conceived as a commodity by the society: "but in those days . . . it was a vocation to be a handsome girl; many of the best marriages had been made by such" (445). Bowen treats the issue of marriage in a sarcastic, humorous tone by foregrounding the pressure placed on young women to produce male admirers. The real problem, which is never explained, is the scarcity of gentlemen among flocks of spinsters and marriageable young women.

The eldest girl, Ethel, becomes obsessed with an eligible bachelor and we see her desperate attempts to nail the young man who is only intimidated by her obvious eagerness to possess him. The gentleman's desire for Ethel follows a pattern alternating between attraction and repulsion, until he finally disappears. Bowen focuses on the emotional anxiety of Ethel, and the slandering of her name by gossip. At last, through a circulating rumor, Ethel discovers that it was the smell of benzine, which she used for cleaning her gloves, that drove her lover away. This ironic stroke is intended to carry the ridicule of Ethel's character to its limit.

In her hope to find some new gloves in her aunt's locked trunk, Ethel strangles her aunt with a pillow, then she opens the trunk and attempts to pick a pair of spotless white gloves. Visions of the forthcoming wedding race through her feverish brain. However, these sweet visions are dispelled when, to her great terror, the gloves stretch out of the trunk and strangle her in return. In this last
scene, Bowen utilizes the conventional Gothic paraphernalia—the creaky doors, the mysterious shadows and the horrible shrieks of Ethel as she falls dead to the ground. The story ends with a bit of black humor as we are told that “in any case, the gloves would have been too small for her” (452). The trivialities of social gatherings and the anxiety of young girls in their fear of becoming helpless, discarded spinsters are the major concerns of Bowen here. Even though she assumes a posture similar to that of patriarchal codes in the judgment of the triviality of women, she exposes, with a great sense of sympathy, the tremendous pressure under which her women strain to secure husbands.

III

We have seen ample evidence of how the Gothic mode has been appropriated to create plots which serve as outlets for women’s concerns. The stories discussed unmask several serious issues which women writers had to grapple with, such as the ideal expectations of motherhood, marital fidelity, sexual anxiety, the social obsession with appearances, and the degradation of working conditions for women. Several stories articulate the need to establish communication between husband and wife in their eager attempt to uphold the family institution. The presentation of the Gothic, as shown in these tales, is fused with strong domestic overtones to bring the home and its procreator—the woman—to the foreground. The general effect of this blending is encoded in the Freudian concept of the uncanny, where the homely and the strange coexist to enhance the perception of reality. The politics of domesticating the Gothic may be
deemed as a means of empowerment through which women writers could subtly subvert patriarchal hegemony. Yet, at the same time, some women writers chose to perpetuate positive patriarchal value judgments, especially those concerning family life.

In another respect, the taming of the Gothic in the selection approached in this study functions as an exorcising process through which these women writers could express their innermost fears and voice their warnings of social evils. Each story points to a certain individual or social problem, which the ghost or the ghostly brings to the surface. It is as if ghosts have become harbingers of positive change. This strategy of transforming ghosts into “pets” foreshadows the politics of postmodern Gothic plots, in which the systematic domestication of the ghost and the vampire reaches wonderful insights into the nature and complexity of our contemporary life styles. In some postmodern works, a friendly ghost may casually be spotted in a movie house or near a café. The best examples come from women writers like Toni Morrison, Isabelle Allende and Anne Rice. By blending the Gothic with magical realism, these writers create humanized ghosts which are no longer despised, marginalized or standing on the periphery of society. The ghost in Morrison’s *Beloved* comes back to the human world through the front door with no apology, and with a striking audacity. She not only reeks havoc around the house, but also demands emotional attention and experiences love-making and even pregnancy. In Allende’s *The House of the Spirits*, the maternal spirits enable the heroine to survive the hardships of her ordeal and give her the voice to write her story. Anne Rice,
whose contemporary Gothic novels, especially *Vittorio The Vampire*, are animated by wonderful and decidedly human and attractive vampires, has probably uttered the best verdict on this issue when she admitted that the use of Gothic was the healing power which nursed her back into health and sanity. In its utilization of magic realism, postmodern Gothic may appear to have crossed the boundaries of the conventional Gothic machinery; nevertheless, it stands as a confirmation of the endurance of the Gothic mode as an irresistible choice for women writers.

أشباح أليفة: استراتيجيات الحبكة في الأدب القوطي النسوي

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ملخص

يغطي هذا البحث استخدام العناصر القوطية في الأدب النسوي وبالتالي من خلال دراسة الحبكة في بعض النصوص المختارة لكاتبات نشطين في الكتابة خلال الفترة ما بين حوالي منتصف القرن التاسع عشر و بدايات القرن العشرين.

إن أهمية هذه الدراسة تكمن في أنها تعرض لمناشدة قصص قصيرة لكاتبات كن دقته الصيغ رغم أن اغبطهن لا يتمتعن بالشهرة الآن. كما و تركز الدراسة على القصة القوطية القصيرة بالذات باعتبار أن الاهتمام النقدي يتجه غالبا نحو دراسة الروايات القوطية لكاتبات شهيرات. إن تفحص النصوص المختارة بين أن الكاتبات استخدمن العناصر القوطية في حبكة الحبكة في قصصهن ك استراتيجيات للكشف عن القضايا والاهتمامات الخاصة بالمرأة والحياة الأسرية. و على هذا يكون استخدام الرعب بحد ذاته باعتبار حرية فريدة ليس فقط في التعبير، بل في مواجهة شئين المخاوف ضمن إطار عاطفي مألوف.
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Notes


3 See Sigmund Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” (1919) in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds., Literary Theory: An Anthology (Massachusetts: Blackwell, i998) 154-167, where Freud defines the uncanny or unheimlich as that “which is familiar and congenial, and on the other hand, that which is concealed and kept out of sight” (156). For a thorough discussion of the supernatural and its relation to Gothic

4 The fact that the Gothic has been viewed as a rebellion against the constraining neoclassical aesthetic ideals in order to recover "primitive and barbaric imaginative freedom" is highlighted by Maggie Kilgour in her *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (London: Routledge, 1995) 3-43.

5 For more information on female characters in the typical Gothic novel, see Tania Modleski, *Loving with Vengeance* (London: Methuen, 1982) 59-ff. See also pp. 61-70, for a discussion of paranoia and its relation to women's confinement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.


9 The vulnerability of women to fits of depression and madness was often linked to their biological condition. For a general discussion of madness in relation to Gothic, see Scott Brewster, "Seeing Things: Gothic and the Madness of Interpretation," in David Punter, ed., *A Companion to Gothic*, 282-285.

10 For a discussion of the importance of the mother in Victorian society, see Claudia Nelson and Ann Holmes, eds., *Maternal Instincts: Visions of Motherhood and Sexuality in Britain, 1873-1923* (London: Macmillan, 1997); see also Natalie
McKnight, *Suffering Mothers in Mid-Victorian Novels* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).


Appendix

A look at the lives of some of the women writers discussed here might be necessary, since most of them are now overshadowed by obscurity, despite the fact that they were highly popular at the time they published their stories. See Anne Crawford and Tony Hayter, eds., *The Europa Biographical Dictionary of British Women* (London: Europa Publications Limited, 1983).

One notices that most of these women had full-time careers as writers and achieved considerable autonomy and success. However, their personal success did not distract them from pursuing the grievances of their other fellow-women. A writer like Amelia Edwards (1831-1892), for example, was a famous Egyptologist in London during the 1880’s, and made lecture tours in the United States. Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1837-1915) was writing to support herself and her mother, who left Elizabeth’s father when she was only four years old. Her celebrated *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), a melodramatic tale of a murderess, sold nearly a million copies. Rhoda Broughton (1840-1920) was brought up in an Elizabethan manor house, which often appears as the setting of her stories. Her mother died when she was a child and she remained unmarried. As a writer, she is considered a sensational novelist. The daring nature of some of her stories led Mrs. Oliphant to announce that “it is a shame to women so to write” (Crawford 67). Mary Wilkins (1852-1930) grew up in poverty. She wrote about the world of spinsters, and she had a short unhappy marriage. She was a prolific writer who completed twenty-two volumes of short stories among other works.

Dorothy Sayers (1893-1957) was the daughter of a Salisbury clergymen. She was established as a successful writer of detective fiction, and she was president of the
Modern Language Association from 1939-1945. May Sinclair (1870-1946) was educated at Chettenham Ladies’ College. She was acclaimed as a leading novelist and pioneer of the “stream of consciousness” technique in her novel *Audrey Craven* (1896). She was an active feminist and suffragette and served with field ambulance during World War I. Elizabeth Bowen (1899-1973) was born in Dublin. She produced work of high quality and became the most distinguished novelist of her generation. She worked in the Ministry of Information during World War II.

Margaret Irwin (1889-1967) was a popular historical novelist. Both her parents died when she was a child and she was brought up by an uncle. She published a historical biography of Sir Walter Raleigh and wrote historical novels with Medieval settings. Dorothea Gerard (1855-1915) wrote several novels and books during the 1890’s, including *Things that Have Happened* (1899), and *On the Way Through* (1892).

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