

THE GHOSTLY DYNASTY: VICTIM-BLAMING, THE GOTHIC NOVEL, AND THE MODERN TRUE CRIME DRAMA

TOPIC

Throughout history, a disturbing trend in social perceptions of domestic abuse and violence against women is a tendency to blame the victim. While feminist movements have changed this culture for the better, contemporary society continually criticizes women for behaving in ways that bring tragedy upon themselves.

CREATIVE PROJECT

To examine and criticize this dichotomy, I have written a contemporary young adult horror novel that plays upon the conventions of both the gothic novel and the modern true-crime drama. My novel, titled "The Ghostly Dynasty," explores the double standards that society places on women in both literary and criminal justice.

INTRODUCTION

Gothic horror is a subgenre of horror that combines elements of psychological fear, the supernatural, and gloomy, haunted landscapes. Where conventional horror focuses on the spectacle of fear, gothic horror is more interested in cryptic symbolism.

At the heart of gothic fiction are themes centering around guilt. Maybe it's a personal guilt over a crime committed or an injustice done. Maybe it's a more societal kind of guilt, over something we do wrong as human beings. Regardless, these feelings are personified, frequently taking the shape of monsters or hallucinations.

Common settings of gothic horror include castles, religious buildings, and graveyards. These desolate, isolated places illustrate decay and deterioration, indicating that something once glorious is now dilapidated.

EXAMPLES

British gothic classics include *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Frankenstein*. These novels focus on morality and faith, and their dark side manifests itself as their protagonists battle good and evil.

American gothic classics include *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, *The Haunting of Hill House*, and *Beloved*. American gothic texts capture anxieties around class, gender, and race tensions, frontier wilderness isolation, and the lasting effects of a Puritan society.

SYMBOLISM

The Byronic hero is a common archetype in gothic fiction. The Byronic hero is a melancholy, brooding, yet somehow heroic protagonist of a gothic novel. Most of the time, he is male, white, attractive, educated, yet somehow outcast from society. He typically falls outside the realm of conventional morality and has a tragic backstory or a dark secret. His violent temper should turn the reader against him, but somehow, readers tend to find him attractive and compelling.

Another important lead in a gothic story is the persecuted maiden. In older gothic fiction, that's the helpless, screaming girl in a nightgown who you always see on the book covers. She is typically a damsel-in-distress-type character targeted by the antagonist of the story. She has an investigative spirit, and yet, especially in early gothic novels, limited agency. The gothic heroine, however, has evolved significantly throughout history.

HISTORY

In the 1970s, academics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar responded to this trope by discovering a counterpart to the persecuted maiden. They find this counterpart within the archetypal gothic antagonist. In their essay, they argue for the existence of "dark doubles" of heroines within the literary trope of the madwoman. They believe the madwoman is a secret outlet for a female author's anger against patriarchal oppression, which is manifested in a personified split in the heroine's personality.

So, in many other gothic novels with an arguably feminist slant, the persecuted maiden and the madwoman in the attic mirror each other. Together, they epitomize a psychosis that Gilbert and Gubar pinpoint to be deeply rooted in female guilt.

MY NOVEL

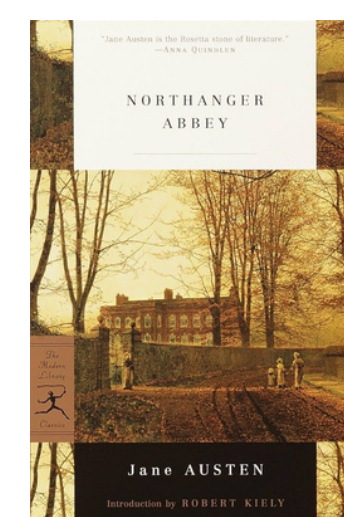
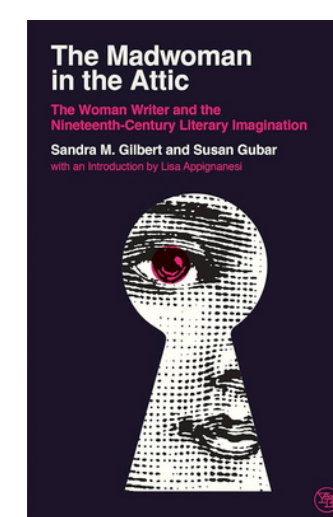
PLOT SYNOPSIS

At the heart of the story is a murder mystery. Six months ago, someone murdered Adair's best friend Lily, and only Adair knows who did it. Namely, her other best friend: town golden boy Liam, a Yale student by day, and a serial killer by night. The police dismiss her story, but Adair wants revenge.

Meanwhile, Adair's cousin, Bellamy, has graduated from her boarding school on the opposite side of the country, and she needs a place to stay over the summer. Bellamy is a voracious reader of gothic novels. The thing she wants most is to spend her vacation with Adair's father, a best-selling horror author who has moved his entire family into a historic mansion in their small town for creative inspiration and a fresh start.

However, Adair and Bellamy experience a lot of discord. They have diametrically opposed personalities, and while Bellamy is dealing with loneliness, Adair is dealing with grief. While Bellamy's coping mechanism is to reach out, Adair's is to lash out.

One day, however, Adair discovers she can see the ghosts of the deceased family that once lived in the house. She enlists them in her revenge schemes against Liam, who she knows is responsible for Lily's death. At the same time, however, Bellamy tries to deter Adair from violence, but in the process, she becomes entangled in Liam's cultish paranormal investigations.



ANALYSIS

Like in *Jane Eyre*, the dual protagonists of my novel experience identity fragmentation as they grapple with mental health and "monstrous" emotions while experiencing gender-based violence and mental illness.

I wrote Adair and Bellamy to be counterparts to a greater whole. They narrate the story in chapters of their altering points of view. Adair is defiant and disliked, and in this way, she reflects the gothic trope of the madwoman in the attic. Adair experiences depression and PTSD.

That, coupled with her dropped charges against Liam, who is popular and well-liked, causes the people around her to perceive her as "crazy," to the degree that she is a danger to herself and others. Adair is an avid watcher of true crime, which she enjoys because it allows her to watch bad things happen to other women and then say, "this could never happen to me because."

Bellamy, meanwhile, is a persecuted maiden with more agency. The fact that she cares about others and wants to be happy is her biggest strength, and it's a way for her to fight back against oppressive systems that seek to put her down.

Liam, my antagonist, conforms to and breaks the trope of the Byronic hero. I purposely made him charming and likable, but throughout the story, Bellamy's challenge is not to fall for it. She needs to learn to trust Adair, and this becomes harder and harder for her to do as Adair insists that she can see dead people. However, part of Bellamy's journey is also about learning what healthy relationships look like, and it soon becomes clear that while Liam isn't completely to blame for Lily's death, his entitlement and privilege are the catalysts behind the major conflicts of the story.