

Like Mother, Like Daughter: The Gothic Maternal Legacy and Its Monstrous Fruits

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This literature review examines eight resources that navigate the complex power and function of gender, trauma, and identity in Gothic literature from the 18th to the 20th century. The sources include critical approaches such as psychoanalytic theory, feminist object-relations theory, cultural historicism, and close textual analysis. The scope of the research includes both canonical and lesser-known Gothic texts, from Horace Walpole's foundational *The Castle of Otranto* to the mid-20th century American Gothic of Shirley Jackson and Robert Bloch. Some of the key issues that exist across the texts include the focus on the mother-daughter relationship in the Gothic plot, the psychological and social impacts of maternal absence or loss, the restriction of female agency within patriarchal structures, and the ways that Gothic narratives cipher and repeat cultural anxieties of gender roles, mental illness, and identity. It is organized into four main categories: an analysis of maternal absence as a recurring trope in Gothic fiction, an exploration of the limits and evolution of female agency, an exploration of the Gothic's commitment to the discourse of mental illness and personality disorders; and a discussion of the genre's depiction of generational trauma and the complicated mother-daughter relationship.

Maternal Absence in the Gothic

Ruth Anolik explores the recurring trope of the absent mother figure in gothic literature in "*The Missing Mother: The Meanings of Maternal Absence in the Gothic Mode.*" Anolik claims that the "typical Gothic mother is absent: dead, imprisoned or somehow abjected" (24), which often leads to the victimization and villainization of those left behind, particularly daughters. This absence is often attributed to the failures of the patriarchal hierarchy. Anolik states, "... an unresolved conflict with one's mother is located as the primary cause of psychological dysfunction, an explicitly Freudian explanation that once again illustrates the centrality of psychoanalysis and, particularly, the Oedipus/Electra complex, in the post-war popular culture model of psychological disorder" (24). Anolik's article raises important questions about the role of the mother in gothic literature and how her absence contributes to the psychological distress of her offspring.

Limitations of Agency

In "*Women's Agency in Gothic Literature,*" Chloe Janelle Heinemann follows the progression of female agency in gothic literature from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Heinemann argues that regardless of the limitations placed on women during this time period, "Gothic female protagonists challenge the patriarchal hierarchy, balance traditional and modern values, and establish a new identity by gaining financial, romantic, and social control in their daily lives" (4). She supports this claim by examining several key texts, including Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Heinemann's thesis raises critical questions about the role of female agency in gothic literature and how it evolves over time.

Intergeneration Trauma

"Unresolved Trauma in Mothers: Intergenerational Effects and the Role of Reorganization" examines the impact of unresolved trauma on mothers and their infants. The authors found that "mothers with unresolved trauma were more likely to have insecure attachment themselves compared to mothers without unresolved trauma (100% vs 25%)" (2). They also discovered that "all of the mothers with unresolved trauma who were in the process of 'reorganizing' toward secure attachment (22%) had infants with secure attachment" (2). This indicates that "while unresolved trauma predicts insecure attachment in mothers and their infants, maternal reorganization toward security may lessen the intergenerational transmission of insecure attachment, even in mothers with unresolved trauma" (9). The article asks important questions about the intergenerational effects of trauma and the potential for reorganization to reduce these effects.

Gothicisation of Mental Illness

Victoria Madden's *"Horror of Personality: Exploring the Gothicisation of Mental Illness in American Fiction of the Long 1950s"* examines the portrayal of personality disorders in American gothic fiction during the 1950s and early 1960s. Madden claims that these texts "reveal to the reader that, at this point in time, not all women can escape the control of the patriarchy" (32) and that "the lack of clarity surrounding the concepts of personality disorder at the start of the Cold War period, combined with the sensationalized portrayal of mental illness in popular media, contributed to the otherization and demonization of those affected" (47). She supports this by analyzing several key texts, including Robert Bloch's *Psycho*, Shirley Jackson's *The Bird's Nest*, Henry Farrell's *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, and William March's *Bad Seed*, stating that "The proliferation of such narratives, which ultimately underscore the ease with which human identity might fracture, becoming something unmistakably 'other' and bestial, highlights particular American anxieties associated with the stability and definability of identity, a concept explored at great length in one of the best known in de siècle gothic texts and progenitor of the 'split personality' narrative in fiction: Robert Louis Stevenson's classic novel, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), a text which holds crucial significance for the study of dissociative identity disorder — or, as it was previously known, multiple personality disorder — a point that will be discussed further below" (132). Madden's thesis asks important questions about the gothicization of mental illness in American fiction and how it reflects larger cultural anxieties about identity and the stability of the self.

The Abject Feminine in Celine

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva analyzes the portrayal of the abject feminine in the works of French novelist Louis-Ferdinand Celine. Kristeva argues that Celine divides the maternal figure into two faces: the idealized, artistic mother associated with beauty and lace and the abject, suffering mother who is "repulsive and fascinating" (158). This representation reflects "the baleful power of women to bestow mortal life" (159). Kristeva also looks at Celine's phallic

idealization of the feminine in the form of dancers and lesbians, objects of the male gaze that allow the author to defer "the abject encounter with feminine sex" (164). On the other hand, Celine portrays socialized feminine power as paranoid and murderous, a "dark, abominable, and degraded power" (168). For Kristeva, these representations of abject femininity are unleashed by the degradation of paternal authority: "One of the sources of Celinian abjection no doubt lies in the bankruptcy of the fathers" (172).

Trapped Women in Gothic Fiction

In "*Gothic Repetition: Husbands, Horrors, and Things That Go Bump in the Night*," Michelle A. Massé claims that the repetition of a central trauma shapes the Gothic genre: the denial of female identity and autonomy in patriarchal society. Massé argues that the Novel revolves around the "prohibition of female autonomy in the Gothic, in the families that people it, and in the society that reads it" (689). The heroine's silent, immobile, enclosed state reflects her internalization of this repression, while the villain's seemingly inescapable power mirrors the pervasiveness of patriarchal control. In Massé's reading, the "impasse of Gilman's narrator and other Gothic heroines rests in the conflict between individual personality and rigid and unchanging social codes internalized from childhood on" (707). The repetitive structure of Gothic narratives, with the heroine enduring one situation after another, dramatizes the ongoing psychological struggle to face this pivotal trauma.

Mothers, Daughters, and Transgenerational Trauma

In "*Gender as a Factor in the Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma*," Miriam L. Vogel draws on feminist object-relations theory to explore how trauma can be passed from mother to daughter through unconscious processes of identification. Vogel proposes that "The daughter's self-boundaries are more fluid, more open, and more vulnerable to encompassing that which the mother carries within herself" (45). When the mother has experienced trauma that she has repressed or disavowed, the daughter may absorb this trauma without being fully aware of its origins. Vogel claims this dynamic is particularly evident in Gothic fiction, where heroines often find themselves haunted by cryptic, unspeakable horrors that are eventually traced back to the mother's untold story. The Gothic heroine's suffering thus becomes a way of "witnessing" and "remembering" (44) the maternal trauma that has been silenced or denied.

The Gothic Mother-Daughter Bond

Roberta Rubenstein's "*House Mothers and Haunted Daughters: Shirley Jackson and Female Gothic*" also explores the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship in Gothic fiction by women writers. Rubenstein argues that Jackson's novels are "emotionally resonant literary representations of the psychology of family relationships," particularly the "ambivalent attachment between mothers and daughters" (309). Drawing on feminist psychoanalytic theory, Rubenstein suggests that the Gothic dramatizes the daughter's struggle to separate from the mother and establish her identity in a patriarchal society that demands female self-abnegation.

The "emotional enmeshment" (320) between mother and daughter is figured through Gothic tropes of haunting, doubling, and confinement, with the ancestral mansion serving as a symbol of the maternal body that nurtures and imprisons. For Rubenstein, the Gothic heroine's journey is thus a negotiation of the "attraction to and dread of the mother" (321) as she strives to find her own voice and place in the world.

The sources in this literature review highlight the Gothic genre's narrow focus on the psychological and social interplay of gender, power, agency, and identity. A central theme that emerges is the Gothic's obsessive return to the figure of the absent, abjected, or monstrous mother, whose loss or failure is often portrayed as a definitive source for the heroine's psychological distress and diminished identity. The genre's exploration of female agency and its limitations within patriarchal structures poses a question for scholars in tracing the ways in which Gothic heroines resist and are shaped by the oppressive social constructs and institutions that limit them. At the same time, the Gothic's conversation of mental illness and the unstable identity is shown to highlight wider cultural anxieties about the nature of self and the looming threat of psychic and social torment. The seemingly inherited trauma across generations, particularly through the complicated mother-daughter relationship, is marked as a central theme of the Gothic imagination, with the ancestral mansion serving as a powerful symbol of the inescapable past and the haunted psyche. These sources offer a deep and nuanced examination of the Gothic as a mode that not only expresses the deepest fears and desires of the cultural imagination but also provides a space for the transgressive exploration of alternative identities, subjectivities, and possibilities for resistance and transformation.

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