About the Author

Maura Rose Calderone is a receiving a Bachelor of Arts in English with a minor in Art History. She viewed her senior thesis as not only an exceptional and challenging academic experience, but as an ideal way to combine both her creative and scholarly sides. Concerning subject matter, Gothic literature was a natural choice. From an early age, Maura has been ceaselessly interested in Gothicism and all of its permutations: art, architecture, music, movies, lifestyle, clothing, and, of course, literature. The stories she chose are by some of her favorite authors and are both Gothic and feminist in nature, which she loves. Maura was co-editor of Bayleaf for 2005-2006 school year. During her senior year, she also interned for the Scranton Lace Archive Project at Lackawanna Historical Society, where she catalogued and archived the records of the former Scranton Lace Company. Maura would like to thank Dr. Bittel, Dr. Conologue, and Dr. Partridge for invaluable academic encouragement and guidance since her return to Marywood; her thesis advisor Christina Elvidge for her support, excellent ideas, and editing skills; and her reader Michael Freund for his perspective and contributions. She would also like to thank her family and Michael Pikul for immeasurable love and support. Following graduation, she will take some time off to look at graduate programs in the field of art history and museum studies, most likely in the area of decorative arts. Her ultimate goal is curatorial work in the field of fashion history.
The Lady of the House: The Dark Architecture of Women’s Gothic Fiction
Maura Rose Calderone

I. The Creation and Evolution of the Gothic Genre

In an uncertain and chaotic world, darkness, both literal and symbolic, is pervasive. So what does it mean to face, and sometimes even embrace, this darkness? And for what purpose? For over two centuries, Gothic literature has been exploring these questions. As a genre, Gothic investigates the darker side of human nature, evolves in response to contemporary anxieties, and often raises controversy along the way. Writers who employ the Gothic characterize everyday conflicts in grotesque fantasies, and acknowledge that we are not free: of social roles, death, even ourselves.

The Gothic mode in a very general sense has always existed. Since humanity’s earliest days, it seems that darkness is an undeniable fact of our nature. Readers can find Gothic elements in the story of Cain and Abel, Beowulf, the Danse Macabre, and the dark folklore of vampires and spirits from various cultures throughout the ages. However, Gothic as a genre has a formal history in literature. The term originally derived from Germanic tribes, the Goths, who played a key role “in the fall of the Roman Empire” (Punter and Byron 3). Little factual record of them remains, but they are historically associated with intense, barbarian, primitive ways. It is not their actual history that is so significant but the cultural myths that they inspired. According to Punter and Byron, “‘Gothic’ became a highly mobile term, remaining constant only in the way it functioned to establish a set of polarities revolving primarily around the concepts of the primitive and the civilized” (3). During the Renaissance era, Gothic referred to the ornate, extreme architecture of the late Middle Ages, particularly evident in cathedrals. This soaring architecture of pointed arches, pinnacles, and flying buttresses was meant to inspire awe, thoughts of the afterlife, the divine, and even apocalyptic fear in those who saw it (Prendergast 1). A prominent example would be the extreme height, massiveness, severe, sharp angles, and intricate decoration of such Gothic cathedrals as France’s Reims or Rouen. Frightening, monstrous creations such as gargoyles and apocalyptic bas-relief sculptures in niches were hallmarks of this style, and their grotesque but captivating nature mirrors the nature of the Gothic as well.

Aesthetically, this style was directly opposed to the more restrained Greco-Roman and later Neoclassical styles, which relied upon rational order, naturalism, and simpler lines (Prendergast 1). This contrast also holds true for Neoclassical and Gothic literature. Gothic
literature was originally conceived in the 18th century as a reaction to the prevailing thought of the “Age of Enlightenment” of the 17th and 18th centuries. The premise of Enlightenment thought and literature relies upon humanity’s capacity of reason to bring order, light, and improvement to the world (“Enlightenment”). Because of its Greco-Roman influences on thought and taste, it was also known as the Neoclassical era, which spanned over a century, from 1660-1798 (Snodgrass 153). The Romantic rebelled against those ideas and focused on the individual and lone self, imagination, and emotion. While Romanticism was “the product of a sensibility that glorifies the self in isolation from society, the Gothic explores the darker side of the Romantic vision,” writes Karen F. Stein (123). Gothic also drew from the distant past, specifically the medieval times of Gothic architecture. Horace Walpole’s novel The Castle of Ortranto (1764), actually subtitled “A Gothic Romance,” has deliberately sinister elements and a haunted castle as a main setting. It is generally considered the “founding text of Gothic fiction” that set the standard for the genre (Punter and Byron 177).

The legacy of the Goths is “pagan vigor, profusion, and embellishment” which Gothic authors embrace in their writing as an alternative to “staid” neoclassical paradigms (Snodgrass 152-153). Gothic literature was critically dismissed in the neoclassical era as “crude, barbaric, unfettered, disorderly, and licentious” (Snodgrass 153). While rationalist thought sought to quarantine them, the Gothic genre tackled and vividly explored these undesirable sides of human nature. Gothic literature demonstrates that the chaos and darkness of the world cannot be ordered, contained, nor denied, and even that our very reason is not always used for the best purposes, if it is used at all. While the Enlightenment worldview sees potential in improving our world, the Gothic world is already doomed.

Writers of the Gothic genre use their own unique vocabulary to create a dark, disturbing world with an ornate and unfettered nature that exudes dynamic energy. From the mysterious world of its medieval origins springs forth the evocative possibilities of strangeness, chaos and passion. The Gothic world is one of mystery, magic, tension, illusion, fear, sometimes even perversity. Authors do not avoid death and decay; their crumbling, antiquated settings are central to the eerie events that unfold in their fiction (Snodgrass 153).

As the Gothic genre gained momentum in Europe following the late eighteenth century publication of Walpole’s Ortranto, it became significant in American literature also. Since the first major efforts in American literature coincided the era of the European Gothic, “American fiction began in the Gothic mode” (Smith 2). An early example of this is the Gothic 18th century
novel *Wieland* (1798) by Charles Brockden Brown. By the mid-nineteenth century, the work of Edgar Allan Poe possessed distinct and masterful Gothic form (3-4). However, the new world of America had a different context than Europe. Instead of remnants of feudal times such as castles and abbeys, there was entirely new unknown and uncharted territory. “How uncanny, how mysterious, how unknowable and infinitely beyond their control must have seemed the vast wilderness of the New World, to the seventeenth--century Puritan settlers!” writes Joyce Carol Oates of the inception of American Gothic (*American 1*). As America grew as a nation and its wilderness was cultivated and civilization established in its place, its older homes, especially its mansions, became the new “castles.” Later in the modern era, the contemporary Gothic used the most subtle and ordinary of settings to reveal fearful elements implicit in our lives.

In order to inspire fear, terror, or horror, Gothic writers employ a variety of themes. Common plots often include imprisonment, entrapment, pursuit, violence, and escape. Evil characters include male villains, and their counterparts, *femme fatales*. Protagonists range from female victims, *naifs*, and outside narrators. Ghosts, doppelgangers, and sometimes vampires, witches, or monsters are fantastic and symbolic characters. Perceptions can include paranoia, feelings of persecution, unsettled psyches or even madness. There are flourishes of the grotesque, the uncanny, and exploration of taboos.

Physical space is not the sole source of confinement in Gothic literature. It could be mental or emotional as well. As the modern science of psychology originated in the Victorian era, Gothic possessed more sophisticated possibilities (Snodgrass 153). Such focus on the mind demonstrates that the reader does not have to go so far to be in the realm of the Gothic. The greater turmoil or confinement could occur in a character’s mind. A haunted house is a standard icon of Gothic literature. So too is a haunted mind, one troubled or even mad. Sometimes both elements intersect, and it can be very hard to discern the reality of the situation. The enigmatic nature of the Gothic often lies in its power to provoke mystery by unsettling our accepted notions of reality (Hogle 3). Illusion is a “core motif” of Gothic fiction that serves to illustrate human frailties, especially those of perception (Snodgrass 188).

The Gothic genre is highly “malleable” and varied, often difficult to pinpoint in immutable terms (Hogle 2). While a work such as *The Castle of Otranto* or Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* could easily be considered distinctly Gothic, the modern forms of Gothicism has evolved into broader and subtler varieties. Each era brings with it a new set of anxieties that find their way into Gothicism. The deeper significance of the Gothic is the creative possibilities for
the writer in the stage it sets: it gives language to the unspeakable. Thus, the Gothic can be an excellent vehicle for the most challenging of subtexts. Concerning the sweeping variety of Gothic that exists today, Gothic is more suitably considered a vision rather than solely a genre; there is “richness and magnitude of the gothic-grotesque vision and the inadequacy of genre labels if by “genre” is meant mere formula,” writes Joyce Carol Oates (American 7-8).

II. The Energy of Places

The primary motif and “general topography” in Gothic literature is the haunted castle (Punter & Byron 259). “Gothic" and “castle” are often thematically intertwined in consciousness. It is not only evidence of medieval decay and fallen aristocracy, but an archetype for the notion of haunted space. It can be a place overlapped with history and the hidden, but also a familial site (Punter & Byron 260). Such a motif reminds us that “human grandeur” can easily translate to ruined vanity over the course of time (262). The “haunted castle” represents the manmade and apparently familiar site that holds possibilities of mysterious phenomena. This applies too to the haunted house, a motif that became very popular in the 19th century (Vidler 2). Its mixture of residual family history and the disturbing possibility of intrusion in a place of comfort speak volumes about humanity’s anxieties (17).

Architecture is not only essential in establishing the Gothic setting; it also can be an “allegorical extension and psychological extension to human characteristics and behavior in Gothic literature” (Snodgrass 157). Architecture can be defined as “the art or science of building, specifically habitable structures; formation or construction as the result of a continuous act; or a unifying or coherent form or structure.” From the start, writers used place to set the tone for Gothic stories. Setting is the “‘pillar’” of Gothic literature (Hennelly 2). Architecture also provides a template for the Gothic, not only in setting, but in theme. Certainly a domestic setting is common to a great deal of literature, but it is central to the Gothic. Gothic literature and architecture possess an artificiality, or human construction, of limited space in a vast world. Such limitations hold great energy, mystery, and possibility.

If all literature is a microcosm of sorts, the Gothic genre is often a particularly claustrophobic microcosm. Gothic is riddled with confined usually “antiquated or seemingly antiquated spaces” that serve as settings for its dramas: gloomy castles, lonely manor houses, crumbling mansions (Hogle 2). Within these are often more confined spaces: secret passageways, mazes, dungeons, attics. This theme speaks not only to universal human fears, but
Specifically to those of oppressed people, including women. At their best, the eerie constructs of the Gothic world possess much deeper meaning. Gothic fiction can illuminate social and political issues in oblique but enticing ways through the use of subtexts (Snodgrass 328). In female Gothic literature, the house is a metaphor for confinement and isolation that evolves to suit any era. The fiction itself is confined to a genre, a mode that is often considered separate from the “mainstream” and everyday experience. Yet in this restrained space the possibilities are unlimited: Gothic often reveals how surreal, unnatural, and potentially grotesque the familiar world around us can really be.

III. Female Gothic Literature

Since its beginnings in the eighteenth century, Gothic has not only been conceived of in regional terms but in “gendered” terms as well. Gothic is the first genre where women, such as Ann Radcliffe (Mysteries of Udolpho) and Mary Shelley (Frankenstein), had significant presence as writers since its early beginnings (Milbank 53). According to Alison Milbank, the central plot of women’s Gothic writing is often considered a “persecuted maiden who is entrapped by a male tyrant in a labyrinthine castle” (53). Critics debate whether this mode is used subversively to express or to reinforce society’s ills, particularly in earlier works (Milbank 54). However, contemporary female Gothic fiction is definitely more subversive. Gothic elements have been re-appropriated and modified in some way by female writers, and are meaningfully employed to expose and transcend the ills and constraints of women’s prescribed roles in society (Stein 126). The 20th century female writers discussed here utilize Gothic conventions in modern and often subtle modes. Most importantly, they have appropriated them to support significant subtexts, often feminist in nature.

The term “female Gothic” was originally coined by Ellen Moers in 1976, and ever since then there has been debate as to whether it is truly a separate genre (Punter and Byron 278). The traditional Gothic tale did have clearly sexist beginnings: its staple was an innocent female pursued by a “lustful predator or monster madman” (Snodgrass 153). There is no “male Gothic” per say, since it assumed that both Gothic literature and conventions began with male authors. However, it is generally agreed upon that while male gothic writing concerns the nature of the transgression of enclosed spaces, female gothic concerns the desire to escape from them (Punter and Byron 278).
Not all female gothic writers write in a distinctly or singularly “female Gothic” mode, yet this sub-genre has certain definable elements that differ from traditional, male-oriented Gothic. The most prominent of these is that the female Gothic focuses on terror rather than horror (Punter and Byron 279). This focus may fit with the alternate agenda-- the escape from a restrained space-- of women Gothic writers. There are key differences between terror and horror. For example, a gory and unexpected murder scene is horrifying; protracted anticipation or even contemplation of it can be terrifying. Horror aims to shock, startle, and often disgust the reader. The reaction to it is immediate, and it “freezes” the reader. Its anticipated effects are physical, such as violence or even death (Hogle 3). Terror is often more protracted and suspenseful, and while frightening, it can lend an element of fascination or awe (Snodgrass 334). Terror is a prolonged and psychological view of “forces beyond our control” (Punter 240). There is much focus on the mind and its possible turmoil, as opposed to physical violence, which is consistent with the attention on terror.

The domestic is the focal point in the female Gothic (Punter and Byron 280). It goes without saying that for centuries, even until quite recently, women’s perceived sphere was the house, while men’s the outside world. The adage of the world woven into society was that men procure, women maintain. Women’s traditionally consigned roles give them the inevitable experience of looking outside while being trapped inside. In the earliest days of the Gothic, women writers such as Ann Radcliffe wrote directly out of this experience. For the modern Gothic writer, in the wake of women’s liberation, evolving gender roles, and the typical employment of both parents, domestic hindrance is less apparent. However, this notion, like the Gothic, evolves in interesting ways. The house is not only a metaphor for Gothic confinement, but for the confining nature of women’s traditional and expected societal roles. Domestic themes can provide an authentic, insurmountable horror sometimes (Becker 10). Female Gothic writers, in essence, “rebuild” the accepted notions of home and women’s place, sometimes by overturning them. They expose this labyrinthine, confined dark architecture.

IV. What is Wrong?: Short Stories of the Female Gothic

If the house is the primary setting for Gothic literature, particularly in female Gothic literature, then other themes rise to the surface and demand exploration. The atmosphere of the house presents itself and works in apparently different but thematically interconnected ways. The stories that I will explore range in time periods from the late 1890's to the 1990's. In every case,
the facade of the house seems fine but conceals hidden turmoil, and in some, it is not only a
setting but a character itself. “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1899), is a
classically Gothic story of one woman's struggle against the confinement and madness that has
been imposed upon her by a misguided husband. It takes place in a secluded ancestral mansion in
the countryside. “The Past” by Ellen Glasgow (1920) is a ghost story and a battle of wills that
occurs in a magnificent Fifth Avenue mansion. Glasgow explores the confinement of the past
and, upon closer examination, the confinement of women's roles. “The Lovely House” by
Shirley Jackson (1950) is also a ghost story of sorts set in the beautiful and highly ornate home
of a wealthy family. Here the confinement is that of aesthetic excess, maintenance, and
aristocratic tradition that preternaturally results from the very demanding, organic house itself.
“Esther in the Night” by A.M. Homes (1990) is an unrelenting study of a mother's very real
physical confinement within her ordinary, modern suburban house and the terrible memories it
evokes as she cares for her comatose son. Finally, in “The Doll” by Joyce Carol Oates (1994), a
highly successful career woman is confined by her rising memories of a painful childhood that
are linked to a beautiful Victorian dollhouse that appears, to scale, in real life. All of these stories
deliver incredibly rich subtexts through the skillful and diverse use of Gothic elements and
traditions.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is often considered a classic
eexample of the female Gothic story. It draws strongly on the Gothic tradition and is in some
ways a template for not only the “female gothic” but for the conventions used in the stories that
follow. Gilman uses the Gothic mode to expose the oppression of 19th century women. “Yellow”
is an excellent example of the re-appropriation of Gothic elements to serve a politically and
socially charged subtext.

“Yellow” also follows the Gothic pattern of “ordinary people” who enter an antiquated
and eventually turbulent house. It takes place in an ancestral “colonial mansion,” what the female
narrator and protagonist outright calls “a haunted house” (2). This statement does not foreshadow
an unfolding ghost story, but rather the mounting struggle in the narrator's troubled, “haunted”
mind. She and her physician husband John, along with their newborn baby, have come to stay for
the summer at this estate for the sole purpose of the narrator's extensive rest after the birth of her
son. The house seems to be an idyllic retreat at first: located in the lush countryside and
described as “the most beautiful place!” Yet, “there is something strange about it” (3). The house
is presumably about 100 years old, but “has been empty for years” (3). It is old and mysterious: a
typical Gothic setting that Gilman utilizes to underscore the subtext of women's oppression. The landscape surrounding the house is maze-like, with “hedges and walls and gates that lock,” which emphasizes the sense of confinement and isolation (3).

The premise of the narrator's retreat into this house is that she is afflicted with a “temporary nervous depression-- a slight hysterical tendency” which both her husband and physician brother believe is not true illness but histrionic symptoms that can be cured by rest (2). The word “hysterical” is exclusively female, since is derived from both the Latin and Greek terms for *womb*, and the Greek notion that women's emotional disturbances were because of a faulty uterus. She is most likely suffering from what we would call today post-partum depression, which we understand as a real illness rooted in the physical. Yet the very words “nervous depression” and “hysterical” are euphemisms that signal a general deep misunderstanding about women's health and well-being.

The husband, John, dictates the narrator's mental state. He is a doctor but quite callous to her needs. In truth the narrator is entrapped and confined by her well-meaning but ultimately ill-serving husband. John represents two significant, patriarchal 19th century institutions that were detrimental to women: marriage and medical care. He plays the role of the classic villain in a subdued way, confining the narrator against her will and ultimately doing her grave harm by the story's end, when she fully succumbs to madness. Just as harmful are the repeated messages throughout the story about women's place in society and perceptions of women in a male-dominated world. Thus words like “nervous” and “hysterical” not only diminish the narrator's plight, they also convey how women were commonly thought of: weak and hypochondriacal. She is treated like a child, and given such affectionate epithets as “a blessed little goose” (5) and “little girl” (9). Her opinions are also hushed. When she notices something strange about the house, she says, “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage” (2). She is cautioned by her husband “not to give way to fancy in the least,” as it will exacerbate her symptoms (5). There is no “reason” for her suffering, but it is quite real nonetheless (4). So the boundaries of her mind and her freedom of expression are greatly restricted. John, “practical in the extreme,” represents science, logic, and rationality, all long considered strongly male traits to keep the irrational, fanciful, overly emotional female nature in check (2).

Gilman presents the conflict between the neoclassical, Enlightenment-era line of thought with its emphasis on reason and rationality versus the unfettered Gothic imagination with its potential for chaos. John represents the Enlightenment ideals. The battle manifests throughout
“Yellow” as John's attempts to contain and rationalize his wife's illness ultimately fail, but it is she who is hurt the most: “I had to creep over him every time!” (16-17). She is in the throes of a severe psychotic break, and continues to crawl over John after he faints in shock. Ironically, madness, the taboo that John most admonishes, has been transgressed in a physical sense when she steps over his collapsed body at the story's conclusion.

The narrator is “absolutely forbidden to 'work' until [she] is well again.” The ideas behind John's antidote of extensive rest come from the popular advice of the 19th century physician Dr. Weir Mitchell, the proponent of “the rest treatment” who is actually alluded to in the story (7). It was even part of Gilman's intent to indirectly address Mitchell in writing “Yellow” (Ames 1). Mitchell's decidedly negative treatment focused specifically on “hysterical” women who were prescribed seclusion and near-complete inactivity (Ames 1). But rest comes at quite a price, as she is prevented from doing anything, especially writing. Writing is her life's passion, and a much needed outlet for personal expression. To do so in secret is exhausting, and eventually feels futile to her. Even imagination must lie dormant, for, according to John, “imaginative power” is liable to be a “nervous weakness” (5). The secretiveness of the narrator's writing in the first-person give the entire story a hushed, paranoid perspective: "There comes John, and I must put this away,-- he hates me to write a word" (17).

The narrator's assigned room within this mansion is the focal point of “Yellow.” Readers know little of the rest of the house since most of it takes place within an “atrocious” room (3). It appears to be a retired “nursery,” which reminds readers of the largely unseen newborn baby in the story. The room has a dungeon or asylum-like feel to it. Both a dungeon and asylum are traditional, more explicit Gothic settings themselves, the former indicating madness, the latter the confinement of an innocent female protagonist (Snodgrass 96). The confinement here is clearly delineated in the room's characteristics. This odd room has barred windows, and “rings and things” in the walls (Gilman 4). There is also evidence of violent struggle: “the floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this great heavy bed which is all we found in the room looks like it had been through the wars” (6). The bedposts have a gnawed appearance to them. Presumably children who formerly occupied the room marred its facade, but ironically the narrator later reenacts these gestures when she gruesomely tries to bite off a piece of the bed in a “desperate,” utterly frustrated state (15)

The room's most prominent feature, and the propelling motif of the story, is its outré yellow wallpaper. The wallpaper itself is very Gothic in its disturbing grotesqueness and “florid
The arabesque pattern (10). The arabesque pattern may refer to 19th century interest in Eastern exoticism or romanticism (Snodgrass 12). It is also an allusion to Poe, who both firmly established the haunted house motif in American Gothic literature and used the arabesque to symbolize the uncanniness implicit in reality (Davison 64). Here such flourishes are hideously awry: “I never saw a worse paper in my life,” declares the narrator (4). Not only is it partially torn off in places, it is also gravely offensive in the aesthetic sense: grossly flamboyant, confusing, and in the tone of “a smoldering unclean yellow” that ranges from an unpleasant orange to a “sulphur tint” (4). Yellow is an interesting choice of color because it traditionally conveys cheer or sunshine, and is said to promote happiness. But at its worst, yellow can convey sickness, decay, or even simply be jarring. Sulphur is also associated with hell, which is what the narrator experiences in her descent into madness.

Copious descriptive detail of the paper's design is given, and yet it is hard to visualize (Hedges 51). Its ambiguous pattern is an apt metaphor for the weight of patriarchal oppression and its detrimental effects on a woman's sense of self. The narrator's obsession with the ugly wallpaper grows exponentially as she tries to uncover its “pattern,” perhaps the pattern of oppression that she is locked in. Her accurately portrayed descent into madness parallels the increasingly overwhelming appearance of the paper. The paper expresses the horror of the story. The pattern has erratic curves that “commit suicide” (4). It watches her with numerous “absurd, unblinking eyes” (6). Design-wise, it is very strange in its lack of “symmetry” or “repetition” (7). It is reminiscent of a “fungus” or “toadstool” (10). It is extremely grotesque: “All of those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!” as the narrator desperately tries to peel the wallpaper off (15).

As the narrator's mental health deteriorates, the wallpaper's pattern takes shape. Within this wallpaper a “woman” begins to emerge: “a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design” (9). Here two Gothic themes, haunting and madness, intersect. As the narrator's oppression intensifies, the woman moves according to her perceptions. This eerie and ghostly image is of course the narrator's own hallucination. The woman in the wall could also be considered the narrator's doppelganger, a metaphor of the double that is often used in Gothic literature. The doppelganger is “a mirroring or duality of a character's persona” and usually represents what is repressed. It can be a twin, who is either good or evil, shadow self, or the other side of a “split personality” (Snodgrass 83). The woman is parallel to the narrator in her imprisonment: she seems to “shake the pattern, as if
she wanted to get out” (9). The narrator desperately tries to uncover the meaning of the “pattern” of the wallpaper, and this illustrates how difficult it can be to uncover a pattern when you are submerged in and overwhelmed by it. Such would have been the experience of the 19th century woman. The alternate side of this doppelganger is that, unlike the narrator, she “gets out” in the daytime (13). Yet she does not stride freely outside, but is instead “always creeping” because she too is oppressed by the patriarchy.

In turn, the already distressed and very bored narrator becomes increasingly paranoid and suspicious, particularly of Jennie, the housekeeper and her foil, and John. “I don't like the look in his eyes,” she states (14). The combination of paranoia, extreme boredom, and oppression that result from the confinement of the rest cure sadly result in madness. Her own desire to leave her situation ironically becomes a desire to remain in the horrid room. There, the boundaries are clearly defined: she can “creep around as I please” on the floor, beneath the pattern (16). It is the only way to make John see: “I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!” (16).

This was a formidable threat, as Gilman ripped apart the banal domestic facade and exposed the truth. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a remarkably subversive story that uses Gothic conventions to poignantly express the ills of women's condition.

“The Past” by Ellen Glasgow is a ghost story written in a traditional, romantic Gothic style that is distinctly feminine. The narrator makes it clear that “a haunted house” is “one pervaded by an unforgettable past,” no matter how beautiful it appears (15). It is immediately ominous in tone: “I had no sooner entered the house than I knew something was wrong.” That something turns out to be the ghost of the owner Mr. Vanderbridge's first wife. The narrator, Miss Wrenn, is the newly hired secretary for the second Mrs. Vanderbridge. She represents the Gothic convention of an outsider narrator, or a “stranger in the house” (4). She is a modern, independent single woman of the 1920's era.

The house, a Fifth Avenue mansion, is grand and old, and has an opulent facade. It, like its mistress Mrs. Vanderbridge, is beautiful but conceals a dark struggle. The Vanderbridges are very wealthy people, and their name even hints at such “new money” wealth as the Vanderbilts. The intuitive new secretary notes straightaway that after the “black iron doors” of the house are closed she feels the sense of being “shut inside a prison” (1). Like the house in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” this grand home is really a prison where each character is polarized, although here we see the struggle of a troubled woman through the eyes of her new secretary.
Glasgow provides plenty of contrast between the house's aesthetic and sensory splendor and the pervasive melancholy that dwells within it. There is “mellow light” shining and pooling over “old pink rugs,” soft as “flowers.” There is the sound of drifting music from another room, and scents of “lilies and hyacinths.” Mrs. Vanderbridge, a famous beauty, looks like a Pre-Raphaelite painting upon her first meeting with Miss Wrenn, with her “dark red” hair, pale and “clear” skin, and a willowy figure (1). It is “as if she had absorbed the beauty and colour of the house as a crystal vase absorbs the light” (1-2). Yet beneath this the narrator sees evidence of tiredness and sadness, and realizes the beauty of Mrs. Vanderbridge is a mutable one. In the same way that she absorbs the loveliness around her, Mrs. Vanderbridge also absorbs the oppressive weight of the past.

Mr. Vanderbridge is very preoccupied with the past, namely in his thoughts of his deceased first wife. Although a kind man, he seems tethered to an aristocratic tradition that is fading in the modern era. When in thought, “sadness seemed to spread like a veil over his features” (5). He is slowly sinking into madness himself. He believes that he “killed” his first wife by marrying her when she was so young, and is haunted by guilt, although he cannot see her specter (10). He is a Romantic figure: a handsome man, with face reminiscent of “an old Florentine nobleman” with an “imaginative sadness” in it (3). Yet he is often on the periphery, rendered ineffective because of his deep melancholy.

The tension of the past divides Mr. Vanderbridge and his wife even though they love one another. Their relationship is stifled by its insidious presence. The central conflict of “The Past” occurs between Mrs. Vanderbridge and the ghost of her husband's first wife that inhabits the house. It is slowly eating away at Mrs. Vanderbridge physically and mentally. Life is draining from her, as evidenced by her increasing physical frailty. The ghost “is killing her” (9). Her life with her husband is overshadowed and wrapped in sorrow because of his former wife, who is revealed to be an adulteress.

Glasgow employs traditional Gothic elements to show a new idea: that the past can be as confining as any physical space. Mrs. Vanderbridge is the classic frail, suffering but good-hearted protagonist in this story, not only a Gothic convention but a traditionally acceptable role for women in general. She is a kindhearted woman “who spends so much of her life thinking of other people,” such as her husband and servants (4). She possesses inner beauty, with a “nature...as sweet as her face” (4). However, she is increasingly “ill,” “weak,” and “feverish” (11). Mrs. Vanderbridge initially remains passive as “it is killing her,” and “the bloom” and color
drain from her features. Sadly she begins to waste away. Further compounding her situation, her physician gives her daily doses of drugs. She is medically managed in a similar way as the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper." Her approach is idealistic, and demonstrates the most basic and enduring conflict in not only the Gothic but in all of literature, good versus evil: “The only way...is to fight fairly when one fights evil” (16). She is radiant and angelically lit as she directly confronts the demonic, “malignant” ghost and relinquishes her fight (16). She has pity for the ghost, while the ghost bristles with “animosity.” Mrs. Vanderbridge wins, it appears, by forfeit: “I give up everything. I give him back to you” (16).

The ghost, the young first Mrs. Vanderbridge, is a consummate femme fatale. The femme fatale, the wicked woman, is a foil to the morally upright but weak protagonist in Gothic literature (Snodgrass 120). She is called “The Other One,” and recalls the traditional Gothic idea of “the other” (8). She died very young and only one month before her child was to be born (12). She is ethereal and ambiguous, adorned in a strange gray, “misty” dress. In contrast to Mrs. Vanderbridge's fair coloring, “the other one” has “twilight” hair and is compelling yet not beautiful. Miss Wrenn first sees her at dinner, thinking her only a stranger, and observes her childish “animosity,” intuitively aware that this woman hates Mrs. Vanderbridge (6).

Because she is a malignant ghost, her evil nature and actions carry weight. She is the one who is “responsible for the shadow that hung over the house” (5). Not only does she linger and torment Mrs. Vanderbridge, it is learned that she committed grave sins for a woman of her time: jealousy, selfishness, and adultery. “She isn't a good sort,” says the maid Mrs. Hopkins (10). The women express little sympathy toward the one who transgressed domestic boundaries. The first Mrs. Vanderbridge chose not to be confined in her role, but is entirely socially unacceptable because of this.

Miss Wrenn is more morally neutral as a modern, independent woman. She is both pragmatic and intuitive, knowing something is wrong but at first dismissing it as perhaps the product of the inhabitants' decadent drug or alcohol use. She also supports herself financially, and has never had much money, so the mansion is foreign place to her. As an employee of the Vanderbridges, Miss Wrenn unknowingly steps into an oppressive atmosphere, “surrounded and overwhelmed by its reality,” however unreal it seems (9). It is described as such: “One could scarcely call it horror, because it was too vague, too impalpable, for so vivid a name; yet, after all these quiet months, horror is the only word I think of that in any way expresses the emotion which pervaded the house” (5). Always there is a sense of being watched, of something lurking,
in a haunted place. Yet this horrible atmosphere is difficult for the narrator to fully describe, although she gives many details. In this way it is similar to the “pattern” of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” conveying that it can be hard to articulate that in which one is submerged. Out of love and loyalty, she resolves “passionately” that she will intervene between Mrs. Vanderbridge and the “unknown evil that threatened her,” perhaps implying a desirable middle ground, or more realistic role between the utmost passivity of the 19th century and the aggression that modern women sought. Ultimately she is a catalyst for Mrs. Vanderbridge's break from the past.

“The Past” is a ghost story but the ghost story is really more of a metaphor. Ghost stories are near-ancient traditions that evoke our fear and superstitions surrounding death. Ghosts can take revenge on those who have wronged them, as evidenced in “the other one's” sense of hatred and vengeance toward her husband and Mrs. Vanderbridge. They are also useful symbols for conveying subtexts (Snodgrass 140-141). The narrator is quite skeptical that the woman she sees is indeed a ghost: “She is only a ghost, and nobody believes in ghosts any longer” (10). Yet such skepticism adds a modern twist to “Past” and instead of negating possibilities, lends new ones to the ghost story genre. This story's treatment of the ghost also marks an evolution in the ghost story and its uses. What began as a fearful, enigmatic remnant of death becomes a psychological symbol. Mrs. Vanderbridge ponders what the ghost really is: Mr. Vanderbridge's projected “thought” of his first wife perhaps? Because he will not relinquish his guilty thoughts, the ghost remains. She questions the objectivity of reality: “What do any of us know of the world beyond? She exists as much as I exist to you or you to me. Isn't thought all that there is--all that we know?” (12). The question, with its acceptance of chronological and ontological ambiguities, and perhaps the answer, is very Gothic.

In “The Lovely House” by Shirley Jackson, the house is an isolated world with a life of its own. It is a beautiful, intricate, and ornate place that upon closer look has sinister underpinnings: it draws female characters in and confines them. The style of this story is reserved but undeniably Gothic. Its narrator is Margaret, a young girl of early adolescence; she also serves as an outsider narrator who enters the scene without fully knowing the situation, as in “The Past.” She can also be considered a classic naïf, an “innocent” but curious protagonist that is “standard to Gothic literature as a foil to innate evil” (Snodgrass 247). But in “Lovely” the evil is more subdued and at first concealed by the beauty of the house. Margaret enters the life of her schoolmate Carla Montague's rich family as a summer visitor. The family seems proper, traditional, and well mannered but is really set in stasis and overshadowed by their parasitic
house. The name Montague has an aristocratic tone to it, and the house matches accordingly. It is lovelier than anything Margaret had ever seen, set on its own large and “lavish grounds,” “a place to be striven for and earned” (204). The facade of the house is reminiscent of a castle:

the perfect grace of the house, showing so clearly the long-boned structure within, the curving staircases and the arched doorways and the tall thin lines of steadying beams, all of it resting back against the hills, and up, past rows of windows and the flying lines of the roof, on, to the tower-- (204)

Although castle-like, this is not a rough-hewn, intimidating structure, but instead very feminine: graceful, curving, long-boned.

This story was written in the 1950's, yet the Montague house and its contents speak to an earlier time, making it even more of an isolated world. Heightening its antiquity are its repeated forms of tapestries and its decor. Repetition lends a subtle and pervading atmosphere of uncanniness, and is often a significant feature of such (Punter and Byron 283). There are servants, a hall of ancestors' portraits, rooms with the sole purpose of displaying decorative objects, and, most importantly, tapestries. When Margaret is first introduced to Mrs. Montague, she is weaving a tapestry, a portrait of the house, which is a long family tradition. Mrs. Montague works tirelessly on tapestries throughout the majority of the story. Her weaving speaks to not only the leisure time and antiquated art at Mrs. Montague's disposal, but the recurring theme of replication in “Lovely.” Jackson weaves this theme skillfully throughout the story. While there is little obvious conflict upon the surface, repetition is a major source of the eerie tension of the story upon closer examination. Even the inhabitants match the house. For example, Mrs. Montague is described as a tall, thin woman in “pale green and pale blue,” and later the room in which she, Margaret, and Carla are standing is described as “pale green and pale blue,” with tall windows (205). As the story progresses, an unhealthy enmeshment of the Montagues, and eventually Margaret, and the house becomes evident.

“The Lovely House” is a narcissistic house, in that it is replete with images of itself and demands devotion from its female inhabitants: “the dreamy life of the Montagues in the house” is most evident when Mrs. Montague creates a faithfully rendered “embroidered house” (212). The house is filled with its own doppelgangers, so to speak. There is a room composed entirely of gold with the sole purpose of displaying tapestries that depict the house in daylight. Likewise, there is a room of silver for the image of the house at night (206). In the tradition of the
doppelganger, there is another unnerving room with mirrors on both sides that show infinite reflections of Margaret and Carla as they enter, and a set of nesting tables and nesting bowls to mimic this sense of infinitude. The tapestries in this room depict the house reflected in the nearby lake. Here Margaret experiences an unsettling, uncanny blurring of reality from both fantasy and art: “it was so difficult for her to tell what was in it and what was not, and how far in any direction she might easily move” (207). The house becomes a labyrinth for someone unfamiliar to it.

In this series of replications, the most ambiguous doppelganger in the house is the eerie tile portrait of a blond girl entitled “Margaret-- Who Died for Love.” It is next to a tile portrait of the house, emphasizing the house's consuming nature. It is a tomb or memorial plaque, contained within a purely decorative, “tiny octagonal room” depicting colored tile scenes of the house (209). The octagonal form of the room enhances its sense of enclosure. This enigmatic phrase is never questioned or explicated, but it could be considered a foreshadowing for Margaret's apparent confinement within the house at the story's end. Fittingly, Margaret sees that a tile is missing from the portrait by then. It is the first flaw that she sees in the house's decoration, and it looks like a tear. It may indicate her impending disillusionment or perhaps worse in the face of the house's demand.

Margaret is driven to venture to the tower of the house alone. As she ascends the rough, gray stairs, she experiences paranoia in which she imagines the tower walls to be transparent and herself visible to the rest of the family: “There is Margaret, going up to the tower at last.” Yet each time she questioned the family about it, they ignored it. She is the only one who visits the eccentric, elderly “great-aunt,” who resides in this tower with a black cat as her sole companion. The aunt is also named Margaret. Perhaps her name is connected to “Margaret-- Who died for love,” and the aunt is a spirit. Or, in the house's conflated sense of time, she may be an elderly doppelganger of the young Margaret. She is a classically gothic recluse, confined to the tower alone. The great-aunt seems to mock the ideology of the house: “My tapestries,” she says sarcastically as she gestures to the windows (216). This recalls Margaret’s budding disillusionment after she has she discovered the marred surface of the tile portrait, except here it is in full bloom.

Margaret's status as the story's naif heightens her odd experiences in the house. Such a character, an odd and vulnerable girl largely alone in a strange creepy place, was a recurrent theme in Jackson's writing (Snodgrass 194). The only action in “Lovely” is the visit of Carla's
brother, home from the army. He brings with him a dark, surly friend, a captain. At least, this is how the situation at first appears. The tall, handsome man named Paul that Margaret perceives to be Carla's brother is unknown to everyone else. By the story's end, there is evidence that it is only she who sees Paul, as the family indicates that the captain is really the brother. “Lovely” is a subtle take on the ghost story in this way. Margaret is very fond of Paul and has spoken to him more than anyone else in the house. Although it is not stated that Margaret is mentally unstable, she is very introverted and has unusual perceptions, here spatial: “perhaps, she thought, from halfway up the stairway this great hall, and perhaps the whole house, is visible, as a complete body of story together, all joined and in sequence” (205). She is given to fancy and preoccupied with the house. After the night of the grand ball, she thinks it was “perhaps a dream that might never have happened at all, as perhaps the figures in the tapestries on the walls of the dining room might remember, secretly, an imagined process...to sit on the lawn where they were woven” (221).

This experience is mysterious, like the tile portrait. Margaret and the old woman speak only of Paul, and the woman hints at tragedy: “He should have come and gone sooner...Then we'd have it all behind us” (217). If she is Margaret's doppelganger, she may speak of a tragedy that has yet to occur for the young Margaret. The windy rainstorm outside escalates and comes through the windows of the tower as ghostly voices call out to Margaret, saying things such as “All is lost” and “It is so dark” as the great-aunt holds Margaret's hands (218). It is unclear whether this is an expression of spirit activity or the product of Margaret's disturbed mind. The uncertain blurring of reality is a puzzle of the Gothic world, one where mystery lies in apparently normal settings.

The house is not so “lovely,” but a vampiric structure that traps and makes demands of not only the Montague family but presumably Margaret too. The almost-living, succubus-like massive home is a recurring Gothic theme. Perhaps its true terror lies in our inability to stop decay or decline, or to prevent time from having the ultimate power in life. The morning after the grand ball, both Paul and the captain plan to depart. The sardonic captain is blunt about the reality of the house's condition. He insults its domestic state. He notices flaws such as a “broken statue by the lake,” a badly worn carpet, and, most alarmingly, “a crack in solid stone” outside the conservatory window. This crack reminds one of the family home in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and its inevitable decline. The Montagues are offended by the captain's admonishments and simply state “It is very wrong of you to notice these things,” as if he is
offending the stature of the house itself (222). They seem to live in an ideal of immutability, of a living past.

Paul exemplifies this living past: “The house is the same as ever...It does not change” (223). He believes that nothing within it can be replaced, only added to, which we see through the endless tapestries that have been woven by Montague women over the years as well as Margaret’s entrapment. The ghostly nature of Paul is hinted at when he says he cares for the house “constantly,” for, without it, he could not exist (223). He says goodbye to only Margaret, and the disembodied phrase “all is lost” surfaces once again. It is really the disagreeable captain who is Carla's brother, and Margaret is left with the panicky question: “and Paul; who was Paul?” (223).

Unbelievably, the Montagues tell Margaret that there is yet still more of the house to see, and do not answer her when she asks when her visit will end: “Surely there will be an end to my visit? (224). There is a sense that Margaret too will be trapped within the house and its static sense of time. Mrs. Montague plans to weave a picture of Margaret and Carla into a tapestry, trapping them permanently. “Lovely” ends with a sort of tableau: “We shall be models of stillness,” Carla laughs (225). Certainly a place can be too lovely if it is so all consuming. The definitions of the word “lovely”-- aesthetically delightful; attractive; grand; and eliciting love by moral or ideal worth-- can be applied in this story with quite negative undertones. Both the captain and Paul, one real and the other spirit, can leave at will, while the women stay behind, and presumably serve the house. In its antiquated atmosphere, their sole role is to care for the house by continually supplying it with laborious decoration.

Written in 1990, “Esther in the Night” by A.M. Homes is a starkly brutal story that could be considered a “suburban gothic.” The concerns of the “contemporary Gothic,” quite similar to those of the earlier Gothic, are clear here: “the dynamics of family, the limits of rationality and passion, the definitions of statehood and citizenship, the cultural effects of technology” (Bruhm 259). All of these themes manifest in “Esther.” Its setting is very contemporary, even mundane, yet Homes tears off this seemingly ordinary façade to reveal great turmoil beneath. The story begins with immediate anxiety-- “If something horrible happens it won't be my fault”-- which does not relent until the end, when Esther gruesomely smotheres her brain-dead son. This instant sense of foreboding is akin to the introduction of Glasgow's story “The Past,” except here the narrator is very familiar with her situation and its boundaries. The mention of “fault” implies the great burden placed on mothers in an especially unsettling situation. “Esther” unabashedly
tackles grim and ethically ambiguous issues. In this story, the evolution of Gothic conventions into more subtle modes suitable to modern life is evident.

The story's vantage point is from the candid and painful point of view of a suburban mother, Esther. She is truly trapped in her home as the primary caretaker for her son Paul, unconscious and on life support after a severe drunk driving accident. As a result, his family is tethered to a bleakly vigilant life. He is a great source of tension for them, even a new take on the Gothic villain in a sense, both in life and in his unconscious state. “I talk to them about therapy, about all of us in one room, coming together to hate Paul,” Esther admits (121). His typical teenage rebelliousness is alluded to in the Motley Crue poster on his door. His sister, Cindy, hints at the only indication of Paul's character: “I've always hated him,” she tells Esther (122). Like Paul's current situation, this is unresolved. “Paul doesn't tell me what the hell happened. He doesn't apologize,” Esther states of the accident (123).

Nothing bad is censored from this story; in fact, it is explored freely. Esther contemplates every homeowner's worst fears-- burglary or a fire-- in the beginning of the story. A burglar would steal her unwanted identity, or, better yet, kill her and alleviate the situation. A fire would cleanse the house. However, Esther envisions the consequences of fire for Paul and it is like a scene from a horror movie, which illustrates the weight of Esther's contempt for Paul: “His tubing would dissolve in a hot pool of plastic, it would begin to bubble, then turn black. Crystals of plastic would imbed themselves in his skin. The oxygen tank, a tall green canister that I once thought was him, would explode.” Yet neither seems to match the dread that “the magic of the living dead” gives to the house (118). Even this gruesome tableau cannot compare to their daily life.

In turn, the audience is literally confined to the role of voyeur in what Esther calls “Museum of the Modern Dead” (119). This demonstrates the “frozen moment” implicit in postmodern Gothic fiction (Punter & Byron 52). We view Esther and her family's confinement in their house and situation through this concept of a museum, a place that both preserves and displays evidence of the past. Yet this is a “working museum,” so their actions continue in its inertia (119). Esther's description of this "museum" is sardonic but it poignantly expresses the impact of a terrible and inescapable past, embodied in Paul. Like the family in “The Lovely House,” this family is set in stasis. Esther describes her “period costume, like the ladies at Williamsburg. I always wear the blue, red, and purple dress I had on the night the state trooper called and said there had been an accident--” (119). The mention of historic Williamsburg recalls
a distant past that is sharply juxtaposed with the present, something inherent in both the Gothic and museums. Paul is a macabre, profane “exhibit”: “brightly lit” from the outside window at night, “he looks like something on display, a Christmas window in suburbia” (119). A close up view shows the true struggle within the home. The audience is invited to see what normally we would hardly like to consider: “come to the birthplace of the living dead...it'll last a lifetime” (119).

The “Modern Dead” is a late 20th century idea. Only with modern medicine and special machinery to support life can Paul exist. Here, the gothic has a contemporary and real context that is unsettling in both its seeming improbability and familiarity. Paul is an embodiment of “the living dead” (123). Comatose and mentally vegetative, he floats “somewhere between sleep and death” (119). The enmeshment of life and death is a very Gothic theme, often related in stories of ghosts, monsters, vampires, and zombies (Hogle 2). In “Esther” it is quite real, and the eeriness of the coma state illustrates that the boundaries between life and death are not always so clear. She relates a sense of “be careful what you wish for” in reference to her prayers to preserve Paul's life after the accident: “It's not enough to assume that if a person lives he'll be all right” (120). This bitter truth conveys not only the fragility of human life, but the perverse turns that life can take.

The home here is so confining for the whole family, especially the mother, that initially intrusion or immolation seem to be a source of relief. She knows that she cannot escape her confinement, so destruction seems like her only viable option. “Esther” ends as gravely as it begins, when the narrator murders her son by suffocation. Her manner is deliberate and detached. It is as if she is watching herself commit the act of murder: “I slide the bag over his head and pull it tight around his neck, wishing he'd fight. As I do it, I see myself in the mirror of his window” (123). Consequently, the audience is again a voyeur of this process. Esther's only desire is for “the end,” a clear resolution. Here it counteracts the selfishness of Paul's ways and their consequences. Homes is fairly graphic in her description of Esther's act: “I feel the skin go cold. I press my face to his face and feel him die” (124). Esther is face to face with death, but it is somehow more manageable than the ambiguities of Paul's comatose state.

Night is significant not only in the story's title but as the time when Paul is murdered. Archetypally, night symbolizes the unknown or even death, both of which apply to Paul. Night is also the traditional timeframe for frightening events in Gothic fiction. The family keeps the lights in Paul's room on at night in the event that he wakes up “in the middle of the night,” “as if light
equals life” (119). Esther waits until morning comes to leave Paul's dead body (125). As in
vampire tales or ghost stories, the day is a refuge from the lifeless villain Paul.

Horrible as it may seem, she admits that she will regret it if she does not murder Paul. The unending limbo of her previous situation was clearly more horrible, for now at least she will “always know where” and “how Paul is” (125). This may refer not only to Paul's coma, but the accident that put him in that state, something that occurred outside of the realm of Esther's maternal knowledge. Although she has resolved her situation, the Gothic mode does not necessarily provide us with clear or easy answers: which was preferable, the horror of the living dead or murder? Her likely consequences are extreme guilt or even jail, that is, more confinement. Perhaps there is no true release, as the ending indicates. The other man in Esther's life, her husband Harold, is presented as another obstruction. As Esther falls asleep after murdering Paul, he “wraps himself around me. I am trapped” (125).

“The Doll” by Joyce Carol Oates is an excellent study in the grotesque, dreams and the uncanny and how these elements can illustrate the experience of psychological confinement. The motif of the Victorian dollhouse from Florence Parr's childhood and its real-life double serve to show that nice facades can conceal dark things. The true question of the uncanny is whether or not the “unspeakable” should ever surface again. This term originates from the translation of Freud's term the unheimlich, or “the unhomely” (Snodgrass 132). Repressed memories surface in the familiar but alter it so as to make it gravely unfamiliar. Florence's repressed memory accordingly resurfaces later in a vivid dream (Hutcheon 1).

The dollhouse is a fitting motif of this uncanny, or unhomely, experience. In Florence's case, events worthy of repression have confronted her. The beautiful house is linked to deeply buried memories of what was most likely childhood abuse. The meaning of confinement evolves in this story, since the house is not Florence's home but a symbol instead. Unwelcome memories tumble into Florence's life when she encounters an actual house that is exactly-- uncannily-- like her childhood dollhouse. What she initially perceives as a coincidence is fascinating and even appealing to her at first. Later her thoughts grow into an obsession with the house and finally compel her to make a late night visit, leaving her hotel in an uncharacteristic move. Yet this segment of the story is revealed as a dream, or rather, nightmare (47). Dreams and nightmares are telling Gothic conventions often used to reveal the future, or convey the unspeakable, in this case the past. In nightmares the subconscious mind battles “terrifying threats” in a viable landscape (Snodgrass 91). Although this is a dream, one wonders whether or not the formidable
Florence is as undisturbed as she appears to be. It speaks to the underlying psychological confinement that stems from her troubled childhood.

Florence Parr, as her name suggests, is quite “on par,” or at least it seems so on the surface. She is an attractive, successful forty-something woman who is now “the president of Champlain College” (33). Her most significant memory and the greatest event of her life was the present of a beautiful Victorian dollhouse on her fourth birthday (27). The dollhouse is “said to be built nearly one hundred years before,” and is a family heirloom. It is a highly detailed creation, almost a piece of life in miniature, “uncannily 'real’” (27). It is filled with Victorian furniture, and complete with “many tall, narrow windows fitted with real glass… three fireplaces made of stone…and even a cupola whose tiny roof lifted miraculously away” (26). Naturally this would be a source of great fascination for any little girl, but this “uniformly exquisite” and fastidiously made house becomes in a way a template for Florence's life (26).

Central to Florence's childhood memories of the dollhouse are the dolls she played with outside of the house, since they were too large to go in. They resembled a family: a blond little girl, a redheaded boy in overalls, a mother, and a tiny spaniel. Oates hints at the uncanny or even the supernatural in an eerie occurrence: “One day, out of nowhere, came the name Bartholomew- - the name of the family who owned the dolls' house.” When questioned brusquely by her parents as to where Florence got that name, she points “mutely at the dolls” (27). Later, Florence repeats this name conversation with the owner of the real house as a deception for her connection to the house. This is another example of how the house transports her back to her childhood memories.

Florence's interaction with the dolls also gives a glimpse into strange aspects of her personality:

Occasionally Florence undressed the human dolls, and washed them with a tiny sponge. How strange they were, without their clothes...! Their bodies were poreless and smooth and blank, there was nothing secret or nasty about them, no crevices for dirt to hide in, no trouble at all. Their faces were imperturbable, as always. Calm wise fearless staring eyes that no harsh words or slaps could disturb. But Florence loved her dolls very much, and rarely felt the need to punish them. (28)

Florence's behavior may hint at abuse. In addition to the mention of “harsh words or slaps,” it is quite strange for a small child to think in terms of dirtiness and flaws unless they were made to feel that they possessed those traits themselves. It is remarkable that she has become so
successful later in life, but her “imperturbable” facade may really be a device to cover up past tragedies. Throughout the story, Florence is often described like a doll herself, always meticulously dressed and with “dark staring eyes,” like her childhood dolls. She is confident and highly capable: “no longer” the “shy, silly, self-conscious girl” of years ago.

Yet there are negative elements to Florence's ultra-polished exterior. She is “distant, even guarded,” and has few truly close friends (37). She even concealed a bout with what turned out to be a benign breast tumor. She never married because of what she perceived as a lack of interest in men, for she was far too absorbed in her work and “an ascetic not through an act of will but through temperament” (37--38). When presenting speeches, such as the one scheduled in Lancaster, she remains as neutral as possible to avoid any dissension. Unbeknownst to others, her identity seems to be more of a construct, even quite detached from her actual self. “Florence Parr, Florence Parr,” she asserts mentally to confirm her existence to herself in times of panic (32). Like her childhood dolls, it is as if Florence has scrubbed herself clean, perhaps to escape from or compensate for her past. Her lack of intimacy with both herself and others is very likely a result of trauma suffered in childhood. She is isolated and confined in her own “dollhouse,” so to speak.

Florence's equilibrium is thrown off balance by the real life “dolls' house” that she spots on 1377 East Fainlight Avenue while in Lancaster, Pennsylvania for a conference (28). In the sense that her childhood dollhouse was “uncannily 'real,'” so too is this experience. All of the same architectural details exist in the life-size version of this Victorian house: “the steep gabled roof,” “the absurd little cupola,” even “the eight tall, narrow windows...with their dark shutters.” The house is very beautiful, however, “the gingerbread trim is badly rotted,” evidence of decay and perhaps a hint at the grotesque about to unfold (29). Florence's astonishment matches that of her four-year-old self; indeed, this is to be the “great event” of her adult life as the dollhouse was the great event of her childhood (38). Perhaps the house is a “coincidence,” although a very strange one (30). But for Florence this notion hardly satisfies the question “And what did it mean...?” (29). Instead she experiences an uncharacteristic level of curiosity.

A lingering quest for meaning haunts Florence throughout “Doll” and influences her to finally visit the house. Her impulse to visit it is something that “was unlike her” (30). Upon first sight, she considers going up to ring the doorbell after considerable hesitation, but is finally deterred by “an attack of panic” that begins to rise within her. This is heightened by the sound of a barking dog (31). It is not the first time that Florence has experienced panic, though it is a rare
occurrence for her. She remembers the first class she taught, and how John Donne's line “bright hair around the bone" from “The Relic" gave her a horribly inexplicable sense of fear (32). The eerie physicality of this image seems to throw Florence off course. Her interior monologue of what she would say to the house's owner during this failed attempt to visit it is peculiarly childish and fantastic: “I had a house like yours. It was yours. But no one lived in my house except dolls; a family of dolls. I loved them but I always sensed that they were blocking the way, standing between me and something else. . .” (33). There is a definite dichotomy between Florence's apparent composure and her odd, obsessive thoughts expresses in childish language. The house seems to bring out a childlike aspect that remains within her. Panic attacks are connected with a sense of “almost infantile helplessness,” highlighting the notion of trauma's effects (36). What is this enigmatic “something else” (33)? The answer may lie in the uncanny itself-- familiar but inexplicable, and something better kept a secret.

The truly grotesque element of “Doll” lies in Florence's bold but pre-calculated second visit to the house. The grotesque is a technique that heightens the reader's sense of the ludicrous, terrible or unnatural by exaggerating or distorting usually human or animal characteristics (Snodgrass 166). At first it is a seemingly pleasant visit with a redheaded young man and his ugly brown dog. Oates gradually introduces grotesque details and flaws, masterfully distorting our perceptions of reality. The man is polite, of “indeterminate age” (39). Florence condescendingly perceives the man as possibly a little “slow-thinking” (40). He wears a “plaid shirt” and odd pants without a front closure or zipper (41). His outfit is significant because he seems to be a life-size version of the redheaded boy of Florence's dollhouse, albeit grown and possibly distorted (27). The brown spaniel is also parallel to the original dog of the dollhouse, except here he is ugly and grotesque, “partly hairless. . .with a naked sagging belly” (41). The parallelism between the real and doll figures heightens our sense of tension and the uncanny. Pleasantries give way to grave conflict after the owner of the house offers Florence a strange and bitter drink. It reminds her of Russian chocolates she tested and spit out as little girl, “while everyone stared” (43). There is the possibility of error in this situation, and the worst happens. He questions her liking of the dark chocolate concoction. Simultaneously, the pathetic dog urinates on the floor and creates “a dark stain” (44). When the man notices he becomes angry and outright spiteful: “You did something nasty on the floor there...For everyone to see. To smell,” he accuses the pristine Florence (45). Her worst fears-- being unclean, unkempt, and having people notice-- are exposed. Florence protests, but it escalates when he violently and
disturbingly “[slaps] both her cheeks at once” as she cries (45). A violent and deep sense of shame overtakes Florence, as she is now metaphorically in the position of an abused child. One cannot but be reminded of her snippets of childhood criticism and their accompanying shame. One of the very dolls she scrubbed and admired when it had no “dirt” now cruelly slaps her in the face to tell her that life cannot be so unspoiled and faultless. Beneath Florence's careful facade is possibly grave self-doubt, as evidenced by the disembodied shout of “Liar! Bad girl! Dirty girl!” (46).

Florence is allowed to return to her regular life in the morning upon awakening, believing she has awakened from “her usual dreamless sleep” and ready to give her formulaic but professional speech. She doubts and erases the discomfort of the dream, like she has done with her childhood memories. For Florence, “Day is the only reality. She'd always known.” As in “Esther in the Night,” day erases evil. The story ends with Florence intact: “Like an exquisitely precise clockwork mechanism, a living mannequin, she would always do well: you'll applaud too when you hear her”(48). Florence has constructed a laudable but essentially sterile self. Florence's persona, guarded and empty, has been cultivated with the purpose of an adoring audience in mind, presumably to erase any memories of a jeering and damaging one.

IV. Gothic Message for Gothic Times

“We live in Gothic times.” -- Angela Carter

What unites these stories even more significantly than their Gothic origins is their expression of female confinement in both their domestic settings and society that is still quite relevant today. The world in which “The Yellow Wallpaper” was written has changed a great deal since then, but its ideas still resonate in new ways. The highly sexist social and medical climate in which Gilman's narrator suffered seems archaic and nearly unbelievable today. “The Past” and “The Lovely House” both express women's oppression earlier in the twentieth century but indicate the dismantling of the old order and new expectations for women. Not until the 1960's and 70's would women begin to adamantly speak out and search for equality. “Esther in the Night” and “The Doll” were written in the wake of the feminist movement. It is clear the worlds of their protagonists are vastly different, at least on the surface, than the world of Gilman's nameless narrator, yet they are still screaming on the inside.

That our culture has been dominated by men for centuries is undeniable. This is true even today, although women have made great strides. So it is no surprise that most of the acceptable
social roles for women are dictated or at least influenced by men. And the choices, or lack thereof, can be quite confining, like the Gothic house. How many acceptable social roles for women are really stereotypes, and how many of these stereotypes are merely gradations on the virgin/whore spectrum? So the dichotomy of “suffering, innocent protagonist” versus “femme fatale,” illustrated beautifully in “The Past,” still rings true.

Each of the previous stories is written by excellent female writers who have synthesized their culture's problems into grotesque situations. Gothic provides both an escape from and an admittance of social taboos and wrongdoings. Sometimes, it was the only vehicle for doing so, such as in the case of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Its relevance lies not only in its literary worth and the awareness that it initially incited, but for what it means today. How many women today are mistreated by male doctors who dismiss their symptoms as fictional? As in “The Lovely House,” how many women feel obligated to maintain the utmost beauty of their homes, and even of themselves? “Esther in the Night” is not only an extreme example of a contemporary problem, namely drunk driving, but also shows the great burden and guilt that can befall mothers, especially when they are doing most of the work. Finally, “The Doll” illustrates the tragic and largely hidden effects of child abuse in our society. Behind Florence's immaculate façade, no doubt key to her professional success, is great pain.

At its best, the Gothic genre expresses our fears-- cultural, personal, spiritual, and physical-- in indelible but accessible ways. The contemporary Gothic is particularly adept at demonstrating that what is most fearful often lies beneath an apparently normal or even beautiful surface. A growing fascination with horror, suspense, and other Gothic trappings is permeating even the mainstream. A most contemporary-- and arguably Gothic-- example is the popular nighttime drama *Desperate Housewives*. Behind the beautiful facades of both the houses on Wisteria Lane and the women themselves lay secrets, turmoil, and catastrophe, all packaged enticingly for the viewer. It is exaggerated, but holds true: there is always trouble beneath the surface in society, especially for women. The show began with the Mary Alice Young’s suicide and the unfolding murder mystery surrounding her family. This plotline captivated viewers, and turned preconceived notions of a prestigious neighborhood upside down. Paul Young is the classic villain right in our backyard. Beneath the unbelievably perfect façade of Bree Van de Kamp is a tragicomic struggle with alcoholism. The impeccable Applewhite family locked their mentally challenged, murderous son in their basement for months. These are more extreme examples, but illustrate society's tendency to either cover up or lock up the horrible.
The Gothic, and its confined spaces, is the place where the socially unacceptable go. It gives us a venue to voice our own feelings of imprisonment. It shape shifts, evolves, and certainly doesn't seem to be going anywhere anytime soon. An Internet search for “Gothic” will turn up about 84,500,000 hits, with subject matter too varied to even contemplate. The underlying theme appears to be escape: into fantasy, from our mundane lives; into catharsis, from our mortal fears; into darkness, because it makes more sense in a chaotic world. These stories are a small slice of the Gothic, but a very important one. Women, who have no doubt been oppressed by a largely male-dominated society for far too long have brought the light of perspective into this dark place. The Gothic genre itself is the means of escape from the complex castle of oppression, perhaps not always for the characters, but for the writers and their audience.
Works Cited


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Anxiety related disorders are among the most common mental health problems facing American citizens today. This paper presents the advantageous use of art therapy in conjunction with cognitive-behavioral therapy in treating anxiety sufferers. Groups of four to eight adult inpatients with varying diagnoses engaged in drawing, painting, sculpture and guided imagery exercises to develop coping strategies. Upon completion of treatment, the client’s artwork was shown in an exhibition designed to educate the public about the nature of anxiety.

Anxiety is one of the most widespread mental health problems in the United States today. It is the number one mental health problem among American women and ranks as a close second to substance abuse among men. In fact, alcoholism is the only other disorder that affects a greater number of people throughout the county. Fifteen percent of the general American population is affected by a wide range of anxiety related disorders (Bourne, 2000). However, only a quarter of affected individuals will seek and receive treatment (Danton et al., 1994).

According to Bourne (2000), anxiety disorders began to climb at an alarming rate during the 1990’s and have only continued to worsen after tragic events such as September 11th and the downfall of the American economy. Bourne states that Western Society is currently experiencing a greater amount of stress than any previous historical period. Today’s population is experiencing a loss of stability and consistency in all aspects of life.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), currently lists eleven anxiety related disorders: Panic Disorder, Agoraphobia, Social Phobia, Specific Phobia, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Acute Stress Disorder, Agoraphobia without a history of Panic Disorder, Anxiety Disorder due to a general medical condition, and substance-induced Anxiety Disorder.

As an anxiety sufferer myself, I took this opportunity to provide healing to others through artmaking. I worked with a mixed population of inpatient adults on three psychiatric units at Binghamton General Hospital and later installed an exhibition of client artwork. For two to three months, I designed and co-lead weekly art therapy groups focusing on various aspects of anxiety. In fighting my own battle with panic and anxiety, I fully understand the debilitating nature of