

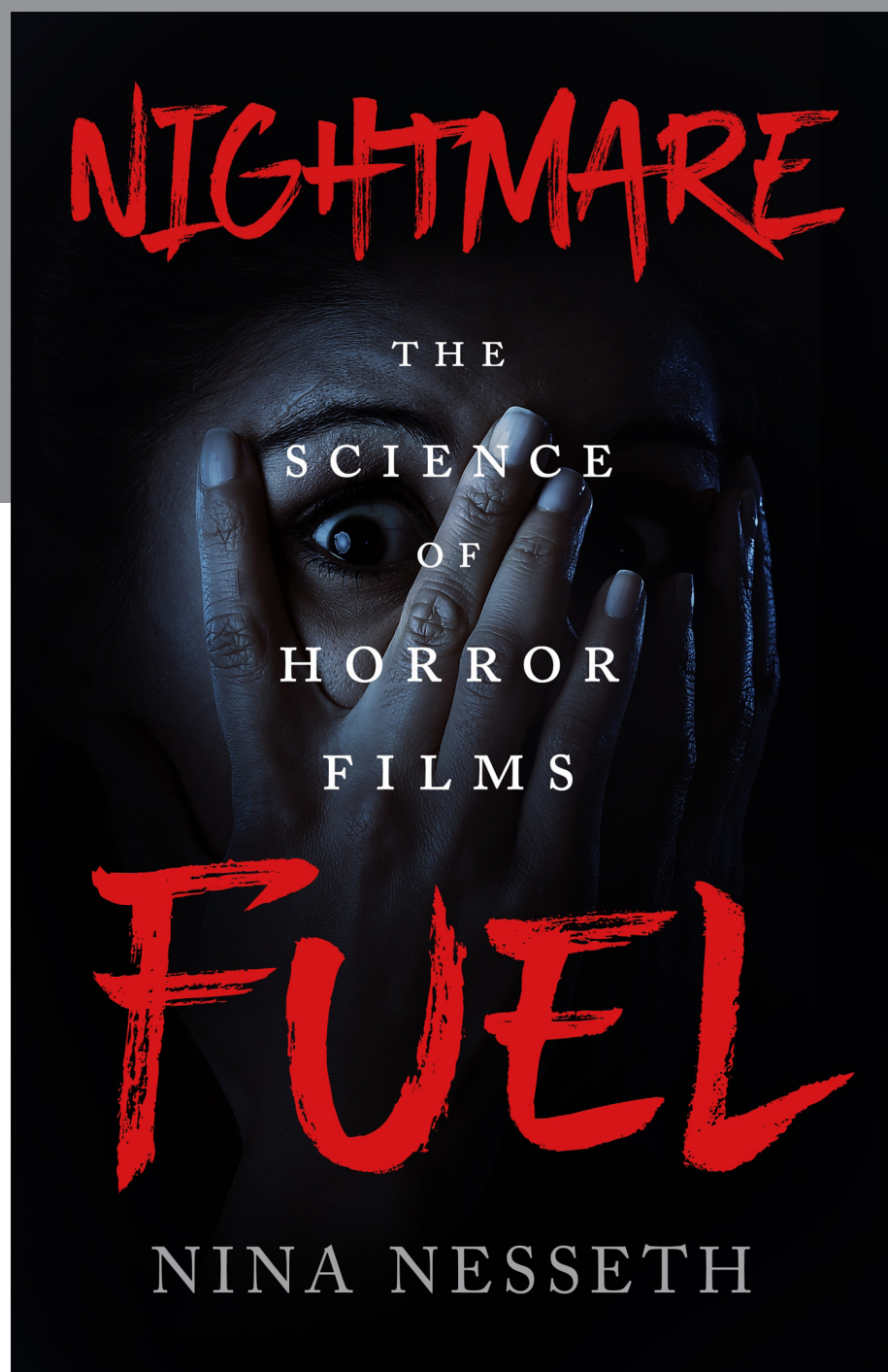


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No. 10 February 2022

*Bad Romance*

How to Deal When Love is a Battlefield





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are you so  
afraid of?*

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## Editor's Note

**Love. Desire. Relationships.** These themes form the foundation, at least partially, of probably 75% of cinema and literature—and 90% of modern pop songs.

No matter the story, Hollywood just *loves* to shoehorn in an unnecessary love interest. But it isn't fully their fault. This compulsion is a reflection of our societal obsession with the heteronormative idea of living "happily ever after." To be in a serious relationship (one that will eventually lead to marriage and children, if it hasn't already) is considered one of the prime objectives of adult life; a milestone that signals that the participants have (finally) settled into responsible adulthood and (presumably) will now live out the rest of their existence in some degree of bliss.

Happily ever after. A tale as old as time.

But not for all.

Beneath the yearning, romance, poetry, vows, and happy endings (yes, in all senses of the term), there lies a sinister underbelly—and identifying the red flags can be a matter of life and death, quite literally. To say that the essays in this issue ditch the rose-coloured glasses is an understatement. You'll find pieces touching on intimate partner violence, obsession, idealisation, rejection, and toxic relationships of all kinds. Our authors explore love triangles, Nice Guy behaviour, reactions to trauma, and the hazards of online dating.

The inimitable Pat Benatar once said, "Love is a battlefield." I'll respond with some wisdom from Sun Tzu: "Know your enemy."

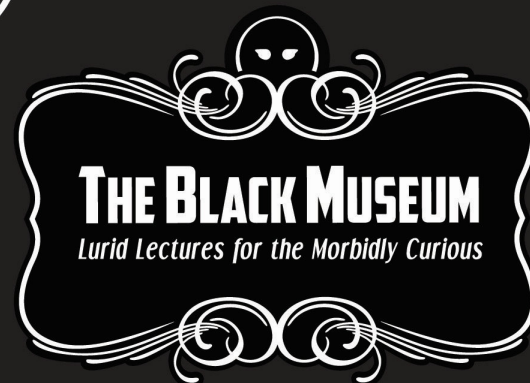
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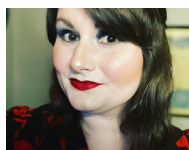




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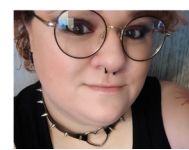
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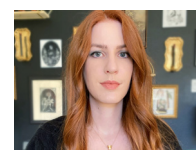
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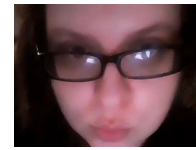
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# You Belong to Me

## Demonic Possession, Domestic Abuse & Identity Crises in *Come Closer*

by Jessica Scott

There are worse things than being alone. However, when you don't feel whole in and of yourself—when you hate, or think you're supposed to hate, who you are—being alone feels like the worst possible fate. It becomes far too easy to settle for partners who chip away at you, significant others whose abuse and solipsism render you insignificant. Sara Gran's novella *Come Closer* (2003) examines the identity crisis that precipitates and results from this existential emptiness. Through the framework of a demonic possession narrative, Gran's work deftly portrays the cyclical way abusive relationships leave you vulnerable to further abuse.

On paper, Amanda has the perfect life. She has her dream house, a good job as an architect, and a stable marriage to a stable man. Life with Ed isn't as happy as it appears, though. Amanda did not marry him because she wanted him, but because she thought he was what she *should* want. Narrating the majority of *Come Closer*, Amanda tells the reader, "Ed was my hero, my savior. Ed was the man who had imposed order on my chaotic life." Ed's "order" comes at a high price. Any time Amanda exhibits characteristics of her old self, he is condescending. He rolls his eyes at her and scolds her before suggesting she see a psychiatrist. Ed makes it clear to Amanda that she is falling short of his cold, rigid expectations.

I, too, used to have what was supposed to be the perfect life. I had a house, a job, and a stable marriage to a stable man. That stability was a trap. If I showed

any signs of energy or creativity outside of what was expected of me, I was (metaphorically) slapped down. When I would speak excitedly about something that interested me, my husband would ask in a condescending voice, "Have you taken your meds today?" He was hurtful and dismissive, putting me in my place and reminding me that I was the "crazy" one in the relationship; that I was the one who needed to be managed and caged. The abuse wasn't overtly physical (except for the one time it was, in a moment that brings me white-hot shame every time I think about it). I was a victim of coercive control—a term I only discovered about a month ago in a sad moment of realization as I looked down a checklist of abuse tactics and mentally checked a box next to each one. I knew when it was happening that it didn't feel *right*, but I wasn't ready to call it *abuse*... not yet. I simply thought it was what I deserved. So no matter how cruel or how miserable things got, I stayed. After all, who else would have me?

**Abusive relationships and demonic possession separate you from your true self, leaving you isolated and wounded, physically and psychologically.**

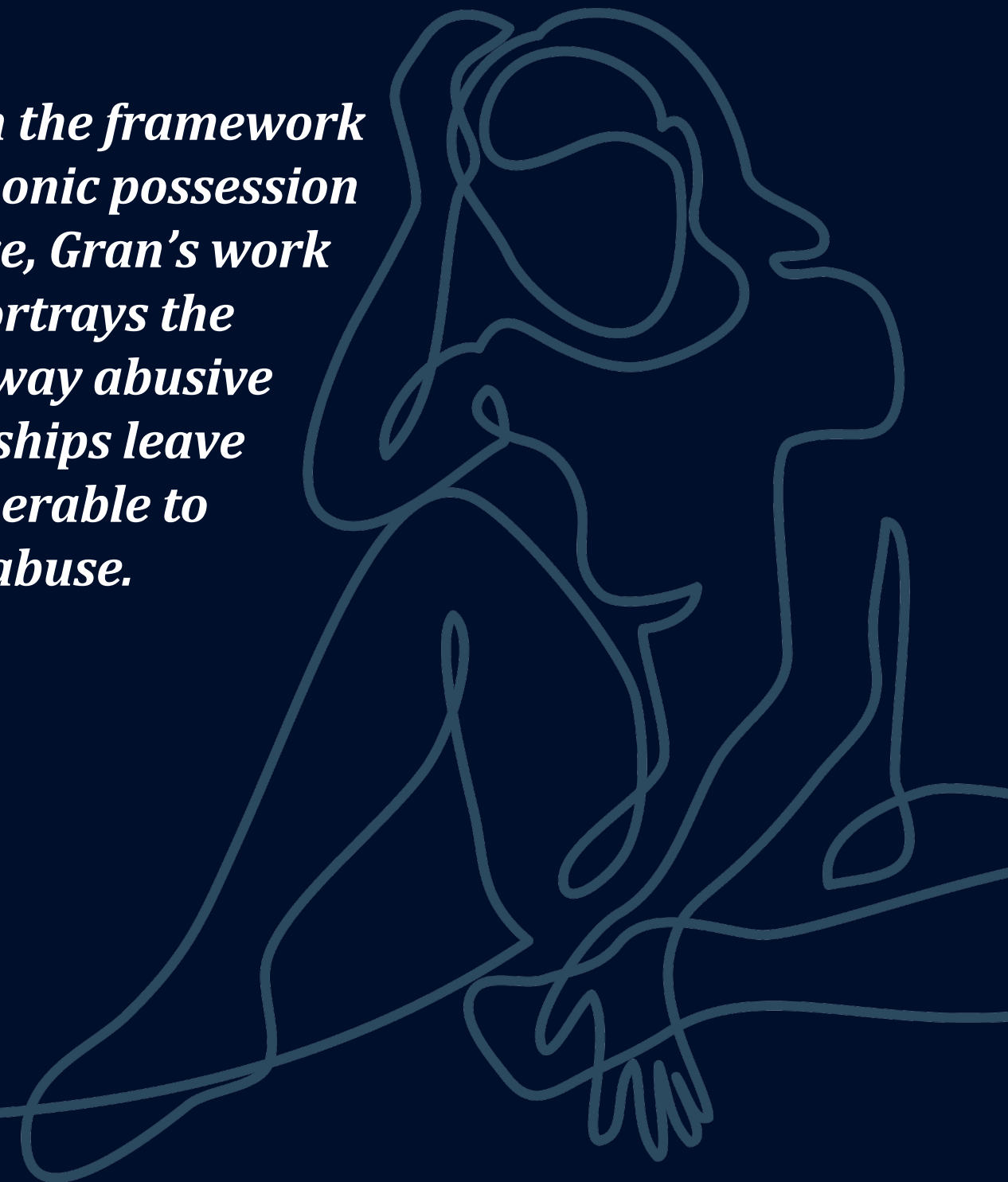
Similarly, Amanda's greatest fear is being alone. So when she inevitably feels alone while trapped in a house with a man who doesn't understand or appreciate her, she finds herself targeted by a demon.

Historically, in horror stories, demons go after the most vulnerable people—usually children or desperate women. The feminist implications of that fact are a topic for another day, but when you look at demonic possession as a metaphor for domestic abuse—as *Come Closer* clearly does—those desperate women and the demons who plague them begin to make more sense. Abusive relationships and demonic possession separate you from your true self, leaving you isolated and wounded, physically and psychologically. They are both insidious: the abuser and the demon start their subtle campaigns of terror slowly, intent on keeping the victim unaware.

As is so often the case in horror stories, Amanda's possession begins with strange noises. She rationalizes the scratching and tapping in the walls to be hungry mice or old pipes, not signals of a demon circling her soul. For me, this is one of the most frightening parts of any demonic possession story, this tiny sign of trouble that is so easily explained away. I have intimate experience with slowly boiling alive as your abuser turns the heat up so imperceptibly that you can't escape the pot of water you've unwittingly jumped into. I also have intimate experience with the curse of hindsight, of thinking, "It's all so clear now. Why didn't I see it then? What's wrong with me?"

These eerie sounds of being circled and hunted terrify me. It's so easy not to see signs of abuse early. It's so easy to tell your instincts to be quiet, that that odd noise or that book flying off a shelf—or

*Through the framework of a demonic possession narrative, Gran's work deftly portrays the cyclical way abusive relationships leave you vulnerable to further abuse.*





that first sign of financial coercion or the early instances of insults, manipulations, and other forms of psychological abuse—are normal, everyday things that are no cause for concern. But they're not normal, and they should be rooted out as soon as you see them.

Therein lies the rub: it's extremely hard to see these harbingers for what they really are. As Amanda says, once the possession has nearly taken full control, "the most shocking truth was...that, previously, I had been so stupid as to think I had any understanding of the universe at all." Despite a history of trauma and bad relationships, I never thought I would be in an abusive marriage. I thought I knew what abuse looked like, but then I lived through it without recognizing it for what it truly was. I heard the footsteps circling and ensnaring me and—just like Amanda and countless other women in possession stories—I wrote them off as the house settling, as a normal part of marriage, as just one of those things that you have to put up with in order to live the life you're supposed to want.

Like me, Amanda's feelings of emptiness and need to be reassured that she is worthy of love—part of her conditioning to seek out a controlling partner in the first place—spring from issues with her mother. The demon targeting her is named Naamah, but she first appears to Amanda in childhood as an imaginary friend named Pansy, whom Amanda describes as "a mother substitute." Though Amanda's need for Pansy/Naamah waxes and wanes over the course of her life, the demon never leaves her side. That awful, existential black hole—that place where self-love and an innate belief in your own worth should be—is always there, just like Naamah. Naamah repeatedly tells Amanda that she loves her and will never leave her. She forces Amanda to do things she doesn't want to do, up to and including murder, all in the name of love. She takes over Amanda's body, violating her sexually, all in the name of love. Naamah treats Amanda like an object to be used as she desires, telling her that she only does what's best for Amanda, that her actions are what Amanda really wants her to do. These are lies with which survivors of domestic abuse are all too familiar.

Though I unfortunately feel a strong kinship with many of Amanda's struggles, seeing the faces of more than one of my abusers in Naamah's description and recognising my ex-husband in Ed, it is important to delineate where my

ability to relate to Amanda ends. She is homophobic and racist, using her narration in at least three instances to aim slurs at queer characters and make prejudiced remarks about characters of colour. This seems to be Gran's way of making sure Amanda isn't overly sympathetic. *Come Closer* is a thorny tragedy of abuse, repressed desire, and buried identity; it is a book with no heroes, and Amanda's bigotry ensures she is far from heroic. While there are perhaps better ways to accomplish that goal (and to achieve the shock value the book appears to be going for in at least one use of a slur), we don't have to excuse Amanda's faults to believe that she deserves freedom from her abusers.

**I heard the footsteps circling and ensnaring me and—just like Amanda and countless other women in possession stories—I wrote them off as the house settling, as a normal part of marriage, as just one of those things that you have to put up with in order to live the life you're supposed to want.**

These shocking moments of bigotry aren't the only jarring moments in Amanda's narration. She is prone to reversals and surprises, which is Gran's most effective way of keeping the reader off-balance in service of *Come Closer's* themes of identity crises and coping with abuse. Amanda ends more than one chapter with an almost offhand confession of some violent or illegal act, "It wasn't until months later that I would look back and realize that, most likely, I had killed the magazine dealer myself." Amanda's nonchalance in the face of such an admission underscores her psychological response to the abuse she faces. Her narration is dispassionate and matter-of-fact, as if she is reading a news report about a stranger rather than recounting horrible acts she committed.

Amanda also frequently dissociates. In one instance when Naamah takes over her body, Amanda states, "But I wasn't there. I was watching it all, I could see it, but I wasn't inside of myself." This is a feeling I know well. When I dissociate, I always describe it as being yanked out of my body, as if someone grabbed my essence and pulled it out through my back, forcing me to exist just outside my body as my physical form goes through the motions

of whatever activity I was engaged in just before my psyche made a hasty exit. Amanda is an unreliable narrator, not because she's not truthful, but because she is simultaneously narrating her own life and someone else's. She is so unsure of herself that the reader can never be sure of who she is either.

This core question, 'who am I, really?', is extremely hard for survivors like Amanda and myself to answer. I am still in the process of deprogramming myself from the thoughts my abusers put in my head. I am still trying to unearth my real identity and find the person I truly am, not the person they convinced me I was or the person I had to become to survive them. When Amanda stands up against Ed's demands, she tells the reader, "For the first time I couldn't tell who was speaking, me or Naamah." This moment, which is empowering when viewed in a vacuum, illuminates just how hard it is to extricate your true self from your abused self.

Amanda's relationship with Naamah is complicated. There are many times when her possessed self helps her escape the clutches of her bad marriage. Trying to tease out which parts are Amanda and which parts are Naamah—or which parts are me and which parts are my abusers' voices in my head, telling me that I'm a burden, that I'm lazy, that I'm worthless and unlovable—can be far more difficult than you'd expect. It's long, arduous work, and it demonstrates just how insidious and destructive abuse can be. The abuser infiltrates the deepest parts of you, just as a demon does, trying their best to control and tarnish every aspect of your life, especially the parts you hold dearest.

*Come Closer* ends with Amanda institutionalized, trapped forever with Naamah and her abuse. Chillingly, and far too relatable, Amanda concludes, "And that's all I've ever wanted, really: someone to love me, and never leave me alone." It may seem a trite point, but it's a hard-won realization that I fight every day to hold onto: I have to be that person for myself. I have to love myself. I have to be vigilant. I can't leave myself alone with that need for validation or search for wholeness, lest I find myself in yet another relationship with someone who seeks to control and define me in ways that suit them. I will reclaim the best parts of myself, and I will exorcise my abusers. It will take time, and it will take strength that I sometimes doubt I have, but I will do it. I will emerge from that period of possession, from that identity crisis, and I will be wholly myself. g

# The Frog Princess

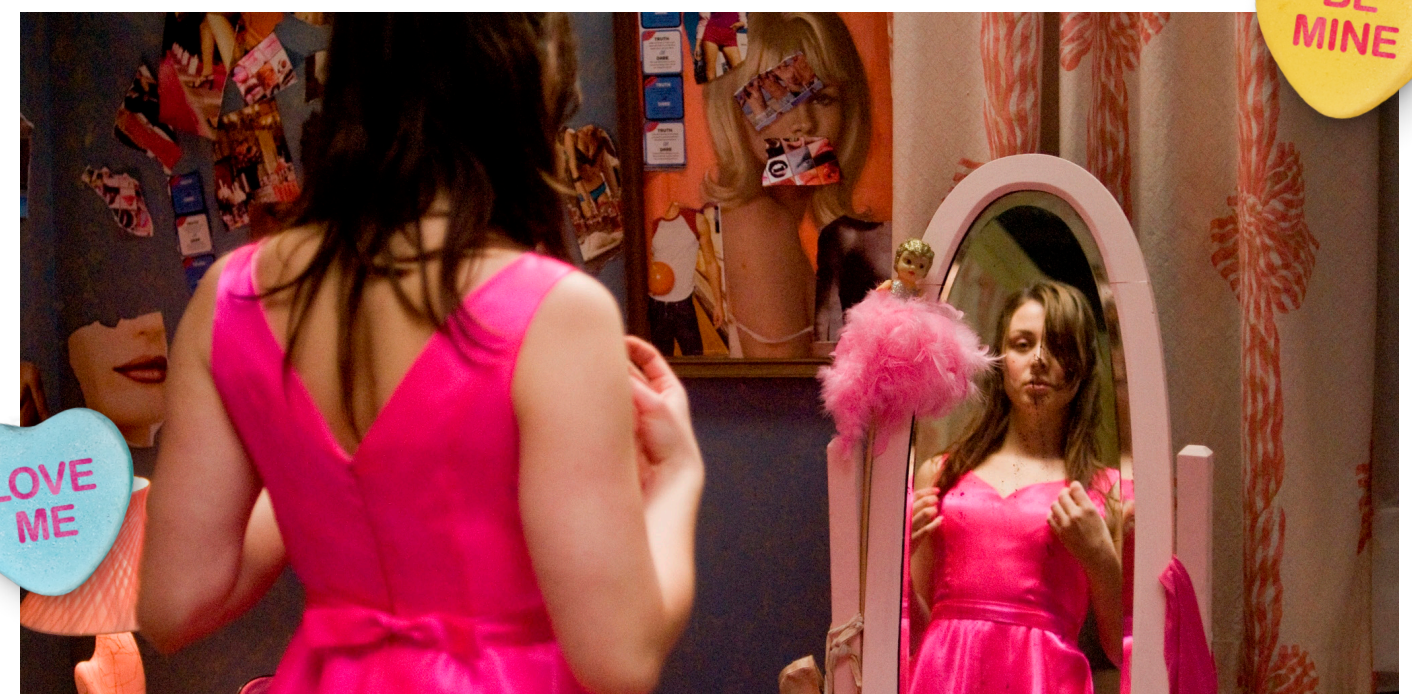
## Torturous Rejection in The Loved Ones

by Jenn Adams

**The Loved Ones (2009) is a fairytale romance turned on its head.** Sean Byrne's brilliant film follows Lola (Robin McLeavy), a rejected teenage girl who uses a warped view of feminine perfection to destroy anyone who doesn't validate her. Lola tells herself she wants love, but what she really wants is power. Raised in a patriarchal world where girls are princesses and women are damsels in distress, she's internalised an extremely limited idea of who and what she should be. Unfortunately, she's also internalised the anger that accompanies these limitations. Seeking her perfect "prince," she tortures boys who reject her to avoid the pain of her insecurity and powerlessness. *The Loved Ones* is a story of romantic expectations gone wrong, a brutal examination of the harm caused by fetishised femininity and superficial attraction.

Brent (Xavier Samuel) is a high school student recovering from the recent loss of his father. On the day of the school dance, he's approached by the shy and demure Lola who asks him to be her date. He politely declines, having already planned to take his girlfriend Holly (Victoria Thaine). Later that day, he is kidnapped by a mysterious man who turns out to be Lola's father. Brent awakens, tied to a chair at Lola's dining room table, surrounded by a warped approximation of the dance. Over the course of the night, Lola and Daddy (John Brumpton) torture him in a twisted version of a fairytale dream date and he is forced into the role of her perfect prince. When she inevitably rejects Brent for her father, the murderous couple attempt to turn him into a zombie, dependent on her and devoid of the humanity that would allow him to reject her again.

Lola is ultra-girly, wearing a bright pink dress and bow-adorned heels for the dance. Her room is an explosion of dolls and glitter. With sparkly pink nails, she looks through her scrapbook full of hand-drawn castles and knights pasted among pictures of her crushes. But this normal expression of girliness takes an ominous turn as her scrapbook also reveals flyers featuring the faces of missing boys, along with Polaroids of her posing with them as they are tortured. She is not just fantasising about these boys; she's fantasising about dominating them. There's an undercurrent of rage and viciousness in her feminine decor. Her dolls are posed in crude sexual positions with the male dolls cruelly subjugated. Pictures of attractive men are ripped and scratched out to dehumanise them. She's not interested in romantic relationships, only those that cause pain.







Lola is obsessed with Kasey Chambers' pop ballad "Not Pretty Enough." The song's lyrics recount a young woman's struggles to fit the description of an idealised romantic partner, trying everything she can to win the love she craves. She worries that she's not pleasing enough, that she's too emotional. But it's the chorus's final line, "Why do you see right through me?" that is revelatory. None of this performance is real. She is creating a facade designed to prove herself worthy of love.

*“Rather than love, what Lola actually craves is the rejection that will unlock her anger at the rigid expectations she's expected to embody.”*

The patriarchy oppresses women by telling us that who we really are is not acceptable. We must bend and shape ourselves into a form that is pleasing and beneficial to men or we will be rejected. Perhaps what Lola is really drawn to is the song's ability to tap into the feminine rage of knowing that everything we've done, all the demure giggles, the diets, the makeup, has been for nothing. We've destroyed ourselves in order to play by the rules of this game and it's still not enough. Rather than love, what

Lola *actually* craves is the rejection that will unlock her anger at the rigid expectations she's expected to embody.

The "dance" Lola and Daddy concoct is an idealised version of a classic stereotype, filled with balloons, banners, and paper crowns. A disco ball throws dancing light around the torture room. With blood-soaked hands, she rips open the shiny pink foil containing her crown, feigning excitement and joy at this artificial validation. The look on her face as Daddy places it on her head is almost orgasmic. Knowing she would never achieve this social approval on her own, she must create it for herself. Lola doesn't want a real relationship, she wants the idealised fairytale version of love. She orchestrates a warped version of prom to allow her to be the princess she fears she can never be in reality.

This is modelled by her father, whose partner, Bright Eyes (Anne Scott-Pendlebury), is a zombified living doll, totally compliant and incapable of expressing free will. Lola seemingly hates this woman, who we will later learn is her mother. She constantly asks Daddy to decide who is prettier and punishes Bright Eyes any time she receives his attention. Her need for male validation is so great that she is jealous of her own zombified mother. Her true romantic

relationship is with her father, the man in her life with the most power and her literal patriarch. Knowing that, as a girl, she can never be "king," she wants to be "queen"—the closest she believes she can get to the strongest source of power in her life. Once her father is dead, Lola kills her mother in an act of revenge for occupying the position Lola wants for herself: the woman of the house.

Lola is also jealous of Holly, who has managed to earn Brent's love organically. Holly represents the ideal Lola wants to achieve. At one point, Lola threatens to orally rape Brent, holding his penis in her hand. But at the last second, she threatens to bite it off. Earlier in the film, she witnesses Holly perform oral sex on Brent shortly after he had rejected Lola, and she wants revenge for this perceived slight. Rather than an intimate relationship with Brent, Lola wants to prove to herself that she has greater mastery of feminine perfection than the popular Holly by claiming Holly's man for herself. She doesn't actually want Brent, she just doesn't want Holly to have him.

The torture to which Lola subjects Brent is highly specific and designed to remove as much power from him as possible. First, she injects his throat with a household chemical, causing him to lose the ability to speak. If he can't

talk, he can't reject her. When he tries to escape, she has Daddy nail his feet to the floor with a hammer and knives. Next, she draws on him, carving her initials inside a giant heart on his chest with a fork. With this cruel act, Lola is marking her territory. She believes she's symbolically ruining him for any other girl. Any time Brent looks at himself in the mirror, he'll see her name—and any girl who sees his bare chest will know Lola's been there first.

After "drawing on" Brent, Lola throws salt in his wounds, relishing his pain and seeking to inflict the maximum amount of suffering. At one point, she sits on Brent's lap and demands that he cry. Brent refuses, growing angrier as Daddy hammers the knives into his feet. Lola is enraged that she can't force the fear out of him, screaming in his face and demanding control of his emotional reactions. Though we never see Lola cry, this hearkens back to the lyrics of her favourite song: "Do I cry too much?" Brent's tears will signal that she has become the dominant one in the relationship, the rejector rather than the rejected.

While "dancing" with Brent, Lola does reject him, saying he's not her prince, just another frog. The completion of this torture will attempt to turn him into

just that. Lola and Daddy plan to drill a hole in Brent's skull and pour boiling water inside his head to "boil his brains." They are attempting to remove, among other things, his ability to choose who he loves. Once the procedure is complete, he will become totally dependent on her. Even though she's decided she doesn't want him as a partner, she still wants his adoration. He will become another "frog" living in a pit below the living room floor. Desperate for validation, Lola has created her own pool of admirers and delights in the power she gains from their forced devotion.

Though Brent is hardly the pair's first victim, this will be Lola's first time creating a zombie, a warped twist on losing her virginity. Rather than her first sexual partner, Brent's body will become the first one she fully destroys. Daddy walks her through the steps of this process, offering the nervous girl tips and pointers along the way. Even the weapons she uses are phallic, the drill that penetrates and the hot fluid entering his body. By zombifying Brent, she will simultaneously remove his humanity and claim the male power she values so highly.

Lola does not want an actual person who loves her, but a reflection of her own mastery of feminine ideals. Her

rage at not being able to obtain this superficial status is directed at anyone who rejects her advances or causes her to feel less than powerful in a patriarchal system. But what if Brent had said yes to her invitation? How would she react if he had actually tried to be her prince? Would she attempt a real relationship or would she find a way to reject him anyway, creating a reason to inflict the punishment she actually desires?

Lola clings to her rage until the bitter end. After being run over by the car Brent is driving, she drags herself forward on her belly, the point of her knife propelling her body down the street. Even this close to death, she is still driven by rage and the need to destroy. Lola has been socialised to believe that her kiss will turn boys into perfect princes. This transformation is validation of her perfection and Brent's failure to comply with her demands is evidence of her failure as a woman. She turns this rage outward, torturing him for refusing to play along with her fantasy. Having long ago checked out of a body she believes exists to please men, she is seemingly impervious to what must be immense pain. Her gruesome appearance is a reflection of the rage she feels on the inside after a lifetime of being told that her authentic self has no value unless it is validated by a man. No wonder she wants to destroy the bodies of boys. *g*





# Obsession, Desire, & Omnipresence

## The Female Love Triangle at the Heart of Rebecca

by Rebecca McCallum

Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) has its roots firmly planted in the gothic horror subgenre. The film's axis rotates not on a typical romance story, but instead around a queer female love triangle involving Mrs de Winter (Joan Fontaine), housekeeper Mrs Danvers (Judith Anderson), and the titular (deceased) Rebecca. Producers and studio executives were apprehensive about the queer reading of *Rebecca* from its inception, with Joseph Breen of the Motion Picture Association Production Code warning that there should be, "no suggestion whatever of a perverted relationship between Mrs Danvers and Rebecca in the final cut." (Leff, 1999, p. 70) a stipulation that Hitchcock managed to adroitly avoid.

The history of *Rebecca* is steeped in female influences, none more prevalent, of course, than the author of the original text. Daphne du Maurier, who identified as bisexual, used the literary art form to explore the elements of both homophobic fear and desire. In Hitchcock's adaption too, the female contribution would be far-reaching and instrumental to the finished film. His long-time collaborator Joan Harrison was co-credited with writing the screenplay and his wife, Alma Reville, also fed fastidiously into the creative process. Finally, of course, the actresses Joan Fontaine and Judith Anderson deserve accolades for transferring the women from text to screen and bringing them to life through their nuanced and haunting performances.

### Obsession

The housekeeper of the gothic and imposing Manderley and former maid to Rebecca, Mrs Danvers, harbours a deep, romantic obsession with both the ghostly Rebecca and the notion of recreating the first Mrs de Winter through her successor. In her initial appearance, she stands erect, phallic-like in her confidence and control. This self-assurance contrasts with the second Mrs de Winter, who brushes her hair back nervously, timidly self-aware and conscious of her physical appearance. The pair share a heated, prolonged gaze as Mrs Danvers confirms she has, "everything in readiness," a statement that hints at her sexual experience and confirms her authoritative status. In response, Mrs de Winter visibly trembles, dropping her gloves to the floor. The

two bend down together in an awkward moment, followed by an extended glare from Mrs Danvers towards the bride, as though she were reimagining Rebecca.

As Mrs de Winter wanders the corridors of her new home, Mrs Danvers keeps close like a shadow, invading her personal space when they are alone in the morning room and in the west wing. When husband Maxim (Laurence Olivier) leaves to undertake the "business of the estate," Mrs Danvers seizes the opportunity to be alone with the heroine as she coaxes her into the west wing. In a gesture that seeks to allure and entice, the housekeeper opens and closes the windows of Rebecca's devoted space as though it were a signal to beckon the heroine nearer.

*Mrs Danvers seeks to revive Rebecca through the heroine by using her as a substitute.*

It is not incidental that the most sexually charged scenes occur in the west wing, a space which is fetishised, linked with the forbidden and the sensual, and where Mrs Danvers shows the new bride Rebecca's lingerie. Not content with merely displaying Rebecca's possessions, the housekeeper entreats the heroine to experience her tactility by pressing furs against her face and, in so doing, Mrs Danvers is one step closer to bringing back Rebecca. She recounts times when she would wait for her mistress into the early hours of the morning, describing routines that are notably confined to the intimate spaces of the bathroom and bedroom. We also learn how Rebecca had taken to calling the housekeeper "Danny," a masculine variant of her name along with references to "undressing" that are laden with sexual undertones.

Mrs Danvers seeks to revive Rebecca through the heroine by using her as a substitute. This intention is alluded to as Mrs Danvers mock-brushes Mrs de Winter's hair and in her suggestion that she dress as Caroline de Winter, an instigation that may seem ill-willed on the surface but might also, in fact, contain hidden desires to bring her beloved Rebecca back from the dead.

In the west wing, Mrs Danvers uses eroticism and seduction for dark purposes. "Why don't you?" she repeats softly into Mrs de Winter's ear, tempting her

towards suicide in a moment reminiscent of foreplay, inextricably linking sex and death. However, they are interrupted by the sound of fireworks, which not only signify the discovery of Rebecca's boat but mimic an orgasmic climax. Rebecca has arrived and, in these few seconds, all three women are united in a triumphant, lesbian *ménage-à-trois*. A look at the hairstyles of both women in this scene also reveals their connection (through the similar design) and opposition (one is fair, one is dark). Representing the light and the darkness, they are both conjoined by the liminal Rebecca.

Ultimately, Mrs Danvers's obsession leads to her death, or, perhaps a more accurate term would be "martyrdom," as she chooses to perish in the shrine of the west wing where she can worship Rebecca forever.

### Desire

Throughout the film, the unnamed heroine experiences a desire to become the eponymous Rebecca while also being compelled to reject her. When dancing with Maxim during their courtship in Monte Carlo, she closes her eyes, seeming to forget him and instead picture someone else (Rebecca, perhaps?). Likewise, when out for a drive with him, it is clearly Rebecca who is on her mind and who she desires to inhabit; "I wish I were a woman of 36, dressed in black satin with a string of pearls." Over lunch, she tells Maxim she has looked up the word "companion" in the dictionary, its definition being: "friend of the bosom," a nod to the female anatomy and sexual intimacy.

*The young bride repeatedly refuses to acknowledge her heterosexual relationship with Maxim as a romantic one.*

The heroine and Maxim often seem awkward in one another's company while she and Rebecca communicate without speaking, creating an unspoken language filled with sexual energy. The young bride repeatedly refuses to acknowledge her heterosexual relationship with Maxim as a romantic one. She refers to the time they spend together in Monte Carlo as, "an act of charity," and when he proposes, she asks tentatively if this means he wishes to hire a secretary. After the



discovery of Rebecca's boat, she suggests being his "companion" or "friend," both terms which serve to highlight how she does not view their marriage in romantic terms. Her focus is elsewhere—namely, on Rebecca. When she comes face-to-face with a photograph of Maxim in the west wing, she turns away from it. She rejects heterosexual love in the context of her newfound desire.

While the new Mrs de Winter confronts her sexuality and queer sentiments in the west wing, elsewhere she is seen repressing her desire. In Monte Carlo, the ghastly Mrs Van Hopper (Florence Bates) describes the former Mrs de Winter as, "the beautiful Rebecca Hildrith," a line that echoes over and over in the heroine's sleep. Crucially, it is not Maxim who is invading her dreams, but Rebecca—representing her subconscious sexual desires. When she breaks Rebecca's cupid ornament in the morning room, she promptly hides it out of sight, tucking it away at the back of a drawer, symbolising an attempt to bury her feelings for the female ghost. Dressing as Caroline de Winter for the masquerade ball, she imitates her predecessor, signifying that she cannot distance herself from nor deny Rebecca. Just as the boat rises from the seabed, in assimilating Rebecca through a de Winter relative, the heroine is reviving the woman she desires.

*The theme of dressing up and assuming multiple identities also speaks directly to notions of queerness in the film.*

Mrs de Winter's desires mean that she mistakes her own meditations on Rebecca with the constant fear that Maxim is comparing her to his first wife. It is *she* who continually brings Rebecca close and it is *her* preoccupation with the powerful female presence that keeps Rebecca so alive. Whenever she attends the west wing, the place most closely associated with Rebecca, she always emerges stronger, as though invigorated by their ethereal connection. "I am Mrs de Winter now," she declares in one notable instance.


The theme of dressing up and assuming multiple identities also speaks directly to notions of queerness in the film. The heroine's appearance is established as boyish—she dresses in thick fabrics such as tweeds and hats evocative of Peter Pan. But through her interplay

with feminine gowns and costumes, her body becomes a site for female, male, and androgynous identities. Upon hearing Rebecca described as "the most beautiful creature," she purchases beauty magazines and dons an evening gown with a floral corsage. Whether this is an attempt to get closer to Rebecca, to resemble her, or to distance herself from her, it is clear that Maxim does not support this exploration as he declares, "it's not you at all." Such a response evidences an attitude of rejection of her sexual fluidity and hints of her emerging queerness. In conversation with Maxim's sister Beatrice (Gladys Cooper)—who also happens to dress in tweeds and pointed hats—Mrs de Winter is told to be more forthcoming in playing with her appearance, an exchange that evidently resonates. Before she settles on the Caroline de Winter costume for the ball, the heroine is seen exploring many alternatives including Joan of Arc—which has queer overtures through its masculinity and phallic sword both worn and bore by a female—as well as women in traditional ballgowns.

### **Omnipresence**

Although absent in person, Rebecca is an omnipresent force throughout the film. In being absent, she offers the perfect metaphor for representing both the power and the enforced silencing of queer romance. Rebecca appears in the heroine's life even before she meets Maxim: through a postcard of Manderley that she recalls seeing as a child. What's more, the second Mrs de Winter confides through voiceover that she continues to go back to Manderley despite the horrific events she experienced there, a preoccupation that evidences a desire to relive the past and to be ever closer to Rebecca. This intrinsic link between Manderley and Rebecca can be seen when the heroine first sets eyes on the stately home, a moment that elicits a stunned gasp of arousal and delight.

Once at Manderley, the power of Rebecca's female sexuality can be felt everywhere, including in the portraits of women that loom high above the heroine in the hallways, dining room, and library. The house (acting as a surrogate for Rebecca) exerts its influence at every turn. Even Rebecca herself seems to be flirting with the heroine through the repeated motif of the letter 'R,' which appears on a napkin draped over her lap and on the handkerchief that Maxim



*Dressing as Caroline de Winter for the masquerade ball, she imitates her predecessor, signifying that she cannot distance herself from nor deny Rebecca.*



offers, which she uses to wipe away a tear-stained face. Such close contact with objects bearing the letter 'R' suggests an intimacy that we never see present in the heterosexual relationship with her husband.

Rebecca's omnipresence is communicated not only through Manderley but via her connection with the elements. Hitchcock continually associates her with air, water, and fire, creating a sense that she is an ethereal power. Mrs de Winter feels her through the breeze in the draughty library, and the crashing, dancing waves of the sea are a constant reminder of Rebecca's presence. In their final scene together, both Mrs Danvers and the heroine have flames close to them,

representative of Rebecca's spirit, with the former lying in front of a roaring fire while the latter is seen carrying a candle. Through her lack of physical presence, Rebecca also has the potential to be misread as a threat and the notion of fearing her as the unknown presence is a clear metaphor for homophobia.

While some argue that Hitchcock's films focus on heterosexual romance, this is simply not the case. Queerness pervades his works, from the homosexual tension between Brandon and Robert in 1948's *Rope*, to the power dynamic of Guy and Bruno in *Strangers on a Train* (1951), to the heated relationship of Lil with the eponymous *Marnie* (1964). While *Rebecca* seeks to exhibit and explore

representations of queer romance, it is also to its detriment that none of the three women occupying the love triangle has a redemptive ending and the potential for a queer romance to blossom is eschewed. It is undeniable, however, that *Rebecca* was taking great leaps for its time. Through the modes of obsession, desire, and omnipresence, the film's presentation of lesbian love and charged, female sexuality will forever situate *Rebecca* as an important text in the history of horror cinema.

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## Dead Wives & Doppelgängers: Lost Love in Vampire Narratives

by Joy Robinson

**A forlorn vampire passes the centuries in agonising grief over his lost love—a beautiful, perfect mortal woman who died tragically.** Then, one day, he sees her face in a photograph or perhaps on a crowded street. Convinced that fate has conspired to return his beloved to him, he tracks her down and determines that, this time, they will be together forever. I didn't say *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, but you were thinking it.

Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 film redefined vampire cinema in a way that no other had since Christopher Lee first donned the black cape for Hammer in 1958's *Horror of Dracula*. It had such a monumental impact that the image

of *Dracula* as a tragic romantic figure has become ingrained in our cultural psyche—so much so that over the years many people have been surprised to discover that Bram Stoker's novel is not a love story. Coppola's film was not the first to give *Dracula* a romantic side, but it remains the most successful. In the thirty years since its release, other adaptations have borrowed its themes of lost love and reincarnation—themes that have become somewhat *cliché* in vampire media.

But *Dracula* was not the first cinematic vampire to find his long-lost love in a modern day *doppelgänger*. In fact, the trope didn't originate with vampires at all.

It was first popularised by Universal's *The Mummy* (1932), directed by Karl Freund. Awakened by archaeologists, Imhotep (Boris Karloff) finds the reincarnation of his ancient love Anck-su-namun (Zita Johann) in a modern woman.

**...the image of Dracula as a tragic romantic figure has become ingrained in our cultural psyche—so much so that over the years many people have been surprised to discover that Bram Stoker's novel is not a love story.**

The trope first became associated with vampires in 1967, when the Gothic soap opera *Dark Shadows* (1966-1971) introduced Barnabas Collins (Jonathan Frid), an 18th-century vampire who is awakened in the 20th century. Barnabas kidnaps Maggie Evans (Kathryn Leigh Scott) and attempts to brainwash her into "becoming" Josette (also Scott), the woman he loved as a mortal and who committed suicide when she discovered the monster he had become. He dresses Maggie in Josette's wedding dress, keeps her locked in Josette's meticulously restored bedroom, and feeds her promises of eternal happiness over the hypnotic tinkling of Josette's music box.

Eventually, Maggie escapes and is presumed dead. Barnabas then sets his sights on Victoria Winters (Alexandra Moltke) as "the next Josette." This time he decides to take a more subtle approach, and a pivotal shift occurs in both Barnabas's character and the direction of the show as a whole. *Dark Shadows* creator Dan Curtis introduced Barnabas as a final effort to save the show from cancellation. When the fan response to what was supposed to be a short-lived character far exceeded Curtis' expectations, Barnabas's (very messy) journey from straightforward villain to romantic anti-hero began. Though his pursuit of Victoria is still dubious—and Barnabas is still the worst—he seeks her affection without supernatural influence and comes to love her as her own person, not just as a replacement for Josette.

Whether director William Crain was familiar with and inspired by *Dark Shadows* when he made *Blacula* (1972) is unclear; it may simply be a coincidence





“By dying tragically, these women cease to be human beings and become myths, romanticised versions of themselves that never truly existed and that the men who loved them try to impose on other women.”

that the two are so thematically similar. Like Barnabas, Mamuwalde (William Marshall) is awakened after centuries locked in a coffin and encounters a woman who resembles his dead wife, Luva (Vonetta McGee). Unlike Maggie, Tina (also McGee) is drawn to Mamuwalde without the aid of vampiric hypnotism. And unlike most vampires who came before and after him, Mamuwalde is honest with Tina: he tells her that he is a vampire, that he believes she is Luva reborn, and that he wants her to “rejoin” him. And when she says that she can’t, he respects that; “You must come to me freely with love or not at all. I will not take you by force, and I will not return.” (Tina changes her mind, of course, but Mamuwalde still gets points for being the only vampire in this article who can take no for an answer.)

By his own admission, Dan Curtis “plagiarised” himself in 1974 when he directed a made-for-television adaptation of *Dracula* (originally known as *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*, now referred to as *Dan Curtis’ Dracula*) that borrowed the lost love narrative from *Dark Shadows*. Curtis’s film was also the first to combine Stoker’s fictional vampire with the historical Vlad Dracula. Dracula (Jack Palance) sees his dead wife in Lucy Westenra (Fiona Lewis) and turns her into a vampire so they can spend eternity together.

*Dan Curtis’ Dracula* exemplifies the tendency of these narratives to reduce women to either a memory idealised

by a man’s grief or a receptacle to assume that ideal at the expense of her own identity, thus abating the man’s grief. Wikipedia calls Dracula’s wife Maria, but she is never named in the film. We only see her in brief, soft-focus flashbacks in which she is either happy in Dracula’s arms or dead in her bed while her husband is violently consumed by grief. She never speaks a word, and all we know about her is that she was Dracula’s wife and she is dead.

This problem goes all the way back to *The Mummy*. Originally, a longer version of the film shone a brighter light on Anck-su-namun by showing the many lives she had lived throughout the centuries. This sequence was cut, so the only flashbacks of Anck-su-namun’s life in the final product are of her death. Like Maria, Josette, and Luva, she is defined by her death.

By dying tragically, these women cease to be human beings and become myths, romanticised versions of themselves that never truly existed and that the men who loved them try to impose on other women.

These other women sometimes fare better than their predecessors. On *Dark Shadows*, Maggie and Victoria had the advantage of long-form storytelling; having been on the show since the beginning, they both had a year’s worth of established characterisation to their names by the time Barnabas showed up, and their narratives continued after

this particular storyline ended. *Blacula’s* Tina is somewhat thinly drawn, but the film does try to provide a glimpse into her world.

But in *Dan Curtis’ Dracula*, Lucy has little more characterisation than Maria. She is already under Dracula’s spell when she is introduced, and we only see her when she is being bitten or when she is writhing on her bed as the heroes try unsuccessfully to save her. After she becomes a vampire, we see her only once—when she tries to attack her husband. She is destroyed immediately afterwards. What we see instead is Dracula’s grief at finding her staked body—he cries, he howls, he demolishes her crypt. The story is about his pain, not her life.

**All we know about Elisabeta herself is that Dracula “prized [her] above all things on Earth.”**

Francis Ford Coppola’s film is also primarily a story about a man’s pain. Dracula’s (Gary Oldman) grief at the suicide of his wife Elisabeta (Winona Ryder) is the force behind his transformation into a vampire. All we know about Elisabeta herself is that Dracula “prized [her] above all things on Earth.” (The use of the word “prized” calls to mind the phrase “prized possession.”)

That being said, Mina (also Ryder)

has greater agency than Maggie and Lucy before her. A proper, “sensible,” sexually repressed Victorian lady, Mina experiences a sexual awakening through Dracula. She is not merely a helpless victim under his spell, and she, in turn, indulges her forbidden desires and resists them, torn between Dracula and the love of sweet, boring Jonathan Harker (Keanu Reeves). The film rejects the traditional endings reserved for a woman in this predicament: either becoming a monster who must be destroyed by the so-called heroes or being saved at the last minute by said heroes. Mina herself is the one who destroys Dracula, bringing his tortured existence to an end and freeing herself from an eternity of the same. A world away from *Dan Curtis’ Dracula*, Coppola’s version of Dracula and Mina occupy equal space within the narrative, and Mina’s story continues—in our imagination, at least—even after Dracula is dead.

If *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* took one step forward, Tim Burton’s adaptation of *Dark Shadows* (2012) takes two steps back. By the end of the film, Burton has combined all three women from the original series into a single

composite character who exists only to be Barnabas’s (Johnny Depp) “one true love.” Victoria Winters (Bella Heathcote) does not exist; the name is an alias assumed by Maggie Evans when she arrives in Collinsport, Maine, where she has been led by the ghost of Josette (also Heathcote). Barnabas shows up and, well, you know the drill by now. Maggie/Victoria falls in love with Barnabas—we are told this rather than shown, as the two barely interact leading up to this revelation. Maggie/Victoria decides to commit suicide because she’ll “grow old and die and [Barnabas will] live forever,” forcing him to either turn her so they can be together or lose her forever.

Upon her death and transformation, she literally becomes Josette. She is merely a vessel for Barnabas’s “true love” to return to him, and Josette has no identity of her own to replace the one that Maggie/Victoria has lost. We see Josette in a single flashback before her death; gazing lovingly at Barnabas and asking him to promise they’ll “be together forever.” As a ghost, she appears only to give Maggie/Victoria a push toward their joint “destiny.”

Tales of long lost love, reincarnation,

and *doppelgängers* in vampire media have a complicated history, to say the least. Still, these stories have a certain appeal. The kind of all-consuming, death-defying, never-ending fantasy love at the heart of these narratives is a very romantic notion—in theory, at least. Perhaps that’s why these stories remain popular and are constantly being retold, with very little variation in theme. The trope is almost exclusively a heterosexual phenomenon, and what queer adaptations exist have achieved nowhere near the same level of success or mainstream popularity. Some stories subvert standard formulae to a certain extent (for example, *The Vampire Diaries* [2009-2017]), but most prefer to stick with tradition.

And the shadow of *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* still looms large, as no other adaptation of Stoker’s work since has had such a lasting cultural impact. Several subsequent retellings have retained the themes of lost love and reincarnation popularized by Coppola’s film. The tragic, romantic Dracula is alive and well in popular imagination and may remain so for another thirty years—or maybe a few centuries. After all, a vampire’s love never dies. §







## An Exception Has Occurred: Doki Doki Literature Club! & the Horror of Pursuit

by Jolie Toomajan

*Doki Doki Literature Club!* (DDLC, Team Salvato, 2017) belongs to a class of psychological horror games masquerading as dating simulators. Dating simulators and romantic visual novels are virtual spaces where the sexual and the romantic meet the ludological. Though they are a vast and varied genre (the tones range from purely pornographic to fairytale, and the gameplay is similarly varied, ranging from resource management, to visual novel, to puzzle), all dating sims functionally turn a character into a win condition, which is to say, that a character becomes an object to be pursued. While this behaviour is acceptable, even mandatory in the context of gaming, in reality, the pursuit of a romantic partner without that partner's consent is horrific. Dating-horror games explore this specifically by interrupting the pursuit; instead of satisfaction, the player is left with discomfort. *DDLC* is unique in that it not only interrupts the pursuit, but it also reverses the pursuit.

One of the originators of the genre, *Hatoful Boyfriend* (Hato Moa, 2011), accomplishes this by reducing the idea of the love object to absurdity and then introducing horrific narrative twists to explain why. *We Know the Devil* (Avee Bee and Mia Schwartz,

2015) plays with the expectation that characters who lose a player's attention will simply go gently into that good night. *Cooking Companions* (Deer Dream Studios, 2021) uses a relationship system coupled with an adorable overlay to cover up horrific crimes. Each of these games narratively interacts with the romantic quest convention of the genre to examine our expectations as players. *DDLC* specifically uses the form of the game to enact a breakdown of reality that would be difficult to achieve in other mediums, making it a uniquely effective critique.

*DDLC* begins innocently enough—the player character is a young man who spends most of his time inside, watching anime. His childhood friend, Sayori, convinces him to join her after-school Literature Club. There the player is introduced to Yuri, Natsuki, and the club president, Monika. Each character corresponds to a common archetype from other dating games and, as per usual, the player makes choices designed to manipulate a character into liking them (here the player must guess which words he thinks each character might like to hear).

The game first interrupts this by taking a sudden narrative turn. Sayori

confesses that most of her “adorable” personality traits are a manifestation of depression; she is late to school and disorganized because she finds living difficult. You are given the option to date Sayori or continue as her friend; either option leads to her graphic suicide. Pursuing Yuri and Natsuki in her stead reveals that they have horrifying personal lives, the kind of deep pain not usually shared outside of a trusting, meaningful relationship. As each of these narrative turns is revealed, the player is further ousted from control and the game begins to malfunction: lines of code become visible, characters glitch, music plays off-key or backwards.

**“The horror is invasive, directed at the player and not their avatar, giving them the smallest taste of what it is like to be hunted.”**

Many dating-horror games stop at this point of interruption, disrupting the possibility of romance and handing the player a horrific experience. *DDLC* takes this breach further, by treating the player as the pursued and not the pursuer. It first does this narratively, by revealing that the player (not the

player character, the player) is Monika's love object. Monika wrests control of the game away from the player; any movement away from her is met with swift reprisal. If the player attempts to choose options other than Monika, the game disconnects mouse movement from the action of the cursor and selects Monika. Alternately, all the gameplay choices will be changed to read “Monika.” She then begins to breach the expected boundaries of gaming. If you further resist her, one of the glitch options she deploys to scare the player back into her arms is a realistic blue screen of death. She calls the player by their real name, which she obtained by rifling through the player's system files. The horror of *DDLC* is invasive, directed at the player and not their avatar, giving them the smallest taste of what it is like to be hunted.


**“Though dating-horror games and Gothic literature exist on fairly separate ends of the literary spectrum, they both are deeply invested in the notion of romantic (or at least lustful and opportunistic) pursuit. Being hunted is an old fear, one of the**

very bases of horror. Though dating-horror games and Gothic literature exist on fairly separate ends of the literary spectrum, they both are deeply invested in the notion of romantic (or at least lustful and opportunistic) pursuit. While games like *DDLC* fail to follow the aesthetic layout of the Gothic—the cobwebbed hallways, crypts, and heiresses have been replaced by high school classrooms, construction paper hearts, and class presidents—they obey the general rules. The story is told in fragments, oftentimes the plot is convoluted, and knowledge is kept from the reader/player until opportune moments. The supernatural, disturbing, or sensational are central to the narrative. And, of course, there is the sexually deviant tyrant who treats other humans as objects. Further, much like early Gothic novels, dating-horror games are meant not just to scare or disturb the player; the very best of them, *DDLC* included, interrogate what we consider normal.

The behaviour behind dating sims is not localized; it is a watered-down version of Nice Guy behaviour<sup>1</sup>. There have been hundreds of articles and thinkpieces about the Nice Guy over the last decade, but, in short, the Nice Guy views sex as transactional—the kindness coins go in, the sex falls out. Much like

in dating games, the preferences of the romantic partner are not taken into consideration; it does not matter whether the object of one's affections is attracted to them, compatible with them (sexually or otherwise), available, or interested. In the context of dating sims, this behaviour is harmless (and it is also incredibly fun). Nobody is hurt by giving an animated sprite digital coffee in the hopes of seeing some cheesecake art. It's when that behaviour is translated from gaming to reality that problems occur.

There are points where art does not and should not imitate life. *DDLC* disturbs the player by revealing that line. In each playthrough, Yuri, who is a bit of a horror buff, muses, “Surreal horror is often very successful at changing the way you look at the world, if only for a brief moment.” *DDLC* supplants the player from their expected position to provide a subtle reminder that single-sided romantic obsessions are best left to fiction.

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that a person of any gender, sex, or orientation can exhibit these behaviors. However, due to the pervasiveness of it being experienced by women who have both friendships and romantic relationships with men, the nomenclature is gendered. 



# Love You to Death

## Toxic Relationships in *The Whip and the Body* & *The Haunting of Bly Manor*

by Jamie Alvey

When Lady Caroline Lamb described notorious rake Lord Byron, she called him “mad, bad, and dangerous to know.” Historically, this phrase can often describe the typical brooding villain in most Gothic horror fare. It definitely applies to Kurt Menliff (Christopher Lee) from Mario Bava’s *The Whip and the Body* (1963) and Peter Quint (Oliver Jackson-Cohen) from Mike Flanagan’s *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020). While the two dashing men have all the traits Lady Caroline Lamb listed, they have much more in common aside from being mad, bad, and dangerous. Loving Kurt or Peter is quite literally a death sentence that is preceded by an emotionally taut and possessive romance. The two men are mirrors of one another, connecting Gothic villains from past cinematic media to those of the present. The thematic threads between *The Whip and the Body* and *The Haunting of Bly Manor* are fascinating and complex, creating a fruitful scholarly conversation regarding the Gothic and how the subgenre is alive and well.

Bava presents Kurt as a cruel but stylish man. He’s tall, handsome, and debonair, but he does not hide his tastes for violence and sex. In contrast, Flanagan’s version of Peter Quint presents himself as similarly refined, yet he takes a more affably charming approach. Interestingly, the men represent opposites on the socioeconomic spectrum; Kurt is aristocratic and Peter comes from an impoverished background. Regardless of how they present themselves, they use the tools at their disposal to put women in their unbreakable thrall. They’re exceedingly aware of the effect that they have on people, and that awareness allows them to deftly manipulate others. As a result, those that clearly see through

them are thoroughly unimpressed and wary of their shrewd manners. Kurt and Peter are not well liked in their respective households and draw the ire of the staff.

Their lives have been punctuated with familial difficulties, with Kurt being estranged from his father and brother and Peter’s history of being sexually abused at the hands of his father. They try to leave these pasts behind, though with little success. Kurt returns to his family’s manor and Peter is victimised by his own memories of his family. There are hints at the humanity of the men beneath the monstrous acts, but those layers are only slowly peeled back in the case of Peter Quint. Kurt remains mostly a dark mystery with only a few details and some context clues in his character before the events of the film.

**“These men drive the women whom they supposedly love inexorably toward destruction.”**

The two men stand parallel to one another, creating an instructive thematic conversation about the richness and intrigue of Gothic villains. Jackson-Cohen in the role of Peter Quint could pass as a descendent of Lee himself, and his spin on the character brings Lee’s performance as Kurt Menliff to mind. The similarities don’t stop at the men and their lives and demeanours; when it comes to love, they both leave ruin in their wake. Kurt’s relationship with a household servant girl resulted in her suicide and his estrangement from his family. Kurt left behind a fiancée, the tragic and beautiful Nevenka (Daliah Lavi), who was subsequently

wed by Kurt’s brother Christian (Tony Kendall). Peter engages in a torrid relationship with the Wingrave family nanny Rebecca Jessel (Tahirah Sharif). These men drive the women whom they supposedly love inexorably toward destruction. Even death cannot thwart Kurt and Peter’s toxic machinations.

While Kurt and Peter are both possessive and brutal kindred spirits in their own rights, Nevenka and Rebecca share a sisterhood that is jarring in contrast. Both are bright and vital, but repressed in some way. Nevenka is languishing in a passionless marriage. Her days are spent being a doll in the Menliff household. Rebecca is an intelligent woman looking to become a barrister who must settle for work as a nanny for the time being. Societal constructs bind both Nevenka and Rebecca into suffocating and unfulfilling lifestyles, and they are victims of rampant sexism that seems to permeate and transcend time itself. Kurt’s return to the family home and Peter’s early interactions with Rebecca provide a jolt of excitement for the women. With Kurt’s arrival, Nevenka’s long dormant sexual nature comes to the forefront, and Peter provides Rebecca with emotional and physical companionship, thus creating a perfect storm for the drama that will follow.

**“Nevenka and Kurt’s relationship at the start of *The Whip and the Body* could have been what Peter and Rebecca’s devolved into if there had been a chance for it to continue.”**

Nevenka and Kurt’s relationship is plagued with volatility. The lovers share a heady connection built on sadism and masochism. They are filled with pent-up desire. Nevenka vehemently insists that she hates Kurt, and her inner conflict regarding her feelings for him is tangible. Peter and Rebecca’s romance is a bit more conventional. It starts out sweet enough but soon sours due to Peter’s jealousy. Flowers and stolen moments turn into anger and accusations. However, Rebecca’s love for Peter endures. In fact, Nevenka and Kurt’s relationship at the start of *The Whip and the Body* could have been what Peter and Rebecca’s devolved into if there had been a chance for it to continue.

**“The thematic threads between *The Whip and the Body* and *The Haunting of Bly Manor* are fascinating and complex, creating a fruitful scholarly conversation regarding the Gothic and how the subgenre is alive and well.”**

Kurt and Peter both die under mysterious circumstances. Kurt is murdered with the same dagger with which the servant girl took her life, whereas Peter is killed by Viola’s ghost and thought to have run away after stealing money from the Wingraves. Yet the comparisons don’t end there. Nevenka and Rebecca are visited by their spectres and subsequently possessed by them. The idea of romantic possession becomes literal when Kurt and Peter possess the bodies of their respective beloveds. Even death isn’t enough to break the bonds of Kurt and Peter’s shared sense of entitlement. The themes of autonomy, love, and ownership become

fantastically blurred. The women are not in control of their lives and, sometimes, not even their own bodies. It is implied that Kurt uses Nevenka’s body to exact revenge on his family, whereas Peter explicitly takes control of Rebecca to test the limitations of his ghostly form.

The possessions of Nevenka and Rebecca lead both women to tragic ends. Nevenka kills herself thinking that she is killing Kurt’s spectre. As a result, Christian deduces that Nevenka had a mental break; however, the end of the film casts doubt on that theory and gives credence to the idea Kurt was possessing Nevenka. Peter, in a

desperate attempt to keep Rebecca with him even in death, possesses Rebecca and drowns her. Rebecca comes to herself while she is in the throes of drowning, but it is too late. She drowns, and everyone concludes she took her life out of heartbreak.

Gothic horror revels in the romantic, and though it might be the toxic sort, it is certainly intriguing. The subgenre remains one that is more widely misunderstood by modern audiences, but Mike Flanagan has made important steps in furthering Gothic horror for the masses. *The Haunting of Bly Manor* fearlessly mirrors Gothic fare of the past like *The Whip and the Body*, all the while looking toward the future. Both pieces of media plumb the depths of horror and romance. The thematic intersection between them creates a memorable and affecting parallel conversation about toxic relationships in Gothic horror. It proves sometimes love that transcends the grave is anything but romantic. *g*



# Peak Trauma

## Love Makes Monsters Of Us All

by Rebecca Gault

In the Gothic tradition, incest has become a staple, growing into one of the key tropes of the genre. By utilising the trope of familial sexual relationships, Gothic creators construct a dialogue between love, the taboo, and horror. With particular focus on Guillermo del Toro's 2015 neo-Victorian film *Crimson Peak* and seminal Gothic texts widely considered to be its predecessors—such as Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839)—we are able to glean why exactly the scandal of incest is so relevant within the Gothic.

*Crimson Peak* explores the incestuous relationship between siblings Thomas Sharpe (Tom Hiddleston) and Lucille Sharpe (Jessica Chastain) who both occupy their family estate, haunted by the ghosts of their past—both literally and metaphorically. Throughout the film, del Toro consistently draws parallels between the Sharpe siblings and the Usher siblings in Edgar Allan Poe's short story. Like Roderick and Madeline, Thomas and Lucille are bound to a crumbling ancestral mansion and both pairs of siblings strive to restore it to its former glory. Both sets of siblings meet the same fate—dying in said home.

If Lucille and Thomas serve as mirrors to Roderick and Madeline, it is first essential to explore the genesis of the incestuous trope: Poe's own allusions to such a dynamic in *The Fall of the House of Usher*. While never explicit in the text, there are distinct implications that the Usher bloodline is cursed and poisoned because of its history of incest. The reader finds allusions to this concept as Roderick reflects on the idea the Usher home has some form of sentience. The narrator states:

The result was discoverable, he added, in that silent yet importunate

and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made him what I now saw him—what he was. (Poe & Galloway, 2006)

The terrible influence in question is one that haunts and twists the family bloodline, leaving them cursed to their own isolation in this home. Poe reflects on the fact that Madeline's death would bring about the end of the Usher dynasty, despite Roderick's ability to marry and have children. The implication here, then, is that the Usher bloodline is founded solely on incestuous relationships.

This reversal of power dynamics is key to del Toro's ultimate aim with the Sharpes: to destabilise conventional notions of the Victorian family unit and bring the dysfunction in such units to the forefront.

Sibling incest in the Gothic is often predicated on a more even power dynamic than father-daughter incest. Yet, when examining the role of the feminine in the Victorian era, there is always going to be an imbalance in societal power, as exemplified by Madeline being relegated to the background of the narrative—a mere tool for Roderick's arc. This is not the case with the Sharpes. Lucille serves as the driving force in their relationship, occupying a position of power over Thomas. While Thomas is depicted as the more emotional of the siblings, a trait often reserved exclusively for women—especially in Victorian and neo-Victorian fiction—Lucille is said to be “the more collected one.” This reversal of power dynamics is key to del

Toro's ultimate aim with the Sharpes: to destabilise conventional notions of the Victorian family unit and bring the dysfunction in such units to the forefront.

Situating *Crimson Peak* within Allerdale Hall is a key aspect of this project. Emilia Musap points out that this is because “the Gothic mansion [functions] as a site of family horror” (Musap, 2017). This underscores del Toro's concern with the family trauma of the neo-Victorian Gothic. It is established that both Lucille and Thomas suffered abuse for a majority of their childhood and were isolated, leading to them forming a co-dependent relationship even through adulthood. This resulted in a relationship that, culturally, was an immoral practice and therefore not socially acceptable. However, their incestuous behaviour also serves as a way to literalise their sexual trauma and make it visible, perhaps as a way to overcome it but likely more as a way to process it.

The incestuous relationship in *Crimson Peak* becomes fully explicit near the end of the film when Edith Cushing (Mia Wasikowska), the central heroine of the film, catches the siblings having sexual intercourse. Del Toro imposes a voyeuristic role upon the audience, forcing them to witness this act, and thereby leaning into the Gothic sensibility of sensationalising morbidity. However, there is also a sense of catharsis in this moment. They are, in a sense, re-enacting the traumas of their past through this sexual behaviour, just as Lucille reconstructs the authoritative role of her mother in an attempt to wrest control of their lives and occupy the social role that they once occupied prior to the decline of their family home.

At Lucille's behest, the Sharpe siblings

make every effort to continue their societal airs and graces. Thomas portrays himself as an eligible bachelor, attracting young women in each city they visit in hopes of securing funding for Thomas's mechanical endeavours. Yet these marriages are never consummated, by Lucille's own admission. Thomas and Lucille seem to reserve physical and sexual intimacy solely for one another. When their incestuous relationship is discovered, they are able to verbalise their abuse. Thomas begins to move past it, exchanging the brutality of their scheme for the love he has for Edith. Despite his death, his ghost is freed from Allerdale Hall after he aids Edith in killing Lucille. Lucille, on the other hand, is unable to let go of her past trauma and wishes to remain in the cycle of re-enacting their past traumas. Lucille then takes the position of the traditionally masculine villain. The narrative ultimately punishes her for assuming this masculine role and for her disruption of patriarchal and societal norms. She remains trapped in Allerdale Hall, forever doomed to linger there.

Lucille and Thomas serve as narrative foils then; where Thomas exemplifies reconciliation of his past with his future, Lucille represents the alienation of herself from the world around her. The Gothic incest motif serves as a vehicle through which to explore concerns of Victorian nuclear family units and the inherently unstable nature of said units. Lucille and Thomas, in particular, are key examples of this; their incestuous relationship becomes the way in which they continue to perpetuate a cycle of abuse that began in their early childhood. By confronting the cultural and psychoanalytic implications of incest, the Gothic attempts to challenge these notions of idealised family units and expose the inherited trauma within.

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# We Belong Dead:

## A Homicidal Romance for the New Millennium

by Kelly Gredner

The title of Ronny Yu's 1998 entry into the *Child's Play* franchise, *Bride of Chucky*, announces the film's inspiration before we see a frame. Written by series creator Don Mancini, the title is an allusion to James Whale's 1935 classic, *Bride of Frankenstein*. The original *Bride* is the story of a man, an abomination of science. But Chucky's Bride gets to tell her own story. Tiffany (Jennifer Tilly) is a charismatic, lovestruck goth, obsessed with spiders and dolls, whose real tragic flaw was falling in love with serial killer Charles “Chucky” Lee Ray (Brad Dourif). But, that's just the beginning of this story. *Bride of Chucky* brings new synthetic flesh to this homicidal romance for the new millennium.

“You know me, I'll kill anybody but only sleep with someone I love.”

After 10 long years, Tiffany is finally able to finagle Chucky's remains. She uses spare doll parts to reconstruct this monstrosity with stitches and staples. He is ugly and perverse compared to her gothic femme beauty. In Whale's film, the Bride (Elsa Lanchester) is a woman created for Frankenstein's Monster (Boris Karloff). This “Bride” is the terrifying reanimated body of Charles “Chucky” Lee Ray—the outer representation of his hideous nature.

Tiffany has zero patience for men who lack the conviction to murder—her boyfriend Damien (Alexis Arquette) can't even kill someone! Once Damien criticises the doll's manhood, Chucky comes to life and smothers him, proving, for Tiffany, what a real man is. Tiffany and Chucky's criminal past seems to have fated the pair to be together, and she's been waiting to have Chucky brought back to her. She even has a heart tattoo with Chucky's name above her right breast. They were destined to be married, she thinks.

“My mother always said that love should set you free, but that's not always true, Chucky.”

Though Tiffany is portrayed as a criminal,

aberrant woman, she also has strong desires towards the domestic. She sets the scene for the perfect reunion and has prepared Chucky's favourite meal of Swedish meatballs. But Chucky can be a bastard. Before he died, she had found a ring she believed was meant for their engagement. Little does she know, it was stolen from a woman Chucky killed purely because of its value: five thousand dollars. When Tiffany asks about the ring, and the idea of marriage, Chucky laughs heartily, devastating her. He will never change; he never wanted to “settle down.” This leaves Tiffany cold, alone, and despairing, crying next to her dead lover.

Sometimes being a monster is lonely, but when Doctor Victor Frankenstein (Colin Clive) stitches together a companion for his creation in *The Bride of Frankenstein*, the Bride wakes and is horrified. She screams at her “Groom” and he is heartbroken. Frankenstein's Monster so desired to have a partner, a creature that matched his own monstrosity, and is anguished to be rejected. Chucky implies his own rejection of Tiffany's love in the form of condescending, maniacal laughter. Tiffany is both the Bride and the Monster, destined to repeat history.

“I've been a prisoner of your love for a long time and now it's payback.”

This is when the tale turns. Tiffany is a hurt woman seeking revenge. She locks Chucky in a child's playpen and buys him a Bride doll to spend his time with. Tiffany then draws herself a hot bubble bath, pours herself a glass of champagne, and watches television. She stumbles across the end of the *Bride of Frankenstein* and weeps. As Frankenstein says to his creator, “She hates me,” Chucky electrocutes Tiffany, foreshadowing the tragic ending of this hostile romance. Forced into the body of the Bride doll, Tiffany is a woman who knows what she wants...and how to get it. Chucky deceives her once again, but, in a dramatic twist of fate only a Don Mancini film would give us, these charismatic dolls with a volatile





relationship go on the run to find new bodies to inhabit, all the while rekindling their extinguished romance.

*"Why can't I get it on with a real good guy?"*

Tiffany and Chucky quickly fall back into old habits. As the bodies start hitting the floor, Tiffany is reminded that Chucky can "show a girl a good time." These homicidal maniacs are bonding like no time has passed. After a particularly inventive and gruesome murder, Chucky proclaims love for her and gets down on bended knee—like she always wanted. She weeps, but this time out of happiness. Her Monster, though vulgar and psychopathic, loves her, and her dream (kind of) comes true.

They make love by the fire in a romantic scene of doll play never witnessed before on screen. Tiffany easily falls back into the "housewife" routine—she makes dinner and bakes cookies, and everything is just how she wants it. But when Chucky tells her to do the dishes, she becomes enraged (her mother

always said that a man could at least do the dishes if a woman cooks) and they fight, leaving the opportunity open for an accident, sending Tiffany into a hot oven and Chucky out a window.

*"I love you Chucky, kiss me—we belong together forever."*

In another role reversal from *Bride of Frankenstein*, Tiffany becomes the reluctant, despondent partner. Chucky has no respect for her as a woman, and it's time to end this charade once and for all. Tiffany realizes that love is meaningless without respect. They were doomed ten years ago, and are doomed today. Tiffany will forever love Chucky and they are meant to be in a macabre world of slashing and explosions. But in this life—a life where true love prevails when both parties are intensely committed—Tiffany and Chucky's love is fleeting, their romance dead in the water. Tiffany wonders, "Why can't I get it on with a real good guy?" Chucky may come from a long line of Good Guy dolls, but he is far from what the name suggests. He is

toxic and dangerous. Yet, so is she.

*"We belong dead."*

As Dr Frankenstein and the Monster anxiously await the unveiling of his Bride, she peers out from behind the bandages into a brand new world. She is proclaimed to be the "Bride of Frankenstein," an identity forced upon her before she was even conscious—her autonomy removed. The Monster extends his hands, offering friendship, and she screams. Tiffany was forced into becoming a doll bride, but owned who she was. She remained unabashedly herself. Though a sucker for romance, she took charge of each situation she found herself in—even revelled in it as best she could. No man could ever tame her. The Monster understands that this was all for naught, and that monsters deserve to be banished to the darkest recesses of hell. Tiffany also understands this. She stabs Chucky and tells him, "See you in hell." This Bride gets more than five minutes of screen time, and she uses every minute of it to tell her story. <sup>g</sup>



# Mother Horror

## GENDER & ARCHETYPE IN THE NOVELS OF GILLIAN FLYNN

BY KRISTIAN WILLIAMS

**Gillian Flynn's trio of novels—*Gone Girl*, *Sharp Objects*, and *Dark Places*—combines elements of thriller, mystery, and horror genres to tell stories of damaged people, unhealthy relationships, and, sooner or later, murder.<sup>1</sup>**

*Gone Girl* (2012) is the portrait of a failed marriage. Nick and Amy Dunne got married, then lost their jobs, and finally moved to Missouri to take care of his mother. There Nick started teaching at a community college, began an affair with a much younger woman, and opened a bar on borrowed money. And Amy...disappeared. Of course, Nick is suspected of killing her.

*Sharp Objects* (2006) focuses on the fallout from the murder of two little girls in the town of Wind Gap, Missouri. When their bodies are discovered, it is revealed that all of their teeth have been removed. Camille Preaker, a reporter for a small paper in Chicago, and a former resident of Wind Gap, is assigned by her editor to write of the town's attempts to grapple with the horror. To do so, though, Camille has to come to grips with the town and revisit a past that includes a gang rape, a dead sister, and a habit of cutting words into her skin, leaving her body covered in scars.

As a very small child, *Dark Places's* (2009) Libby Day lost her entire family: her mother and sisters, brutally murdered; her brother, imprisoned. Fourteen years later, depressed, alcoholic, and broke, Libby is drawn into a subculture of true crime fanatics, serial killer cosplayers, mass-murder groupies, and amateur detectives. Hearing their theories, she begins to doubt her own beliefs about what happened to her family.

Flynn's *oeuvre* has a stable set of

<sup>1</sup> Flynn's fourth book, *The Grown-Up* (2014), is really a long short story, and follows a different pattern than what I discuss here.

concerns. The author's work follows a pattern, a similar logic, but none of her novels unfold in a predictable manner. Nick Dunne did not kill Amy, though by the end of the novel he may wish that he had. Instead, Amy meticulously and ingeniously faked her death and framed her husband. She watched the drama of her disappearance unfold from afar, delighting in her media canonisation, gleeful at every stage of Nick's downfall. Amy, it becomes clear, is some variety of sociopath. She is hyper-competitive, hyper-critical, driven to perfection, narcissistic, and extremely disciplined (to create evidence of repeated rape, for instance, Amy tells the reader, "I took a wine bottle, and I abused myself with it every day..."). It would not be right to say that she is amoral; rather, her obsessive, self-centred, competitive perfectionism is her morality. Nick is smart and handsome, but deep down he is really just sort of a normal guy, better than average in some ways, worse in others. But Amy doesn't want normal or average; Nick is an intolerable disappointment to her. She feels that he is dragging her down, and when she learns that he has betrayed her, she becomes fixated on revenge. It is all that she desires.

**FLYNN'S GENIUS IS NOT FOR PLOT, BUT FOR CHARACTER.**

**THE HORROR OF THESE STORIES IS NOT THE THINGS THAT PEOPLE DO, BUT THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE ACTS.**

Similar to how the incidents surrounding Amy's abduction aren't as they seem, the girls of Wind Gap were not murdered by a drifter or a pervert, but by a classmate, another young girl: Camille's sister, Amma. Ben Day did not murder his family in *Dark Places*, but he was complicit. Preparing to run away, Ben and his girlfriend, Diondra, were

hoping to steal whatever money they could find and sneak off unnoticed. But one of Ben's sisters uncovered their plot and Diondra, intent on silencing the witness, chased the girl down and choked her to death.

Flynn's genius is not for plot, but for character. The horror of these stories is not the things that people do, but the people behind the acts. The events of the novels sometimes strain credulity, but the characters do not. They seem like people we have known, their protective masks removed. The horror lies in the sense of recognition—the uncomfortably familiar, suddenly stripped of its comforting illusions.

In one respect, Amy, Amma, and Diondra are just spoilt rich girls who resort to murder when they cannot get their way. From another point of view, however, they are each victims malformed by their upbringings. Diondra's parents are literally absent. They leave her for weeks at a time—a large house, a full fridge, plenty of cash, but no guidance or concern. She is both spoilt and neglected, pampered and feral. Her father's only rule—complete with a "purity ring," which Ben rightly finds creepy—is that she remain a virgin. Her father says that he will kill her otherwise, and she is afraid he might. When she becomes pregnant, she and Ben decide to flee.

For Amy and Amma it was just the opposite. Amy's parents were, if anything, too involved, too attentive. They wanted everything for their little girl, and they expected everything of her. They idealized her, and did so very publicly, writing a best-selling series of children's books entitled *Amazing Amy* about a girl who excelled at everything. Amy observes,

"Whenever I screw something up, Amy does it right: When I finally quit violin at age twelve, Amy was revealed as a prodigy in



the next book...When I blew off the junior tennis championship, Amy recommitted to the game...I went off to Harvard (and Amy correctly chose my parents' alma mater)...That my parents, two *child psychologists*, chose this particular public form of passive-aggressiveness toward *their child* was not just fucked up but also stupid and weird and kind of hilarious."

In *Sharp Objects*, Adora, Amma and Camille's mother (and, until her death, Marian's), is both withdrawn and smothering. She rations her affection; it has to be earned. Her disapproval, on the other hand, flows freely and is almost impossible to avoid. Camille never felt worthy of her mother's love; that is what saved her. We learn over the course of the novel that not only had Adora poisoned her daughters' minds,

<sup>2</sup> Parenthetical references silently removed. Jung further notes, "The parallel myth is that of the lamias, the nocturnal spectres who terrify children. The original legend is that Lamia seduced Zeus, but the jealous Hera caused her to bring only dead children into the world. Ever since then, the raging Lamia has persecuted children, whom she destroys whenever she can." (Jung, 1990, p. 248). This is notable for our purposes because, in *Gone Girl*, Amy Dunne tells us, "My mother had five miscarriages and two stillbirths before me." When Amy was born, her mother "couldn't bear to think of me as an actual baby, a living child, a girl who would get to come home."

she had poisoned their bodies. This is what killed poor Marian: "Munchausen by Proxy. The caregiver, usually the mother, *almost always* the mother, makes her child ill to get attention for herself... you make your child sick to show what a kind, doting mother you are."

**ADORA'S IS A KIND OF PERVERSION OF MOTHERLY LOVE. SHE EXAGGERATES ITS VIRTUES UNTIL THEY BECOME FAULTS.**

This revelation makes Adora the prime suspect in the murder of the other girls. "I started thinking," the police detective explains,

"What kind of woman would kill little girls and steal their teeth? A woman who wanted ultimate control. A woman whose nurturing instinct had gone awry... The killer was a woman who resented

strength in females, who saw it as vulgar. She tried to mother the little girls, to dominate them, to turn them into her own vision."

This is a good theory, psychologically speaking, but in the end it turns out to be mistaken. It was not Adora, but her daughter, Amma, who killed the other girls. The motive was not control—at least not directly—but jealousy. "Ann and Natalie died because Adora paid attention to them." Amma was afraid of being replaced in her mother's affections; like Adora, "She demanded uncontested love and loyalty." Amma feared, in effect, that Adora might choose another victim before her.

Adora's is a kind of perversion of motherly love. She exaggerates its virtues until they become faults. She is smothering, absorbing. "Adora devours you," Jackie, one of Adora's few friends says, "and if you don't let her, it'll be even worse for you." This is almost literally true: Camille remembers her mother holding a baby, cooing, expressing delight, and then, when she thought they were alone, "staring at the child almost lasciviously. She pressed her lips hard against the baby's apple slice of a cheek. Then she opened her mouth just slightly, took a tiny bit of flesh between her teeth, and gave it a little bite."

Carl Jung (1990) spoke of "the mother who gives life and then takes it away again as the 'terrible' or 'devouring' mother" (p. 261). Jung connected this figure to the myth of Lilith, Adam's "demon-wife" before Eve. Adam, Jung said "strove for supremacy" over Lilith, but she

"changed into a nightmare or lamia who haunted pregnant women and kidnapped new-born infants.... This motif is a recurrent one in fairytales, where the mother often appears as a murderess or eater of human flesh; a well-known German paradigm is the story of Hansel and Gretel" (p. 248).<sup>2</sup>

In the same work, Jung suggested that the central struggle in every story is "The Battle for Deliverance from the Mother"<sup>3</sup>—that is, the process of individuation:

It is not possible to live too long amid infantile surroundings, or in the bosom of the family, without endangering one's psychic health.

Life calls us forth to independence, and anyone who does not heed this call because of childish laziness or timidity is threatened with neurosis. And once this has broken out, it becomes an increasingly valid reason for running away from life and remaining forever in the morally poisonous atmosphere of infancy. (p. 304)

**JUST AS A GRIEVING LOVER CAN IMAGINE HIS COMPANION ALWAYS PERFECT AND PURE, THE MOTHER OF A DEAD CHILD CAN PLAY AT BEING THE PERFECT MOTHER, THE PERFECT MOTHER TO THE PERFECT CHILD.**

Poison, for Adora, is not a means for eliminating inconvenient people, but a way of preserving innocence—both the victim's innocence and also her own. By erasing the real existence of the victim, the murderer removes any threat to her idealised fantasy. Just as a grieving lover can imagine his companion always perfect and pure, the mother of a dead child can play at being the perfect mother, the perfect mother to the perfect child. "I know the wisdom, that no parent should see their child die," Camille reflects, "that such an event is like nature spun backwards. But it's the only way to truly

<sup>3</sup> Such is the title of the sixth chapter of *Symbols of Transformation*. There, Jung wrote, "An individual is infantile because he has freed himself insufficiently, or not at all, from his childish environment and his adaptation to his parents, with the result that he has a false reaction to the world: on the one hand he reacts as a child towards his parents, always demanding love and immediate emotional rewards, while on the other hand he is so identified with his parents through his close ties with them that he behaves like his father or his mother. He is incapable of living his own life and finding the character that belongs to him." (Jung, 1990, p. 284).

keep your child." Later she tells Adora, "I can't ever forgive you for Marian. She was a baby." Adora replies, "She'll always be my baby."

Adora, Marian—and even Amma, and the girls Amma killed—are all victims of a fantasy. After she killed them, Amma removed the girls' teeth and used them to decorate, "a huge, four-foot dollhouse, fashioned to look exactly like my mother's house"—a miniature version of the house where she lived as a virtual prisoner. It was of course deeply symbolic. When children play with dolls they pretend that inanimate objects are living people; however, the illusion depends on the people being entirely subject to the child's will. Sometimes a girl will pretend at being a mother with imaginary children. By extension, idealising children denies their real humanity; it treats them as imaginary, as an embodied expression of the parent's desire. The parent's fantasy takes priority over the real needs of the child. Years before, Adora had written in her diary, "Marian is such a doll when she's ill, she dotes on me terribly and wants me with her all the time. I love wiping away her tears."

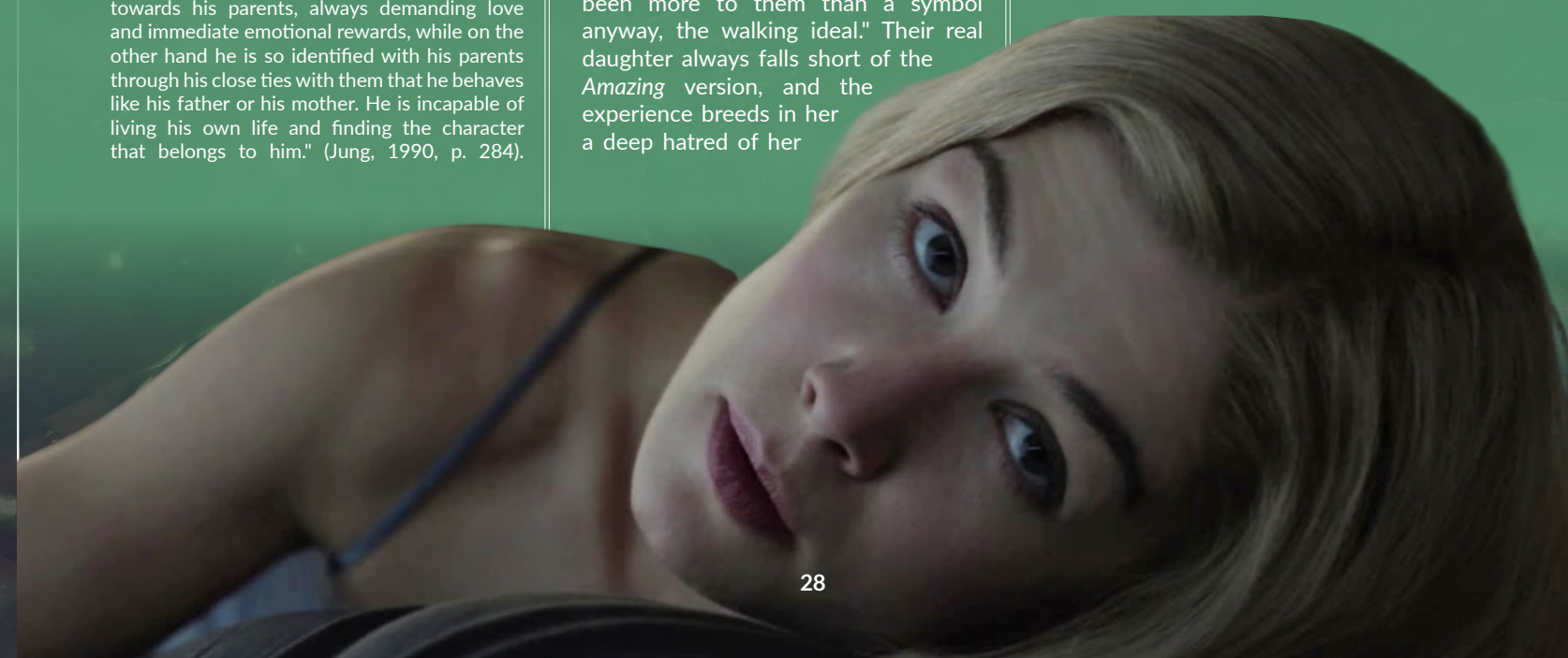
**IT IS AMY'S CURSE FROM THE BEGINNING TO BE FOREVER COMPARED TO THE IMPOSSIBLY PERFECT VERSION OF HERSELF IMAGINED BY HER PARENTS...**

*Gone Girl*, too, is about dangerous fantasies. It is Amy's curse from the beginning to be forever compared to the impossibly perfect version of herself imagined by her parents and published in the *Amazing Amy* books: "I've never been more to them than a symbol anyway, the walking ideal." Their real daughter always falls short of the *Amazing* version, and the experience breeds in her a deep hatred of her

own imperfections, and an intolerance for the imperfections of other people, especially her husband. So Amy strives to present the perfect version of herself, and she actively tries to reinvent Nick as the perfect husband she imagines him capable of being, and which she believes she deserves. Amy is exacting, judgmental, and overbearing, skilled in making others feel inadequate and guilty; she becomes the agent of exactly the dynamic that created her. Flynn writes,

"[H]er obsessions tended to be fueled by competition: She needed to dazzle men and jealous-if-y women....She needed to be Amazing Amy, all the time."

Amy is playing a role, or several roles. "Sometimes I feel like Nick has decided on a version of me that doesn't exist," she complains, though she later acknowledges her part in creating that fiction; "Nick loved a girl who doesn't exist. I was pretending..." Elsewhere she admits that her real self is "Not Diary Amy, who is a work of fiction." Her journal is in fact a forged piece of evidence, intended to have a specific effect; "They have to read the diary like it's some sort of Gothic tragedy." After *Amazing Amy*, the persona she adopted for the sake of her parents, and the Cool Girl whom she pretended to be in order to win over Nick, Amy "began to think of a different story, a better story, that would destroy Nick....A story that would restore my perfection. It would make me the hero, flawless and adored. Because everyone loves the Dead Girl." In the end, having returned to her husband, her life renewed, she gets what she wants: "I have a book deal: I am officially in control of our story."





Libby Day, in *Dark Places*, also tries to exploit her story: selling her brother's letters, making paid appearances at true crime conventions, and agreeing to a ghostwritten book "about how I'd conquered the 'ghosts of my past.'" The story Libby told in court literally imprisoned her brother and represented a kind of prison for her as well. When she attends the Kill Club convention, she encounters some hostile questioning:

"Why did you testify that Ben killed your family?"

"Because he did...I was there...I saw what I saw..."

"Bullshit. You saw what they told you to see because you were a good, scared little girl who wanted to help."

Libby resents this presumption, but she also finds it unnerving.

Later she talks to another of Ben's accusers, Krissi Cates, who, as a little girl, told the authorities that he had molested her. The truth was something less: She and Ben had conducted a not-quite-innocent flirtation, which she naturally exaggerated. "I told the girls about my high school boyfriend. All proud," she recalled. "I made up things we did, sex things." This started a chain of events which, while utterly predictable, was also unintended. One of her friends told her parents, who called Krissi's parents, who called the school, who called a psychologist. "It just kept getting bigger," Krissi states. By the time she was formally interviewed, she found it was

"...impossible to tell the truth. He wanted to believe I was molested... And I don't know, you're at that age, if a bunch of grownups are telling you something or encouraging you, it just...it started to feel real. That Ben had molested me, because otherwise, why were all these adults trying to get me to say he had?"

Libby understood only too well, "they thought the harder they believed you, the easier it'd be for you... They were trying to help you, and you were trying to help them."

Right away, other girls started telling

stories about Ben, more fantastical and less based in reality. But then, "after the murders all the girls panicked." They all felt somehow responsible, "like we'd really summoned the Devil. Like we made up this bad story about Ben and some part of it became true."

#### REFERENCES TO FAIRY TALES PEPPER ALL THREE BOOKS.

Stories set patterns, establish expectations, and create norms. Some stories are as ephemeral as idle gossip, tabloid television scandals, or faddish moral panics. Others are very old. Some of the creepy fanboys Libby Day encounters are obsessed with murders from more than a century before. A folk tale about a woman in white who haunts the forest outside of Wind Gap adds to the mystery in *Sharp Objects*. Mr. Punch plays a central role in Amy's plan in *Gone*

*Girl*. References to fairy tales pepper all three books. Diondra's name makes Ben "think of princesses or strippers, he wasn't sure which." Nick muses, "Amy was too independent, too modern, to be able to admit the truth: She wanted to play damsel." Amy may be more aware of this dynamic than Nick knows, though she sees it mostly as a way to manipulate men. When her plan goes awry, she reaches out to an old boyfriend for help: "Desi is a white-knight type. He likes troubled women." But that story, too, becomes a kind of prison, the "ultimate white knight fantasy: He steals the abused princess from her squalid circumstances and places her under his gilded protection in a castle that no one can breach but him." Amy kills him to escape.

She goes back to Nick, freeing him from her intended trap, but luring him into another. The thing that finally closes Amy's grip on him is the announcement that she is pregnant. This, more than anything else, supplies the story's ultimate horror. Amy uses the child to control her husband, but Nick also offers, "Good God, can you imagine having her for a mother?" At last Amy's nature has a medium for its expression; she has a vessel into which she can pour her neurotic enthusiasms, an unspoiled human that she can tend, and shape, and control.

The final horror of *Gone Girl* is not the view of marriage as an endless mutually deforming power struggle, nor the castrating fury of the scorned woman; it is that Amy may become the devouring mother. The final horror is the realisation that no horror is final, that horror proceeds generation after generation.

This insight is carried through in *Dark Places*, another story of a wrongly accused man, a missing girl, and the ways we can become imprisoned by the stories that people tell. Everyone thinks that when Ben Day was fifteen years old, he killed his entire family as part of a satanic ritual. What we learn, however, is that he sits in prison, unprotesting, to protect a more

guilty party—his girlfriend and their daughter.

Diondra was a petulant and demanding teenager; now the mother of a teenager herself, she has become more than a little narcissistic. All these years later, mother and daughter are still hiding. Until Libby finds them, the girl has been a secret to everyone but her parents. The younger woman serves as the reflection of the older (as her name, Crystal, suggests). Their intimacy seems unwholesome; their identities are indistinct. "Crystal knows the whole story," Diondra explains with pride. "I tell her everything. We're best friends."

Crystal echoes, "She's my best friend."

"I just bet Diondra was her best friend," Libby thinks. "All these years, they lived in a two-person pod. Secret. Gotta stay secret for Mommy." As a result, Crystal can hardly be said to live her own life. She lives in isolation, accompanied only by her mother, enchanted by stories of a family long ago dead. To guard their secret, to defend that bond, both women are willing to kill.

#### NO ONE IS BORN A DEVOURING MOTHER, ONE MUST BECOME THE DEVOURING MOTHER. IT IS THE LAST STEP OF A VERY LONG PROCESS.

Jung (2011) described the over-identification between mother and daughter as a "Hypertrophy of the Maternal Element." The mother depends on the daughter for her sense of identity, and the daughter's identity becomes subsumed into that of the mother. What appears as an excess of love, Jung observed, is in fact an obsessive need to control, ultimately destructive to both parties:

[Mothers] of this type, though continually 'living for others,' are as a matter of fact, unable to make any real sacrifice. Driven by [a] ruthless will to power and a fanatical insistence on their own maternal rights, they often succeed in annihilating not only their own personality but also the personal lives of their children. (pp. 21-22)

That is clearly an unhealthy dynamic.

For Gillian Flynn, it is a diseased pattern created by the stories of the culture, imposed on and inhabited by certain women. No one is born a devouring mother, one must become the devouring mother. It is the last step of a very long process. One begins as a child, spoiled, neglected, or repressed, but ultimately unloved.

Of all the qualities Flynn's characters use to define and deform their stories, none is as pervasive as gender.

These gendered narratives are the stories behind, beneath, and inside all the others. Obviously, gender is central to the Devouring Mother figure and, in these stories, to the children—all girls devoured. There is a gendered aspect to Adora's infantilising impulses that emphasise innocence enforced with shame. So, too, with Diondra's virginity pledge and her rebellion against it; with Krissi's coerced casting as an innocent victim; with Libby's role as the Final Girl; and then with the dysfunction they all endure in the aftermath. Gender determines the demands imposed on Amy Dunne—even those she imposes on herself—and it shapes and limits every persona that she adopts and discards, "Amazing Amy. Preppy 80s Girl. Ultimate-Frisbee Granola and Blushing Ingénue and Witty Hepburnian Sophisticate. Brainy Ironic Girl and Boho Babe.... Cool Girl and Loved Wife and Unloved Wife and Vengeful Scorned Wife." All of these are drawn from stereotypes and stories already circulating in the culture, and it is from the same stuff that Amy constructs the plot against her husband.

Nick Dunne was so terrified of becoming like his father—abusive, domineering, sexist—that it traps him in a loveless marriage, facing continual disapproval and shame. Rather than withstand a confrontation, he became a habitual liar, which only made him easier to manipulate. When Amy vanishes, he does not seem

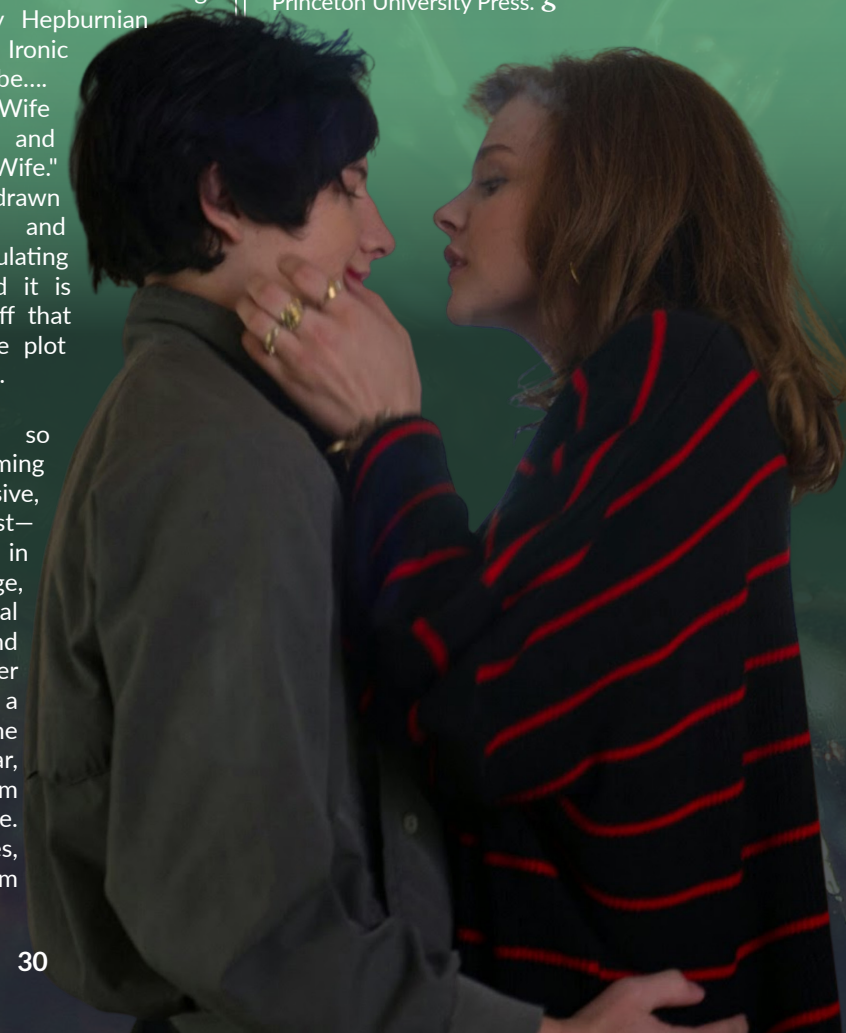
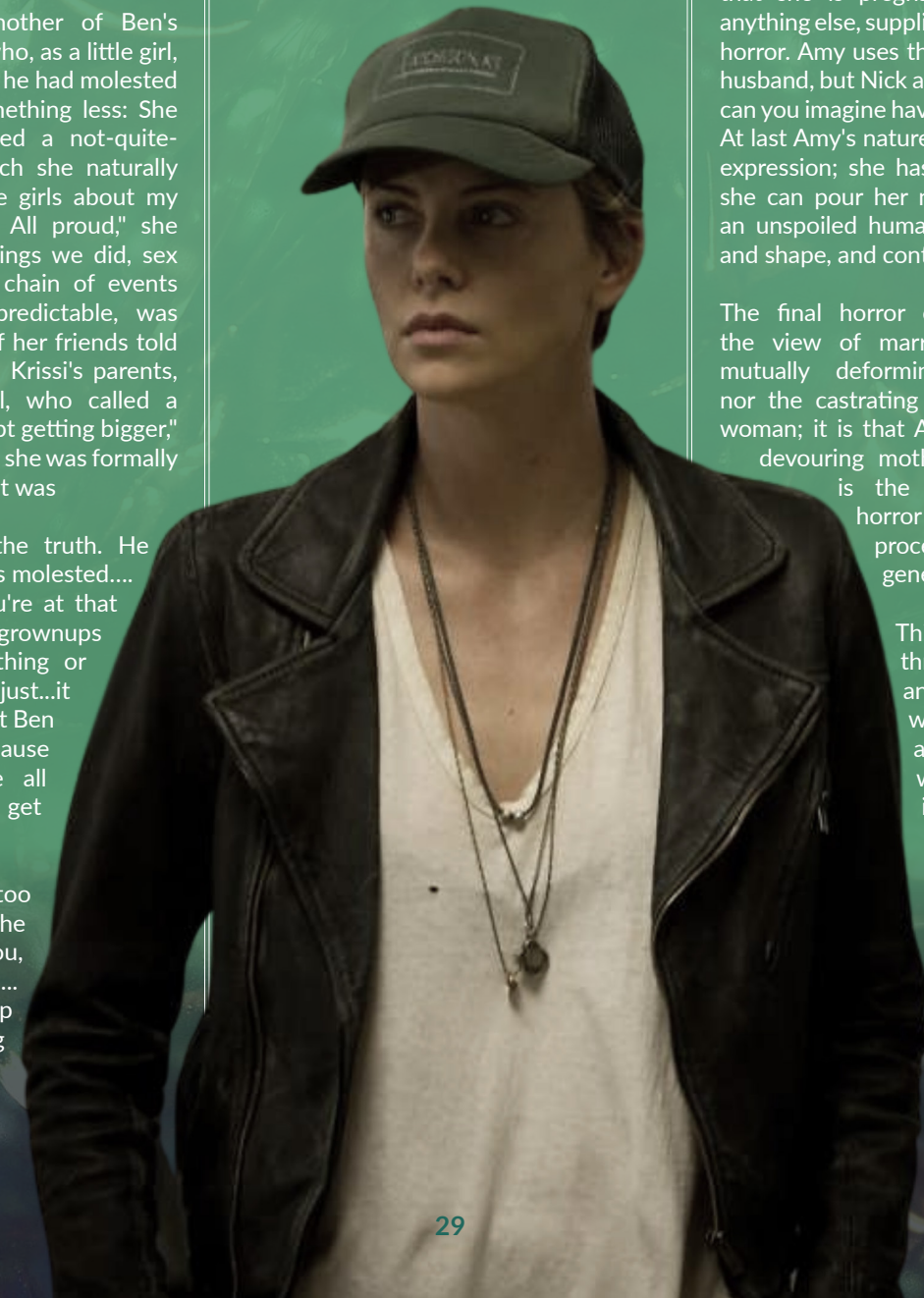
appropriately distraught; people read his reticence as indifference, and his need to please comes across as smug and smarmy. He is so determined to seem like a nice guy, it makes people suspicious. Nick's sister, Margot (his twin, interestingly) understood this as his main weakness, "You'd literally lie, cheat, and steal—hell, kill—to convince people you are a good guy." Ben Day, in contrast, was tired of being a wimp and a loser. He tried hard to seem like a tough guy, and he did it so well that people believed he was a murderer. Ben wants so badly to be a man that it leads him to prison. In *Sharp Objects*, suspicion falls on the brother of one of the murdered girls for the simple, unforgivable fact that he says he loves his sister and has been seen crying in public.

Gender is perhaps our oldest story. And it remains a trap, no matter where one falls on the spectrum or what attitude one takes toward it.

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# MONSTROSITY BORN IN LOVE

## In Conversation with Julia Ducournau

by Valeska Griffiths  
& Joe Lipsett

*With just two films under her belt, Julia Ducournau has already firmly established herself as one of the most audacious and exciting filmmakers of this generation.*

Her 2016 feature film debut, the exquisite coming-of-age cannibal tale *Raw*, shocked and enthralled its audiences in equal measure. While her long-awaited sophomore effort, 2021's *Titane*, hits different, it's just as impactful—and serves as a compelling showcase of Ducournau's ability to achieve a rare and delicate balance of brutality, pathos, abjection, and beauty.

As with *Raw*, *Titane* centres on a complicated young woman with alarming appetites (a mesmerising and sensitive performance by Agathe Rousselle in her first feature film role), yet the film quickly and confidently embarks on a very different journey, setting it apart not only from its predecessor, but from any other film released in recent memory. Its marketing initially leaned heavily on its novel hook: the carnal coupling of a woman and an automobile. But this first act scene is only a jumping-off point that takes the audience on a twisting and unexpected path which unflinchingly explores the heady concepts of identity, desire, love, loneliness, monstrosity, and transhumanism.

*Titane* is an absurdist, bizarre, challenging, and gorgeously visceral work of art, delivered with equal parts style and venom. It's an off-the-rails body horror, nestled in a slasher, with a disturbing/poignant family drama at its surprisingly effective heart. It deftly plays with gender and with our expectations, subverting the male gaze, interrogating the idea of humanity, and pulling us toward an uneasy sympathy for the devil.

Valeska Griffiths and Joe Lipsett sat down with Ducournau for a candid discussion about her creative process, how she works with her actors to embody and convey often uncomfortable material, and why she is working to develop her own language of film.

*Valeska Griffiths: The film is full of really striking imagery and plot points. I'm wondering about the process of writing the story—did you start with a particular scene or image and work from there?*

**Julia Ducournau:** After a long process of connecting the dots between various desires that took many months, I think the first scene I came up with might have been the last one. And then, coming from that, but also knowing the intentions I had in there—you know, it's not just the *image* of the scene or anything, it's just really the *feeling* that I wanted to convey for the audience to leave with, you know, when they leave the room. And this form of, let's say, sheer romantic optimism about the fact that a new world and a new humanity was possible, and that it would actually somehow be stronger, because it's more monstrous—because that monstrosity is born in love, you know what I mean?

I don't want to spoil too much. It's hard for me not to pronounce the word. But I had this need for light, basically, at the end of the film. And, going from that, I worked all the way back, 180, to the beginning, which had to start in deep darkness, and deep rejection of humanity, annihilation of humanity, violence, so that I could have a start to build a character who would, little by little in the film, get closer to her humanity and closer to her emotions. But for this to happen, that she had to be devoid of this at the start.

*VG: It was a fascinating journey. We both love the film, by the way.*

**JD:** Thank you.

*VG: You created so many emotionally complex scenes with little to no dialogue, could you maybe talk a little bit about your 'less is more' approach and why you chose dance as a mode of expression?*

**JD:** Well, for me, it was fairly natural, to be honest. Once I decided, as I just said, that I would put love at the centre of my film, that's something that was a huge challenge for me. I really doubted that I was able to do that. It's hard for me to talk about love, especially when we're talking about love as, let's say, a means to escape any form of representation or any form of social construct, and just as a way to be present for someone who is as present to you, but beyond anything that represents, you know? And so, talking about that...it's hard with words. Because, for me, I feel that words kind of belittle that feeling, somehow. Words don't get you through the essence of that feeling. They don't get you through the barriers of gender, of representation—it's really something that can, for me, belittle that feeling. So I knew from the start that there would not be a lot of words in my film. And, obviously, that "*je t'aime*" was going to be maybe the most important for my main character, knowing that she's absolutely unable to express it as the start of the film.

**I think that dancing is a very, very natural way of establishing a dialogue between two bodies, in between two people. You don't need more words than that.**

Coming from that, basically, I fairly naturally came to a character who was going to be almost constantly silent, but for a very clear reason that if she opens her mouth, then she's busted, pretty much. That was, for me, a good way to really start to apprehend actually how two people can, in almost an animal way, sniff each other and confront each other and hate each other—and, at the same time, the fact that they are in physical contact constantly, in an animal way, it makes them bond. It makes them closer, somehow. It's really all about their bodies being stuck together in that department, and him trying to pull her towards him and her trying to escape

that, obviously. The approach of 'less is more' is something that was fairly, honestly, logical in the narrative of my film, I think.

And as far as dancing is concerned, again, very natural to me. If you have characters who can't speak, and yet you need to, you know, try to create a bond in between? Well, I think that dancing is a very, very natural way of establishing a dialogue between two bodies, in between two people. You don't need more words than that. You don't need more words than someone who pulls you to a form of dancefloor, and you don't want to go and then you start fighting and all that. And the look that they give each other—this defiant look, constantly—and then afterwards, they become looks of complicity or love...all of this doesn't need work, you just need to look at the screen. And I think that in the dancing, there is an immediacy between my characters and the audience, because you take the feeling right away. You don't intellectualise it like you would do with words, you know? You just take it physically and you embrace what they're going through physically. So that's why I think I use so much dancing. It's really...it's a real language.

*VG: And it's so effective.*

*Joe Lipsett: Building on that question, and talking about the relationship that you have as a director with your actors, your films are often highlighted for having a very scary level of body horror and violence. How do you work with actors to solicit performances that feel genuine, but are really scary and uncomfortable to watch? How do you work with actors to get those kinds of results?*

**JD:** Well, I think two things. Because there is a lot of nudity in my film—even though it's not sexualised, it's still nudity, you know? You have to shoot it. One thing is that I really try to constantly establish a secure and safe place for my actors to be able to move in their body, move with their prosthetics and all that, without feeling self-conscious. I understand that it's a very big surrendering that I require from them. This is something that I do not take lightly at all. And I think that, in return, my duty is to assure that they are never uneasy, and that I will always stand by my words, knowing that, for example, I don't do playbacks on shoots



and I don't watch the rushes, so no one does. Which means that we are just all going forward together. For me, it's an energy that's very important. But when it comes to certain scenes that are either violent or implied nudity, or both, I always tell them *exactly* what I'm going to shoot, what part of the body we're going to see. And if they're not comfortable with the part of the body, I *will not* shoot it. And I *will never* betray that word. I think this is something that is essential when you require such a surrender from them.

**JL:** Okay, that's great to hear. Because you're right, there is a huge amount of nudity in this film, but you don't want the actors to go through that. I feel like you may have talked about this at other points, but I'm curious. I've noticed that you have a certain amount of resistance to labelling your films as horror. So you often talk about them as coming-of-age films. You've mentioned the word 'romance' a number of times. Is there something that you don't like about the label? Is it a semantic issue? Or is it just that you feel like it's not the best descriptor?

**JD:** No, I just don't want to label my films, period, basically. So when you hear me talking about, like, coming-of-age and romance or whatever, I'm kind of messing with you <laughs>. You know, believe it or not, I never pitched my film.

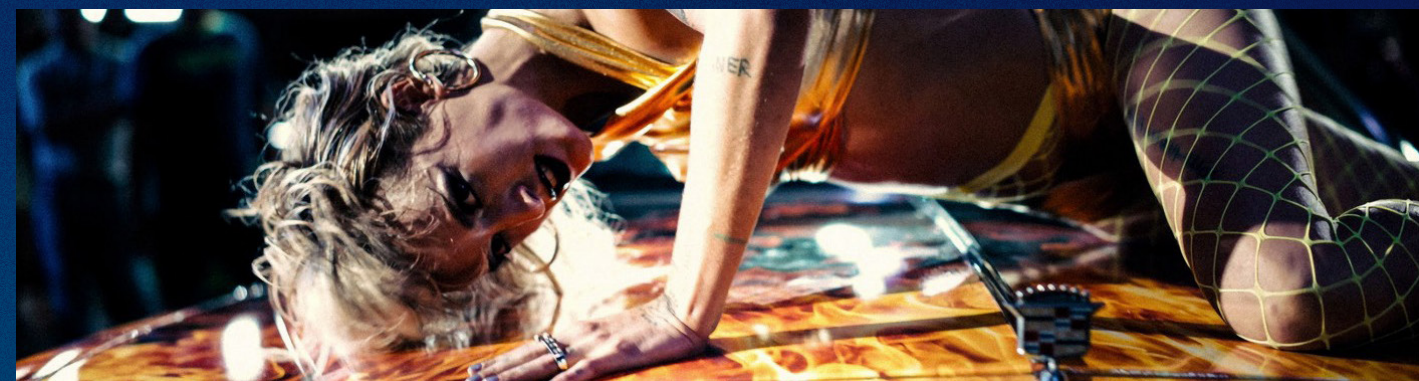
**JL:** Okay.

**I** try to divert the codes of all these typologies of film and I try to make them mine, I try to digest them in my own way. I'm trying just to create my own language.



**JD:** *Titane*, I never pitched it. One, because I don't think I could pitch it in a way that would really convey the experience that I tried to create. And two, because I really don't see why I should, to be honest. Do I use the grammar of body horror? Yes. Do I use the grammar of comedy? Yes. Thriller? Yes. Drama? Yes. I think it's fair to say that that's what I use. I have no problem with people saying there is body horror in my film. However, it's not a body horror through and through. I have no problem with saying people saying there are comedic aspects to my film, which is completely true, but it's not a comedy film, and so on. You know what I mean? I try to divert the codes of all these typologies of film and I try to make them mine, I try to digest them in my own way. I'm trying

just to create my own language. And my own language, it so happens, is in the intertwining many things, but also trying to, again, break the boundaries between all these typologies of film. I don't see why, for example, you have a film and you say it's a drama—so does this means you have to cry all the way through? I mean, that's not how it is. I mean, the experience for me that I want to convey is the human experience and, in life, you can actually burst out in laughter at a funeral because of the nervousness and because of the tension, for example, and things are way more complex than this. And I personally need more tools to reflect that complexity. So I need to work with like many different grammars to give the complexity of the human experience that I'm trying to build. *g*



**The horror genre is not the most family-friendly place, but it is one of the most honest.** It reflects our fears back at us, and, as scary as it can be, it is a comfort to know we're not the only ones who are afraid. For decades, women, non-binary, and trans people have been unable to relate to works of horror. Their fears do not reflect back at them from page or screen because men dominate the genre. When the male observer tells us what to fear, he downplays the fears of the many—especially those of womb-having people.

A key fear experienced by women and womb-having people is that of pregnancy and childbirth, but, in horror, the fear is negated by the male lens. Men in horror often portray pregnancy as a symbol of hope. The symbol is narcissistic because it assumes an heir of the male protagonist is a promise for the future. However, as narcissists do, the male lens ignores the horrors the pregnant person has to endure to deliver the symbol of hope into the father's arms.

As much as it is true that pregnancy may be viewed as a beautiful journey, for many people pregnancy is a source of terror; it is their greatest fear. When horror focuses only on its positive implications, being afraid feels wrong. Art is supposed to reflect society, and if society is excited, then to be afraid is to be isolated from the many. However, as more diverse people have begun creating in the genre, horror is engaging more with the physical fear of pregnancy and not just glorifying the end result. Having more womb-having people in the horror sphere allows the reflection of our fears to be less blurry. Instead of being isolated, we are understood.

John Krasinski's *The Quiet Place* (2018) demonstrates the horrors of childbirth in an apocalyptic setting. The pregnancy and resulting child are not seen as a symbol of the future, but a saboteur. Although written and directed by men, Emily Blunt, as one of the protagonists, delivers a performance that womb-having people may relate to on a much deeper level. The gruesome birth scene uses the monsters, and the need to stay silent, as a hyperbolic metaphor for how dangerous childbirth can be. It also highlights how much the realities of birth are ignored. In fiction, we see the pregnant person enter a hospital room and leave with a cleaned-off six-month-old. We see neither the blood

## What to Reject When You're Expecting: Changing the Narrative of Childbirth

by *Ellie Sivins*

nor the fear going on inside. *The Quiet Place* forces us to witness both; we are afraid *for* her and *with* her. Horror binds us together, and, in this instance, the viewer relates to and understands the fear of birth. While this setting exaggerates the fear of pregnancy and birth, there are also instances of horror embedded in reality, where the child is wanted, and it is safe to give birth, but the experience is still horrific.

Kirsty Logan's short story collection, *Things We Say in the Dark* (2020), explores the experience of pregnancy through the perspective of a queer woman. Her perspective is new to the horror space, although it is not new to the world. Logan conveys the fear of watching her partner be pregnant while contending with her own fears of being pregnant herself one day. Her point of view is interesting because, for same sex couples, pregnancy is yearned and struggled for, so being afraid almost feels like kicking a gift horse in the mouth. But Logan gives us permission to be afraid—unlike male authors who have come before her, she doesn't convince us that there's nothing to be afraid of, she illustrates exactly what there is to fear, and she is afraid right next to us.

Further, Logan carefully balances her fears of something alien growing inside of her alongside the love she has for the impending child. Her collection shows the complexity of pregnancy being both horrifying and beautiful, appreciating the fear of it even if it is exactly what someone wants.

Naomi Booth's novel, *Sealed* (2017), considers how external factors exacerbate fears by following a protagonist pregnant in a world ravaged by climate change (sounds familiar). In a gruesome, beautifully written scene, birth is rendered terrifying as Booth highlights the visceral idea of being a human incubator alongside the harrowing effects of climate change. *Sealed* builds up to the birth of the protagonist's child as the societal, environmental and emotional impacts of climate change increase tensions throughout the novel. Booth's eco-

horror forces readers to ask if they want to birth a child into an overpopulated and climate-disaster-ridden world, and questions if it's even safe to do so. *Sealed* recognises that sometimes it is not just the physical fear of having a child, but the horrors of the modern world that scare us away from parenthood.

Both Logan and Booth validate the fears of womb-having people by giving us protagonists to relate to and depicting believable experiences. Although the authors are relatively new to the genre, it is clear that they are already becoming immensely valuable voices in horror by bringing more fears to the table.

In these examples, the protagonists experience a full pregnancy; however, I have yet to come across a piece of art that delves into the horrors of childbirth where the protagonist ultimately chooses not to keep the baby. Pregnancy is a big fear for those of us who don't want children. Whether or not abortion is accessible in your country, being pregnant without wanting to be is terrifying. Yet abortion has not been widely explored in horror. This may be because once a protagonist's horrors end with the relief of an abortion, the author is immediately placing themselves inside of a very politically charged debate. Abortion is embedded in Western society, and it needs to be spoken about more positively, instead of a dark secret kept in the cupboard.

Childbirth and pregnancy are horrific, even if it hasn't always been presented that way on the page or screen. While not the only things modern female, non-binary, and trans writers focus on in their works, they are topics that are moving out from under the male lens in horror. Diverse voices, as proven by Logan and Booth, are the only way to pull the fake skin of hope away from pregnancy and reveal the gore and terror lying beneath. More diverse voices means that our fears are reflected back at us in the way we experience them and not how male authors observe them. Seeing our fears in art, portrayed by protagonists we can relate to, stops us feeling alone in our fears and, together, we are less afraid. *g*



# The Closest Thing to Love is Death

## 9 Case Studies of Love & Obsession

by Zelda Arena

**The act of loving someone can be painful.** Even in the healthiest relationships, to love is to make yourself vulnerable and open various emotional experiences. When you love someone, you connect with them, even conjoin with them in a sense—those you love become a part of you and vice versa. You share in their happiness and pain. It is an exhilarating and meaningful state of being, yet to love someone can also be terrifying...especially when one's mind wanders to loss. Some would rather do anything than endure such a loss.

Horror films are full of such characters. There are those who act out of unrequited love or obsession, uncaring of how the other treats them as long as there is no perceived loss of their affection. And there are those who love and are loved truly in return—and would stop at nothing to protect their beloved.

### THE HORROR WAS FOR LOVE.

"The horror was for love" is a line directly spoken by one of the main characters in Guillermo Del Toro's *Crimson Peak* (2015). The line is delivered by Lady Lucille Sharpe (Jessica Chastain) following Edith's (Mia Wasikowska) discovery of the former's incestuous and murderous relationship with Edith's husband—and Lucille's brother—Sir Thomas Sharpe (Tom Hiddleston).

Lucille and Thomas endured an abusive mother, finding solace only in each other as they grew up. Over time, their relationship developed into something more than your average brother-sister bond and they became lovers. The pair eventually concoct and commit a marriage-and-murder scheme in order to support themselves and finance Thomas's inventions.

They pulled this off successfully three times, but with Edith, things change as Thomas truly falls in love with her. When this becomes clear towards the end of the film, Lucille, enraged and devastated, turns on her brother/lover, stabbing and killing him in what many would deem a crime of passion—one last act of horror in the name of her love.

The same concept can be seen in Wes Craven's *Scream 4* (2011). Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell), the Final Girl of the *Scream* franchise, returns to her hometown of Woodsboro only for copycat killings to commence upon her arrival. During the climax, the culprits' identities are revealed, with one perpetrator being none other than Sidney's cousin, Jill Roberts (Emma Roberts), whose motive is a combination of envy towards Sidney and the desire to eliminate and succeed her, becoming famous herself.

The other member of the duo, aspiring filmmaker Charlie Walker (Rory Culkin), has a twofold motive, the first being his

desire to "remake" the *Stab* franchise—in-universe horror films mirroring the diegetic events of the *Scream* series. The second, however, is the more urgent driving force behind Charlie's actions: Jill has manipulated him into believing she is genuinely interested in him, and that they will become romantic partners and enjoy fame together.

Charlie, who has feelings for Jill—whether of love, lust, or both—is easily manipulated to go along with her plan. In a scene toward the end of the film, after stabbing a fellow classmate, Kirby (played by Hayden Panettiere and with whom he has shared a kiss only moments before), he explodes, "Four years of classes together and you notice me now?" Charlie displays a sense of entitlement and anger at being, in his eyes at least, scorned by girls. Jill's interest, combined with his wounded ego, make Charlie willing to do anything she asks of him, so long as he gets her attention and affection. Infatuation, though different from genuine love, can be a powerful thing, and Charlie Walker



is a great example of someone willing to go to horrific lengths to keep the object of their affection interested.

*Scream*, Craven's 1996 smash hit which launched the series, also centres on the aforementioned Sidney Prescott, then a seventeen-year-old girl coping with her mother's brutal murder just one year earlier. As more murders begin to occur, Sidney is harassed by an unknown assailant who likes to taunt people over the phone before attacking. Though her mother's lover was convicted and sentenced for her death, it becomes clear to Sidney that he was framed—and the truth is much closer to home.

One of the many ways in which *Scream* redefined the genre was through its shocking killer reveal. There are not one, but two killers: Sidney's boyfriend, Billy Loomis (Skeet Ulrich) and his best friend, Stu Macher (Matthew Lillard). The film's climax includes several notable instances of physical contact between the two. Stu resting his head on Billy's shoulder is reminiscent of a scene in Tom Holland's *Fright Night* (1985) and many have speculated that it was a purposeful nod and proof of queer subtext. The scene unfolds as the two begin stabbing each other to create alibis. Stu tells Billy to "get it up" and "hit it," referring to him as "baby". Stabbing and knives in horror have long been linked to the phallic and, taken in the right context, this may be viewed as a sex scene.

**Many fans hold the opinion that Stu's loyalty went beyond that of a best friend and that his true motive is his feelings for Billy—whether they were unrequited or the two were in a secret relationship.**

Interestingly, while Billy lays out his motive to Sidney, Stu's is never revealed. He states that it was fun and makes a reference to peer pressure, but we never get a concrete reason for his willingness to go along with Billy and kill multiple people they know, including his own girlfriend, Tatum (Rose McGowan). Many fans hold the opinion that Stu's loyalty went beyond that of a best friend and that his true motive is his feelings for Billy—whether they were unrequited or the two were in a secret relationship.

Directed by Karyn Kusama, *Jennifer's Body* is the story of high-schoolers Jennifer Check (Megan Fox) and Anita "Needy" Lesnicki (Amanda Seyfried),



best friends since the sandbox. The two attend a rock concert held at a local dive bar for the indie band Low Shoulder. When the bar is evacuated after a fire breaks out, Jennifer agrees to leave with the band, despite Needy's protests. After this, Jennifer undergoes some mysterious changes. Jennifer later reveals to Needy that Low Shoulder took her into the woods, where they offered her as a virgin sacrifice to Satan in exchange for fame. The sacrifice and demonic exchange were a success, but as Jennifer was not actually a virgin, she became permanently possessed.

At first glance, it may seem that the two have little in common. Jennifer dates around and is more outgoing, whereas Needy is reserved and in a steady relationship with her boyfriend, Chip (Johnny Simmons). In reality, though, the two are not that different. Despite her more reserved persona, Needy has no trouble asserting herself against Low Shoulder when she overhears them talking about Jennifer's virginity—or against Jennifer herself, even after learning of Jennifer's transformation into a succubus.

The reveal of Jennifer's possession follows a scene where the pair finally act on the tension between them: they make out, signalling both a physical attraction and an emotional intimacy. Upon realizing that her friend is no longer the person she once was, Needy is thrown into a loop of uncertainty and grief. She mourns a loss, despite Jennifer being there in a physical

sense. When Jennifer eats Chip, Needy decides there's only one thing she can do to help Jennifer and other potential victims: kill her or expel the demon inhabiting her body. She effectively does so, but is subsequently sent to a mental health facility, making her yet another victim of Low Shoulder.

Following her incarceration, we learn that Needy has gained some of Jennifer's succubus abilities through a wound sustained during their confrontation. She escapes the facility and hitches a ride, smirkingly telling the driver that she is following a band. The credits roll over home-video footage and a series of crime scene photos showing that the members of Low Shoulder were murdered in a hotel room. Through the abilities transferred to her by Jennifer, Needy has avenged them both and has weaponized that which was forced onto Jennifer when the men used her body for their own ends.

All of this is straightforward as well as symbolic. The bond between Jennifer and Needy is stronger than ever, and a part of Jennifer will live on inside Needy.

**"I'VE BEEN A PRISONER OF MY LOVE FOR YOU FOR A VERY LONG TIME."**

Spoken by Tiffany Valentine (Jennifer Tilly) in Ronnie Yu's 1998 entry in the *Child's Play* franchise, *Bride of Chucky*, the quote above sums up Tiffany's relationship with her serial killer beau turned haunted doll, Charles Lee Ray



(Brad Dourif), better known as Chucky. Tiffany is a hybristophilic (one who is sexually interested in criminals), as shown by her disgust when her neighbour Damien (Alexis Arquette) admits that they only *pretended* to kill people in an attempt to impress her. Tiffany truly does care for Chucky, however, as evidenced when she says, "I'll kill anybody but I'll only sleep with someone I love."

The line is spoken shortly after Chucky mocks her, stating he never intended to marry her as she believed. Following this, Chucky kills Tiffany by electrocuting her while she takes a bath, then transfers her soul to another doll. While Tiffany was previously a prisoner of his love in the emotional sense, willingly becoming an accomplice and devoting herself to someone with whom she had an unbalanced relationship, her death renders her a prisoner of her love for him in the physical sense. Her words have become true both in the physical as well as the metaphysical.

Clive Barker's *Hellraiser* (1987) opens with Frank Cotton (Sean Chapman) purchasing a puzzle box in Morocco in order to find pleasure beyond the realms of human experience. He solves it, only for chains and hooks to suddenly appear and tear him asunder. With Frank now missing, his brother Larry (Andrew Robinson) and Larry's

wife Julia (Clare Higgins) attempt to repair their ailing marriage following an affair Julia had with Frank prior to their wedding day. The couple moves into Frank's old house where he was, unbeknownst to them, torn apart in the attic. When some of Larry's blood is spilt at the site of Frank's death, it resurrects Frank as a skinless corpse. Julia discovers the reanimated corpse soon after and Frank wastes no time imploring her to bring people to the attic for him to drain, in order to fully restore his corporeal form. He promises her that when he is whole, they will run away together. Julia, who remains obsessed with Frank despite being married to Larry, agrees to his request.

**While the Cenobites are the antagonists of *Hellraiser*, the real villains of the piece are Frank and Julia, who will stop at nothing to get what they want.**

Julia's extreme obsession with Frank is the driving force of the plot. She is willing to do anything to be with the man who cares little for her and gives her nothing but false promises. While the Cenobites are the antagonists of *Hellraiser*, the real villains of the piece are Frank and Julia, who will stop at nothing to get what they want. Despite Julia's infatuation with Frank, she is a powerful villain in her own right, using

her charm to ensnare unsuspecting men and luring them back to the attic like a spider spinning its web for the oblivious fly.

Ultimately, Frank accidentally kills Julia in a struggle then proceeds to drain her as he did the others, showing absolutely no remorse. The act is a fitting allegory for their relationship, as well as many other toxic ones where one partner takes everything but gives nothing in return, metaphorically draining the other's life force.

Combined with key aspects from *The Phantom of the Opera*, Argento's *Opera* is his own version of *Macbeth*. The tagline for the film reads, "Obsession, Murder. Madness", informing us from the marketing that obsession is going to play a key part in this tale.

The story focuses on Betty (Christina Marsillach), a young opera singer who is stalked by a deranged fan intent on killing those around her and claiming her for himself. Over the course of the movie, the killer strikes multiple times and, on more than one occasion, forces Betty into a voyeuristic position during his grisly murders. He restrains her and tapes needles under her eyes, prohibiting her from blinking and rendering her unable to look away while he slaughters his victims. This killer is unique in the way that he attempts to foment and



implicate sexual perversion, rather than punish it in the style of other slashers.

When the killer's identity, as well as Betty's repressed memories of her past, are revealed, we learn that Betty's mother (also Marsillach) was once in a relationship with the killer, Inspector Alan Santini (Urbano Barberini). To say this was not a healthy relationship would be an understatement. There is a noticeable age gap between the two. Given Santini's young age, the implication is that he was just a teenager at the time, whereas Betty's unnamed mother was an adult.

Betty's mother had a penchant for being tied up and watching Santini kill helpless women and derived extreme gratification from this, as is shown in a flashback scene. With his kills in the present, Santini strives to recreate the past, convinced that Betty is his second chance and that subjecting her to gruesome imagery will unlock inner urges similar to those of her mother. Like *Lady Macbeth*, Betty's mother demanded that Santini murder people

and, obsessed with her, he complied. Ultimately, he snapped and killed her, claiming she was too greedy for demanding more and more cruelty and blood, while never allowing him to touch her. It is clear that the mother did not love Santini; rather, she wanted a patsy for the murders and manipulated the already obsessed teen. This frames Santini as both villain and victim. Yet the film never shies away from the fact that he is just as depraved as Betty's mother, whether this was a nascent aspect of his character unleashed or something for which he developed a taste as time passed.

Santini, presumed dead, manages to track Betty down and, once again, tries to convince her to become her mother's proxy. Using her wits, she plays along, telling him that she realized that she *does* share her mother's appetites. This is a trap and she is able to stall him until police arrive and take him into custody. The brightly coloured, surreal, and seemingly happy ending that visually wouldn't look out of place in a musical is not well-loved by many fans, but it

is one of my personal favourites for its symbolism and interpretative flexibility. One reading of the sequence is that Betty is actually more like her mother than she would ever admit and has been driven over the edge by her own repression, as well as the obsessions of Santini and her mother.

#### THE CLOSEST THING TO LOVE IS DEATH.

The relationship between the two main characters in Tyler MacIntyre's 2017 horror-comedy *Tragedy Girls* is never stated outright to be more than just BFF, but the queer subtext of the film is hardly subtle. Best friends Sadie Cunningham (Brianna Hildebrand) and McKayla Hooper (Alexandra Shipp) live in a small Midwestern town and run a true-crime blog that is not getting them as much attention as they desire. The pair want nothing more than to take the internet by storm and become social media stars, and decide the way to achieve the fame they seek is to bait a killer who has been terrorizing their





town, kidnap him, and carry on the murders themselves, framing him for the additional crimes.

Tragedy Girls has all the hallmarks of a teen romantic drama when it comes to the girls' relationship.

The men in this movie are plot devices, from serial killer Lowell Orson Lehmann (Kevin Durand) to McKayla's ex Toby Mitchell (Josh Hutcherson)—chosen by Sadie as their first onscreen victim after she sees him flirting with McKayla—to the local sheriff's son Jordan Welch (Jack Quaid), whom Sadie begins dating. The true focus is the relationship between the two girls, and *Tragedy Girls* is unique in that its protagonists are also the slashers. It calls to mind a version of *Scream* as told from Billy and Stu's point of view, rather than the Final Girl's.

*Tragedy Girls* has all the hallmarks of a teen romantic drama in the girls' relationship. The seemingly unbreakable bond between them begins to fray when Sadie dates Josh, leading McKayla to partner up with Lehmann, who had previously attempted to convince her that Sadie would abandon her. This is the "break-up" phase of the movie. It all comes to a head on prom night, which the girls attend with Jordan and Lehmann, respectively.

Rather than kill Sadie, as Lehmann was planning, McKayla instead confronts her with the intention of "saving" her from Jordan, the prom itself, and the lifestyle that Sadie had decided to pursue while turning her back on her true nature and appetite. This scene can be read as McKayla urging Sadie out of the closet. The film employs extremely coded dialogue such as, "Do you remember our first time?"

This memory has severe repercussions as it calls to mind a time when, years ago, the girls caused the car accident that killed Jordan's mother. Both Jordan and Lehmann are left reeling when, following the heart-to-heart, the girls embrace and turn on them. Sadie tells Jordan he doesn't know her at all when he insists that she and McKayla have nothing in common. The girls team up once more and kill both the men. They then leave together, setting fire to the prom venue and locking the doors from the outside, standing hand-in-hand.



The film ends with the two as Final Girls, having survived everything together. Their relationship stronger than ever, they set off for college. The last shot of the film shows them in a car, speeding away from the confines of a small town and towards their bright futures, where they will presumably continue to sate their bloodlust, together.

Jean Rollin's *La Morte Vivante* (1982) is both a love and horror story. The director confirmed that within his movies he also wanted the element of love to be prominent (Mondo Digital, 2001). The love in this story is mutual and oftentimes so tender that it makes the carnage with which it is juxtaposed seem all the more vicious.

Catherine Valmont (Françoise Blanchard), a young woman who died several years prior, is resurrected as the result of grave robbers spilling toxic waste in the crypt where she rests. After killing the thieves and drinking their blood, she wanders aimlessly to her childhood home and is flooded with memories of her friend Helene (Marina Pierro). We are treated to a flashback scene where Helene promises that if Catherine dies before her, she will follow.

When Helene finds Catherine, she initially assumes that the latter had not been dead for the past two years but simply in hiding. She gently washes the blood from Catherine and tucks her into bed before dragging the corpses Catherine has accumulated down into the crypt in order to hide them and protect the other woman. As she is in the middle of this, Catherine arrives and begins drinking blood belonging to one of the corpses. Helene intervenes, cutting her own arm and allowing Catherine to drink from her instead, claiming she will find a way to supply

her with blood.

Helene then goes about obtaining victims for Catherine. As Helene grows more ruthless in the pursuit of helping the woman she loves, Catherine grows more humane as a result of the emotion she feels for Helene. Both of these changes come as the result of their love for one another. As Catherine's humanity grows, she comes to realize that she must be destroyed. She pleads with Helene to destroy her, but Helene is unable to do so; instead, she simply goes back to the village and finds another victim for Catherine. Helene would rather kill than live in a world without Catherine. She brings a man and woman back, but Catherine rejects the sacrifice, freeing the potential victim, Barbara (Carina Barone). Barbara's screams alert Helene however, who in turn brutally murders both Barbara and her boyfriend, Greg (Mike Marshall).

Catherine, overwhelmed and unable to cope with all of the carnage, attempts to kill herself. Helene intervenes and offers herself to Catherine, who is unable to resist and devours Helene alive.

Catherine's consumption of Helene is easily taken as a symbol of intercourse between the two women. But Helene's willingness to become Catherine's victim is also a beautiful, romantic metaphor and heartbreaking sentiment. It speaks of the sacrifices people make for the love of another and how, when you truly love someone, you can be willing to do anything in order to keep them safe (or alive).

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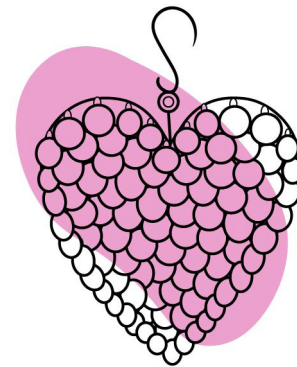
# Blind Date

by Molly Henery

illustrated by Lily Todorov

Now - Home

On rainy days like this, I always find myself reminiscing. I go to my walk-in closet and lift up the loose floorboard in the back corner. Inside is my own little treasure trove. I sit on the side of my bed and rummage through the old shoebox. Inside are several earrings; all different shapes and sizes. Not pairs, just single earrings. I've been on a lot of dates. Over time, it became a habit for me to bring home a little something after each date. I guess you could say I like to keep mementos of my conquests. Don't get me wrong, I'm a hopeless romantic at heart, but I'm also just a man. Until I find the right woman, this is just the way that it is. I swirl my finger through the box of earrings and pick up one particularly vile, pink monstrosity. It's a dangly earring with pink sequins making the shape of a quarter-sized heart. I remember that date well.



Early October - Date #9  
MandyCandy87

The man stood in front of the bathroom mirror, trying to fix his hair in an attractive way. The man wasn't bad looking, but he wasn't particularly good looking either. He had light brown hair, an average face with brown eyes, average height, average build. With a resigned sigh, he gave up on his hair and threw on a navy blazer and trench coat and headed out the door. He was already running late for his date.

As he stepped out of his apartment building, the brisk fall air caressed his neck and wormed its way down his back. He pulled up the collar of his coat and sped up his pace.

The man walked into the bar and scanned the people sitting at the tables. He was trying to find the platinum blonde with bright blue eyes he had been chatting with online for the past couple weeks. The girl he knew as MandyCandy87. He spotted the back of her head and moved in.

"Hi, MandyCandy87?" he said awkwardly, moving to her side.

"Yes, hi! It's nice to meet you in person," MandyCandy87 smiled up at him and gestured for him to take a seat opposite her. The man noticed she didn't look quite like her profile picture. Her dark roots were growing out, contrasting

with the platinum blonde she dyed the rest of her hair. Her eyes also didn't look blue now; they looked more like an amber brown colour. He figured she must have worn coloured contacts for her profile picture.

The man smiled back at her as he took his seat. There was a moment of awkward silence as the two tried to think of something to say.

"I'm sorry I'm late. My last meeting of the day ran long. The cyber security world never sleeps," the man tried to fill the silence.

"Oh, don't worry about it, I only got here a few minutes before you did."

More awkward silence. Blind dates are always like this, the man thought to himself, he should be used to this by now. The waiter finally came by. The man hadn't even looked at the menu, but he knew he was going to order the lasagna. From the breadsticks on the table, the rich smell of garlic and tomatoes, the red and white checkered vinyl table cloth, and the somewhat claustrophobic atmosphere, he already knew this was your typical family Italian restaurant. He also ordered a glass of the Syrah/Malbec blend. MandyCandy87 chewed on her acrylic fingernail as she looked at the menu, trying to decide what to order. She asked for a Caesar salad and a glass of the house white.



Once the food and wine arrived, the two got much more comfortable, mostly thanks to the wine. They talked about their jobs, their families, their hobbies. After finishing their food, the man gave his credit card to pay for the meal. MandyCandy87 didn't object.

"Do you maybe want to come back to my place for a drink? I'm just a couple blocks away," MandyCandy87 smiled coyly at the man and brushed her hair behind her ear, revealing a flash of a dazzling pink earring.

"I'd love to. By the way, those earrings you're wearing are very fun."

### Now - Home

I put the pink earring back in my shoebox and rummage around through the other earrings until I land on one. This is a stud earring, about the size of a nickel. The earring is a cutesy looking white ghost. The ghost smiles up at me. I smile back at the ghost as I recall the events of that particular date.



Late October - Date #14  
Science\_Lvr

It was the bar's big Hallowe'en bash, complete with themed music, themed drinks, and horror movies on the televisions behind the bar. The place smelled like an odd combination of tequila and chocolate. Everyone was wearing a Hallowe'en costume. The man decided to dress up as a doctor with fake bloodstains on his clothes, mostly because wearing scrubs was like wearing pajamas on a date.

Tonight's date, Science\_Lvr, walked back to the man from the bathrooms. The man watched her closely as she

made her way through the crowded bar. She was dressed up as the blonde from the all-female *Ghostbusters* movie. There were two other women in the bar who had dressed up as the same character, but Science\_Lvr had clearly put more effort into her costume than the other women. She had even curled her dirty blonde hair so it stuck out on one side, completing the look with yellow-lensed goggles on top of her head, beige coveralls, and what looked to be a home-made proton pack. She even had on little ghost earrings.

"Wow, those bathroom lines are atrocious," Science\_Lvr had to slightly yell over the music, taking her gin and tonic from the man's awaiting hand. She sipped her drink as she bobbed her head along to whatever top 100 hit was playing.

"These places always get crowded on Hallowe'en. It brings out the freaks in droves," said the man, gesturing to himself.

Science\_Lvr giggled at the man's meagre joke. From there, the conversation went on to the typical getting-to-know-you topics. She really did love science. She even worked as a botanist. When the crowded bar got to the point where it was too loud to carry on a conversation, they decided to leave. Science\_Lvr paid for her three gin and tonics, despite the man's insistence on covering her drinks, and he paid for his two rum and Cokes. The two decided to go for a walk around a nearby park so that they could carry on a peaceful conversation.

"So, tell me more about being a botanist," said the man as they walked side by side in the chilly evening air.

"Oh, it's not really that exciting. The best part though is that I get to work outdoors a lot. Even with the class I teach part time at the community college, I usually take the students outside to get their hands dirty," she explained as she gazed at her feet, avoiding his stare. "You can't really learn everything there is to know about plants without getting into the soil and growing them yourself. It weirdly almost gives you the feeling of being God. You have complete power over the plants. Whether they live or die depends entirely on how you take care of them."

"Maybe you could help me grow something sometime. I've never had much of a green thumb," the man remarked.

She smiled at that and shyly lifted her shoulders up towards her ears. She clearly wasn't used to having men flirt with her. The man found this strange since she was very pretty—petite with her natural blonde hair and brilliant green eyes. She was one of the prettiest blind dates he had been on, even with the Hallowe'en getup.

"You know, I think you are one of the prettiest girls I have ever been on a date with," the man said out loud, echoing his thoughts.

Science\_Lvr abruptly stopped and turned towards the man. Suddenly she lunged, wrapping her arms around the man's neck and kissing him deeply. He kissed her back and wrapped his arms around her waist. Her mouth tasted of lime and pine needles. She then pulled back to look into his face.

"I'm sorry, I never do this. I've never done that before, but...do you maybe want to...come back to my place?" she asked, looking down towards her feet.

He lifted her chin so he could look into her eyes and said, "Lead the way."

The two walked hand-in-hand back to the man's car. He opened the door for Science\_Lvr, and she got in the passenger seat. The man got in the driver's seat and started the car.

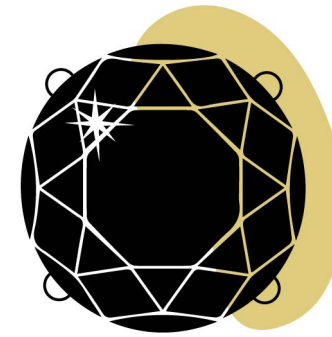
Before pulling into the road, he looked at Science\_Lvr and said, "Those ghost earrings look great on you."

### Now - Home

I run my thumb over the little ghost earring. She was so close to being the one. Maybe someday I will find a girl to settle down with. Until then, I will continue my collection.

I drop the ghost back in with the rest. A bright glimmer catches my eye, and I pick it up out of the mess. This one is a small black diamond stud in a gold setting. This is one of the few actual diamonds in the box. I roll it between my thumb and index finger, making the diamond sparkle despite its blackness.

The earring reminds me of the girl who wore it—covered in black and grey, but with a brightness that comes out from within.



Early December - Date #21  
L1v1ngDeadG1rl

There was already a thick layer of snow on the ground. Going on a date this time of year was always tough. No one wants to go out when the weather is this cold, especially with snowy roads. Still, L1v1ngDeadG1rl had agreed to meet the man at a local bar and music venue.

It was the kind of seedy place that typically hosts local rock bands, but no one was playing that night. He felt his shoes stick to the floor and he tried his hardest not to imagine the source of the stickiness. The man and his date sat at a booth in the back corner. His back was to the wall so he could look out at the rest of the bar and L1v1ngDeadG1rl sat directly across from him. She was on her second Coors Light, he was still on his first.

"I mean, the remake of *Dawn of the Dead* is fine. It's exciting and bloody and scary as all hell. But it just can't compare to Romero's original work. His film had so much social commentary on race and social class systems and consumerism. It was more than just a zombie movie. The remake doesn't live up to that!" L1v1ngDeadG1rl was practically yelling in enthusiasm. Her high honey blonde ponytail swayed as she talked with great fervor, giving the man glimpses of the dark teal streaks at the end of her hair.

The man had never seen either film, so he simply nodded in agreement. By this point, he knew he didn't need

to say much, she would do most of the talking. He sipped his beer as she continued talking. "Oh god, and the *Evil Dead* remake? Now that is a great remake," she continued. "Even Raimi said that it was what the original *Evil Dead* would have looked like if he made it today. It was so terrifying and the practical effects of the film were fantastic."

"What did you think of the new *Blair Witch*?" the man asked. He didn't really care, but he knew that would get L1v1ngDeadG1rl started on another long, exuberant tangent.

The man slouched in the booth, bored and only half listening to what his date was saying. Whatever it was, she was gesticulating quite a bit. This girl was passionate about things. She had a great fire within her the man was intrigued by, although he didn't care much for the topic. Horror films were always too violent for him.

The man looked over to the television set mounted on the wall behind the bar. On the screen was the ten o'clock news. At the bottom of the screen the headline read "Seventh Victim of the Blind Date Killer Found in Local Park." The man sat up a bit and read the subtitles on the muted TV.

"Today police found what is believed to be the seventh victim of the Blind Date Killer. The body of a woman in her late twenties to early thirties was found in Magnusson Park this morning around 5:30am by an early morning jogger. It is believed that the woman was not killed in the park, but the killer dumped the body here. Police have yet to reveal the woman's identity, but they did tell us that she fits the pattern of the previous victims: blonde hair, slim build, shorter than 5'5", and the victim's left ear has been severed. Police do not know why the left ear is severed from each victim, but since they have yet to find the ears of any of the victims, they believe it is likely a trophy taken by the killer. Police are urging women in the area to be wary of meeting any man from an online dating site until the killer has been apprehended, and they advise that if you do go on a date or to a bar to take proper precautions. This has been Dana Fox, Eyewitness News."

The man smiled to himself and turned back to his date, who was still fervently

talking about some horror movie or other. He examined her face as she spoke. She was wearing a bit too much eyeliner, but it made her eyes stand out more. They were almost the same colour teal as the streaks in L1v1ngDeadG1rl's hair. With her hair pulled back, the man could clearly see the black diamond studs she was wearing. Most of her outfit was either black or grey. In a fit of passion L1v1ngDeadG1rl swung her hand in a wide swoop and knocked over her glass of beer, spilling into the man's lap.

"Oh shit, I'm so sorry!" L1v1ndDeadG1rl said as she jumped up and grabbed a wad of napkins off the table. The man stood up and tried to brush off the liquid that hadn't already soaked into his lap. His date knelt down and used the napkins to try to clean what was left, giving the man a lovely view down her low-cut top. She looked up and noticed the direction of his gaze. She smirked and said, "Why don't we get out of here?"


The man smiled back and helped her to stand. He threw some cash on the table as the two made their way out of the bar.

L1v1ngDeadG1rl only lived two buildings down. She led him up to her third floor apartment and sauntered in a few steps ahead of him, leaving the door open for him to follow. The man stepped into the small but nicely furnished studio apartment and slowly closed the door behind him, never taking his eyes off his date.

"You know, those earrings really bring out your eyes."

### Now - Home

Tossing the diamond back into the box, I do one last sifting through the jumble before I put the lid on the box. I carry the box back over to its hiding spot where it will remain until after my next blind date.

Back in the kitchen, I go to the notepad with my shopping list and add "car air fresheners" at the bottom of the list. When I get back from the store I'll have to throw a couple of those into the shoebox. Hopefully that will get rid of some of the odor. Those ears are starting to smell. 



# INVASION OF THE POD PEOPLE

## Horror Podcast Showcase

by Valeska Griffiths

When we're not enjoying spooky things, we're listening to women talk about them! This month, we're spotlighting Sophie and Hannah Day of *28 Days Lady-er*!

Listen: [aospodsquad.podbean.com](https://aospodsquad.podbean.com)

For readers who haven't yet heard *28 Days Lady-er*, what's the elevator pitch?

Sophie: *28 Days Lady-er* is a podcast that wants to make you feel like you're at a boozy brunch with your girlfriends discussing the latest horror movie.

What inspired you to launch the show?

Hannah: I think what really inspired us was our mutual love of horror movies but also our mutual frustration that so many horror podcasts didn't represent our preferences or our experiences. We were really reflecting, again semi-drunkenly, about how inclusive the horror community can feel when you're in a big group of other horror nerds, but also realizing that a lot of the conversations we were having in those groups were not the kinds we were seeing represented by other podcasts.

How do you decide which topics and films to cover?

S: We love to cover new releases, but a lot of times we're picking topics based on the kind of conversation we can have about them. We love to get our hands dirty and have what can sometimes be hard conversations in a way that feels accessible to folks.

Why do you think the femme perspective is so important when it comes to critiquing genre media, and horror in particular?

H: To me, the horror genre is so deeply rooted in gender, and



especially in female presentations and experiences of gender, that is insane to me that it is still so often a male-led genre and space. I think it's no coincidence that Sophie and I felt the power to come forward with our voices at the same time that many women are claiming their spaces in the industry.

S: Women have been an integral part of the horror space forever and, for a long time, our stories were being told and presented without a lot of input or reflection from us. I think Hannah and I have both had the experience of being discounted or looked down on within genre communities because of our gender. Not only do we have every right to be in those spaces, but it's important for there to be a femme perspective to hold the genre and the community accountable for the way that characters that "represent" us are portrayed and treated within not just the media itself but the culture's experience of it.

What are your least favourite tropes in horror cinema?

S: I can't stand movies that use sexual violence or the threat of sexual violence without much care or thought about what it means. If you're using a rape just to show the audience how twisted a character is, that is not something I am going to be happy with. When those situations are portrayed with no empathy or understanding for the victim, but only to shock the audience, I'm going to have a problem with your movie.

H: My least favourite trope in horror is probably women being topless for no reason. Especially when they're running from something. I remember Sophie and I having a conversation when *The Town That Dreaded Sundown* remake came out and we felt so seen when a character who was topless grabbed a shirt when she realised something was amiss. By the same token,

however, it is sort of a running joke on our podcast that I think there should always be more dicks in movies. On one hand, I'm like, I've seen enough unnecessary female nudity to last my lifetime. But on the other, I contradict myself because I'm like, more dicks! Men should always be naked in my horror movies!

Hannah, you are a gem. Apart from more dicks, which changes would you two most love to see in the industry over the next couple of years?

H: One of the biggest things I hope to see change is representation in horror movies. The genre is sometimes more accessible to newcomers and I really hope to see more women and people of colour behind the wheel and in front of the camera. And of course, more dicks but specifically nude and in front of the camera.

S: Like Hannah said, I have been really excited over the past few years to see the genre expanding in terms of the sorts of stories that are being told. I think the advent of accessible streaming and the growth in popularity of things like Shudder and genre festivals are creating more avenues for people who aren't cisgender, straight, white men to get their stories in front of an audience. I LOVE that in 2021 I was able to get *Promising Young Woman*, *Lucky*, *The Stylist*, and *False Positive*—four phenomenal movies exploring three very different female experiences within a genre framework, with women in the creative driver's seat.

What gear and software do you use to create the show?

S: I use a Yeti microphone and Hannah uses whatever she has on hand. A resolution for 2022 is definitely to get her a nicer mic so our listeners can enjoy her attitude without any distortions.

Which horror-related podcasts do you love?

S: Hannah is not as into film criticism as I am when it comes to horror, but listeners of our show know that I love 'em and



Sophie & Hannah Day



Hannah & Sophie Day

love to bring them up on our show. Some of my favourites are: *The Faculty of Horror*, *Switchblade Sisters* (RIP), *Afro Horror*, *Post Mortem with Mick Garris*, *Colors of the Dark*, and *Psycho Analysis*.

Apart from horror, what else can we find in your Netflix lists?

S: We both love a good rom-com, and absolutely lost our shit over the *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*. Because of scheduling, though, we still haven't had the chance to get together on Zoom to watch the third one, *Always and Forever!* You will catch that lurking in both of our Netflix queues, waiting to be watched!

What's an underrated, female-directed horror film that you think people have slept on?

S: I'm biased, but I have to go with *The Stylist* which came out last year and was directed by a badass woman named Jill Gevargizian out of Kansas City (where I live now). It's based on a short of hers by the same name that I had the pleasure of seeing at a genre festival a few years back. Hannah and I are definitely hoping to cover it in 2022 so hopefully if you haven't seen it yet, you'll watch it then!

Which episodes would you recommend our readers check out if they want to get the full *28 Days Lady-er* experience?

S: Definitely the episode on *Signs* and our episode on *False Positive*, which we recorded with dear friend of the pod, CC Stapleton. We are relatively new to the Anatomy of a Scream Pod Squad Network, so some of our older episodes can be found just by searching our podcast name in your podcatcher of choice. Some classics to check out would definitely be our episodes on *The Slumber Party Massacre* and *Sweetheart*. [g](#)



Named for a popular cosmetic adhesive, Spirit Gum explores the intersection of horror and beauty. Painterly people often go from well-shaped lips to well-placed blood drips. Here, we examine those of us who are always red-handed!

## The Love Witch: Makeup is Modern Witchcraft

Accusing women of witchcraft was oft a sinister act used to punish women by asserting their wiles were of a dark art. Wearing makeup, a craft of its own, is often called a “lie,” leaving women accused of portraying a fake image of themselves to lure men. Of course, close as it may be to mythical, makeup is no dark art, but simply a craft by which wearers may express themselves and control their own appearance. In the realm of using powder and cream pigments, there’s Elaine (Samantha Robinson), the titular character of *The Love Witch* (2016), a woman whose makeup acts as a symbol of her status as a witch and elegantly mirrors the themes of Anna Biller’s film. Elaine’s appearance, adorned with eyeliner and lipstick, reflects the dichotomy she represents: a woman bent and shaped by the patriarchy who accidentally ends up devouring its perpetrators.

Elaine is not the typical image of a femme fatale. On the surface, she’s a puffed up and powdered portrait of femininity whose full-time profession is luring in men. For Elaine, men are not the means, but the end. She’s absorbed the desires of the patriarchy to a polished red effect and parlayed that to embrace the feminine ideal and lure would-be lovers. Then she kills them.

Biller, who wrote, directed, and did most everything else for her film, created Elaine from a specific image. Biller sees Elaine as embodying both hero and villain: “All deep narcissists are victims at least of their own warped psychology and inability to experience a true self, but Elaine is also the victim of abuse and of a society that has used and discarded her” (Alexander, 2016). To that end, Elaine is a portrait of how the patriarchy shaped her with wisps of suggestion that she’s hiding sharp teeth and will match perfectly with blood spatter.

Elaine’s makeup is that of poppy magazine covers, not the vampy appearance of most on-screen witches. Describing her image, Biller explained, “I wanted her to look like the sex sirens in movie posters and pulp novel covers from the late ‘60s” (Basilou, 2016). Elaine is splashed in graphic blue eyeshadow, finished with thick black eyeliner, and meticulously placed eyelashes. This look is not unlike that of Biller’s character in her other film, *Viva* (2007), a 1972-set story of a woman who experiences sexual violence and dabbles in arranged sexual encounters.

Though Biller handled most of the film’s aesthetic, makeup was done by Emma Willis. Biller and Willis looked to classic ‘60s beauties like Bridgette Bardot and Claudia Cardinale, leaning into looks with “heavy eyeshadow and pale lips” (Basilou, 2016). But Elaine’s aesthetic plays to the duality of the character as precariously balanced in *The Love Witch*, a comedy thriller about a killer. It’s a feminist movie with a feminist character that is a manifestation of patriarchal desires. It’s a delicately painted portrait of a feminist rage story that looks a little too much like a story about a male fantasy. Elaine’s aesthetic portrays that perfectly.

Shadow and rouge aren’t all that make up the character. In designing her surroundings, Biller was inspired by witchcraft symbolism and tarot (Alexander, 2016). Playing to the sun and moon cards’ colourways, Biller decorated Elaine’s living room in the “male” aesthetic of the sun cards and her magic room after the “female” moon cards. In both spaces, Elaine blends in like a dream, looking like a meticulously staged pin-up from inside a retro magazine.

For Biller, the witch is a representation of female power and the male fear of her sexuality. This is much like makeup,


a craft often showcasing power, one that is often used as a sword by men wanting to shame the women for wielding such power by attaining beauty standards. Elaine’s appearance, as accented by her makeup, caters to the male gaze, backwardly weaponizing it. In her dissection of Biller’s work, director Allison Anders discussed how Biller uses gaze, “Anna Biller pushes back against the feminist resistance to the ‘gaze.’ Cinema is gaze, it’s all about how you play with it, and how we as women can empower ourselves by taking charge of that gaze” (Anders, 2017).

*The Love Witch* walks a delicate line between portraying the male fantasy and making a feminist statement. The lead is happy to push back at anyone who questions her catering to the patriarchy, dressing herself up to do just that. And while her main focus appears to be the patriarchal desire to woo a mate, Elaine is a dangerous killer who’ll slice right through her lovers. Elaine’s shadow and rouge are a shellac that stand in for the patriarchal fantasy, created to match the feminist rage aesthetic of everything else—thus, her makeup is the visual representation of the film’s dichotomy.

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## Dear Countess

The Countess is a certified Gothic therapist, an interior decorator with a soft spot for spooky, and a 6000-year-old Vampire-Canadian with more opinions than she knows what to do with. In each issue of *Grim*, her advice column tackles timeless dilemmas and dishes out practical solutions.

**I recently left a long-term relationship and started dating again (yay, Tinder). When is it appropriate to reveal to my dates that I’m a witch?**

Congratulations on dipping your charmed toes back into the dating pool! I’m assuming that you’re taking all the necessary precautions when it comes to meeting up with your swipeable sweethearts, so I’ll focus on the question at hand: when should you share the joyous news of your magickal inclinations?

There is no hard-and-fast rule, I’m afraid! Since witchhood is widely misunderstood and still carries some stigma, I recommend that you follow your intuition and best judgment. Guide the conversation to magick-adjacent subjects and see how your date responds. If they respond positively (or, better yet, enthusiastically), offer to whip them up a tincture for better sleep. If they react negatively, consider unmatching and finding someone who will adore every enchanting iota of you.

**My daughter is going through puberty and has started undergoing some rather extreme changes (my ex is a werewolf). How can I best support her?**

Puberty is a confusing and challenging time for everyone—but especially for those of us with shapeshifter genes. My heart goes out to your daughter, but she already has one very important thing going for her: she has a mother who cares about her emotional wellbeing. Good on you, mama.

What your daughter needs most right now is to feel normal and accepted. Gift her some novels featuring strong and capable wereines and stream some documentaries about werewolf who’ve achieved amazing things—did you know that Taylor Swift is 1/8<sup>th</sup> werewolf?

Lastly, consider signing up for a monthly subscription service for either customised conditioners or razors, depending on your daughter’s preference. Good luck!

**Have a question for the Countess? Need advice about the spookier side of life? Submit your queries via the contact form at [anatomyofascream.com](http://anatomyofascream.com).**



# CLASSIFIEDS

## Commercial & Residential Real Estate

AVAILABLE APRIL 1: Homey sub-sub-sub-basement in semi-desirable neighbourhood downtown. Partially furnished (full laboratory set-up with drainage). Separate alleyway entrance behind a spacious trash receptacle. Definitely not haunted. Well, not SUPER haunted, anyway. And steps away from TWO different Taco Bells! That's cool, right? Inquire through Ana: (666) 671-8881.

## Services - Offering

You haven't had a real exorcism until you've had one from me! I'm the best there is, baby! Lemme come through & expel that spirit! M: (666) 541-0700.

Create a splash with your next sacrifice! Starving artist specializing in spatter. You say "bloodletting," I say "stunning visual storytelling!" Yui: (666) 779-3264.

Experienced theremin player available to perform anywhere in the tri-city area. Make your next party, séance, or alien autopsy 100% spookier! Contact Ji-yeon at (666) 828-6289.

## Services - Seeking

Require regular sitter for my 5yo demon. I travel for 1 week at a time once a month. Demon is water-type & does not have allergies or special needs. Call Delima: (666) 565-8342.

Crime scene clean-up needed! Timing of crimes negotiable. Call Priyanka or Lita: (666) 455-8123. Rates still v fair!!

## Jobs

Can you lift 50 lbs? Are you willing to work overnights? Can you keep your damn mouth shut? Seeking 10 general labourers for confidential project. Call Maxine at (666) 223-1469. Absolutely no snitches.

## Buying & Selling

I really need to get rid of this orb. It won't stop SQUEALING and I can't sleep. Maybe you like squeals? Please help. Text GH: (666) 432-1111.

Desperately searching for vintage Raggedy Andy dolls that have never been washed. No questions, will pay cash. Contact Joan (666) 437-9006.

## Romantic Encounters



Virile vintage Cadillac loves to dance and hook up with hot chicks. I've got stamina for days, a healthy stick shift, and only mild tire wear. I usually hang out in weird warehouse parties. Not looking for anything serious. Come give me a hug if you into getting rubbed.

## Humans for Humans

Okay, fine. You win. I'm sorry. I know I was wrong. I was always wrong. But I'm working on making it right. I've already returned the ancient stones to the sacred formation behind the old willow tree. Yes, I did it during the witching hour on a Wednesday. I wouldn't have screwed that up. Please forgive me and return my calls.

Place your free 'Humans For Humans' ad via the contact form at [anatomyofascream.com](http://anatomyofascream.com).

# grim



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